Surveillance technologies at European Borders

In recent years, technology has acquired a privileged position in debates and policy in the field of migration. We have witnessed European states and institutions put forward "techno-solutionist" arguments that first construct migration as a threat and then promise to solve it through the granting and expenditure of millions of euros on border surveillance and biometric identification technologies, often without safeguards. However, there is a persistent lack of transparency around the implementation of this type of equipment and the incorporation of Artificial Intelligence tools to migration policies. The recently adopted EU AI Act exempts AI used in migration and law enforcement from important regulation, proving a missed opportunity to safeguard people on the move against the harms of intrusive technologies.This secrecy constantly hinders attempts by civil society to thoroughly assess the impact of these developments on the lives of people crossing borders.

Over the past year, the Border Violence Monitoring Network has worked on shedding light on these changes by conducting field and desk research, FOIs and interviews on the border technology deployed in several countries along the so-called Balkan route, investigating their funding and potential impacts. Though the research on this subject continues, the result of this project is a series of six reports that will be published consecutively over the next six weeks. The upcoming reports focus on the Evros region in Greece, Cyprus, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Albania, Serbia and Croatia.

The research has confirmed a policy of secrecy from the institutions and authorities when it comes to decisions surrounding the use of potentially harmful technologies. FOI requests, especially those related to EU projects, were often rejected on the grounds of security or commercial interest, despite them being publicly funded. Moreover, the reports show the prominent role that the EU holds in the funding of these changes, in their efforts to reinforce borders on the continent, and often pushed as part of wider externalization policies. Hence, in Cyprus, Greece, Bulgaria and Croatia local security agencies have obtained technologies through EU funding programmes, such as ISF, BMVI and AMIF. In non-member states, these changes are also better understood in relation to wider externalization strategies,
as shown by the links between EU and Schengen Accession processes and the purchase of these equipment or capacity-building programs, especially in Bulgaria before accession to the EU and Schengen, or in Serbia and North Macedonia.. Thus, tenders are sometimes offered through funds such as the Pre-Accession Instrument, and new border policies are demanded as a prerequisite for the advancement on the paths towards Accession.

Similarly, inter-governmental organizations such as IOM and ICMPD hold a prominent role in the development of these "smart borders" in non-member states, often acting as middle agents between the national security agencies and EU funds, reducing overall transparency and safeguards of the process. Moreover, as it is the case for Serbia, intrusive technologies get sometimes tested as part of certain EU Research and Innovation projects, such as Roborder and IBorderCtrl, but no information is disclosed regarding the dis/continuation of use of the tested technologies after the projects have finished . In Evros, Greece and Cyprus, surveillance technologies have also been sourced through EU-funded research projects such as NESTOR, ANDROMEDA and CERETAB.

Despite the vast amount of funding and increasing number of actors involved in these policies, the implementation of border technologies, especially those based on Artificial Intelligence, seems to be slower than it is often publicized. The verification of this claim is made difficult by the ever-present secrecy. Nevertheless, these reports, and the research behind them help shed light on the sheer amount of human, technical and financial resources that go into the building of "smart borders" (facade or not), facilitating further human rights violations and border violence, in the context of under-funded and purposefully dysfunctional reception and asylum systems.