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Traditional fishing canoes along the beach in a community North of Dakar, Senegal where European-funded campaigns have tried to convince the youth not to embark on dangerous migration journeys.  
Photo: Ida Marie Savio Vammen

## Speaking up against EU externalisation: Activist-led migration information campaigns in Senegal

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For close to two decades, the European Union and its member countries have invested in migration information and awareness campaigns in West Africa, including in Senegal. These campaigns aim to impact migrants' decision-making and prevent unwanted irregular migration to Europe. However, in Senegal, activists have begun targeting local populations with alternative migration information campaigns to contest European externalisation and border violence and to advocate for African citizens' right to migrate safely.

## Key Takeaways

- EU externalisation and border violence fuel new forms of transnational collective actions and activism in so-called transit and sending countries.
- Alternative migration information campaigns reappropriate European-driven campaign communication strategies to expose and create awareness about EU externalisation in Senegal and North Africa and draw on new forms of shared transborder activism.
- In the context of rising anti-French and anti-Western sentiments in West Africa, examining the impact of EU externalisation and its ripple effects, including how these dynamics shape local forms of resistance, is crucial.

### Context: EU Externalisation and Migration Information Campaigns

The softer side of EU migration governance in Africa—migration information campaigns (MICs)—has gained momentum in recent years. This is despite research indicating the limited effects of such campaigns and demonstrating that warnings about the dangers of migration rarely reshape migrants' aspirations to leave their home country. The 2015 European migration crisis spurred renewed interest in MICs, leading to the launch of new campaigns, many funded by the European Union Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) that was established to address the root causes of irregular migration and displacement in Africa.

Senegal, a primary beneficiary of the EUTF, has been a focal point for such campaigns. According to EUTF monitoring, 17,768 awareness-raising events on migration were funded between 2016 and 2023, reaching over 21 million potential migrants through physical campaigns and social media in Senegal. Campaign activities spiked after 2020, prompted by renewed migration along the dangerous West Africa-Atlantic sea route to the Spanish Canary Islands. Yet seemingly all this appeared to have little effect: in 2024, the highest recorded number of arrivals—46,843—was registered on these islands.

Migration has long been an important livelihood strategy in Senegal, where remittances provide a vital safety net and have prompted development. European-funded campaigns aim to break the positive perception of migration to Europe and dissuade youths from approaching migrant smugglers. These campaigns have entered the public debate and social media through local radio shows, newspaper ads, presence on social media, TV spots and series, local theatrical performances, concerts, debates, and peer-to-peer messaging. Increasingly, return migrants are recruited to foster trust when trying to dissuade others from leaving.

These campaigns frequently focus on portraying the dark side of migration, using migrants' personal stories or graphic images of migrants' deaths, suffering, and failed rescue attempts at sea, as well as emotional theatrical performances and films. At the same time, they promote the idea that "making it here" (Réussir au Sénégal or Tekki Fii) is a viable alternative to migration. Yet, this information is far from neutral, as it circulates moralising discourse aligned with the European migration agenda that aims to make people stay. For most Senegalese, visa options and legal and safe migration pathways are largely inaccessible, therefore irregular migration is common. However, by branding irregular migration negatively, the campaigns attempt to make it appear as an abnormal phenomenon.

While the European-funded campaigns largely dominate the landscape in Senegal, alternative MICs also emerge from below, aiming to rewrite the largely European dominated migration discourse and instead inform local populations about the dangers of European externalisation policies today. As this brief underscores, activists employ similar strategies but for very different purposes.

### An Ethnographic Approach to the Local Effects of Externalisation

This brief draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in September 2022, January 2023, and August 2023 in Dakar and its surrounding areas. The study explores how key national stakeholders navigate competing global and national priorities regarding migration management in an EU-centric policy context, specifically focusing on how civil society actors influence the national migration debate and policy. The findings used in this brief stem from participant observation during activist-led public MICs in the suburbs of Dakar organised by Boza Fii, which was founded in 2020, and 25 interviews conducted

with its members and participants. Boza Fii is led by former Senegalese migrants and human rights activists who, together with their members, fight for the freedom of movement and settlement for everyone. They also strive to provide better reintegration support for deported migrants. Their campaign activities were primarily funded through crowdfunding and partnerships with ideologically like-minded individuals, activist networks, and NGOs in Africa and Europe.

