

The Atlas of migrants in Europe

The asylum and immigration policies of European Union (EU) countries have undergone great changes since the 1980s. The issuing of «Schengen» visas in European consulates, the hardening of conditions for admission on account of family immigration, the strengthening of external border controls or their delocalisation into neighbouring countries such as Morocco or Ukraine, the development of detention sites and the practice of «joint flights» for expulsions, all constitute obstacles that curb legal immigration into the Union. The 1951 Geneva Convention on the status of refugees is applied in an increasingly restrictive manner, when it is not ignored: in May 2009, several hundred African and Asian migrants were stopped by the Italian Navy during their crossing of the Mediterranean, and they were returned to Libya without their situation in relation to the right to asylum being examined. This development moves European countries further away from the principles established by international conventions concerning human rights.

Is it possible to strike a fair balance between respecting these principles, that member states claim they respect, and the means that are deployed to fight «illegal» immigration? The European Pact on asylum and immigration that was adopted in October 2008 under the French Presidency of the Union, states that it seeks to «mobilise all their available means to ensure a more effective control of external land, sea and air borders», while it mentions the «norms in international law and particularly those that relate to human rights, the dignity of human beings and refugees». Nonetheless, this may be questioned if one considers the administrative, police and judicial practices, and all the social consequences that are caused by the judicial and material mechanisms that European states have introduced.



The goal of this atlas, through the spatial organisation of the European Union's migration borders, is to make the human impact of the strengthening of migration controls visible: not just through the living conditions of foreigners who are blocked at the borders or live in those territories that are at the margins of existence such as the «jungles» in the Calais region in France or the «tranquillos» in the region of Oujda in Morocco, but also in the access to refugee status for asylum seekers, in the protection of unaccompanied minors or in the journeys of those who merely wish to pay a visit to their relatives or friends in Europe.

Although the European territory continues to attract a large number of migrants, it only receives a small part of the populations that are in danger throughout the world. Immigrants, emigrants, asylum seekers, refugees, exiles; people who are displaced within their own countries, people under United Nations protection..., each of these terms leads back to complex situations that the law sometimes struggles to identify. The members of the categories that they designate are continuously evolving, whether this is due to crises and conflicts, the United Nations' interests or states' economic, political or diplomatic strategies. Apart from being the key for attaining a better life or to flee from misery, and an emancipating factor, crossing a border may also represent the only way of escaping oppression or death.

The Atlas of migrants in Europe describes the process for the organisation of the Union's borders in its own continent and throughout the world, as well as the way in which European states deploy their migration controls there. The mechanisms established by European states in (and with) third countries, like the detention and exclusion of foreigners in Europe and in Mediterranean countries, are cross-level phenomena, that is, they affect every geographical scale. Hence, cartography makes it possible to illustrate and interpret the securitarian concept applied to the issue of migration in Europe and beyond, while leading the classical portrayals of the border to evolve. Finally, the photographs enable an understanding of how migration borders are organised, of seeing the infrastructures within which foreigners are taken to stay and the transit territories that they travel through. While we are aware that we may be dealing with a geography of what is ephemeral, it was a matter of presenting some snapshots like the surveyor takes the topographical readings of a space.

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