Heroes, Villains & Victims
A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Swedish News Media’s Representation of Frontex

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Abstract
This thesis explores in which ways the EUs border management agency Frontex was represented as a ‘humanitarian’ actor in the Swedish news media during Operation Triton 2014-2017 in the Central Mediterranean. It conducts a critical discourse analysis of Sweden’s largest newspaper Aftonbladet, using traditional and contemporary understandings of humanitarianism paired with saviour, villain, and victim narratives as a theoretical framework. The thesis concludes that such narratives were reproduced in the Swedish news media’s representation of the agency and when combined with the notion of ‘Swedish exceptionalism’, Frontex was especially portrayed as a humanitarian actor. Furthermore, the thesis argues that Frontex was considered a ‘discourse technologist’ within certain areas of the EUs border regime, and that Sweden’s humanitarian position in the EU was compromised during the 2015 refugee ‘crisis’. The research contributes to the field by concentrating explicitly on Frontex in the Swedish news media, which existing research is lacking.

Keywords: Frontex, Sweden, CDA, victim/saviour dichotomy, humanitarian borderwork.
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1. Introduction

In recent years many scholars in the critical border studies community have noticed a discursive change in how border control agencies in the Global North present themselves and their practices in a more humanitarian manner (Andersson, 2016; Campesi, 2014; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015; Williams, 2016). Some claim that agencies such as Frontex, the EU-agency tasked with control and surveillance of the EU’s external borders, have adopted a discourse which frames a ‘victim and saviour dichotomy’ (Pallister-Wilks, 2017), reproducing a narrative in which migrants are framed as helpless ‘victims’, to be saved from smugglers (‘villains’), by the ‘saviours’ i.e., the border guards. The trend of highlighting search and rescue (SAR) operations, and emphasising their role as ‘saviours’, characterizes a humanitarian focal point in Frontex’s discourses and practices.

Likewise, this newfound discourse supports the larger concept that migrant safety and border control can co-exist, known as ‘humanitarian borderwork’ (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017). Paradoxically, acts of humanitarian borderwork and the use of humanitarian discourse are claimed to further produce irregular populations in need of protection (Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017), and legitimize the role of Frontex as the most appropriate responder to ‘humanitarian emergencies’ by framing migratory inflows in an ‘emergency logic’ (Campesi, 2014). Ultimately, achieving the opposite of its humanitarian claims, by covering up its exclusionary politics with humanitarian reasoning. Additionally, the humanitarian reframing of Frontex, from the former more control-oriented discourse, benefits the agency’s moral reputation by deflecting criticism of human rights abuses, justifies their financial and spatial expansion, whilst safeguarding their role as protectors of Europe and of vulnerable migrants simultaneously (Perkowski, 2018).

Neatly put, claiming borderwork to be humanitarian is problematic because it constructs a dichotomy of care and control (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017), where the illusion of humanitarian rescue and assistance conceals the reality of irregular populations being exposed to exclusionary practices through traditional borderwork. In other words, the self-proclaimed banner of ‘care’ and ‘humanitarianism’ helps to shift the focus away from the human rights abuses, violations of refugee protection rights, and restrictive migration policies occurring at the border (see Horsti, 2012; Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017; Perkowski, 2018).

Furthermore, the more widespread this discourse becomes reproduced and adopted by other societal actors, the stronger this illusion of ‘humanitarianism’ becomes.
For instance, if Frontex is regarded a ‘discourse technologist’ (Fairclough, 1995) as Horsti (2012) claims, their discourse carries ‘an aura of truth’ and will be uncritically and unquestionably reproduced in the European news media. Therefore, this thesis will focus on Frontex’s representation in the Swedish news media to investigate how the agency is framed and in which ways they are perceived as a ‘humanitarian actor’ in the context of the EU’s border management. The agency’s humanitarian discourse and other relevant concepts within the critical border studies field will be presented as a backdrop for the study, paired with a critical discourse analysis of Sweden’s largest news outlet Aftonbladet, to investigate whether Frontex is perceived as ‘humanitarian’. Throughout the thesis the term ‘borderwork’ will refer to work occurring at the border carried out by Frontex and other national coast guard actors, e.g., identification, detection, processing, detention, and deportation of migrants. The term ‘border management’ refers to policies, decision-making, and regulations on the supra-national and EU-level, influencing the EU’s borders.

1.1. Research Problem & Aim

The ‘humanitarianisation’ of border management (Williams, 2016) is not exclusively occurring in the North American or European contexts. Rather, it is a global phenomenon which claims to act in the best interest of migrants, but oftentimes has exclusionary and sometimes lethal consequences (Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017). Perhaps most importantly, the humanitarian discourses used by Frontex, and other border policing agencies are spreading fast and being adopted by other societal actors. The discourse has gained policy traction and “provides a script for knowledge production about governance and irregular populations globally” (ibid.: 550). Consequently, the production and reproduction of this discourse can have harmful effects on populations’ attitudes towards migration if frequently presented in the media. Therefore, the aim of my thesis is to investigate how Sweden’s largest media outlet, Aftonbladet, frames Frontex and their operations, exploring in which ways elements of humanitarianism are presented in their representations of the agency.

The purpose of my study is to investigate the Swedish news media’s representation of Frontex’s presence in the Central Mediterranean between Libya and Italy (as seen in Figure 1), labelled the ‘deadliest route’ for refugees and migrants where approximately 4.600 migrants lost their lives in 2016 (Statista, 2021). The death rates during 2016 were the highest during the 2014-2017 period, when 14.445 migrant deaths were estimated in total by IOM’s ‘Missing Migrants Project’ (2018). According to UNHCR (2016), 1 in 47 migrants die
crossing this route, making it the most dangerous sea crossing to Europe compared to the Western and Eastern Mediterranean Routes. I will investigate the Swedish news media’s representations of the Frontex operation Triton lasting from 2014 to 2018 in this area. This EU-led operation replaced the Italian government’s operation ‘Mare Nostrum’ described as a security operation aimed to save lives, which was launched as a response to 400 migrants drowning of the coast of Lampedusa in 2013 (Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017).

![Migratory Mediterranean Routes. Source: IOM](image)

At first, operation Triton had no official humanitarian objective, but was presented as a border control and intelligence collecting mission to support the Italian authorities, however with a sliced monthly budget amounting to only a third of Mare Nostrum’s budget (Cuttitta, 2014). Only after the European Commission’s ‘Ten-point action plan on migration’ was introduced as a response to the 2015 refugee ‘crisis’ did the operation’s budget triple and its mandates expand (Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017: 545). The new objectives of Triton were to rescue migrants at risk, capture and destroy vessels used by smugglers, and coordinate the ‘rapid return’, i.e., deportation, of irregular migrants (ibid.). Little & Vaughan-Williams (2017) claim that the emphasis on capturing smugglers justified continued military action in Frontex operations, endangering the migrants the operations were supposedly concerned with ‘saving’, due to the difficulties of distinguishing the two groups during seaborne missions.

The Swedish case is chosen out of empirical interest and due to its media’s supposed objectivity when reporting news. Additionally, the Swedish Coast Guard cooperated with Frontex in operation Triton, lending ships, staff, and resources, thus making them a key actor in the Frontex operation, and by extension, part of the agency. Additionally, in 2015 Sweden
welcomed 162,000 asylum seekers following the refugee ‘crisis’, only to drastically restrict its migration legislation in 2016 (Yantseva, 2020). Some label this drastic change the end of ‘Swedish exceptionalism’, having formerly been a country renowned for its open-door policies and inclusivity compared to its Scandinavian and European counterparts (ibid.). In other words, Sweden has formerly been known for its more humanitarian migration policy but have in later years retracted and become more restrictive. Additionally, Hovden, Mjelde & Gripsud (2018) note that humanitarian aspects of migration events had started to fade over time in the Swedish news media, reflecting a step back from ‘Swedish exceptionalism’.

1.2. Scope and Research Question

My selected timeframe for gathering news reports and editorials as material is between January 2014 and August 2017, published during Operation Triton. This due to the noticeable increase in media attention European border management was given during this time period. Operation Triton replaced Operation Mare Nostrum shortly after the tragedy in Lampedusa in 2013 and corresponded with the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015, triggering the European Commission’s action plan on migration and massive media attention relating to the topic of border security and irregular migration to the EU. Since then, issues relating to migration have generally become buzzwords in Scandinavian news reports (Hovden, Mjelde & Gripsud, 2018). The scope of my study will be limited to Operation Triton in the Central Mediterranean, thus revealing contemporary Swedish news portrayals of Frontex operations. Additionally, I will investigate whether the media discourse has changed over time, exploring differences or similarities in portrayals of the operation in relation to humanitarianism.

