

POLICYBRIEF

Forced Migration from Eritrea and Regime Stabilization

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The document analyses the mass exodus of Eritreans as a consequence of the open-ended National Service and the government's state stabilization strategies based on diaspora-exploitation and provides a critical discussion of EU responses to Eritrea's policies.

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Introduction

Since its independence from Ethiopia in 1993, Eritrea has never held national elections; the state has no constitution, no functioning parliament and there is no rule of law. President Isaias Afewerki has ruled the country for 30 years with an iron fist, and Eritrea has been involved in various wars with its neighbours, including the current armed conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray Region. Since 2002, Eritreans have been forced to serve in a national service that often lasts for decades and has been labelled a system of forced labour by UN human rights agencies. The absence of freedom and economic opportunities has caused a mass exodus of hundreds of thousands from a country with about four million inhabitants. Today, Eritrea is a diasporic state that relies heavily on diaspora support to sustain the population, as recent research by the author reveals.

This policy brief analyses the transnational political system established by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) government, including a system of surveillance and control of the exiled population, which is also supposed to pay a diaspora tax. In conjunction with private remittances, without which the subsistence of the forcibly recruited population at home would be threatened, transnational control has stabilized the failing state at the cost of miserable living conditions and a

¹ This policy brief has been reviewed by Hélène Thiollet (Sciences Po) and Christiane Fröhlich (GIGA) as part of MAGYC's internal review process.

continuing mass exodus. EU responses have been ambiguous and often shortsighted, focusing on curbing migration towards Europe without tackling the underlying causes.

Evidence and Analysis

Eritrea: Diasporization and Transnational Surveillance

Eritrea is a state in the Horn of Africa that gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after a thirty-year long liberation war. The former Italian colony was administered by Great Britain from 1941 to 1952, when the international community decided to federate the territory with the Ethiopian Empire ruled by Haile Selassie. The independence struggle was instigated by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which was dominated by Muslims who felt marginalized by the Orthodox-Christian-dominated Ethiopian state. Yet, during the mid-1970s, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) emerged under the domination of Isaias Afewerki, who mobilized Christians for the war and has kept his power position to the present day². The EPLF labelled itself a socialist movement, but was not supported by the Eastern Bloc because Ethiopia had been turned into a socialist country after a military council (*Derg*) had ousted Haile Selassie in 1974. The military council received military support from the Soviet Union, while the EPLF received little international support and consequently relied on the growing Eritrean refugee communities abroad. Hundreds of thousands of Eritreans had to flee the aerial bombardment and scorched-earth policies of the *Derg*³. Most Eritreans fled to Sudan, but many moved on to the Arab Peninsula, Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia. The EPLF actively controlled these communities through mass organizations for women, workers and students. Members were politically indoctrinated and were supposed to support the armed struggle from afar through regular financial contributions⁴.

The Eritrean Diaspora Tax and the Transnationalization of the Eritrean Polity

After independence, the political leadership introduced a rehabilitation tax that became known as “diaspora tax” for all Eritreans living in exile, regardless of whether they have become naturalized citizens of their respective host countries. According to Eritrean law, every person with at least one Eritrean parent is regarded a national, no matter if he or she has acquired a different nationality, which is the case for most Eritreans living in democratic host countries. Diaspora Eritreans are supposed to pay two percent of their income, whether it be derived from work or from social welfare benefits. The ruling party, which consisted of the former EPLF leadership but renamed itself People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), invested in a network of diplomatic missions in all countries with significant Eritrean diaspora presence with the purpose of controlling Eritrean communities abroad. The mass organizations were replaced by *mahbere-koms*

² Pool D (2001) *From Guerrillas to Government. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front*. Oxford: James Currey.

³ De Waal A (1991) 'Evil Days. 30 years of war and famine in Ethiopia.' Human Rights Watch.

⁴ Koser K (2003), 'Mobilizing new African diasporas: An Eritrean case study', in Koser K (ed.), *New African diasporas*, London: Routledge, pp. 111–23.

or community centers, which serve as surveillance and mobilization hubs and assist in fundraising efforts. The government also introduced a so-called "clearance" issued for Eritreans who have paid the tax, which to this day is a prerequisite for obtaining any kind of government services such as extension of passports or issuing of birth certificates. Only diaspora Eritreans in possession of a clearance are able to buy or inherit property in their home country⁵.

