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The moral geographies of migration maps: spatial order as a normative basis for border control

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ABSTRACT


The politics of migration management is peppered by maps promoting specific spatial imaginaries of human mobility and its control. These maps are key sites where a space to be bordered is constructed and reaffirmed. Building on the insights of critical cartography, this piece examines the development of maps of 'migratory routes' on the part of EU-based actors focusing on FRONTEX's maps and their evolution over time. The role of institutional cartographies is understood as prefiguring sites of the border where action must take place and resources allocated. In this regard, this paper engages the literatures on moral geographies and moral economies to analyze the implicit normative plea in these maps. FRONTEX maps serve as a powerful visualization, such that researchers of migration management cannot avoid referring to the spatial imaginaries they enshrine. These maps are imbued with a moral order of the world that has a strong postcolonial legacy. This order, and the action it requires are referred to as an Accepted Moral Spatial Order. Engaging this spatial order requires a self-reflexive perspective by researchers attuned to how norms and values contribute to knowledge production on borders and the longer histories that underlie these maps of purportedly recent events.

KEYWORDS

Critical cartography; Moral geography; frontex; Moral economy; Migratory routes

Introduction

The presence of maps has been a recurring feature of the external dimension of EU border policy. Ever since I started researching EU externalization fifteen years ago, whether in fieldwork sites and interviews or in online databases, maps of migratory dynamics and/or border cooperation projects appeared repeatedly. As a geographer and as someone whose previous work had focused on the political work of map-making (Cobarrubias and Pickles 2009), I felt compelled to engage with these cartographies, since they were a stable element of the politics around border externalization. As part of an interdisciplinary research project working on border externalization, we began to publish on these cartographic representations of migration, how they frame the spaces

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of an externalized border (Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias 2019); or how they constitute sites of political struggles over human mobility (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015).

This retrospective piece interprets how migration management maps generate spaces that require efforts to manage people moving through or toward them. These maps implore the viewer to take or support action to ‘set mobilities or borders straight’. This normative plea appeals for needed and appropriate economic and political action. In order to think of maps as conveying normative pleas, I utilize the literature on moral geographies. *Moral geographies* explore how certain spaces are designated as ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’, or how certain peoples are designated as being in the ‘right place’ or ‘out of place’ based on normative criteria (Cresswell 2005; Smith 2000). Here, I use the concept of moral geographies to examine how spaces of appropriate and inappropriate mobilities are created. In the context of this special issue, the concept of moral geographies develops an understanding of how specific moral economies of migration management are spatially constructed (Stielike et al. 2025), placing the two literatures in conversation. Recent work in moral economies examines the inter-combinations of normative criteria with more utilitarian criteria (e.g. productivity, efficiency, or profit) as constitutive of the ‘economic’ in broad terms. This literature has helped expand the notion of how economic practices can emerge based on normative principles of value. In this interpretation of moral economy, moral geographies help clarify how maps participate in the production of normatively-charged and materially-produced spaces in migration management, identifying ‘where’ political action must occur (see also Perkowski 2025 and Nieswand 2025).

To center these discussions, I use the case of cartographies produced by agencies tasked with migration management and the development of an accepted visual narrative of migration. In particular, I examine maps produced by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, FRONTEX. FRONTEX has become a referential expert site imbued with institutional authority on the matter of borders for the EU and its member states (Kasperek 2021; Léonard and Kaunert 2022). The expert knowledge emanating from these maps has contributed to the stabilization over time of certain spatial categories. This relatively established space of migration management then defines criteria of risk and success, requiring action by various political and economic actors (Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias and Pickles 2019).

The first part of this paper situates the convergence of the literatures on moral geographies and moral economies. Moral geography is used to examine how normativity is spatialized and accrues differently according to how sites are imagined and shaped. I then engage the concept of moral economy, focusing on the ways this literature has explored the production and reproduction of effects and normativity as capable of influencing and structuring social and economic action. The second section engages with FRONTEX’s maps. Insights from the field of critical cartography (Crampton and Krygier 2005) are used to examine the visual narratives at work in these maps. In particular, I highlight the creation of a stable visual structure that maintains coherence even in the midst of different humanitarian crises. This cartographic narrative appears objective, as if about migration in essence, and renders itself constant over time. I propose that these cartographies reflect and help produce an accepted moral spatial order (AMSO) of (in)appropriate mobilities. I then suggest an analysis of the longer-term ordering of space that may be at work in these maps and their implications. The visualized moral order is not created *ex*

nihilo within contemporary politics of migration but rather is layered upon historical engagement and relations between regions of the world, reflecting consistency rather than novelty. Finally, in line with the call of this special issue to engage reflexivity, I propose caution in how migration researchers engage with expert knowledge on migration from institutional sites such as FRONTEX (see also Landau 2025). Specifically, researchers need to reflect on the historical trajectories of these cartographic representations, their related moral, political, and economic ordering functions, and the ways they direct attention or even condition research, critical or uncritical.

This paper is primarily a theoretical reflection attempting to apply the literatures of moral geography and moral economy so as to contribute to critical studies of the political and economic spaces of migration management (see also Lambert 2025 and Manser-Egli 2025). Drawing on conclusions from previous research on EU border externalization policies (Cobarrubias 2019, 2020; Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias and Pickles 2019), this paper carries out a preliminary research sampling and examination of FRONTEX maps of irregular migration from 2010–2022, in order to identify patterns of visualization and stability in the geographies represented. The samples are based exclusively on the available online archive of publications from the FRONTEX website.

Ultimately, my goal is to unveil the controversial moral geographies behind the neutral façade of institutional map-making. This paper shows how these cartographies convey a negative understanding of certain human mobilities associated with particular territories. It is my priority as a son, grandson, and now father, of different migrant generations, to show human mobility otherwise.

Moral geographies

The concept of ‘moral geography’ has been used in many works in the discipline of geography, with a particularly active period of debate in the mid-1990s and early 2000s; however, there is no set definition or subfield. Moral geographies are usually understood in one of two ways, one more prescriptive and the other more descriptive (Barnett 2014; Smith 1997). The prescriptive conceptualization is linked to the literature on geographies of responsibility (Massey 2004); here, moral geographies have to do with why and how should geographers adapt certain explicit normative criteria in their scholarly work, and the ethical and professional questions that emerge therefrom (Smith 2000). The descriptive conceptualization focuses on how certain spaces are constructed as morally (in)appropriate – i.e. certain subjects are considered to be in the right place or out of place based on thoroughly normative judgements (Cresswell 2005). This second understanding of moral geography has been utilized in studies of child protection laws in Victorian England (Beckingham 2013), the everyday practice of Muslim masculinities in modern Turkey (Gökarıksel and Secor 2017), post-Soviet land restitution in Estonia (Printsmann, Nugin, and Palang 2022), and the politics of light pollution (Dunnett 2015). David Livingstone (1993) and Winlow (2006) have used the concept of moral geography to analyze maps as prefiguring certain spaces; the historical cartographies analyzed by these authors categorized world regions as superior or inferior according to notions of racial hierarchy and environmental determinism.

With regard to work on migration, moral geography has been used to describe how asylum seekers from certain countries are prioritized as ‘more deserving’ of international

protection and, as such, are hierarchized relative to nationals from other countries (Garelli and Tazzioli 2013). Josh Watkins (2020) depicts the moral geography of migration management as one that orders people to remain in their designated countries of citizenship and that commands migration through specific legal means. His research focuses on the work of the IOM with different religious institutions in Indonesia to convince people (especially potential facilitators of migration) of the ‘immorality’ of certain forms of migration (Watkins 2020).

This relation between the moral and the spatial is fundamental for authors Lee and Smith (2011):

Moralities are profoundly geographical products of the uneven development of social relations among people and between people and nature. (...) Moralities are, in short, constructed through geographically articulated social interaction. The interesting questions which arise here concern not so much the distinction between the ‘moral’ and the ‘immoral’, but how ‘moral’ and ‘immoral’ come to be defined, practiced and reproduced in distinctive ways across space and time. (Lee and Smith 2011, 7)

Thus, moral geographies are not static spaces, but rather must be designated and re-produced regularly through socio-spatial interactions. This point has been developed by Prinz and Schetter (2021, 97) in their concept of spatial moral ordering, which ‘involve[s] drawing boundaries along moral and spatial (and often territorial) isomorphisms, while at the same time bringing moral hierarchies into alignment with these spatial boundaries.’. Building on these insights, I suggest that maps of migration management reflect – and help to construct – an assumed common understanding of the spatial ordering of the world, of what – and who – belongs where. I propose calling this an accepted moral spatial order (AMSO). The human migration reflected in these maps is understood as ‘problematic’ and threatening to the AMSO if left unaddressed.

