



# GUARDING THE FORTRESS

The role of Frontex in the  
militarisation and securitisation of  
migration flows in the European Union

**Author:** Ainhoa Ruiz Benedicto



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The global situation that emerged in 1989 after the fall of the blocks, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War seemed to include the opening up of borders and the expansion of freedoms, backed by the discourse of globalisation. However, the globalisation narrative has proved to be far from the reality that has since taken shape.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century borders have gone from simply demarcating territorial integrity and political sovereignty to become geographical areas at war in which new threats are said to be appearing, such as migration and the movement of people. These changes were encouraged by the expansion of securitisation policies that followed the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States.

In this context of securitisation of border regions, population movement is understood and treated as a suspicious activity that needs to be controlled, monitored and registered, while the migration of often forcibly displaced people and refugees is seen as a security threat that must be intercepted.

The discourse that defines people who migrate as a threat became increasingly dominant in the security strategies from the early 2000s in Western countries. It went hand in hand with the construction of a Fortress Europe. This started in 1985 with the Schengen Agreement, which established a safe internal space and an unsafe external space beyond the European Union (EU). In the 1990s Spain took this idea further with the construction of the first border fences erected on the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta (1993) and Melilla (1996) located on the African continent, to keep migrants out.

In this context of expanding security policies and large-scale migration flows worldwide, in 2004 the EU set up the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) to manage its borders and cross-border movements. Frontex was one of a range of security measures deployed to build what has become known as Fortress Europe.

This report analyses the theory and practice of Frontex, the agency set up to manage the EU's borders and migration flows, as well as its contribution to Europe's securitisation and its role in guarding Fortress Europe.

## MOVEMENT AND MIGRATION AS A THREAT

Analysis of the founding regulations and mandate of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) shows that the EU considers migration a security risk on a par with crimes such as drug trafficking or smuggling, paving the way for the approval of exceptional measures to address it.



The 2016 Regulation on Frontex gave it more powers and approved the use of force in the course of undertaking its duties, making it an instrument of containment and coercion with regard to the treatment of migration flows. It also allowed it to act in the territory of Member States without their consent, thus infringing their sovereign right to use a different, non-securitised approach to dealing with migration.

Since 2016 the role of Frontex has shifted from facilitating to coordinating operations to return migrants to their country of origin, as is evident in the growing budget devoted to such operations.

## THE PRACTICE OF SECURITISATION BY FRONTEX

The budget for Frontex increased from €6.2 million in 2005 to €288 million in 2018, making a total of €1.65 billions for the 2005–2018 period, and its approved budget for 2019 is €333 million. This reflects the political determination to reinforce Frontex as a border-control system. Most of the budget is allocated to its operational activities.

The budget shows the growing importance of migrant-return operations, from €80,000 in 2005 to €47.8 million in 2018, with an approved budget of €63 million for 2019.

None of the 19 main joint operations conducted by Frontex has a specific mandate to rescue people or to include civilian shipping fleets in its actions. They all concentrate more or less exclusively on combating and intercepting different cross-border crimes, most of which are related to flows of migrants.

Frontex collaborates with NATO on joint operations carried out in the Mediterranean by the UE (Operation *Sophia*), thus consolidating a securitised and militarised practice in the management of migration.

Frontex also plays a crucial role in expanding Fortress Europe by conducting and coordinating operations in third countries by various means. These include Coordination Points and Focal Points, which are aimed at forging links between security forces and training them to work together, as well as the rapid deployment of Frontex in third countries. In this way, the EU's migration policies are externalised, imposing its approach to managing migration flows on other countries.

Operations conducted in the Mediterranean such as *Poseidon* and *Triton* had budgets of €18 million and €19 million respectively for their six months of activity. The Italian government operation they replaced, *Mare Nostrum*, had a six-monthly budget of €54 million in October 2013 and 2014.

One of the main objectives of joint operations like *Hermes* and *Attica* is to identify 'illegal' migrants and help to organise operations to return them to their countries of origin.

Of the 19 operations analysed, only one, *Vega Children*, mentions working together with a humanitarian organisation, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to control cross-border movements of child migrants.

The analysis shows that Frontex engages in one practice typical of securitisation policies: the use of emergency measures such as the deployment of Rapid Border Intervention Teams (RABITs) to intercept migrants. These emergency operations were carried out in 2010 and 2015, on the borders of Greece and in its territorial waters. In 2015 its core mandate was to identify and intercept migrants before they reached European soil.

The European Border Guard Teams (EBGTs), which replaced the RABITs in 2016, have a permanent corps of 1,500 guards ready to be deployed in the event of large-scale migration movements. Their duties are similar to those of Frontex, including migrant-return and rapid-return operations.

Joint operations such as EUROcup, reinforced border control during the European Cup, which began to be conducted in 2008, and implied the expansion of control and surveillance policies on cross-border movement, including on the EU's internal borders.

Analysis of migrant-return operations shows that Member States have become increasingly interested in these operations. Their number rose by nearly 76% in 2018 compared to 2017, according to Frontex figures.

These securitisation practices implemented by an EU agency reinforce the widespread idea that people who migrate are criminals, coupled with the existence of a safe 'internal space' and an unsafe 'external space' from which the EU needs to insulate itself by strengthening its borders with security agents whose use of force is considered legitimate. They also reinforce the territorial power dynamics in which one's country of origin is one of the factors that determine a person's freedom of movement. This buttresses the differential treatment applied to people as they cross borders.

Thus, Frontex safeguards the EU's structures and discourses of violence, distancing it from policies that defend human rights, peaceful co-existence, equality, protection and more equal relations between territories.



**Stop  
Wapenhandel**

Read our full report on:  
[www.centredelas.org/en/guardingthefortress](http://www.centredelas.org/en/guardingthefortress)

With the support of:

