



Surveillance Technologies at European Borders

Assessment on North
Macedonia



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Border Violence Monitoring Network



**An assessment of
North Macedonia,
2024**

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For a while now, civil society organizations have been denouncing the dangers of the use of new technologies and Artificial Intelligence in the field of migration and border control, including the deployment of intrusive surveillance technology and the collection of biometric data from people on the move. The lack of transparency and regulation surrounding these processes and their impact results in a lack of accountability on the part of the authorities, tech companies, as well as public research institutions, as it poses severe difficulties in the monitoring of likely violations of human rights. The recently adopted EU Artificial Intelligence Act is a missed opportunity to safeguard against the harms of intrusive AI. Instead, it excludes the field of migration and law enforcement from important regulations. This report is one in a series of research publications produced by the members of the Border Violence Monitoring Network, with the objective of expanding the knowledge and evidence of new technologies being used as part of the European migration regime. With a lack of concrete case studies and research from countries along the so-called Balkan Route, we look into the developments in border surveillance in these regions and analyze the (actual and potential) harmful impacts of these technologies on people crossing borders.

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List of abbreviations

PoM	People on the Move
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IPA	Instrument for pre-accession assistance
Frontex	European Border and Coast Guard Agency
EURODAC	European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database
MLSP	Ministry of Labor and Social Policy
TTC	Temporary Transit Centers
RC	Reception Centers
NG	National Guard
MYLA	Macedonian Young Lawyers Association

1. Introduction

North Macedonia has been a strategically important country for regional and European migration politics since 2015. With neighbouring Greece being located at the beginning of the Western Balkan route, North Macedonia has been a key transit country for people migrating towards Western Europe since the beginning of the so-called refugee crisis. As such, the country has become central to the European Union's project of border externalisation. North Macedonia became a candidate for EU membership in 2005, and in 2020 the Council of the European Union gave the green light for accession negotiations.

This report documents how the EU has utilised the instrument for pre-accession assistance (IPA) to carry out its externalisation project by outsourcing migration management to countries outside of the European Union. The report shows the mechanisms of externalisation by detailing how EU enlargement funds are invested into advanced border surveillance technology. An analysis of the funding programs highlights how migration is increasingly becoming intertwined with a crime and security discourse, paving the way for the erosion of the rights of people who migrate and contributing to the criminalisation of migration.

Furthermore, the report highlights the crucial role EU agencies and international organisations play in migration and border control. In North Macedonia, the securitisation of borders with advanced surveillance technologies is funded by the EU, the technology is procured by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the surveillance of the borders is carried out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) in collaboration with national police authorities. The technology documented in this report consists mostly of vehicles, different types of surveillance cameras as well as biometric data collection technology. The latter include fingerprint scan and facial recognition technologies which have been used in connection with pushbacks and other rights violations against People on the Move (PoM) in the Western Balkans. BVMN has documented this practice extensively through testimony collection and through an in-depth visual analysis of a pushback from North Macedonia to Greece¹.

The creation of a biometric database system in the Western Balkans (BALKANDAC) modelled on EURODAC and the interoperability, easing data exchange, between the two raises concerns regarding further rights violations against PoM. EURODAC, which stands for European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database, is an EU-wide information system operational since 2003 that is used for comparing the fingerprints of international protection applicants, individuals apprehended for irregularly crossing the external borders of the EU or irregularly staying on the territory of a member state². Finally, the report discusses how the lack of transparency surrounding the use of advanced surveillance equipment makes it difficult to obtain an empirical impact and risk assessment of how these border technologies affect the rights of PoM.

1 BVMN (2022). "Pushback from North Macedonia: Visual Analysis" Available at: <https://borderviolence.eu/reports/pushback-from-north-macedonia-visual-analysis/>
See also: BVMN (2022). "Balkan Regional Report – February 2022" Available at: <https://borderviolence.eu/reports/balkan-regional-report-february-2022/>

2 <https://www.eulisa.europa.eu/Activities/Large-Scale-It-Systems/Eurodac>

1.1 Context of migration movements

Since 2015 North Macedonia has been a central transit country for PoM who migrate northwards from Greece to central and northern Europe through the Western Balkans. Countries included in the so-called Western Balkan route are Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Croatia³. Typically, the so-called Western Balkan route begins in Turkey, where people initially enter Greece, either via the shared border, crossing the Evros/Meriç River or through the Greek islands. Subsequently, they transit through the Greek mainland and then into North Macedonia. The main crossing point is located between the Greek city of Idomeni and Gevgelija on the North Macedonian side. From there the route continues into Serbia, with people attempting to cross into the EU through the Hungarian or Croatian borders.

An alternative route begins in Turkey with transit through Bulgaria, passing through the Belasta mountain and waterfalls and into North Macedonia, reaching villages such as Strumica and the surrounding area. Due to the mountainous terrain of this route and the absence of any collections or organisations in the region, we have limited information about it.

The number of people transiting through North Macedonia reached its peak between 2015 and 2016 with roughly 800,000 crossings⁴. Although the number never reached the level of 2015–16 again, it continued to increase yearly with the Western Balkans being described by Frontex in 2021 as the second most active migratory route in Europe⁵. In 2021, 20,874 irregular crossings were registered. In 2022, the number was up to 27,391⁶.

However, from January to July of 2023, the number of people transiting through North Macedonia decreased by 48% compared to the same period of 2022. According to numbers from the UNHCR, 6,441 people have transited North Macedonia from January–July of 2023⁷. This decrease must be viewed in the context of EU border externalisation and the illegal practice of pushbacks. This trend reflects the overall situation of the so-called Western Balkans route. In the first four months of 2024, Frontex recorded a significant decrease in numbers, a 69% drop, which is the 'biggest drop among major migratory routes into the EU'⁸.

Despite the recorded decrease in PoM crossing through North Macedonia in the first half of 2023, there has been an increase in the number of asylum applications. In 2022, 168 people filed an application for asylum in North Macedonia⁹. Comparatively, from January–October 2023, 428 people applied for asylum. Most applicants were from Syria, Congo, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sierra Leone.

3 Since 2013, Croatia has joined the Schengen Zone.

4 European Commission. (2020). Republic of North Macedonia - EU for improved border and migration management capabilities in North Macedonia

5 Frontex. (2020). "Migratory Routes - Western Balkan Route". Available at: <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-routes/western-balkan-route/>

6 EU Enlargement report 2023 for North Macedonia: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2023_en

7 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2023) "Western Balkans - Refugees, asylum-seekers and other people in mixed movements" Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/103047>

8 Frontex. (2024) EU external borders: Irregular border crossings down 23% in January-April. <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/eu-external-borders-irregular-border-crossings-down-23-in-january-april-zJDs3F>

9 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2023), Bi-annual fact sheet 2023 - North Macedonia <https://www.unhcr.org/media/bi-annual-fact-sheet-2023-02-north-macedonia>

Out of the 428 asylum applications in 2023¹⁰ :

- 407 applications have been closed
- 21 applications have been rejected
- 10 asylum interviews were conducted
- 3 applicants from Afghanistan, Morocco and Algeria have received “complementary forms of protection”
- 0 people have received refugee status.

In fact, since 2016, no one has been granted refugee status in North Macedonia¹¹. This can partly be explained by North Macedonia’s status as a transit country on the way to the EU, where people rarely intend to stay. Indeed 407 out of 428 asylum applications were closed according to official asylum statistics. The UNHCR explains that, the “otherwise closed” category can mean that someone withdrew their application, died before the application was processed, or that they have left the country before receiving a decision¹². However, the discrepancy between the numbers of those able to access asylum procedures and those returned to Greece coupled with testimonies describing difficulties in accessing such procedures suggests that official data does not accurately represent the number of people seeking asylum.

In 21 out of 70 testimonies (30%) collected by BVMN since 2019, PoM expressed the wish to claim asylum in front of state authorities during pushbacks but were denied access to the asylum system. Respondents explain that they were told they “have no right to claim asylum,”¹³ were “not able to ask for asylum”¹⁴ or were simply ignored.¹⁵

1.2 National and EU policy responses to migratory movements

In early 2015, a state of emergency was declared and military police started patrolling the southern border with Greece¹⁶. In November 2015, construction of a 3-metre fence began along the border and in January 2016 a second, a bigger wall was built a few metres away from the initial border fence in response to the growing number of PoM at the border¹⁷. In March 2016, thousands of people were left blocked on the Greece-North Macedonia border in Idomeni due to the closure of the humanitarian corridor.¹⁸ They decided to attempt to cross the border collectively in what was named the “March of Hope” but were met with

10 For all the numbers, visit the Western Balkans Asylum Dashboard

11 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2023) “Western Balkans - Refugees, asylum-seekers and other people in mixed movements” Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/103047>

12 Global Commission on International Migration. (2005) International Migration Data Collection. Available at: https://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/mainsite/policy_and_research/gcim/tp/TP11.pdf

13 See Glossary of testimonies: Testimony 1.38.

14 See Glossary of testimonies: Testimony 1.19.

15 See Glossary of testimonies: Testimonies 1.16 and 1.32.

16 J. Hall. (2016). “European refugee crisis: Macedonia builds 10ft-high razor-topped fence along Greek border”. International Business Times. Available at: <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/european-refugee-crisis-macedonia-builds-10-foot-high-razor-topped-fence-along-greek-border-1537078>

17 R. Hackwill. (2016, February 7). “More problems at FYROM-Greek border slows refugees’ journey north”. Euronews. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2016/02/07/more-problems-at-fyrom-greek-border-slows-refugees-journey-north>

18 The “humanitarian corridor” refers to the legalised entry route into the EU during 2015-2016, established after Hungary restricted the flow of people in September 2015. For a more detailed explanation see <https://borderviolence.eu/about/the-balkan-route/>

violence from North Macedonian authorities who returned them to Greece.¹⁹

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a state of emergency was again instated in March 2020 when North Macedonia announced the closure of all its borders. The country's president, Stevo Pendarovski, emphasised their "zero tolerance" approach towards migrants crossing the borders:

"Regardless of the coronavirus crisis, we are closely monitoring the situation, but mainly there is no difference in our attitude".²⁰

Due to its location on the Western Balkan route, North Macedonia is a strategically important country on regional as well as European issues of migration and the externalisation of EU borders. In 2020, the Council of the European Union gave the green light for the start of accession negotiations with the EU, 15 years after North Macedonia was awarded candidate status and following 10 recommendations of the European Commission.²¹

In the context of North Macedonia seeking to join the EU, accession is linked to cooperation in the externalisation of EU borders, putting North Macedonia under what has been described as "migration blackmail."²² As demonstrated throughout the report, the EU and its Member States have contributed significantly to the militarisation of North Macedonian borders with the deployment of foreign border officers as well as posting millions of euros worth of border security equipment and technology into the country.

