

# Frontex, keeping a forceful watch at the borders of Fortress Europe

With its coastguards and border guards, this is the European Union institution that has expanded the most rapidly. In the space of 15 years, Frontex has become the key agency in Europe's migration policy, ensuring control of the periphery of the Schengen Area and policing the Mediterranean, from its headquarters in Poland down to Spain and the south of Albania. But its detractors condemn this as a further manifestation of "Fortress Europe".

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**Photos by Sadak Souici, Agence Le Pictorium**

See the full photo reportage by Sadak Souici at [www.etui.org](http://www.etui.org)

**It is particularly dangerous for *pateras* among the heavy traffic of the Strait of Gibraltar.**



The two elderly people waiting by the roadside suddenly vanish, swallowed up by the thick cloud of dust that whirls up behind the passing patrol. Bringing up the rear in the convoy of three vehicles travelling along the bumpy road in the little Albanian village near Kapshticë, on the border with Greece, Dominik has no choice but to wind up the window, to avoid getting the dark leather seats of his rugged 4x4 coated in a beige film. The 29-year-old German wants to keep everything clean. Just two weeks into his mission in this Balkan country, he has been using this Land Rover for work every day. It is a very special "Discovery" model. On the blue emblem superimposed on the metallic grey of the vehicle's bodywork is the wording: "European Border and Coast Guard Agency".

Since 22 May 2019, the European Union (EU) Member States have allowed Frontex to deploy 50 border guards in the "Land of Eagles", split between Kapshticë and Gjirokastër, the other border post further south. This is unlike any other mission in the history of the agency: for the first time, it is taking place in a non-EU country. When it was created in 2004, Frontex was only responsible for coordinating the integrated management of Europe's external frontiers. Now it is carrying out wide-ranging operations in several European countries and in the Mediterranean. For Fabrice Leggeri, Frontex Executive Director, this "important stage" makes it possible, under the agreement signed with the Albanian government in October 2018, to "combat irregular migration and, in particular, put a stop to the wild fluctuations in migration flows". The aim is to avoid a repeat of the 2015



episode, when more than 120 000 men and women crossed the region via the "Balkan route", often wrong-footing national control bodies.

"Frontex helps us find out who's crossing the border. In conjunction with the local authorities, it keeps logs, takes fingerprints and fills out forms that help identify people-smugglers, so they can be arrested," explains Izabella Wiewior, one of the organisation's spokespeople, from the back seat of the Land Rover. She adds that "2 310 migrants" have been intercepted by the surveillance patrols since the start of the mission. In total, there are 12 nationalities represented by

those supporting the Albanian police under the aegis of Frontex. Back home in Germany, Dominik belongs to the federal police, following a stint with the riot control police. Here in Albania, he may not be fitted with body armour or a shield to protect against violent demonstrators, but he does carry a revolver, a truncheon, a pair of handcuffs and a flashlight. And he pairs the European agency's familiar blue armband with a bullet-proof vest. "Frontex is much more interesting: you get to

**Border guards Jan and Christian intercepted 22 migrants earlier in the week.**



"The agency reflects a Europe that is becoming bogged down in an increasingly security-centred rationale."

**In Albania, citizens are often requested to gather information on people smugglers.**

travel around Europe, share experiences and so on. It's my seventh mission, but my first time in Albania," he recounts, not forgetting to flash a broad smile to the Frontex representative in the rear-view mirror. Izabella, the arbitrator of what may and may not be divulged, regularly gets involved in the conversation, particularly when it comes to describing the frontier guards' day-to-day dealings with migrants. One of the agency's activities is to "interview" certain migrants to obtain information on the networks of people-smugglers. According to Caroline Intrand, codirector of the Belgian non-profit CIRÉ (Coordination et initiatives pour réfugiés et étrangers), this is when "the lack of a legal framework and any transparency, and the poorly defined nature of the objectives and use of data collected" becomes apparent: "There is no particular procedure guaranteeing respect for the physical or moral integrity of the people who are intercepted."

### Turning a blind eye to abuse

In August 2019, the agency found itself in the spotlight following a joint publication by the German investigative journalism site *Correctiv*, the British newspaper *The Guardian* and the German channel ARD. On the basis of "hundreds of internal documents", the investigation revealed that Frontex had turned

a blind eye to the mistreatment by local officials of asylum seekers in Bulgaria, Hungary and Greece. These revelations cast a shadow over the impressive rise of the agency, which could have a budget of more than 11 billion euros by 2027, compared with the few tens of millions it had at its inception. "While the agency can suspend an officer deployed by Frontex, it does not have the authority over the national border police forces," responded Frontex in a news release.

