

# **Creating Europe from the Margins**

Mobilities and Racism in  
Postcolonial Europe

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## **Chapter 11**

### **When the Margins Enter the Centre**

The Documentary *Along the Borders of Turkey*  
and Its YouTube Comments as Conflicting  
Constructions of Europeanity

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# 11 When the Margins Enter the Centre

## The Documentary *Along the Borders of Turkey* and Its YouTube Comments as Conflicting Constructions of Europeanity

Nico Carpentier and Vaia Doudaki

### Introduction

Europe has many meanings, and there are many approaches to understanding Europe. Even when common sense often points to its material characteristics, such as a land mass or the people living in this territory, the many contingencies and ambiguities – even at this material level – raise questions about how Europe is discursively constructed. There are also many answers to these questions, as there are many different approaches in discourse studies, but here we want to foreground a discourse-theoretical perspective, inspired by Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory. This macro-textual approach uses a definition of discourse which is closely related to ideology and looks at discourses as frameworks of intelligibility. Moreover, this discourse-theoretical approach allows us to theorize the struggles over the articulation of particular discourses and the struggles between different discourses for a hegemonic position. This particular discourse-theoretical approach was selected because it is highly suited for a reflection on Europeanity. Europeanity – the *idea* of Europe, and the ideas about the features and qualities of being European<sup>1</sup> – has no stable essence; it is a deeply contested concept, with a long history of diverging articulations, as we will discuss in the theoretical part of this chapter, first mapping out the different discursive constructions of Europeanity, and then zooming in on some of its hegemonic or semi-hegemonic articulations, especially those related to benevolence.

This theoretical framework will then be used in a documentary case study. The reason behind the focus on media products is that the field of media plays a prominent role in the circulation of a diversity of competing discursive components that construct Europeanity. Two episodes of the documentary series *Along the Borders of Turkey*, produced and broadcast by the Dutch public broadcaster VPRO, will be studied for this purpose. These two episodes focus on Cyprus and Greece, two countries that demarcate European borders and their complexities in specific ways and invite a reflection on European identity and its contingencies. We are hence interested to see how these episodes contribute to particular constructions of Europeanity, via a dual problematization of Europe's margins and Europe's constitutive outsides – in this case, enacted by Turkey. These episodes reveal, in particular, the tensions and contradictions caused by different migration flows – with bodies

considered ‘strange to Europe’ and coming from/through Europe’s ‘margins’, crossing its permeable borders and entering European territory. Migration flows thus provide ample opportunity to better understand how particular articulations of the Europeanity discourse are made visible and get validated and/or discredited.

### **The Discursive Construction of Europeanity<sup>2</sup>**

Different concepts have been used to capture what it means to be European: European identity, Europeanity, Europeanness, Europeanism, Europeanization. However, they all assume that Europe can be constructed as distinct, also bringing in different constitutive ‘outsides’ that support this European particularity. While some of these concepts are articulated in relatively open and contingent ways, other articulations incorporate strong essentialist claims.

Many of the discourses that articulate ‘being European’ are deeply essentialist, bringing in the notion of European values, which fixate Europe as “a paragon of international virtues: a community of values held up by Europeans and non-Europeans alike as an exemplar for all to emulate” (Judt 2005, 798). A critical summary of this essentialist position is found in Ponzanesi and Blaagaard, who write that “many people [...] want to see it [Europe] as an ideal, the cradle of the Enlightenment and of scientific revolutions, and therefore of Western modernity and democracy” (2011, 1).

More relationist approaches exist, nonetheless. For instance, Delanty argues that Europeanity is (and has been) constructed in antagonistic relationships with constitutive outsides, and addresses the need for critique:

there appears to be widespread consensus today that the cultural foundation of Europe is deeply rooted in Latin Christendom, humanist values and liberal democracy (Kundera 1984). I hope to be able to show that these beliefs are ungrounded, or at best mystifying [...].

(1995, 2)

Non-essentialist approaches point to the diversity of the constitutive outsides – and their contingencies – that have played a role in the history of the discursive construction of Europe. Colonialism, for instance, has been a major constitutive outside in the construction of Europeanity, creating “the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures” (Said 1995, 7). A second constitutive outside of Europeanity is Islam. The long-term threat of the conquest of Europe by Muslims consolidated Christianity as a “powerful myth of legitimization” (Delanty 1995, 26), which obscured much of the internal diversity. This constitutive outside resonates until today, featuring for example in the discussions concerning the European identity of Turkey (Aydin-Düzgit 2012, 34). A third constitutive outside that was particularly important during the twentieth century, and is regaining prominence with the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, is the undemocratic Other, partly internal (e.g. Nazism/fascism (Delanty 1995, 111)) and partly external to Europe (e.g. Soviet Union/Russia (Paasi 2001, 12)).

