

# Europe's police target refugees in operation Mos Maiorum

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At the initiative of the Italian presidency of the European Union (EU), the joint police mission Mos Maiorum began on October 13. Through strengthened controls at major traffic points, borders and airports, refugees without valid residency permits are to be identified.

Across Europe, 18,000 police are taking part in the hunt for refugees without valid residency permits from the 28 states in the Schengen zone, with the exception of Switzerland. The refugees will first be arrested before they are deported. Such joint police operations are carried out regularly in the Schengen zone and are generally organised by the six-month rotating presidency of the EU. Only under the Greek presidency in the first half of 2014 was there no such police operation.

Unlike previous missions targeting refugees, which usually lasted five days, the Italian government has extended Mos Maiorum to two weeks and involved the border protection agency Frontex for the first time. This means the external borders of the Schengen zone will also be included in the control measures. In addition, Frontex will make available vast quantities of detailed information.

The targeting of refugees, who have often reached European territory by putting their lives at risk, is not only aimed at deporting as many of them as quickly as possible. It also promotes fascist and anti-immigrant sentiments throughout Europe and plays into the hands of extreme right-wing organisations.

Aping the rhetoric of the fascist dictator Mussolini, Italy's government, led by Matteo Renzi, prefers to use Latin names in the tradition of the Roman Empire to designate its anti-immigrant operations.

The comprehensive surveillance of the Mediterranean Sea last year already carried the name "Mare

Nostrum," our sea. Mos Maiorum "morals of our forefathers," served 2,000 years ago as a description for the customs and moral outlook of Roman aristocrats, such as work, piety, loyalty to the state, and military strength. The values of the divine code were supposed to distinguish Rome, which was striving for global dominance, from its enemies in the Mediterranean. It would be hard to express the anti-immigrant character of the operation more explicitly.

Officially, Mos Maiorum aims to uncover and prosecute "human trafficking" groups. For example, the German federal police claimed in a press release that they would only collect and pass on anonymous data, and that people traffickers were the main target of the operation. The statement declared, "In the area of the pursuit of criminal prosecutions, the federal police is focusing mainly on the investigation of ruthless people trafficking organisations, which are structured to exploit the fate of people for their own economic interests, often under inhumane conditions."

The police controls are in fact aimed at hunting down refugees. During the last police operation, named Perkunas and organised by the Lithuanian presidency, over 10,000 refugees without residency permits were identified, close to 1,900 in Germany alone. Most of them came from Syria, Palestine, Afghanistan and Eritrea, and were fleeing from war or civil war for which the EU was either jointly responsible for starting or supported.

Significantly, the word "refugee" did not appear once in the written statement of the Italian presidency on the Mos Maiorum operation. Instead, the fight against "illegal immigration," "illegal border-crossing," and "irregular migration" was repeatedly noted.

Human rights groups have criticized Mos Maiorum. For Karl Kopp, of the German refugee organisation

ProAsyl, explained in the *Tageszeitung*, “The operation takes place at a time when 100,000 boat people are arriving, when worn out people move from the park bench further north, in search of a life of human dignity. The exhausted and often traumatised people then fall into the grasp of the police as they are fleeing.”

With the operation, the Italian government is demonstrating to EU member states that Italy is proceeding with full force against refugees. Within the framework of the Mare Nostrum mission, the Italian navy, despite its reluctance to do so, saved 100,000 refugees from the Mediterranean and brought them to Italian territory. This rescue operation irritated its European partners, especially as the Italian authorities did not deal with the arriving refugees sufficiently, leaving them to their own fate. As a result, numerous refugees were able to travel onwards to Germany, Austria and France.

“The situation cannot continue as it currently stands,” declared Germany’s interior minister Thomas de Maizière recently at a meeting with his European counterparts in Luxembourg. He was not referring to the deaths in the Mediterranean, but the onward travel of refugees from the states bordering the Mediterranean like Italy and Greece.

According to recent statistics from the International Organisation for Refugees (IOM), 75 percent of documented deaths of refugees between January and September 2014 took place in the Mediterranean Sea. While 3,072 migrants drowned there, “only” 230 died on the Mexico-US border, and in east Africa “only” 251 attempts to flee ended in death.

The deaths in the Mediterranean are continuing unabated. The replacement of Italy’s Mare Nostrum mission by the Frontex Triton operation at the end of the year will make the crossing even more dangerous. Triton is not aimed at rescuing refugees at sea, but exclusively at repelling migrants.



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