

Left to the Waves: The Perilous Reality of Migrant Pushbacks at Mediterranean Sea

Dalgalara Terk Edilenler: Ege Denizi'ndeki Geri İtmelerin Tehlikeli Gerçeği

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the Aegean Sea has become the deadliest sea route for migrants and asylum seekers from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. A ship capsized with 750 migrants on June 14, 2023 in the Mediterranean Sea and sinking off the coast of Greece with 80 dead, 100 rescued and 500 missing showed the depth of tragedy of Mediterranean Sea route for migrants and pushbacks practice. The aim of this article is to investigate Pushbacks practice in the Aegean Sea which is the deadliest sea route for the migrants and asylum seekers. This article will also examine the practice of pushbacks, which has contributed to an increase in deaths in the Mediterranean. Pushbacks appear to have begun after the 2015 migration crisis, and evidence confirms that pushbacks were implemented deliberately in response to mass migration.

Pushbacks include a variety of state measures aimed at forcing refugees and migrants to leave their territory while denying access to applicable legal and procedural frameworks. In some cases - migrants are forcibly returned from EU territorial waters to the open sea and leaving afloat in the middle of Sea in a dangerous way by Greek Coast Guard and Frontex. Pushbacks are considered unlawful under international migration law and European migration policies.

Türkiye has historically been a country of origin, transit and destination for migrants. At the same time migrants and asylum seekers consider Türkiye as a transit country to reach Greece and Italy via the Aegean Sea. It is worth noting that among EU member states, Germany is the most important destination for refugees and asylum seekers.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Geri İtme, Göçmen,

Mülteci, Ege Denizi Ve

Yunanistan.

ÖZET

Son yıllarda Ege Denizi, Kuzey Afrika, Orta Doğu ve Güney Asya'dan gelen göçmenler ve sığınmacılar için en ölümcül deniz rotası haline gelmiştir. 14 Haziran 2023'te Akdeniz'de 750 göçmen taşıyan bir geminin batması ve Yunanistan kıyılarında 80 kişinin ölümü, 100 kişinin kurtarılması ve 500 kişinin kaybolması, Akdeniz göç rotasının trajedisinin boyutlarını ve geri itme uygulamalarının vahametini gözler önüne sermiştir. Bu makalenin amacı, göçmenler ve sığınmacılar için en tehlikeli deniz

yolu olan Ege Denizi'ndeki geri itme uygulamalarını incelemektir. Ayrıca, bu çalışma, Akdeniz'deki ölümlerin artmasına katkıda bulunan geri itme pratiklerini de ele alacaktır. Geri itmelerin, 2015 göç krizinin ardından sistematik olarak uygulanmaya başladığı ve kitlesel göç hareketlerine kasıtlı bir yanıt olarak hayata geçirildiği kanıtlanmaktadır.

Ger i itmeler, mültecilerin ve göçmenlerin ülke topraklarını terk etmeye zorlanmasını ve yasal prosedürlere erişimlerinin engellenmesini içeren çeşitli devlet uygulamalarından oluşmaktadır. Bazı durumlarda, Yunan Sahil Güvenliği ve Frontex tarafından göçmenler, AB karasularından uluslararası denizlere zorla geri gönderilmekte ve deniz ortamında güvenliksiz bir şekilde terk edilmektedir. Bu uygulamalar, uluslararası göç hukuku ve Avrupa göç politikalarına aykırı olarak kabul edilmektedir.

Türkiye, tarihsel olarak göçmenler için köken, transit ve hedef ülke konumundadır. Aynı zamanda, göçmenler ve sığınmacılar, Ege Denizi üzerinden Yunanistan ve İtalya'ya ulaşmak için Türkiye'yi bir transit ülke olarak kullanmaktadır. dikkat edilmesi gereken husus, AB üyesi ülkeler arasında Almanya, mülteciler ve sığınmacılar için en önemli varış noktasıdır.

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1. GİRİŞ

Germany is regarded as a nation characterized by a “Willkommenskultur” (welcome culture) towards migration. Following the declaration of an open-door migration policy by Chancellor Angela Merkel, Germany witnessed the arrival of over one million refugees in the year 2015. (Omini, 2018). It was the largest wave of refugees on the European continent since 1985, and according to the Pew Research Center report (Pew Research Center, 2016), around 1.3 million asylum seekers applied in 28 member states of the European Union in 2015. Angela Merkel, the former Chancellor of Germany, was esteemed both domestically and internationally as the preeminent political figure in Europe. However, her handling of the refugee crisis drew criticism from political factions on both the left and the right, including those within her own country and from officials in Brussels (Spiegel, 2015). “After initially welcoming refugees in September 2015, European states are now rolling out the razor wire, refusing to share resettlement burdens and failing to take action that could help reduce the number of refugees drowning in the Mediterranean” (Ignatieff, Keeley, Ribble and Maccammon, 2016, p. 2). Between 2014 and till the end of 2024 the obtained data indicate that more than 31,200 individuals perished in the Mediterranean Sea. (statista, 2025).