This brings us to the notions of European culture(s), European identity and the European imagined community, which are – generally speaking – closer to the more relationist approaches. Of course, the relationship between identity and space is complex, as it is mediated through a variety of discursive constructions. One starting point to reflect about this relationship is through the concept of the nation, which authors such as Anderson (1996, 4) understand as a cultural artefact. This immediately brings in a logic of contingency. As Wodak et al. (2009, 186–87) argue, there is not one national identity; rather the signifier of the nation is articulated in a variety of ways, and integrated into a variety of discourses, that all struggle over the nation's meaning. In other words, national identity is not a static concept but is always open to contestation, re-articulation and struggle. The nation has a spatial-discursive component, as, for instance, the notion of the homeland indicates, but when the signifier of the nation becomes articulated with the state, we enter the realm of nationalism, which combines the nation-as-people and the nation-(as-)state, as Billig (1995, 24) argues.

Place-based identities are not restricted to the level of the state, though, nor are they mutually exclusive (Galpin 2017, 22). Regional and subnational identities coexist, in hierarchical or non-hierarchical ways, with supranational, continental or pan-continental identities, of which the European identity is one example. Again, we find here a sense of belonging (to a community) and sharing – similar spaces, histories, cultures, religions, languages or other elements – but this time in relation to an entire continent, with all the diversity that this entails. Even though some authors maintain that a European identity does not exist (see e.g. Paasi 2001), it is arguably – like other place-based identifications – an object of discursive struggle (Aydin-Düzgit 2012, 8), further complicated by the existence (and active identity-building interventions) of the European Union.

### **Discursive Struggles over Europeanity**

The above discussion on Europeanity argues that its related signifiers are objects of political struggle and that their meanings are not stable and given, but constructed. This implies that there is not one ‘correct’ definition – or discursive load – of Europeanity. Several, very different, meanings of Europeanity co-exist, with different levels of societal acceptance and dominance, sometimes close to a more hegemonic position, while in other cases they can be considered more counter-hegemonic. This brings us back to the discourse-theoretical framework that we are using in this text, as this framework supports a reflection about how discourses engage in struggles with each other, sometimes focused on the meaning of a particular signifier (for instance: What does it mean to be European?).

Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory emphasizes the importance of the political and the ways that discourses engage in struggles in their attempts to attain hegemonic positions over other discourses, and, thus, to stabilize and sediment meanings (Laclau 1990). Sedimentation occurs when a hegemonic order is established, resulting in the forgetting of its constructed nature, and in its articulation as natural and objective (Mouffe 2005, 17).

Still, sedimentations are always temporal, while “[h]egemony is always possible but can never be total” (Sayyid and Zac 1998, 262). As Mouffe formulated it: “Every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, i.e. practices which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install other forms of hegemony” (2005, 18). A second implication is that not everything has been hegemonized and sedimented. In some societal fields, there is simply an ongoing struggle, without hegemonic closure. As contemporary societies are characterized by diversity, it is also not surprising that a multitude of discourses remain engaged in struggles, unable to achieve even a temporary hegemonic position.

In the case of the Europeanity discourse, there is an ongoing struggle for hegemony that is highly relevant here. This is a struggle about what is European, and what Europe is. As the previous section of this chapter already discussed, there are a wide variety of essentialist and relationist articulations of the Europeanity discourse. In particular, the essentialist component is worth additional scrutiny, as the constructions of Europeanity through the European spirit and European values (including democratic values) are indicative of what could still be called a hegemonic – or quasi-hegemonic – articulation of Europeanity, namely the idea that Europe, as the cradle of Enlightenment, is a moral beacon for the rest of the world. When analysing the literature on the essentialist articulations of Europeanity, it is remarkable how omnipresent positive values are, and how rarely Europeanity is constructed *from within Europe* through more problematic practices and values (e.g. imperialism, militarism, racism or exceptionalism). Even though the more relationist articulations of Europeanity might be seen as more open and able to deconstruct these rather selective articulations of Europeanity, at the same time the constitutive outsides – whose importance can be identified through the relationist approaches – can also be used to support this construction of Europe as the global centre of Enlightenment. For instance, orientalist discourses ‘protect’ this benevolent construction of Europeanity by constructing the Orient as inferior, also at the level of morality and values. These othering discourses are also embodied, as they impact on and are strengthened by racialized, gendered and classed discourses of Europeanity and non-Europeanity, as, for instance, Keinz and Lewicki (2019) argue.

