

REFRAMING BORDER SECURITY THROUGH FRONTEX FOCUSING ON IDENTITY DYNAMICS AND INCLUSIVITY IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

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Abstract. *This article reframes border security in southeast Europe by placing Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity at the centre of analysis. While dominant policy and institutional discourses continue to treat border security primarily as a technical and geopolitical matter of effectiveness and deterrence, the study argues that such a framing is analytically insufficient. Drawing on critical border studies, securitisation theory and scholarship on differential inclusion, the article develops an integrated theoretical framework that treats Frontex's operational practices, processes of identity formation and struggles over inclusivity as mutually constitutive. Empirically, it examines two key operational theatres, the Greek - Aegean border and the Western Balkans route, through a qualitative, interpretive analysis of official documents, secondary literature and civil society reports. The findings show that Frontex actively participates in the production of security knowledge and the categorisation of mobile subjects, contributes to racialised and gendered othering processes, and shapes the conditions of differential inclusion at the EU's external and externalised borders. Identity negotiations take distinct forms in Greece and in the Western Balkans. Inclusivity remains structurally constrained by operational pressures, blurred accountability and limited access to protection. The article concludes that a more comprehensive understanding of European border governance requires treating questions of belonging and rights as constitutive rather than residual dimensions of border security, with implications for both theory and policy.*

Keywords: *Frontex; border security; identity dynamics; inclusivity; differential inclusion; southeast Europe; Western Balkans; critical border studies; securitisation; externalisation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Southeast Europe occupies an important position in the European Union's external border architecture as both a geographical gateway and a strategic corridor for migration and security governance, with the Western Balkans route remaining one of the most significant entry pathways into the EU.

Frontex, as the agency responsible for coordinating external border management, provides joint operational support, risk analysis, surveillance, technical assistance and

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training, thereby strengthening collective border resilience and institutional cooperation between Member States and partner countries in the region.

Beyond operational effectiveness, Frontex contributes to identity management through biometric registration systems and shared databases while integrating fundamental rights safeguards via its *Fundamental Rights Office*, reflecting an evolving approach in which security and inclusivity are increasingly interdependent.

This article critically examines how Frontex contributes to three interconnected dimensions of border governance in southeast Europe, security effectiveness, identity management and inclusive governance, positioning the agency as a central institutional actor in the development of a more coordinated and normatively structured European border regime.

1.1. Research context

Border security in the European Union has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades. What was once primarily a national competence has evolved into a more integrated, supranational regime centred on the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). Established in 2004 and significantly strengthened after the 2015 - 2016 migration crisis, Frontex has expanded both its operational capacity and its geographical reach, increasingly intervening beyond the formal external borders of the Schengen Area.

In southeast Europe, particularly along the Greek - Turkish border and the Western Balkans route, the Agency has become a central actor in the daily management of mobility, risk analysis, screening and joint operations with national authorities and third countries.

This expansion is not merely technical. Critical border studies have long demonstrated that border control practices produce and reproduce social, racialised and gendered hierarchies of belonging (Bigo, 2014; Vaughan-Williams, 2009). Frontex's risk analysis reports, operational guidelines and visual materials actively construct the figure of the "*migrant Other*" while simultaneously affirming a particular vision of European identity and security (Sachse, J., Stachowitsch, S., Binder, C. 2022; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015).

At the same time, the Agency's growing presence in the Western Balkans, through working arrangements, liaison officers, joint operations and capacity-building projects, diffuses an EU border-control culture into candidate and potential candidate countries, reshaping local practices and identities.

1.2. Motivation for choosing the topic

The decision to focus on Frontex's role in southeast Europe stems from the recognition that dominant policy narratives continue to frame border security primarily in terms of effectiveness, deterrence and the protection of the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice. But there are questions of identity dynamics:

- How borders produce inclusions and exclusions of national, regional and European belonging - and of inclusivity?
- How fundamental rights, vulnerability and differential access to protection are negotiated?

These types of questions remain secondary or are treated as residual concerns.

Southeast Europe offers a particularly revealing context for examining these issues. The region functions simultaneously as an EU external border zone, a transit space, a buffer area and a site of ongoing enlargement dynamics.

Practices of circular mobility, pushbacks, biometric registration and remote control have become routine. Local populations, national authorities, civil society actors and people on the move experience and contest these practices in ways that continually renegotiate meanings of security, belonging and rights. Studying this region therefore allows for a deeper understanding of how operational, identity-related and rights-based dimensions of border security intersect in practice.

1.3. Research problems

The central problem addressed in this article is that the prevailing framing of border security remains analytically and politically insufficient. Border security in southeast Europe cannot be adequately understood without examining the interplay between Frontex's operational logic, the identity processes it both reflects and generates, and the persistent challenges of inclusivity at the EU's external and externalised borders.

Current approaches tend to prioritise technical and geopolitical considerations while underplaying the ways in which security practices actively shape categories of belonging and conditions of inclusion or exclusion.

