



Viewpoint

More externalisation of migration control

Blanca Garcés-Mascreñas
(Senior researcher, *Barcelona Centre of International Affairs, CIDOB*)

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We pay but others do it. This first and foremost has been the response of the European Union to the so-called “refugee crisis”. Under the title of the [European Agenda on Migration](#), in May 2015 the European Commission proposed a series of measures to stop what it called “the human misery created by those who exploit migrants.” This document established as a priority cooperation with third countries to jointly address the causes of emigration. In practice, this cooperation has been limited to promoting the readmission of irregular migrants, border control and the reception of asylum-seekers and refugees in third countries. The EU’s agreements with Turkey (March 2016) and more recently with Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali and Ethiopia (June 2016) represent the implementation of this approach.

The essence of these agreements is no other than to condition development aid, commercial agreements or visa liberalisation policies on cooperation with the European Union in matters of migration control. In short, they are a promise of money in exchange for control. In fact, this is nothing new. The [Global Approach to Migration and Mobility](#), approved by the European Commission in 2011, already insisted on the necessity of a regional and bilateral dialogue with countries of origin, transit and destination. Neither is it new if we take into account that distinct Member States, Spain being a pioneer amongst them, have for years been signatory to bilateral agreements in the same direction. The difference is that now they are being carried out at the EU level and the exchange is understood not only as an incentive but also as a way of penalising those that don’t collaborate.

What is it that the EU seeks with these agreements? The first big question is the readmission of “returnees” on the part of countries of origin and transit. It should be recalled that together, the Member States reject around half of all the asylum applications they receive. Taking into account that in 2015 there were more than a million applications, this signifies the deportation of hundreds of thousands of people in the coming years. Despite the political emphasis on “return”, we know from experience that readmission agreements are difficult to sign or implement, basically because to accept the deportation of your own citizens or citizens of neighbouring countries has a high political cost for governments. Conclusion: the money, our money, cannot do it all.

These agreements also mean continuing with the externalisation of migration control – that is to say, having others control our frontiers for us. This translates into the deployment of police and military forces, in massive deportations far from the frontier and, increasingly, the involvement of governments of origin and transit in the so-called “fight against the traffickers”.

The long history of agreements between Spain and African countries (but above all with Morocco) provides the evidence that this does work. It works because it is easier to avoid people getting in than deporting them once they are in, and because beyond the frontier anything goes: the impunity with which these states can detain, deport and even assassinate makes them much more effective. Hence the growing externalisation of migration control. But we should be responsible for that which is done in our name, either because we pay or because we give something in exchange. There is no doubt that those who pay are as worthy of blame, if not more so.

Finally, these agreements also seek to externalise the duty of international protection. The agreement with Turkey is the most explicit: the EU promised to pay €6 billion in exchange for Turkey taking in refugees on the move. This form of externalisation, not of migration control but of the duty of international protection, is new in the European context. At the Seville summit in 2002, Tony Blair made a similar proposal that was immediately rejected. Today there is barely a discussion. The “crisis”, goes the argument, justifies the “exception”. Australia, in fact, has been doing it for some time: since 2001 it has subcontracted the detention of asylum-seekers to small “prison islands” (some of them purposefully declared to be outside of Australian territory) and has signed more than 20 bilateral agreements with countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia. Like the majority of countries neighbouring the EU, they are not signatories to the Geneva Convention. But when security prevails over rights, that is not what’s important – what’s important is that others do it, although we pay.

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Web: www.statewatch.org | Email: office@statewatch.org | Phone: +44 (0) 207 697 4266

Post: c/o Resource for London, London, N7 6PA

Charity number: 1154784 | Company number: 08480724
Registered office: 2-6 Cannon Street, London, EC4M 6YH