Benevolence, broadly defined “as a particular crystallization of humanitarian thought” (Tiffin and Gilbert 2008, 5), is of special relevance to this project, as it is at the core of the discursive struggles concerning the construction of Europeanity. Benevolence “bespeaks goodwill, but it also speaks inequality; it involves the willingness and power to give, but it also involves demands and obligations that are sometimes complicated and unwelcome” (Tiffin and Gilbert 2008, 1). The multi-layered nature, ambiguity and contingency of benevolence, and its grounding in a mixture of universalist humanitarian ideals, unequal relations between benefactor and beneficiary, and practices of oppression and exploitation throughout colonial and European history make it a focal point worthy of scholarly attention.

Finally, it is important to stress that the emphasis on the discursive constructions of Europeanity should not be understood as an argument in favour of the position that there is only discourse. As argued extensively elsewhere (Carpentier 2017), the

discursive and the material are intensively entangled, locked in permanent interactions. In the non-hierarchical approach – between the discursive and the material – that we are advocating here, this implies that the discursive is very much needed – and inescapable – to provide meaning to our world, but that the material also has the capacity (and agency) to dislocate (see Torfing 1999, 148), that is, to disrupt discourses.

In the case of the Europeanity discourse, the materiality of these constructions is often emphasized in the relevant literature (see e.g., Harmsen and Wilson 2000, 13; Olsen 2002, 923–24), but in most cases, the material is analysed without regard for the discursive, or for the discursive-material entanglement. In this chapter, we want to argue that material events can dislocate the Europeanity discourse in many different ways. One particular area, on which we want to focus here, is how the material events related to refugeedom potentially play a dislocatory role by disrupting the semi-hegemonic articulation of Europeanity as synonymous with civilization, tolerance and human rights. The arrival of bodies considered foreign in European territory has been feeding into an articulation of a Europeanity discourse that constructs the refugee-Other as a threat or even enemy. This articulation defines Europe as the centre and other parts of the world as margins and periphery and brings in “isolationism, cultural segregation and national purity” (Junuzi 2019, 143–44; see also Wodak and Boukala 2015). At the same time, we also want to analyse how the semi-hegemonic articulation of Europeanity as benevolent resists the dislocation, and how discursive protective strategies are deployed, rendering this dislocation a site for struggles over Europeanity.

#### *Along the Borders of Turkey: Refugeedom and the Margins of Europe*

There are many (different parts of the) public spheres (or spaces) that allow for the circulation of the diversity of competing discursive components that make up Europeanity. Of course, various societal fields function as public spheres (or spaces), but, as already mentioned, the field of the media plays a prominent role in the circulation of particular articulations of the Europeanity discourse (and many other discourses). Within this vast media field, we can find many different types of media organizations and communicative practices, which sometimes overlap. Our case study consists of two episodes of the Dutch documentary series *Along the Borders of Turkey* (2012), which was posted on YouTube by its producer and broadcaster, the Dutch public broadcaster VPRO. The specificity of YouTube (Benson 2017; Burgess and Green 2018) adds extra layers to these episodes of the documentary film, produced by a mainstream media organization; not only were subtitles added in various languages (although the Greek and Turkish languages were not included), but viewers could also comment on the episodes.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the VPRO web team could respond to comments, which they did in about a dozen cases.

*Along the Borders of Turkey* (2012) is a VPRO documentary series co-funded by the European Union, with Bram Vermeulen as its presenter (VPRO 2012). It consists of four episodes, focusing on four countries: Greece, Syria, Iraq and Cyprus. To allow for an in-depth analysis and in alignment with our expertise, we have

chosen to analyse only two episodes, on Cyprus and Greece. We will analyse the Cypriot episode first – even though it was broadcast last – because it refers to a much older refugee crisis (from the end of the 1950s to the 1970s).

These episodes and the comments they generate are particularly relevant for our discussion, because in the opening sentences of each episode, the series sets up a dichotomy between Turkey and Europe, aligning the documentary's presenter with Europe, and Turkey and its border with Europe's margins: "We travel along the borders of Turkey. The buffer zone between a Europe in crisis and a Middle East in chaos. What do these borders say about the Turks, and about us?" (0:10). Through a discourse-theoretical analysis (Carpentier 2017) of the episodes and their comments, we can better understand how Europeanity is constructed – through these media practices – and how its hegemonies and semi-hegemonies are either contested or protected.