My research question guiding the study is: In which ways does the Swedish news media frame Frontex as a ‘humanitarian’ actor?

2. Background of Frontex

Many scholars would agree that the birth of ‘the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders’, or Frontex, has ties to the early developments of securitization in the EU and as a response to the U.S. terrorist attacks of 2001, and new migratory patterns after the Cold War in the 1990’s (Neal, 2009; Perkowski, 2012; Campesi, 2014). When the Schengen Agreement was incorporated into EU law in 1999, free movement and the removal of internal borders called for a heightened response for
the security of the EU’s external borders (Campesi, 2014). Additionally, the issue of migration had become more contested and received more media coverage following the end of the Cold War (Perkowski, 2012). Subsequent to 9/11, the Justice and Home Affairs Council of the EU called for an extraordinary meeting, linking the subject of migration and the right to asylum, to issues concerning security (Neal, 2009). The following conclusion drawn by most EU institutions, Member States, and policymakers was that external ‘threats’ constitute a necessity for strengthened securitization, i.e., relating a topic such as migration to the issue of security, of the external borders, linking both; migration and security, and borders and terrorism (ibid.).

However, most Member States were not in agreement about how the issue of security in the EU should be dealt with. Some Member States were opposed to yielding their sovereignty and migration control for the purpose of a shared EU border management mechanism (Campesi, 2014). Nevertheless, the powerful combination of the 2001 terrorist attacks, media coverage of migration, and the EU’s eastward expansion in 2004, amplified the perceived urgency for such a mechanism, which at first was primarily advocated for by southern EU Member States (ibid.). As a result, Frontex was established in 2004, with six tasks assigned to the new agency. The main tasks being; to assist and coordinate cooperation between Member States in managing the external borders with technical and operational assistance, carrying out risk analyses, and develop research on control and surveillance of external borders (Perkowski, 2012).

The agency’s first operations HERA I and II in 2006 have been described as the ‘best publicized’ operations Frontex ever constructed (Perkowski, 2012: 21). Both were conducted off the Western African coast to assist in identifying irregular migrants and coordinating return flights (ibid.). Hera I ‘produced’ the identification of nearly 19,000 irregular migrants arriving in the Canaries, with over 6,000 deported, whilst Hera II ‘produced’ nearly 4,000 by intercepting migrant boats at sea before leaving African territorial waters (ibid.:22). The interceptions in non-EU territorial waters were made possible through bilateral agreements with Senegal, Cape Verde, and Mauritania. Frontex press releases tied to the operations claimed that by diverting boats back to their point of departure, the agency was ‘reducing the lives lost at sea’ (ibid.).

However, the humanitarian justifications for the operations were not well received by European and African activist groups. Frontex was met with heavy criticism from civil
society actors, e.g., Human Rights Watch and UNHCR, calling their operations ‘push-back’ operations, breaching non-refoulment, and making the external borders ‘sites of death and suffering’ (Jeandesboz & Pallister-Wilkins, 2014: 318). Likewise, German advocacy groups named Frontex ‘a murderer of refugees and migrants’ and a ‘hunter of boatpeople and undocumented’ (Horsti, 2012: 300). Collectively, opposers of the agency accused Frontex of constructing ‘Fortress Europe’ with inhumane and legally breaching practices (ibid.).

Meanwhile, mainstream European news outlets reported on the migratory events as African migrants arriving through the ‘back door’ of Europe, phrasing the event in terms of natural disasters (waves, flows, streams), and also reporting on the amounts of migrant deaths along the route as an exceptional European emergency (Horsti, 2008).

Despite criticism from a range of societal actors, Frontex has quickly become one of the largest and fastest expanding agencies in the EU. For instance, their annual budget increased from €19m in 2004 to €143m in 2015 (Andersson, 2016) and likewise, their number of operational days for operations Nautilus and Hermes in the Central Mediterranean region had more than tripled from 2007 to 2012 with a 196% increase in spending (Campesi, 2014).

More recently in 2016, as a result of the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’, the European Council extended the agency’s mandate to ‘regain control of the EU’s external borders’ and ‘save Schengen’ (European Council, 2016).

However, as a response to the criticism of human rights violations, the Consultative Forum on Fundamental Rights was formed in 2012 to change the agency’s antagonistic relationship to NGOs and human rights actors (Perkowski, 2018). The forum consists of nine NGOs, two EU agencies, and six international organizations and its purpose is to advise Frontex on human rights related matters. Consequently, there has been a large incorporation and growing awareness of human rights in the agency’s internal organizational discourse and code of conduct, with frequent human rights training seminars for staff (Aas & Gundhus, 2014).

Consequently, the organizational narrative and self-representation of Frontex weaves together elements of security, humanitarianism, and human rights (Perkowski, 2018). In her study, Perkowski (2018) identifies three somewhat contradictory framings in the agency’s self-identification and organizational narrative as: a protector of Europe from migrant threats, a saviour of migrants at sea, and a promoter of fundamental rights. Thus, the agency views

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1 Europe as a whole, with an emphasis on EU Member States.
itself as an analyst of risk with the resources to anticipate risks ahead of time, a predominantly security organization that does its best to save lives, and as an influencer for Member State’s border police to take fundamental rights into account. In her opinion, the self-constructed narrative reaps three major benefits for the agency. Firstly, it entitles them to a cooperation between a wide range of actors in EU border management. Secondly, it enables them as a ‘go-to’ solution for times of ‘crisis’ and thirdly, it allows them to shift the blame of human rights abuses onto Member States that lack knowledge of fundamental rights (ibid.)

Today, Frontex has many ongoing operations within, outside, and on the outskirts of the EU. In the Western Mediterranean region, off Spain’s sea borders, operations Hera, Indalo & Minerva are conducted. Operation Themis in the Central Mediterranean region, Operation Poseidon in the Eastern Mediterranean region, and various land-based operations in the Western Balkans (Frontex, 2022). Also, their annual budget has increased from €288m in 2018 to €460m in 2020, with their external personnel nearly tripling during that time (Frontex, 2019).

3. Previous Research

In this section I will present relevant existing research on the topic of humanitarian borderwork, and the discourses centred around the topic. The section will begin with a brief description of humanitarian borderwork as a concept, followed by the scholarly debate of traditional and contemporary understandings of humanitarianism. Later, examples identified by scholars in the field will be presented on how humanitarian discourse weaves together elements of security and control with humanitarianism and care, and how such processes benefit Frontex on moral, legal, and financial levels. Subsequently, the most common overarching narratives found in the discourse will be presented, which ultimately frame the actors Frontex, irregular migrants, and smugglers in saviour, victim, and villain roles respectively. Additionally, various European media representations of irregular migration will be presented. Finally, I will clarify the gap in existing literature and how my thesis contributes to the field.

3.1. Humanitarian Borderwork

‘Humanitarian borderwork’ is a concept that has emerged in the critical border studies field in recent years (Pallister-Wilkens, 2017; Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017). The concept rests
on an assumption that *migrant safety* and measures of *border control* (such as increased militarization and securitization) can co-exist (Waerp, 2019). However, when examining the term ‘humanitarian borderwork’ it seems as if the term is composed of two incompatible elements – humanitarianism, ‘to do no harm’ (ibid.), and borderwork, i.e., acts of exclusion, control, and security of sovereign territory (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017). Furthermore, humanitarianism, which in the past was more commonly reserved for the NGO sector, is now increasingly carried out by supranational governments and States, in an age of ‘new humanitarianism’ (Nascimento, 2015). In this new age, it appears as if militarization/securitization and humanitarianism are inextricably linked. Consequently, border practices, operations, and discourses have been framed in a more ‘humanitarian’ manner (Williams, 2016).

Originating from heavy criticism from civil society and NGOs about migrant death rates at the EU’s southern borders, and as a result of closing legal and safe pathways onto sovereign territory, Campesi (2014: 131) claims that Frontex has adopted a humanitarian rhetoric and appropriated it to their own purposes. He believes the victimization of migrants - reframing them as ‘victims’ rather than ‘risks’ - used by Frontex, was a discursive strategy to divert attention from the agency’s shortcomings and direct it onto smugglers exploiting and endangering migrants (ibid.). Further, he identifies two main effects of this discursive shift. Firstly, it paradoxically conceals the violation of the migrants’ fundamental rights to seek asylum during ‘rescue’ operations. Secondly, it delegitimizes the critique from human rights actors and allows Frontex to capitalize in terms of political and ethical legitimacy of their operations (ibid.).

