

TELLING THE STORY OF EU BORDER EXTERNALISATION



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WITH



The Lebanese Center
for Human Rights
(CLDH)



**Stop
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CONTEXT

This document complements [“Telling the story of EU border militarisation”](#), a paper produced by a civil society coalition in 2022-3 around framing the militarisation of EU external borders.

In the past decade the EU has heavily expanded its role in “migration deterrence”. Architects of “Fortress Europe” policies have claimed to be motivated by stopping irregular crossings, destroying smuggling networks, and/or neutralising Europe’s contentious migration debate.

They have succeeded in none of these aims. Crossings continue because the circumstances causing people to move persist, while the criminalisation of movement has pushed people onto more dangerous routes, and the far-right has led in polarising Europe on migration more than ever before.

The “Fortress Europe” approach has also eroded human rights standards at a time when they are under attack globally, strengthened corporate influence in EU politics, and fuelled dangerous actors and political instability with consequences - from [surveillance expansion](#) to [fuelling regional instability](#) - that ripple beyond migration policy.

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WHAT IS "EXTERNALISATION"?

EU border externalisation refers to the **outsourcing and export** of policies and practices from the EU to non-EU countries aimed at **controlling and restricting human movement**, increasing the reach of European **border and military architecture**. It allows the EU and its Member States to **avoid accountability** for any harms committed in the process, and evade their protection responsibilities.

Border externalisation is the continuation of a colonial strategy by the EU and European states rooted in extraction, coercion, and transactional diplomacy for political and financial gain.

More detailed reading, and translations of this definition are at the end of this document.

EXAMPLES

Externalisation has been a central element of the “Fortress Europe” approach, with **programmes** and **budgets** ballooning. Externalisation policies may involve:

- Funding and equipment for third country security forces to combat migration, or the deployment of border forces in third countries.
- Facilities for asylum processing, detention, or deportation on the territories of third countries.
- Exchanges of intelligence, or provision of services such as training and consultancy to third countries’ security forces.
- Support for refugee and migrant reception and integration in third countries which is tied to commitments on migration control.
- The use of foreign policy (e.g. trade, visa, diplomatic) and aid as leverage to coerce compliance with or implementation of migration control policies

Extreme examples include the US’ use of the CECOT prison in El Salvador, Australia’s detention of asylum seekers including children on Nauru, or the **EU’s cooperation with a regime of torture and modern slavery in Libya**.



WHAT ARE THE DOMINANT NARRATIVES ON EXTERNALISATION?

The term “externalisation” is not widely understood, although specific policies, such as the UK’s attempted Rwanda deal, have sparked significant public debate.

Public discourse on externalisation cannot be separated from wider discussions on migration and borders; which are characterised by a range of negative trends including:

- The portrayal of migration as a social, economic, security or cultural threat; and/or the product of a loss of control by states and societies over their future.
- The portrayal of migration as serving the ends of political elites.
- The portrayal of border and migration enforcement as protecting migrants and wider society against “smuggling”.
- The argument that harder migration enforcement is necessary to prevent the rise of the far right.
- A more permissive environment for openly racist and extreme positions on migration and race.

IN THIS CONTEXT, EXTERNALISATION POLICIES ARE PRESENTED AS A “SOLUTION” TO THE PERCEIVED MIGRATION “CRISIS” IN TWO KEY WAYS:

The conservative frame; in which it is just and reasonable to expect third countries to comply with European migration control aims. This is generally argued on the basis of externalisation deals being fair transactions, or countries’ responsibility to accept the return of “their” migrants. This frame is more likely to emphasise the “migration crisis” as the overwhelming of European borders.

The liberal frame; in which working with partners on counter-smuggling and border enforcement can be humanitarian and is a form of multilateralism. This frame is more likely to emphasise the “migration crisis” as a humanitarian emergency.

These narratives are not completely discrete from each other and are often combined. Critically; they both obscure:

- The harm; violence; and illegality involved in many externalisation processes.
- The failure and cost of externalisation processes to date.
- The nature of the authorities to whom migration control is being outsourced to.
- The risks outside of migration policy; for example the knock-on effects of normalising international relationships based on authoritarianism and surveillance in return for migration control.
- The situations and aspirations of people migrating, and the root causes of mobility.



COMMUNICATING EXTERNALISATION

WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO COMMUNICATE, TO WHOM, AND HOW?