1.4. Research questions

Against this background, the article addresses the following central research question:

- How does Frontex contribute to the reframing of border security in southeast Europe when identity dynamics and inclusivity are placed at the centre of analysis?

This overarching question is operationalised through three interrelated secondary questions:

2) In what ways do Frontex's operational practices, risk analyses and cooperation arrangements in southeast Europe shape and are shaped by identity dynamics (national, regional, European and migrant subjectivities)?

3) How are claims to inclusivity, particularly access to asylum, protection of vulnerable persons and respect for fundamental rights, negotiated, constrained or enabled within Frontex-supported border regimes?

4) What theoretical and policy implications arise from reframing border security through the nexus of Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity?

1.5. Objectives of the research

The objectives of the article are threefold:

O1: to map the evolving role of Frontex in southeast Europe, moving beyond a purely institutional or legal description toward an analysis of practices and their social effects;

O2: to theorise the intersections between border security, identity formation and inclusivity, drawing on critical border studies, securitisation theory and scholarship on differential inclusion;

O3: to contribute to ongoing academic and policy debates by proposing a more comprehensive analytical framework that treats identity and inclusivity as integral rather than residual dimensions of border security.

1.6. Importance and originality of the research

The importance of this research lies in its potential to advance both scholarly understanding and policy-relevant insights.

Academically, it contributes to critical border studies by integrating three dimensions, Frontex as an operational actor, identity dynamics and inclusivity, that are often analysed separately. Empirically, the focus on southeast Europe highlights dynamics of externalisation, Europeanisation and multi-level governance that are less visible in studies confined to core EU Member States.

The originality of the article resides in its insistence that identity and inclusivity are not peripheral concerns but constitutive elements of contemporary border security. By placing these dimensions at the centre of analysis, the study challenges narrow, technocratic understandings of Frontex and offers a reframed perspective on European border governance, one that is more attentive to questions of belonging, rights and differential inclusion in one of the most complex border regions of the European Union.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Critical analysis of the specialised literature

The academic literature on European border security has grown considerably since the establishment of Frontex in 2004 and, more intensively, after the 2015 - 2016 migration crisis. Early contributions largely focused on the Agency's legal mandate, institutional design and coordinating role within the area of *Freedom, Security and Justice*. These studies tended to treat Frontex as a technical instrument of operational cooperation between Member States.

A more critical body of scholarship has subsequently emerged, examining Frontex not merely as a bureaucratic actor but as a producer of security knowledge and practice. Research has analysed the Agency's risk analysis reports, screening procedures, joint operations and cooperation arrangements with third countries as mechanisms that actively construct categories (Bigo, 2014; Sarantaki, 2024; Pollozek & Passoth, 2024). of risk, suspicion and mobility Particular attention has been paid to processes of externalisation, whereby EU border-control standards and operational cultures are diffused beyond the formal external borders of the Union, especially into the Western Balkans (Pavicevic, 2025; Sarantaki, 2024).

Parallel strands of literature have explored the representational and identity-related dimensions of border control. Studies of Frontex's discursive and visual regimes have shown how risk analysis materials and operational communications participate in the racialisation and gendering of migration, constructing the figure of the "*migrant Other*" while affirming particular images of European identity and security (Sachseder, Stachowitsch & Binder, 2022). Related work has examined the coexistence of humanitarian and security logics in Frontex-supported operations, particularly along the Greek–Turkish border (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015).

Scholarship on inclusivity and fundamental rights has documented persistent tensions between formal normative commitments and operational realities. Research highlights constrained access to asylum, inadequate vulnerability assessments, pushbacks and accountability gaps in multi-actor border regimes (Pollozek & Passoth, 2024; Sarantaki, 2024).

Civil society documentation and independent monitoring have further exposed the practical limits of rights protection in both the Aegean and Western Balkans contexts.

2.2. Main theories and approaches

We can say that three theoretical clusters dominate the specialised literature relevant to this study.

The first is rooted in critical security and border studies. Didier Bigo's (2014) concept of the "*(in)securitization*" of borders emphasises the professional practices and practical senses through which different universes of border control (military, police, database analysts) construct threats and hierarchies of mobility. Complementary work by Vaughan-Williams (2009, 2015) conceptualises borders as dynamic, performed and dispersed practices rather than fixed territorial lines, highlighting processes of remote control, anticipatory risk management and externalisation.

The second cluster focuses on identity dynamics and securitisation. Drawing on securitisation theory and critical discourse analysis, scholars examine how border practices produce and stabilise distinctions between a protected European self and externalised others. Research on racialised and gendered representations in Frontex materials (Sachse, Stachowitsch & Binder, 2022) illustrates how operational knowledge participates in the construction of belonging and exclusion.

The third cluster centres on differential inclusion and the politics of rights. Rather than framing border control solely in terms of absolute exclusion, this literature analyses the hierarchical and conditional forms of access to territory, asylum and protection that characterise contemporary mobility regimes. Inclusivity is understood as a contested field shaped by legal frameworks, operational cultures and the agency of migrants and civil society actors.

