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Europe's unsafe Environment: Border Control under Covid-19

Introduction

“Historically”, the novelist Arundhati Roy (2020) notes, “pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew.” Indeed, past pandemics such as the ‘Black Death’ or the ‘Spanish Flu’ have prompted the re-organisation of societies and spaces, not least through novel modes and technologies of mobility and population governance, including travel passes and quarantine centres. For Roy, the current SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) pandemic “is no different”: “It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.” While it is too early to envision the contours of this ‘world to come’ with any great certainty, the first year of the rampant Covid-virus offers some indication as to the ways in which societies and spaces are being re-imagined and re-ordered.

Clearly, the pandemic has already prompted transformations in the governance of human mobility. Administrative, legal, technological, and political measures have emerged over the first twelve months of the health crisis, often intending to halt, slow down, or track human movement and therewith the spread of the dangerous virus. Given the prevailing focus on domestic citizens or cosmopolitan travellers and the effects of mobility restrictions on international tourism and trade, little attention has been paid to the ways in which the pandemic has been seized by states to actively target those who had already been precluded from safe forms of travelling and sheltering prior to the health crisis.

The UN (2020) has noted that the pandemic has exacerbated “existing vulnerabilities” of displaced populations and people ‘on the move’, who are said to face three interconnecting crises: a health crisis, a socio-economic crisis, and a protection crisis. Increasingly restrictive mobility policies and border controls have ensured that those most detrimentally affected by this myriad of crises are unable to escape along formal corridors, with the UNHCR (2020) noting a record low in

refugee resettlements in 2020, as well as informal corridors, as discussed later. Displaced humans and those precariously ‘on the move’ have not only experienced how the pandemic has been instrumentalised to further restrict their ability to move and escape, but also how imposed restrictions have become justified in the name of their own protection.

In this short article, we examine border closures and forms of migrant confinement in the European context that have been carried out in the name of safety and protection - of both citizens and migrant travellers - from the Covid-19 virus.ⁱ While, at the outbreak of the pandemic, cosmopolitan travellers and international tourists were asked by ‘their’ national governments to return home, those already displaced and precariously on the move were meant to be kept ‘elsewhere’ and prevented from crossing borders for their own sake. The rationale of European authorities that the well-being of migrants could not be protected given the lack of resources and overwhelmed health systems, indicate, we argue in this essay, a shift from a European policy of *hostile environment* that has predominated over the past five years since 2015’s ‘migration crisis’ toward a paradigm of an *unsafe and risky environment* where the Covid-19 conditions justify, in the name of protection and safety, migrant deterrence and confinement practices.

Deter and Confine to Protect

Over the first months of 2020 and in view of the dramatic spread of the Covid-19, mobility and border restrictions were rapidly re-imposed or reinforced throughout the world. In Europe, the EU Schengen Area of ‘free’ mobility turned into a fragmented and bordered zone. Nonetheless, despite the re-nationalisation and re-bordering of European space, guarding the EU’s external frontiers would remain “a common responsibility”, according to the European Commission (2020), as they would constitute “a security perimeter for all Schengen States.” Along this European security perimeter, spectacularly violent efforts were undertaken to prevent its breach.

In April 2020, and in what has become known as the ‘Easter massacre’, several migrant boats escaping from Libya were left unassisted for days, or sabotaged, by European authorities in the Maltese Search and Rescue zone. In one case, nine of 63 migrant travellers on a precarious boat died of drowning or dehydration despite having been detected by aerial assets of the Armed Forces of Malta and the EU border agency Frontex (Alarm Phone, 2020). In order to prevent their arrival,

the Maltese authorities succeeded in orchestrating their return to Libya by instructing a ‘secret fleet’ to leave Valletta harbour, pick up the distressed, and steer toward Tripoli harbour (Kingsley, 2020). During this push-back operation, three other individuals died.

The violence at EUrope’s borders, which turned particularly excessive in Spring 2020, was justified through an inversion of a long-standing safety paradigm. With Italy and Malta closing their harbours and declaring themselves ‘unsafe’ due to the Covid-19 crisis, EU member states reversed the common designation of EUrope, and its harbours, as ‘places of safety’. The Maltese government suggested that it was simply unable “to ensure the availability of a ‘safe place’ on the Maltese territory to any persons rescued at sea” (Government of Malta, 2020). Ostensibly unwilling to expose migrants travelling precariously across the Mediterranean Sea to *unsafe EUrope*, the disembarkation of migrants was disallowed not merely in order to protect the citizens of Italy and Malta from incoming ‘Corona spreaders’, but also in the name of protecting the precarious travellers themselves from being exposed to the virulent pandemic. “Malta’s ports are closed”, prime minister Abela stated in reference to the case in which Malta’s non-assistance and push-back practices had prompted twelve fatalities, “but it coordinated this rescue and ensured that the irregular migrants were taken to the port that was open” (Times of Malta, 2020).