The Border War with Ethiopia and the Silencing of Critics

The first years of independence looked promising for both locals and foreign observers with regard to nation-building and economic development, and Eritreans abroad volunteered to pay the diaspora tax to help with the reconstruction of their war-torn homeland. However, in 1998 a border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia not only claimed more than 70,000 lives, but put an end to hopes of democratization and development. In an ensuing national political debate, the nascent free press and a group of prominent political reformers in the ruling PFDJ and became known as the G15, demanded a critical assessment of the war as well as democratic elections. Most of them were jailed in 2001 and have remained behind bars without trial ever since; many are believed to have died due to harsh detention conditions. Efforts by EU officials to negotiate the release of one of the victims, Dawit Issak, a journalist who holds a dual Swedish-Eritrean nationality, have failed⁶.

President Isaias Afewerki turned Eritrea into an autocratic political system without an implemented constitution, functioning parliament or juridical system. The rule of law is utterly absent and human rights violations are common. In 2002, the government introduced an open-ended national service as a political project with the purpose of inculcating the values of the EPLF into the next generation. This includes a culture of selflessness and self-sacrifice, putting the nation before the individual good. However, this system of societal militarization has led to a failing economy, a chronic scarcity of goods and a pronounced lack of skilled labour. What is more, the recruits receive a remuneration that is far too low to sustain their families. Accordingly, the national service has caused massive population exodus, and hundreds of thousands have since fled the country. Initially, the regime tried to limit the flight through shoot-to-kill orders at the border, but eventually, high-ranking military officers got involved in smuggling recruits out of the country for personal gain, and the refugees were regarded as additional source of income. To this day, when refugees need consular services, they are made to sign a letter of regret in which they plead guilty of desertion and pledge to pay the diaspora tax regularly. Diaspora remittances contribute decisively to the stabilization of this unsustainable system. By early 2020, when the Covid-19 crisis rendered movement difficult or impossible, more than 170,000 Eritreans had fled to Ethiopia and more than

⁵ Hirt N (2014) The Eritrean Diaspora and its Impact on Regime Stability. Responses to UN Sanctions, *African Affairs*, 114/454, pp. 115–135.

⁶ UN Human Rights Council (2015) Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, A/HRC/29/42, p. 7.

100,000 were officially registered in Sudan, with a very high number of unrecorded cases. About 100,000 Eritreans applied for asylum in Europe, mostly between 2014 and 2019⁷.

Heterogeneity and political splits in the diaspora

The political developments in Eritrea had severe repercussions in the diaspora: on the one hand, the PFDJ government lost support due to its controversial policies, the lack of democratization and the continued suffering of Eritreans who had remained at home. Old opposition parties split, new ones were formed, and new civil society movements have emerged that label themselves as ‘justice seekers’ and try to alleviate the fate of refugees on their perilous journeys. On the other hand, many diaspora Eritreans still have faith in their government, including second-generation diaspora Eritreans who enjoy the rights of their democratic host countries, but often romanticize the conditions in their imagined home Eritrea⁸. In 2004, the government founded the Young PFDJ in democratic host countries with the purpose of indoctrinating the second-generation youth through festivals and political seminars. The readiness to pay the diaspora tax had declined over the years, and the Young PFDJ served as a fund-raising organization in addition to the embassies, which often use coercive methods and use feelings of obligation to make people pay.

Eritrea has never published a state budget, and very little is known about the use of the diaspora tax, but given the deplorable state of the economy and the widespread poverty in a country which heavily restricts small business enterprises and private investment⁹, the money is certainly not spent for constructive development purposes. When Eritrea made peace with Ethiopia in 2018, there were some hopes for reforms, but the national service remained in place and currently, Eritrea is once more engaged in a war: this time, it clandestinely participates in Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s campaign against the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF), which dominated the Ethiopian ruling coalition for thirty years.