Leaning against their two cars, 31-year-old Christian and 42-year-old Jan are rather reticent in describing how they themselves intercept refugees. The two Germans are working together on this early September afternoon. They are patrolling with Mario, a 28-year-old Albanian policeman. Jan speaks last and is rather serious. The last time he arrested migrants was just two days ago. Twenty-two of them got picked up by the authorities. "The families don't run away. When you find them, they stay together. Often, they're from Iraq. The men on their own are always Algerians or Moroccans – that lot, as soon as you see them, they run away. Then we catch up with them and detain them," he says, but doesn't let on whether he uses handcuffs on those who offer most resistance. Once they have been rounded up, the border guards call the Albanian police to take the asylum seekers to a centre, where their identity is recorded. "When there are a lot of families,

the women and babies go first. That happened about a month ago." It is difficult to establish how long people stay at this centre under supervision, and in what conditions. They are then sent to Tirana, the Albanian capital, or Babrru, which has the country's only centre for asylum seekers. The daytime patrol finishes its last circuit at eight o'clock in the evening and is then joined by a different team.

Night falls on the valleys of Kapshticë. Except at the border post, street lights are rare in the nearby villages. A little earlier in the day, when the sun was chasing away every inch of shade, we met a shepherd, whose daily rounds were interrupted by the Frontex agents. When asked "Have you seen any migrants going by?", the old man had seemed embarrassed to reply in front of the authorities and the journalists. Lowering his head, his eyes almost invisible under his broad-brimmed beige hat, he whispered: "There's no one by day. But night-time is a different matter..." These more frequent arrivals are confirmed by Anton and Pavel, two Czech border guards on a mission for the European agency. From 8 p.m. until the small hours, along with another team, they scan the hills using a thermal camera mounted on the roof of their van. "When the weather conditions are good, you can see as far as 20 km. But, on average, the camera can zoom in up to 10 or so kilometres from our position," explains Pavel, the team leader and head of the Brno police in his

home country. On the two monitors fixed to the wall, the guards can see the smallest detail, zoom in with the joystick, focus, record a sequence and take photos. Each night, they say they identify between one and three small groups of migrants. Once they have them on the screen, Pavel and Anton have to alert the Albanian police, but Frontex agents can also go along to meet these people. This is what we see from a recording made on 21 August. The guards catch up with three men. They encircle the asylum seekers, get them to sit down and keep them in the torchlight. Once they have been contacted, the Albanian authorities pick them up and take them to the centre near the border post. It is often Andi who takes on the task of calling the patrol: he is the only Albanian working directly with the team using the thermal camera. Before Frontex, the 25-year-old worked in passport control in the north of the country. With his blue armband, Andi

seems happy with his current job, which gives him more responsibility.

### 643 agents and a budget of 320 million

Frontex makes a big play of this cooperation between local police and European agents deployed by the Member States. However, the agency, with its spectacular growth, is not to the taste of every European country, such as those with populist governments that fear loss of sovereignty. At the agency's headquarters in Warsaw, Izabella Cooper never misses an opportunity to mention that Frontex would not exist without the European countries. It is one way of countering the argument that "the armed wing of European migration policy", as its detractors call it, must be kept under control. It is a view that is emphatically

not shared by Frontexit, a group of researchers and associations which claims that there is a genuine lack of transparency about the agency's activities. "The EU is scrambling to build up Frontex, even though no study has been made of the impact of its current activities on fundamental rights. The agency reflects a Europe that is becoming bogged down in an increasingly security-centred rationale, to the detriment of both the rights of exiles and their support structures."

On the eleventh floor of the modern building in Warsaw's business quarter, Cooper, a former spokesperson for the United Nations, tries to justify the role Frontex plays: "The countries of Europe were not set up to deal with the migration crisis of 2015. For one thing, they didn't have enough equipment or even an internet connection on the Greek islands. Initially, lots of people went unrecorded. The priority was to reestablish border control." The 2015 "wake-up call" for Member States was the trigger for an overhaul of the agency, to expand its powers. This change gave rise to the reform adopted in 2016 by the European Council of heads of state or government. This was a real turning point in the prerogatives of Frontex, then reaffirmed in October 2018 by a new reform along these lines. The number of officials went up from 309 in 2015 to 643 in 2018, and the annual budget increased from 143 to 320 million euros over the same period. "The EU recognised the fact that Frontex should not be operating under urgent conditions. We aren't there to firefight. We have to prevent the fire in the first place," explains Cooper.

