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**FROM ASSISTANCE TO ARMED  
SURVEILLANCE: FRONTEX AND THE  
EU'S SECURITISED MIGRATION AGENDA**

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## Introduction

The European Union (EU) faces complex and interconnected security concerns beyond traditional threats. In her July 2024 address to the European Parliament during the Plenary Session preceding her re-election, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen addressed the rising complexity of security challenges. “A Member State’s border is a European border,” she stated, proposing doubling the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) resources and tripling the European Border and Coast Guard Agency’s (Frontex) staff to build a more robust and cohesive European response to migration and security threats (von der Leyen, 2024). Von der Leyen’s approach marks a fundamental shift: while Europe pledges “solidarity” and protection of human rights in response to migration challenges (von der Leyen, 2024), it is progressively embedding these principles inside a framework of robust security measures.

Historically, the EU’s approach to border control has shifted from a regulatory focus to a proactive security posture known as ‘Fortress Europe.’ This notion highlights the EU’s rising intention to protect its borders through externalised control mechanisms, including third-party governments in migration and security management (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). This move aligns with the new EU Migration and Asylum Pact, which emphasises enhanced collaboration with third countries to facilitate readmission processes, thereby positioning Frontex at the forefront of forming and supporting new partnerships with non-EU nations (European Commission, 2024; Gkliati & Kilpatrick, 2021). According to Jones et al. (2022), this effort is consistent with the EU’s overarching security and migration policy goal for 2021-2027, which allocates a large share of funds from the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the European Peace Facility (EPF) to improve hard-power capabilities. These actions represent a watershed moment, cementing the EU’s position as an assertive security player in response to perceived threats at its borders and in the larger geopolitical context.

The significance of this investigation derives from the widening reach of EU border control systems and the ramifications of militarising these procedures. The EU’s goal in externalising border control is to restrict migratory flows while lowering security threats through increased collaboration with neighbours. However, such tactics raise concerns about the ethical and humanitarian implications of an increasingly militarised border policy. This paper examines the EU’s externalisation strategy, focusing on Frontex’s critical role in migration management and the Union’s growing militarisation of border control.

The next sections will provide a detailed roadmap for this investigation: the first section delves into the EU’s externalisation strategy for border control; the second section examines the militarisation of border administration and its implications; the third section will discuss

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Frontex's strategic role, including its collaborations with third countries; finally, the conclusion summarises these findings and discusses the long-term possibilities for an increasingly militarised approach to EU border security.

## **1. The EU's Externalisation of Border Control**

The EU's strategy regarding border security has evolved considerably since the introduction of the 1985 Schengen Agreement, which facilitated unrestricted movement inside Europe's internal borders while strengthening restrictions at its external borders (Akkerman, 2018). This framework was enshrined in EU law by the Amsterdam Treaty of 1999, after which the EU made border security a key component of its policy (Akkerman, 2018). A pivotal moment came in 2004 with the launch of the European Council's Hague Programme, which set the agenda for the EU in the areas of justice, freedom and security. The Programme prioritised the "fight against illegal immigration," intending to integrate external border control, technological innovation, and improved information exchange (European Council, 2004, as cited in Akkerman, 2018). Furthermore, the Hague Programme underscored the importance of "cooperation with third countries," a principle that has continued to influence the EU's migration strategy by strengthening external border control via partnerships with non-EU countries (European Council, 2004, as cited in Akkerman, 2018). These initiatives cemented the start of the EU's 'externalisation' policy, designed to curb migration at its source and accelerating the process of incorporating military and surveillance measures, particularly in response to the 2015 'refugee crisis.'

Considering ongoing realities, scholars contend that the continuous securitisation of migration by many European leaders, such as Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has led to its framing as a 'hybrid threat' intertwined with terrorism and organised crime—Orbán's administration has imposed tough border restrictions and increased national security, portraying migrants as possible threats to societal stability and national identity (Berman, 2021). This narrative has resulted in increased militarisation, particularly in the Mediterranean (Kinacioğlu, 2023). Military operations conducted under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), including the European Union Naval Force (EU NAVFOR Med)—also known as Operation Sophia—, patrolled the Mediterranean to intercept migrant vessels attempting to traverse from North Africa (Drent, 2018). These initiatives have shifted the region into a zone for defence and deterrence rather than humanitarian action (Kinacioğlu, 2023). Such a securitised interpretation has been further exemplified by the European Commission President, who easily switched from addressing hybrid threats and organised crime to border security and migrant control (von der Leyen, 2024). Her proposal for more Frontex resources and a stronger Europol mandate reveals a continuous conception of migration as a security concern that must be addressed militarily, reinforcing

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the belief that migration challenges require a defence-oriented response (von der Leyen, 2024).