Building on these debates, this paper analyzes how maps contribute to producing a common sense about the ‘(im)morality’ of traversing certain spaces, leading to normative judgements and sociopolitical action regarding certain bodies as being in place/out of place. In this case, I examine how maps of migration management help construct certain human mobilities as risky types of migration that require management – if not outright control – because they are a threat to the AMSO (I will return to the idea of the AMSO in part 4). The reiteration of certain visual patterns in these maps over a period of years helps ossify a view of which migrations are irregular and in need of management. Thus, this normative construction of ‘risk’ designates objects which can be targeted to reduce risk. Additionally, the fact that these cartographies are produced by an authority tasked with border control and coordination among roughly two dozen countries lends the weight of ‘expertise’ to their visualizations. These maps then designate where sites, objects and bodies in need of intervention are located. The concept of moral economy aids in interpreting how a structure of value is constructed wherein these different sites are inserted.

Moral economies

Migration management requires the production and reproduction of economics of migration¹ based on specific discourses and categories of human mobilities. Where different mobilities are located, and how they should be managed differently, become

important questions. Action (institutional, economic, and otherwise) becomes necessary to manage those mobilities designated as objects of control.

The concept of moral economy serves to explore how certain issues, bodies, events, and situations are framed as significant and transformed into having ‘value’ – in other words, how a seemingly non-economic object is rearticulated as the center of a series of economic practices and actors, becoming an object of added value. The concept of moral economy has a long and varied history (dating from roughly the eighteenth century) and reflects the modern understanding of the economy as a semi-autonomous sphere detached from other social norms (Götz 2015). Despite the multiple interpretations of the concept over the years (see Thompson 1971 and Fassin 2009 for examples), one key contribution is how moral economy has served to bridge the supposed autonomy of economic logics with other concerns. As Götz (2015, 148) posits, moral economy serves ‘to illuminate such key features of economic allocation as motivated by ideational, rather than material expectations of personal gain’.

Moral economy aids in examining how the criteria of added value are made through social norms and normative discourse. Notions of economic efficiency, or worthwhile investment, intermix and are co-produced by normative rules. Moral economy facilitates not ‘settling prematurely for either a materialist or idealist perspective that prevents ... taking into account the coexistence and tension between economic and moral types of rationality’ (Götz 2015, 158).

Specifically, with regard to migration politics, the concept of moral economy has been used to interpret humanitarian borders and questions of asylum and refuge (Fassin 2015; Garelli and Tazzioli 2013).² This reflects, in part, the understanding of the moral as ‘that which is right and good’, mirroring debates on duties toward refugees. Yet even in the case of recognized refugees, ‘that which is right and good’ cannot be automatically assumed. An analysis of moral geographies and moral economies requires understanding the moral as Götz et al. (2020), building on Fassin (2009), suggest. Namely, to include the definition and production of something as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ to begin with. To this end, I propose that irregular migration being reiteratively framed as ‘wrong’ through laws, media representations, political discourse, and (for the purposes of this paper) maps has the effect of defining irregular migration as an object of action (Götz et al. 2020, 300).³

In this context, I examine how certain normative constructions of ‘risky’ or ‘dangerous’ migration produce objects which must be acted on: the greater the represented problematic human mobility, the greater the demand for action to ‘deal’ with it. The ability to deal with or act on these mobilities then becomes a measure of success. I focus on how maps, produced by institutional sites of migration management, participate in this normative construction. The referential nature of these institutions, which can act as ‘go-to’ places for expertise on migration, lends further weight to their narratives.

Expert knowledge production on migration helps constitute mixed or risky migration as objects. This knowledge production (whether in science, politics, or the private sector) contributes to producing a certain moral order that is threatened by migration, thus tying the order to the creation of materially strong border regimes. One site where this conceptual production occurs is in the field of cartography, particularly the cartography of institutions and agencies tasked with migration management. In seeking to understand the

role of maps in the production of the irregular migrant and the construction of irregular migration as a ‘moral problem’ requiring management, the concept of moral geographies can adapt the moral economy approach to the spatial aspect of mapping. Nonetheless, ‘reading’ the moral geographies embedded in the visual language of the map will require insights from the field of critical cartography.

Cartography and maps of risky migrations

One central claim from the field of critical cartography runs through the argument of this paper, namely that the ‘map precedes the territory’ (Winichakul 2009). As John Pickles articulated it, ‘the map creates the territory it purports to represent’ (Pickles 2004). This cartographic experience of a space, even prior to ‘being there’, can condition our understanding of what happens in a mapped space, of points of interest and value, as well as of sites of danger. As Harley has suggested, the straightforward information on the legend, along with the graphic work done via the bird’s eye view, lines across the map, etc., convey a sense of mastery over space (1989). In this sense, migration maps do not merely represent actual human flows but shape our very understanding of human mobilities (Harley and Andrews 2002; Monmonier 2018; Wood, Fels and Krygier 2010; on migration maps specifically, see Van Houtum and Bueno Lacy 2020; Walters 2002). The visual semiotics therein do just as much work as the numbers and symbols referred to in sidebars and map keys: choice of color, size and direction of arrows, etc. operate to convey a specific interpretation, rather than a neutral representation.

Based on these understandings of cartography, migration maps invoke moral imperatives about subjects in motion. By focusing on certain types of human circulation and creating a specific visual language of representation, these maps do not simply reflect migration, or even so-called ‘irregular flows’. Official migration maps help constitute certain circuits of human mobility as risky, in the process transforming them into recognizable, knowable, seeable objects of moral judgment, which in turn demands and legitimizes consequent action as necessary and ethically grounded. Furthermore, these ‘... maps cannot be understood as stand-alone artifacts’ (Winlow 2006, 132); rather, they are inserted into, and contribute to, a broader politics of migration – in this case, in the EU especially. Thus the moral imperatives which emerge do so at an intersection between: design elements of the map (line thickness, color choice, etc.), what is mapped and what is left out, accompanying text, broader narratives of migration as well as the historical geographic imaginaries of other countries and continents (Dodge and Perkins 2015). Multiple actors are involved in producing maps of migration in the EU and its member states, from press and political parties to national authorities and think tanks, yet there are key institutions whose visualizations of migration become nearly definitive.

The following section focuses on maps of migration routes. First, drawing on previous research, I present the work of the International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) (Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias and Pickles 2019), which aided in developing the spatial concept of migratory route management and a cartographic project to support it, called the i-map. Second, I focus on FRONTEX’s adaptation of the routes concept and their subsequent maps. FRONTEX maps are produced regularly and appear in different publications, particularly their ‘Risk Analysis’ series (including yearly Risk Analysis

reports, Strategic Risk Analysis projections, and the FRONTEX Risk Analysis Network – FRAN) Quarterly Reports) but also in more regionally focused publications (Eastern Partnership Risk Analysis Network, Western Balkan Risk Analysis Network, and the Africa-FRONTEX Intelligence Community Joint Reports) and in their quarterly reports and strategic documents. The goal of this analysis is not to give outsized importance to FRONTEX or the agency's maps (nor to their precursors in the ICMPD and i-Map project) in configuring public and expert imaginaries of migration; rather, my purpose is to emphasize FRONTEX, and to an extent ICMPD, as particularly relevant players due to their institutional location – itself situated in a specific moral configuration around migration in the EU.

A new way of seeing borders?

The idea of visualizing migratory routes was first introduced in 2003 at a regional meeting between EU, North African, and West African migration authorities. During this meeting, a draft map was presented by the ICMPD. According to ICMPD accounts, for EU authorities the idea of migratory routes was a different way to address migration management and a new way to deal with issues around controlling external borders (ICMPD interview Vienna September 2011). This initial success led to the creation of the i-Map project, which served as a precursor to the 'Migratory Routes Initiative' of the EU, approved in 2005 as part of its *Global Approach to Migration*.

The explicit charge of the ICMPD is to formulate and disseminate policy concepts that improve management of human mobility and that better enable the development of European migration policy. Through its role as a policy development agency and a site of official expertise on migration, the ICMPD has emerged as an important factor in translating the complexity of migration into discrete categories with corresponding legal and policy elements. These are then mapped into concrete and knowable systems of routes, which are organized into templates of recommendations for state policymakers to manage and coordinate visa, policing, and border management norms and regulations. As an ICMPD co-founder stated, one of the center's main tasks is 'to develop new concepts on legal and illegal migration' (Arbenz 2009). In this sense, it is reasonable to see the ICMPD as a central actor in framing and defining *what* is migration, *who* is a migrant, and *what* is to be done about it. Furthermore, by developing distinct concepts toward 'legal and illegal migration' ICMPD contributes to a fundamental distinction between human mobilities based on the political decision of states to make something legal or not. In their defense, ICMPD interviewees have often stated that their work on irregular/illegal migration is based on the demands of states and the EU (their clients) to focus on this (ICMPD interview 2012). Nonetheless, by acquiescing to this demand, ICMPD is contributing to deepening that fundamental differentiation between legal/illegal, the implicit values that each category carries (rather than trying to nuance the distinction), and by extension the conditions that different mobile people will face (Figure 1).

