

WEBINAR SUMMARY

**Tracked, scraped, destroyed:**

**smartphones of people on the move in the focus of state authorities**

*Organised by Brot für die Welt and Border Violence Monitoring Network, March 12, 2024*

**Speakers:**

Matthias Monroy - [nd](#) & [cilip](#)

Maurice Stierl - [Alarm Phone](#)

Claudia Lombardo Diez - [Border Violence Monitoring Network](#)

Sarah Lincoln - [Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte](#)

**Moderator:**

Andreas Grünewald - [Brot für die Welt](#)

**INTRODUCTION**

On March 12th, Brot für die Welt and the Border Violence Monitoring Network organised a webinar to highlight the role of smartphones in the increasingly militarised EU border and migration regime. In the context of an expansion of surveillance technologies across Europe and beyond, the webinar highlighted both how smartphones have become an essential part of state-led surveillance practices and how people on the move and solidarity activists use them to resist such controls, and to organise and navigate their journeys.

The themes covered by the speakers relate to the broad course of issues that might be encountered on a journey from a country of origin beyond Europe's external borders and eventually on to Germany, exposing the role and associated risks and opportunities related to smartphones at each stage.

The webinar also coincided with the launch of the English language version of the Brot für die Welt web-dossier, "A blessing and a curse: Smartphones and people on the move," [available here](#).

## **1. Smartphones and surveillance along migration routes (Matthias Monroy, Journalist - ND)**

State authorities and international organisations are collecting so-called “big data” in countries of origin, giving an indication about people’s migration intentions and greater migration trends and using it to help counter unwanted migration. Such big data includes, for example, call records, geo-located social media, google searches, and IP addresses.

EUROPOL, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, was traditionally focused on monitoring terrorism-related content, but [since 2016 has dealt specifically with anti-smuggling](#). As part of this new role, it can, for example, take down Facebook groups used by people on the move to access essential information about their journeys.

In transit countries as well as on the Mediterranean, Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, has gradually built up an elaborate surveillance fleet, consisting of multiple layers (satellite, stratospheric, aerial, and ground), starting with satellite and zeppelin systems, to unmanned aircraft (drones), all the way down to ground sensors and cell phone towers. The [EU-funded Foldout Project](#) is one of Frontex’s flagship surveillance projects, which includes situational awareness and alarm software which connects the various layers of the surveillance system. This allows for the location of boats and individuals on the move, sometimes leading to [pushbacks](#) by third actors such as the Libyan Coast Guard.

## **2. Counter-strategies on the Mediterranean: mobile phones as tools to support people in distress (Maurice Stiel, Alarm Phone)**

Alarm Phone serves as a hotline for people on the move who find themselves in distress and in need of assistance. It was founded in 2014, in the wake of the Arab uprisings of 2011 and 2012, when the number of people attempting to travel from northern African countries reached greater numbers, with Libya in particular being a key point of transit. Due to the lack of safe routes and limited state rescue mechanisms, deaths during transit started



increasing and the urgency for a tool to facilitate the rescue of boats in distress became apparent.

Alarm Phone came into being through the efforts of various activist networks and civil society organisations in Europe and North Africa who had been attempting to facilitate rescues themselves and to support people in distress and to document their cases. Today, Alarm Phone has supported the rescue of 8,000 boats in distress. When someone calls, Alarm Phone activists rely on GPS data from the mobile phones making the call to define the exact location of where the rescue call is coming from. This location is then shared with boats in the area including authorities, civil search and rescue fleets, as well as civil aircraft. Together with Alarm Phone, these actors form part of a chain of solidarity, using mobile phones and tracking systems to try to prevent pushbacks and save lives.

By providing a direct line of communication between boats in distress and potential rescuers and documenting and publicising these incidents, Alarm Phone also helps to counter the narrative that state authorities' failure to assist is related to the lack of information on distress incidents, as is often claimed.

### **3. Confiscation and destruction of mobile phones in Europe (Claudia Lombardo Diez, Border Violence Monitoring Network)**

While people on the move are in transit within Europe, their mobile phones continue to be targeted by authorities. The destruction and theft of phones is one of the most common types of violence documented by the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN).

Between 2021 and 2022, 92% of testimonies collected in Croatia specify the destruction or theft of personal belongings, including mobile phones, during a pushback. In the same period, 95% of testimonies collected in Greece testify the same. Phones are destroyed by being smashed on the ground with boots or batons, or are coercively confiscated. BVMN testimonies have also shown that authorities often become [more violent](#) when people refuse to hand over their mobile phones.

Other cases show how mobile phones become tools to [facilitate further rights violations](#). Upon being handed over to authorities, phones are often searched for information on the

person's identity, their route, and sometimes an indication of the whereabouts of other people on the move.

The consequences of the theft or destruction of mobile phones from people on the move can be severe. Phones are tools of communication, and orientation and provide access to information. Without a phone, people on the move may find themselves unable to move and get back to a place of safety, after being pushed back. Often people are left in the middle of the night in remote places, such as forests, sometimes with injuries from violence inflicted during pushbacks. Being unable to communicate with their families or lawyers or to communicate their location, the conditions that people on the move find themselves in can be categorised as those of an enforced disappearance.

Lastly, mobile phones are essential tools to document pushbacks and concurrent violence. BVMN has relied on photos and footage from people on the move documenting injuries and destroyed belongings resulting from their pushback experience to provide evidence to courts, human rights mechanisms and political forums.

#### **4. Scraping of mobile phones of asylum seekers in Germany, (Sarah Lincoln, Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte)**

The GFF, Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte, is a human rights organisation based in Germany working to defend human rights in court. Recently the GFF has highlighted cases in which German federal police have confiscated and searched phones of people arriving in Germany, in search of information on human trafficking networks, sometimes keeping the devices for years on end.

This practice is based on the underlying assumption that anyone arriving at the border would have been in contact with a trafficker – an assumption that hardly corresponds to reality. GFF argues that the mere fact of crossing a border does not provide sufficient evidence that a person has been trafficked and thus cannot justify the confiscation nor the extended withholding of their personal belongings.

Since 2017, mobile phone data has also been extracted by Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) to confirm asylum seekers' identity. In February 2023, [GFF contested this practice in court and won](#). However, [in August 2023 Germany introduced a](#)



[new law](#) allowing the migration office to analyse the cloud storage of anyone who has not been able to present valid documentation, essentially legalising the practice. The office uses data analysis software to analyse the extracted data and verify information on the asylum seekers' identity and country of origin, including country codes of incoming and outgoing calls, location data collected by the phone, and personal messages.

Analysis of this practice has found that in 65% of cases, the findings of the data analysis are useless. Despite the German Supreme Court having found this practice unlawful, and recommending exhaustion of other methods of identity verification before resorting to phone data extraction, the strategic litigation efforts by the GFF have only resulted in a change in legislation, legalising this intrusive practice.

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If you wish to get in touch about the issues covered in this webinar and pursue further collective action, please feel free to send a mail to:

BROT: [andreas.gruenewald@brot-fuer-die-welt.de](mailto:andreas.gruenewald@brot-fuer-die-welt.de)

BVMN: [field@borderviolence.eu](mailto:field@borderviolence.eu)