The framing of migration as a hybrid threat, as articulated by Kinacioğlu (2023), continues to significantly alter the dynamics of the Mediterranean. Initially, military personnel assisted civil border management authorities and humanitarian actors with search-and-rescue (SAR) operations; however, their responsibilities have progressively evolved to encompass operations backed by mandates that enable the use of force beyond self-defence. For instance, Operation Sophia had an enforcement mandate to ‘take all necessary steps’ against a vessel and its associated assets, including ‘disposing of them or rendering them unworkable’ (Kinacioğlu, 2023). Considering these developments, it is essential to understand militarisation as a strategic approach that extends the concept of securitisation (Kinacioğlu, 2023). This raises pertinent questions about the EU’s commitment to promoting human rights and democratic principles (Napolitano, 2023; Sadik & Kaya, 2020; Marin, 2020).

By externalising border controls, notably across the Mediterranean, the EU has shifted responsibility for border security to non-EU governments, particularly those in the Middle East and North Africa region. The EU incentivises local governments with development funds linked to migration control, which might prolong human rights violations (Napolitano, 2023). A particularly contentious part of this strategy, for example, is the collaboration between the EU and Libyan authorities. This partnership has facilitated ‘pullbacks’ of migrants attempting to reach Europe, essentially returning them to Libya despite the well-documented dangers of abuse in detention facilities (Jones, 2020). According to an analysis conducted by Statewatch, these EU actions have rarely faced consequences, creating serious ethical and legal issues about cooperation in potential human rights violations (Jones, 2020). Furthermore, the EU’s military-oriented policy is supported by agreements such as the 2016 EU-Turkey pact, which effectively outsourced border management by asking Turkey to prevent migrants from entering Europe in exchange for financial aid (International Rescue Committee, 2022). While this arrangement was initially lauded as a ‘solution’ to irregular migration, it has been attacked for putting migrants in perilous situations, frequently with little access to humanitarian aid and restricted legal avenues into Europe (International Rescue Committee, 2022).

This intermingling of externalised border control and financial incentives for local governments not only reflects the EU’s shifting priorities but also continues to raise significant ethical implications regarding the treatment of vulnerable populations. However, the EU’s cooperative agreements with external countries facilitate new opportunities for European security and technology businesses, which export surveillance and biometric technologies to strengthen local border controls (Marin, 2020). Furthermore, as border

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management externalisation proceeds, a disturbing pattern emerges: EU border security is increasingly reliant on the involvement of the military and security sectors. This is demonstrated by advisory boards made up mostly of business representatives rather than human and civilian rights campaigners (Akkerman, 2018). As a result, these advisory bodies have steered security research in a way that favours market-oriented solutions, prioritising technical improvements above civil liberties and human rights concerns (Akkerman 2018). Notably, the absence of participation from civilian groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) exacerbates this imbalance by reducing the range of opinions in policymaking and supervision. This method, which includes non-state actors and commercial organisations in border control through funding and contracts, has significantly shifted migration management from a purely state-centric model to a more extensive network of stakeholders while maintaining state control (Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). Such complex dynamics highlight the shift in the EU's migration strategy, which contrasts humanitarian rhetoric with policies that increasingly reflect a securitised and market-driven orientation.