3.2. Paradoxes of Humanitarianism

Little & Vaughan-Williams (2017) argue that there lies a great paradox within this humanitarian discourse in the EU-context. It ignores the role of the EU inciting irregular migration and human smuggling through its ever-growing restrictive border regime, and further legitimizes military action at the border (ibid.). Dating back to the creation of the Schengen area, Campesi (2014) claims that the EU have been replicating a pattern of restrictive migration policies in times of crisis, rather than re-evaluating its closed border policies. The ‘migration diplomacy’ legitimizing the need for interceptions in cases of ‘humanitarian emergency’ in the Mediterranean, lead to more extensive border control practices, and more dangerous migratory pathways (ibid.). In other words, humanitarian
discourse justifies and legitimizes the initial cause of the issue - the EU’s restrictive border regime - framing it as a solution.

Likewise, the ‘humanitarian’ components of Frontex’s practices have been rigorously questioned as well. The traditional understanding of humanitarianism has impartiality, transparency, and accountability as key principles, and an overarching goal to do no harm and improve aspects of the human condition, without ulterior motive and without discrimination (Waerp, 2019: 6). In other words, it subscribes to the principle that ‘all lives are equal’ and should, ideally, be completely unbiased and non-discriminatory. However, contemporary humanitarianism, or ‘new humanitarianism’ (Nascimento, 2015), stands in contradiction to the traditional reasoning, with long-term objectives of development, peace, a promise of ‘normality’, and security (De Lauri, 2016). The involvement of State actors pursuing their own agendas using the exceptionalist discourse of ‘humanitarian emergency’ allows for military solutions to humanitarian problems (Little & Vaughan, 2017: 546). What Ticktin (2011: 5) refers to as ‘armed love’ permits brutal measures in the name of care and rescue, and ultimately work to reinforce an oppressive order of deservingness. In other words, militarized intervention strategies used by Frontex to ‘rescue’ irregular migrants ultimately work to uphold a hierarchy of deservingness and exclusion.

Consequently, many scholars compare humanitarian borderwork to Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, ergo, the attempt to enhance and optimise life at the level of the population (Foucault, Davidson & Burchell, 2008). However, in contrast to the Foucauldian concept of nurturing the wellbeing of a population, humanitarian borderwork has the potential to both protect the lives of irregular populations, whilst simultaneously developing militaristic, autoimmune tendencies that negate those lives (Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017: 536).

Similarly, Ticktin (2011) notes that the care and humanitarian assistance granted to a small number of the irregular population – what she calls ‘humanitarian exceptionalism’ – simultaneously reinforce extensive structures of exclusion for the majority. Put differently, borders operate within a dichotomy of both inclusion and exclusion, whereby those lives excluded end up in detention centres processed according to the EU’s border policies, and at times are forced to return to the persecution they originally fled from. The irony of what tends to happen to the majority after being ‘saved’ is perhaps best summed up by Perkowski (2018: 467): “In conceptualizing migrants as bodies to be saved, stripped of agency, it
reproduces their vulnerability, however, by exposing saved bodies to the very control practices that rendered them vulnerable in the first place.”.

3.3. Consequences of ‘Humanitarian Discourse’

Similarly, Andersson (2017) argues that the use of humanitarian discourse deployed by Frontex is much more than an attempt to salvage their public reputation. He writes: “it also provides a justification on psychological, moral, legal, political, and even financial levels for preemptive migration controls beyond Europe’s borders” (ibid.:72). On an individual level, border guards have claimed moral superiority over traditional humanitarian actors, arguing they risk their lives to save the lives of migrants, whilst their NGO counterparts merely supply them with aid to carry out their dangerous seaborne journeys (ibid.). However, this is a somewhat contradictory claim, as many NGOs such as MSF and MOAS regularly assist in SAR operations (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017). Interviews conducted by Aas & Gundhus (2014) with Frontex personnel partially confirm the agency’s claim as well. After the incorporation of fundamental rights into the Frontex training programme, some officers have become concerned with improving the conditions for migrants. However, the results reflect that the majority of Frontex officers view the suffering of migrants as part of the job, and “not particularly challenging” (ibid.: 8).

In terms of justifying the legality of Frontex operations, Andersson (2017) refers to the Joint Operation Hera in 2006, where mixed messages were sent about the objectives of the operation. Mixed statements referred to both ‘fighting illegal migration’ by intercepting boats before they arrive on the Spanish coast, whilst simultaneously defending these interceptions on the basis of ‘saving lives’ (ibid.). Such rescue/interception operations outside of European territory are made possible by the ‘international convention on the safety of life at sea’ (SOLAS). Pallister-Wilkins (2017: 93) argues that the primary motive presented from a rescue operation is to ‘save lives’ under the SOLAS directive, but in practice it is a border policing operation with the goal of interception. Meaning, migrant vessels that are categorized as ‘at risk’ or ‘in need of rescue’ allows for Frontex to expand their space of interception into international waters (ibid.). Thus, humanitarian discourse additionally justifies and expands Frontex operations outside of EU territory.

Furthermore, through emphasizing the necessity for Frontex SAR operations through the humanitarian approach, it further justifies the agency’s financial expansion and need for
additional resources and investments. Expensive technological developments for surveillance and gathering of biometric data, such as EURODAC, profits not only Frontex but a wide range of actors in a system that Andersson (2016) refers to as the ‘illegality industry’. Since the founding of Frontex in 2004 until 2015, their annual budget increased from €19m to €143m (Andersson, 2016: 1059). Not to mention the large investments for ‘mobility partners’ outside of EU territory, which consist of financial incitements to third countries to assist and halt migratory flows to the EU. The most telling examples are the $5bn Italy-Libya ‘Friendship Pact’ of 2008 (Andersson, 2016: 1059) and the €6bn ‘EU-Turkey Deal’ of 2016 (MPI, 2021), both aimed at combatting ‘illegal migration’ and ‘saving lives’. In sum, expensive investments disguised as humanitarianism, help justify overall exclusionary practices.

3.4. Narratives & Media Representations

In the same vein, other scholars have identified narratives which benefit Frontex by introducing smugglers as a third actor and framing them in a villain role. The narrative of the ‘victim and saviour dichotomy’ (Pallister-Wilkens, 2015), implies that vulnerable migrants are reliant on the valiant efforts of border agents at sea. Moreover, it creates a form of governmentality which identifies roles of victim, perpetrator, and saviour (Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017: 547), reproducing a narrative in which migrants are framed as helpless ‘victims’, to be saved from smugglers, by the ‘saviours’ working at the border. Perkowski (2018: 466) additionally identifies a similar narrative she calls the ‘unscrupulous smuggler’ which shifts the blame of migrant’s suffering and vulnerability onto the smugglers, whilst at the same time framing Frontex as ‘the protectors’ of both Europe and smuggling victims. A prominent example of the saviour reframing are SAR operations, where the former action of ‘apprehended migrant’ or ‘interception’ has been replaced with the phrase ‘rescue at sea’ (Campesi, 2014:132). In an interview when asked what the difference between ‘interception’ and ‘rescue’ was, a coast guard replied: “It’s the same, but interception refers more to drugs, migration is usually more of a rescue because it is more humanitarian.” (Andersson, 2017: 73, emphases added).

In terms of Frontex’s public communication, Horsti (2012) critically analysed press releases published on its website between 2006-2011. She claims that the agency makes a regular appearance in European news as an ‘expert source’ on irregular migration, and thus massively contributes to the public understanding of the issue. She treats Frontex as a
'discourse technologist’ (see Fairclough 1995: 105), meaning a producer of discourse given an expert status in the public realm, and therefore carries an ‘aura of truth’, which shapes the public understanding of irregular migration in Europe. Furthermore, she argues that domestic news media presents the issue of irregular migration in a ‘Europeanized’ framework, expanding from a national agenda to a European-level issue. Consequently, the mass media contributes to the construction of migrants as a ‘threat’ or as ‘victims’ by consulting Frontex when framing the issue. Furthermore, Horsti (2012) theorizes that the term ‘illegal’ is no longer, or at least seldom, used by Frontex to frame migrants but rather smugglers instead. However, migrants still fall within the ‘illegal’ category by association with smugglers and ‘illegal border crossings’, as stated in the press releases (ibid.). Thus, the self-produced texts from Frontex are intended for EU institutions, policymakers, the media and wider public, shaping interpretations.

