People have been dying while trying to cross the external borders of the EU for over three decades. Some shipwrecks – such as those in October 2013 and April 2015 – captivate international publics and trigger intense political debates, but this kind of death is also normalised. This thesis examines the relationship between border deaths and EU policy. Building on existing literature that has tied border deaths to the legal and political developments of the Schengen Area, the thesis makes an important empirical contribution to current debates surrounding deaths in the Mediterranean.

Based on a meticulous collection of official death records of persons who died crossing the borders from 563 municipalities in five southern EU Member States, the thesis reveals discrimination against irregularised travellers in overburdened death management systems and the remarkable prevalence of non-identification of bodies believed to be those of migrants. Further analysis of this new source of data demonstrates the unreliability of news-sourced death data on which policy-making and scholarship depend.

The EU and its Member States have pursued a migration agenda based on assumptions that scholars fundamentally disagree with. The Deaths at the Borders Database provides official evidence that there have been deaths every single year since the emergence of the southern EU external borders. In addition, all existing datasets suggest an increase in deaths in the 21st century compared to the 1990s, as border control has intensified. While non-conclusive, the facts undermine the premise of EU policy-making in the area of migration and border control, that deaths happen because enforcement is weak and smugglers are ruthless. Meanwhile, the facts support the alternative view common among scholars, that deaths happen because policies are selectively restrictive and border control encourages risk-taking.