## **2. Militarisation of Border Management**

The militarisation of EU border control represents a strategic alteration that prioritises security over humanitarian concerns. This tendency, which gained momentum with the 2015 refugee crisis, prompted the EU to adopt increasingly security-focused migration management solutions (Akkerman, 2018). Notably, military engagement at the border has surged, highlighted by operations such as EUNAVFOR Sophia (2015) or NATO's Operation Sea Guardian (2016). The latter works with EUNAVFOR Sophia in the Central Mediterranean to increase marine situational awareness in the region while also sharing intelligence with the EU mission; it aims to improve maritime security in general, but it especially focuses on potential terrorist-related commerce flows of guns and combatants (NATO, 2023; Drent, 2018). While first touted as efforts to disrupt human trafficking and rescue vulnerable migrants, it seems that these operations have increasingly relied on confinement and deterrence rather than humanitarian relief (Drent, 2018).

The development of military technology applied to border control, such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and automated surveillance systems, has bolstered this militarised approach, allowing the EU to watch and intercept migrants from afar (Kinacioğlu, 2023). Reports indicate that the EU has allocated €100 million for monitoring equipment built by defence contractors, including Airbus and Israeli armaments industries (Kinacioğlu, 2023). Human Rights Watch argues that enhanced surveillance and harsh measures exacerbate the perilous situations that refugees face, citing several incidents of delayed rescues and disregard for asylum responsibilities (Sunderland, 2022). The current EU strategy prioritises a security-first approach that frequently violates humanitarian responsibilities, aggravating

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the Mediterranean Sea crisis. According to Kinacioğlu (2023), this hyper-militarised governance strategy has led to more deaths and pushbacks for migrants, often due to unstable and risky conditions in the Mediterranean. This hyper-militarised strategy has also resulted in a sharp spike in migrant mortality, with over 3,000 deaths reported in 2023, one of the bloodiest years in the Mediterranean since 2017 (Welle, 2023). Furthermore, reports indicate regular pushbacks when migrants are forced to return to dangerous locations like Libya, exposing them to assault, extortion, and terrible prison circumstances in violation of International Law (Welle, 2023).

The EU's 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)—the EU's long-term budget plans—, which prioritises measures that promote 'push-back' methods above SAR missions, reinforces this strategy (Jones et al., 2022). Such financing highlights an emphasis on containment rather than providing safe migratory pathways or addressing underlying issues. Additionally, the framework's distribution of funds for such actions has reinforced military methods. The MFF lacks comprehensive engagement with human rights agencies—such as the Fundamental Rights Agency—raising questions about the EU's commitment to human rights in migration management (Jones et al., 2022). This inward move towards security-oriented measures not only externalises EU border management but also raises ethical concerns about the impact on migrant rights and safety.

### **3. Frontex & EU Border Management**

Established in 2004 under Council Regulation (EC) 2007/2004 (Frontex, 2024), Frontex has emerged as a key participant in the EU's external border management, not only via direct operational support but also by acquiring substantial strategic and analytical capacities. The agency's Strategic Risk Analysis (SRA) assesses significant factors influencing the EU migratory landscape, such as global inequities, climate change, demographic pressures, and geopolitical conflicts (European Commission, 2023). These megatrends inform Frontex's reaction tactics under the European Integrated Border Management (EIBM), which tries to tailor border restrictions to specific difficulties at land, sea, and air borders (European Commission, 2023). This comprehensive risk analysis approach not only enables Frontex to adapt operational priorities to handle urgent security risks but also equips the agency to anticipate long-term changes that may affect migration flows (European Commission, 2023).

#### *Strategic Partnerships with Third Countries*

Currently, Frontex has seventeen agreements with other nations and two with regional organisations made up of third countries (Jones, 2017). These collaborations have two primary purposes: first, they aid EU Member States in border management, and second,

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they help Frontex realise its strategic goals and operational mandate (Marin, 2020). Except for the agreement with Russia—which requires shared data on migrants’ age, nationality, and migratory routes—information processing and sharing are fundamental to Frontex’s risk evaluations and strategic assessments (Marin, 2020). These insights facilitate Frontex’s, hence the EU’s, strategic alliances with third countries, enabling the agency to coordinate responses to emerging patterns such as state actors exploiting migration, as observed at the EU’s eastern borders during Russia’s aggression against Ukraine (European Commission, 2023). The EIBM’s collaboration strategy aims not just to limit unauthorised border crossings but also to oppose the impact of organised criminal networks that assist illegal migration (European Commission, 2023). According to the European Commission (2023), inter-agency communication and real-time situational awareness are critical for managing Europe’s varied and changing border environments, hence strengthening the EU’s border security system’s resilience and flexibility.

