

TELLING THE STORY OF EU BORDER MILITARIZATION



DEVELOPED BY



INTRODUCTION

Addressing and preventing European border violence is a huge but necessary strategic challenge. This guide offers framing messages, guiding principles, and suggested language for people and organisations working on this challenge. It emerges from a process of discussion online and in-person between over a dozen organisations working in the European migrant justice space.

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WHY BORDER MILITARIZATION?

The European Union's external borders are becoming bigger and more dangerous. Europe's border regime has cost people's lives, destabilised countries beyond European borders, and driven widespread abuse for a long time. However, recent years have marked a steep change in both rhetoric and policy, with moves such as an unprecedented increase in the border agency Frontex's budget and remit, and the creation of a new policy area for "Protecting/ Promoting our European Way of Life." The Commission has put expensive, expansive, and extremely violent border control at the heart of European migration, security, and foreign policy - which has damaged rather than increased stability for all.

- Frontex is increasing the size and scope of its militarized border force, expanding intrusive surveillance technology. It has already run joint operations with EU member states in which human rights abuses and preventable deaths were routine.
- The EU is expanding its deals, also called statements, with non-member states to control migration beyond EU borders. This web of deals with both nearby countries, such as Libya and Turkey, and those as far afield as Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, leads directly to widespread abuse, violence, and death at borders; as well as disfiguring European foreign policy.
- Governments in some EU member states are increasing the level of violence at their own borders, and in turn dragging EU policy towards the extremes.

THERE ARE A RANGE OF DRIVERS OF THIS NEW WAVE OF BORDER VIOLENCE.

1. **Increasing displacement:** Firstly, the context of rising inequality, conflicts and war, and climate change has increased the number of people seeking safety through international protection. The EU's response to this has been border militarization.
2. **Political campaigning:** Secondly, in the presence of division, weakening social welfare safety nets, deepening inequality and rising social alienation within Europe, the hardline response of the extreme right to migration and those exercising their right to seek asylum has caused EU leaders to react defensively by hardening border policy.
3. **Perceived future threats:** Thirdly, European leaders are increasingly seeing global challenges like climate change (and the movement it is expected to drive) as a security threat that requires increased militarization and surveillance. (The Ukraine war has intensified this dynamic - however, it has also provided a model for how effective and compassionate EU refugee protection can be when leaders make different choices.)
4. **Profiteering:** Fourthly, a border and surveillance industry including arms, technology, and logistics companies is increasingly lobbying for border militarization at the same time as the EU attempts to foster a homegrown security industry.

THESE MOVES ARE ALREADY HAVING WIDESPREAD CONSEQUENCES, INCLUDING

- Rising numbers of deaths, injuries, and other forms of serious harm caused to people on the move - either as a direct or indirect consequence of EU policy, member state policy, and/or allied third country policy.
- The inhumane treatment of people inside European borders; in detention, in the legal system, and at the hands of increasingly unworkable systems that prevent people from accessing the right to seek protection, or to move for a better life.
- The increased use of intrusive surveillance technology to spy on and monitor migrants - but that catches most of us in its dragnet - which provides a dangerous precedent for infringements on civil liberties and produces the side-effects of increased power and decreased accountability for militarized police and border forces.
- The increased capture of EU priorities by both political and for-profit interests, and the diversion of resources away from the common good and toward border violence.
- A shrinking space for civil society and humanitarian action, such as the criminalisation of search and rescue workers, alongside the growth of fear-based political discourse.
- The diversion of resources and attention away from tackling the underlying causes of displacement.



THE CURRENT CONTEXT

A range of narratives about border militarization exist. They appeal to different audiences but generally serve the same purpose of justifying ongoing and increasing border violence. They can broadly be divided into four categories.