1.3 Bilateral Agreements

Foreign Border Guard from the EU and other Countries to the Republic of North Macedonia

Since 2015, North Macedonia has cooperated closely with Serbia and certain EU member states on migration management. After North Macedonia emphasised at European and regional levels the need for support in dealing with irregular migration and humanitarian assistance to refugees, international cooperation was established between North Macedonia and Austria, Croatia, Serbia and especially the countries associated with the Visegrad Group – Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The goal of the cooperation was to deploy foreign officers to assist the Macedonian border police with patrolling the border with Greece. The cooperation further involved joint training, information exchange and coordination with an initial 166 foreign police officers deployed to patrol the border, which was funded by the EU.²³

Notably, North Macedonia has been supported by Czechia since 2015 through bilateral cooperation.²⁴ This cooperation has been continually expanded. Most recently, in Sep-

19 BVMN (2023): "Decoding Balkandac: Navigating the EU's Biometric Blueprint" Page 62. <https://borderviolence.eu/reports/balkandac/>

20 Global Detention Project. (2020). "Covid-19 Updates". Available at: <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/europe/macedonia>

21 Main reason for the delay has been the dispute over the official state name between Greece and North Macedonia (Former: the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) which was solved with the Prespa-Agreement in 2019.

22 Statewatch. 2021. Blackmail in the Balkans: How the EU is Externalizing its Asylum Policies. Available at: <https://www.statewatch.org/analyses/2021/blackmail-in-the-balkans-how-the-eu-is-externalising-its-asylum-policies/>

23 Think for Europe (2020, September 11). How are the Republic of North Macedonia and Frontex Handling the Refugee Crisis? Available at: <https://www.thinkforeurope.org/research-analysis/how-are-the-republic-of-north-macedonia-and-frontex-handling-the-refugee-crisis>

24 Embassy of the Czech Republic in Skopje. (2017). "The Czech Republic has donated more than 1mil EUR to Macedonia". Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4jnsajjc>

tember 2021, a bilateral meeting between both Ministers of Internal Affairs, Jiri Novarek (Czechia) and Oliver Spasovaski (North Macedonia) took place. It was decided to implement joint “training courses and seminars, aimed at exchanging experiences and improving tactical skills and capacities”.²⁵

Czech police officers have reportedly been responsible for the apprehension of 28,647 PoM in North Macedonia, Hungary, Serbia, and Slovenia from 2017 to 2020.²⁶ Reports from 2020 state the apprehension of 8,306 PoM in the North Macedonian–Greek border by Czech police.²⁷ The Minister of Foreign Affairs in North Macedonia, Oliver Spasovaski, stated in September 2021 that, “the project to intensify control and surveillance of the southern part of our state border currently employs 131 foreign police officers, including 40 Czech police officers”.²⁸

Today, foreign border guards in North Macedonia have been replaced by Frontex after a Status Agreement in April 2023.

The role of Frontex in North Macedonia

Frontex is one of the main actors in migration in North Macedonia. In 2009, Frontex and North Macedonia signed a Working Agreement aiming to “counter illegal/irregular migration” through the means of “border control as well as strengthen[ing] security at the borders between EU Member States and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”.²⁹ This agreement included technical cooperation, joint operations, training, and other developments in the field. For example, in 2016 Frontex was tasked with creating a Master Plan for the implementation of a biometric IT system for the identification and registration of PoM, supported by IPA funding. In 2022, the EU created an action plan with a budget of 10 million EUR for the implementation of the Frontex Master Plan in North Macedonia.³⁰

In 2019, Frontex’s mandate was expanded,³¹ making Frontex operations possible on the territory of non-EU countries or countries not bordering the EU.³² Consequently, Frontex established several Status Agreements between the EU and several Western Balkan states, including North Macedonia in 2022.

25 North Macedonia, Ministry of Internal Affairs. (2021, 13 September). “Press Release: Meeting off the leaderships of our and the Czech Ministry of Internal Affairs: The excellent cooperation continues” (Средба на раководствата на нашето и чешкото МВР: Продолжува одличната соработка). Available at: <https://mvr.gov.mk/vest/17109>

26 Czech Republic. Aliens branch (Policie České republiky). (2020). “Record for 2020” [Bilance roku 2020 z pohledu cizinecké policie], p. 12. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y5dch3wr>

27 Czech Republic. Aliens branch (Policie České republiky). (2020). “Record for 2020” [Bilance roku 2020 z pohledu cizinecké policie], p. 12. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y5dch3wr>

28 North Macedonia, Ministry of Internal Affairs. (2021, 13 September). “Press Release: Meeting off the leaderships of our and the Czech Ministry of Internal Affairs: The excellent cooperation continues” (Средба на раководствата на нашето и чешкото МВР: Продолжува одличната соработка). Available at: <https://mvr.gov.mk/vest/17109>

29 Frontex. (2014). “Working Arrangement establishing operational cooperation between the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (Frontex) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. Available at: <https://prd.frontex.europa.eu/document/north-macedonia-working-arrangement/>

30 European Commission. (2022). EU for Improved Border and Migration Management Annual action plan in favour of North Macedonia for 2022. Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/84d7d37a-349e-483e-af20-2fc8570b0e03_en?filename=C_2022_9166_F1_ANNEX_EN_V3_P1_2342950.PDF

31 Regulation (EU) 2019/1896 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 November 2019 on the European Border and Coast Guard and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1052/2013 and (EU) 2016/1624.

32 Statewatch. (2021, March 11). “Briefing: External action: Frontex operations outside the EU”. Available at: <https://www.statewatch.org/analyses/2021/briefing-external-action-frontex-operations-outside-the-eu/>

In October 2022 the European Union and North Macedonia signed an agreement on operational cooperation in border management with Frontex. Through this agreement, Frontex will “assist North Macedonia in border management, carry out joint operations and deploy personnel both to the border with the EU, as well with borders of neighbouring Western Balkans partners.”³³ The agreement went into force on 1st April 2023 and since then Frontex has been deployed to the country’s southern borders.³⁴

Detention Facilities in North Macedonia

As documented in a 2017 report by the Global Detention Project, North Macedonia expanded its detention capacities in early 2016. This expansion included depriving people of liberty at the ad hoc “transit centre” in Gevgelija called Vinojug Transit Centre, near the southern border with Greece and accommodating people in a non-secure transit centre in Tabanovce, in the north. Both centres were originally built to assist the transit of refugees from 2014-2016 when North Macedonia saw the highest numbers of transits across the country. However, since March 2016, the centres have become semi-open or closed detention centres.³⁵

Tabanovce Temporary Transit Centre

Tabanovce TTC is located 7km away from Kumanovo Town. It operates as a largely open non-secure facility where people are strongly encouraged not to leave but have been seen exiting and entering the facility. A BVMN research visit in 2023 found that people usually stay for a short duration, either prior to departure for Serbia or after being pushed back. Organisations present in the Tabanovce TTC are the ICRC, IOM, UNHCR and Legis.

Vinojug Temporary Transit Centre

Vinojug TTC is a closed detention centre where people are not allowed to leave. Vinojug TTC is situated 1 km from Gevgelija, a small village near the North Macedonian-Greek border, where many people are caught in transit and subsequently brought to Vinojug where their biographical and biometric data is collected before they are pushed back to Greece. In other cases, as reported by the Global Detention Project, some people have been held in the facility for up to a year with no status, no open asylum case and no legal means to challenge their detention.³⁶ The third operational detention facility is officially called the Reception Center for Foreigners in Gazi Baba, on which there is very little available information.³⁷ The normal procedure is for people to be transferred to the Gazi Baba Reception Centre in Skopje once their asylum claim has been registered and their basic information taken during their stay at the Vinojug TTC.