The ICMPD's i-Map was an interactive mapping and database tool developed to trace multiple and overlapping migration routes that lead to the EU. The i-Map followed the evolution of trans-Saharan, trans-Mediterranean, and eastern European migration itineraries from the early 2000s until approximately 2015.⁴ On the maps, routes take

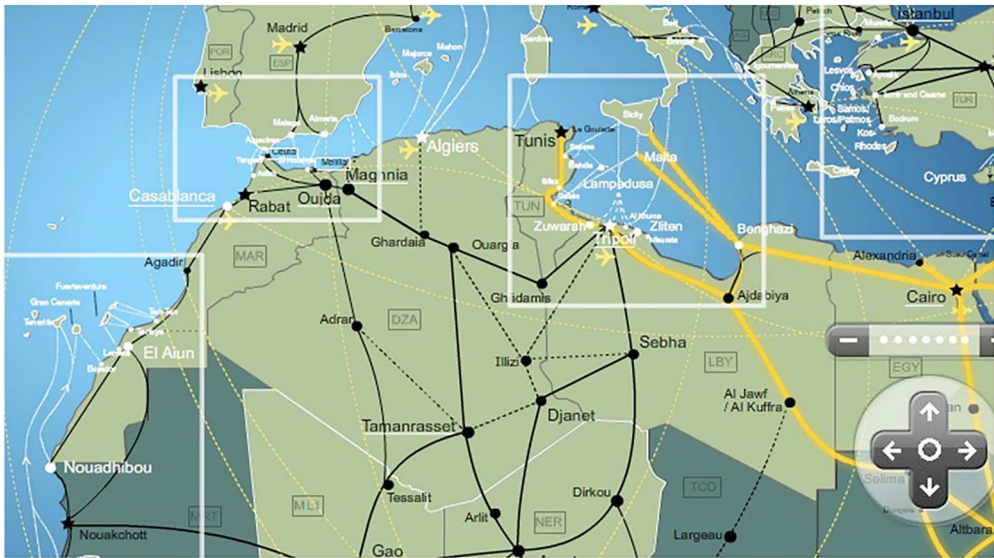


Figure 1. I-MAP IMAGE.

precedence over national borderlines, and countries are represented only by their ISO codes (e.g. Spain = ESP, Algeria = DZR). This visualization of territoriality is further highlighted by the way in which the details of ‘major’ routes flash in bright yellow when the viewer scrolls over the migratory itineraries. The i-Map clusters itineraries in five major routes: West African, West Mediterranean, Central Mediterranean, East African, and East Mediterranean.

The network imagery of the map attracted a great deal of interest, notably from FRONTEX, and quickly became iconic. The breakdown of EU-bound migration into specific routes became a mainstay of migration and border management. These routes are portrayed as essentially EU-bound, and they are separated from mobilities to and from other regions. The routes identified in the i-Map and early debates on migratory route management continue to be the main portrayal of migration dynamics between the EU, Africa, and Southwest Asia. The sense of mastery provided by a graphic tool able to deal with disorder and potentially risky complexity is echoed by one of the i-Map team members, who described the origins of i-Map as ‘an avant-garde’ and ‘a machete clearing a path in the jungle’ (ICMPD headquarters, Interview 2011). Since the peak of that project, simplified versions of maps of migration routes have become a standard image in policy discussions.

Without a strict line of causality between the two, shortly after the i-Map project began, the idea of managing ‘migratory routes’ was developed in 2005 by the European Commission, and it has been reiterated in EU documents since then (see European Commission 2005, 2020). According to this policy concept, migratory routes consist of channels of irregular and mixed migration flows connecting ‘countries of origin, transit and destination’, with multiple and shifting hubs and sub-hubs at key points along each route (Cobarrubias 2020). For FRONTEX, this geography of routes became a strategic vision for border management: information, strategic thinking, risk assessment, and

publications (including the FRONTEX website) are organized according to migratory routes. The agency's public maps are examples of simplified route maps.

FRONTEX's, and the EU's, adoption of the language and strategy of migratory routes management, together with the specific cartographic visuals of routes, demonstrate the intermixing between a non-state actor dedicated to knowledge production and a supra-national organization. The ICMPD defines itself as a site of expert knowledge production, contracted by the EU and states to develop concepts. Their specific concept of route management then became an idea for organizing the EU's and FRONTEX's approach to external border management and externalization. This expert concept, adapted by the main EU agency tasked with external border management, thence became a standard that others researching FRONTEX or EU approaches will encounter or need to engage. Researchers analyzing FRONTEX or routes management may or may not be aware of the lineage of this concept, but the directionality thereof demonstrates the 'world-shaping' capacities of expert knowledge production. Researchers may inadvertently contribute to this by focusing on FRONTEX strategies and spaces of action as givens, rather than as produced by particular frameworks of knowledge. While FRONTEX adapted the routes concept for its public visualizations, the content, form, and message of the maps of routes have changed considerably over time. I present the development of FRONTEX's adaption of the i-Map visuals of migratory routes.

Initial adaptations of route imagery in FRONTEX's public maps are similar to the i-Map, although they are missing the complexity of nodes, hubs, and interconnectedness. Directionality is more vividly stressed via arrowheads (Figure 2).

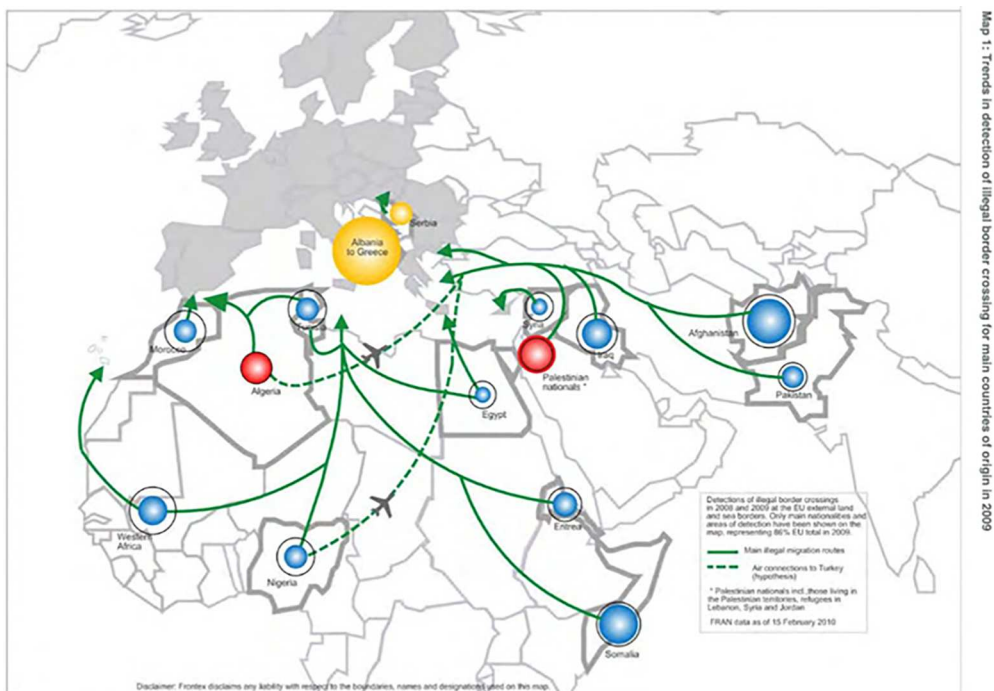


Figure 2. Source: Annual Risk Analysis (2010, 14).