#### *Along the Borders of Turkey: 'The Last Wall' (Episode 4)*

The last of the four episodes of the documentary series *Along the Borders of Turkey* (see YouTube 2017b) focuses on the so-called Cyprus Problem, a series of violent conflicts in the second half of the twentieth century that have deeply affected the islanders and left the island divided into a Southern part – the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus – and a Northern part – the de facto Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, recognized only by Turkey, and controlled by the Turkish army since 1974, violating international law. One important consequence of the different stages of this conflict was that large segments of the Turkish Cypriot community (in the 1960s and after 1974) and of the Greek Cypriot community (mostly after 1974) became internally displaced, with the Turkish Cypriots moving to the North and the Greek Cypriots to the South of Cyprus. Cyprus complicates the inside/Europe vs. outside/Turkey dichotomy, and its history is at the core of the discursive struggles over European identity, as Turkey's military presence in the North weighs heavily on the entire island, both discursively and materially. This complication is further enhanced by the fact that Cyprus joined the European Union in 2004 as a de facto divided island. While the whole of Cyprus is EU territory, and eligible Turkish Cypriots are considered EU citizens, EU law is suspended in areas where the internationally recognized government of the Republic of Cyprus does not exercise effective control (see European Union n.d.).

The opening shot of the documentary shows Turkish soldiers on the ferry from Turkey to Cyprus for a six-month tour of duty. The interview shows the Turkish claims on the North of the island:

*PRESENTER:* So it's [Cyprus] just like Turkey?

*SOLDIER 1:* Yes.

*PRESENTER:* But it's a different country.

*SOLDIER 1:* Yes, but we still belong together. That's just the way it is.

*PRESENTER:* Why are Turkish troops stationed there?

*SOLDIER 2:* To prevent the Greeks from entering Turkish territory (02:40).

Later in the episode, this position is repeated, but from the perspective of the Turkish Cypriot community, when the presenter says: “They [Turkish Cypriots] do worry about the constant influx of mainland Turks and about Turkey’s wish to turn Turkish Cyprus into a puppet state” (44:30). Discursively, Cypriots are frequently positioned as non-Turkish and thus European. This is done through the references to earlier phases of co-habitation, when one interviewee (named Christina) recounts how Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot women would sometimes breastfeed each other’s children (30:38). Earlier when a group of Turkish Cypriot youngsters is interviewed, and they are being asked who lived in the houses “before,” the answer is “Greeks and Turks, side by side” (11:32).

In addition, the Cypriotist ideology – summarized by the “Cyprus for the Cypriots” slogan – is prominently present in the documentary, for instance, when the documentary zooms in on Hüseyin and Nikos. Hüseyin is a Turkish Cypriot who lives in the North, in the house that belongs (or belonged) to Nikos, and which Nikos was forced to abandon; Nikos now lives in Limassol, a harbour city in the South. The two men still meet regularly. When they are sitting in front of the house, barbecuing *sheftalia* (a meat dish cooked in both the North and the South) (see Figure 11.1), Hüseyin says: “Turkish people come here and say they’re Cypriots. Give me a break. [They’re] not Cyprus people at all. Cyprus people, that’s me. Nikos and me” (21:07). Similarly, a former inhabitant of Varosha, a Greek Cypriot district of Famagusta (situated in the North), currently fenced off by the Turkish army,<sup>4</sup> says: “Cyprus is for Cypriots. No matter what language you are. No matter where you come from originally” (50:52).

Some of the YouTube comments reiterate this position – ‘andreas manicou’<sup>5</sup> for instance writes: “The old Cypriot guy. This is how every Cypriot should be. Understand his past and love his ‘mother’ country [Greece or Turkey] but above all remember he is a Cypriot.” At the same time, we see that the Cypriotist ideology is contested through Turkish and Greek nationalist positions. Some mock



Figure 11.1 Hüseyin and Nikos at the barbecue [image clip from documentary film – © VPRO].

the complex demographics in the North, as for instance ‘VLAD THE IMPALER’ does: “Too late man. You got the turkish peasants taking over in the North there. You asked for it, you got it. You guys have to deal with that. No one else.” Other nationalist voices claim exclusive legitimacy for their position, through references to history, culture or majoritarianism, and/or express their intolerance for the Other, as, for instance, ‘anil yüksel’ does when writing: “The Greek is a dog and should be treated like a dog.”

Importantly, the dislocation of internal refugeedom, and the traumas it has caused,<sup>6</sup> are thus articulated in the documentary to construct Cypriotness (and Europeanity), through the acknowledgement of a shared suffering. The documentary shows the limits of this intracommunal empathy, though, in two distinct ways. First, a number of Turkish Cypriot voices refer to the structural inequalities – e.g. at the economic level – behind the intracommunal relations (in the past and the present). In one example, in an interview with two managers of a holiday resort in the North – they are father and son – near the beach where the Turkish army landed in 1974, the father says, talking about Greek Cypriots: “They don’t accept us, as Cypriots and as partners. They like to dominate us. They like us to be their servant. To work for them” (43:50). Second, not all Cypriots are seen as welcoming towards people from the ‘other’ territory when visiting ‘their’ territory. Witnessing the visit of the Greek Cypriot Nikos to the North (where Nikos’s house is), a restaurant manager, who explains that he was injured as a child in the Cypriot village of Lefke,<sup>7</sup> clearly shows his dissatisfaction with Nikos’s presence:

<i>RESTAURANT MANAGER:</i>	Most of the Cypriot people are very civilized people. They [Greek Cypriots] are welcome now. But I won’t.
<i>PRESENTER:</i>	You won’t?
<i>MANAGER:</i>	I won’t
<i>PRESENTER:</i>	You won’t?
<i>PRESENTER:</i>	Most of them ... Most of them, they do. But I won’t. Because I’m Turk, you understand. I know what I went through with them. I got marks on my hand, from the bullets in 1974 (16:00).

