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Europe is becoming more and more armored every day



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Human rights bodies criticise immigration policy

Poland began the construction of a new 186-kilometer wall in the last week of January, deployed almost half of its common border with Belarus. The iron control of immigration is a priority of the European Union (EU), deaf to critical voices from the associative world, human rights organizations and a part of the continental political class.

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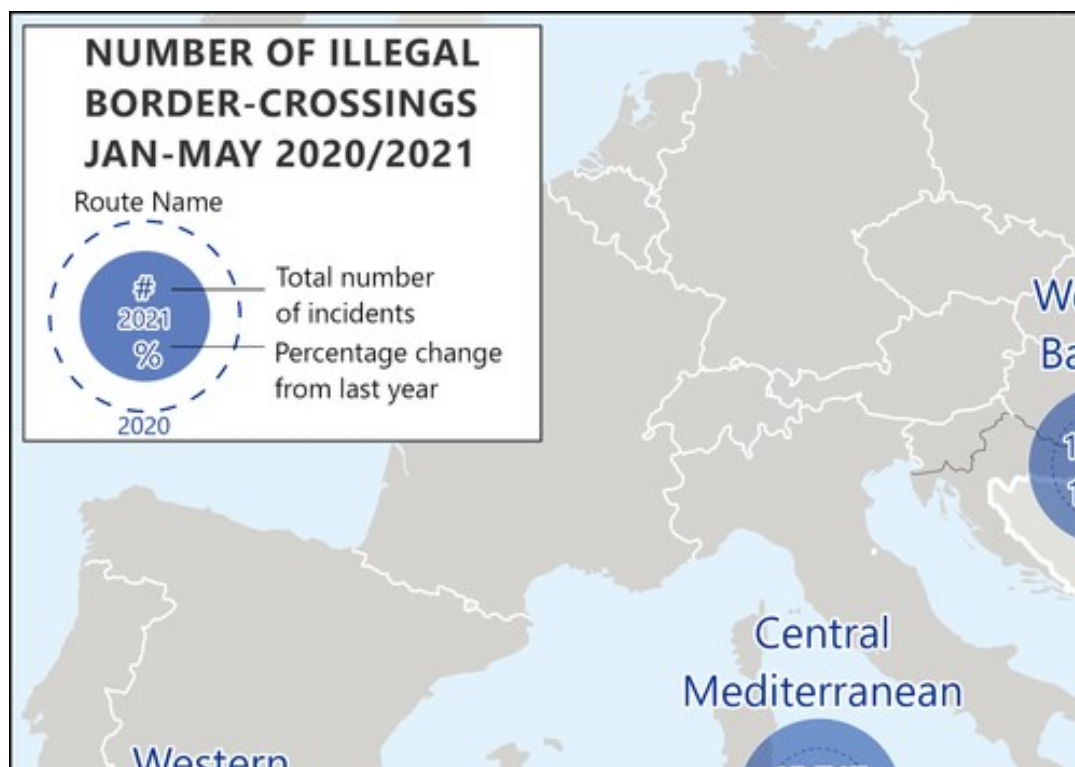
This wall of 5.5 meters high will be completed in the middle of the year and will cost 340 million euros, of which 24 million are destined, exclusively, to install security cameras and motion sensors.

Over the past year, thousands of migrants, mostly from Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria, Lebanon and Afghanistan, tried to cross the Polish border to enter the EU. Poland created a special high-security zone, partly protected by barbed wire and closed entirely to humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the press.

This new wall under construction comes to swell a network of fences that exist in different parts of the continent. Some with more history, such as those of Ceuta and Melilla, in Spain; Cyprus; that of Kaliningrad, between Lithuania and Russia. Others, more recent: that of the Évros River in Greece; the one located between Bulgaria and Turkey; port of Calais (between France and Great Britain); that of the Arctic Route; as well as the one built in North Macedonia and the Northern Balkans.

More than 200,000 *irregular migrants* arrived in the European Union in 2021, the highest number since 2017. It is almost 57% higher than in 2020 and 37% higher than in 2019, according to official information communicated by Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (<https://frontex.europa.eu/es/>). Presenting its annual report in the second week of January, Frontex highlighted that more than 65,000 people arrived through the central Mediterranean, which constitutes the main immigration corridor to European territory.

The same report indicates that in the first half of 2021 alone, 8,239 people trying to enter Europe were returned. This constitutes a record of the anti-migration policy of the European Union, which already in 2020 had defined a "migration pact" based on two essential pillars: the shielding of *borders* and the expulsion of irregular people.



Immigrant forwarding in the first half of 2021

Frontex, created in 2004 and significantly strengthened in 2016, in recent years has gained both in its own strength and in criticism from progressive European sectors. It has more than 1,500 officials from the Member States deployed on the mainland and as Fabrice Leggeri, its executive director, points out, "in several years, it will have 10,000 border and coast guard agents to help European countries in border control and migration management."

Frontal criticism against Frontex

For years, Amnesty International has been documenting the existence of illegal rejections at the European Union's land and sea borders, in countries such as Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain, France, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia. Such actions, the human rights NGO notes, "endanger people's lives and are illegal under European and international law."

Amnesty International recalls, for example, that since 2017 Frontex has been carrying out aerial surveillance over the central Mediterranean. When a boat with migrants is detected, it usually alerts the Libyan coastguard, who intercept the boat and disembark the people on board in Libya. "Men, women and children intercepted while crossing the Mediterranean

and forcibly returned to Libyan detention centres are exposed to serious human rights violations."

The NGO has repeatedly condemned the disastrous consequences of Europe's cooperation with Libya. It has also denounced the systematic violence and ill-treatment by the Croatian authorities at its borders. Through aerial surveillance, Frontex helps the Croatian authorities identify people who try to enter the country irregularly.

In Greece, since 2013, there have been forcible forwards. Individuals and families are held in informal settlements before being illegally returned to Turkey via the Evros River. In 2021, AI reported that Greek border police forcibly intercepted migrants and refugees, including hundreds of kilometers from the border, and deported them to Turkey. Faced with these pressures contrary to international law, it calls on Frontex to suspend its operations in Greece or to withdraw completely from that country.

Among its demands, Amnesty International demands that Frontex be held accountable, including in operations carried out jointly with other migration authorities. It points out that it is imperative that every Frontex operation includes a transparent reporting mechanism. "It is imperative that the agency protecting the EU's external borders in cooperation with its member states respect international law."



Numerous other European civil society organisations, as well as political figures, are raising their voices against Frontex's actions. They criticize the agency for lack of transparency in its actions, although they recognize that it responds to the political guidelines of the European Union to intensify its shield against extra-COMMUNITY migrants.

"We must ensure that Frontex does not become a state within a state, that the organisation does its job transparently and provides sufficient information about it. In addition, border controls must go hand in hand with the protection of human rights," Tineke Strik, a Dutch GREEN Party MEP, told the Swiss weekly *Die WoZ (Wochenzeitung)* as early as April last year.

Switzerland to vote on Frontex

For the first time in a European country, the Swiss electorate will soon have to decide on Frontex. The Swiss Migrant Solidarity Network together with other associations launched a referendum against funding to that agency. It opposes the increase — accepted last October by the Swiss Parliament — of the contribution to that agency, which would go from 24 million to 65 million (23 to 62 million euros) within six years. If the signatures that support the vote are validated by the official entity, the referendum will be submitted to the population on May 15. In that case, a heated societal debate will open, both on respect for the human rights of migrants as well as on the currently complex relations between Switzerland and the European Union.

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