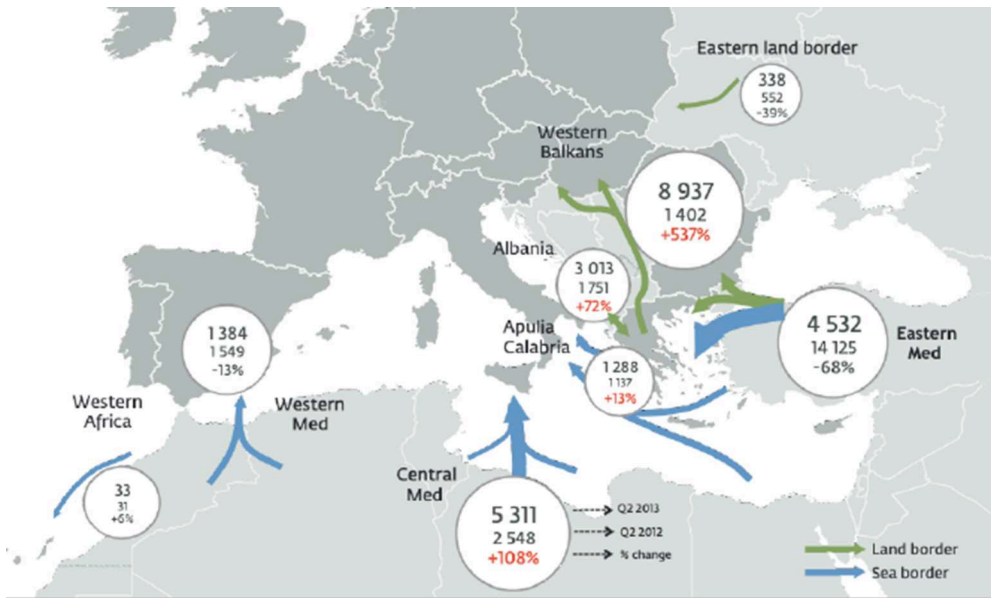


Figure 3. Source: FRONTEX Risk Analysis Network Quarterly Report Q2 (2013, 18).

Later editions of FRONTEX's routes map simplified these routes further, seeming to emphasize the points prior to crossing an EU border rather than the route itself. The following examples are from 2013 and early 2015 (Figures 3 and 4).

Interestingly, as 2015 goes on, the visualizations simplify even further, into a series of unidirectional, menacing, dark (often red) arrows. This visual esthetic has been maintained since then (Figures 5–10).

Rather than simply represent human mobilities, these maps do a very particular kind of political work, becoming even more strident after 2015. The visual narrative at play belies an epistemological approach highlighting certain mobilities as threatening while ignoring others, what authors have highlighted as 'cartopolitics' (Strandsbjerg 2012; Van Houtum 2012). Henk van Houtum and Rodrigo Bueno Lacy in particular have situated the cartopolitics at work in FRONTEX within the tradition of 'propaganda maps' (2020; 2019), stressing how the visual semiotics condition a certain type of viewing of the central issue.⁵ While many aspects of these maps are worth analyzing, I emphasize two: the role of arrows, and reiteration.

Menacing arrows

Migration is represented via unidirectional arrows pointing toward the EU from multiple directions. The more recent versions of these maps show thick arrows of irregular migration joining together into even larger arrows. The size of the arrows appears even larger than the countries themselves. While the smaller arrows purportedly reflect lower numbers of people compared to other arrows, the relationship between arrow size and number of people allegedly taking that route is not clear. The sizes of the arrows do not have a clear scale, and lacking concrete legends about specific

Figure 4. Detections of illegal border-crossing in 2014 with percentage change on 2013, by route

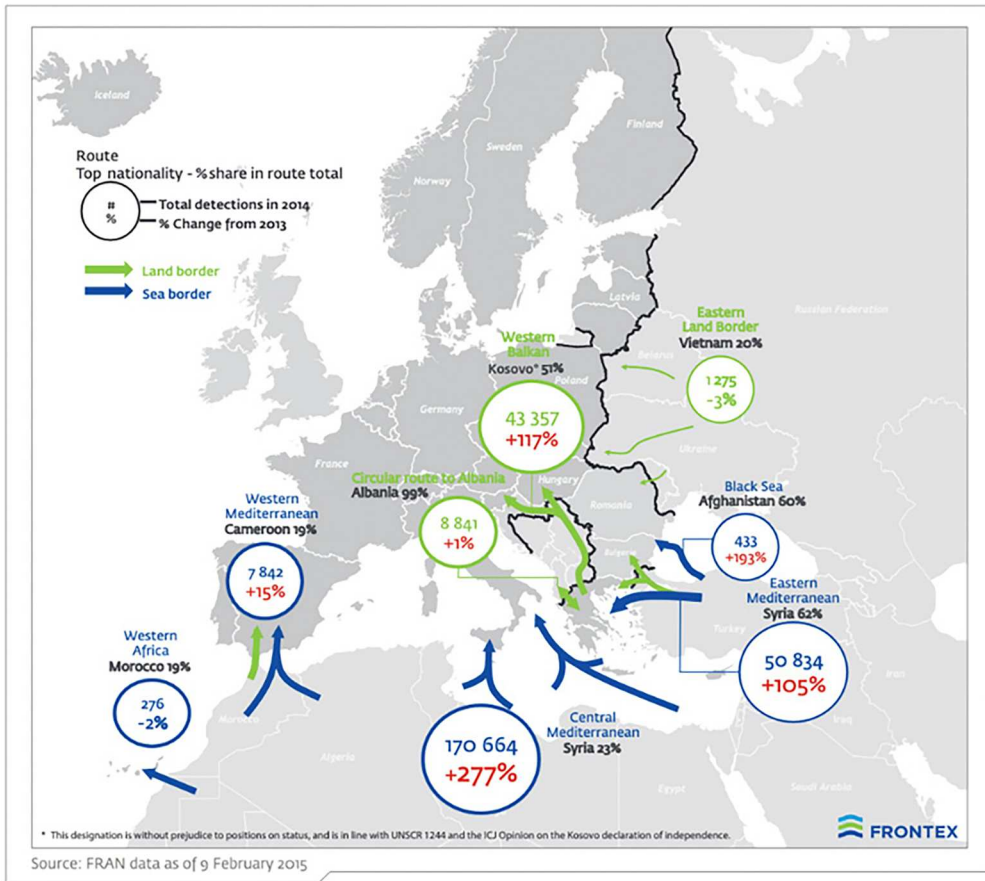


Figure 4. Source: FRONTEX Annual Risk Analysis (2015, 19).

numbers. Especially in the post-2015 maps, the arrows are so large that they create a totalizing impression for the viewer. These arrows take up most of the representational space available, omitting from the map other relevant human mobilities in the regions pictured, such as intra-African migration, intra-EU migration, or emigration from the EU (Vermeulen, de Korte, and van Houtum 2020). With this sleight of hand, these maps become maps of migration in it, rather than of specific targeted mobilities of potential interest to one EU agency.

Additionally, while arrow size fluctuated prior to 2015, after this year sheer arrow size especially confers urgency and demand for action and management. A regular feature of the maps since then, the fluctuating arrow size communicates where, across the map of Europe, the most serious pressure exists. This pressure is labeled a ‘migratory threat’ in FRONTEX reports (FRONTEX 2020, Risk Analysis Report). The ominous size and color of these arrows convey a threat to the AMSO of orderly nation-states, grouped in the uniformly colored EU. These maps are most often part of reports and strategy documents where the maps will be accompanied by texts explaining the represented situation as well as other visual aids, such as

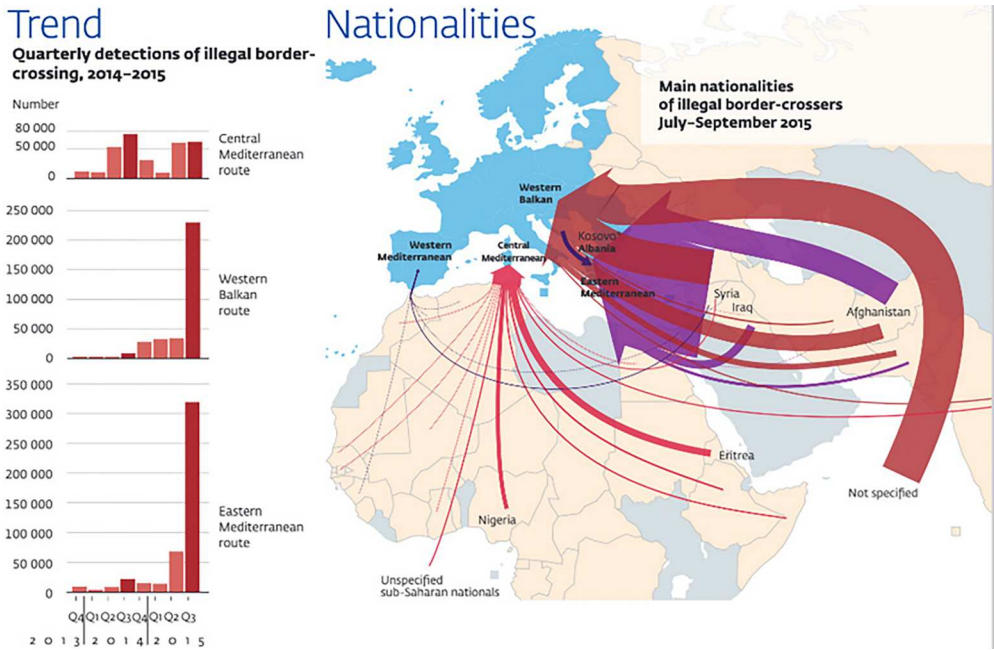


Figure 5. Source: FRAN Quarterly Report (Q3) (2015, 9).