2.3. Gaps identified in previous research

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, several significant gaps remain.

First, studies of Frontex tend to prioritise either institutional and legal dimensions or specific operational practices. Fewer works systematically examine the interconnections between the Agency's activities, the identity processes they generate, and the conditions of inclusivity they enable or constrain.

Second, while identity and securitisation have been extensively theorised, their concrete articulation with inclusivity challenges in multi-actor and externalised border regimes is still underdeveloped. The relationship between othering practices and differential inclusion is often acknowledged but rarely analysed in an integrated manner.

Third, southeast Europe is frequently treated either as a case of externalisation or as a site of EU enlargement conditionality. Less attention has been paid to the region as a space in which operational security practices, identity negotiations and struggles over rights simultaneously unfold and mutually shape one another.

Finally, much of the critical literature remains focused on core EU Member States or the Mediterranean maritime routes. The specific dynamics of the Western Balkans, where Frontex operates through working arrangements and joint operations on the territory of non-EU countries, remain comparatively underexplored in integrated theoretical frameworks.

2.4. Positioning of the present research in relation to the existing literature

This article positions itself at the intersection of the three strands of literature outlined above. It builds on critical border studies, securitisation theory and scholarship on differential inclusion, while seeking to integrate them into a single analytical framework centred on the nexus of Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity.

Rather than treating these dimensions as separate or sequential, the study argues that they are mutually constitutive. Frontex's operational practices participate in the production of identity categories; these identity processes, in turn, shape the conditions

under which claims to inclusivity are negotiated; and struggles over inclusion feed back into the legitimisation and contestation of security practices.

Empirically, the article focuses on southeast Europe as a particularly revealing site for examining these interconnections. By analysing both the Greek - Aegean and Western Balkans contexts, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of externalised and multi-level border regimes. Theoretically, it advances an integrated perspective that reframes border security beyond technocratic or purely geopolitical logics, treating questions of belonging and rights as constitutive rather than residual elements of European border governance.

3. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Key theories and concepts

This article draws on three interrelated theoretical strands from critical border and security studies in order to analyse Frontex's role in southeast Europe.

The first strand is rooted in *critical approaches to border security*. Building on Didier Bigo's (2014) work on the "(in)securitization" of borders, borders are understood not as fixed territorial lines but as dynamic, performed and dispersed practices. Bigo distinguishes between different professional universes of border control (military/navy, border guards/police, and database analysts) and shows how these universes generate distinct practical senses of what "*controlling the border*" means. These practices actively construct threats, categories of suspicion and hierarchies of mobility. Complementary insights from Vaughan-Williams (2009, 2015) emphasise the spatial and temporal expansion of borders through remote control, anticipatory risk management and externalisation. In this perspective, Frontex does not simply implement a pre-given security mandate; it participates in the continuous production of border security knowledge and practice.

The second strand focuses on *identity dynamics and bordering processes*. Borders are conceptualised as intimately linked to processes of identity formation: they do not merely reflect pre-existing national or European identities but actively produce and stabilise them through practices of differentiation, othering and belonging. In the EU context, the construction of the "*migrant Other*" frequently relies on racialised, gendered and culturalised representations that contrast a threatened European self with external sources of risk (Sachseder, Stachowitsch & Binder, 2022). Securitisation theory further illuminates how mobility is framed as an existential security issue, justifying exceptional measures and the expansion of control apparatuses. In southeast Europe, these dynamics are complicated by the region's ambiguous position as both inside and outside formal EU borders, generating layered and sometimes contradictory forms of national, regional and European identification.

The third strand centres on the concept of *inclusivity*, approached through the lens of *differential inclusion*. Inclusivity is not understood as an ideal of open borders, but as the differentiated ways in which people on the move are granted, denied or conditionally afforded access to rights, protection and recognition within border regimes. Contemporary border control rarely operates through absolute exclusion; rather, it produces hierarchical forms of belonging in which some subjects are partially included under conditions of vulnerability, temporariness or surveillance (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; De Genova, 2013).

In the EU context, formal commitments to asylum, non-refoulement and the protection of vulnerable persons coexist with operational practices that generate tensions

between normative frameworks and practical outcomes. Inclusivity is therefore treated as a contested field shaped by legal frameworks, operational cultures, political priorities and the agency of migrants, civil society organisations and local communities.

3.2. Theoretical model

On the basis of these theoretical resources, the article proposes an integrated analytical model that treats *Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity as mutually constitutive dimensions* of border security.

In this model Frontex's operational practices (risk analysis, screening, joint operations and cooperation arrangements) actively participate in the production of identity categories and hierarchies of belonging;

These identity processes, in turn, shape the conditions under which claims to inclusivity are negotiated, constrained or enabled;

Struggles over inclusion and rights feed back into the legitimisation, contestation and reconfiguration of security practices.