THREAT

Border violence is justified as deterring a threat. People who move are falsely claimed to be a threat in some form - whether economic (to jobs, services, etc.) or cultural (to political stability or safety). This is often an intentional political tactic to distract from domestic failures in areas like employment and public services. Alternatively, where it is more difficult to portray people moving as a threat, the spectre of another villain (e.g. smugglers) is raised to obscure the violent consequences of policy - and the fact that smugglers would not be able to profit from people's dangerous journeys if safe routes were available. Risk analysis or other forms of expertise are sometimes used to provide a veneer of neutrality to such discriminatory threat assessments. Relatedly, opposition to each more extreme measure is branded as opposition to security of any kind.

MORALITY

Border violence is justified by an appeal to the moral necessity of border controls that distinguish between “deserving” and “undeserving” people, or that are “protecting” citizens. A debate about “who has the right to be here” also serves to obscure the immediate issue of border violence.

HUMANE CONTROLS

Border control technologies are presented as fairer and more impartial and even as fulfilling a humanitarian function. New intrusive technology is often wrongly justified as making the system more sanitised, humane, or potentially less discriminatory through removing individual guard bias. Any violence that is acknowledged is presented not as the fault of the border system but of either migrants themselves, smugglers, or of hostile states which have “weaponised” migration. This is, in turn, closely linked to the threat narrative. Issues are framed and research is commissioned in ways that misdirect resources, including humanitarian resources, towards policies where border violence is the most likely outcome.

AVOIDANCE

Considering the significance of the issue, perhaps the most striking feature of the border violence discourse is its relative absence in public debate. The exception to this is within the far right, which advocates for more border control and violence. By contrast, most of the institutions actually involved in border control - the police and armed forces, Frontex, relevant EU bodies - keep a relatively low profile. There are a few significant exceptions, such as Ursula von der Leyen’s inaugural speech, which both expressed sympathy for refugees and defended unprecedented Frontex expansion.

Directly “countering” these narratives can have unintended effects; for example, communications that focus on how migrants are not a threat will only reinforce existing narratives. Where existing narratives serve to occlude the reality of what is happening, our story should expose and clearly state actual reality in terms that people can understand and relate to.

A great deal of movement work is currently happening across Europe to challenge border expansion and militarization: at both national and EU level; across the full range of policy areas; and in areas including direct aid and solidarity, political engagement, communications, strategic litigation, and human rights defence. However we lack a shared story that can help move the dial decisively in favour of migration justice at European level.

FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGING THE STORY

The principal strategic challenges underpinning our approach are:

- The development of a high-level, ambitious but near-term vision for migration justice in the EU. A set of north star goals that our work can consciously build towards will provide clarity and focus.
- Challenging externalisation deals with third countries. These deals exist to manage, via outsourcing, the contradiction between Europe's professed human rights commitments and its border violence. Exposing this contradiction is essential.
- Challenging the relationship between the European Commission and related authorities and industry; exposing the for-profit relationships underpinning border violence.
- Challenging political discourse that justifies border violence both at European level and in major member states.
- Swift communications responses in migration emergencies.
- Centering human dignity as a policy objective.

The theory underpinning our approach is explained in more detail [here](#), and as it relates specifically to migration [here](#). It has guided successful projects on multiple complex issues. For a case study of a similar project dealing with related issues, see the [Race Class Narrative](#).

Briefly, the steps are:

STEP 1:

How we discuss issues defines how the issues are perceived. It is not enough to simply support or oppose something; we need a story that explains the issue, points to those responsible, explains how we work together to win, and describes what winning looks like.

STEP 2:

Framing issues effectively requires mapping and understanding the audiences who are supposed to be engaged, their views and motivations. Audience groups on any issue will be disparate, but they can be divided into a base (existing supporters), a middle (persuadables who share some but not all of our ideas; or oppose some of our ideas on a rational or otherwise moveable basis), and opposition (who will never be convinced).

STEP 3:

Our role is to develop messages that motivate the base to persuade the middle and diminish the influence of the hostile opposition.

This table links our top three strategic focuses to our proposed communications objectives, in order to help select key audiences.