Frontex can now rely on its own material resources to achieve this objective. The text provides that the agency can buy on its own behalf, or rent under a leasing arrangement – everything it needs to perform its operations. "The difficulties faced by individual states in securing and protecting their borders showed that Frontex too needed strengthening, especially in areas where tensions exist. Now we can purchase our own equipment – helicopters, planes, patrol vehicles and so on," says Izabella Cooper in the agency's Situation Centre. Behind her, four large screens display images of boats out at sea, alongside tables and curved lines. Among the three rows of desks, each with two computer monitors per workstation, Disma Malgarini explains the sources of the data being displayed. "These are real-time images, which our experts are observing 24 hours a day over periods of several days.

**Sailor Manuel Capa denounces the militarisation of the Spanish maritime border.**




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The Spanish maritime rescue service pales into insignificance compared with Frontex's finances.

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They can be transmitted by a camera or by radar installed on our airborne platforms: a plane, a drone, a satellite or even a balloon," explains the Head of the Situation Centre. This "balloon" refers to an aerostat deriving from two tenders held in November 2017 and October 2018, worth 400 000 and 500 000 euros respectively. Tender records show that, since the 2016 reform, no fewer than 70 calls for tender have been issued, worth a total of more than 340 million euros.

This budget rankles with Manuel Capa. A seaman for eight years with the Spanish Maritime Safety and Rescue Society (or "Salvamento Marítimo"), this father and member of the trade union Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT) is first in line to pick up men, women and children who are risking their lives crossing the Strait of Gibraltar. The maritime rescue service pales into insignificance compared with Frontex's finances. In the port of Tarifa in the far south of Spain,

Capa describes one of the vessels that sets out to sea to pick up survivors from the rickety craft they call "pateras". "This is the Maria Zambrano, named after the Spanish philosopher who had to flee the Franco regime. There are 10 to 12 people on board. We start by throwing a rope fore and then aft of the boat carrying the migrants, and we approach very carefully," he explains, pointing to a 39-metre orange vessel. Behind him, lying on the cement floor, a *patera* has been brought into port. Between the six benches of this fishing boat, used by 60 migrants a few days previously, are the scars of a fatal crossing: among two T-shirts and a stained pair of jeans, there are a number of lifebuoys strewn on the floor of the boat. "They aren't strong enough to save someone from drowning," says Capa, who complains of a serious lack of staff and resources for Salvamento Marítimo's primary mission: to save lives. The organisation has 80 people to cover no less than

600 kilometres of sea border, from Cartagena to Barbate. Frontex is currently deploying five vessels, two helicopters and 292 agents in the field. But Salvamento Marítimo has very little to do with the agency. "We never see them. Actually, no one really knows what they're doing," explains one of the organisation's captains, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of a backlash.

### Subcontracting border control

In Spain, Frontex says it is conducting the operations Hera, Indalo and Minerva. The first dates from 2006 and is a groundbreaking mission for the agency. It involves patrolling off the coasts of Morocco, Senegal and Mauritania, together with the fleet of each country concerned, to intercept people trying to reach the Canary Islands and return them to their port of departure. The other two missions have been going on since 2014 in the Mediterranean. "Frontex observes, but does not rescue," continues the vessel's pilot. "When we sail in from the open sea after rescuing a *patera*, there are about 20 Red Cross personnel waiting at the port to receive the refugees and identify any first aid needs, backed up by several Spanish police from the Guardia Civil. There are 15 or so Frontex agents there as well. They take notes and then leave." It is no coincidence that there is a military presence from the Guardia Civil and the European agency, given that surveillance and rescue along the Spanish sea border are increasingly beyond the control of civil organisations like Salvamento Marítimo. This assumption of control is backed up by bilateral agreements between Spain, the European Union and Morocco. The policy has slashed the number of migrants arriving in Spain from more than 60 000 in 2018 – the year when, according to the International Organization for Migration, Spain was top of the list of European countries for arrivals of asylum seekers – to fewer than 16 000 in 2019. To "congratulate" his partners on this result, Fabrice Leggeri went to Rabat in June, where he met Nouredine Boutayeb, the Moroccan Minister for the Interior, and his staff. In Africa, Frontex is on familiar territory. As evidence of its power outside Europe, the agency has numerous liaison officers posted there, particularly in Niger. Its presence is not likely to encourage NGOs to stop speaking out about the outsourcing of the European Union's border control and the increasing power that Frontex now wields. ●

**A *patera* left abandoned at the port of Tarifa (Spain).**