Rather than viewing security, identity and inclusivity as sequential or hierarchical, the model posits them as interdependent and co-constitutive. Border security in southeast Europe is therefore understood as an assemblage in which operational logics, processes of othering and belonging, and contested forms of differential inclusion continuously interact and reshape one another (Bigo, 2014; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013).

This integrated framework allows the analysis to move beyond purely institutional or technocratic accounts of Frontex and beyond identity-focused studies that underplay the role of operational actors. It provides the conceptual tools for examining how the Agency contributes to the reframing of border security when questions of identity and inclusivity are placed at the centre of inquiry.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research paradigm

This study is situated within a *qualitative and interpretive research paradigm*, informed by critical social science. It adopts a constructivist orientation that understands border security, identity and inclusivity as socially produced and discursively mediated phenomena rather than as objective or purely technical realities. The analysis is guided by critical border studies and securitisation theory, which emphasise the productive power of practices, discourses and institutional arrangements in shaping categories of risk, belonging and rights.

4.2. Methods and techniques

The research employs a combination of the following qualitative methods and techniques:

- Critical document analysis of official Frontex reports, risk analyses, operational guidelines, working arrangements and EU policy documents;
- Systematic review and critical synthesis of secondary academic literature in the fields of critical border studies, security studies and migration governance;
- Discourse-oriented analysis of how identity categories, othering processes and claims to inclusivity are constructed in institutional and scholarly texts;

- Comparative case analysis of two key operational theatres in southeast Europe (the Greek/Aegean border and the Western Balkans route).

No primary data collection (interviews, ethnographic observation or surveys) was undertaken. The study relies on the triangulation of existing empirical research, policy documents and theoretical contributions.

4.3. Research design

The research follows a *qualitative, multi-case, interpretive design*. It combines a broad theoretical mapping of the Frontex – identity - inclusivity nexus with a focused comparative examination of two strategically selected operational contexts in southeast Europe. The design is both exploratory and analytical: it seeks to refine conceptual understanding while generating empirically grounded insights into the interplay of security practices, identity dynamics and inclusivity challenges.

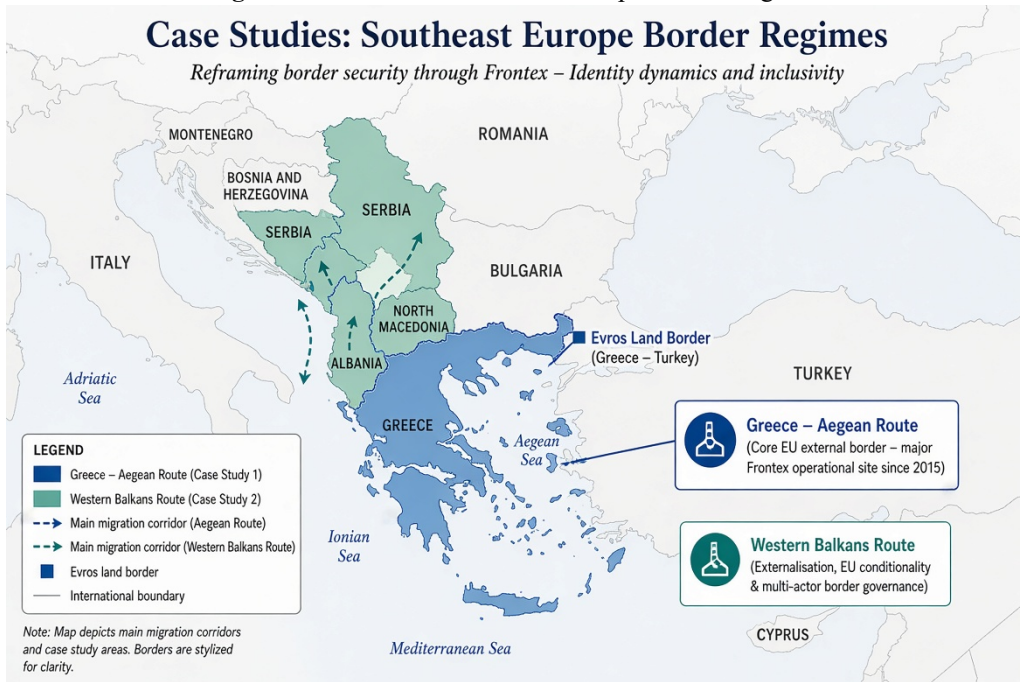
4.4. Case study

Two primary cases were selected on the basis of theoretical relevance and empirical significance:

1) *Greece – Aegean route* (including the islands and the Evros land border), representing a core EU external border and a major site of Frontex operational activity since 2015;

2) *The Western Balkans route* (with particular attention to Albania, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina), representing a key space of externalisation, EU conditionality and multi-actor border governance beyond the formal external borders of the Union.

Figure 1. Case studies Southeast Europe Border Regimes



Source: Authors' creation

These cases were chosen because they illustrate different yet complementary configurations of Frontex engagement, identity negotiation and inclusivity challenges within the broader southeast European border regime.