Interestingly, the restaurant manager defines his position as a minority position, and invokes a Turkish nationalist discourse by labelling himself a ‘Turk’ (and not a ‘Turkish Cypriot’). Not only does this illustrate the presence of Turkish nationalism within the Turkish Cypriot community, but it also aligns the rejection of the Cypriot Other with Turkishness, and thus protects the construction of Cypriotness (and Europeanity) as tolerant. As mentioned earlier, the YouTube comments include such nationalist voices, making exclusive claims on the entire island (“Cyprus is turkish,” as ‘Jay Ski’ writes, or “NO GREEKS, NO PROBLEM” as ‘GreyWolf BozKurt’ exclaims), blaming the other community for the suffering, or simply insulting them.

At the same time, the construction of Europeanity has a more critical (and counter-hegemonic) component in the documentary. Europe, as such, is rarely discussed explicitly in this episode, even though the entire documentary series constructs Europe in juxtaposition with Turkey – invoking the constitutive outsides of Europe, of orientalism, Islam and malfunctioning democracy, as attached to Turkey – and implicitly embraces Cyprus as part of Europe, even when it is simultaneously defined as Europe’s periphery.<sup>8</sup> This construction of Cyprus as part of Europe is done, for instance, by mentioning that the Republic of Cyprus is a member of the European Union (48:14), and showing EU flags. One of the few explicit references to Europe (again equating it with the EU) occurs when a coffee shop owner in the North is preparing his coffee – where he symbolically mixes Greek Cypriot coffee with Turkish coffee (Figure 11.2) – and is asked to explain the difference. His response refers to the EU’s export rules, and uses a more bureaucratic approach to Europe (and the EU): “Their [Greek Cypriot] coffee is suitable for Europe. Our coffee isn’t. Do you understand? This is European coffee. And this is Turkish coffee. Sultan. That coffee is different” (46:27). This example echoes the contingency of Europe’s benevolence and democratic standards, on the one hand adhering to international law and protecting the Republic of Cyprus’s rights, not allowing direct trade with the North (until a lawful solution to the Cyprus Problem is agreed upon), and on the other hand, subjecting the Turkish Cypriots to isolation.

At the same time, the episode critiques the hegemonic or semi-hegemonic discourse of European benevolence and constructs Europe as indifferent. This counter-hegemonic construction comes from the Turkish Cypriot voices, which express a sense of abandonment by Europe and a lack of interest. Here, Cyprus, and in particular the North, becomes articulated as the periphery of Europe, which is neglected by the centre. Such responses also echo a critique against Europe’s constitutive Other, that of the colonial subject, given that Cyprus was a British protectorate and then a colony from 1878 to 1960, when the island gained its independence after the local (Greek Cypriot) population’s liberation struggle.



Figure 11.2 Cypriot coffees [image clip from documentary film – © VPRO].



Figure 11.3 Talking about Europe [image clip from documentary film – © VPRO].

For instance, a man, presumably a Turkish Cypriot, is filmed standing in front of a café, raising his hands in despair (Figure 11.3), and saying:

Who will save us now? We're about to disappear. Cypriots are going extinct. Who will come and save us? Is the EU going to save us now? Where is the EU now? Thanks to them, we can get a passport of the Republic of Cyprus. But the Greeks neither want us nor those mainland Turks. No one wants us. But we were born in this country. We are Cypriots. We are Cypriots, but no one wants us.

(44:48)

In the YouTube comments, we find a few rare comments that echo the same sentiment, also touching upon Islam as Europe's constitutive outside. ‘Oğuz Tokur’ writes: “europe is christian and they are supporting you [Greek Cypriots] and they will, no matter what. Turks will always be the ‘invader’ always be the ‘genocider’.” Another example is the following comment, posted by ‘Lev Osman’:

after 40 years NRTC[9] is still not recognised and the people who were the intended victims still live under embargo all this say to me is Europe doesnt want Turks in Cyprus and shame on all those countries who believe that it is fair not to recognise a state just because its inhabitants are Turkish Muslims.