Transnational Control in Non-Democratic and Democratic Countries

The Eritrean regime’s power to control the diaspora is especially strong in non-democratic countries, where Eritreans are labelled labour migrants and cannot apply for political asylum or refugee status. This affects mainly the hundreds of thousands of Eritreans who work in the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, specifically in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. They only get work permits upon presentation of a

⁷ InfoMigrants, 3.4.2018: Why are so many People Fleeing from Eritrea to Europe?, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/8407/why-are-so-many-people-fleeing-from-eritrea-to-europe>, accessed 16.03.2021.

⁸ Graf S (2018) Politics of belonging and the Eritrean diaspora youth: Generational transmission of the decisive past. *Geoforum* 92: 117–124; Hirt N (2021) Eritrea’s Chosen Trauma and the Legacy of the Martyrs: The impact of postmemory on political identity formation on second-generation diaspora Eritreans. *Africa Spectrum*, doi 10. 1177/ 0002 0397 20977495.

⁹ Bertelsmann Transformation Index (2020) Eritrea Country Report, <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report-ERI-2020.html>, accessed 16.03.2021.

valid passport. This obliges them to pay the diaspora tax, and to make additional donations to the government on the occasions of national holidays.

Nevertheless, Eritrean transnational institutions are also present in democratic countries, including EU states with sizable diaspora communities such as Germany and Sweden. A network of embassies and consulates, community organizations (*mahbere-koms*) and pro-government informants are involved in fundraising activities. The current Covid-19 pandemic has also been used as a fund-raising purpose although the government has claimed a low Corona-prevalence. Refugees who made it to Europe and applied for protection have also been targeted by regime agents and requested to sign the letter of regret and/or pay the tax¹⁰. Government agents visited accommodation centres for refugees, and pro-government interpreters are said to have manipulated asylum interviews. On the other hand, in many cases, European authorities such as resident registration or civil registry offices demand official documents from Eritreans who have been granted asylum, and thereby force them to contact the authorities of the country they fled. Field research by the author revealed that the Eritrean government has also infiltrated several Eritrean Orthodox Church communities throughout Europe, where false clerics demand fees to provide religious services such as baptisms. These funds are allegedly transferred to Eritrea.

Bleak Prospects after 30 Years of Independence

Three decades after independence, Eritrea as a former beacon of hope in the Horn of Africa has turned into a diasporic state with up to half of its population living in all corners of the world without intention to return any time soon. President Isaias Afewerki rules with a small group of advisers without a constitution and has weakened all government institutions, turning the country into a failing state. However, the president has been successful in maintaining strong transnational political structures that serve to control, indoctrinate and intimidate the diaspora. Long-distance nationalism thrives among diaspora Eritreans, and many still believe in the narrative of Eritrea's heroic past. After the 2018 peace agreement with Ethiopia, many Eritreans abroad engaged in a social media campaign demanding reforms under the motto "Enough!" (or "*Yiak!*"). However, instead of investing in peace, Eritrea is once more involved in an undeclared war¹¹. The Eritrean diaspora has served as a tool to stabilize a political system and an economy which probably would not have survived without constant flows of remittances to both the government and the suffering population.

¹⁰ Written Submission by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Ms. Sheila Keetharuth to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, House of Commons, Parliament of Canada, 20 July 2016, p. 7; Belloni, M (2018) Refugees and Citizens. Understanding Eritrean refugee's ambivalence towards homeland policies, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, p.12.

¹¹ De Waal A (2021) Eritrea's Silent War. World Peace Foundation, 19 February, <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2021/02/19/eritreas-silent-war/>, accessed 15.03.2021.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Since the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015, the EU has engaged in a strategy of curbing migration from the African continent through various strategies, including cooperation with refugee-producing countries such as Eritrea through the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (ETUF). It has allotted more than 150 million EUR to projects in Eritrea with the purpose of improving governance and migration management, strengthening resilience and creating better economic and employment opportunities. This approach does not take the diasporic nature of the Eritrean polity into consideration and seems to be unaware of the fact that the stabilization of Eritrea’s political system, namely an unelected president who has ruled for 30 years without having held national elections and in the absence of a constitution, a parliament and a functioning judiciary, strongly depends on the support of the diaspora.