4.5. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected primarily from:

- Official Frontex publications and risk analysis reports;
- EU legislative and policy documents related to the European Border and Coast Guard;
- Peer-reviewed academic literature on Frontex, critical border studies, securitisation and differential inclusion;
- Reports by civil society organisations, investigative journalists and fundamental rights bodies documenting operational practices and rights-related concerns.

Table 1. Data collection criteria

No.	Type of Source	Description	Purpose in the Research
1	Official Frontex publications and risk analysis reports	Risk Analysis Reports, operational guidelines, annual reports, situational assessments	Primary data on Frontex operational practices, risk construction and knowledge production
2	Regulations on the European Border and Coast Guard, Integrated Border Management policies, status agreements	Institutional and legal framework of Frontex mandate and external cooperation	EU legislative and policy documents
3	Critical border studies, securitisation theory, differential inclusion scholarship	Theoretical foundation and analytical lens	Peer-reviewed academic literature
4	Civil society, investigative and fundamental rights reports	Reports by NGOs, investigative journalists and fundamental rights bodies	Documentation of operational practices, rights violations and inclusivity challenges

Source: Authors' creation

The analysis proceeded through thematic coding and critical interpretation. Documents and secondary sources were examined for the ways in which they construct security, identity categories and conditions of inclusion or exclusion. Comparative

analysis across the two cases was used to identify both common patterns and context-specific variations in the interplay of the three central dimensions of the study.

4.6. Methodological limitations

The study has several important limitations. First, it relies exclusively on secondary literature, policy documents and existing empirical research rather than original fieldwork. As a result, it cannot fully capture the micro-level interactions, informal practices and subjective experiences of Frontex officers, national authorities, people on the move or local communities. Second, the availability and transparency of operational data remain limited, constraining the depth of insight into certain practices. Third, the focus on two operational theatres, while analytically productive, does not exhaust the diversity of Frontex activities across other borders. These limitations are acknowledged and are used to delimit the scope of the claims advanced.

4.7. Ethical considerations

As the research is based entirely on publicly available documents and secondary academic sources, it does not involve direct interaction with human participants and therefore raises no issues of informed consent or primary data protection. Nevertheless, ethical sensitivity has been maintained in the interpretation of materials concerning vulnerable populations and contested border practices. The analysis strives to avoid the reproduction of stigmatising or securitising representations and to treat questions of rights, vulnerability and differential inclusion with analytical care and critical reflexivity

5. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

5.1. Presentation and analysis of the empirical material

The analysis draws on a critical synthesis of Frontex official documents, EU policy texts, secondary academic literature and civil society reports. The material is examined through the integrated theoretical lens developed earlier, focusing on the interplay between operational practices, identity dynamics and inclusivity. Findings are organised around the three secondary research questions and illustrated through the two selected operational theatres: the Greek/Aegean border and the Western Balkans route.

5.2. Frontex operational practices and the production of border security knowledge

Frontex's activities in southeast Europe have evolved from limited coordination roles toward sustained operational engagement. In Greece, the Agency has been heavily involved in border surveillance, screening, debriefing, registration and situational awareness through EUROSUR, particularly on the Aegean islands and along the Evros land border. Screening materials and nationality determination practices supported by Frontex have become integral to the processing of mixed migration flows (Pollozek & Passoth, 2024).

In the Western Balkans, Frontex's role has expanded through working arrangements, status agreements, liaison officers, capacity-building projects and the deployment of joint operations on the territory of partner countries (Albania, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina). These arrangements contribute to the diffusion of an EU border-control culture beyond the formal external borders of the Union (Sarantaki, 2024; Pavicevic, 2025).

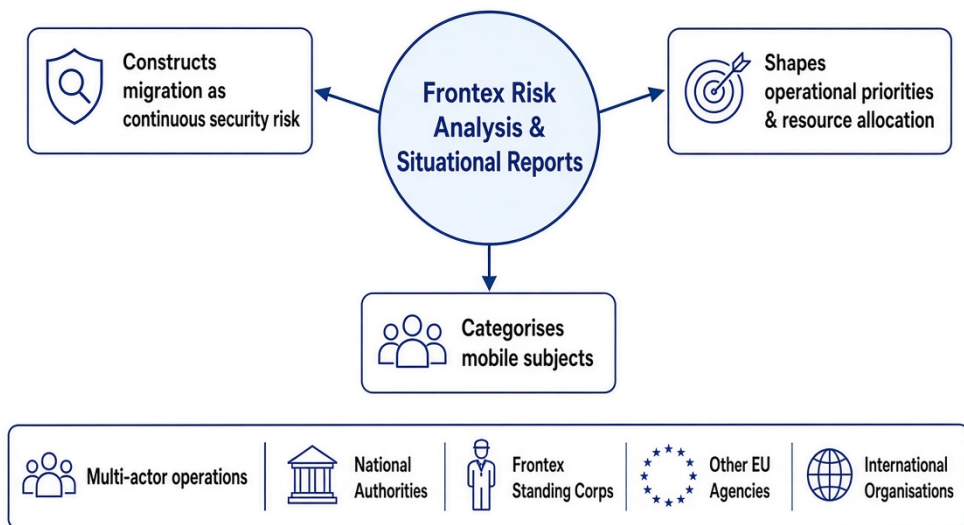
Sarantaki (2023) examines the emergence of a new European border control culture, highlighting the increasing role of Frontex in shaping border governance and securitisation practices across the EU.

