



## Testing societal security at the border: the case of Lampedusa

Giacomo Orsini<sup>1</sup>

SOURCE Article / September 2014

Over the last decades, coinciding with the entering into force of the Schengen Agreement, immigration to Europe increasingly emerged as a core security concern for EU as well as for individual nations and national polities. Parallel to the increasing freedom of movement granted to the growing community of EU citizens, societal anxieties started to concentrate on immigrants and asylum seekers entering the Schengen Area. In response to these growing concerns the external border of *Schengenland* was established and progressively reinforced to limit uncontrolled immigration to the EU. Looking closely at the EU external border after more than 20 years of developments, one is left with the impression that it does not really address any of the security demands for which it was officially established.

From a societal security analytical perspective, here is in effect a contradiction between the security of the population within it and the safety of those individuals trying to cross it.

Despite the fact that Lapedusa island is not the Italian territory closest to Africa<sup>2</sup> it is today one of the most iconic spots of Europe's external frontier, with more than 150,000 boat migrants landed over the last 20 years. Since the late 1990s, the island transformed into one of the major logistical centre for several FRONTEX<sup>3</sup> operations bringing to a proper militarization of the atoll and its surrounding waters<sup>4</sup> while making of the island one of the symbol of Europe's fight against undocumented immigration to the EU. Simultaneously, *Lampedusa* became the icon of the enormous perils and sufferings that both migrants and asylum seekers must face in order to enter Europe: within little more than two decades, tens of thousands died trying to cross the Sicilian channel to reach the island. However a closer look at what really happens in *Lampedusa* challenges this security-centred narrative surrounding the EU border and *Lampedusa*, opening to further interrogations over the very concept of societal security in relation to immigration when tested along the border.

First, it is striking to realise as, despite the great emphasis on the fight against illegal immigration, actually most of those reaching *Lampedusa* are refugees. This almost paradoxical insight becomes even more controversial considering that the vast majority of EU undocumented residents entered

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<sup>1</sup> PhD student of the University of Essex/visiting researcher of the IES of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Italian island of Pantelleria is 30 nautical miles closer to the coasts of the North African country than Lampedusa.

<sup>3</sup> Based in the Polish capital of Warsaw, this European agency "promotes, coordinates and develops European border management in line with the EU fundamental rights charter applying the concept of Integrated Border Management".

<sup>4</sup> Since 2006, 3 major operations coordinated by the European agency FRONTEX took place in and around the island – Nautilus (from 2006 to 2008), Hermes (from 2009 to 2012) and EPN Hermes (2013) – with 26 states taking part, for an overall expenditure of 46,661,244.5 €.



the EU with regular VISA as *over stayers*<sup>5</sup>. Those who crossed the EU external borders without the required documents being just a small minority. This makes immediately unclear which threat being securitized by the border established on and around Lampedusa. If on the one hand indeed the border in *Lampedusa* constitutes one of Europe's main concern to contrast undocumented immigration to Europe, on the other hand empirical data suggests that those landing in the island are an almost irrelevant portion – in numerical terms – of those residing illegally into the EU. On the other hand, if the presence of navies patrolling *Lampedusa's* border at sea is meant to work primarily to secure refugees' lives, why not, for instance, to open a less expensive and safer humanitarian corridor using the ferryboat connecting daily Tunis and Palermo – so that refugees would not have to undertake these dangerous journeys?<sup>6</sup>

Thus, within the frame of EU migration policies and the fight against irregular immigration *Lampedusa* does not seem to correspond to any tangible priority. Given the relatively small numbers of undocumented migrants reaching *Lampedusa*, almost paradoxically the border on *Lampedusa* seems to be a disproportionate security dispositive generating the conditions for the public to perceive boat migrants' arrivals as a proper invasion, consequently increasing European societal (perceived) insecurity.

The EU sea-border extends over thousands of square kilometres of waters crossed by countless boats. It is almost impossible to patrol effectively. On the other hand, aside from rare exceptions, no migrant or asylum seeker actually arrives in *Lampedusa*: rather they reach the island transported by Member State coast guards whose patrolling forces rescue them tens of nautical miles away, near the shores of Libya or Tunisia. In other words, arrivals in *Lampedusa* are not actual arrivals, nor do they correspond to any sort of natural occurrence. Rather, they are the product of a deliberate institutional decision to make them happen where they happen. In other words, the costly machinery of the border in *Lampedusa* seems not to provide any further substantial security to European societies. Rather, within a sort of looping relation, the border seems to lead only to the packing of a small and isolated European island with thousands of asylum seekers, producing the conditions for the displaying of migrants' invasion so intensely threatening European societies.

If we accept that the border on and around the island of *Lampedusa* is meant to protect European societies, then it is meant to provide security for islanders as well. However, in reality the border constitutes a major source of insecurity for locals. If on the one hand local fishermen find themselves often involved in very dangerous rescue operations at sea, migrants' extreme crisis in the island<sup>7</sup> can lead to disastrous tourist seasons, seriously undermining the economic security of the whole local population. Moreover, considering as, based on international agreements and conventions, most of those reaching the island are refugees whose protection into the EU must be granted, it is again not clear how such a border can anyhow help securing their protection while increasing Europeans'

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<sup>5</sup> The *overstayers* are those non-EU citizens that entered with regular documents into the EU, and remained longer than permitted.

<sup>6</sup> Following the most tragic recorded shipwreck taking place in Lampedusa's seawaters on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October of 2013, when more than 300 boat-migrants and asylum seekers lost their lives just 1 nautical mile south from Lampedusa, the Italian Prime Minister Gianni Letta "called on the EU to set up 'humanitarian corridors' to provide protection for migrant boats".

<sup>7</sup> In 2011 corresponding to the revolution in Tunisia and the Civil War in Libya more than 50,000 boat migrants reached Lampedusa. In March of that same year in the island, there were more boat-migrants than residents with tensions between locals, police forces and migrants being screened worldwide by the several media present in Lampedusa.



safety. Again, within the frame of the societal security discourse, it is not clear whom the border in *Lampedusa* really protects and from which actual threat.

**Giacomo Orsini** is Phd Candidate at the Department Sociology of the University of Essex and visiting researcher at the Institute of European Studies – IES – of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel – VUB. From a sociological angle, his studies focus on the most ground level local effects of European integration.  
Email: [gorsin@essex.ac.uk](mailto:gorsin@essex.ac.uk)