Communication for social change aims to persuade and/or empower group(s) to move decision maker(s) to enact a change. Because border externalisation is an umbrella term, there is no single agency or decision maker, and therefore no one-size-fits-all communications strategy. Some examples of communications on border externalisation:

- **Corporate campaigning:** mobilising investors and/or consumers to ensure a private firm - for instance, a provider of administrative services in detention - respects its human rights obligations.
- **Political campaigning:** mobilising sufficient voters to make maintaining the current policy an electoral risk for politicians.
- **Movement-building:** building a movement of sufficient size to impede border externalisation through protest.
- **Narrative change:** broadening the ideas, information, and stories that people have access to when they think about migration.

In July 2024, organisations from across Europe and North Africa selected three key groups who may be able to slow the spread of border externalisation. These were:

- **EU policymakers** who want to uphold anti-discrimination, human rights, and transparency frameworks of the EU.
- **Middle-ground voters in large EU economies** such as France, Spain, Italy, and Germany who want their public money to be used transparently, in their interests, and not for harm.
- **A cross-border movement against (neo)colonial power structures** based on justice and accountability, capable of joint work in the EU and countries where externalisation is taking place.

These are just three of many possible approaches which require different approaches to communication, and the emphasis of different arguments. For example; **arguments with reference to moral values are often more persuasive to public audiences than arguments with reference to legal rights.** However, we can and should strike a balance between different approaches and unified overall messages.

THE NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Narrative development involves **creation, testing and refining** and **implementation**. We have had limited opportunities for **testing** our frames, and hope to do so more as these messages are released.

CREATING A NARRATIVE

We use the value/villain/vision process to sketch out our narrative. This involves bringing together voices in the movement to decide:

- **What values do we share with the audiences we are trying to reach?** People who currently are unaware or disagree with our ideas will nonetheless share some values with us that we can appeal to.
- **How do we identify a common villain?** What is the problem, who is causing it, and why are they causing it? To take action, people need to know who and what they are trying to move, and this needs to be explained in a way that is easy to understand.
- **What is our vision?** Values get us heard, and villains describe what the problem is, but we also need to paint a picture of the future as we want to see it. This must be about outcomes rather than processes - “selling the cookie not the recipe” as some have put it. Knowing our policy remedies is important, but imagining the world we want to see at the end of the process is what inspires people to act.

A narrative should **inspire the base**. People who already agree with us, or who are directly affected by the issue, should want to go out and tell our story. It should also **persuade the persuadables**; shifting the opinions of those who can help us build power. And it should **alienate the opposition**; explaining how they are opposed to the interests of the majority.

TELLING OUR STORIES

On border externalisation in Europe, we have developed a range of narratives following the value/villain/vision framework. Further work is needed to test and develop these to see how effective they are compared to each other; and when best to use each one will often depend on context. Below is a **broad range of possible frames** through which we may choose to talk about externalisation, depending on the context.

Chaos versus control

When we plan for the future, it's easier to address challenges.

Currently too many governments are thinking in the short-term about migration; trying to stop people from moving by paying other countries to control movement by force. It doesn't work, causes people to suffer, and because policies and people's routes have to continually change, it means migration becomes more chaotic and unpredictable.

If migration routes are safer, it's possible to better plan for who will arrive where and when, ensuring that both people moving and the communities they move to have the resources and infrastructure they need, and can enjoy the benefits of migration.

Injustice versus fairness

Our systems - including the immigration system - should be underpinned by fairness to all.

But governments, in a bid to appease Trump's extreme allies in Europe, are forcing people into countries that they never came from, have no connection to, and are not safe in. These cruel schemes have never worked and have cost us billions.

We need a system that isn't held hostage by politicians, and that provides access to a fair and just process for people seeking to make a home here.

Authoritarian insecurity versus safety and democracy

Our country should use what power it has to both promote our own interests, and make the world a better place.

Right now, we are doing neither. In a bid to prevent people from moving, governments are instead creating more refugees. Their deals with third countries to prevent people migrating are resulting in violence and abuse, and also making us more dependent on the whims of the authoritarians we are allied to.

Instead, diplomatic power should be used to promote human rights and universal standards in the countries we work with, making the world a safer place for all.

Surveillance versus freedom

We value our privacy and security - and European regulation has protected many of us from the worst of unregulated high-tech surveillance.

But taking advantage of paranoia about migration, tech giants are seeking to undermine our rules by stealth. They are building vast networks across continents and reaching into ever more parts of our lives, in order to track, spy on, and control the movements of people migrating.

This alliance of profiteers, dictators, and extreme politicians is not stopping at migration. All of our civil rights need to be protected, not traded away.

Global justice versus neocolonialism

We deserve a world where historic injustices are reduced - not worsened.

Right now, more powerful countries are paying less powerful countries to attack people seeking safety. This is just one example of contemporary politicians benefiting from historic colonial systems which continue to produce conflict and war, displacement, inequality, and violence at borders.