Greece, often identified as the primary entry point for undocumented migrants and asylum seekers en route to European countries, is not only considering the extension of its substantial border barrier from 40 kilometers to 120 kilometers along its frontier with Türkiye — while seeking financial assistance from the European Union (AP, 2022), but has also implemented pushback practices. These measures entail the forcible return of migrants and asylum seekers from Greek territory, even when they are actively seeking asylum.

In May 2021, The Guardian, drawing on its investigative findings, reported (Tondo, 2021) that European nations had resorted to unlawful methods - specifically, the

pushback of approximately 40,000 asylum seekers from Europe's borders amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The pushbacks resulted in the tragic loss of approximately 2,000 lives in the Mediterranean Sea.

The Human Rights Council recently disclosed in a report (Morales, 2021) that the pushbacks of migrants are not limited to land borders but also occur in urban areas, including detention and reception centers in Greece. Pushback policies and practices are employed by governments as a deterrent measure, a form of punishment, and a means of collective expulsion of migrants, constituting part of broader strategic approaches (Morales, 2021). Data published in 2020 (Bar20) in Volume II of *"The Black Book of Pushbacks"* by the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) organization, funded and commissioned by a left-wing political group within the European Parliament, reveals alarming accounts of pushback victims. Based on testimonies from migrants, the report highlights that 90 percent of pushbacks in countries such as Italy, Slovenia, Hungary, the Balkans, Greece, and Croatia involve one or more forms of torture or ill-treatment.

The data indicates that prior to 2014, pushbacks did not occur, as the number of migrants and asylum seekers from both Syria and Afghanistan was significantly lower than in the post-2014 period. "The case of Syria, the large-scale migration movements towards Türkiye and Europe following the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011 can be considered an important phenomenon in terms of the current relevance of the issue. These movements involve millions of irregular migrants who aim to reach Europe, mostly via Türkiye and largely using Greece as a transit country" (Şahin, 2024: 2). Following Syria, Afghanistan has consistently been the second-largest source of migrants and asylum seekers in European countries since 2014. "Afghanistan's economy was heavily dependent on international aid and funding, so when NATO forces announced their withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, security deteriorated alongside the economic situation, caused to widespread Afghanistani migration" (Pouya, 2022: 295).

As previously noted, pushbacks occur frequently both at sea and on land. However, the primary focus of this paper is on the pushback of migrants and refugees at sea, particularly in the Aegean Sea, which is considered the deadliest maritime route for migrants and refugees attempting to reach the European continent. Concurrently, the European Union has called upon Greece to investigate the sinking of a migrant boat in the Aegean Sea, an incident that resulted in the deaths of five children and involved a reported pushback by the Greek Coast Guard (Szucs, 2022).

2. Methodology and Data

The data presented in this article has been gathered from secondary sources, including websites, United Nations reports and books. One of the most sensitive issues in migration studies is the occurrence of torture. In this study, *"Black Book of Pushbacks"*, books based on primary sources and testimonies of victims of 620 cases conducted by researchers, has been utilized as a primary data source. This article is based on analysis of review of relevant published research and news articles complemented the primary research. Quantitative methods and data collection was

conducted between May 20th 2022 to December 31th 2024. A quantitative study generally takes a linear path and emphasizes objectivity leading to causal explanation. (W. Lawrence, 2014) One of the strengths of this research is that it covers data and events over a four-year period, including recent events related to pushbacks and death tolls in the Mediterranean Sea. The practice of pushbacks remains a contentious issue, with ongoing debates surrounding the terminology used by researchers, news outlets, and government authorities. Furthermore, the practice of pushbacks is frequently denied by the parties involved. In this article, data on pushbacks have also been sourced from the Statista European Statistics website and the Der Spiegel journal, both of which are reputable and reliable sources for government and think tank research and the media.

3. Definition of Pushbacks

There is no precise definition of “pushbacks”. The term “push-back” is a non-technical term coined by refugee advocates (lawyers). Although it is practiced by states, it is not defined by international law (Şahin, 2024: 55). However, terms such as *removal*, *turn back*, *return back*, *force back*, and *pushback* are often used interchangeably to describe the expulsion of migrants and refugees from a state's territory, either on the spot or later. European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR, 2019) defines the Pushbacks as a variety of state measures directed at forcing migrants and refugees out state territory while preventing access to legal and migratory procedures. In doing so, States bypass safeguards governing international protection (including minors), detention-custody, expulsion and the utilize force. “Greece’s systematic policy of ‘pushbacks’, and more specifically of ‘drift-backs’—a term coined by the research agency Forensic Architecture in reference to the abandonment of asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants at sea in non-navigable life rafts in the Aegean Sea” (debordercollective.org, 2024).

Pushback has recently also been considered as enforced disappearance in the context of migration. “In late September 2023, the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances formally adopted its first General Comment on the application of the Convention on Enforced Disappearances in the context of migration” (debordercollective.org, 2024).