Reception Center for Foreigners in Gazi Baba

The Gazi Baba detention facility is a former kindergarten located in a suburb of Skopje. Officially called the “Reception Center for Foreigners,” the facility is commonly referred to

33 European Commission. 2022. Border Management: EU Signs Agreement with North Macedonia. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_6417

34 European Commission (2023) EU Enlargement Report 2023 for North Macedonia, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2023_en

35 Global Detention Project. (2017) Immigration Detention in Macedonia. Available at: <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/immigration-detention-in-macedonia>

36 Ibid.

37 Global Detention Project. (2017) Reception Centre for Foreigners - Gazi Baba. Available at: <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/europe/macedonia/detention-centres/2032/reception-centre-for-foreigners-gazi-baba>

using the name of the suburb in which it is located. It was opened in 2007, even though the building dates back to the early 1990s. According to sources, the building was used as a temporary shelter for Bosnian refugees in 1993–1994 and was used as a shelter for victims of trafficking in the late 1990s.³⁸ Since it began operating as a detention centre, it has had little national or international monitoring. Up until 2014, there were no publicly available reports about the facility and to date there is still little information available.³⁹ There have been numerous claims of police violence at the facility.⁴⁰

1.4 Actors and practices in border surveillance and control

North Macedonian Authorities responsible for Migration

In North Macedonia, the responsibility to handle migration is divided by three institutions. Firstly, the Department of Border Affairs and Migration under the Ministry of Interior is responsible for dealing with security and border management.⁴¹ The border police are under this body. They are in charge of the day to day policing of the borders, the policing of cross-border crimes as well as affairs related to foreigners and readmission.⁴²

Secondly, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP) has the responsibility of access to social services and of the socio-economic integration of migrants and refugees. A representative of MLSP is present as camp manager at the Temporary Transit Centers (TTC) and the Reception Center (RC). Access to the two TTCs is managed by the Crisis Management Centre. Additionally, under the Serious and Organized Crime Department, there is a specialised unit tasked with human trafficking and smuggling.⁴³

Status Agreement with Frontex

Prior to the status agreement of April 2023, Frontex were present in North Macedonia but their mandate was limited to observe and advise. Additionally, they started the implementation of a biometric registration system modelled on EURODAC. Before the status agreement, mixed border police patrols were taking place at the country's southern border with foreign border police officers as described in the previous section on bilateral agreements. Frontex would be present as observers in these joint operations.⁴⁴ Since April 2023, foreign officers have been replaced by Frontex, who are now actively deployed to the country's southern borders at the Bogorodica border crossing point where they operate in collaboration with the North Macedonian police authorities. At the launch of the operation, Frontex deployed 121 officers and 21 patrol cars.⁴⁵ The stated aim of the agreement is to "provide support with border control and the management

38 Global Detention Project. (2017). "Macedonia Immigration Detention Profile – Global Detention Project". Available at: (https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/europe/macedonia#_ftn49)

39 *ibid.*

40 *ibid.*

41 Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022) Review of the Implementation Status of the Global Compact for Migration in the Republic of North Macedonia. Retrieved from: <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/system/files/docs/North%20Macedonia%20-%20Voluntary%20GCM%20Review.pdf>

42 Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association (n.d.) North Macedonia - The Bureau for Public Security. Available at: <https://www.sepcaregion.eu/members/north-macedonia/>

43 United Nations Network on Migration (2022) <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/system/files/docs/North%20Macedonia%20-%20Voluntary%20GCM%20Review.pdf>

44 European Commission. (2021) North Macedonia 2021 Report. Retrieved from: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-10/North-Macedonia-Report-2021.pdf>

45 Frontex (2023) Today, North Macedonia celebrates the Republic Day! [Status update]. Facebook. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/frontex/posts/today-north-macedonia-celebrates-the-republic-day-frontex-currently-supports-the/590838049894689/>

of irregular migration and cross-border crime".⁴⁶ This includes support in the identification and registration of PoM. Frontex documents also state that Frontex will deploy patrol cars and specialised equipment such as document readers and heartbeat detectors.⁴⁷

At the ceremony for the launch of the operation, the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson referred to the operation as the European Union and North Macedonia standing shoulder-to-shoulder "fighting crime together and managing migration together." Speaking at the same event, North Macedonia's Minister of Interior Affairs Oliver Spasovski ensured that the joint operation for dealing with "irregular migration and cross-border crime" would mean greater security for the citizens of North Macedonia and the European Union.⁴⁸ Their speeches are illustrative of how migration is increasingly intertwined with a crime and security discourse enabling the criminalisation of migration as well as the erosion of the rights of PoM.

On social media, Frontex writes that 595 Frontex officers have been deployed to North Macedonia and that more than 10.000 "illegal migrants" have been apprehended.⁴⁹

According to Frontex, the operation will eventually expand to North Macedonia's borders with Albania and Serbia. Frontex social media show that Frontex officers are already present at Tabanovce at the border with Serbia as well as in Skopje Airport.⁵⁰

A report from November 2023 from the Fundamental Rights Monitor mission to North Macedonia reported that Frontex are present at the Tabanovce border crossing point at the border with Serbia. However, the report also notes that the surveillance activities of Frontex at the southern border would not be extended to the border with Serbia for the time being. As such, the role of Frontex at the Tabanovce border crossing point is limited to the identification of false documents and identity checks of PoM crossing the border. The national authorities of North Macedonia justified not expanding the surveillance operation with the "lack of sufficient human resources within Border Police who could support and work together with Frontex staff deployed in the field."⁵¹

At the time of the 2023 report, Frontex staff and assets were reported to be present at the southern border with Greece where Frontex are actively participating in the apprehension of migrants and the surveillance of the border area. Frontex were also reported to be present at one Temporary Transit Centre where they assist with identification and registration. In the report, the name of the exact TTC is redacted. However, BVMNs research visit to North Macedonia as well as interviews with actors in the country, found that Frontex are present at the TTC in Vinograd. Further information on the operational plans of Frontex in North Macedonia are shrouded in secrecy. Frontex have rejected several Freedom of Information requests asking for information on their operations, citing "security concerns."

46 European Commission (2023) EU Enlargement Report 2023 for North Macedonia, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2023_en

47 Frontex (2023) Factsheet: Joint Operation (JO) North Macedonia (Publication No. FPI-23.0164). Retrieved from https://www.frontex.europa.eu/assets/Key_Documents/JO_North_Macedonia_documents/FPI-23.0164_Factsheet_JO_North_Macedonia.pdf

48 Frontex (2024) Frontex launches joint operation in North Macedonia. Retrieved from <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-launches-joint-operation-in-north-macedonia-U4i3lv>

49 Frontex (2024) Frontex joint operation in North Macedonia [Status update]. LinkedIn. Retrieved from https://www.linkedin.com/posts/frontex_frontex-joint-operation-in-north-macedonia-activity-7187093592639733761-jCyZ

50 Ibid

51 Monitoring Mission to North Macedonia (2023, 10-21 July) Mission Report. Retrieved from: <https://prd.frontex.europa.eu/wp-content/themes/template/templates/cards/1/dialog.php?card-post-id=2722&document-post-id=13289>

Prior to the status agreement, Frontex were present at border crossing points in North Macedonia but were limited to advise and observe. As noted in a 2022 Annual Report from the Fundamental Rights Officer, Frontex staff in North Macedonia did not report any cases of mistreatment of migrants and no Serious Incident Reports or Complaints were filed that year. However, during a field visit, the Fundamental Rights Office noted “insufficient informational materials on the Frontex complaints mechanism in the locations where Frontex was present.”⁵² Mission reports from 2023 to North Macedonia by the Fundamental Rights Monitor, obtained through FOIs, show that a consistent recommendation is to enhance the awareness of the serious incident reporting system and the complaint mechanism for Frontex officers. In light of the widespread practice of illegal pushbacks and other serious rights violations in North Macedonia, the lack of transparency around the Frontex joint operation is gravely concerning.

In a July 2023 SIR during a “search for migrants”, a gunshot was fired although it came from someone not involved in the Frontex operation. Since the incident was a “warning shot and within national legislation” and caused no injuries, Frontex did not take further action. Notably, BVMN was mentioned in the report (with other names redacted) as one of several organisations working in North Macedonia with it explicitly stating that the incident could “negatively affect the Frontex activities and/or the Agency’s reputation”.

During an interview conducted in Vinojug Temporary Transit Centre (TTC) in October 2023, key stakeholders noted changes in practice since Frontex was deployed at the border. They stated that individuals apprehended during joint border patrols between Frontex Standing Corps officers and North Macedonian Border Police were brought to the TTC where they were then taken into a Frontex container for a ‘debriefing interview’. During this interview, North Macedonian officers are not permitted to be present and Frontex uses their own interpreters. As such, nobody knows the exact content of these interviews. At the end of the interviews, staff from the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA) are called upon to explain the asylum procedures. Nevertheless, allegations or pushbacks persist. Stakeholders noted that, after Frontex officers leave the camp at 16:00 every day, North Macedonian officers continue to push people back to Greece. One respondent stated that the presence of Frontex had “changed nothing” with regards to rights violations against People on the Move.

The role of IOM in North Macedonia

Another key actor in the field of migration in North Macedonia is the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) The IOM Mission to North Macedonia was established in 1999 and in 201, North Macedonia became an IOM member state. The main office of IOM is located in the capital, Skopje.

In written answers provided by email, IOM in North Macedonia describes their main area of work as related to “protection services for migrants and victims of trafficking in human beings, focusing primarily on humanitarian assistance, access to healthcare, psychosocial aid, as well as strengthening referral mechanisms to facilitate migrants’ access to protection and assistance, (..)”. The IOM declined an in-person visit during a field trip to North Macedonia.

⁵² Frontex (2022) The Fundamental Rights Officer Annual Report 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-fundamental-rights-officer-publishes-report-for-2022-QtQzyB>

Additionally, their task is to strengthen the capacities of the border police in what they call “humanitarian border management” by training and briefing border police on topics such as international human rights standards and the identification of victims of trafficking. In the written answers, IOM Skopje refer to their general mission as “attempting to implement a so-called “rights based approach to migration.”