The institutional memory of the EU also seems to be short-lived when it comes to Eritrea’s shifting strategies in regard to accepting and rejecting support: The Eritrean government has used the rising numbers of Eritrean refugees reaching Europe as a tool to influence European policy-makers. It also has a history of erratic relations with the EU: as early as 1997, the Eritrean government decided to terminate development cooperation because it claimed to have reached self-reliance. After a devastating war with Ethiopia (1998 to 2000), it re-invited donors, only to expel most NGO’s and bilateral donors again in 2005. In 2007, the EU had granted 122 million EURO development aid for Eritrea under the 10th European Development Fund (EDF), but in 2011, cooperation was terminated by Eritrea, presumably because the government expected high income through gold mining, which commenced that year. However, five years later, European support was welcome again and many European politicians were ready to enhance cooperation, being alarmed by rising numbers of Eritrean refugees reaching Europe, amounting to about 75,000 between 2014 and 2015. Delegations from Italy, Norway, Denmark, Switzerland, the UK and Germany have since visited Asmara to discuss with the president and his advisor Yemane Gebreab, focusing on the causes of the flight and the human rights conditions in the country. It seems these delegations believed in vague promises made by Yemane to reform the open-ended national service, which is the main reason for the mass exodus as has been shown above. In 2015, the EU pledged another 200 million EUR through the 10th EDF with the aim of strengthening the energy sector and the improvement of statistical data collection – measures hardly suitable to prevent Eritreans from fleeing their homeland. During this period, the government tried to improve its international reputation without any intention of introducing meaningful political or economic reforms or of improving the dire human rights situation in the country.

One year later, Eritrea’s president entered a coalition with Saudi-Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in their fight against the Huthi rebels in Yemen, and the UAE established a military base at Eritrea’s port of Assab. The financial flows resulting from this engagement have caused the government to lose interest in Europe once again, and only a mere

fraction of the 200 million EUR were used¹². After the 2018 peace agreement with Ethiopia's prime minister Abiy Ahmed, Eritrea's army was not demobilized and is currently once again engaged in military activities. Nevertheless, the EU has remained committed to support the Eritrean government, this time through the ETUF, granting 150 million EURO. Out of these, 80 million were allotted to the project "Reconnecting Eritrea and Ethiopia through rehabilitation of the main arterial roads in Eritrea" with the purpose of creating employment opportunities¹³. This decision is highly questionable, since the government banned all private construction activities in 2006, and companies owned by the ruling party are the only firms carrying out infrastructure and construction work based on the forced labour of the national service recruits. At the same time, the border between both countries was unilaterally closed again by Eritrea in late 2018, and no trade agreements have since been put in place. The war in Tigray makes it highly improbable that relations will return to normal any time soon.

Against this background, the EU's policies towards Eritrea have neither curbed the mass exodus from the country, nor have they led to democratic reforms or the improvement of the human rights situation on the ground. The hundreds of thousands of Eritreans who have fled their country in the past two decades financially support their relatives who are caught in the national service, and many of them pay the diaspora tax, which helps to stabilize the autocratic system and its failed economy. A "Rapid Fragility and Migration Assessment for Eritrea" conducted for the EU in 2016 states that the main reasons for flight are the national service without time limitation, the lack of political, economic and social rights, and a lack of income opportunities in the marginalized private economy. However, these insights have not resulted in a policy shift or an end to unconditional cooperation with the government of Eritrea. Currently, the main tasks for states of the European Union are to protect Eritreans who are living under their jurisdiction from the transnational institutions of the Eritrean government. In addition, any further economic cooperation should be conditional on an immediate cessation of military activities by Eritrean soldiers in Tigray, a complete reform of the national service, the implementation of the constitution and the establishment of rule of law.

Policy Recommendations

- ETUF should not be used to circumvent conditionalities that apply under the EDF, such as the prohibition of forced labour
- Insist on unlimited access to the country, transparency and adequate financial monitoring as a precondition for cooperation
- Consider the role of the diaspora as regime-stabilizing factor and empower progressive diaspora groups as possible agents of change

¹² Tesfanews, 15 November 2011, Eritrea terminates all ongoing programs funded by the European Development Fund, <https://tesfanews.net/eritrea-terminates-all-ongoing-programs-funded-by-european-development-fund/>, accessed 16.03. 2021; Hirt N (2012) 'Eritrea', in Mehler A et al. (eds.) Africa Yearbook 8, p. 327.