“People crossing the oceans in search of protection or opportunities since the beginning of humankind” (Cantor, 2016). Before 2015, there were no reports or complaints about migrants being pushed back. According to reports and news sources, after the migration crisis in 2015, pushbacks became regular and today pushbacks occur daily in the Aegean Sea “resulting in the deaths of more than 40,000” (Tondo, 2021).

The 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees do not mention the term and definition of pushbacks (UNHCR, 2022). However, pushbacks constitute a violation of the principle of non-refoulement (Articles 32 and 33) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which serves as the cornerstone of international refugee protection. This principle explicitly prohibits states from deporting individuals to a country where their life or freedom would be at risk.

European legislation and the *IOM* Glossary on Migration do not use the term “forced return”; instead, they employ the softer synonyms “removal” or “compulsory return,” which occur in accordance with a formal return decision (EMN, 2014). When an asylum seeker’s application is rejected in the host country, they are removed from its territory based on a formal decision. In contrast, pushbacks occur immediately when migrants and asylum seekers attempt to enter a state. The Greek police and border patrols have been reported to employ so-called “slave migrants” in these operations (Statiu, et al., 2022). They have also expelled migrants and asylum seekers from the mainland - including police stations, reception centers, and detention facilities - through night time operations - forcibly returning them to Türkiye (debordercollective.org, 2024). “There are currently at least 32 applications pending before the European Court of Human Rights seeking to challenge the practice of ‘driftbacks’, which we argue is a form of torture that exposes migrants to refoulement and grave risks to their life” (debordercollective.org). Europe’s attempts to stop migration by strengthening national borders and bolstering detention centres outside its borders are pushing people into the hands of smugglers, bypassing checkpoints, crossing borders, through fences and eventually into the hands of smugglers on boats in the Mediterranean.

4. Scope of Pushbacks: Countries involve in pushbacks practices

This research primarily focuses on pushback operations in the Aegean Sea, particularly along the border between Greece and Türkiye, as well as in the OSCE frontline states, where such practices frequently occur. There are reports and investigations indicating that pushback operations are occurring across the entire OSCE region. (Christides, Freudenthal, Lüdke and Popp, 2020). According to the “Black Book of Pushbacks” (Bar20), which is based on the testimonies documented in 620 pushback cases, mass deportations are carried out by Croatia, Greece, the Balkan countries, Hungary, Slovenia, and Italy, respectively.

Spain is another country engaged in pushbacks, employing extreme force at its two enclaves in North Africa. Moroccan and Sudanese migrants have been reported climbing the chain-link fences surrounding the Melilla border with Morocco (HRW, 2022). On the other side of the Melilla enclave, there is an immigrant cemetery on the outskirts of Nador, where the bodies of deceased migrants are occasionally buried en masse by Moroccan authorities (UNHCR, 2022). It is important to note that the territorial disputes between Spain and Morocco over the regions of Ceuta and Melilla are a primary cause of the violence, victimization, and instrumentalization of migrants in North Africa. Morocco and Tunisia are the two main countries through which African migrants travel across the Sahara to reach Spain and Italy. Morocco has been involved in both pullbacks at sea and pushbacks in the desert. “In Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, migrants are brought to remote areas and abandoned without food or water - some of them right in the desert” (Bautista, 2024).