However, as our research shows another key function of the IOM in North Macedonia is to procure modern border surveillance equipment for the national authorities with EU funding. The EU has selected IOM to procure the technology based on their technical know-how and expertise.⁵³ In fact, throughout this research, the majority of the border surveillance technology detected in the country has been procured by IOM. As such, IOM – together with Frontex and the European Union – is the leading actor in the securitisation of the borders in North Macedonia. IOM Skopje, in their email, says the purpose of the equipment is to detect cross-border crime. When asked about potential human rights concerns related to the use of the equipment, IOM claims that they implement a Human Rights Due Diligence Policy which includes key risks assessment and mitigation measures. Additionally, some of the equipment is introduced to the national authorities alongside training in human rights protection. Finally, IOM ensures that the equipment complies with human rights standards.

However, as will become evident later, from our collection of testimonies from pushback survivors the procurement of modern surveillance technology in the hands of police authorities who systematically engage in human rights violations raises concerning questions regarding the role and indirect responsibility of the EU and IOM in pushbacks.

1.5 Key human rights issues

Fatal shooting of Fatmata

On April 19 2023, North Macedonian police shot and killed a 23-year-old woman from Sierra Leone named Fatmata at the border between North Macedonia and Greece. She had been living in a refugee camp in Greece before being denied asylum there. Consequently, the couple left Greece and entered North Macedonia. Shortly after crossing the border, a police officer shot Fatmata during a vehicle inspection just outside Gevgelija. Fatmata later died from her wounds in a nearby hospital. Her husband, who was with her during the incident, was detained for 36 hours while trying to document what had happened. He reported that the North Macedonian police offered to take him and the transit group to the Serbian border but he refused and chose to stay in North Macedonia to seek justice for Fatmata.⁵⁴ BVMN along with the Greek organisation Second Tree submitted an expression of concern to Frontex and MEPs regarding the shooting.⁵⁵ Although the police officer who shot Fatmata was indicted, after the case garnered international media, he was acquitted of the charges this year.⁵⁶

53 European Commission (2020) Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II) 2014-2020 Retrieved from: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-03/2020_ad2_eu_for_improved_border_and_migration_management.pdf

54 https://secondtree.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Fatmatas_Facts.pdf

55 BVMN (2022, October). Expression of concern to Frontex and MEPS regarding shooting at the Greece-North Macedonia border. Available at: <https://borderviolence.eu/reports/expression-of-concern-to-frontex-and-meps-regarding-shooting-at-the-greece-north-macedonia-border/>

56 SkopjeDiem. (2024, July 12). Fatmata case: Police officer Markov acquitted. Available at: <https://skopjediem.com/uncategorized/fatmata-case-police-officer-markov-acquitted/>

Overview of key human rights issues

Our research has identified a number of human rights issues. First and foremost, the collection of testimonies from PoM who have been pushed back from North Macedonia to Greece show that pushbacks are a common practice which has involved both national police authorities as well as foreign border guards. The large EU investment into border surveillance technology in the country raises concerns about the potential involvement of this technology in the detection of PoM, who could become victims of pushbacks. Apart from advanced surveillance cameras, radars and sensors, devices for the collection of biometric data, are also an integral part of border surveillance. The EU and Frontex are working on the implementation of a biometric database informally known as BALKANDAC. This system is modelled after EURODAC, the European fingerprint database for migrants and asylum seekers. As demonstrated in the testimonies section, there are incidents in which PoM have been apprehended by the border police and have had their biometric data collected without the presence of a translator and without any knowledge as to how their data will be stored and used. They are then subsequently pushed back to Greece. This raises serious concerns regarding GDPR violations and the right to privacy as well as concerns of how EU funded border technology could potentially be implicated in the practice of illegal pushbacks.

Conditions of detention.

Conditions in detention facilities is another key human rights issue in North Macedonia. In a 2021 annual report, the Ombudsman to North Macedonia addressed complaints regarding the detention of unaccompanied foreign children in Vinojug TTC and Tabanovce TTC. The Ombudsman's visit to the facilities found that the facilities have "inadequate conditions for accommodation of these children, restriction of freedom of movement, non-provision of appropriate psychological services, as well as failure to provide a translator / interpreter." The report goes on to state that unaccompanied minors must be given a secure legal status so they can have access to basic rights according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁵⁷

The report also highlights that one of the biggest human rights issues related to migrants in North Macedonia, is the arbitrariness in their detention. For example, in a visit to Vinojug TTC, the authors of the report spoke with several people who had been detained for 15 or more days and no officials had spoken with them in a language they could understand. The persons had no documents of their detention, they did not know why they were detained and they did not know for how long they would continue to be detained. The use of detention against PoM who are held as witnesses in criminal proceedings against smugglers was already critiqued in a 2018 report from organisations including the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights.⁵⁸ The report from the Ombudsman in 2021 established that most of the people detained in Vinojug TTC, are detained as witnesses in criminal proceedings against smugglers. It was common practice for people detained as witnesses to be held in containers before court proceedings but this practice has stopped.⁵⁹ Finally, based on the collected evidence, the report concludes that the conditions and treatment of people in Vinojug TTC "could be included under the notion of inhuman, degrading and humiliating

57 Republic of North Macedonia Ombudsman. (2021) Annual report on the level of respect, promotion and protection of human rights and freedoms. Available at: <https://ombudsman.mk/CMS/Upload/NarodenPravobranitel/upload/Godisni%20izvestai/GI-2021/GI-2021-Ang.pdf>

58 https://mhc.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/HoTR_SEPTEMBER_2018.pdf

59 Macedonian Young Lawyers Association. (2021). Immigration detention in North Macedonia expressed in number. Available at: <https://myla.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Immigration-detention-in-North-Macedonia-compressed.pdf>

treatment.”⁶⁰

Analysis of testimonies

Testimonies collected of pushbacks from North Macedonia to Greece follow a systematic pattern. Respondents are most often apprehended near the border at Gevgelija or on public transport further north in the country towards Skopje by men in uniforms corresponding to the North Macedonian police, officers of other nationalities such as the Czech police (this was prior to the deployment of Frontex and the shift from bilateral agreements) and suspected Frontex officers. After apprehension, individuals are transported to the Vinojug TTC near Gevgelija, where they are detained for several hours whilst their biometric and personal information is taken. From there, they are transported a short distance to the border and pushed back through a ‘gate’ (coordinates, 41°07’41.9”N 22°31’03.1”E) in the border fence into Greece.



Figure 1: Photo of the identified ‘pushback’ gate taken during a field visit

Of the 70 pushback testimonies from North Macedonia gathered by BVMN, 48 report instances of physical violence by border authorities against PoM. Common forms of documented violence include the use of excessive force, electric discharge weapons (EDWs), forced undressing, threats or excessive force with firearms, inhuman treatment in police vehicles, and in detention facilities. More than half of the testimonies also highlight the collection of biographical and biometric information before pushbacks, raising aforementioned concerns about potential GDPR violations and the handling of such sensitive information.

60 Republic of North Macedonia Ombudsman. (2021) Annual report on the level of respect, promotion and protection of human rights and freedoms. Available at: <https://ombudsman.mk/CMS/Upload/NarodenPravobranitel/upload/Godisni%20izvestai/GI-2021/GI-2021-Ang.pdf>

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Ten testimonies mention Czech officers, identified by their uniform which reportedly read 'POLICIE' and included the Czech flag. The earliest recorded testimony is from January 10th 2020⁶¹ and the most recent is from March 25th 2022.⁶² Testimonies involving Czech officers are typically violent with respondents reporting having been beaten with batons or flashlights, kicked, bare fists, verbally abused and their personal belongings taken or destroyed, corroborated by field interviews. On November 3rd 2022, BVMN called for an investigation⁶³ from the Czech General Inspectorate of Security Forces (GISF) into potential human rights violations by Czech officers in North Macedonia following documentation of pushbacks and violence that could be considered torture, violating EU Charter Article 4 and ECHR Article 3. In 2020, reports documented Czech police apprehending 8,306 PoM in the country.⁶⁴

Role of NGOs/grassroots actors in border monitoring/supporting PoM

There are several NGOs and grassroots organisations that support PoM in North Macedonia. Below is a list of the main active organisations that came up during the research.

Caritas⁶⁵

Established in North Macedonia in 1991, Caritas assists in the TTC and RC, as well as in the broader society in the provision of food/basic necessities, as well as language classes for Roma children looking to enter the Macedonian school system.

JRS⁶⁶

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is present in Reception Centers, conducting the following activities: Social protection. Social activities. Pre-school kindergarten and sports. Free legal aid and counselling.

In detention centres: Psycho-social support. Food supplements. Social activities. Provisions of basic medicine and hygiene kits. Gym room. Free legal aid and legal counselling.

61 <https://borderviolence.eu/testimonies/january-10-2020-0020-bogorodica-north-macedonia/>

62 <https://borderviolence.eu/testimonies/march-25-2022-0000-41-128306-22-517528/>

63 <https://borderviolence.eu/app/uploads/BVMN-statement-czech-officers.pdf>

64 Czechia.. Aliens branch (Policie České republiky). (2020). "Record for 2020" [Bilance roku 2020 z pohledu cizinecké policie], p. 12. Available at: <https://www.policie.cz/clanek/bilance-roku-2020-z-pohledu-cizinecke-policie.aspx>

65 <https://www.caritas.eu/caritas-macedonia/>

66 <https://jrs.net/en/country/macedonia/>

In Transit Center Vinojug and Transit Center Tabanovce: Social protection. Psychosocial support. Social activities. food supplements, support with basic medicines and hygiene kit, free legal aid and legal counselling.