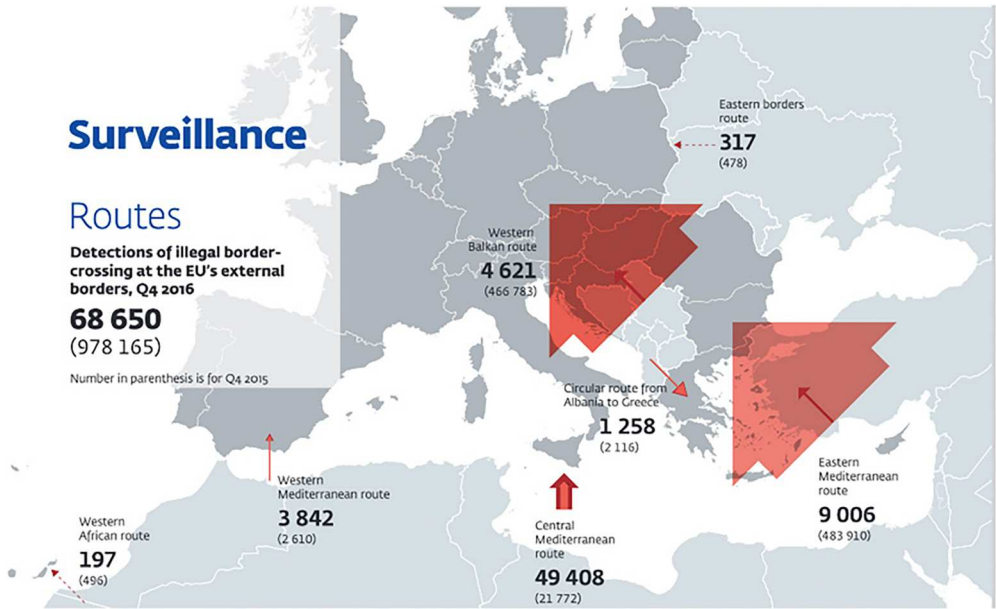
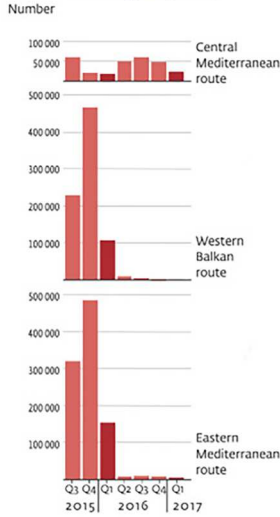


Figure 6. Source: FRAN Quarterly Report (Q4) (2016, 6)

graphs and photos of FRONTEX operations. The text and accompanying information in the reports help guide the reader in their interpretation of the map, and vice versa, the map lends authoritativeness to the text.⁶

Trend

Quarterly detections of illegal border-crossing, 2015–2017



Nationalities



Figure 7. Source: FRONTEX Risk Analysis Network Quarterly Report Q1 January–March 2017, 9.

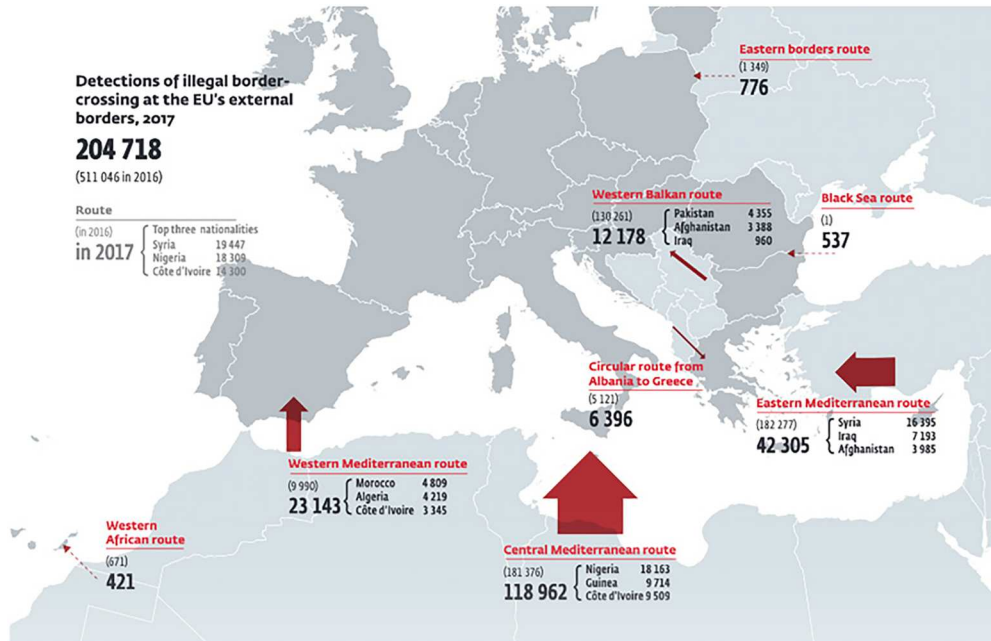
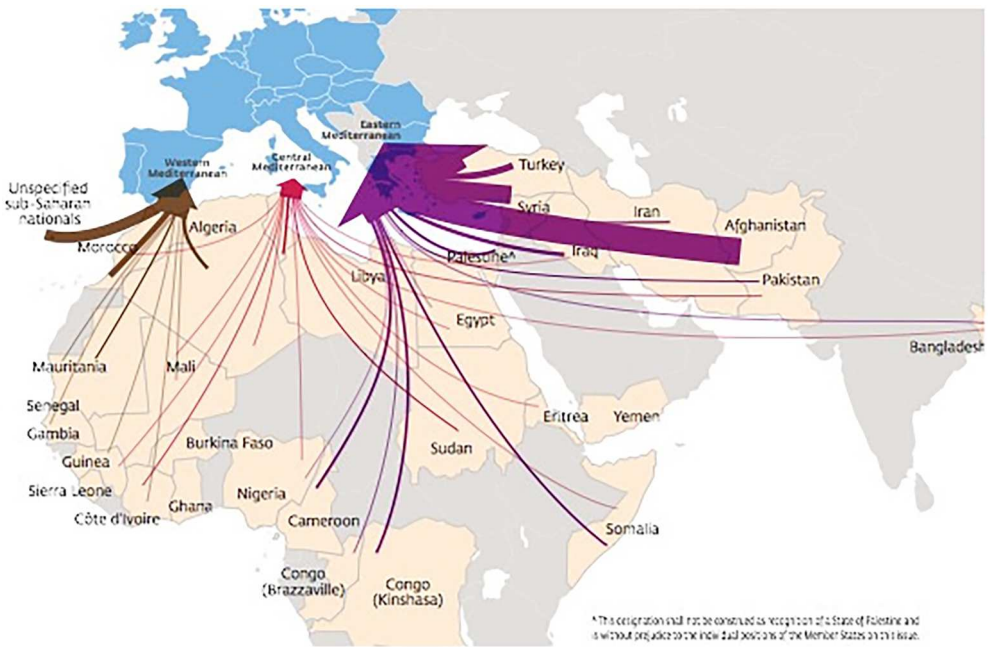


Figure 8. Source: Risk Analysis Report (2018, 18).

The moral geographies embedded in these cartographies of migration indicate mobilities in need of management and places where political and economic action should take place. The ability to ‘manage’ mobilities – specifically by reducing flow (exemplified by a



5.1. Situational Overview

Figure 9. Source: FRONTEX Risk Analysis Report (2020, 22).