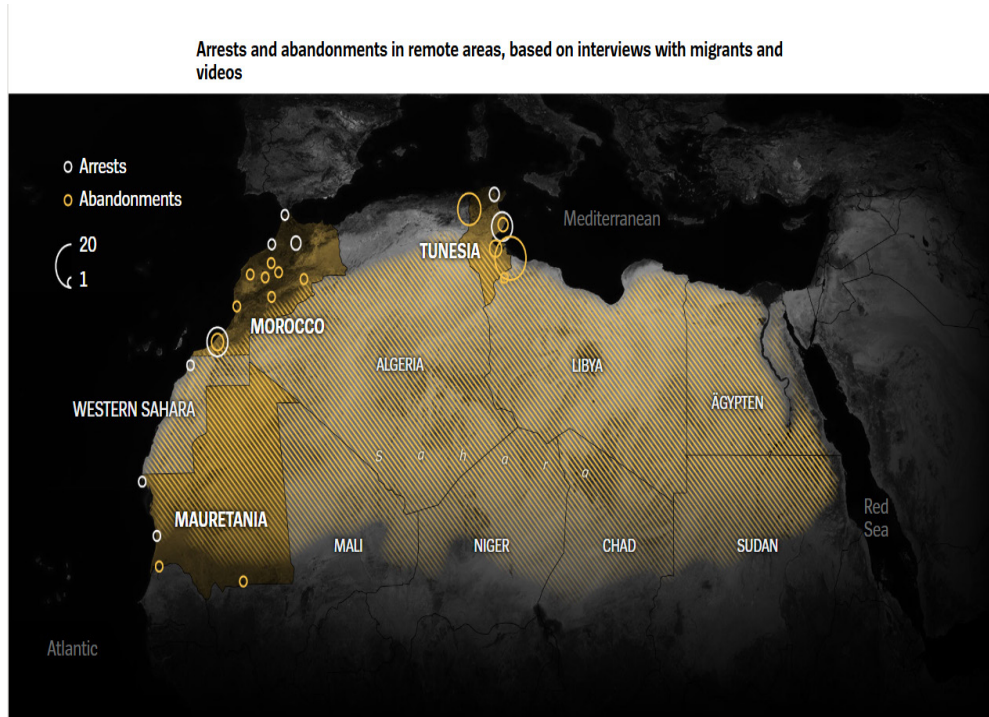


Image: Arrests and abandonments in remotes areas

Resource: https://interactive.spiegel.de/gra/ai2html/international/2024/2224_sahara-v0/img/2224-sahara-v3-Presentation.jpg

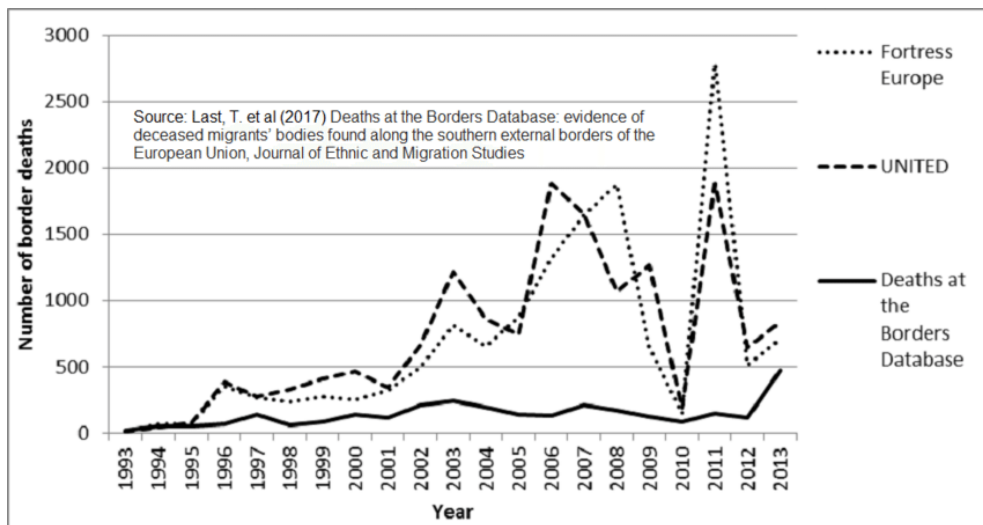
The English Channel, the narrow waterway separating the UK from France, is another place where the British government has implemented a push-back operation to prevent migrants from crossing the English Channel and reaching the UK, sometimes leading to incidents. In November 2021, 27 migrants including children and pregnant woman died after their inflatable boat capsized in the English Channel while trying to reach UK from France (Meheut, 2021). Report indicates that more than 290 migrants have died in the English Channel since 1990 (Parliament.uk, 2021). The UK House of Lords had planned to legalize the pushback of migrants (hrw, 2022) and the deployment of the Royal Navy to deter migrants crossing the English Channel (Taylor, 2020), but was later rebuffed by the British Home Office following widespread condemnation.

4.1. Pushbacks in the Aegean Sea

The phenomenon of “border deaths” has certainly existed in the Mediterranean for over 25 years and there seems to be no end in sight. Migrants and refugees die on the way from the Canary Islands of Spain to Lampedusa of Italy and from the Aegean to the fences of Ceuta and Melilla (Cantor, 2016).

The southern EU land border and sea routes are more dangerous for migrants than

other external routes. According to the “Deaths at Borders Database Website”¹, which records migrant deaths from 1990 to 2013, the average fatality identification rate on land routes to the southern EU is 34%, while on sea routes it is 35% (Cantor, 2016). The number of deaths can be attributed to the documentation provided by the Border Deaths Database, which records the recovered bodies and identified deaths of 3,188 individuals attempting to reach southern parts of the EU between 1990 and 2013. According to the infographic data from the Deaths at Borders Database (Borderdeaths.org, 2013) 342 migrants lost their lives attempting to cross the Aegean Sea from Türkiye to Greece by land and sea routes between 1990 and the end of 2013. The cause of the deaths was not pushback, as it was not practiced by Greece at that time.



