

Unmasking Europe's Deadly Migration Policy

Article by Bianca Carrera Espriu

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A little-known border crossing between France and Italy has become a deadly trap for people on the move. Across Europe, violent pushbacks and intimidation have become a key feature of migration policies, casting a long shadow of the continent's claim to liberal values. Starting from Menton, journalist Bianca Carrera Espriu traces the racist and violent patterns in Europe's migration policies which imperils its future.

In the coastal city of Menton, on France and Italy's shared border, mourners gathered on 6 February to remember the victims of Europe's migration policy.

In this small village in the south of France, on which thousands of unsuspecting holidaymakers descend every year, a deadly crossing where the Italian border begins hides mere kilometres away. In this unknown migration hotspot, at least 50 people have died since 2015. That is the year when border controls were established, and they have remained in place despite [European legislation against it](#).

Protesters mourning victims on 6 February denounced the impunity of European states and regional authorities with the chant: "*Migrer pour vivre, pas pour mourir*" (To migrate to live, not to die).

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Violent migration policies abound in Menton and beyond

Menton's violent migration control follows a wider trend on Europe's borders. Agnès Lerolle, who works as a project coordinator at CAFI-Coordination for Border Actions – a platform that monitors the situation at various border crossings in France – says that illegal border controls, people being pushed back without assessment, discrimination and degrading treatment have become common. She argues that while Menton is probably the most dramatic case given the number of deaths, it fits a broader pattern of increasing violent border control.

Bárbara B., communications coordinator at No Name Kitchen, an NGO operating at six European border hotspots: Ceuta, Patras, Veliika Kladusa, Bihac, Sid and Subotica adds: "We have seen that the pattern of violence is systemic". In recent years, [EU leaders](#) have called for toughening security and control measures at all border crossings.

During a meeting on 10 February, only four days after the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria began, EU leaders agreed to recognise each state's deportation decisions – to prevent migrants from trying to seek asylum after having already been rejected once. They also agreed to increase their allocated budget for more surveillance and "protection" at the EU's external borders.

Meanwhile, the United Nations estimates that around 1.5 million people in Turkey have now been left homeless. Separately, Brookings reports that at least 3.5 million Syrian refugees have barely any infrastructure and services in the areas they were living.

Although this policy responds to the anticipated migration wave from Turkey and Syria, Eleanor Paynter, a postdoctoral migrations fellow at Cornell University, reminds us that it is not sudden: “This announcement is in line with a trend in the EU towards increasingly restrictive migration policies, more border security and surveillance, and more funding for a range of attempts to keep people from certain regions out of Europe”.

Europe’s toolbox for migration pushback

Countries’ migration pushback strategies vary. For example, French authorities racially profile people and carry out document checks that often end with detentions – which are supposed to be an exception under 1985’s Schengen Agreement. Although these checks, often justified as responding to a “terrorist threat”, were contested by the European Court of Justice last year, France and other states continue to turn a deaf ear.

Militarisation and weaponisation of borders have been championed by European states to protect their so-called “garden” from an ever-encroaching jungle. Eleanor explains how the EU has increased funding for Frontex, its border agency, from 6 million euros in 2005 to more than 750 million euros in 2022.

The platform Abolish Frontex sees an interesting coincidence behind these numbers.

The same security and arms companies supplying Frontex with equipment would be the same conducting research for EU institutions and shaping EU migration and border policies. Abolish Frontex argues that “the military and security industry has been able to push a narrative in which migration is framed as a security problem, to be combated by the products and services this industry has on sale”. Big arms companies such as Airbus, Leonardo and Thales are reportedly the main winners.

A Cambridge University investigation into the Italian arms company and defence contractor Leonardo S.p.A uncovers this tactic and the extent of the arms lobby’s undue influence over migration policies. The company and its subsidiary suppliers participate in EU-funded research programmes studying migration, while also participating in two lobby organisations shaping EU security policies. The Cambridge study suggests that there are many other security advisory group members “closely linked to companies and institutions that win EU-funded security projects”.

Externalising border management has been another tactic deployed by European countries. This policy tries to keep people on the move away from European borders while passing the hot potato to bordering states. “What is being done is paying third countries to stop migrants, so that the EU does not have to get their hands dirty,” says Bárbara, who has spent months monitoring the crossing between Spain and Morocco. There, at least 72 were killed as a result of an interaction with Moroccan border officers, who have increased their activity after an externalisation agreement with the EU last summer.

The evidently racist migration policies of EU countries casts doubt over their commitment to freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, peace and stability – all core values of the EU.

