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Asylum seekers and security screening of social media and data carriers in Europe

The armed conflict in Syria that erupted in 2011 has produced a vast number of forced migrants and is considered one of the driving factors behind the high influx of asylum seekers in Europe since 2014. The sudden and dramatic increase in the number of asylum applications – which affected different European countries in different degrees – led to exceptional challenges with regard to the identification and screening of asylum seekers. In this contribution, I will discuss how, during the high influx, five European countries (Belgium, Germany, Norway, the Netherlands and Sweden) tried to properly assess the applicants' identity and engage in thorough 1F exclusion – and security screening.

The results are based on interviews with 43 representatives of immigration authorities, aliens police agencies, intelligence and security services and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) as well as a review of available academic literature, relevant rules and regulations and available formal and informal policy documents.

Our study demonstrates that the use of new methods such as data carrier extraction and social media analysis has in some countries increased substantially in the past years, while other countries are hesitant to adopt these methods. Sound evaluations with proper cost-benefit analyses of these new methods are not – or at least not publicly – available. This impairs a fact-based and normative debate on whether or not, and to what extent, the implementation of such methods is recommendable. Apart from questions relating to effectiveness and cost-efficiency, the application of these methods also leads to all sorts of legal, normative and ethical questions that are currently hardly (publicly) discussed.

Maarten Bolhuis is Assistant Professor in criminology at VU University Amsterdam, focusing on migration related crime. His main research interests are international crimes, terrorism and irregular migration. During his PhD trajectory, Maarten has also gained substantial experience with conducting policy research and teaching. Previously, Maarten has worked in the field of human rights.