Graph 1. Number of Border deaths

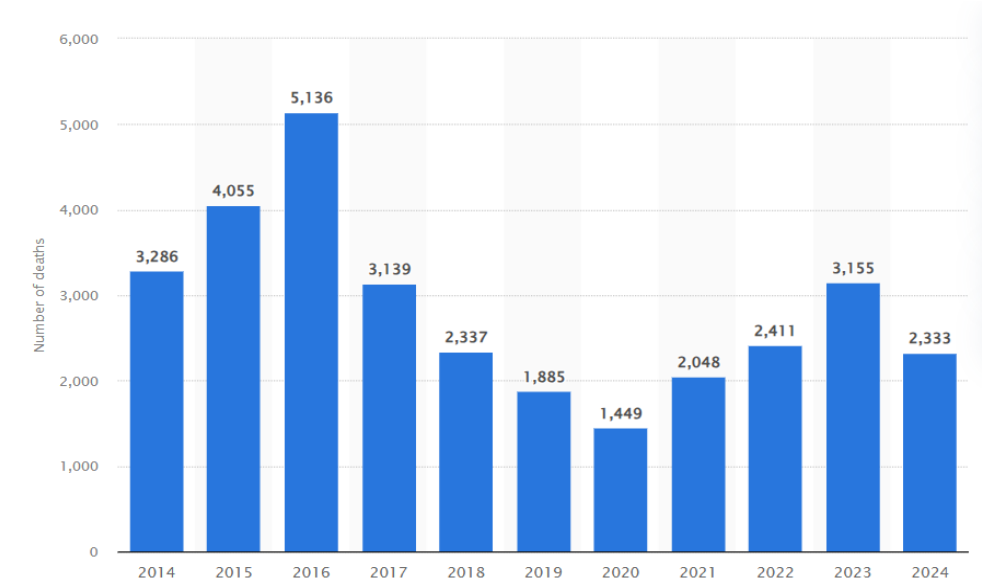
Source: https://www.borderdeaths.org/?page_id=529

The above graph shows a stark difference in trends between news reporting of dead and missing migrants (steep increase with a dramatic dip in 2010) and the number of bodies found along southern EU borders (overall increase since early 2000s but more constant).

According to data compiled by IOM, 4,077 migrants died in 2014 while reaching their destinations, mostly by sea, with 75% (3,077) of the deaths occurring in the Mediterranean. (Brian and Laczko, 2014). IOM estimates that at least 40,000 migrants died between 2000 and 2014. “Many argue that there is a high “human cost” associated with the border control policies of many States” (Brian and Laczko, 2014, p. 16). The causes of drowning normally are a combination of factors such as overcrowded boats, rough weather and neglect, lead to a human tragedy (Brian and Laczko, 2014).

¹ <http://www.borderdeaths.org>

Number of recorded deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea from 2014 to 2024



Graph 2. Deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea 2014-2024

Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1082077/deaths-of-migrants-in-the-mediterranean-sea/>

The data presented in Graph 2 indicate that over 31,200 individuals lost their lives in the Mediterranean between 2014 and the end of 2024. The analyzed data demonstrate that the lowest recorded number of fatalities occurred in 2019, with 1,449 deaths recorded, whereas the highest number of fatalities was recorded in 2016, over 5,100 individuals. However, the precise number of fatalities in the Mediterranean Sea remains uncertain. For example, between 2014 and 2018, approximately 12,000 individuals who drowned were never recovered (statista, 2025). In 2024, at least 8,938 individuals lost their lives along migration routes, with the Asian routes proving to be the deadliest, followed by the Mediterranean crossing and routes through Africa, including the Sahara Desert (reuters, 2025).

In recent years, pushback operations by Greek coastguards and patrols have been a major factor in migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea. In a classified report, the EU’s anti-fraud office found that Frontex EU border guards were involved in Pushbacks operation in the Mediterranean Sea (www.spiegel.de).

According to Amnesty International (International Amnesty, 2021) evidence, migrants detained up to 700km away from the sea and land borders and then transferred and returned at the land border with Türkiye. On November 14, 2022, Frontex announced that in the ten months of 2022, 275,000 irregular migrants were intercepted

at the external borders of the European Union, 73% increase compared with the last year and the highest number since 2016 (Frontex, 2022). Western Balkan migratory route is considered the most active entrance gate to EU for migrants from countries of Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran.

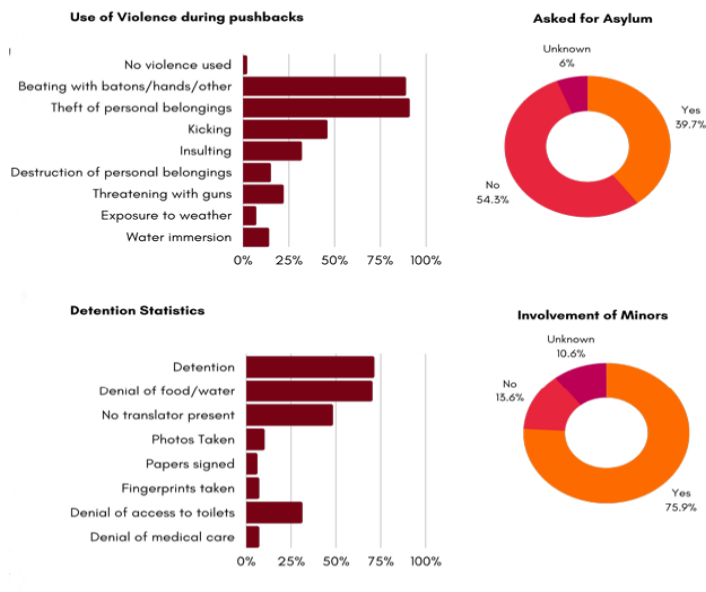
5. Torturous journeys: Torture and humiliation on the Border

According to World Organization Against Torture report (OMCT, 2021), Greek authorities illegally and forcibly returned over 7,000 migrants and refugees to the Mediterranean in 2021.