In this enlarged responsibility, Kinacioğlu (2023) observes that Frontex’s role has evolved from aiding EU member states to becoming the principal orchestrator of EU border management. Under Regulation (EU) 2016/1624, Frontex’s broadened mandate incorporates cooperation with military organisations like NATO, intertwining military and civilian responsibilities in ways that present significant institutional and ethical challenges, especially regarding the humanitarian implications of operations in the Mediterranean (Kinacioğlu, 2023). Moreover, a substantial concern raised in an investigation by Forced Migration Review is the agency’s lack of transparency concerning its on-ground activities (Gkliati & Kilpatrick, 2021). The obscurity of operational plans, coupled with restricted access to information from third countries, poses critical questions as the EU seeks to delegate border management and, consequently, shift its responsibilities under refugee law and human rights protection (Gkliati & Kilpatrick, 2021).

### *Technological Advancements and Intelligence Sharing*

To support its extensive array of operations, Frontex employs sophisticated surveillance technology supported by the European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR), an integrated monitoring system that combines surveillance data from EU member states to provide a real-time picture of border activity (Akkerman, 2018). Akkerman (2018, p. 347) describes EUROSUR as a ‘system of systems’ that is constantly upgraded, demonstrating the EU’s commitment to maintaining a high-tech, adaptable border security system that can meet the needs of developing security threats. EUROSUR’s real-time data is critical for Frontex, allowing it to conduct complete risk assessments and respond quickly to new risks (Akkerman, 2018). The European Commission has emphasised EUROSUR’s continuity, stating that its expansion would most certainly continue—this trajectory indicates an ever-

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increasing necessity for advanced surveillance technology, confirming the ‘security continuum’ connected with migration management (Akkerman, 2018).

Frontex and EUROSUR employ a wide range of military-grade equipment and tools. UAVs are a well-known technology utilised for long-range surveillance over the Mediterranean and other border zones. Frontex has allotted significant funding to contractors to install UAVs capable of monitoring migrant routes from the skies and delivering real-time data on vessel movements and migration attempts (Kinacioğlu, 2023). Drones allow Frontex to monitor and intercept migrants from a distance, allowing border authorities to conduct ‘push-back’ operations remotely and collaborate with third-country players (Kinacioğlu, 2023). Satellite surveillance technologies enhance these efforts by producing high-resolution photos that allow Frontex to follow activities across vast sea and land regions (Kinacioğlu, 2023).

The agency’s position as an intelligence hub, which is key to its cooperation agreements, has helped to elevate its status as an authoritative knowledge player in the EU. Frontex operates four regional intelligence-sharing networks to enhance its risk analysis capabilities: the Western Balkans Risk Analysis Network (WB-RAN), the Eastern Partnership RAN (EaP-RAN), the Turkey RAN (TU-RAN), and the Africa-Frontex Intelligence Community (AFIC) (Marin, 2020). Marin (2020, p. 161) posits that Frontex’s ‘knowledge hub’ gives it enormous control over other EU organisations and member states. Frontex not only centralises surveillance data, but it also handles intelligence supplied by third-country partners. This trend exemplifies a broader pattern where migration control increasingly depends on cross-border intelligence sharing, thereby creating an extensive monitoring network that extends the EU’s authority beyond its geographical confines. The effectiveness of these intelligence-sharing practices is vital for Frontex’s international collaborations, enabling the agency to perform intricate risk assessments and data exchanges that solidify its role as a significant knowledge resource within the EU (Marin, 2020).