Our societies face many challenges, from poverty and inequality to environmental dangers and the rising threat of war. We must address that by imagining new and different ways of working together - not repeating the old patterns that got us here.

Corporate power versus transparency

We - not rich profiteers - should benefit from the public services we pay for.

Right now, corporations are exploiting paranoia about migration to extract billions in taxpayers' money for murky contracts aimed at stopping people moving in faraway countries. Our money is going on weapons, walls, and surveillance that harms and kills people seeking safety every day.

No-one benefits from this except those who make profit from it. We need to take back control of our resources and ensure they are spent on helping us all, not hurting people for profit.

Preventing versus celebrating movement

We all want a decent future for ourselves and our families. All of us would move, if we felt we had no other choice, for safety or opportunity.

Politicians and profiteers have made people seeking safety into the enemy in order to cover up the damage they have done to our society - where we suffer from high living costs, poor housing, and shrinking jobs and infrastructure.

Rather than building networks of weapons, walls, and prisons for those seeking a better future, we should focus on building a better future for ourselves. In doing so we can be inspired by people who make journeys to survive and thrive.

Other key messaging points

The key problems and talking points on the issue are summarised in Statewatch's [share kit on externalisation](#).

Externalisation - as compared to others forms of migration control - has been adopted for a range of reasons; including but not limited to:

- Invisibilising and denying responsibility for human rights abuses when they happen outside EU countries.
- Preventing people from ever reaching Europe to avoid responsibility for asylum claims.
- As part of wider relationships of militarisation and surveillance.
- Lobbying for political and/or financial gain by political and corporate special interests.
- Its ability to act as a point of unity between states that disagree on other aspects of migration policy.

Our communication should address these motivations head-on, providing context that exposes the problems with existing dominant narratives and makes space for new narratives.

PROBLEM	SOLUTION
“Externalisation” is not widely-understood as a term	Be specific, but introduce context. In practical examples, it may be more useful to not always refer to externalisation, which is an academic and poorly-understood term. It is generally more clear to talk about outcomes rather than processes; for example “funding violent policing” or “building offshore prison camps where people are mistreated and denied rights.” [where people are...xxx]. However where possible, this should be put into the context of a wider system; e.g. “these camps are part of a decade-long effort by states and corporations to undermine the rule of law...”
Externalisation is complex; who is behind is a difficult question to answer.	Name specific actors, but introduce context. As above, try to point to an immediate and relevant key actor whilst discussing systemic characteristics. “In this deal, X corporation is profiting from abuse. It is one of many contractors and European governments involved in the business of cutting deals with authoritarians to deport people to places they have no connection to.”
Affected people are invisibilised	Centre directly affected people. People directly affected by externalisation should be able to tell their stories and be key to deciding messaging. This is an ethical obligation but also a strategic one; first-person narratives are usually much more persuasive than those coming from policy or political spokespeople.
Externalisation policies are seen as justified, or providing benefits.	Name harms clearly - both to directly affected people and wider society. There are a wide range of harms relating to externalisation, including: • Strengthening an environment characterised by abuse, denial of rights, unlawful deportations, and preventable deaths of people migrating. • Forcing people into dangerous places they have no connection to; or “sending them back to where they didn’t come from.” • Eroding our rights and the rule of law. • Strengthening relationships between European leaders and authoritarians. • Strengthening coercive and extractive relationships between EU countries and weaker economies. • Reducing transparency and increasing corporate influence over politics. • Misdirecting badly needed public resources.* *Care should be taken with costs-based arguments; used alone they could imply that policies which were cheaper but equally violent would be acceptable. However, this risk can be neutralised with context; e.g. “The human and financial costs of this policy are too great to bear. The government must stop funnelling our money to those who profit from the abuse of people seeking safety.”