According to the “Basic Human Rights” report of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, there have been 42,000 migrants pushed back to Türkiye by Greece since 2020. (Ombudsman, 2020).

In the I. volume of “The Black Book of Pushbacks”, which recorded torture and abuses based on horrific testimonies of thousands of victims in Croatia and Greece, 90 percent of migrants and refugees faced ill-treatment, serious abuses violence, torture and humiliation (Barker and Zazovic, 2020).

The Black Book of Pushbacks between 2017 and 2020, revealed the atrocious types of violence that used in Pushbacks based on the collected testimonies were the theft and destruction of immigrants’ belongings (77%), the beating/kicking with batons (72%), being forced to undress even in winter (27%), guns threatening and shooting (40%) humiliation (23%) and pushing people to the ground (20%), water immersion (7%) etc. (Barker and Zazovic, 2020). According to testimonies, as time passes, the types and volumes of atrocities against immigrants perpetrated by states are increasing.



Graph 3. Using of violence during the pushbacks

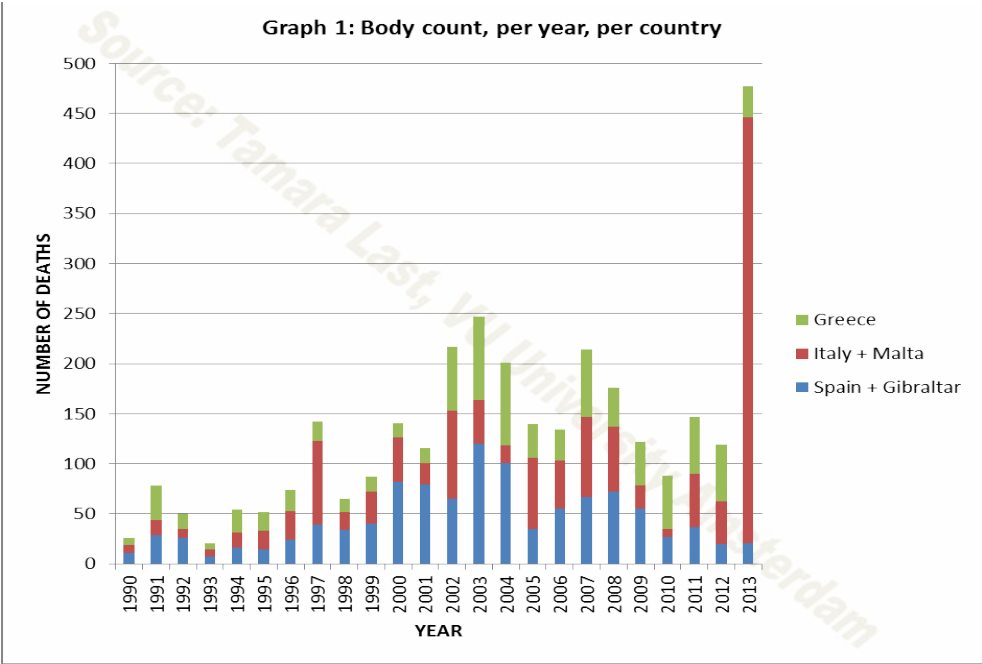
Source: <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn%3Aaaid%3As-cds%3AUS%3Ac5a9aaa-ee62-3286-a505-0d9122b69b8f>

The above data, obtained from the “The Black Book of Pushbacks” books written based on original reports, show that more than 80% of migrants and asylum seekers were subjected to physical violence during the pushbacks by Greek Coastal Guards. The majority of migrants and refugees Amnesty International interviewed had experienced or witnessed some sort of violence either by Greek uniformed officials or men in civilian camouflage. The violence includes hitting with sticks or truncheons, punches, kicks, slaps and pushes, often resulting in severe injuries. Men were more subjected to humiliating and oppressively naked body searches in, sometimes before their women and children (International Amnesty, 2021).

On October 15, 2022, Greece accused Türkiye of “pushing forward” migrants crossing the Evros River and according to their claim, 92 migrants mostly Afghanistani and Syrian were found naked, some with bodily injuries, at the Greece-Türkiye border (washingtonpost, 2022). At the same time, Türkiye and other international organizations including Human rights Watch regularly accuse Greece of violently pushing back immigrants entering by land and sea.