### *The Securitisation of Migration Data: Ethical Concerns*

Frontex’s engagement with foreign nations poses significant legal and ethical concerns, particularly over data gathering and privacy. According to Sadik and Kaya (2020), large-scale databases—including the Schengen Information System (SIS), Visa Information System (VIS), and the European Asylum Dactyloscopy (Eurodac) database—demonstrate how migration and asylum data are increasingly being exploited for security and counterterrorism objectives (Sadik & Kaya, 2020). These systems, which save personal and biometric data on persons identified at EU borders, enable full tracking and screening of migrants, including fingerprint and face recognition data (Sadik & Kaya, 2020). This information is exchanged among EU member states and, in some situations, with third-country partners to improve



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security coordination and intelligence sharing (Sadik & Kaya, 2020). Originally intended for migration management, these databases have subsequently grown in breadth to meet broader security objectives (Sadik & Kaya, 2020). The adaptability of these platforms has aided Frontex's intelligence-driven activities, but it has also continued to raise questions about the agency's openness and accountability. Carrera (2009) criticises Frontex's 'coordinating intelligence-driven operations' for being opaque and lacking democratic control, highlighting the necessity for EU institutions to improve openness to respect democratic norms in border management.

Furthermore, Léonard (2010) contends that Frontex has deliberately contributed to the securitisation of migration within the EU, employing a 'sociological' approach that prioritises actions above speech. Frontex's tactics in targeting migrants as possible security hazards have contributed to the European psyche's perception of migration as a social danger. This approach is consistent with the agency's implementation of 'integrated border management' (IBM), a comprehensive approach that includes not only policing borders but also engaging in preventive measures such as partnerships with third countries to reduce migration flows before they reach Europe (Léonard, 2010). Frontex has used this technique to establish itself as a dominant authority in EU border management, obtaining both operational autonomy and influence over European border security policy.

### *The Geopolitical and Humanitarian Impacts of Frontex's Externalisation Strategy*

To sum up, Frontex's collaborations with other nations serve a dual purpose of improving EU border security while also expanding the agency's reach outside EU boundaries. This multinational partnership, along with Frontex's strategic use of technology and intelligence, materialises the trend towards a more militarised and securitised approach to migration management, one that seems to prioritise security over humanitarian concerns. While Frontex's intelligence-sharing agreements and surveillance technology have improved EU border control, these measures have far-reaching consequences for EU foreign policy and relations with neighbouring countries. The externalisation approach, which aims to curb migrant flows, has transformed the EU's diplomatic interaction with African governments, frequently strengthening local autocrats' ability to impose stringent migration regulations (Marin, 2020). This security-centric approach risks legitimising authoritarian practices and undermines the EU's professed commitments to human rights, potentially eroding its values-driven foreign policy (Sadik & Kaya, 2020). Furthermore, these strategies may contribute to instability in regions with fragile state capacities, thereby increasing migratory pressures and fostering radicalisation (Bøås, 2021, cited in Augustova et al., 2023). The complexities inherent in Frontex's operations call into question the accountability, transparency, and ethical dimensions of Europe's expanding border security framework.

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## **Conclusion: Towards 'Fortress Europe'**

This paper has examined the growing militarisation and securitisation of EU border management, focussing on Frontex and the EU's externalisation plan as key drivers of this transition. The EU's approach to border control, which began with cooperative regulation, has grown into a sophisticated security system geared to strengthen the Union's external frontiers, frequently at the price of human rights and ethical considerations. Frontex's growth, widespread use of surveillance technology like EUROSUR, and cooperation with foreign nations all point to a strategy that establishes migration as a pressing security concern, reflecting the EU's notion of a 'Fortress Europe.'

Key findings reveal that this method has resulted in a solid but contentious border regime. The introduction of military-grade technology, such as drones and intelligence-sharing systems, has improved EU border control while also having serious humanitarian consequences. The rising presence of military and security actors, notably in the Mediterranean, has shifted migration management from a civilian role to one dominated by defensive mechanisms (Akkerman, 2018; Drent, 2018). Frontex's ties with non-EU governments have been beneficial, helping the agency to push the EU's security objectives beyond its boundaries. However, these collaborations frequently disregard migrants' rights and well-being, who endure assault, incarceration, and restricted asylum options (Martini & Megerisi, 2023; Augustova et al., 2023).

As the EU proceeds along this route, it must make a fundamental decision: continue its path towards a securitised 'Fortress Europe' or adopt a migration strategy that matches security with humanitarian ideals. Achieving this balance would include reevaluating ties with foreign nations, maintaining openness, and incorporating human rights issues into all levels of policy. Finally, the future of EU border management is not just about safeguarding its borders but also about displaying a commitment to human dignity, thereby creating a Europe that is both secure and ethical.

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