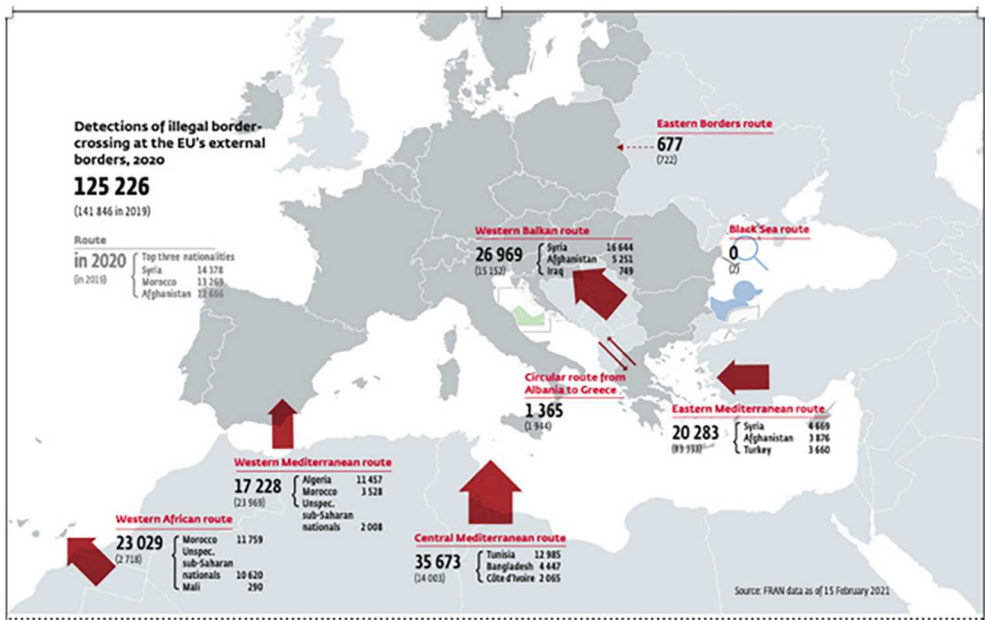


Figure 10. Source: FRONTEX Risk Analysis Report (2021).

reduction in the size of arrows) or through the ability to detain or register particular mobilities – becomes a way of auditing success. The visual narrative of the maps lends itself to a specific definition of success: reducing pressure, which reduces arrow size, with the more mobile bodies being registered, deterred, or even detained, the better. Thus, the moral geography communicated in these maps also contributes to the formation of a particular moral economy and the prescription of certain types of actions that can then translate into quantitatively more or less ‘success’.

In a limited sense then, the routes imagery adapted by FRONTEX are simply self-serving representations: the risks getting ‘bigger’ would seem to justify an expanded role, budget and personnel of the agency. The reduction of arrow size, equivalent to risk, would be linked to more and more successful interventions by FRONTEX. Taken this way, these maps would be directed at an EU and member state policymaker audience to continue supporting the growth of the agency. This paper though does not make the claim that this is the primary role, regardless of how logical it might appear. More broadly, what these maps do is emphasize the idea that irregular migration is a problem, and a growing one. This goes beyond the success or growth of one agency and its operations. FRONTEX reports and visuals, together with those of organizations such as the IOM, have become go-to references to understand migration and border issues, for policymakers, research institutes and journalists. FRONTEX as an EU agency is directly responsible to – and during border operations can have authority over – European and member state level authorities. In this regard, FRONTEX visuals play into a broader political framing of borders and migration as a salient issue.

Reiteration – stability and immutability

These maps of routes outlined by arrows are re-issued year after year, adjusted slightly to events at specific borders. The same routes are continually named: West African/Atlantic, Western Mediterranean, Central Mediterranean, Eastern Mediterranean, Eastern Borders, and West Balkan, reflecting for the most part the basic structure of the ICMPD’s i-Map. Each route has its own sub-webpage on the FRONTEX site, providing news on that specific route.

The reiteration of these maps – using a similar visual structure, and identifying the same routes – serves to establish and fix a specific geographic imaginary of irregular migration, and a consequent plea for action, for FRONTEX itself, EU decision-makers, as well as other map users. Once a potential reader (such as press or policymaker) is accustomed to the visual narrative, it becomes relatively easy for them to skim through reports and identify how specific routes are experiencing more or less ‘pressure’, and from there to conclude which countries or authorities need to be concerned.⁷

Over time, the routes represented on these maps appear to become stable structures, with shifts in numbers and changes in circulation patterns read as ‘developments’ within the overall structure of the route in question. Regardless of fluctuations, the itinerary of a given route – including its assigned countries of origin, transit, and destination – remains. As Critical Cartography has noted, the drawing of a line signifies a key moment in representing difference, geographic or otherwise (Olsson 2007). The repetition of the same or similar lines over time and across representations becomes a way of solidifying that initial distinction as an existing truth. The repetition stabilizes

the spatial structure and framing of space, further aiding the map to precede and produce space and territory (Pickles 2004). The routes then become a regular source of concern for an AMSO that is out of order. While the reiteration could suggest that the routes themselves are simply stable elements of regional dynamics, the visual language conveys that it is imperative to bring them under control.

This approach of reifying routes is evident in a series of maps that portray the evolution of two routes over three years, shown in Figure 7. The Central Mediterranean and West Mediterranean routes are represented in a series of what are known as ‘heat maps’ – that is, they indicate the growing or shrinking number of travelers along a given itinerary by color, using red for more and pallid yellow for fewer travelers. This color choice refers to the number of subjects in motion in such a way as to provoke unconscious impressions on the map reader, using color codes with common associations (i.e. red is for danger/fire). Heat maps in particular have a semi-organic feel to them, making the esthetic of the route seem like the representation of a semi-natural phenomenon.

Despite their apparent neutrality, these maps carry an emotional charge, with an underlying message: more mobility means less security, which requires intervention to prevent harm. The maps portraying these ‘irregular’ mobilities are accompanied by text (on the maps or in the reports) that refer to keywords such as ‘illegal’, ‘terrorism’, ‘foreign-fighter’, ‘smuggling’, ‘clandestine’, ‘fraud’, and ‘migratory threat’. These keywords pepper most of the FRONTEX reports analyzed. To be fair, these are reports of ‘Risk Analysis’ as many of them are titled. Yet, the reports themselves and accompanying maps make little hint at the context of migratory policies that lead certain human mobilities to irregularity. Occasionally, these reports will make a gesture to that context. This quote from the Risk Analysis for 2022/2023 signals this awareness: ‘Faced with stringent requirements for legal migration to Europe, often the only choice open to migrants is irregular migration which oftentimes results in a dire humanitarian situation’ (14). Yet, the recommendations in this or other reports, and the elements on the maps, do not respond to this situation of imposed irregularity. Nor do the maps and reports situate these irregular mobilities in the context of the broader human movement into, out of and among the European Union. Thus, the maps of the borders of the EU and of migration make these movements seem risky, potentially harmful, out of context and morally out of place.

The routes trace what are technically termed ‘mixed migration flows’, a typology of human movement used by migration and border authorities that comprises people who might later be categorized as economic migrants, trafficked peoples, unaccompanied minors, asylum seekers, or refugees; these maps lump all these existential situations and administrative statuses together, under the moral verdict that their movement is suspicious.

The visual stability of the route maintains itself regardless of specific international crises or debates on asylum. Since refugee flows are considered part of ‘mixed migration flows’, they are still considered a risk, and thus they are represented in maps of ‘irregular migration routes’; this diverges from other work examining the moral economy of asylum (Fassin 2009; 2015; Garelli and Tazzioli 2013). The presence of a group of refugees from a country considered ‘deserving’ at a certain point in time will not find its status reflected or itself differentiated on these maps: the visual work continues to be one of an

immediate need to be addressed, with increased arrow size indicating increased need and the location of the arrow on a particular route specifying demand for more action in relation to other routes. A brief example of this can be seen in [Figure 6](#), the map during the Syrian refugee crisis. While relevant debate about international protection for people from specific conflict areas took place in certain EU member states, this had no bearing on the overall visual structure of ‘risk’ and the urgency of the need to manage it. No distinction was made on the map to distinguish arrows proceeding from the ‘correct’ country, whether by color, shape, a separate map, etc.; rather, in the maps, these flows are still represented by the arrows of ‘irregular and mixed migration routes’. The only significant change in the graphic language about the space of the route was the size of the arrows. The quarterly publications by FRONTEX invoke ‘risk’ as a permanent feature of these routes, regardless of conjunctural concerns and emergency situations, whereby the routes become not only stable but immutable, even structural.⁸

Furthermore, this repetition year after year has spread the sense that it is the ‘normal’ and ‘correct’ way to represent the border. In previous work on what I call a ‘mapping migration matrix’ (Cobarrubias 2019), I point to the reproductive power of these maps as being a source underpinning the legitimacy and currency of restrictive migratory policies, which eventually become the new normal. Analyzing the ‘cartopolitics’ of a specific FRONTEX map, Houtum and Lacy write: ‘The striking power wielded by this map becomes manifest once we realize that it is by no means a stand-alone exception. Throughout the years, the repetition of its cartographic structure across all kinds of institutional documents has turned its visual composition into the ‘normal’ cartographic representation of undocumented migration in the EU’ (2019, 153). The cartographic knowledge about migration and illegality in those maps, while limited and problematic, nevertheless spreads among border security personnel, politicians, and media outlets. This authoritative reiteration of a cohesive-seeming set of numbers, grids, and lines becomes the accepted explanation of migratory ‘crises’ and illegal border crossings.