6. The Greece’s Pushbacks to Deter Migration

Greece’s migration policy since the 1990s has mainly focused to manage and reduce the influx of refugees and migrants (Dimitriadi, 2022). After the 2015 refugee crisis, several immigration laws were passed to integrate long stayed immigrants in the country while resorted to a strong deterrence policy for new arrivals (Dimitriadi, 2022). Pushbacks of migrants is recently added to as an undeclared deterrent policy for Greece. Last year Greek Migration and Asylum Minister in a joint ministerial decision (JMD), (reliefweb, 2021) statement designated Türkiye as a “safe third country” and returning migrants back to Türkiye from countries like Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, Somalia and Bangladesh upon their arrival. Greece claiming that Türkiye is not at war, therefore, it meets all the conditions for the living and protection of migrants from these countries and accept the return of persons ineligible for international protection (Grandi, 2022). On the other side, there is widespread rhetoric and discourse among Turkish people that Türkiye turned to (In Turkish using metaphor *yol geçen hanı*) warehouse of undocumented migrants.



Graph 4: Body count, per year, per country

Source: https://www.borderdeaths.org/?page_id=293

The aforementioned Graphic 4 presents a demographic breakdown of the population within the database, categorized by sex, origin, age, and cause of death. The data reveals a significant gender disparity, with males constituting the majority (72%) of the recorded individuals.

For many years, Greece has confined migrants and refugees to overcrowded islands, with the notorious Moria refugee camp emblematic of the European Union’s failure to address migration challenges humanely. Greece’s approach to migration is not limited to containment; it has increasingly adopted a policy of pushbacks, intensifying the return of migrants to Türkiye on a daily basis, including from refugee camps and throughout Greek territory. According to Amnesty International, migrants have returned to Türkiye from a distance of 700 km from the border (International Amnesty, 2021).

Greece functions primarily as a transit country; however, despite the fact that the principal destinations for migrants and refugees are Germany and other EU member states, it systematically conducts pushback operations. “For eight years, the Border Violence Monitoring Network has been documenting pushbacks, the unlawful and often violent and deadly crossborder expulsion of an individual without due process, as well as related forms of violence. Based on the thousands of testimonies collected by BVMN and its members, we have demonstrated that pushbacks are a systematic practice and de facto policy at European borders” (BVMN, 2024).



Image: Demonstration of migrants and refugees in Athen

Source: <https://debordercollective.org/updates/unaccountability-eu-borders-ombudsperson-frontex/>

During the 2015 migration influx, official Greek government data indicate that of the 1.3 million refugees and migrants who entered the country, only 62,000 remained (Howden, 2017). In contrast, German Federal Statistical Office (destatis.de, 2022) records show that out of over 2,136,000 arrivals in 2015 alone, Germany retained 1,139,000 refugees and migrants.

Since 2015, the European Union and international organizations have allocated over \$3.4 billion in funding to Greece through the *Protection, Surveillance, and Rescue Program* (Commission European, 2022). While officially participating in maritime rescue operations, Greece has been systematically engaged in the violent pushback of migrants towards Türkiye, in some cases abandoning them adrift at sea. This practice has been extensively documented through visual evidence, including repeated footage captured by Turkish Navy unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) showing Greek Coast Guard vessels forcibly repelling migrant boats in Aegean waters (hurriyetdailynews, 2022). Greek Migration Minister Notis Mitarakis announced that in the 8 months of 2022, more than 1500,000 illegal migrants were prevented from entering Greek by land and sea (Tasos, 2022).

7. Pullbacks of migrants at Sea

Migrants attempting to reach Europe via transit through Greek territory from Türkiye are routinely intercepted by Greek coast guard and border patrol units. These individuals are then systematically returned to Turkish waters, with documented cases of abandonment at sea occurring during both daylight and nighttime operations. As documented by InfoMigrants (2022) indicates that Greek Coast Guard personnel

engage in abandonment of migrant vessels at sea, including the systematic removal of boat engines to prevent entry into Greek territorial waters (infomigrants, 2022). The International Maritime and Rescue Convention (SAR Convention) obliges the member states to provide assistance and to rescue people in distress at sea and in coastal areas (unhcr, 2015).

All European Union member states have criminalized actions that assist irregular migrants in facilitating their entry and stay, with penalties ranging from substantial fines amounting to thousands of euros to imprisonment for up to ten year (EU, 2019). Opendemocracy in collaboration with journalists from across Europe, revealed that more than 250 people were arrested and charged in 14 countries over a five-year period, and most of those convicted appear to have been charged mostly with providing migrants with food, shelter and transport to the migrants without any documents (Archer, 2019). Iasonas Apostolopoulos, a civil engineer who has worked with aid organizations since 2015, was initially told he had won “Greece’s Presidential Award” for his humanitarian work, However, on the eve of the ceremony the award was rescinded on the grounds that he had “insulted Greece” through his support for migrants (Katy, 2022).