In the context of the Nordic news media, the ‘Europeanized framework’ is present as well, reproducing identities and positions in society. In her 2008 study, Horsti analyses Finnish and Swedish news media and concludes that a Europeanized framework supports the construction of a European identity against ‘the Other’. In other words, news coverage play an important role in drawing a line between those who belong and possess European values, and those who do not, typically framing migrants as ‘illegals’, ‘objects of control’, or ‘victims’, reproducing identities of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (ibid.). Regardless, Sweden has historically been internationally praised for being leading in humanitarian migration, resisting European trends of restrictive migration policy, and granting the most international protection of any OECD country per capita, illustrating the term ‘Swedish exceptionalism’ (Emilsson, 2018).

More recently, following the 2015 refugee ‘crisis’, European news media representations of irregular migrants have become quite heterogeneous. For instance, the German and British news media framings have shifted from a humanitarian perception to one characterized by threat and securitization (Berry et al., 2016). Whilst in the early months of the ‘crisis’ in Swedish news coverage a humanitarian framing was more widely used, with overall more positive sentiments relating to the issue of migration (Hovden, Mjelde & Gripsud, 2018). However, the humanitarian aspects of migrant representations started to fade in the later months of 2015, shifting the focus more to the negative consequences of refugee arrivals (ibid.). Emilsson (2018) argues that the external shock caused by the refugee ‘crisis’ has
influenced Sweden’s policies, politics, and media, perhaps bringing an end to ‘Swedish exceptionalism’.

3.5. The Research Gap & My Contribution

To conclude, the humanitarian discourses used by Frontex have been researched extensively in recent years. The agency’s official discourse and various humanitarian narratives have justified Frontex’s extended mandate, moral and legal legitimacy, budget, and resources over the years (Andersson, 2017; Campesi, 2014). A prime example being search and rescue operations along the Mediterranean routes at the external borders of the EU (Waerp, 2019). The humanitarian focus in Frontex’s discourse and practices reflects a paradox of how they are presented, ergo as both the watchdogs surveilling the borders in the interest of Member States, and as humanitarian actors saving migrants from ‘the bad smugglers’. Moreover, many studies of Frontex’s discourses and practices reflect a detachment from ‘traditional’ humanitarian values, and primarily reveal exclusionary results in the name of security and protection (Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017; Pallister-Wilkins; 2017; Perkowski, 2018). Additionally, if Frontex is considered an expert on the issue of irregular migration in the mass media, thus regarded as a ‘discourse technologist’ (Fairclough 1995: 105), they have a key role in shaping and influencing the public’s understanding of the issue. Thus, it is important to investigate where such discourses have been reproduced, for instance in the Swedish news media.

Finally, existing literature points to a gap of how Frontex is explicitly presented in the news media. Though many critical analyses of media discourses have been conducted on the subject of how migrants are represented (see Horsti, 2008; Berry et al., 2016; Hovden, Mjelde & Gripsud, 2018; Haglund, 2020; Yantseva, 2020), Frontex and the role of Sweden are often only implicitly referred to in such contexts. Therefore, this thesis will contribute to the gap in the literature by explicitly focusing on how Frontex is represented in relation to humanitarian borderwork in the Swedish news media. Importantly, news coverage plays an essential role in reflecting social realities and reproducing or challenging identities and existing positions in society, and ultimately shape public opinion (Horsti, 2008). Therefore, it is important to investigate to which extent the Swedish news media take part in the ostensibly humanitarian discourses used by Frontex.

4. Theory
The theoretical framework guiding my research will be a collection of the leading concepts within the critical border studies field presented in the literature review. In this section, I will present two of the concepts in further detail and explain how I plan to operationalize each of them in my analysis. Starting with the traditional and new understandings of humanitarianism, followed by narratives which induce victimization of migrant, criminalization of smugglers, and glorification of Frontex, such as the ‘victim and saviour dichotomy’ (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017) and the ‘unscrupulous smuggler’ (Perkowski, 2018).

4.1. Humanitarianism

The concept of humanitarianism can be quite ambiguous with no across the board, unanimous definition. In her study, Waerp (2019) traces the varying definitions of humanitarianism within different discourses and concludes that the rather flexible concept will entail different meanings depending on the context. What can be surmised from a wide body of literature (see Barnett, 2011; Redfield & Bornstein, 2011; Ticktin, 2014; Nascimento, 2015) is that humanitarianism in its traditional sense has started to shift into a fusion of ‘new humanitarianism’. The traditional understanding of humanitarianism, what Waerp (2019) calls ‘classical humanitarianism’, views suffering as a preventable tragedy and combines humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, universality, transparency, and accountability as key principles, to ultimately confirm the belief that ‘all lives are equal’.

Today, humanitarianism carries a different meaning, one which is characterized by politics with military solutions to humanitarian problems (Little & Vaughan, 2017: 546). However, some authors dispute this argument, claiming that conflicting dichotomies of care and control have always gone hand in hand, combining humanitarianism and policing with the goal to limit human mobility (Agier, 2011). Nascimento (2015) defines the current humanitarian arena as ‘new humanitarianism’, where State actors with political and military agendas blur the distinction of who is a legitimate humanitarian actor. This wolf in sheep’s clothing strategy can be viewed as a political hijacking of the humanitarian concept to legitimate and justify armed intervention (Waerp, 2019). In other words, contemporary, state-oriented humanitarianism contradicts the traditional understanding of humanitarianism, by involving biased actors with political agendas.

Thus, when reviewing my material, I plan to find elements of classical and new humanitarianism. I will do this by primarily focusing on how the humanitarian and State
actors are portrayed in the articles. For instance, if the Swedish news media uses the same ‘emergency logic’ (Campesi, 2014) as deployed by Frontex to describe the situation in the Central Mediterranean as a ‘humanitarian crisis’ or likewise, I plan to analyse how the actors at the border are described. Meaning, if NGOs and internationally recognized humanitarian actors are presented giving emergency relief, the interpretations will lean more towards a traditional humanitarian understanding. However, if Frontex or other border enforcement actors are portrayed as the main humanitarian actor saving lives or rescuing migrants, the interpretations will lean more towards the new humanitarian logic. Ultimately, investigating if ‘care and control’ is evident, finding which humanitarian elements are presented will reveal to which extent the humanitarian discourse used by Frontex is present in the Swedish news media.

4.2. The Victim and Saviour Dichotomy

Finally, the various narratives created through introducing smugglers as a villainous and criminal third actor will serve as my leading theoretical concepts to investigate the Swedish news media’s representation of Frontex. Many scholars have underlined Frontex’s discursive trend of shifting the blame for migrant deaths and dangerous migratory routes onto smugglers, to not bear the responsibility and accountability themselves (see Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017; Pallister-Wilkins, 2017; Perkowski, 2018). For instance, the ‘victim and saviour dichotomy’ outlined by Pallister-Wilkins (2017) reproduces narratives of three main actors at the EU border: ‘the bad smuggler’, ‘the helpless migrant’, and ‘the valiant border guard’. This narrative helps both in ignoring the role of the EU inciting irregular migration and smuggling through an ever-growing border regime, and simultaneously legitimizes militarized action.

Likewise, the criminalization and villainization linked to the narrative of ‘the bad smuggler’ allows Frontex to reproduce their role as saviours, whilst deflecting criticisms of human rights violations. What Perkowski (2018) calls the ‘unscrupulous smuggler’ is an additional narrative employed by Frontex to shift blame onto smugglers. This narrative further justifies Frontex’s practices by framing the agency as both a ‘protector of EUrope’ and a protector of smuggling victims (ibid.). In other words, they protect EU territory as gatekeepers, fending off criminal, terrorist, and economic threats, and simultaneously protect smuggling victims by being ‘saviours at sea’. Furthermore, their role as ‘saviours’ is strengthened by being a self-proclaimed ‘protector of fundamental rights’ (ibid.) and through incorporating human rights
discourse into their public and organizational communication (Aas & Gundhus, 2014). Consequently, the vulnerability of irregular migrants, and its causes, are not properly addressed, leading to a stronger focus on security rather than safety.

For the purpose of this thesis, I plan to operationalize these concepts to reveal how such narratives are reproduced in the Swedish news media. I will do this by once again focusing on the actor descriptions of Frontex, migrants, and smugglers, to explore how they are portrayed. Though the analysis is limited to how Frontex is framed by the Swedish news media, how they are framed in relation to other actors in the European borderlands are equally relevant for creating the narratives. For instance, if descriptive words and phrases with overall positive connotations are used to frame Frontex, this would reproduce their narrative as ‘saviours at sea’ (Perkowski, 2018). Likewise, words and phrases describing the actions of irregular migrants and smugglers will be analysed to investigate if the victimization of migrants and the criminalization of smugglers are prevalent, ultimately reproducing the narratives of ‘the helpless migrant’ and ‘the bad smuggler’ (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017), thus discursively creating a need for a ‘saviour’.