STRATEGIC FOCUS	COMMUNICATIONS OBJECTIVE
<p>European Commission, EU institutions and member states to strictly regulate border surveillance companies and remove opportunities to profit from border violence. These industries, not people on the move, are regarded as a threat by the majority of people in Europe.</p>	<p>Remove the social licence of the border and surveillance industry (BSI) companies involved in border violence; expose consequences of border contracts; ensure transparency and accountability in relationships between the EU Commission, EU institutions, and the border industry.</p>
<p>EU Commission to stop outsourcing migration control and provide more safe pathways and effective resettlement programmes for people who need to move.</p>	<p>Remove the social licence of BSI companies involved in border violence to expose and disrupt relationships between the EU Commission, EU institutions and the border industry; ensure the EU is seen by civil society and public audiences as responsible for the work it outsources.</p>
<p>Shifting public debate in Europe away from migration as threat and to the need for safe pathways as a step towards more free movement. People understand root causes and Europe's involvement in forced displacement.</p>	<p>Demonstrate the root causes of displacement, European involvement in them, and proposed solutions. Contrast border violence to practical and humane alternatives, creating the political space for EU policymakers to legislate safe pathways.</p>

Who are we speaking to?

- **The existing support base:** Campaigners across Europe in civil society and politics who are committed to a more just and humane migration system. This group should be inspired and motivated.
- **The persuadables:** Civil society groups to whom migration is relevant but who are not currently engaged, investors linked to border and surveillance companies, persuadable EU politicians. This group should be moved toward becoming advocates and placing pressure on those in power.
- **The opposition:** Those who directly advocate for or profit from border violence. This group should see the space for their current approach narrowing.



TELLING THE STORY

There are already ample guides for talking about migration and refugee protection more generally. This does not contradict or replace some of the existing literature, but it is a specific guide to talking about **European border militarization**. Additionally, messaging guides will be needed for specific campaigns (e.g. on the Libya deal).

1. Describe what is happening in clear and simple terms

What we are doing...

Often, we can become bogged down in policy and complexity, and/or use language that it is difficult for audiences to relate to. Terms like “pushbacks” for instance, hardly do justice to the scale of violence at European borders that we see. Even terms like “denied basic rights” can end up obscuring people’s understanding of the specific rights being denied.

What we need to do...

We should point as directly as possible to outcomes rather than processes; people who are being killed, injured, deliberately put at risk of injury or death, locked up, or spied on as a result of policy.

2. Talk about the choices being made with our resources, in our names

What we are doing...

Currently, many people see helping migrants as incurring a cost and migration control as not doing so. Sometimes advocates try to tackle this by talking about the cost and ineffectiveness of migration control in an unhelpful way - as if cheaper and more effective methods would be better.

What we need to do...

We need to talk about costs, but in a way that links issues together and makes the conversation about choices. The EU is spending money and resources that could be going towards helping people on harming people instead. In the midst of an energy crisis and soaring living costs - not to mention long-term problems like the climate emergency - states are instead choosing to build ever-more expansive and expensive weapons, walls, and surveillance systems to control, hurt, and kill people seeking safety. These do nothing to tackle the reasons why people move, they only increase their suffering and entrench inequality. These are choices from which no-one benefits, except profiteers.

3. Pivot to the profiteers

What we are doing...

Currently migrants and those who help them are being made the villain of the migration story through threat narratives.

What we need to do... We need to pivot away from the current targets (refugees, migrants, those who help migrants move, activists) and point to those who benefit financially and politically from a border regime which harms people on both sides of it. Sometimes those who profit from border violence also raise the real and genuine harm done by smugglers - harm that would not be possible if smugglers could not profit from the absence of safe routes that compel people to take dangerous journeys.

The root problem is profiteers; the border and surveillance industry, those who are lobbying for contracts and pushing for the use of more expensive and violent technology, and politicians who scapegoat people moving in order to distract from their own domestic failings.

Left unchecked, this combination of destructive politics and profiteering from the public purse will harm and kill more people, become more unaccountable, and demand ever more from all of us. To break the cycle, we have to make profiting from border violence impossible.

4. Point to double standards and the threat to European values

What we are doing...