Huysmans (2006) argues that migration and asylum have increasingly been framed as security issues within the European Union.

Across both contexts, risk analysis emerges as a central mechanism. Frontex risk assessments and situational reports actively construct migration as a continuous security risk requiring monitoring, anticipation and intervention. This knowledge production is not neutral: it shapes operational priorities, resource allocation and the categorisation of mobile subjects. The multi-actor nature of operations - involving national authorities, Frontex standing corps officers, other EU agencies and international organisations - creates overlapping mandates and frequently unclear lines of responsibility, complicating both effectiveness and accountability

Figure 2. Risk analysis situational reports

Risk Analysis as Central Mechanism in Frontex Operations



Overlapping mandates → unclear responsibility

Source: Authors' creation

5.3. Identity dynamics: securitisation, othering and layered belonging

The analysis confirms that Frontex-supported practices participate in processes of identity formation and othering. Risk analysis reports and operational communications frequently rely on racialised and gendered representations that differentiate a protected European self from externalised sources of risk (Sachseder, Stachowitsch & Binder, 2022). Migrants are alternatively framed as potential threats (linked to irregularity, criminality or terrorism) or as vulnerable objects of humanitarian concern, while European border guards are associated with professionalism and the defence of European space.

In Greece, these dynamics reinforce narratives of the country as a frontline Member State defending the external borders of the European Union. In the Western Balkans, identity negotiations are more complex. Cooperation with Frontex is often presented as evidence of Europeanisation and readiness for accession, yet it simultaneously raises questions of national sovereignty and local ownership. Borders in the region thus become sites where national, regional (Balkan) and European identities are performed, contested and renegotiated.

Local perceptions further complicate institutional discourses. Communities living near major migration routes experience borders not only as sites of control but also as spaces of economic opportunity, social encounter and moral negotiation. Belonging appears as a relational and contested outcome rather than a stable attribute, produced through the interaction of institutional regimes, security infrastructures and everyday practices.

5.4. Inclusivity challenges and differential inclusion

Formal commitments to asylum, non-refoulement and the protection of vulnerable persons coexist with significant practical constraints. In both the Aegean and Western Balkans contexts, civil society organisations and independent monitors have documented obstacles to effective access to asylum procedures, including physical barriers, deterrent practices, pushbacks and the rapid removal of persons before protection needs can be adequately assessed.

Vulnerability assessments are frequently constrained by time pressure, limited specialised staff and the prioritisation of security and identification tasks. The result is a regime of *differential inclusion*: rights are neither fully granted nor fully denied, but selectively distributed according to administrative categories, nationality, gender, age and perceived deservingness (Pollozek & Passoth, 2024). Screening and registration procedures supported by Frontex participate in this sorting process, even when final decisions rest with national authorities.

Civil society actors play a crucial counterbalancing role by documenting rights violations, providing legal assistance and advocating protection-sensitive approaches. However, they face increasing restrictions, including limited access to operational areas and, in some cases, the criminalisation of assistance. The interaction between Frontex, national authorities and civil society thus constitutes a key arena in which the meaning of inclusivity is continuously negotiated.

Table 2. The interaction between Frontex, national authorities and civil society

Aspect	Role / Contribution of Civil Society	Challenges Faced
Documentation	Documenting rights violations	Limited access to operational areas
Legal support	Providing legal assistance	Increasing restrictions
Advocacy	Advocating protection-sensitive approaches	Criminalisation of assistance (in some cases)
Overall interaction	Key arena for negotiating the meaning of inclusivity	Interaction with Frontex and national authorities

Source: Authors' creation

5.5. Comparative insights from the case studies

Comparing the Greek - Aegean and Western Balkans cases reveals both common patterns and important contextual differences.

In both settings, Frontex operates as a key node in a multi-level border regime that combines national, European and externalised elements. Risk analysis, screening and joint operational cultures travel across these spaces, contributing to a degree of standardisation in how mobility is categorised and managed.

Identity dynamics, however, take distinct forms. In Greece, the emphasis lies on the defence of the EU's external border and the country's role as a frontline state. In the Western Balkans, identity negotiations revolve more strongly around the tension between EU-oriented Europeanisation and national sovereignty, as well as around the region's ambiguous position as both inside and outside the European security space.

Inclusivity challenges are present in both contexts, yet the legal and institutional frameworks differ. Greece operates under full EU asylum and fundamental rights obligations, while Western Balkan partners are bound by a combination of national law, international obligations and EU conditionality linked to accession processes. Across both cases, the interplay of operational logic, identity processes and inclusivity deficits points to the need for a reframed understanding of border security—one that treats rights, belonging and differential inclusion as constitutive rather than secondary dimensions of border governance.