5. Method & Tools

In this section I will present my method and analytical framework guiding my research process. First, I will present my research design, delimitations, and reflexivity. Secondly, I will briefly describe Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and why it is a beneficial approach for this thesis. Thirdly, I will explain Fairclough’s (1996) Three-Dimensional Model for CDA with descriptions of the three dimensions: text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. Finally, I will describe linguistic analysis and the concept of ‘discourse technologist’ which will be used as tools in the textual and sociocultural practice dimensions.

5.1. Research Design, Delimitations & Reflexivity

The research design for this thesis is a qualitative and explorative case study, since it uses an open-ended question with more room for the researcher to make interpretations of the collected data from a particular case (Creswell & Creswell, 2018: 41). The thesis uses the method of critical discourse analysis from the constructivist camp of research. CDA is an appropriate method because it considers discourse as socially constructed and constructing, ergo discourse is both socially shaped by overarching structures and has the potential to shape
such structures (Fairclough, 1996), which aligns with my ontological and epistemological framework and will help the research process gain in-depth understandings through contextualization. In my research I will prescribe to the constructivist worldview, meaning I believe the world does not exist outside of our perceptions, and that knowledge is subjective and contextual (Moses & Knutsen, 2012: 200). Though my research design is largely inductive, the theories and concepts mentioned above will help me organize the material collected. As Creswell & Creswell (2018: 258) claim, deductive thinking tends to play a significant role, even when the research process starts off inductively.

Furthermore, the internal validity and reliability of this thesis are solid because CDA of Sweden’s largest news outlet, Aftonbladet, is a suitable approach to answering my research question, since it is a text and discourse-oriented approach. Ergo, CDA is beneficial for critically investigating how Frontex is represented in the Swedish news media, by to some extent considering the larger cultural, historical, and political context from which the discourse stems. On the other hand, the external validity of this study is rather low, because choosing only one news outlet is not generalizable or representative of ‘the Swedish new media’ in its entirety. However, the goal of qualitative research is not to achieve generalizability, but rather particularity, favouring internal validity over external (Creswell & Creswell, 2018: 276).

Additionally, the replicability of this study can be considered both strong and weak. Strong, because following my detailed selection criteria of material, research question, and theoretical and methodological framework could produce similar results. Weak, because my own interpretations may differ from other people’s. In other words, the world appears different to different people and interpretations will always vary with the contextual settings of the observer (Moses & Knutsen, 2012: 199). Thus when taking a firm constructivist stance, it is difficult to claim that my interpretations in the study can be replicable to someone else’s.

Due to my scope and method, my analysis will primarily focus on the micro and macro dimensions of Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, ergo the text and sociocultural dimensions. Meaning, the linguistic analysis of the Swedish news media’s choice of words will be given the most attention in the analysis to reveal how Frontex is portrayed in relation to other actors in the context of humanitarian borderwork. Additionally, the analysis will be put into a larger historical, cultural, and political context, reflecting the sociocultural practice
from which the discourse stem. Furthermore, only one Swedish news outlet (Aftonbladet) has been chosen, due to a lack of time and resources.

Furthermore, due to the epistemology of constructivism being anchored in contextual meanings and that knowledge is intersubjective (Moses & Knutsen, 2012: 201), my background as a researcher needs to be addressed. In terms of reflexivity, it is important to note how my personal past experiences may shape my interpretations throughout the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018: 260). Being a former activist for refugee rights in Sweden and a strong opposer of the EU’s restrictive border regime, it goes without saying that I am critical of Frontex being framed in a ‘saviour’ role, which will naturally influence my research. Therefore, I will aim to account for all choices made throughout the research process, to clarify my bias and achieve greater replicability. This will be achieved by recording reflective notes throughout the research process so I may consider how my personal experiences shape my interpretations and results (ibid.).

5.2. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA is a multidisciplinary approach which provides a deeper, more qualitative look at texts to understand how language connects to social, cultural, and political power structures. Fairclough (1996) claims that a closer inspection of discourse is vitally important to reveal the connections between the use of language and the exercise of power. Common uses of language, including news reports in daily papers, take a whole range of ideological assumptions for granted, such as rights, relationships, knowledge, and identities, and the ‘invisibility’ of these ideological assumptions helps to sustain power relations (ibid.: 309). He treats the often-ambiguous term ‘discourse’ as any spoken or written language and views all language as a social practice.

In Fairclough’s (1996) opinion, this implies that all language is historically and socially situated in a dialectal relationship, meaning it is both socially shaped and shaping. CDA then helps to explore the tension between the two sides of language use, how it is both constitutive and constituted, how discourse can reproduce or challenge knowledge, identities, and social (power) relationships (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2011). Moreover, types of ‘discourse’ should be understood as context-specific, meaning that a discourse refers to the kind of language used in a specific field (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2011). Discourse, in Fairclough’s opinion, is the language used to represent a certain social practice and a particular point of view (1996: 310).
For instance, the social practice of politics will be differently signified by Marxist or liberal discourses. In the case of this study, discourses relating to humanitarianism and securitization will be analysed.

The definitions and relationships between a text, a discourse practice, and a sociocultural practice will be explained below.

5.3. Fairclough’s Three-Dimensional Model

The three-dimensional model developed by Fairclough is an analytical framework to guide CDA research on communication and society. It consists of three dimensions of investigation when analysing a ‘communicative event’ (Fairclough, 1996), ergo any use of discourse whether it be a text, a speech, or an interview, for example. The model and its dimensions have been explained in many different ways with varying definitions (see Fairclough, 1996; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2011; Bergström, Ekström & Boréus, 2017). Below the model will be defined as simply as possible.

As seen in ‘Figure 2’, the three dimensions of a communicative event to be analysed are: text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. The innermost dimension ‘text’ is framed and shaped by the ‘discourse practice’, which in turn is framed and shaped by the larger structure.
of the ‘sociocultural practice’. Meaning, the text is influenced by larger, surrounding structures which may make the text ‘creative’ or ‘normative’ (Fairclough, 1996). The text in the first dimension should be analysed at the word level, or ‘micro level’, as I call it. Here, the individual words chosen reveal attitudes around a subject, and can have ideational and interpersonal functions (ibid.) Traditional forms of linguistic analysis help to reveal how the text upholds or challenges systems of knowledge and belief (ideational), and social relations and identities (interpersonal).

Additionally, certain words or sentence structures can have underlying meanings, implications, and presuppositions (Van Dijk, 2018). In the context of Frontex, the superficial and overall positive meanings and connotations of using the word ‘rescue’ rather than ‘interception’ of migrants, can have racist and negative implications, and reveal a binary understanding of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ (ibid.: 240). Meaning, it contributes to the construction of identities and the ‘Othering’ of migrants (Horsti, 2008). Thus, the choice of words in the textual dimension has ideational and interpersonal functions, that help to determine how the text is constitutive of and constituted by the social world.

Secondly, there is the dimension of ‘discourse practice’, that speaks to the production and consumption of the text, as well as the social practices that the text challenge or restructure. The second dimension should be analysed at the text level, or the ‘meso-level’. Here, various aspects of the institutional and discourse processes are analysed. However, due to time limitations and the scope of my study, I will exclusively focus on the text and sociocultural practice.

Thirdly, the ‘sociocultural practice’ encompasses and frames the dimensions of the text and discourse practice. It is an analysis at the norm level, and speaks to the standards of society, norms, traditions, and social, economic, political, and cultural structures (Fairclough, 1996). Because this dimension is concerned with overarching structures of power, ideology, values, and identity, I call it the ‘macro-level’. Here, the shaping social structures could refer to a society at the domestic level, or even a whole continent, at the supranational EU-level. Thus, the sociocultural practice influences and shapes both the discourse practice and the text of a communicative event.

5.4. CDA Tools
In this section I will outline which CDA tools I will use in my analysis, and in which dimensions of Fairclough’s model they can be useful.

