European border force Frontex to be expanded on the model of America's ICE

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The European Union (EU) intends to massively tighten its border regime and equip Frontex with far-reaching powers. The border police agency is to become the central authority for fortifying the EU's external borders and for the deportation of refugees and migrants to their countries of origin or to third countries. EU border policy will thus become even more brutal, paving the way for further and more extensive human rights violations than those it already commits today.

Systematic human rights violations in the name of "border protection"

Frontex has continually expanded since its founding in the wake of the Schengen Agreement, which phased out routine border checks between most EU states. For as long as Frontex has been deployed at the EU's external borders, there have been repeated reports of systematic human rights violations in which the agency is involved. These are not cases of individual "misconduct" by particular Frontex officers, but a structural practice of repelling migrants in which human lives count for nothing.

Illegal pushbacks by Frontex have been documented above all on the Mediterranean coasts and in the Balkans. Refugees are forcibly driven back across the border or into non-European waters without any asylum procedure whatsoever. Various human rights organisations and media outlets have documented how tens of thousands of refugees have been systematically denied the right to asylum by this method.

Frontex thus bears direct responsibility for the thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean, since the capsizing of boats is accepted as a consequence of the pushbacks, or even provoked. For many years, investigations have repeatedly uncovered cases in which Frontex forced unseaworthy boats to turn back and, during pushbacks, ignored the lack of supplies and the mortal danger facing the passengers on board. Shots fired at refugee boats with Frontex involvement have also been reported.

Internment in lawless zones, with the active toleration or participation of Frontex, has been documented for south-eastern Europe in particular. Journalists from the investigative NGO Lighthouse Reporting uncovered so-called "black sites," i.e., secret prisons. One was on the Bulgarian-Turkish border, where refugees were locked up for days in barred sheds without food or a toilet. Frontex vehicles and officers were present at the scene. In Hungary, refugees were crammed into shipping containers, where they were kept without food or water and were also attacked with pepper spray.

Frontex also supports the establishment of internment camps in Libyan desert regions, which are intended to stop migrants from sub-Saharan Africa long before they reach the Mediterranean coast. Although the European Court of Human Rights has ruled that refugees may not be returned to Libya because they face torture and death there, Frontex works closely with the so-called Libyan "coast guard." According to research by *Der Spiegel* and other media outlets, when Frontex identifies refugee boats in the Mediterranean through its own aerial surveillance, in most cases it does not notify civilian European rescue ships, even when these are closest to the boats' position. Instead, it informs Libyan forces, which then intercept the boats.

New role as the EU's central deportation authority

Until now, Frontex has formally been conceived as a "support agency" that is deployed at the request of a member state. Responsibility for border controls and for asylum and migration policy continues to lie with the European states. If the European Commission's proposal for a new Frontex regulation, which has now been tabled, is adopted, Frontex will in future be directed centrally from Brussels and the agency will gain considerably more powers.

Under the European Commission's plans, Frontex is to play a central role in the deportation of migrants. A new "Return Coordination Centre" is to be set up under Frontex authority to coordinate "the full spectrum of return processes" across the EU. Deportation procedures are to be more heavily digitalised and managed with "maximum effectiveness" with the support of AI. The Frontex regulation also provides for the establishment of a "rapid reaction force."

To this end, staffing is to grow from 10,000 at present to a standing corps of 30,000. The budget is to be doubled in parallel, from €6 billion to €12 billion.

Structurally, Frontex increasingly resembles the notorious US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, which enforces the Trump administration's anti-migrant policy through brutal raids, internment camps and deportations. ICE's lawless operations have included the murder of US citizens and longtime immigrants alike, with those responsible shielded from accountability.

The planned expansion of Frontex supports the implementation of the "Return Regulation," which was adopted by EU interior ministers on 1 October 2026. This decision by the member states was the final

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formal step; the European Parliament had already given its approval.