### **"You Watch the Borders, We Watch You!"**

"Frontex is an invisible force acting here. People need to be educated about what they do. We feel it is necessary to fight against their actions."  
Saliou Diouf, the director of Boza Fii

In 2022, Saliou Diouf, the director of Boza Fii, shared this sentiment while he was busy preparing for their "72-Hour Push Back Frontex Campaign" with the other members of the small organization. For Saliou, in a context where he saw other Senegalese NGOs and CSOs enrolled in and amplifying the EU's anti-irregular migration agenda, their information campaigns filled a critical information gap in Senegal and represented a patriotic act. In contrast to the many European funded information and awareness campaigns, Boza Fii aimed to raise awareness about the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and its growing presence in Senegal.

Boza Fii's campaign brought its message to the streets of a local neighbourhood of Dakar, displaying banners with slogans like "Push Back Frontex. Vous surveillez les frontières. Nous vous surveillons" ("You watch the borders. We watch you") alongside banners listing migrant deaths linked to restrictive European policies. The events were open to the public and other NGOs, CSOs, and stakeholders were invited to take part. The campaign programmes drew on many of the same communication strategies as the European funded ones, but highlighted unequal access to mobility, border violence, and the fight for freedom of movement. As such, their political messaging directly countered the narratives of most other MICs while aligning with Pan-African calls for sovereignty.

A key campaign objective for the activists was making people aware of Frontex's efforts to expand its mandate and operations in Senegal. In 2022, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson discussed a potential partnership with Senegal to deploy Frontex drones, vessels, and armed personnel for operational activities. Many

of the activists had been in North Africa and had seen Frontex at work. Drawing on their personal experiences they feared that the agency would militarise Senegal's waters, exacerbate border violence during push backs, and hinder search and rescue (SAR) operations. Thus, expanding the agency's mandate and the extension of EU jurisdiction beyond its borders, would fundamentally challenge Senegal's sovereignty. During the Push Back Frontex 2023 event, an image of the Spanish Guardia Civil controlling the Saloum Islands in the Fatick region, where boats set out for the Canary Islands, was used to make the audience aware that European efforts to externalise border control were already happening deep within their territory.

### **Commemorating the Dead**

"Neither Forgotten Nor Forgiven: In memory of those who did not arrive. Forgetting them is killing them a second time. Migrate to live, not to die." Boza Fii campaign slogan

Boza Fii collaborates with activist networks in North Africa and Europe and draws inspiration from their actions. One such initiative is "CommemorAction" a collective form of remembrance first introduced by the Alarm Phone network in 2019 in Oujda, Morocco. Combining mourning with anger, CommemorAction seeks to make deceased migrants' stories known and support their families in seeking justice and reparations.

In Dakar, Boza Fii organized its first CommemorAction event in 2021. Similar to the Push Back Frontex campaign, the objective was to inform the Senegalese public about the brutality of contemporary border control.

In 2022, Boza Fii's Tarajal campaign marked the anniversaries the Tarajal killings of 2014, where 15 migrants died trying to cross into Spain, after the brutal encounter with the Spanish Guardia Civil. The activists also focused on the Melilla tragedy of 2022, where Moroccan border guards contributed to the deaths of at least 37 migrants attempting to cross into a Spanish enclave. Events included screenings of the BBC documentary "Death on the Border," which exposed these violent incidents to Senegalese audiences — not to deter migration, but to raise awareness of EU externalisation's deadly consequences and call for justice. Their messages highlighted that no one should die when attempting to improve the lives of them or their families.

### **Conclusion**

Boza Fii's alternative campaign activities demonstrate how activist reappropriate conventional MIC

communication strategies merging them with new forms of transborder collective action to challenge EU externalisation. While the EU and European governments externalise migration control through a range of restrictive policies, grassroots movements – like Boza Fii – mirror this process by displacing activism across borders and amplifying its ripple effects.

By exposing the inequalities and violence perpetuated by EU externalisation, these campaigns highlight the urgency of safeguarding African migrants' rights. They also act to emphasise the importance of holding the EU and European actors accountable for the high costs and human rights violations linked to restrictive migration policies and interventions. European policy actors should take their concerns seriously.

Without genuine commitments to more equitable mobility partnerships with key African partner countries—beyond border restrictions, deportations and the criminalisation of migration—Europe risks fostering further contestation and resistance.

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A forthcoming special issue titled Unpacking the rippling effects of European migration governance in Africa will examine these issues further, see: [journals.sagepub.com/home/MRX](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/MRX)