#### *Along the Borders of Turkey: ‘Gateway to Europe’ (Episode 1)*

The first episode of *Along the Borders of Turkey*, entitled ‘Gateway to Europe’ (see YouTube 2017a), takes us to Greece, and in particular, to the border with Turkey, in the Northeast of mainland Greece. As the documentary shows, most of this border is constituted by the river Evros/Meriç, with the exception of a small part, close

to the Turkish city of Edirne – the former capital of the Ottoman Empire before Constantinople/Istanbul took its place – where both river banks are Turkish, and the border is situated a few kilometres to the West of the river. These geographical complexities make the region highly suitable for migrants who want to enter the EU through Turkey.

In this episode, Turkey is explicitly constructed as Europe's outside. As mentioned before, the entire series is built on this premise, but this specific episode contains more direct references to this construction of Turkey. For instance, when presenter Bram Vermeulen drives a car from Edirne to the Greek-Turkish border (on the Turkish side), he explains, “I want to see how close we can get to the European border from this angle” (02:57). A minute later, he says, “These Turkish soldiers are the last hurdle for travellers to Europe. They are the gatekeepers outside the walls around Europe” (4:48).

Of course, the entire border apparatus, with its watchtowers, patrols, fences (under construction) and surveillance systems (Figure 11.4a), supports this construction, especially because of the emphasis on European guards, from all over the EU, who are “helping us to guard” (21:51) the Greek/European border, in the words of a Greek police officer. In the documentary, we see both Estonian and Dutch police officers at work (Figure 11.4b). The presenter explains, “This is the European border, so anyone coming in here may potentially end up in the Netherlands. So Frontex, the border agency for the EU, has Dutch officers who patrol the borders all night” (24:45).

This reference is connected to the EU-Turkey deal, signed in 2016, to maintain the migrant flows within Turkey's borders, in exchange for a six-billion-euro aid package to improve the living conditions of refugees in Turkey, and for visa-free travel to Europe for Turkish nationals. The agreement consolidated the right of the EU to send back migrants who arrived in Greece from Turkey ‘irregularly’ (see International Rescue Committee 2022). The argument is often made that ‘untrustworthy’ Turkey violates the agreement, while Frontex protects the borders.

The documentary looks back into the past, when this border was stabilized after the Balkan Wars, the First World War (and the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920), and the Turkish War of Independence (and the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923). In Edirne, we are shown the imposing Lausanne Memorial, that “honour[s] Turkey's borders” (9:35), and the presenter explains how this treaty included a massive population exchange of hundreds of thousands of “Greek Orthodox people” and “Greece's Muslims” (9:55). As the presenter states: “Ethnic cleansing laid down in a peace treaty” (10:05). In the next scene, the presenter talks to a farmer couple in Turkey whose ancestors came from the Greek city of Thessaloniki, connecting these refugees' destiny with that of the current migrants:

Our ancestors were refugees, just like those Arabs are now. My grandmother was eight when she got here. She told me how her mother had set the cattle free and then left, weeping, carrying her child and some of her things.

(10:46)



*Figure 11.4a and 11.4b* The border apparatus [image clips from documentary film – © VPRO].

The documentary focuses on these current migration flows and shows how the EU is turned into a fortress with strongly guarded borders, protecting its territory but also its identity. When travelling from Turkey to Greece, the presenter narrates: “On the other side of the border [in Greece], Europe steps up its border control. [...] What we see here is a renaissance of borders” (13:29). The strong emphasis on the border apparatus is intertwined with a series of statements from Greeks, who use a discourse of intolerance to other the wide range of migrants who enter Greece through a still permeable border. For instance, an elderly Greek man, sitting outside a café in the border village of (Ano) Vissa, says, “I can’t understand it. Greece is now full of them” (25:42). A bit later, we can overhear a conversation at the café, with voices saying: “Here comes another swarm of flies,” “Yes. What can we say?”, “Once they know their way here it’s just an endless parade” (26:47).

This is also where the YouTube comments become relevant, as they strengthen this component of the documentary through orientalist references. For instance, ‘Huge

hog Lil nuts' writes: "Stay strong Spartans! Your ancestors repelled the Persians, and you all can repel these new invaders!" Another comment by 'Chris' says:

the border of Greece with Turkey is the border of Western civilization (Europe) and Eastern (middle Eastern), and Greek soldiers should be more careful, if they don't want their country to join the middle East thanks to refugees from Syria, Turkey, Iraq etc.

The documentary contains a street interview, where a villager first identifies the migrants as a cause of Greek unemployment: "The Greeks themselves can't get jobs, let alone these people. And if they do get a job, our children won't be able to find work" (30:08). He then continues by pointing to the health risks for the Greek population, again through orientalist claims of the uncivilized others:

We're afraid of a lot of things. They sleep in caves, then come here. What have they been through? There are no doctors there. Have they ever seen a doctor? How many of them have seen a doctor? You understand? That's the problem.

