Frontex – the driving force in the war against Boatpeople and Sans Papiers

Sea operations, EuroSUR and new border technologies

Crossing Borders

5 years ago in May 2005, Frontex, the European border agency, started its work with a few pilot projects. Today, Frontex is permanently involved in militarized sea- and land-operations against refugees and migrants on the European border as well as in the coordination of charter-deportations. Frontex is the driving force on different levels intensifying the repressive system of migration-control even beyond EU-borders. In their mission to combat so-called illegal migration, Frontex is willing to accept the death of thousands of refugees in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean. Thus Frontex represents one of the main counterparts in our struggle for freedom of movement.

The context was clearly set in the Stockholm programme, the new five-year-programme for Justice and Home Affairs of the EU-Council, adopted in December 2009: „Europe will need a flexible and demand-driven labour immigration policy, responsive to the needs of Member States' national labour markets… Europe needs a strategic and systematic use of all available instruments of the EU Global Approach to Migration – migration profiles, migration missions, cooperation platforms on migration and development and Mobility partnerships – for long-term cooperation on all dimensions of this policy in close partnership with selected third countries along priority migratory routes …“. The crucial actor was mentioned often in the paper too: Frontex. According to the program the strengthening of the European Border Agency is a key issue.

It has been apparent from the beginning that sea borders have a particular significance for Frontex. The first major joint operations after the establishment of the agency in 2004 took place at sea borders, and it was those operations which rapidly grew both in scope and duration. It is also reflected in the budgets, where spendings on maritime operations have always constituted the largest item. The special attention that Frontex devotes to the sea borders might stem from their

special character: there is no clear borderline with border posts and barriers; instead they are a broad, diffuse area, a “blurred border of the rule of law” – an excellent experimentation ground for an agency which is seeking to invent, test and ultimately establish a new form of “border management”. The rights and often also the lives of migrants are lost in the middle of this process. Thousands die at sea and due to illegal pushbacks, so called „interceptions and diversions“, are the daily business of Frontex: be it at the coasts of West Africa (operation Hera), in the Mediterranean Sea (operation Nautilus) or around the Aegean Islands (operation Poseidon). Of course the Spanish, Italian or Greek border guards still play a central and often worse role in blocking and returning refugees and migrants to Senegal, Libya or Turkey. But a militarized Frontex armada does not only tolerate the life-threatening practice of hunting down and illegaly deporting refugees and migrants. Frontex moderates, coordinates and evaluates this war against migrants in order to ultimately shape a new practice of deterrence.

„Furthermore Frontex is responsible to develope the European Border Surveillance System (EuroSUR) with a view to ensuring that the necessary cooperation is established between the Member States and with Frontex to share surveillance data relating to the eastern and southern borders no later than 2013“ (Stockholm programme). Land border and airport operations of Frontex are still limited or often even on a level of pilot projects only. But as explicitly described

in the Stockholm programme, Frontex is expected to assess what European border management under joint responsibility is really supposed to mean. EuroSUR is the name of an ambitious, comprehensive surveillance system, and its development is supposed to be enforced by any technological means necessary! Satellites and drones, every equipment available should be used and „integrated“ into this larger system. High-tech companies are called to develop particular instruments. „The possibilities of new technologies hold great potential for rendering border management more efficient as well as more secure. This includes inter alia the use of gates for automated border control. The European Council takes note of the ongoing studies of Frontex in this field and encourages the Agency to continue its work in order to establish best practice. …“ This quotation from the Stockholm programme does not refer to the outwards borders only. Frontex and the EU Commission are both aware that the majority of those who are livingin the EU despite the lack of proper residence permits initially entered legally but simply did not leave when their visas expired (the so called “visa-overstayer”). Subsequently, a new „Entry-Exit“ system has already been proposed 2 years ago, which in conjunction with the upcoming Visa Information System will allow for the tracking of individuals within the european population, relying heavily on biometric technology.

Frontex has learned during the last years and attempts to improve its increasingly bad reputation. They present themselves as neutral agency, solely providing technologies to establish „best practices“. They even utilize the human rights discourse by pretending that their measures help to save boat people. But these empty rhetorics cannot hide their true task. Be it against Sans Papiers inside the EU or against boat people at the outer borders of the EU, Frontex maintains a manifolded key-position „combatting illegal migration“. Consequently, the call of the network welcome to Europe states: „Frontex represents one of the main counterparts in our struggle for freedom of movement“. Lets fight them by any means necessary!

Transnational Newsletter 8th edition, May 2010: www.noborder.org