Unmasking racist Europe

These measures are justified with a discourse that portrays the EU as inundated with migrants and unable to handle this influx. However, this discourse on capacity constraint falls apart when held against recent events; in a matter of days, the EU invoked a 2001 directive to provide temporary assistance to Ukrainian refugees. By February 2023, this mechanism protects 4 million Ukrainian refugees in the EU.

Notably, the temporary directive excluded foreign nationals that were not permanent citizens of Ukraine. This exclusion has encouraged unequal treatment of people fleeing the war. “There are documented accounts of discrimination against African students enrolled in Ukrainian universities who had to flee,” explains Eleanor. African students constituted 20 per cent of all international students in Ukraine, around 16,000 people. Most of these students were told to go back to their countries.

Eleanor argues that gender, religion, and especially race continue to shape this differentiated protection for refugees. “It was easier for EU leaders to agree to help white Christian women and their children than it is for them to agree that Brown and Black Muslim men fleeing conflict, persecution, and extreme precarity in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia should also receive aid.”

After all, antiracism activist and migration expert Sani Ladan claims that “borders are a result of everything that has happened across history before the establishment of the border. A result through which we see who are the surplus of the world population”.

The evidently racist migration policies of EU countries casts doubt over their commitment to freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, peace and stability – all core values of the EU. “We’ve repeatedly seen EU member-states adjust their border policies in ways that call into question fundamental rights and established international law”, argues Eleanor. Several migrating people tell Eleanor in disbelief, “we thought Europe was the land of human rights, but that’s not the case”.

A racist migration policy penalises Europe

Besides contradicting the EU’s values and earning it widespread criticism, draconian migration policies undermine the EU’s own interests.

For an ageing and shrinking population such as Europe’s, immigration is the only safe boat. The International Monetary Fund reports that immigration accounted for 80 per cent of Europe’s total population growth between 2000 and 2018.

In countries such as France, where age and population stagnation are threatening to increase the retirement age, accepting immigration could be a helpful remedy. On 16 February, 15,000 protesters filled the streets of Nice to denounce the French Government’s decision to raise the retirement age from 62 to 64. The move comes after repeated warnings from the Pensions Advisory Council, that the current pension system will have considerable deficit each year, at least from now until 2032.

The conversations required to create a migration framework that has the realities and hardships of people in mind will require a structural re-adjustment

for every single EU stakeholder.

A new migration paradigm: a utopia for who?

With 50 people killed at Menton's border crossing and more than 5,000 deaths at European migration routes since 2021, changing Europe's migration policy is an urgent task. With people displacement projected to rise due to natural disasters and climate impacts, Europe cannot ignore this task and resort to violent tools for humanitarian crises.

Looking at climate-related causes alone – like the increase in global temperatures but also the increase in the frequency of natural disasters such as cyclones and heavy rains – the World Bank estimates that 216 million people across 6 regions will need to migrate internally by 2050. Furthermore, the 2015 issue of the Annual Review of Economics found that every 1 degree Celsius increase in temperature could increase conflict between groups by 11.3 per cent. A rise in conflicts could push the number of displaced people even higher.

Associations on the ground like No Name Kitchen demand that the EU adopts legal and safe pathways so that people who need to migrate or request asylum can do so without having to risk their lives at border crossings. They demand a new migration framework that prioritises the wellbeing of all peoples, not just those from the Western hemisphere, and responds to humanitarian crises.

While European leaders across the political spectrum are quick to repeat the second principle of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals European “leaving no one behind”, their actions paint a very different picture. Existing research proves that “immigration policies enacted by governments on the left or the right do not differ substantially, as differences remain mostly at the level of discourse”. Therefore, the conversations required to create a migration framework that has the realities and hardships of people in mind will require a structural re-adjustment for every single EU stakeholder.

As Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas, a senior research fellow at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, puts it, “Europe will have to choose between addressing the cause of migration or fortifying itself at the expense of its own liberalism”, something that could shackle its most essential foundations.

For antiracism activist and migration expert Sani Ladan, this should not be framed as a utopia. “When we talk about freedom of movement, we are talking about rights that are already enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” argues Sani with indignation. “In article 1 of the declaration, all people are born free and equal in rights and dignity, maybe we will have to redefine and explain what we mean we say ‘people’. Does it start from the Mediterranean upwards? Is it the whole world?”

For Eleanor Paynter, “the biggest lesson of this period of struggle over migration is that the EU – and the West in general – needs to reckon with the need to expand and revise this vision of how rights are defined, and who they're for”.



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