Young Macedonian Lawyers (MYLA)⁶⁷

MYLA is a legal NGO established in 2003. They offer free legal support to asylum seekers in North Macedonia. They focus generally in the fields of asylum and migration, anti-discrimination, statelessness, children's rights, and fighting against human trafficking.

Legis⁶⁸

LEGIS is a humanitarian, non-profit civil society organisation. They offer direct support and monitoring of human rights violations in Lojane. Their work includes Food and NFI assistance, legal assistance and psychosocial support in the TTC.

They have official cooperation to accompany the Ombudsman during his announced and unannounced visits to institutions in which refugees and migrants are being detained and/or accommodated (reception and asylum-seeker centres). The goal is to provide recommendations to the relevant institutions regarding access to rights and torture prevention to refugees and migrants in detention and reception centers. They also do advocacy at a national and EU level.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)⁶⁹

UNHCR has been present in North Macedonia since 1993 and supports authorities in addressing the protection needs of forcibly displaced and stateless people in the country and collaborates with partners to build an integration framework for refugees, and asylum seekers and other forcibly displaced people.

Red Cross⁷⁰

The Red Cross provides medical support to PoM, asylum seekers, displaced populations etc. They are active throughout the territory in multiple locations.

Open- Gate La Strada⁷¹

La Strada advocates and provides services to support victims of trafficking. Their main programs include: shelter, emergency counselling, education, and social assistance.

67 <https://myla.org.mk/en/home-english/>

68 <https://legis.mk/advocacy/>

69 =

70 <https://ckrm.org.mk/en/home/>

71 <https://lastrada.org.mk/contact/?lang=en>

1.6 Overview of developments in border surveillance and control technologies

Since 2015, in the context of the so-called refugee crisis, the EU has increasingly utilised the EU enlargement fund, IPA, towards enhancing the border security capacities of North Macedonia in an attempt to limit migration towards Western Europe. While some of the funds have gone towards humanitarian purposes such as medical equipment, the EU has also spent millions of euros on enhancing the capacities of the North Macedonian border police under the Ministry of Interior, as well as donating millions of euros worth of border security technology.⁷²

These donations have taken the form either as direct grants or donations of equipment to the Ministry of Interior or through indirect management in which Frontex and the IOM have received EU funding to carry out tasks or to procure and purchase equipment and technology. As previously mentioned, the IOM has played a central role in the procurement of EU funded border security technology in North Macedonia. Below is a selection of examples. The list is not exhaustive but it highlights the mechanism of EU border externalisation in the Western Balkans.

In 2016, the EU donated 10 million EUR under a second Special Measure⁷³ which included a program titled “Support to the management of the Southern Border in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”.⁷⁴ The purpose of the program was to enhance the border management capacities of North Macedonia by reinforcing systematic border checks and border surveillance through joint patrols of national and EU Member State border of-

icers. This included a donation of vehicles to the Ministry of Interior valued at 909.264,00 EUR.⁷⁵ The program also tasked the IOM with procuring border security technology for a total value of 3,4 million EUR. The technology consisted of police vehicles and different types of surveillance cameras.^{76 77}

In 2019, under Special Measure IV, the EU donated 3.5 million EUR to a program titled “Support the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to improve its border and migration management capability.” The objective of the program was to enable the border management authorities to

“(..) strengthen their operational capacity to carry out border control and surveillance, in line with EU standards through the provision of logistical support, capacity-building, expertise and supply of surveillance vehicles and specialised equipment.”⁷⁸

72 European Commission. (n.d) North Macedonia - financial assistance under IPA. Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance/north-macedonia-financial-assistance-under-ipa_en

73 European Commission. (2016). Press release: European Commission - Press release, Brussels, 10 March 2016. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_16_304

74 European Commission. (2020). EU Support for Improved Border and Migration Management (Publication No. 2020_AD2). Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-03/2020_ad2_eu_for_improved_border_and_migration_management.pdf

75 European Commission. (2016). Report: EU Projects. Available at: <https://euprojects.mk/maps/report/230>

76 International Organization for Migration. (2017). Special Measure supporting the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to manage its southern border in the context of the European Migration Crisis. Available at: <https://www.iom.int/proc-data/Special%20Measure%20supporting%20the%20former%20Yugoslav%20Republic%20of%20Macedonia%20to%20manage%20its%20southern%20border%20in%20the%20context%20of%20the%20European%20Migration%20Crisis>

77 International Organization for Migration. (2017). Special Measure supporting the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to manage its southern border in the context of the European Migration Crisis. Available at: <https://www.iom.int/proc-data/Special%20Measure%20supporting%20the%20former%20Yugoslav%20Republic%20of%20Macedonia%20to%20manage%20its%20southern%20border%20in%20the%20context%20of%20the%20European%20Migration%20Crisis>

78 European Commission (2020). EU Support for Improved Border and Migration Management (Publication No. 2020_AD2). Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-03/2020_ad2_eu_for_improved_border_and_migration_management.pdf

Under this program, IOM procured different types of vehicle supplies as well as border surveillance cameras.⁷⁹

Under IPA II in 2020, the EU contributed 4 million EUR to a program titled “EU for improved border and migration management capabilities in North Macedonia. The aim of the program was to enhance the border security capacities along the southern border of Greece. In particular, the police stations of Bogorodica, Dojran and Medzitlija. Furthermore, the western part of the southern borders were to be strengthened through the use of “new and advanced technological equipment.”⁸⁰

The IOM was tasked with implementing the program as well as the procurement of “special equipment for border surveillance and control systems and migrants’ identification and registration in line with the EU standards (..).”^{81 82}

These examples demonstrate how the EU enlargement fund, IPA, since 2015 increasingly has been used as a tool for the externalisation of EU borders through investments in border security capacities in North Macedonia.

Border Security Technology through bilateral relations

North Macedonia has also received financial and material support for border control through bilateral relations with different EU Member States. For example, Czechia donated 1.3 million euros for cars and equipment from 2015–2017.

79 IOM (n.d.). Special Measure on supporting the Republic of North Macedonia to improve its border and migration management capabilities. Retrieved from <https://www.iom.int/proc-data/Special%20Measure%20on%20supporting%20the%20Republic%20of%20North%20Macedonia%20to%20improve%20its%20border%20and%20migration%20management%20capabilities>

80 European Commission (2020). EU Support for Improved Border and Migration Management (Publication No. 2020_AD2). Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-03/2020_ad2_eu_for_improved_border_and_migration_management.pdf

81 Ibid.

82 IOM (2021). Supply and delivery of mobile surveillance systems (MSSs) equipped with camera. Retrieved from <https://www.iom.int/supply-and-delivery-mobile-surveillance-systems-msss-equipped-camera>

In 2017, the EU donated 31 off-road vehicles worth 800.000 euros.⁸³

Up until 2019, Germany had provided a total of 1 million euros worth of equipment and vehicles. This consists, among other things, of 22 emergency control and patrol vehicles (estimated at 350,000 euros), thermal imaging cameras (estimated at 100,000 euros), document scanners and clothing.⁸⁴

On January 13th, 2021, Germany provided 660.000 EUR worth of equipment to the border police through the Ministry of Interior. The donation consisted of vehicles worth 370 thousand EUR and technical equipment worth 290.000 EUR. The provision consisted of 22 vehicles, technical equipment for the forced stopping of vehicles, equipment for advanced document verification, thermal cameras, flashlights, and more.⁸⁵

In April 2022, the Liaison Office of the German Federal Police, donated 17 vehicles, short and long-range thermal imaging cameras, day and night binoculars, computers and forced vehicle stop devices to a total value of 675,000 euros.⁸⁶

83 European Policy Institute. (2020) Tacking the Migrant Crisis in the Republic of North Macedonia. Available at: <https://epi.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Tackling-the-Migrant-Crisis.pdf>

84 Deutscher Bundestag. (2021). “Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Ulla Jelpke, Dr. André Hahn, Gökay Akbulut, weiterer Abgeordneter und der Fraktion DIE LINKE” (No. 19/27951). Available at : <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/19/279/1927951.pdf>

85 Kanal 5 (2021) Германска донација на возила и опрема за граничната полиција. Kanal5.mk. Available at: <https://kanal5.mk/germanska-donacija-na-vozila-i-oprema-za-granichnata-policija/a456363>

86 North Macedonia, Ministry of Internal Affairs (МИНИСТЕРСТВО ЗА ВНАТРЕШНИ РАБОТИ). (2022, April 12). “Donation of vehicles and equipment from the German Embassy to the Department of Border Affairs and Migration (Донација од возила и опрема од германската амбасада за Одделот за гранични работи и миграција)”. Available at : <https://mvr.gov.mk/vest/20016>

2. Methodology

The methodology employed in this research project aimed to comprehensively investigate the use of border surveillance technology and the impacts on PoM, focusing on the border between North Macedonia and Greece. In this section, we outline the research design, data collection and analysis methods used to achieve our research objectives.

2.1 Research & Data Gathering Methods

The research design adopted a mixed-methods approach, using a combination of methods to investigate the research topic. These methods included initial desk research, document and policy analysis, including Freedom of Information requests; analysing interviews, ethnographic field visits to key border regions and sites in North Macedonia and observations and analysis of testimonies involving North Macedonia on the BVMN database. The research has also used OSINT tools to identify specific types and models of technologies. For example, social media posts, photos and videos on YouTube of the Ministry of Interior as well as Frontex documenting donations of technology and equipment have been analysed.