¹³ EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/horn-africa/eritrea/reconnecting-eritrea-and-ethiopia-through-rehabilitation-main-arterial_en, accessed 16.03.2021

Research Parameters

This policy brief is based on the author's long-term research experience focusing on Eritrea and the Horn of Africa, including results from a) the research project "Do Diasporas Contribute to the Stabilization of Authoritarian Rule? Responses of Eritrean citizens abroad to transnational governance" funded by the German Research Association (DFG-Hi 1984/2-1)) and b), the Horizon2020 project "Migration Governance and Asylum Crises" (MAGYC, grant agreement number 822806), which seeks to assess how crises like the mass exodus of Eritreans analysed in this policy brief shape policy responses to migration on the domestic, regional and international level. The research presented here was part of the work package "Comparing Crises" led by the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) in Hamburg, which is particularly interested in how state stability and survival interact with migration movements and their governance in the Middle East, North Africa and the Horn of Africa.

The aim of this research was to analyse the nature of the transnational structures of the State of Eritrea, which is one of the most diasporic societies worldwide and among the largest refugee-producers in Africa. Applying qualitative research methods such as semi-structured interviews and long-term participant observation, it explored how the diaspora responds to the regime's efforts to exploit and control its citizens abroad. The transnational structures created by the Eritrean regime have decisively contributed to the stabilization of the autocratic Eritrean government and have caused a vicious circle of mass exodus, (mostly coerced) diaspora engagement in favour of the government through the Eritrean diaspora tax and other financial contributions. The theoretical framework is based on theories of transnationalism and long-distance nationalism that helps to control populations living outside their homeland.

The topic is of high political relevance due to the on-going refugee influx into Europe that includes tens of thousands of Eritreans. Generally, the transnationalisation of authoritarian policies calls for answers to the question how authoritarian regimes use their exiled population for domestic purposes.

Project Identity

PROJECT NAME	MAGYC - Migration Governance and Asylum Crises
COORDINATOR	The Hugo Observatory (Université de Liège), Liège, Belgium. hugo.observatory@uliege.be
CONSORTIUM	Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique - Institut français du Proche-Orient (Beirut, Lebanon) GIGA Institute of Global and Area Studies (Hamburg, Germany) IDMC (Geneva, Switzerland) Lebanese American University (Beirut, Lebanon) Lund University (Lund, Sweden) Sabancı University (Istanbul, Turkey) Sciences Po (Paris, France) SOAS University of London (London, UK) University of Economics in Bratislava (Bratislava, Slovakia) University of Macedonia (Thessaloniki, Greece) University of Milan (Milan, Italy)
FUNDING SCHEME	This project has received funding from the European Commission's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme (2014-2020), Societal Challenge 6 – Europe in a changing world: inclusive, innovative and reflective societies", call MIGRATION-02-2018 — Towards forward-looking migration governance: addressing the challenges, assessing capacities and designing future strategies.
DURATION	November 2018 – October 2022 (48 months).
BUDGET	EU contribution: 3,175,263.70€.
WEBSITE	https://www.magyc.uliege.be/
FOR MORE INFORMATION	Contact: Lucia Ragazzi: lucia.ragazzi@uliege.be
FURTHER READING	Hirt, N (2016): No Lessons Learned. Europe's unconditional engagement with the Eritrean regime, Horn of Africa Bulletin, 28 (5), pp. 22-27. Hirt, N and AS Mohammad (2018): By Way of Patriotism, Coercion or Instrumentalization: How the Eritrean regime makes use of the diaspora to stabilise its rule, Globalizations 15 (2), pp. 232-247. Hirt, N and AS Mohammad (2021): Eritrea's Self-Reliance Narrative and the Remittance Paradox: Reflections on Thirty Years of Retrogression, accepted 23 Dez 2020, Remittances Review (forthcoming).

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