The EU invests a great deal in outsourcing violence whilst presenting itself as a humanitarian force. Exposing this process undercuts one of the key mechanisms by which border violence occurs.

What we need to do...

We need to be clear that the EU cannot be taken seriously when promoting democracy and human rights around the world whilst it routinely, and lethally, violates those rights. European authorities cannot simply avoid this contradiction, as they currently do, either by pushing non-EU countries into doing the EU's dirty work away from European borders, or accepting the abuses of EU member states. Europe must be consistent and serious about its values and beliefs.

5. Talk about where we can win, and are winning

What we are doing...

Migration is a difficult campaign area to work on, involving a great deal of human suffering in often worsening conditions. Not only despite, but because of all this, mobilising people means celebrating the wins that we have gained and building on them.

What we need to do...

From examples of solidarity in action to successful legal or legislative challenges, communications from the sector should celebrate wins, talk about how and why they happened, and put them into a wider vision for how we move the dial toward justice in migration.

6. Link border violence with its wider consequences

What we are doing...

People seeking safety are those at the most severe risk of immediate harm as a result of European border militarization. But there are also wider consequences, and naming them can break down divisions between migrants and citizens, or the silos between campaigning issues.

What we need to do...

We should be clear that the policing and surveillance dragnet tested first at borders threatens all of our liberties. Border violence profiteers are heavily linked to the fossil fuel industry and the wider mismanagement of climate change consequences. The role of lobbyists and the industry poses serious threats to the health of our democracy. Injustice at borders is playing a role in making life worse for all of us.

7. Propose clear and credible solutions

What we are doing...

Often it is easier to define what we are against than what we are for, and advocates may not agree on big questions about the future of borders. However, what we should be able to agree on is a near-term vision that people can be persuaded by, and can campaign for.

What we need to do...

We can and should talk about ambitious demands - the demilitarization of borders, the granting of new routes to safety, the end of border deals with third countries, strong lines of accountability for human rights at borders, strong regulation of the border and surveillance industry, tackling the root causes of displacement and providing the right kind of support to displaced peoples. All of these things are achievable. If we focus on tackling the causes rather than consequences of displacement, we can also start to solve the situation rather than deepen it.

8. Centre the leadership and experiences of those directly impacted by border militarization

What we are doing...

People affected by the policies we oppose should be at the heart of how we communicate them.

What we need to do...

Communications should be more than finding lived experience voices for an interview, or simply telling more human stories, although these things are also important. Rather, affected people should be involved in designing, developing, reviewing, and, where viable, implementing change.

OUTPUTS: SAMPLE STORY

A simple general message that contrasts border militarization with the public good.

Shared values

We all want to live in safe and decent homes, where our basic needs are met and our rights are respected, so we can live dignified and fulfilling lives.

Name those who profit from the problem

But right now our public money, which should be being spent on improving our lives, is instead being handed by politicians to corporate profiteers to make people's lives more miserable.

Border control and arms companies have received tens of billions from the European Commission for military and surveillance equipment, as part of both direct contracts and through dodgy deals with other countries, that torture and kill people seeking safety every day. [use this sentence to include a specific local example]

Collective action and vision

These are our resources, and these are crimes being committed in our name. Our politicians should answer to us, not profiteers. When we refuse to be divided by background or borders, we can come together and demand a Europe where no one can profit from human misery, and where instead we focus on our common problems - from the cost of living crisis to the climate emergency - ensuring we can all live safe lives on a safe planet.

These are guidelines. They may change and are intended to be versatile. There will be times when our full message will not be appropriate for the audience. Communications may be intended for a wide range of purposes - influencing legislators with different politics, encouraging whistleblowers to come forward, publicising legal action, winning public-facing arguments in particular regions, engaging with journalists, campaigning for corporate boycotts, or drawing immediate attention to emergencies. In fact, there rarely will be occasions when we can simply repeat this story in full. These guidelines are intended both to help organisations think about how to structure specific products - interviews, press release quotes, or reports - and to foster shared thinking on the scale of and necessity of long-term change.