In the early stages, desk research helped provide a solid understanding of the specific context and informed decisions on which sites to visit and which stakeholders to interview. The desk research provided the context and knowledge needed to make informed decisions about further research and the selection of interviewees. Through the desk-research, we gained insights into recent developments of border technology at the borders, important technologies used, and the main actors involved. This approach ensured that fieldwork that followed was more focused and that interviews were more specific.

In order to investigate Frontex's activities related to the monitoring and management of migration at the North Macedonian-Greek border, Freedom of Information (FOI) requests were submitted to Frontex using their online PAD (public access to documents) application portal. The following documents were requested:

- a) All Fundamental Rights Officer's (FRO) mission reports on visits conducted in Greek-North Macedonian Border
- b) North Macedonia Serious Incident Reports (SIRs), Specific Activity Plan, Situational Report, Annual report 2020-present

We successfully received the FRO mission reports, with redacted information. We received the North Macedonia SIRs but only for the years 2023 and 2024, and again with significant redactions. The redacted reports and partially disclosed data highlight the ongoing issues of transparency and accountability in the handling of migration by Frontex.

Field visits in North Macedonia

Field visits were conducted across various locations between July 2023 and October 2023, including sites near the North Macedonian-Greek border in Gevgelija, Vinograd Temporary Transit Centre, the Asylum Centre in Skopje, and locations in the north of the country, including Kumanovo, Tabanovce Temporary Transit Centre, and Lojane Village.

Vinojug TTC was chosen as a key field site due to its frequent mention in testimonies. Another significant factor in choosing this site is that since April 2023, Frontex are stationed and have their headquarters at Vinojug TTC. The first visit here took place on July 14th 2023 with the presence of international and civil society organisations. A subsequent visit took place on October 9th 2023 together with civil society organisations. To gain access to the TTC, day passes were obtained from the Crisis Management Centre office located here Општина Гевгелија / Gevgelija Municipality.

On 19th July 2023, a meeting took place with a civil society organisation. A subsequent meeting happened on the 28th August 2023. Additionally, another visit took place, this time at the Asylum Centre in Skopje on the 31st of October 2023 to learn more about the asylum situation in the country and how the centre operates.

On October 12th 2023, a field trip to the north of the country took place focussing on three locations; Kumanovo town, Tabanovce TTC and Lojane village. Lojane village is a key transit route and two testimonies of pushbacks from Serbia to North Macedonia mention Lojane village.⁸⁷

Field visits in Greece

The BVMN Thessaloniki field team conducted two field trips close to the North Macedonian border, one in November 2022 and the other in April 2024. During the first trip in November, the team visited Polykastro and Idomeni, areas oft cited in testimonies by PoM as places of apprehension, in Greece. However, they did not encounter any PoM until they went to a known site close to the border where PoM stay before they attempt to cross into North Macedonia or return after being pushed back to Greece. There were several transit groups, approximately 15 men from Morocco, Algeria, Syria, Kurdistan and sub-Saharan Africa. The men were charging their phones and some shared that they avoided Thessaloniki due to risks of arrest from authorities. One man said he was apprehended in Thessaloniki the year before and violently pushed back to Turkey, where his belongings were stolen and he was forced to undress before being pushed back over the Evros/Meriç river.

In April 2024, the team revisited the same key locations near the North Macedonian border – Polykastro and Idomeni. Similar to the previous trip, they didn't encounter any people in transit in the villages but at the known site near the border there were about 15–20 people. Some were in sleeping bags outside, while others rested on the grass or were charging their phones near the entrance. A man working at the site, perhaps the owner, was inquisitive and closely observed the team, frequently approaching their table, which made it difficult to communicate with the transit groups. He initially asked if they were police but after being reassured that they were not, he mentioned that fewer people were transiting due to problems in Turkey and added that the police occasionally come and check peoples' papers but there are no issues if they have documentation. Among the groups were some men from Syria who said that they had no difficulties crossing, likely referring to the Turkey–Greece border. There was also a French-speaking man, potentially from West Africa and a group of five or six men from Turkey who were reluctant to speak.

87 <https://borderviolence.eu/testimonies/april-19-2020-0000-lojane/>
<https://borderviolence.eu/testimonies/april-3-2020-2300-border-of-srb-mnk-close-to-lojane/>

Interviews with stakeholders

Data was collected through eleven semi-structured interviews with representatives from two local NGOs and the director of the Asylum Centre in Skopje, who have a solid understanding of the historical context of borders and migration-related matters in North Macedonia. Respondents were selected based on desk research and previous collaborations. Questions were open-ended and focused on migratory patterns, migration and border management and access to the asylum system. A final interview was conducted with an academic specialising in border studies and who has researched the role IOM plays in the datafication of borders and procurement of border technology. BVMN also reached out to IOM Skopje for an interview. While the request was rejected, IOM Skopje did provide some answers by email, as noted above. We also posed questions to Frontex in North Macedonia but received no response.

Testimony collection

Since 2019, BVMN has been documenting pushbacks in North Macedonia, resulting in 70 individual testimonies detailing the ill-treatment, abuse and torture of more than 789 people. Three of these testimonies are chain pushbacks from Serbia to North Macedonia and then to Greece. These recorded pushback testimonies likely represent only a fraction of the actual number of pushbacks occurring. The testimonies in the database were downloaded and analysed to identify specific patterns or trends. We searched through the testimonies using terms associated with technology, such as 'drone' or 'infrared camera'. An anonymous member of the network adopted their pushback testimony methodology to include questions related to border surveillance and technology.

2.2 Limitation of the study

One significant challenge encountered during the field visits was the absence of an interpreter, particularly in certain field locations such as border regions and villages, where Macedonian was the primary language. Fortunately, a representative from a local NGO is bilingual and assisted with interpretation. Arranging an interpreter and an adequate budget to join on field trips is recommended because it allows for communication with local residents and potentially key stakeholders who cannot speak English but can offer vital information. Having someone assist with research who could speak Macedonian could also have been beneficial in obtaining relevant information which is not available in English.

A further limitation encountered was the small sample size of interviews conducted. Despite sending requests and emails to a range of stakeholders, the response rate was lower than anticipated and several organisations ignored our requests. Considering that IOM plays a significant part in equipping the country with border technology and surveillance and plays a crucial role in migration management and border securitisation, it is particularly regrettable that an interview with them was denied.

Interviews with stakeholders are crucial but it is just as important to centre the voices of PoM, who are impacted by border technologies. Although we have 70 testimonies in the database, the number of people experiencing pushbacks is higher and unfortunately, it is difficult to document them. Of the 68 testimonies, it is important to note that men-

tions of surveillance technology at the border in these testimonies were not prevalent. However, more than half reported having their biometric information taken. Increasing testimony collection is difficult but visiting key locations near the border, such as Idomeni and Polykastro, could be beneficial. Testimonies taken at one of our member organisations' sites are not as frequent and visiting these border region locations might increase the likelihood of encountering more people, who may be willing to give a testimony. However a translator is needed as there were communication issues due to a language barrier but some were apprehensive to speak.

The North Macedonian–Serbian border was less of a focus during our background research and field visits compared to the country's southern border with Greece. With fewer testimonies in the database related to pushbacks from Serbia to North Macedonia and no field visits conducted at that border, there's a gap in knowledge of border infrastructure in that area. To gain a more comprehensive view of the situation at the country's borders, it would be crucial to visit the North Macedonia–Serbia border and try to establish contact with individuals and organisations active in the area. This is particularly relevant because in February 2024, Legis obtained visual footage showing a group of men, partially naked after being stripped of their clothing in harsh temperatures, being pushed back from Serbia into North Macedonia. According to Legis, this was the second of two violent pushbacks within a 24-hour period, whereby over 50 Syrian men were forced to strip naked or down to their underwear by Serbian authorities before being pushed back into North Macedonia.⁸⁸

88 The Guardian. (2024, February 22). Videos show migrants stripped of clothing in freezing temperatures at Serbian border Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/feb/22/videos-show-migrants-stripped-of-clothing-in-freezing-temperatures-at-serbian-border>

3. Border technologies in North Macedonia

This section outlines the key findings on border surveillance technologies in North Macedonia since 2015. The EU and its Member States have equipped the North Macedonian border police with millions of euros worth of border security technology. The Commission has repeatedly stated in their action plans on North Macedonia that irregular migration is to be managed with “new and advanced technological equipment.”

However, the research has found that the border surveillance technology deployed in North Macedonia is mostly limited to different types of surveillance cameras, monoculars and binoculars. For example, the research has not identified the use of drones or any AI-powered surveillance technology. The most advanced forms of surveillance technology detected in North Macedonia are the Local Deployable Coordination and Communication Centre (LDCCC) and the so-called Mobile Surveillance Systems (MSS). According to a national programming document for the EU’s 2021–2027 border management funding, Greek authorities are set to receive €47 million to implement an Automated Border Surveillance System (ABSS) along Greece’s borders with North Macedonia and Albania, modelled after the ABSS at the Evros border with Türkiye.⁸⁹

The first funding for LDCCC and MSS came from the EU in 2017 under a 4 million euro project which also consisted of different types of vehicles for border management. The LDCCC and the MSSs were contracted by a Slovenian company named Dat-Con.

What is an LDCCC and MSS?

LDCCC stands for local deployable coordination and communication centre. The centre is designed for border police operations to monitor the area between the border line and a few kilometres within the territory.

