

## **Human rights violations at Croatia's borders must cease immediately**

At the European Union's external borders in Croatia people are deprived of their right to seek protection in the EU. Pushbacks - the forced return of people - are exercised with life threatening brutality. The increasing use of firearms is the inevitable consequence of a policy that puts the protection of its borders above the protection of people.

Despite overwhelming evidence including reports, testimonies, photographs and videos published by human rights organizations and the media, Croatian authorities simply deny any wrongdoing. »Statements, accusations in reports or rumors almost became facts, but they are not«, as the Croatian Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković recently stated in the European Parliament.

The envisaged accession to the Schengen Area is a predominant agenda of Croatian politics. As a means of joining the club, human rights violations at its external borders including torture have been normalized and institutionalized – accompanied by the European Union's benevolent silence.

As »Guardian of the Treaties«, the EU Commission is responsible for monitoring the Member States' compliance with EU law. Despite the blatant evidence of human rights violations against protection seekers at the Croatian state border, in October 2019 the Commission gave its »green light« for Croatia's Schengen accession. With this decision, the Commission has de facto approved systematic violations of international law.

According to an official communication by the Commission, an amount of 6.8 million Euro granted to Croatia was in parts meant to be used for a new human rights monitoring mechanism. But up until now, there is no sign of installment of such a mechanism in Croatia. Quite the contrary, even the Croatian Ombudswoman is hindered to exercise her duties within the National Preventive Mechanism.

The excessive use of force of the Croatian border police is an expression of a yearlong repressive backlash after the refugee movements of 2015. At the Croatian external borders, the new imperative of the European border regime is manifesting: never again 2015. Systematically overturning the principle of non-refoulement and the prohibition of torture at its core, this regime calls into question the European project as a whole.

Justifying the use of force and illegal pushbacks by claiming that people on the move put themselves into unlawful situations and that asylum seekers may access official border crossings points to make use of their right to seek protection is highly cynical. This claim contradicts the reality at the external borders of the European Union.

Pushbacks are not a new phenomenon at Europe's external borders. The Croatian example demonstrates that pushbacks have reached a new quality in brutality that is highly worrisome.

The organizations undersigning this declaration demand

- immediate independent investigation of allegations against the use of force by the police at the Croatian borders and appropriate measures against the perpetrators at all levels;

- that the EU Commission finally condemn the violence and human rights violations. This must lead to infringement proceedings against Croatia;
- the accession to the Schengen Area to be subject to Croatia's compliance with international and European law;
- that the work of the Croatian Ombudswoman, human rights defenders and people supporting refugees and other migrants must not be hindered nor criminalized;
- that further investigation is needed to shed light on the question if and to what extent EU funds are linked to human rights violations;

The European Asylum System must be based on solidarity and protection. A refugee policy based on human rights must create safe and legal means of entry that will automatically put an end to violence, suffering and family separation of protection seekers along European borders.

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