News > World > Europe

Hundreds of Europeans including firefighters and priests arrested for 'solidarity' with refugees, data shows

Research suggests sharp rise in people being criminalised for providing food, shelter and transport and other 'basic acts of human kindness' to asylum seekers across Europe

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Firefighters, priests and elderly women are among hundreds of Europeans who have been arrested or investigated for demonstrating "solidarity" with refugees and asylum seekers over the past five years – with such cases rising sharply in the last 18 months, new research shows.

A database collated by global news website *openDemocracy* reveals 250 people across Europe have been arrested or criminalised in other ways for providing food, shelter and transport and other "basic acts of human kindness" to migrants.

The number of cases increased dramatically in 2018, with more than 100 cases recorded last year – twice as many as in 2017. The majority of the cases in 2018 were arrests and charges for providing food, transport or other support to migrants without legal papers.

Among the cases identified are a Spanish firefighter who faces up to 30 years in prison for rescuing migrants from drowning at sea in Greece, a French olive grower arrested for feeding and sheltering migrants on the border of Italy and a 70-year-old Danish grandmother who was convicted and fined for offering a lift to a family with small children.

Human rights groups said this "clampdown" by the European authorities on the work of individuals and NGOs assisting asylum seekers and refugees went "against the rule of law", and urged EU member states to "recommit to human rights and European values".

They warned that if far-right parties make big gains in the upcoming European elections – where migration is a central battleground issue – arrest numbers were likely to rise still further across the continent.

It comes after Amnesty International called on European governments to stop "criminalising human rights defenders" following the arrest of British citizen Tom Ciotkowski, who is facing up to five years in French prison and a fine of up to €7,500 (£6,500) for documenting police abuse of refugees in Calais.

The human rights group has called for all charges against the 30-year-old to be dropped, branding them "unjust" and "emblematic" of harassment and intimidation faced by volunteers in northern France.

Elisa de Pieri, researcher at Amnesty International, said the European authorities were trying to "block volunteers offering people the minimum of what they require to survive" – and that it had started with Italy's decision to block refugee boats from entering its ports.

"That sent a very powerful message – and the wrong message – that NGOs were doing something wrong. And now that sort of discourse has spread to other countries that are not facing the seafront on the south," she said.

"It started to paint a negative picture of NGOs and humanitarian assistance, which played into the hands of the far right [...] and it has had a chilling effect. There's a difference between smuggling and supporting people who don't have the bare necessities to get by."

The new research, which is based on news reports, research by NGOs across Europe and other online sources, shows people have been arrested, investigated, or threatened with prison or fines across 14 European countries since 2015. The vast majority occurred in Italy, Greece, France, the UK, Spain, Germany and Denmark.

It is believed to be the most comprehensive list ever compiled of these cases

across borders to date, but campaigners said it was likely to be the "tip of the iceberg" as many cases will not have been detected as part of the research.

Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, said it was "troubling" to see the "increasing pressure and restrictions" European countries were putting on the work of individuals and NGOs assisting migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

"They face administrative burdens intended to make their work impossible, stigmatisation by misleading and hostile political rhetoric, and even criminal prosecution," she continued.

"Instead of clamping down on those who help migrants live a more dignified life, Council of Europe member states should become more serious in implementing the standards they agreed to and finally put human rights and the principle of responsibility sharing at the centre of their migration and asylum policies.

"It is high time that political leaders across member states recommit with human rights, the rule of law and European values. This is both a legal and a moral duty."

Josh Hallam, field manager for Calais-based charity Help Refugees, said the "criminalisation" of volunteers who are trying to help people was a "worrying", and – he feared – "escalating" practice in northern France.

"Our volunteers have been issued with charges including 'defamation', 'assault' and 'contempt' for highlighting police violence and the horrendous treatment of refugees and migrants at the hands of the authorities who should be protecting them," he continued.

"Pressing charges against volunteers is only part of the efforts to discourage individuals who want to support displaced people. Intimidation, harassment, unjustified surveillance, ridiculous fines, threats of arrest, aggression and active

violence are all recorded by volunteers – practices that still happen here with regularity.

"This treatment of volunteers has become so endemic that it features as part of our trainings for new volunteers before they go out to work in Calais."

Countries across Europe have criminalised acts that facilitate illegal immigration – including directly or indirectly assisting entry, movement or settlement in a country without valid immigration papers, through to providing accommodation, food, shelter and assistance with transport.

In some cases, these laws have existed for years, but are now being applied with increasing severity under far-right leaders, the research states.

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