According to the IOM tender which outlines the technical specifications of the LDCCC, the centre should be positioned not directly at the border but a few kilometres inside the territory. The centre should be positioned in a “suitable location with good visibility (line of sight) to the area of interest.”⁹⁰

The LDCCC is equipped with a mast with radars and cameras. In good weather conditions, the radars can detect people within 10 kilometres and vehicles within 18 kilometres. The camera system consists of daylight and infrared sensors, as well as laser rangefinder. The camera can also detect people within 10 kilometres and vehicles within 18 kilometres in good weather conditions.

The LDCCC can be operated 24/7 for several weeks of continuous operation. To run, it requires two operators: one who operates the sensors and compiles a “common operational picture” as well as a second operator who communicates with the deployed mobile surveillance systems and superiors within the border police.

⁸⁹ Algorithm Watch (19 December 2023). Greece is planning a €40m automated surveillance system at borders with North Macedonia and Albania. Available at: <https://algorithmwatch.org/en/greece-is-planning-a-e40m-automated-surveillance-system-at-borders-with-north-macedonia-and-albania/>

⁹⁰ IOM (N.D.) “Item 1 - Technical Specifications_LDCCC.” Retrieved from: https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/Technical%20Specifications_LDCCC_Item%201.pdf

The LDCCC works together with the mobile surveillance system (MSS). An MSS is a van with cameras and radars mounted on top. The MSS is equipped with a thermovision camera (infrared), a daylight camera, a radar and a laser rangefinder. To be operated, the MSS requires two people who are deployed for 12-hours.⁹¹

The thermovision camera (infrared) can detect a potential target within a 15 kilometre range. Within 6 kilometres, it should be able to recognise the target and within 3.5 kilometres it should be able to identify with 50% accuracy whether the target is a human being.

The laser rangefinder can determine the distance of an object up to 10 kilometres away. Finally, the radar can detect a walking person within at least 7 kilometres.

The MSSs are to be located between the borderline and the LDCCC. The LDCCC can then receive surveillance inputs from MSS. Communication between the LDCCC and the MSS as well as other operational border police units take place via the Tetra voice communication system (GFE) – a form of radio communication designed for government agencies.⁹²

In short, the LDCCC and MSS is used to detect people and vehicles before they cross the borderline using cameras and radars. When movement is detected, the operators of the LDCCC will send border police units to the potential crossing point or to a “suitable intercept point in order to stop the person (..)”⁹³

According to IOM documents from the 2017 call for tender, the system was to be deployed near the border crossing at Bogorodica (on the southern border with Greece) where it was operated by the North Macedonian border police.

Since then, North Macedonia has acquired several other MSSs. In 2021, IOM with EU funding procured MSSs from the Bulgarian company Opticoelectron Group Jsc for a value of 969,204 EUR.⁹⁴ In 2022, another Mobile Surveillance System (MSS) was contracted to the Slovenian company Dat-Con at a value of 349.902,00 EUR.⁹⁵ Finally, in 2022, a Bulgarian military outlet reported that North Macedonia purchased three “mobile observation and surveillance systems from the MUSON series” – the MUSON 20FM is developed by Opticoelectron. The technical specifications of the MUSON 20FM include high-resolution day and thermal and infrared cameras, providing clear images. Optical devices of the system have a range of 20+ km, a telescopic tower with a 360-degree view and are equipped to operate in hard-to-reach areas and off-road terrain.⁹⁶

91 IOM (N.D.) “Item 2 - Technical Specifications_Mobile Surveillance System with EO-IR Cameras and Radar.” Retrieved from: https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/Technical%20Specifications_Mobile%20Surveillance%20System%20with%20EO-IR%20cameras%20and%20Radar_Item%202.pdf

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 International Organisation for Migration. (2021) Supply and Delivery of Mobile Surveillance Systems (MSSs) equipped with camera. Available: <https://www.iom.int/supply-and-delivery-mobile-surveillance-systems-msss-equipped-camera>

95 International Organisation for Migration. (2022) Supply and Delivery of Mobile Surveillance System equipped with Camera (MSS) as per the requested specification. Available: <https://www.iom.int/supply-and-delivery-mobile-surveillance-system-equipped-camera-mss-requested-specification>

96 Bulgarianmilitary.com (2022)N Macedonia gets MUSON surveillance system: 20+km range, 4x4, 360° turn. Retrieved from: <https://bulgarianmilitary.com/2022/05/03/n-macedonia-gets-muson-surveillance-system-20km-range-4x4-360-turn/>

Thermal Imaging, Night/Day vision technology

Other common forms of surveillance technology in North Macedonia are different types of binoculars and monoculars. These are a mix of either short and long range and can either be handheld or mounted on gear, for example on helmets.

In 2022, Germany donated technical equipment worth 290,000 EUR. This included AGM Fuzion LRF TM35-640 Thermal & Digital Day/Night Vision monoculars from the US electro optics company, AGM Global Vision.⁹⁷ This handheld monocular has day and night vision as well as thermal sensors. According to the manufacturer, the thermal sensor can detect human-sized heat signatures up to 1750 metres. Furthermore, the monocular is equipped with a 600m laser rangefinder. Laser rangefinders are used to determine the distance of an object. In a migratory context, the technology can be used to detect and determine the location of people using thermal sensors and laser rangefinders.⁹⁸

Frontex, at the launch of their joint operation in North Macedonia in 2023, has also provided surveillance equipment in the context of the joint operation.⁹⁹ This included thermal imaging binoculars from the Bulgarian company Optix which produces equipment for military and law enforcement agencies.¹⁰⁰ The Optix Bidentifier 75/100 E LRF is a thermal imaging bi-ocular with a laser rangefinder which can be either handheld or mounted on a tripod. The device can detect humans within a 2700 metre range. Within 900 metres, it can recognise the human – meaning, you can see the person clearly. For vehicles, the detection range is 6700 metres and the recognition range is 2200 metres.¹⁰¹

Frontex also provided night vision goggles from the Bulgarian company Opticoelectron.¹⁰² The specific model is called NIRECON Night Vision Goggles and is designed to be mounted on head gear. The goggles are equipped with infrared vision.¹⁰³

Testimonies mentioning technology

In a testimony of a pushback on September 8th 2019, the respondent believed that he and his transit group were detected by officers in North Macedonia through the use of night vision cameras: *“They use the cameras, so they can follow you when you walk. They follow you.”*¹⁰⁴

Another respondent reported that he and his transit group were apprehended shortly after crossing the border into North Macedonia near the railway tracks and said: *“Maybe they saw us before we were crossing the border. As soon as we crossed the border, they came directly by car and arrested us”*.¹⁰⁵

97 The specific model has been identified through an analysis of the photos available here: Ministry of Interior of the Republic of North Macedonia. (2022). Handing over of German donations in vehicles and equipment. Retrieved from: <https://mvr.gov.mk/galerija/412>

98 AGM Global Vision. (n.d.). AGM Fuzion LRF TM35-640. Retrieved from <https://www.agmglobalvision.com/agm-fuzion-lrf-tm35-640>

99 Frontex. (2023, March 15) Frontex launches joint operation in North Macedonia (video). Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvW-2pnERhU>

100 The specific model has been identified through an analysis of Frontex’ video from the ceremony in which the different types of technologies are displayed on a table. By pausing the video and saving a screenshot in high resolution, it has been possible to read the label and identify the technology. Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvW-2pnERhU>

101 Optixco. (n.d.). Thermal Imaging BI-Ocular BIdentifier LRF. Retrieved from <https://www.optixco.com/en/military-optics-164/thermal-vision-devices-173/thermal-imaging-bi-ocular-bidentifier-lrf-125>

102 The specific model has been identified through an analysis of Frontex’ video from the ceremony in which the different types of technologies are displayed on a table. By pausing the video and saving a screenshot in high resolution, it has been possible to read the label and identify the technology. Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvW-2pnERhU>

103 Opticoelectron. (n.d.) Night Vision Goggles Nirecon. Retrieved from: <https://www.opticoel.com/product/night-vision-goggles-nirecon/>

104 <https://borderviolence.eu/testimonies/september-8-2019-0000-10km-into-north-macedonian-interior-north-of-gevgelija/>

105 <https://borderviolence.eu/testimonies/september-4-2020-1300-gevgelija-north-macedonia/>

The location where the group was apprehended is where a Mobile Surveillance System is deployed, intended to detect people before they cross the border. Similarly, in a testimony taken of a pushback on June 27th 2022, the respondent believed that he and his transit group were detected by infrared cameras because they were intercepted by four uniformed men after they crossed the gate at 2AM.¹⁰⁶

In the most recent pushback testimony BVMN has recorded from North Macedonia to Greece in late December 2023, the respondent described how he was coerced during his apprehension by Macedonian-speaking men in dark green uniforms into opening his phone to show the route he had taken and to provide information about his source. He further reported noticing cameras between what he described as two army camps (41°07'44"N 22°30'19"E) and shared a map with BVMN, marking another camera he said he saw on the road from the border towards Gevgelija (41°08'17"N 22°30'51"E).

3.1 Collection of biometric data and the role of databases

A recent report published by BVMN examined how countries in the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia, are using new technology to collect biometric and biographical data from PoM who are transiting through the region.¹⁰⁷ BALKANDAC, a biometric database, is being designed to identify people crossing borders in the Western Balkans, modelled off EURODAC. This information has the potential to be shared with EU countries as part of their efforts to manage migration. While data-sharing with third countries is possible in theory, we have no evidence to confirm that this has happened or is currently happening. Such data-sharing could potentially be in violation of the LED. Consequently, EU countries may potentially evade responsibility for asylum applications by outsourcing to third countries, such as those along the Western Balkans route. The report further highlights concerns that the increasing overlap between migration and criminal databases can lead to the criminalisation of PoM, making it even harder to access asylum and international protection.