Figure 3. Comparative insights Greece – Aegean vs. Western Balkans

Comparative Insights: Greece–Aegean vs Western Balkans

	Greece – Aegean Route	Western Balkans Route
 1) Frontex Role	 Key node in multi-level border regime (national + European + externalised).	 Key node in multi-level border regime (national + European + externalised).
 2) Identity Dynamics	 Defence of EU external border Frontline Member State.	 Europeanisation vs national sovereignty / Ambiguous inside-outside position.
 3) Inclusivity Framework	 Full EU asylum & fundamental rights obligations.	 National law + international obligations + EU conditionality.



Common pattern: Standardisation of risk analysis, screening and operational cultures.

Source: Authors' creation

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Interpretation of the results

The findings demonstrate that Frontex cannot be adequately understood solely as a technical or coordinating instrument of border control. In southeast Europe, the Agency operates at the intersection of three interdependent dimensions: operational security practices, identity dynamics, and struggles over inclusivity. These dimensions mutually shape one another.

Frontex's risk analysis, screening procedures, joint operations and cooperation arrangements actively participate in the production of identity categories. Through the classification of mobile subjects according to nationality, risk profiles and vulnerability assessments, the Agency contributes to processes of othering that reinforce distinctions between a protected European self and external sources of insecurity. At the same time, the diffusion of an EU border-control culture into the Western Balkans reshapes regional and national identity negotiations, linking Europeanisation with security alignment.

Inclusivity is not external to these processes. The same operational mechanisms that generate security knowledge and identity boundaries also determine the conditions under which people on the move can access asylum, protection and recognition. Differential inclusion emerges as the dominant mode of governing mobility: rights are neither fully granted nor fully denied, but selectively distributed according to administrative categories and operational priorities. The result is a border regime in which security, identity and inclusivity are co-constituted rather than sequential or hierarchical.

6.2. Comparison with the existing literature

The results both confirm and extend key insights from critical border studies. Consistent with Bigo's (2014) analysis of (in)securitization practices, the findings show that Frontex participates in the continuous production of border security knowledge rather than merely implementing a pre-given mandate. The observed role of risk analysis and screening in constructing categories of suspicion and mobility aligns with earlier work on the productive power of border control (Vaughan-Williams, 2015; Pollozek & Passoth, 2024).

The study also corroborates research on the racialised and gendered dimensions of Frontex's representational regimes (Sachse, Stachowitsch & Binder, 2022). However, it goes further by systematically linking these identity processes to the practical conditions of inclusivity. While previous literature has extensively analysed either securitisation and othering or rights deficits and differential inclusion, fewer studies have examined their mutual constitution within the same analytical framework.

In relation to the southeast European context, the findings support existing accounts of externalisation and the transformation of the Western Balkans into a buffer zone (Sarantaki, 2024; Pavicevic, 2025). At the same time, they highlight the additional complexity introduced by enlargement conditionality and layered identity negotiations, dimensions that remain less developed in studies focused primarily on core EU Member States or maritime routes.

6.3. Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretically, the analysis advances an integrated framework that treats Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity as mutually constitutive. This approach moves beyond institutionalist or purely legal analyses of the Agency and beyond identity-focused studies that underplay the role of operational actors. It underscores the value of combining insights from critical security studies, border studies and scholarship on differential inclusion.

Practically, the findings carry several implications for policy and operational practice. First, fundamental rights and inclusivity considerations need to be integrated into the design and evaluation of operations from the outset, rather than treated as subsequent compliance checks. This requires stronger independent monitoring, clearer lines of accountability in multi-actor operations, and the operational prioritisation of effective access to asylum procedures.

Second, cooperation with third countries in southeast Europe should move beyond a predominantly security-oriented logic. Capacity-building and joint operations need to be accompanied by robust safeguards for protection-sensitive migration management, including systematic vulnerability assessment, legal assistance and meaningful engagement with civil society.

Third, greater transparency regarding operational data, serious incident reporting and the practical implementation of fundamental rights obligations is essential. Without improved transparency, the gap between formal commitments and operational realities is likely to persist.

Finally, policy debates would benefit from recognising the identity effects of current practices. Securitising discourses and othering representations not only shape public perceptions but also influence the political feasibility of more inclusive approaches.

6.4. Answers to the research questions

In response to the central research question - how Frontex contributes to the reframing of border security in southeast Europe when identity dynamics and inclusivity are placed at the centre of analysis - the study shows that the Agency functions as a key site where security practices, identity processes and struggles over inclusion are continuously negotiated and reconfigured.

Regarding the first secondary question, Frontex's operational practices, risk analyses and cooperation arrangements both shape and are shaped by identity dynamics. They participate in the construction of the "*migrant Other*," reinforce distinctions between European and non-European subjectivities, and intersect with national and regional identity negotiations in the Western Balkans.