(30:19)

The harshness of these dehumanizing statements, driven by intolerance and a lack of empathy, together with the material border apparatus, all in response to the dislocation of refugeeedom, frustrate and disrupt the hegemonic or semi-hegemonic discourse of European benevolence. Still, the documentary itself *supports* European benevolence, empathy and humanity in a variety of ways. One articulation that is used is to show the suffering and traumas of the migrants, which also emphasizes their humanity. On several occasions, references are made to the migrants who died during their attempts to enter Greece, for instance when showing a village cemetery in one of the Greek villages with a Muslim population, with, according to the local imam, "over 500 people" (40:11) buried there. At the end of the documentary, the presenter refers to the sinking of a ship on 6 September 2012, near the Turkish city of Izmir, where "61 of them drowned, mostly women and children below deck who had nowhere to go when the ship sank" (51:58). But the most chilling example of suffering is the scene where the presenter is shown a human skull, with his guide explaining:

This person may have drowned three or four kilometres upstream. The currents have taken him or her down here. There was a hand here too earlier. I don't know where that's gone. An animal may have taken it. A jackal or a fox. I don't know.

(18:33)

The second articulation that supports the discourse of European benevolence is when people are shown expressing explicit sympathy and compassion for the migrants. For instance, one man, sitting in the café in the border village of



Figure 11.5 The skull of a drowned migrant [image clip from documentary film – © VPRO].



Figure 11.6 The Greek refugees from the 1920s [image clip from documentary film – © VPRO].

(Ano) Vissa, explains: “They had a hard life out there. They’re looking for a better life. Those poor people need a future. Poor souls, with children and everything. I can only feel sorry for them” (37:19). In this interview too, the link with the population exchange from the 1920s is made, supported by old photographs of Greeks forced to leave their homes in Turkey and becoming refugees (Figure 11.6).

A third articulation that supports the European benevolence discourse is more explicit and outspoken. It comes through the voice of activists, who try to help the migrants once they have arrived in Greece. Together with some of the YouTube commenters ('Ariel Martelli,' for instance, writes: “listen at the old man in the café make me sick”), they ground their critique in an ethical stance. Moreover, some YouTube commenters also point to the responsibility of ‘the West’ in contributing to these migration flows. For instance, ‘Angelo Philippopoulos’ writes: “Maybe the

USA and allies should stop bombing and dislocating people and sending them that route.” At the very end of the episode, one activist elaborates a very clear ethical critique of the European fortress:

*PRESENTER:* But now we are in crisis. You can imagine that people will say ... no more ...

*ACTIVIST:* Europe is in crisis, true, so ... if we agree with this idea, we can say why to build only 10,000 metres of fence. Let's build 180 [thousand metres of fence], let's build to Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, ... So let's make a Europe with a fence around, like Melilla and Ceuta in Spain, in Evros now, ... And be sure that ok, we're happy, we're living in our continent. And then it's ok, the rest of the people, we can see them behind the fence and say: ‘ok, you're born Iranian or Syrian, or Kurdish or Palestinian, you can die there, I see you, ok, I'm happy. I'm like a here-born European’ (50:10).

A second discourse that becomes dislocated through the material flow of migrants is the idea that Europe (and in particular the EU) can stop these flows. Less an ethical critique, this type of positioning is grounded in a critique of the *effectiveness* of the European border protection. Those who use more intolerant and nationalist language lament that “Frontex and the border guards do nothing. They arrest them, but they can't stop them. I can't understand it. Greece is now full of them. We are powerless. We have no borders” (25:36). Evoking a counter-hegemonic argument on the issue, near the end of the documentary, the presenter concludes:

European parliaments still believe the flow can be stopped with stricter laws, more police, higher fences. But seeing all this I realized: no fence will ever stop the hope of a better life. Those who want to go will go.

(45:43)

Finally, the documentary shows the material liminality of the European borders. At the very beginning, we see Turkish fishermen in Greek waters who have just caught 50 kilograms of ‘Greek’ fish (0:59). The ability of the Dutch presenter to speak Turkish – pointed out by several YouTube commenters – also shows how languages travel across borders. But it is the emphasis on the population exchange in particular that demonstrates the complex relation between people, countries and borders. As the presenter mentions slightly enigmatically: “Borders create countries, not the other way round” (13:14). The strongest argument for the liminality of borders, as offered by the documentary, is the part that shows that not all Greek Muslims were displaced in the 1920s. Some remained in Greece, showing the ancient religious complexity of Europe and frustrating the myth of European homogeneity and Christian roots, thus countering the discourse of Islam as Europe’s constitutive



*Figure 11.7* Sidiro, one of the ‘old’ Muslim communities in Greece [image clip from documentary film – © VPRO].

outside. The documentary shows an old mosque in Sidiro, one of the Greek villages close to the border (Figure 11.7). As the presenter explains:

Despite the mass migrations of the past century there’s still a small Turkish community on the Greek side of the border. It proves that Greeks and Turks used to live alongside each other here. Here we see a mosque, in Greece.