With regard to the dissemination of the knowledge in these maps, it is worth noting the transformations in their visual structure over time. When the original i-Map project was in its prime (approximately 2009–2013), ICMPD participants perceived it as a tool to convey rigorous expert knowledge: ‘the i-Map is not supposed to carry a message, it is supposed to carry the truth. It is a technical tool, not a political tool,’ (ICMPD interview 2011). This sentiment may reflect the research background of many ICMPD employees and their self-understanding of producing evidence-backed concepts. However, it would be hard to transfer this same sentiment to the FRONTEX adaptations of the route map over the years: the exaggerated sizes of map elements and the lack of a clear legend would seem to discredit those maps as ‘carriers of truth’. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the FRONTEX maps analyzed in this paper are all illustrations from reports, strategic documents, and the like, which are filled with details, reports, charts, and other minutiae of data; thus, the maps form part of an expert information product. Additionally, FRONTEX’s use of mapping goes beyond what is publicly available in their reports: maps and mapping projects are a regular part of the task of border control, and FRONTEX units such as the SitCen (Situation Centre) or the RAU (Risk Analysis Unit) produce maps as well (FRONTEX interview 2013). At first glance, it seems that the main division of tasks is between maps as information and communicative tools (those publicly available) and maps as operational tools (those for concrete border

work and therefore unavailable to the public). The possible interactions of the different kinds of maps and cartographic knowledges remain to be researched.

Thinking through maps

Through reiteration and the projection of immutability on a series of irregular migration routes, the above maps are able to establish an implicit yet compelling moral geography of (in)appropriate mobilities. Besides pointing to the mobilities' size, pressure, and itineraries, these maps indicate the countries and zones from which these inappropriate mobilities tend to come. The regions where risk originates appear as stable over time as the routes themselves.

Underlying these maps is a rather simple geographical narrative. While objective-looking, these maps are grounded in a Schengen-inspired spatial ontology that sharply differentiates EU-ropean territories from 'extra-communitarian' ones (Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias, 2019). A spatial divide emerges, wherein Europe itself is always a destination (as opposed to a point of transit), Europe is never a source of emigration, and mobilities among or within other regions are essentially ignored. Furthermore, neither these maps nor the general debates around migration even hint at any history or context as to why certain 'routes' develop the way they do, or why the categories and layers of the maps are organized around classifications such as irregular vs. regular migration. Why, when, and how these categories and human movements gain significance is omitted; they are simply given as empirical facts. If we look closely at any of these maps, we can ask ourselves: Where are the arrows coming from? The answer seems to always revert back to a simplistic geography: From former colonial spaces. Thus, the 'moral' imperative and normative value in these maps connect back to this historical difference. It is to this general observation that I now turn.

As suggested previously, maps operate as one element in the construction of illegality as a risk and a threat. Maps help spatialize this threat, answering the question of 'where' it is to be found and action is to be taken. The technical appearance of the map provides it with the veneer of expert and apolitical knowledge. However, this technical side carries with it a moral plea, as the human movement in these maps is construed as threatening and as pressure. Thus, the technical cartographic elements imply a moralizing process that entails normative duties: there are too many arrows, they are too big, and they are out of control; therefore, it is right that they be managed or stopped. The maps then act as a pretext for organizing economic and political action to bring migration 'under control'.

At work in these maps is a double maneuver. The base of the map is presented in calmer colors, reflecting an ordered world of nation-states (Agnew 1994; van Houtum and Lacy 2019; Walters 2009). The arrows and routes crisscrossing them thus reflect a threat or deviation from the base. The maps invoke an accepted moral spatial order (AMSO), represented by the base and threatened by arrows. Consequently, migration management is posited as a way to re-establish the AMSO.

The visual semiotics of this AMSO – namely, of an ordered Europe (and by extension an orderly world) threatened by flows, routes, and arrows – are not created *ex nihilo* by migration maps nor by FRONTEX. Rather, the world-ordering function of these maps is layered upon cartographic visions from other historical periods, in particular maps of

developed/developing countries and maps of metropolises and colonies. Each of these cartographic portrayals of world order can be thought of as a map layer, with each layer representing a specific AMSO and each AMSO corresponding with a set of practices and where or on whom they should be carried out. For an AMSO of colonialism, this could include raw material extraction, monoculture farming for export, or settlement. For an AMSO of development, this might include policies of foreign investment, industrialization, and the building of infrastructures. In the case of maps of migration management, we may be witnessing the beginnings of an AMSO whose economic and political practice is predominantly oriented to managing human mobilities.

If visual representations of these AMSOs (especially those originating in Europe) were to be superimposed upon each other, the territories would by and large coincide. Despite the differences in time period as well as in sociopolitical organization and practice, the AMSOs coincide in territorial terms such that the layers of the colonial world, of development, and of the FRONTEX maps depicted above refer to similar macroregions. Each of these spatial orders implies a distinct moral economy, but the spatial hierarchy they claim to represent remains constant. Furthermore, this hierarchy entails a morality suitable to each AMSO, whether it is a duty to civilize, a duty to develop, or a duty to manage out-of-control mobilities. These duties entail a hierarchy of power that translates into political and economic action by one part of the AMSO in relation to another.

Given this hierarchy, within each AMSO, a dispositive of expertise develops that designates who can speak in the matter of recommending action and who defines the criteria to address the needs of that AMSO. Arturo Escobar has adroitly developed this in his critique of development logics as a 'system of relations [...] that sets the rules of the game: who can speak, from what points of view, with what authority, and according to what criteria of expertise; it sets the rules that must be followed for this or that problem, theory or object to emerge and be named, analyzed and eventually transformed into a policy or a plan' (2012/1998, 41). The spatial logic of development designates authority to those institutions, thinkers, and concepts hailing from or trained in 'developed' geographies. This hierarchy of authority distinguished in each AMSO establishes who creates goals about what is to be done and where, along with what actions should be taken; in this way, a clear and rigid hierarchy of expertise/knowledge with a spatial referent is established.

In each AMSO, the central organizing idea and the political and economic practices change, but the overall territories and hierarchies at play vary only somewhat. How exactly transition occurs from one AMSO to another is a historical question for further research. Landau's work on 'containment development' (2019) may indicate a sort of shift concept between an AMSO based primarily on developing third-world nations to one based on managing their human mobilities, which establishes continuity between a development AMSO and one of migration management.

This argument about layers becomes especially relevant in reflecting on the morally persuasive power of migration management maps. It demonstrates that the current maps build on many decades and levels of AMSO that contain a familiar and similar visual narrative, reiterating the AMSOs of previous periods. As a result, 'reading' migration management maps (such as those of FRONTEX) does not require explanation, and the fact that irregular migration comes from developing nations/former colonial spaces becomes almost self-evident.⁹ There is no need to explain why visas are issued

or not, since problematic human movement simply comes from regions that seem almost ‘naturally’ problematic. Furthermore, with other relevant human mobilities in these maps (migrations between other continents, intra-African migrations, emigration from Europe, etc.) ignored, the similarities between regional hierarchies of other time periods become even more visually ‘apparent’.

These maps work in conveying a message because parts of their basic structure are also recognizable to many readers: there are elements which do not require explanation and fit into a broader narrative. This can include elements as simple as north on top, or the outlines of nation-state borders. These confer a sensation of common sense, the obvious or even modernity.

There is a further fitting into a broader narrative in these maps though. The story of morally problematic unruly mobilities is overlaid upon preceding stories of difference, and of superiority and inferiority, inflected through geography. Prior maps and accompanying geographic imaginaries of development and imperial spaces serve as a recognizable background onto which the maps of irregular migration can be superimposed by map readers. The visual story readable from these maps and accompanying texts, fits into a much broader narrative that coheres with and reinforces previously existing understandings of human differences related to geography. The way in which maps communicate a narrative to map viewers and users is strengthened when the map can easily guide viewers to recognizable elements, structures and stories, that can be understood without being said. The new or distinct elements in the map can more easily fit or match a reader’s understanding.¹⁰

It is in this layered insistence on problematic movement that the normative basis for the moral economy of border control is reproduced. The stability of the AMSO is reiterated in the short term through the repetitive nature of FRONTEX’s maps and routes maps over roughly two decades. In the long term, the spatial ordering of the AMSO of migration management is supported by its being layered on previous spatial orders (such as those of development and colonialism). The self-definition of an EU whose internal movement and borders are ‘rightly ordered’ and that must protect itself from certain ‘extra-communitarian’ mobilities, or aid in ordering the borders therein, is reinforced by historical spatial imaginaries of world hierarchies. Consequently, it becomes ‘right’ and ‘normal’ that effort be expended to put such human movements back into order and to organize political and economic action toward that goal.