Regarding the second secondary question, claims to inclusivity are negotiated under significant constraints. While formal rights frameworks exist, operational realities—screening pressures, pushbacks, limited vulnerability assessment and blurred accountability—produce differential inclusion rather than consistent access to protection.

Regarding the third secondary question, the theoretical implication is the need for an integrated analytical framework that treats security, identity and inclusivity as co-constitutive. The policy implication is that a more comprehensive and rights-aware approach to border governance requires embedding protection considerations into operational design, strengthening accountability and transparency, and recognising the identity effects of current practices.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined the reframing of border security in southeast Europe through the interconnected lenses of Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity. The analysis yields three central findings.

First, Frontex functions as more than a coordinating or technical agency. Through its risk analysis, screening practices, joint operations and cooperation arrangements with third countries, it actively participates in the production of security knowledge, the

categorisation of mobile subjects and the diffusion of an EU border-control culture beyond the formal external borders of the Union. In both the Greek - Aegean and Western Balkans contexts, the Agency operates as a key node in a multi-level and increasingly externalised border regime.

Second, identity dynamics are constitutive of border security rather than secondary to it. Securitising discourses and operational practices generate and stabilise distinctions between a protected European self and racialised, gendered or culturally marked others. In southeast Europe these processes intersect with national and regional identity negotiations, particularly in candidate and potential candidate countries where cooperation with Frontex is linked to Europeanisation and accession prospects. Borders thereby become sites where multiple layers of belonging - national, regional and European - are performed and contested.

Third, inclusivity remains a persistent and structurally constrained challenge. Formal commitments to asylum access, fundamental rights and the protection of vulnerable persons coexist with operational practices that produce differential inclusion, limited access to procedures and accountability gaps. The multi-actor nature of border management in the region complicates responsibility and monitoring, leaving significant discrepancies between normative frameworks and lived outcomes at the border.

Collectively, these findings support the argument that an adequate understanding of contemporary border security requires the simultaneous analysis of operational actors such as Frontex, the identity processes they participate in, and the conditions of inclusion and exclusion they help to generate.

The article makes three main original contributions.

Theoretically, it advances an integrated analytical framework that treats Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity as mutually constitutive rather than analytically separate domains. This approach moves beyond institutionalist or purely legal analyses of the Agency and beyond identity-focused studies that underplay the role of operational actors.

Empirically, the focus on southeast Europe highlights the importance of examining border regimes in spaces that are simultaneously inside and outside formal EU membership. The region's position as an external border zone, a transit corridor and a site of enlargement conditionality reveals dynamics of externalisation, Europeanisation and identity negotiation that are less visible in analyses confined to core Member States.

Conceptually, the study underscores the value of combining insights from critical security studies, border studies and scholarship on differential inclusion. By tracing how security practices produce identity effects and shape the conditions of inclusion, it offers a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary European border governance.

The present study has several limitations. It relies primarily on secondary literature, policy documents and existing empirical research rather than original fieldwork. While this approach allows for a broad synthetic analysis, it cannot fully capture the micro-level interactions, informal practices and subjective experiences of the diverse actors involved in border management - Frontex officers, national border authorities, people on the move and local communities.

Additionally, the focus on southeast Europe, while analytically productive, leaves open the question of how comparable dynamics unfold in other operational theatres, such as the Central Mediterranean or the eastern land borders. The limited transparency of certain operational data further constrains the depth of insight into specific practices.

Future research would benefit from multi-sited ethnographic work that includes Frontex officers, national border authorities, people on the move and local communities. Such research could illuminate the informal practices and everyday negotiations that remain less visible in document-based analysis.

Comparative studies across different Frontex operational areas would further test and refine the integrated framework proposed here. Longitudinal research examining the evolving effects of status agreements and joint operations in the Western Balkans would also be valuable, particularly as the Agency's extraterritorial presence continues to expand.

Finally, greater attention to the perspectives and agency of people on the move themselves would enrich understandings of how identity and inclusivity are experienced and contested from below.

On the basis of the analysis, three broad policy orientations can be suggested.

First, fundamental rights and protection-sensitive approaches should be embedded more systematically into the design, implementation and evaluation of Frontex operations. This includes stronger independent monitoring, clearer accountability mechanisms in multi-actor settings, and the operational prioritisation of effective access to asylum procedures.

Second, cooperation with Western Balkan partners should balance security objectives with robust safeguards for inclusivity. Capacity-building and joint operations ought to be accompanied by measurable protection benchmarks, systematic vulnerability assessment and meaningful engagement with civil society organisations.

Third, greater transparency regarding operational practices, serious incident reporting and the practical application of fundamental rights standards is necessary to enable effective parliamentary, judicial and public scrutiny. Without improved transparency, the gap between formal commitments and operational realities is likely to persist.

In conclusion, reframing border security through the nexus of Frontex, identity dynamics and inclusivity offer both an analytical and a practical pathway toward a more comprehensive and rights-aware approach to European border governance in southeast Europe and beyond.

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