The European Parliament approved the regulation with a majority secured through collaboration between the conservative European People's Party (EPP) group and the far-right groups in the European Parliament, coordinated in large part by the German EPP leader Manfred Weber of the Christian Social Union (CSU). Both the regulation itself and the process of its implementation show how far European migration and asylum policy is already determined by a far-right agenda. The vote can be regarded as a trial run for the collaboration being sought in EU states, in particular between the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany.

The "Return Regulation" is part of the EU's tightened asylum policy, the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which places the repelling of refugees at its centre. Essentially, it undermines the rights of people seeking protection and migrants who have found their way to the countries of the European Union. If they come from supposedly "safe third countries," they are denied access to a fair asylum procedure; they face detention, faster and harsher deportations against which they can scarcely defend themselves, and ultimately deportation to and internment in countries with which they have no connection whatsoever.

So-called "return hubs" are to be set up in third countries outside Europe to take in migrants who cannot be deported to their countries of origin. In this way, responsibility for protection is to be shifted onto third countries that were never the refugees' destination, or even on their route. These countries are to take in the refugees—permanently, or until deportation to the country of origin becomes possible.

Within the EU, a group of five states has formed that is driving this policy forward and wants to establish the practice of deportation to third countries as quickly as possible. It consists of Germany, Denmark, Austria, Greece and the Netherlands. Other EU states have expressed their support. Only Spain and France have voiced reservations—they fear that investments in the "return hubs" will be wasted if court rulings on the human rights situation in the third countries ultimately prevent them from going into operation.

A number of states are under discussion as partner countries that could operate "return hubs." Rwanda, Uganda and Uzbekistan are named again and again. The Dutch government has already concluded such an agreement with Uganda, and the Austrian government with Uzbekistan. Rwanda was previously Britain's partner in its similar attempt to deport asylum seekers there. Egypt, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Libya, Mauritania and Tunisia have also been named as possible third countries.

A glance at the list of states is enough to reveal that crimes are being prepared here. These are impoverished, dependent states whose authoritarian governments offer their services to the imperialist countries as accomplices. Since they carry little "ballast" in the form of democratic institutions, they can act all the more ruthlessly. Human Rights Watch speaks of countries "with an appalling human rights record" that the Europeans have in their sights as partners for their criminal refugee policy.

Expanding Fortress Europe—a deeply reactionary project

The strengthening of Frontex is an essential building block in the arch-reactionary project of "Fortress Europe." Frontex began in 2005 with 45 staff, a budget of €6 million and performed "risk analyses." Soon the agency will have a budget of €12 billion and 30,000 border guards, its own ships, aircraft, drones and vehicles, as well as intervention units that operate independently at external borders, actively prevent entry, collect data and work closely with authoritarian regimes—without any democratic legitimacy.

EU governments vilify war refugees as "illegal migrants"—even though they are fleeing wars and upheavals that originate with the imperialist powers themselves: in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Libya and elsewhere. The European Union likes to present itself as a bastion of democracy and human rights. "The EU is founded on common values: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights," states the European Commission's website, for example. The utter hypocrisy of this claim is revealed at the EU's external borders, where a migrant's life is worth nothing.

The expansion of Frontex is an expression and an organic component of a sharp shift to the right by all European governments. In the face of mounting social tensions, the ruling elites are resorting to authoritarian forms of rule within the EU as well. Refugees and migrants are made scapegoats onto whom social tensions are to be diverted. In this, the EU is also emulating the United States and its brutal escalation of attacks on migrants. Frontex is being armed on the model of the notorious ICE forces.

Immigrants and refugees, among the most vulnerable sections of society, are being targeted in preparation for a wider assault on democratic rights. The stripping of rights and state violence directed today against migrants can quickly be turned on the entire working class. In the United States, the murders of Renée Good and Alex Pretti by federal immigration agents have already made clear that "border protection forces" are also deployed with brutal violence against domestic opposition and protests.

The European working class must tear down Fortress Europe. Open borders, an unrestricted right to asylum and the international unity of the working class against the governments committing these crimes against human rights—that is the answer to the far-right agenda being pursued by EU governments and their interior ministers.

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