5.4.1. Linguistic Analysis

At the textual level, or ‘micro-level’, I will use various forms of traditional linguistic analysis to discover underlying meanings, implications, and presuppositions in the texts. I, as the recipient of the discourse, will apply my shared knowledge of both the European and Swedish contexts to reveal what is both explicitly and implicitly written in the texts (van Dijk 2018: 239). For instance, though the texts may not explicitly refer to Frontex agents as ‘saviours’ or ‘heroes’, they may be implicitly referred to in this way, depending on the context and the descriptions of the actors and their actions (ibid.). My theoretical framework of concepts’ relation to humanitarian discourse will be used to derive plausible implications of what is both said and unsaid in the texts.

Furthermore, I will seek to find presuppositions in the texts that use ‘common ground’ between the speaker and recipient to manipulate the knowledge, beliefs, and interpretations of the reader (van Dijk, 2018: 240). Phrases used to describe migrants, Frontex agents, and smugglers may indirectly create facts in the mental models of the reader (ibid.). Most commonly the reader can presuppose that ‘migrant’ or ‘smuggler’ becomes synonymous with ‘illegality’ (see Horsti, 2008). Systematic analysis of the actors (migrants, border agents, and smugglers) and descriptions of their actions (search and rescue, illegal entry) can provide insights into underlying attitudes about each of them respectively, albeit mostly about Frontex as my theoretical framework of narratives rely on all roles to discursively create the ‘saviour’.

5.4.2. Discourse Technologist

Finally, at the ‘macro-level’ of CDA, I will use Fairclough’s (1995: 105) concept of ‘discourse technologist’ as a tool to analyse the sociocultural practice that influences its inner dimensions down the ladder. As this dimension speaks to the immediate situational context of political and cultural structures, it is plausible to view Frontex as a ‘discourse technologist’ understood as an ‘expert’ of the migration issue in Europe today. Frontex fits perfectly into the role of a discourse technologist because they have privileged access to scientific information (through routine risk analysis of the EU border), they hold a high role in the large
institution of the EU, and are routinely employed as expert consultants for Member States, and therefore their discursive practices carry ‘an aura of truth’ (ibid.).

In the context of the European media, they are routinely consulted for their ‘expertise’, and thus contribute to shaping the public opinion and understanding of irregular migration today (Horsti, 2012). Therefore, when analysing my material, I will investigate if the Swedish media asserts Frontex this expert role. In other words, I will investigate if the discourse used by Frontex is taken at face value, as a discourse technologist, or whether it is questioned and elaborated upon.

6. Material

In this section I will present my material and the criteria for its selection.

6.1. News Articles & Editorials

My corpus consists of 15 news articles, 1 editorial, and 3 debate articles from 2014-2017, one written by the Swedish left party, one by Wolfgang Hansson, a prize-winning Swedish journalist, and one by Jean-Claude Juncker, the former president of the European Commission. The debate articles were the only ones published in relation to the topic during the time period, and include polarizing opinions about the EU’s border policies, the 2014 article being critical and the 2015 article supportive. All texts were published by the Swedish independent socially democratic online news outlet, Aftonbladet. Since starting to publish their newspaper online, Aftonbladet has approximately 2.9 million daily readers through the web, digital app, and print media which accounts for nearly 30% of the Swedish population, making it Sweden’s biggest news outlet (Aftonbladet, 2020). Aftonbladet was chosen due its public outreach and online accessibility.

Predictably, the majority of the articles (13 out of 19) were published during 2015 coinciding with the refugee ‘crisis’ and the European Commission’s urgent meeting to form a ten-point action plan in response to the ‘crisis’, leading to the financial expansion of Frontex. Only one article was found from 2014, two from 2016, and three from 2017. All articles from the corpus are listed in the final chapter of this thesis. The reason for my unproportionate corpus is due to my selection criteria, described below.

6.2. Selection Criteria
The texts were found through ‘Mediearkivet Retriever’ by using a key word search of ‘Frontex’, ‘medelhavet’ (the Mediterranean) and ‘Italien’ (Italy) between January 2014 and February 2018, to ensure relevant articles relating to operation Triton. Including the keyword ‘Triton’ limited the results significantly, though all chosen articles relate to Triton either directly or indirectly. Furthermore, only texts with at least 500 words were selected to gain in-depth and nuanced reports and avoid short reports leaving little to be analysed. Ultimately, using these selection criteria the search results yielded 19 articles in total, thus eliminating the need for randomized sampling techniques to remove bias and ‘cherry picking’.

7. Analysis of Material

When reviewing and categorizing the material, a few major themes were found in the articles: (1) a lack of argumentation for legal pathways and an eventual decrease of EU-criticism finding SAR operations and resettlement favourable; (2) an increase of villainizing smugglers; (3) a strong belief in Swedish exceptionalism; and (4) a mix of expert roles given to both Frontex and NGO actors. Below I will present examples of each theme and explain how they relate to my theoretical framework and previous research on humanitarian borderwork, and how they have changed over time. Quotes and individual phrases have been selected from the corpus and translated from Swedish to English, to be analysed at the ‘micro-level’, and additionally put into the larger historical and political context occurring in the EU at the time, reflecting the ‘sociocultural practice’.

7.1. EU Accountability & SAR Operation Solutions

A trend noticed in the early articles of 2014 and 2015 was an urgent call for opening more legal pathways into Europe and a belief that the EU was not doing enough to prevent deaths in the Mediterranean. Articles from this time reflect the ever-changing sociocultural practice where opinions about the EU’s border regime were in constant flux. In her debate article one year after the tragedy on Lampedusa, EU parliament representative and member of the Swedish left party Malin Björk, writes in opposition of Operation Triton and Frontex in general:

“It soon became apparent that Triton is a border surveillance operation with the objective of securing the EU’s borders. They will naturally also save people under international maritime law but the purpose is not, as with Mare Nostrum, to prevent
catastrophes and their boats are too small to save hundreds of people in need of sea rescue.”

(Björk, 2014).

The general argument is that the main objective of Triton is security, whilst the previous operation Italian-led operation, Mare Nostrum, was concerned with saving lives. Likewise, the Aftonbladet editorial gives similar arguments: “In sum: a lifesaving mission was replaced by a border guard”, claiming Triton to be a watered-down copy of Mare Nostrum with less emphasis on saving lives (Pettersson, 2015) Additionally, the representation of NGOs such as the Red Cross and Save the Children was stronger, questioning ‘Fortress Europe’ and giving a more nuanced portrayal of European border management and the political debate.

However, the trend of addressing the issues of restrictive policies was quickly replaced with framing SAR and resettlement as a solution to the refugee ‘crisis’. Coinciding with the European Commission’s ten-point action plan, the focus quickly shifted to the main points of the action plan: to triple the EU’s presence in the Mediterranean (i.e., Triton), crack down on smuggling networks, and develop shared EU mechanisms for resettlement of refugees (Juncker, 2015). News coverage of the meeting typically included Swedish politicians saying: “We cannot let thousands die” (Aftonbladet, 2015d), mirroring the traditional humanitarian belief that human suffering is a preventable tragedy. However, underlining that Frontex is the best actor to assist in the ‘crisis’, thus leaning more towards ‘new humanitarianism’ (Nascimento, 2015). For instance, when asked about opening legal pathways rather than considering the financial expansion of Frontex, former prime minister Stefan Löfven said: “That’s for others to consider” (Aftonbladet, 2015c). Thus, news coverage from the time of the ten-point action plan encapsulates one of the main claims of humanitarian borderwork as a concept, ergo that restrictive border management is presented as the solution to, not the cause of, humanitarian crises (Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017).

7.2. Victim/Villain/Saviour Narratives

Within the sociocultural dimension, following the European Commission’s ten-point plan, operation Triton was expanded to include the Swedish Coast Guard, leading to a larger representation of European border management in the Swedish news media during two missions in 2015 and 2017. At the textual dimension, the efforts of Frontex and other national
coast guards were portrayed in earlier articles, commonly describing their actions as ‘saving lives’ and ‘rescuing migrants’ (Aftonbladet, 2015b), thus framing them in a saviour narrative. However, this narrative was amplified in articles portraying the efforts of the Swedish Coast Guard assisting in the Frontex operation Triton (Aftonbladet, 2015h; 2017a; 2017b). This focus on Swedish initiatives additionally strengthened the belief in ‘Swedish exceptionalism’, which will be elaborated upon in the next section.

During the second Swedish mission in 2017 the ‘rescues’ were described in detail and the vulnerability of the migrants emphasised, with a pregnant woman portrayed as ‘saved’ thanks to the operation. In response, the commander of the Swedish ship said: “I think it [Triton] is very important. No one should have to die in the Mediterranean.” (Aftonbladet, 2017a). This perfectly exemplifies the ‘victim and saviour dichotomy’ outlined by Pallister-Wilkins (2017), by presenting migrants as vulnerable and helpless victims that rely on the heroic efforts of the border guards. Additionally, giving a voice to the ‘saviour’ legitimizes their humanitarian role and reproduces their perceived necessity in times of crisis and emergency, whilst granting them a discourse technologist role on the issue.