Testimonies in the BVMN database suggest that North Macedonian authorities systematically collect biographical and biometric data from PoM. Out of 70 testimonies, 38 people reported that they had their fingerprints taken. In Vinujog TTC, respondents are typically fingerprinted, their personal information recorded and photographs taken of them. This frequently happens in the absence of a translator so individuals are not given explanations as to what is happening and are unable to give their informed consent. Furthermore, they are not informed about the handling and storage of their data, raising serious concerns about GDPR violations. Individuals apprehended are then taken to the border and pushed back into Greece through a gate in the fence, as mentioned previously.

In 2020, North Macedonia adopted the Law on Personal Data Protection 2020. Although not an EU Member State, the law is almost entirely aligned with the EU General Data Protection Regulation. The Personal Data Protection Agency and the European Commission are currently working on the further alignment of the Law on Personal Data Protection from 2020 with the EU's GDPR.¹⁰⁸

106 <https://borderviolence.eu/testimonies/june-27-2022-0000-gevgelija/>

107 Border Violence Monitoring Network. (2023) Decoding Balkandac: Navigating the EU's Biometric Blueprint. Available at: <https://borderviolence.eu/reports/balkandac/>

108 One Trust Data Guidance. (2024). Republic of North Macedonia - Data Protection Overview. Available at: <https://www.dataguidance.com/notes/republic-north-macedonia-data-protection-overview>

BVMN carried out a visual investigation into two pushbacks experienced by a respondent on the 23rd of April 2022 from North Macedonia to Greece.¹⁰⁹ The individual had been apprehended and taken to Vinojug TTC, where his biometric and biographical data were taken without the presence of a translator. He managed to record a video in the TTC and in the footage, an officer suspected to be of Czech nationality can be seen with an imaging device used to take photos of apprehended individuals, further uncovering how foreign officers are present and actively participate in the pushbacks. The investigation was affirmed by the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearance as a successful example of using techniques to 'collect evidence of enforced disappearance of migrants and to establish their fate and whereabouts'.¹¹⁰



109 Border Violence Monitoring Network. (2022). Pushback from North Macedonia: Visual Analysis. Available at: <https://borderviolence.eu/reports/pushback-from-north-macedonia-visual-analysis/>

110 OHCHR. (2023). New Technologies and Enforced Disappearances - Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. A/HRC/54/22/Add.5. Available at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5422add5-new-technologies-and-enforced-disappearances-report-working>

4. Impacts and Risks of Border Technologies

The following two sections present the impact and risk analysis of surveillance technologies on people who migrate through North Macedonia.

4.1 Impact of technologies on People-on-the-Move

The report has highlighted how the use of advanced surveillance technologies is a key element in the strategy of EU border externalisation. The Commission has stated how EU accession is linked with the enhancement of borders with modern and advanced technologies. From a human rights perspective, it is crucial to understand what impact different types of technologies have on people who migrate. For example, if the use of surveillance technologies is coupled with the illegal practice of pushbacks, how will this affect the right to claim asylum? However serious and important this question might be, there are several obstacles to assessing the impact of border technologies in North Macedonia.

Firstly, the research has identified a serious lack of transparency regarding the specific technologies and their applications in a migration context. In order to identify the specific types and models of technologies, it has been necessary to go through 100s of pages of public EU documents as well as tendering programs to follow money trails and compare the specific donations of technologies with open-source materials such as social media posts and YouTube videos in which the donated technologies appear. This process is complicated and time consuming and involves various uncertainties. Ultimately, it obstructs the process of obtaining an empirical assessment of the impact of the specific technologies. There has to be more transparency from the EU, organisations that procure technologies as well as the national authorities around the specific types of technologies and their actual use and functions in migration management to ensure that these technologies are not used for rights violations against people who migrate.

Secondly, surveillance technologies can be characterised as sort of hidden agents that act in the background. As such, it is difficult to obtain information about the role and impact of surveillance technologies from people who have transited North Macedonia as they are often unaware of their existence. Similarly, these technologies were difficult to locate and evaluate during field research. Additionally, it is important to recognise that during pushbacks, which are violent and distressing situations, people may not pay particular attention to the technology in their surroundings.

4.2 What are the risks of technology for People on the Move

While it has proven difficult with certainty to identify the actual impact of modern border technologies, it is possible to identify several potential risks. Firstly, the use of border surveillance technology can exacerbate border violence. As long as there is a lack of pathways to access asylum and people are forced to take long and dangerous routes, EU funded surveillance technology in the hands of police forces who commit pushbacks and other rights violations can increase the chance of PoM experiencing border violence and

it can decrease their access to asylum and protection. This technology renders PoM more visible, thereby increasing the likelihood of apprehension, detention and possible push-back. This raises questions regarding the complicity of the EU in rights violations against people who transit North Macedonia. Greater transparency around how this technology is used could help provide accountability for survivors of border violence.

Secondly, the collection of biometric data from people who are apprehended at the border without proper translations and without transparency as to how the data is stored and used raises questions regarding fundamental rights and personal data protection. This practice should cease immediately until proper safeguards are in place. Furthermore, with increasingly interoperable systems, national authorities can access the biometric information of PoM, which is currently only accessible by border authorities under the EURODAC system. EURODAC data, used for fingerprint registration and to determine which Member State is responsible for asylum requests, is now being used to combat the threat of terrorism, linking PoM's information to criminal records in the EU.¹¹¹ The integration of migration and criminal databases may unjustly criminalise migrants, hindering their access to asylum and protection. This issue highlights the conflict between personal data protection, fundamental rights, and the use of biometric systems for surveillance, especially if Western Balkan systems connect to EU databases before accession. Furthermore, the presence of Frontex and their surveillance equipment hasn't stopped pushbacks. Sources at the border report that pushbacks are still happening, possibly more frequently than before yet no SIRs have been filed regarding pushbacks.

111 Blasi Cassagran (2021). "Fundamental Rights Implications of Interconnecting Migration and Policing Databases in the EU" Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/hrlr/article/21/2/433/6131329>

5. Conclusion


The report has attempted to map the existence and usage of modern border surveillance technology in North Macedonia. The research has found that since 2015 the EU has increasingly utilised the EU enlargement fund, the instrument for pre-accession assistance (IPA), to enhance and strengthen the capacities of the North Macedonian border police. The research has further found that, since 2015, EU Member States have been supporting North Macedonia with “migration management” through bilateral arrangements.

This support includes deploying foreign border guards as well as donating border security equipment, particularly in response to the so-called refugee crisis in Europe. The technology identified in North Macedonia includes different types of advanced cameras, radars and sensors with thermal (infrared), day and night vision. Most notably, the LDCCC and MSS technology which was identified at the southern border with Greece. This technology enables the border police to monitor several kilometres of the border area and detect any potential irregular border crossings. Coupled with the systematic practice of pushbacks and the many accounts of violence against people-on-the-move at the border, the use of EU-funded surveillance technology raises questions about the potential responsibility of the EU in exacerbating violence and rights violations against people in transit. The EU has an obligation to ensure that its funding is not used in connection with rights violations and by failing to do so, becomes complicit in these violations. Any support provided to third countries must be accompanied by comprehensive and independent Fundamental Rights Impact Assessments (FRIA).

Furthermore, the report has shown the significant role Frontex and the International Organisation for Migration play in the implementation of the EU border externalisation project. The analysis has found that the IOM has been tasked with procuring EU funded surveillance technology while Frontex since April 2023 has been actively deployed in a surveillance operation at the southern border with Greece in cooperation with the national border police. Furthermore, Frontex is also funded by the EU to implement their Master Plan in North Macedonia for Balkandac, a biometric database for migrants modelled on EURODAC, the European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database. In 2022, the Commission initiated an Action Plan with a 10 million EUR budget to support the further implementation of the Frontex Master Plan for a biometric database in North Macedonia. BVMN published a report in September 2023 which highlights how interoperability between biometric databases can lead to the further criminalisation of PoM.

The criminalisation of migration is connected with a security discourse in which migration management is linked with the safety and protection of Western European citizens grounded in racism and colonialism. The research has found that the EU has justified investing millions of euros worth of border security equipment in North Macedonia with reference to the need of strengthening Europe’s external borders in order to ensure the safety of Europe. Linking migration with crime and security contributes to the further erosion of the rights of PoM.

Analysing the impact and risks of border surveillance technologies on PoM is a useful lens to understand how criminalisation and securitisation affects migration. However, due to a lack of transparency around the types of technologies used as well as their actual usage, it is difficult to empirically assess the impact of border surveillance technologies. For such an assessment to be successful, there is a need for a higher level of transparency from the EU, international organisations as well as national authorities on what type of technology



is being deployed and how it is being used. This research has attempted to make a small contribution in this direction by identifying the most common types of surveillance equipment in North Macedonia. Furthermore, more testimonies and accounts from victims of border violence are needed to understand the impact of technologies on migration. The difficulty in collecting such testimonies lies in the often invisible nature of these technologies, acting as hidden agents in the background. Therefore, it is imperative that the responsible authorities are transparent about their use of modern surveillance technologies in order to ensure accountability and prevent EU funded technologies being involved in human rights violations.

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