The reversal of the safety paradigm has also underwritten the politics of migrant incarceration, as strikingly observable in both Italy and Greece where migrants have become subjected to multiple forms of confinement. In Italy, migrants who arrived by boat were confined in newly-installed ‘quarantine ships’. Remarkably, even migrants who were already hosted in accommodation centers on Italy’s mainland, including those who had tested positive of Covid-19, were transferred onto these ships. On the Greek islands, differential lockdown measures were enforced on citizens and migrants: While the general lockdown had ended for the former in May 2020, the latter remained subjected to extending lockdown measures in overcrowded hotspot camps.

From hostile EUrope to unsafe EUrope

EUropean border measures in view of the Covid-19 crisis were pursued in the name of safety and protection - of citizens and migrants alike - when, of course, they were anything but protective to those least able to move and shelter safely. Confined in spaces where hygienic-sanitary standards

could hardly be adhered to, migrants have been directly exposed to contagion and health risks in EU hotspots, on ‘quarantine’ ships, and in other “cramped spaces” (Walters and Luthi, 2016). While such use of the ‘health and (un-)safety’ paradigm appears as a straightforward, and cynical, instrumentalisation of the pandemic, it is entangled in, and has implications for, the humanitarian-security nexus underpinning European forms of mobility and border governance.

In light of the draconian migrant deterrence policies that have followed 2015’s ‘migration crisis’ (Stierl and Tazzioli, forthcoming) - policies that have been characterised as prompting processes of de-humanitarianisation (Heller, Pezzani, Stierl, forthcoming) - we can now observe new configurations of humanitarian-security rationales with migrants turning not merely into either “risky subjects” or “subjects at risk” (Aradau, 2004). Rather, they turn into subjects who have to be deterred and confined in the name of safety - both their own safety and the safety of citizens. While in practice, Europe’s manifold hostile environment policies vis-à-vis precarious migrants continue to be ruthlessly enforced, the Covid-19 emergency has allowed for a novel configuration of the humanitarian-security nexus at Europe’s borders, which has repeatedly evolved over the past years (Walters 2010; Pallister-Wilkins 2015; Vaughan-Williams 2015; Garelli and Tazzioli 2018).

The rationale of deterring and confining to protect, therefore, needs to be placed in a situation where the environment is not *made hostile* but in which it has *become unsafe* through forces seemingly beyond Europe’s control. Whereas hostile environment policies intended to make “certain ‘ways of life’ ... unviable” by turning the border into “a pervasive environment that subtracts life-sustaining resources (from water and food to rescue and healthcare provisions) and exposes migrants to harsh socio-natural conditions (not only extreme heat or cold, or chronic food and sleep deprivation, but also the lack of access to any social support)” (Pezzani 2020), the Covid-19 pandemic has seemingly ‘naturally’ turned the environment itself unsafe, so that border practices become, even if merely discursively, mechanics of protection and humanitarian care, guaranteeing the safety of those they target.

Although, without a doubt, these European border measures need to be understood in the continuity of the EU border regime, we can nonetheless observe a shift: from *hostile Europe* to

unsafe EUrope. Where the former openly declared to manufacture conditions so adverse as to prompt unwanted individuals to leave, or not even come in the first place, the latter has allowed to justify ‘keeping them out’ or ‘containing them elsewhere’ in the name of protecting them from the rampant pandemic that has turned Europe itself unsafe.

Conclusion

The outbreak of Covid-19 does not constitute a watershed moment in the functioning of the EUropean border regime: rather, it has worked as an accelerator of changes that were meant to be implemented, some of which will presumably remain in place in the foreseeable future. Far from triggering homogenous border closures, the pandemic has further multiplied unequal access to mobility, rights, and protection. In particular, as this essay has shown, those who are racialised as ‘migrant others’ have been subjected to variegated forms of confinement, detention, and containment that were enforced under the guise of protection.

‘Deter and confine to protect’ designates the strengthening of hierarchies between citizens and migrants, as well as new ways of enacting containment in the name of both migrants’ and citizens’ safety. As we have illustrated, hygienic rationales in mobility restrictions have become deeply intertwined with the politics of deterrence and containment that has prompted, in turn, shifts in the humanitarian-security nexus underwriting the EUropean border regime. If, as Roy suggests, the pandemic is indeed a portal or gateway, it appears that for many oppressed and marginalised populations, it will be the moment in which their condition of confinement has not merely become drastically cemented, but legitimised in the name of their very safety - far away from EUrope’s unsafe environment.

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ⁱ This article speaks of 'EUrope' throughout. In this way it seeks to problematise frequently employed usages that equate the EU with Europe and Europe with the EU and suggests, at the same time, that EUrope is not reducible to the institutions of the EU.