Of course, as previously discussed, the saviour framing is only made possible by framing migrants and smugglers in victim and villain roles (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017; Perkowski, 2018). Such narratives were overwhelmingly present in the majority of the articles, especially the ‘unscrupulous smuggler’. Some articles frame the smugglers as ‘cynical smugglers’ who profit from the suffering of migrants: “Cynical smugglers send people out in boats that they know will sink” (Pettersson, 2015). Thus, shifting the responsibility of migrant deaths onto smugglers and legitimizing the need for ‘saviours at sea’ (Perkowksi, 2018). This argument is further exemplified in the debate article written by Juncker (2015): “We have tripled our presence in the Mediterranean. We save lives and arrest smugglers”. Though Frontex, on behalf of the EU, are never explicitly referred to as ‘heroes’, it could be argued that the narratives in the many articles imply as much. The villainization frame, paired with the decreasing trend of questioning the lack of legal pathways to the EU, reflects Campesi’s (2014) theory that the EU tends to replicate restrictive migration policies in times of crisis, rather than revaluating its closed border policies.

During the second Swedish mission in operation Triton, Swedish police were also onboard to ‘keep things in order’ justified by the statement: “[T]here can also be dangerous people onboard” (Aftonbladet, 2017b). Their presence was portrayed as necessary to assist in
registering and identifying migrants, and to single out any potential smugglers onboard the migrant vessels, as the objectives of Triton were to “discover” both migrants and smugglers (Aftonbladet, 2017a; 2017b). On the micro-level of textual analysis, the word ‘discover’ is used rather vaguely as it can entail ‘rescue’ or ‘arrest’ depending on the situation (see Andersson, 2017). Furthermore, the presence of police in a SAR operation implies that humanitarian problems require military or law enforcement solutions (Little & Vaughan, 2017), indicating ‘new humanitarianism’ (Nascimento, 2015).

This calls into question how ‘humanitarian’ SAR operations can be. In terms of humanitarian action being non-discriminatory and not selective, it is difficult to argue that EU border practices operate under such principles. Pallister-Wilkins (2017: 95) views borders as filtering mechanisms where migrants are categorized according to politics of categorization. For instance, the category ‘refugee’ carries a larger set of rights, responsibilities, and ultimately a higher value than the less significant and rights-limited category of ‘migrant’ (ibid.: 88). Additionally, through the criminalization of smugglers, migrants fall into the same ‘illegal’ category by association (Horsti, 2008), and describing Triton as an operation aimed at ‘discovering’ both migrants and smugglers further blurs the distinction between who is considered ‘illegal’ and who is not.

Indeed, when critically reviewing the texts, one could argue that migrants, as well as smugglers, are framed in an ‘illegal’ category. However, most often migrants were framed through a lens of victimization, emphasising their helplessness, vulnerability, and need for rescue. This has for instance been done by giving space to Frontex operatives to express the vulnerability of migrants in the hands of the ‘bad smuggler’: “The weakest are most effected. There are heart-breaking stories” (Aftonbladet, 2015f). The commander of the Swedish ship Poseidon, Joakim Håkansson, described a migrant vessel as:

“It was very overloaded and in poor condition and when we stopped close by we saw it was filling up with water. When we had boarded all the people it remained in the water with water up to the rim [...]. That boat will sink, says Håkansson.”

(Aftonbladet, 2015h).

Once again, this exemplifies how the helpless victim framing benefits Frontex and reproduces their role as ‘saviours at sea’ and as ‘protectors of smuggling victims’ (Perkowski, 2018). Overall, the narratives of the ‘victim and saviour dichotomy’ (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017)
and the ‘unscrupulous smuggler’ (Perkowski, 2018) were very present in the texts, implying that Triton was a humanitarian necessity and redirecting the responsibility of migrant deaths onto smugglers, rather than the restrictive EU border regime.

Likewise, on the micro-level of analysis, due to the news coverage often portraying the situation in the Central Mediterranean as a “refugee catastrophe” (see Aftonbladet, 2015e; 2015f; 2015g; 2015i) or a “refugee crisis” (see Aftonbladet, 2015j; 2016) the articles were using an ‘emergency logic’ (Campesi, 2014) to frame migratory inflows to the EU. The emergency relief given to migrants was most often described as coming from Frontex officers and coast guards rather than NGOs and internationally recognized humanitarian actors. However, this could be due to the keyword search not including ‘NGO’ or likewise. For instance, during the first Swedish mission in 2015 the commander of the Swedish ship Poseidon was interviewed, saying: “[T]he migrants have received food and water, tarps have been set up over the deck for shade, and toilets are accessible with the possibility to wash themselves” (Aftonbladet, 2015h). In articles emphasising how many migrants were ‘rescued’ through Triton, NGOs assisting in the missions rescuing the same amounts typically only received a small mention as compared to coast guards (Aftonbladet, 2017a). Thus, border enforcement actors were typically portrayed as the main humanitarian actor saving lives and providing humanitarian relief, framing a logic of new humanitarianism (Nascimento, 2015).

7.3. Swedish Exceptionalism

As mentioned, the inclusion of the Swedish Coast Guard in operation Triton led to more news coverage and additionally strengthened the belief in Swedish exceptionalism. Put into the sociocultural practice at the macro-level of analysis, Sweden, having been known as a frontrunner in the humanitarian arena and as the Western world’s foremost granter of international protection per capita (Emilsson, 2018), was undoubtedly one of the main EU Member States accepting asylum seekers in the early phases of the ‘crisis’. As noted by other scholars, the external shock of the ‘crisis’ and the reception of 162,000 asylum seekers in 2015, resulted in a far more restrictive migration policy, and a diminishing focus on humanitarian aspects of the ‘crisis’ over time in the Swedish media (Emilsson, 2018; Hovden, Mjelde & Gripsud, 2018; Yantseva, 2020). Something noteworthy found in my corpus was a shift in the Swedish news media, from Sweden arguing for their humanitarian responsibility of accepting migrants, to an argumentation for a more Europeanized
framework and EU solidarity. Moreover, the Swedish exceptionalist argument that Sweden had ‘done enough’ was over time used to limit its open-door policy and furthermore, glorify Sweden’s humanitarianism in operation Triton.

For example, early articles practically slandered the EU’s border policies’ lack of humanitarianism, by writing: “There is not a lack of money, there is a lack of political will” (Björk, 2014), “Europe’s border is a wall” (Pettersson, 2015), and former foreign minister Margot Wallström saying: “The future of the EU’s credibility is on the line” (Aftonbladet, 2015d). However, in the later months of the ‘crisis’ this rhetoric changed, and the humanitarianism linked to Swedish exceptionalism was used as a claim to glorify Sweden as the foremost humanitarian Member State and to shift blame and responsibility onto other States who had not done enough. Ultimately, portraying Sweden as the EU’s primary humanitarian actor that has done its part during this European ‘crisis’. Texts such as: “Former refugee friendly countries Germany and Sweden have hit capacity” (Hansson, 2016) and attorney general Morgan Johansson saying: “It’s time to live up to the European values of solidarity and help each other” (Aftonbladet, 2015i), exemplify this discursive shift. In general, the issue of migration was no longer portrayed as a Swedish issue, but as Horsti (2012) theorizes, a European issue set in a Europeanized framework.