(38:39)

### **Conclusion**

When we move away from the essentialist approaches towards Europeanity and look at its discursive construction, we find a variety of struggles and contingencies. But these discursive struggles need to be seen as intensely entangled with the material. In particular, the material-spatial component of Europe and Europeanity – with its territories and peoples – remains relevant, as the idea of a continent with a European people situated there interacts with this materiality. The dislocation of refugeedom is deeply traumatizing for the people who are displaced, but at the same time these material flows of people, who are moving across what Europeans define as ‘European borders’ and are seen to come from ‘Europe’s margins,’ also impact on the articulation of the Europeanity discourse. The discursification of these material flows of human beings is not a given, though; there are multiple possible articulations (in relation to the Europeanity discourse), and they co-exist. Moreover, they actively engage in discursive struggles with each other, sometimes attempting to essentialize (and racialize) the European identity, sometimes trying to protect the articulation of the Europeanity discourse through benevolence.

The two episodes of the documentary series *Along the Borders of Turkey* that we analysed, present these struggles, showing how Europe is discursively constructed through the ceaseless interactions and unresolved tensions between the centre and the margins, articulating Europe as characterized by both benevolence and intolerance. The episodes (and the entire series) position Turkey as outside Europe and thus demarcate the borders of Europe. Cyprus is shown to be part of the European periphery, but Cypriots – both Greek and Turkish Cypriots – remain constructed as Europeans, in contrast to the Turks who are also based on the island, and without much regard for their complex interactions. Greece is constructed more clearly as part of Europe, struggling with an influx of migrants – Others – who are trying to enter Europe. Still, the episodes also deconstruct this dichotomy by pointing to the Turkish Cypriot Europeans on the other side of a frontier with Europe, by filming how Greek Cypriot and Turkish coffee is physically mixed, and by showing the liminality of these borders when dealing with unstoppable migrant flows.

Most importantly, the episodes show the disruption of the semi-hegemonic European benevolence discourse, where the abandonment and despair of Turkish Cypriots is visualized and thematized, as they are abandoned by Europe – in this case the EU – on the ‘wrong’ side of the buffer zone. The episode concerning Greece is even more tragic as it combines a portrayal of the suffering of migrants with the indifference and plain hostility of some of the Greek inhabitants, reinforced by some of the comments by YouTube users, and the material enclosure of Europe by the creation of a border apparatus. But here, the series comes to the rescue. *Along the Borders of Turkey* actively intervenes in the struggle over the articulation of the Europeanity discourse by showing the pain and suffering of Cypriots, by giving voice to the Cypriotist ideology (carefully avoiding the suggestion that all Cypriots homogeneously support this ideology), by showing the pain and suffering of migrants, by enabling viewers to identify and empathize with the travellers, and by bringing in ethical activist voices that aim to protect the European benevolence discourse and its intrinsic humanism. Also here, some of the YouTube users align themselves with this articulation. The episodes do not offer closure, though, but only show and contribute to this ongoing struggle over Europe’s benevolence and humanity, suggesting that this struggle still has a long way to go.

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## Notes

- 1 Scholars often use interchangeably the terms ‘Europeanness’ and ‘Europeanity’ to reflect on what it means to be European; we chose to consistently use the term ‘Europeanity’.
- 2 This part uses reworked texts from Carpentier (2021).
- 3 After they were uploaded on YouTube and at the time of our analysis (in December 2021), the episode on Cyprus (posted on 18 May 2017) had 368 comments and 132,076 views. The episode on Greece (posted on 27 April 2017) had 59 comments and 40,007 views.
- 4 Visitors have only recently been allowed into Varosha, for what can only be described as a theme park experience.
- 5 The commentators’ names are given quotation marks. Citations of their comments in these open YouTube discussions are rendered ad verbatim (including spelling errors), with the exception of one comment that was translated from Turkish to English.
- 6 This is illustrated in the documentary through the focus on displacement, but also through the emphasis on people who went missing during the violent stages of the conflict. Considerable attention is devoted to Christina, a Greek Cypriot whose father and brother went missing, even showing the search (by the Committee of the Missing Persons in Cyprus) for their bodies.
- 7 This makes it very likely that he is a Turkish Cypriot, and not a mainland Turk. But this is not made explicit in the documentary. In Greek, the village name is Lefka.
- 8 One YouTube comment contests this, when “Ismail Abdukadir” writes: “Actually Cyprus is not in Europe geographically.”
- 9 Most likely, the commenter means TRNC, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

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