PROBLEM	SOLUTION
Externalisation is seen as a niche migration policy issue.	Point out how externalisation affects other areas of public policy, and erodes all our rights. Examples may include: Dangerous and violating surveillance technology is often used on people migrating. They say this keeps you safe, but in practice many of these technologies first tested on people with less access to the justice system go on to be used against us all. Communities and civil society in North Africa are fed up with closed-door deals where Europe uses their countries to trap people seeking safety. Europe is losing credibility around the world at a time when it needs it; with huge consequences for our soft power. By whipping up and exploiting paranoia about migration, governments and corporations have drawn both attention and resources away from schools, health, and housing in order to build prisons, weapons, and walls in other countries. By arming and supporting violence in other countries and allying with governments that do not share our values, the government is not preventing forced migration so much as producing it.
Externalisation is seen as a way to stop the far right, or to maintain European unity.	Point to the historical record. Cruel and costly external border policies precede current politics. They have been tried - with the same results every time - for decades. The tough times we're in call for a different approach, based in compassion and hope. For the last decade, mainstream governments have told us that building higher walls and borders is needed to satisfy the public. Instead, the drift to the far-right has only increased. It's time for leaders to lead - rather than pretend to be following public opinion in a bid to retain their own interests. Europe's border deals have given the far-right power; putting Europe's most extreme leaders in charge of negotiating on all our behalf. We stop the far-right by standing up for our values, not conceding to theirs.
Externalisation is seen as unavoidable.	Name clear alternatives. Examples might include: Expanding safe routes would mean less resources spent on cruel and failing enforcement, and more on ensuring both people migrating and the communities they join are well-equipped. Our economic and diplomatic power should be used to build peace, advocate for human rights, address the impacts of climate change, and address economic inequality; which would reduce people's need to move rather than violently preventing them from moving. With high standards of pay and conditions for all, no-one would need to worry about a race to the bottom between migrant and domestic workers. Rather than spending billions trying to violently prevent people moving in other countries, we should focus on building a healthier society at home.

Note on use of visuals

- Where possible try to avoid imagery with no outside context or explanation; such as harmful border infrastructure that the viewer may not necessarily identify as harmful. Try to ensure that your images communicate the story you are trying to convey.
- Similarly, try to avoid imagery of enforcement, weapons, equipment etc. shown without context
- Try to avoid decontextualised images of suffering, and avoid images of faceless groups of people, that may dehumanise people migrating. In general, if using images showing people in adverse conditions, think carefully about whether there is a clear purpose for doing so, and whether the image you are using is likely to have been produced with informed consent. Ensure imagery of people respects their agency, and aims to tell stories about positive futures - not just the difficult present.

READING & TRANSLATIONS

FURTHER READING

- [What is Externalization? 5 Questions](#)
- [Desert Dumps](#)
- [North Africa bears the brunt of Europe's externalisation policies](#)
- [How an EU-funded agency is working to keep migrants from reaching Europe](#)
- [Frontex and the pirate ship](#)
- [Beyond Borders, Beyond Boundaries](#)
- [Hardwiring the externalisation of border control into EU law](#)
- [Why We Must Show Feminist Solidarity with People on the Long Road West](#)
- ['Weapons of mass migration': how states exploit the failure of migration policies](#)
- [In-depth Q&A: How does climate change drive human migration?](#)
- [Cashing in on Crisis: How the World's Largest Investors Fuel and Profit from Climate Change and Border Militarization](#)
- [Financing border wars: The border industry, its financiers and human rights](#)
- [Expanding the Fortress: The policies, the profiteers and the people shaped by EU's border externalisation programme](#)
- [From Development to Deterrence? Migration spending under the EU Neighbourhood Development and International Cooperation Instrument \(NDICI\)](#)

TRANSLATIONS OF EXTERNALISATION DEFINITION

DE

Die Externalisierung der EU-Grenzen bezeichnet das Outsourcing bzw. den Export politischer Maßnahmen und Praktiken aus der EU in Nicht-EU-Staaten, die darauf abzielen, die Bewegungsfreiheit von Menschen zu kontrollieren und einzuschränken und damit den Einflussbereich der europäischen Sicherheitsarchitektur auszuweiten. So können die EU und ihre Mitgliedstaaten Verantwortung für die in diesem Prozess entstehenden Schäden umgehen und sich ihrer Fürsorgepflicht entziehen.

Die Externalisierung von Grenzen ist die Fortsetzung einer kolonialen Strategie der EU und europäischer Staaten, die auf Ausbeutung, Nötigung und transaktionaler Diplomatie zum Zweck politischer und finanzieller Vorteilsnahme beruht.

FR

L'externalisation de l'UE désigne le transfert, vers des États tiers, de politiques visant à restreindre la mobilité des personnes et à étendre le dispositif sécuritaire européen. Elle permet à l'UE et à ses États membres de se soustraire à toute responsabilité quant aux préjudices engendrés et d'éluder leurs obligations en matière de protection.

L'externalisation des frontières s'inscrit dans une stratégie coloniale déployée par l'UE et les États européens, fondée sur l'extraction, la coercition et une diplomatie transactionnelle au service d'intérêts politiques et financiers.

AR

يشير مصطلح الاتحاد الأوروبي "التمديد" إلى تصدير سياسات من أوروبا إلى دول أخرى بهدف تقييد حركة الأفراد، وزيادة نطاق منظومة الأمن الأوروبية. ويتيح هذا المصطلح للاتحاد الأوروبي ودوله الأعضاء التهرب من المساءلة عن أي أضرار قد تحدث في هذه العملية، والتنصل من مسؤولياتهم في مجال الحماية.