The stability of this moral geography over time lends credence to a moral economy that structures action around the need to know, manage, and control certain human movements. The migration management maps operate at the nexus where the ideational/normative helps to configure the spatial contours of a moral economy of migration. These normative values of inappropriate mobilities have created an ecology of interconnected political and economic practices and actors. The visual work of the maps analyzed in this paper is amplified by FRONTEX’s economic and institutional role of indicating and defining the ‘risks’ of irregular migration and the need to manage it. Identifying which mobilities are problematic and from where they come is the work of these maps, thus underscoring Lee and Smith’s (2011) argument that all moral orders are spatial orders, and all moral economies are also moral geographies.

Reflexive conclusions

Tackling the politics of migration management in the EU requires engaging with the prolific production of concepts, language, and visualizations of migration by expert institutional sites. These can include the work of policy centers (like the ICMPD) or of EU agencies (like FRONTEX). Nonetheless, it is important for researchers to keep in mind that focusing on these sites, even from a critical angle, can result in engaging the respective moral geographies on their own terms, as the expert sites set the spatial boundaries (terms) of debate within which critique can develop. While it is important to carry out this work, it must be done with the awareness that this can limit our understanding of the broader spatialities and multiple directionalities of migration politics that are not part of the repetitive visual narrative of FRONTEX's risk analysis reports.

When exploring the moral geographies and spatial limits of these cartographic representations on their own terms, research can easily miss how the migration dynamics between Africa and Europe also include the Gulf or southern China. The 'turbulence' (Papastergiadis 2000) of migratory dynamics spills over the spatial contours of the cartographies in question. Furthermore, the moral geographies in these institutional maps not only naturalize historically-laden representations of particular territories and continents but also miss the mark on the ways these spatial framings of migration and tactics of bordering travel between sites. For example, these maps do little to explain the relationship between the United States' attempts to manage South American borders, Australia's Pacific Solution, and EU member state border externalization. Additionally, if visuals of migration management and migratory routes – as well as the concepts themselves – are analyzed without accounting for the historical legacies they build on, researchers may inadvertently reproduce a myopic understanding of the spatialities underpinning the moral geography of unmanaged borders. Consequently, the reiteration of the routes in these maps can lead researchers to discuss routes as actually existing. A position as a reflexive researcher, aware of their role in (co-)producing knowledge would require carefully approaching and analyzing the route as a socially constructed object of governance. An object that reflects the concerns of particular institutions (like FRONTEX or ICMPD), rather than a pre-existing route of human mobilities. Despite the ostensible structure of migratory routes to the EU, the relationship between existing mobilities and the analyzed 'routes' is a question to be answered in research, rather than a given.

Therefore, engagement with maps such as those of FRONTEX needs to be conducted in a way that is aware of their knowledge-producing character: it takes seriously the moral geographies therein (i.e. not viewing them as simply smoke and mirrors), but it also situates them in a context that transcends the limited spatial understandings communicated by those institutions. As Harley suggests (1989), maps are also cultural artifacts reflecting the interests, desires, fears, and world views of their creators and the institutions that request their creation. Therefore, it may be useful for researchers to also locate themselves on a 'map' so to speak. My own approach toward these institutional maps comes from a compilation of several influences. First, as a geographer and student of John Pickles, a referential theorist on cartography and space, I was educated to pay special attention to map-making and the graphic representation of space. This made me sensitive to how distinct maps of borders and migration convey distinct realities, politics, and ethical positions on human mobility.¹¹

Secondly, my own family trajectory, personal experience and ethical/spiritual condition led me to question the institutional visualizations of migration analyzed in this piece. As a person born of immigrants in one country, whose grandparents had moved from yet another country and myself having had to move internationally several times, I always find it odd how my family's narrative would fit or not into many of these cartographic portraits of human mobility. The exacerbated attention to certain mobilities, the implicit acceptance as normal of others, and the selective erasure of history, makes me feel forced to signal what appears as a contradiction.

This contradiction between accepted and unacceptable migrations, as well as ignoring past movements to focus exclusively on the present (as if migration was somehow a 'new' phenomenon), led me to a position where the freedom of movement seems to be the most logical political horizon, if not goal. This position is not only based on a vague cosmopolitan conception of rights, but also on historical notions of religious obligation to hospitality. In this regard, the maps analyzed in this piece act within a 'clash of cartographies' where radically opposite worlds are evoked and prefigured: some worlds in which human mobility is assumed and facilitated; other worlds focused on dissecting, intersecting and filtering certain mobilities in harmful ways (Casas-Cortés et al. 2017). This piece contributes to one side of that battle, the one promoting 'no-borders as practical politics' (Anderson et al. 2011).

FRONTEX (and ICMPD) maps serve as a powerful (even dominant) visualization, so much so that researchers cannot avoid taking on the topic of migration management without referring to these maps or the spatial imaginaries they enshrine. These maps not only precede the territory but also imbue it with a moral order of the world that has a strong postcolonial legacy. The implicit moral order in these maps (as in other artifacts of migration management) requires a self-reflexive perspective by researchers. Thus, the analysis of the moral geographies therein takes place on two different levels: first, understanding how norms and values contribute to and are embedded in expert institutional knowledge production on borders; and second, on an epistemic level, the necessary reflection on the historical trajectories of these cartographic representations and the related moral and economic ordering functions.

Notes

1. The understanding of the economic in this paper implies a broader approach than the analysis of market dynamics per se, but rather includes the role of policy and social practice in constituting dynamics of exchange and permissible economic acts, even as far as defining something as belonging to the realm of the 'economic'. Loosely, this understanding reflects the influence of approaches such as regulationist or Polanyian thinking. The concept of moral economy will aid in identifying how the seemingly non-economic can be inserted into circuits of value, creating object that oscillate between the normative and the economic.
2. Other research has developed the concept of moral economy in Migration Studies in distinct ways (see Marino, Schapendonk, and Lietaert 2023 and Ambrosini 2023 for reviews of this literature), although often still focused on perceptions of what is right and good regarding 'deserving' migrants and notions of justice, and less on the moral economy underpinning border management.
3. In line with the goals of this special issue, this process of writing and mapping certain mobilities as 'wrong' has impacts for the reflexive turn as well. Researchers' attention is turned towards those migratory movements deemed most problematic. This is often a response

to the serious human rights concerns and injustices directed toward irregularized populations. Yet, the focus of research, even critical, can also be a knee-jerk reflection of the official narrative of irregular migration as something meriting special attention, thereby reinforcing the separation of irregularized mobilities from other forms, sources and directionalities of mobility.

4. While the ICMPD's i-Map project continues to exist, its work and organization has changed fundamentally. See <https://www.imap-migration.org>.
5. In particular, they note how propaganda maps can produce a sense of encirclement, threat, or even invasion that beg for action be taken.
6. For more on the relationship between map reading, text and interpretation see Denil (Denil 2017) and Hanna (Hanna 2012).
7. While this article does not attempt to trace distribution and usage, it should be kept in mind that FRONTEX documents, analyses and training are spread across EU institutions and member states. While difficult to assess how differently placed readers or users of this information interact, FRONTEX is directly responsible to the EU Parliament and Council as well as the border authorities of different member states and disseminates it reporting and documentation regularly to these bodies. Furthermore, as the central border authority of the EU, FRONTEX is responsible for envisioning coordinated joint operations and vigilance among distinct EU member states, training different member state institutions, as well as participating and advising on the creation and design of policy tools (such as the recent European Travel Information and Authorisation System). Thus the spatial imaginary and strategy of FRONTEX has an impact in border policy formation and implementation throughout the EU.
8. The idea of humanitarian protection and asylum disappears under a broader umbrella of 'risky migration'. In this way, two seemingly-contradictory structuring moralities underpinning migration management become ultimately compatible: on the one hand, the moral imperative of limiting migration from undesirable countries, and on the other hand, the ethical call for humanitarian protection via asylum and anti-trafficking. What seems like incoherence between these two goals becomes internally coherent in these maps of irregular migration: all flows represented uniform, threatening arrows.
9. For development of the argument of spaces as almost 'naturally' problematic see Escobar (2012/1998) and Power (Power 2003) for Development and Mignolo (Mignolo 2003), Edney (Edney 1999) and Livingstone (Livingstone 2002) for colonial spaces.
10. For more on maps, the communication of stories via maps, and cartographic narratives please see: Pickles (2004); Wood and Fels (Wood and Fels 2008); Caquard (Caquard 2015); and Boria and Rosetto (Boria and Rossetto 2017).
11. I am of course in the company of other scholars who have worked at this intersection of map-making and migration (Henk van houtum, Rodrigo Bueno Lacy, William Walters Maribel Casas Cortés, Lorenzo Pezzani, Charles Heller, among others). This research interest also builds on my own trajectory as a member of the Counter-Cartographies Collective (<https://www.counter-cartographies.org/>)

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