Moreover, in the context of operation Triton, the Swedish Coast Guard was also portrayed as being a better humanitarian actor as opposed to its European counterparts. In fact, all articles relating to Swedish initiatives in operation Triton emphasised the fact that all migrants were rescued during distress calls and not one migrant drowned on their watch (Aftonbladet, 2015h; 2017a; 2017b). Contrastingly, when other national coast guards were mentioned, the articles emphasised the amounts of deaths, even though Triton consisted of many more non-Swedish missions and the early ones occurred before the financial expansion of the operation (Aftonbladet, 2015a; 2015b; 2015c). For instance, by writing: “Only 28 people could be saved by the Portuguese initiative” when reporting on an incident where 700 people were onboard a migrant vessel (Aftonbladet, 2015b). Though the texts do not explicitly rank the different national initiatives in Triton, they imply that Swedish initiatives were exceptionally better, ensuing their role as the EU’s primary humanitarian actor. Additionally, this suggests that the Swedish news media asserts specifically Swedish factions of Frontex as unquestionable humanitarian actors.
Furthermore, reports from Swedish missions reflect this almost humanitarian ‘boasting’ in the context of Frontex operations. When interviewing the Swedish chief executive officer Anders Kjaersgaard, he claimed that Swedes have a “very good reputation” in the border management sector, saying: “We treat people in difficult situations in a very nice way” (Aftonbladet, 2017b). Thus, the belief in Swedish exceptionalism was a hegemonic discourse, which presupposes that the Swedish Coast Guard was the most humanitarian actor in the Frontex joint operation Triton. Incidentally, this is not an isolated occurrence for the prominence of humanitarian ideals within the internal border management discourse. Aas & Gundhus (2014) note an East/West and North/South divide within Frontex’s organizational discourse, where officers from Western and Northern EU States claim to have better knowledge of human rights and overall have better treatment of migrants, compared to their Eastern and Southern counterparts. In other words, the EU border management sector is heterogenous and national policing cultures differ significantly (ibid.). Thus, the Swedish Coast Guard is represented as a more humanitarian sub-culture of Frontex.

7.4. Expert Roles

Finally, when reviewing which actor received the most ‘expert status’ when commenting on operation Triton, the results varied significantly, resulting in no single discourse technologist on the topic of irregular migration in the EU represented in the Swedish news media. Though, early articles from 2015 typically reported on operation Triton with more nuance, granting expert status to a wide range of societal actors, such as volunteer health workers (Aftonbladet, 2015e), witness statements from journalists (Aftonbladet, 2015a), and spokesmen from UNHCR (Aftonbladet, 2015b). Whilst the articles with the Swedish Coast Guard in focus were granted expert status on the operation exclusively (Aftonbladet, 2015h; 2017a; 2017b). Thus, it is difficult to argue that the Swedish news media asserts Frontex as a discourse technologist, or at least not as the sole expert on the issue of irregular migration in Europe. On the other hand, representations of the Swedish missions certainly reveal a bias towards Swedish coast guards, regarding their statements with an ‘aura of truth’ without differing statements from other actors, or much further elaboration.

Additionally, when reporting on confirmed numbers of migrant arrivals and deaths in the Central Mediterranean, organizations such as IOM and UNHCR were most often cited for statistics (see for example Aftonbladet, 2015e; 2015j; 2017b; 2017c). However, statistical predictions were almost exclusively referred to by Frontex, as one of their tasks is to conduct.
risk analyses (see for example Juncker, 2015; Aftonbladet, 2015c; 2015e). Therefore, one could argue that Frontex informs the media, EU policymakers, and the public about what is to come, and thus legitimizes their role as ‘protectors’, and the Swedish news media uncritically reproduces this securitized border discourse. In the same vein, Campesi (2014) gives examples of when such risk analyses were wrongfully conducted. For instance, in 2012 following the escalation of the Syrian crisis and State failure in Libya, Frontex’s annual risk analysis did not predict any potential risk in the Central Mediterranean. Only after the events on Lampedusa in 2013 did Frontex release an updated risk analyses stressing that their presence in the area was urgent, resulting in additional funding (ibid.). Ergo, Frontex claims to have situational awareness and use their privileged information to legitimize expansion in times of crisis and can in that sense be regarded as a discourse technologist of prediction of risk unquestionably.

On the topic of smuggling networks, it seems quite clear that the Swedish news media asserts Frontex in an expert role, being the most represented actor in relation to smugglers in the EU. In the later articles of my corpus, Frontex are consulted frequently on the topic of smuggling activity in Libya, Morocco, and within the EU, giving estimates of prices, methods of coercion, and predictive numbers of ‘clients’ (see for example Juncker, 2015; Hansson, 2016; Aftonbladet, 2017c). Furthermore, the agency explains that their heightened presence in the Central Mediterranean (Triton) resulted in higher smuggling activity through the Western Mediterranean Route, underscoring that more resources should be granted to Western operations, i.e., Hera, Indalo, and Minerva (Aftonbladet, 2017c). Indeed, this is yet another example of claiming situational awareness to legitimize financial and spatial expansion of Frontex operations. Additionally, it is rather evident that their possession of privileged information concerning smuggling activity is monopolized, granting them a sole expert role of smuggling in the context of the EU:

“The EU’s own border surveillance agency Frontex point out that the crossing between Morocco and Spain is shorter and the journey cheaper […]. According to Frontex the price to travel from Morocco to Spain with help from smugglers has increased proportionally with the increase of migrants. One year ago the cost of the journey corresponded to barely 5,000SEK but now the price has doubled.”

(Aftonbladet, 2017c).
In sum, the Swedish news media treats Frontex as a discourse technologist for predictive statistics, situational awareness of the EU external borders, and smuggling activity. Additionally, by legitimizing their role as ‘protectors’ of both the EU and smuggling victims, it strengthens their perceived reputation as a legitimate humanitarian actor in the Swedish news media. However, they are not considered a discourse technologist on the topic of irregular migration as whole.

8. Conclusion

In this thesis I have conducted a critical discourse analysis of the Swedish news outlet Aftonbladet to investigate in which ways the EU-agency Frontex is represented as a ‘humanitarian actor’ in the Swedish news media. By deductively reviewing my material through a lens of classical and new humanitarianism, and narratives which discursively create saviour, villain, and victim roles, I can conclude that Aftonbladet indeed portrayed Frontex as a legitimate ‘humanitarian’ actor during Operation Triton in the Central Mediterranean between 2014 and 2017. My key findings reflect that the Swedish news media’s discourse shifted during the 2015 refugee ‘crisis’ from viewing the situation as a Swedish humanitarian responsibility, to one set in a Europeanized framework, where Frontex was perceived as the most suitable actor to respond to the ‘crisis’ and the EU’s restrictive border policies were eventually found favourable over legal pathways for migration.

Moreover, my findings show that narratives such as the ‘victim and saviour dichotomoy’ (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017) and the ‘unscrupulous smuggler’ (Perkowski, 2018) were especially prevalent, discursively framing Frontex in a saviour role, and representing the agency as both a ‘humanitarian’ actor and ‘protector’ of EUrope and smuggling victims. Additionally, this thesis found that pairing SAR missions with ‘Swedish exceptionalism’ strengthened the overall ‘humanitarian’ framing of Operation Triton. Finally, the thesis concludes that Frontex is not viewed as the sole discourse technologist of irregular migration in the EU but are granted an expert role in the Swedish news media in terms of predictive statistics, situational awareness, and smuggling activity.

As seen in the previous research relating to ‘humanitarian borderwork’ and media representations during the 2015 refugee ‘crisis’, this thesis contributes to the field by explicitly focusing on how Frontex was represented during this time. Though the contribution may be seen as small, by only studying one news outlet in one European country, it can be
argued that the overall topic has large potential for further research within the critical border studies field. Seeing as Frontex is the largest actor within the EU border management sector, the lack of existing literature about how they are portrayed in the media to the general public, warrants more research.

Therefore, I believe there is a need for further research on this topic on a wider scale. This thesis can be used as a point of departure for larger critical studies relating to Frontex. In the Swedish context, my theoretical and methodological framework can be replicated to a more widespread scope, to include more Frontex operations and a more representative sample of ‘the Swedish news media’ investigating more news outlets with a wider public outreach, or comparisons therebetween. Likewise, the study can be replicated in the context of other EU-States and as a foundation for comparison studies between different States, to explore how media representations of Frontex may be heterogeneous or similar within the European news media.

On a final note, I want to underline the importance of this study. As Little & Vaughan-Williams (2017: 550) claim, Frontex’s humanitarian discourse: “provides a script for knowledge production about governance and irregular populations globally”. Therefore, if this problematic discourse is unquestionably and uncritically reproduced and targeted to the public through the media, the illusion of ‘humanitarian borderwork’ will grow stronger to conceal the exclusionary practices occurring through borderwork. Put differently, by framing the EU’s border practices as ‘humanitarian’ it shifts the focus away from the ever-growing restrictive policies in place which conceal human rights violations, diminish refugee protection rights, and blurs the distinction between who is and who is not considered an ‘illegal’ actor. Paradoxically, it discursively presents stricter migration policies and border practices as the solution to, not the cause of, migrant suffering. With this in mind, can ‘humanitarian borderwork’ truly be considered ‘humanitarian’?
9. Reference List


10. Corpus


Aftonbladet (2017c), ‘Fler flyktingar tar sig till Spanien’, *Aftonbladet*, 13 August, available at: https://nogo.retriever-