In addition to preventing irregular migrants from entering European Union countries by land and sea, Türkiye simultaneously engages in rescue operations. The Turkish Coast Guard has stopped 60,000 illegal migrants en route to Europe by sea in 2019 and has intercepted more than 238,000 migrants from entering Europe since 2015 (dailysabah, 2020). The Turkish Coast Guard rescued more than 12,000 undocumented migrants in the Aegean Sea in 2022 (trthaber, 2022).

Every migrant’s boat that sets sail is provided by human traffickers with the contact number of Rescue Organizations and Coastal Gaurds for rescue operations in the event of capsiz or other incident at sea. In the last two years, the death toll in the Aegean Sea had increased significantly. In the tragic shipwreck incident on November 2, 2022, the Greek Coast Guard recovered the bodies of 21 migrants following the sinking of their boat, with dozens more reported missing or presumed dead. (Elena, 2022). In August of that year, 27 migrants drowned in the Aegean Sea, with numerous others reported missing.

In 2021, Greece conducted rescue operations for 1,500 migrants, marking a notable increase compared to the 600 rescue operations carried out by the Greek Coast Guard in the previous year. (dailytimes, 2022). Despite the allocation of millions of euros in aid and funding to support Greek rescue operations, recent data indicate a decline in the scale and effectiveness of these operations.

The deadliest and most tragic event of the ship capsized in the Mediterranean occurred on 14 June 2023. According to IOM report “it is believed to have been somewhere between 400 and 750, according to various testimonies. So far 104 people have been rescued and 78 bodies retrieved, while hundreds remain missing, and feared dead.” (IOM, 2023).

In 2023, it is estimated that 3,105 migrants lost their lives crossing the Mediterranean

Sea. By 2024, 2,333 deaths were recorded. However, the exact number of deaths recorded in the Mediterranean is not known. For example, around 12,000 people who drowned between 2014 and 2018 have never been found (Statista, 2025).

8. Conclusion

Since 2015, the Aegean Sea has been the deadliest route for immigrants and asylum seekers from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asian countries. Migrants and asylum seekers from these countries strived to reach EU countries, but were stopped by the Greek Coast Guard in the middle of the sea and in coastal areas and pushed back to Türkiye. Greek authorities used migrants as intermediaries and sent migrants and refugees back to Türkiye hundreds of kilometers away from the camps and borders. They were subjected to torture and humiliation at the borders of EU countries, especially in Greece and the Balkans.

Thousands of migrants perished at sea every year trying to reach western countries through waterways as the European Union has tightened border controls since 2015. To deter the inflow of migrants and asylum seekers, Greece has resorted to a pushback practice that forcibly and torturously pushbacks migrants and asylum seekers to Türkiye. During the pushbacks operation the data indicated that, more than 80% of migrants and asylum seekers were subjected to physical violence during pushbacks by the Greek Coast Guard.

The evidence obtained confirmed that pushbacks began following the 2015 migration crisis and were deliberately implemented as a response to large-scale migration. Despite tightened border controls by both Greek and Turkish authorities to prevent tragedy on the Mediterranean waterways, migrants and refugees continued to cross the Aegean Sea, often bypassing Greek territory and heading directly to Italy. The European Union and the United Kingdom are tried to ease the migration burden by processing refugee applications in third countries.

Pushbacks have taken place on land and at sea, and it is important to note that pushbacks are linked to pullbacks, where Türkiye tried to prevent cross-border infiltration and kept migrants and asylum seekers on its side. Pushbacks was not practiced before 2014 and data showed that pushback was introduced in 2015 following a large influx of migrants and asylum seekers trying to reach European countries. Data indicated that between 2000 and 2014, more than 40,000 people died on Mediterranean waterways trying to reach Greece and Italy. The findings of this research not only highlight the increasing death toll in the Mediterranean Sea, however also revealed that 2024 was the deadliest year for migrants, with a toll of 9,000 fatalities, the highest number ever recorded.

The data also revealed that more than 31,200 people lost their lives in the Mediterranean between 2014 and 2024. The data demonstrated that the tightening of border controls and the implementation of pushback practices have contributed to an increase in migrant and refugee fatalities, as well as a rise in missing persons in the Mediterranean Sea. European attempted to stem migration by strengthening national borders and bolstering detention facilities outside its borders pushed people into

smugglers hands and ultimately onto boats on the Mediterranean Sea.

For those who successfully reached Europe, the challenges and dangers persisted upon arrival. The absence of adequate shelter, exposure to unsanitary living conditions, harsh weather, perilous border crossings, and encounters with hostile authorities place individuals at heightened risk of illness, injury, and suffering from mental health problems for some time.

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This paper complies with Research and Publication Ethics, has no conflict of interest to declare, and has received no financial support. The article has been checked for spelling and plagiarism/similarity. The article was evaluated by "at least two external referees" and "double blinding" method. The author sent a signed "*Copyright Transfer Form*" to the journal. **There is no need to obtain ethical permission for the current study as per the legislation. The "Declaration Form Regarding No Ethics Permission Required" was sent to the journal by the authors on this subject.** The author contributed to all sections and stages of the study alone".

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