



A coalition to “shield” migrants and refugees against violence at the borders

We will hold Greece and the EU accountable for the violations of the rights of migrants and refugees fleeing Turkey

Over the last days, violations of the rights of migrants and refugees seeking to access EU territory via Greece have escalated to a new extreme. The conditions for such an escalation have long been in the making. In 2015, the EU introduced the “hotspot” approach, imposing on Italy and Greece the sorting of migrants and refugees arriving on their shores. In March 2016, the EU signed an agreement with Turkey, which for a time, allowed to contain crossings. Yet the twin developments transformed Aegean islands into open-air prisons and exacerbated a humanitarian catastrophe at Greece’s borders. And the untenable cooperation with Turkey – denounced by civil society - is now unsurprisingly breaking down, with Turkish authorities seeking to pressure the EU by sending migrants and refugees in its direction.

In the aim of stemming the increasing arrivals of exiles fleeing war and now the threats of Turkish authorities, Greek agencies have resorted to a new level of violence – and have been joined in them by segments of the population. At sea, the Greek coast guard have blocked the route of migrants and refugee boats, shooting in the air and even wounding passengers.¹ A child has drowned during the crossing.² On land, push-backs across the Evros river have continued, and video footage –labelled as “fake news” by the Greek authorities³ but now verified by Forensic Architecture - shows a Syrian refugee being shot dead.⁴ Finally activists acting in solidarity with migrants and refugees are being criminalised and attacked by far-right groups.⁵ Grave violations are ongoing and the most fundamental principles of asylum law are being shunned.

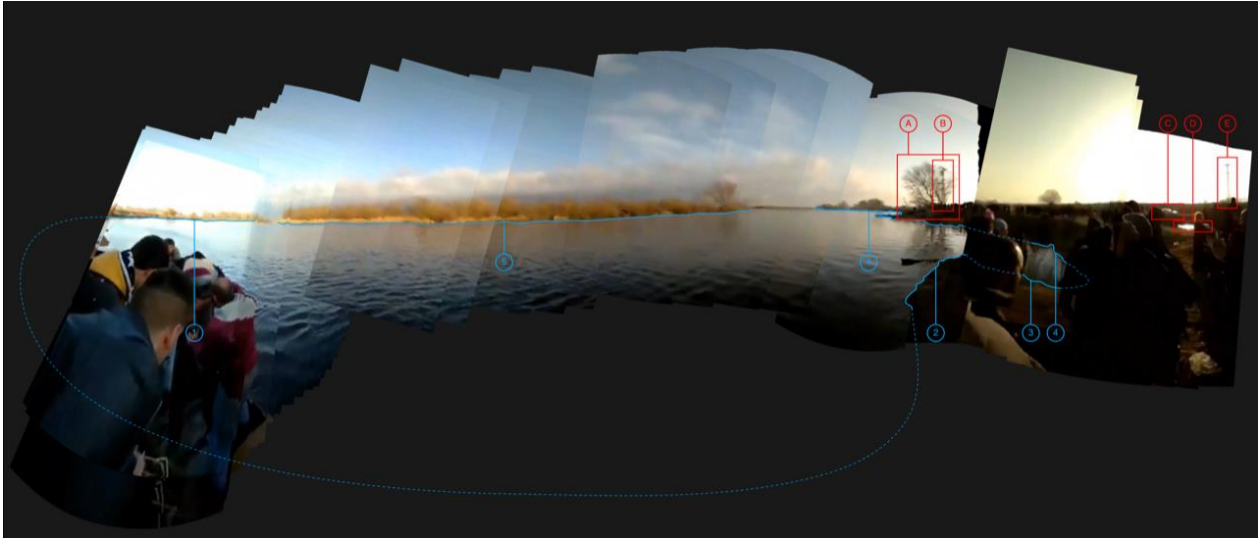
¹ https://alarmphone.org/en/2020/03/04/escalating-violence-in-the-aegean-sea/?post_type_release_type=post&fbclid=IwAR2r2ATotl6HEfg2F2Zt3FDScFgZHB4wU5jb-T27jwkhV_pFcXYcdla4xXg

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/02/child-dies-as-boat-carrying-migrants-capsizes-off-lesbos>

³ <http://www.ekathimerini.com/250110/article/ekathimerini/news/greece-calls-fake-news-on-news-of-dead-refugee>

⁴ <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/syrian-refugee-killed-by-greek-police-while-trying-to-cross-border/news>

⁵ https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/xgq533/video-shows-greek-mobs-attacking-migrant-boats-and-aid-workers



Still from an ongoing video investigation by Forensic Architecture showing a panorama created from eyewitness footage capturing the transfer of Muhammed al-Arab, who was fatally shot after he crossed the Evros/Meriç river. Credit: Forensic Architecture, 2020. Full video: <https://vimeo.com/395567226>

Greek authorities are sending a simple message to potential migrants and refugees, one that the Greek foreign ministry conveyed on twitter: "no one can cross the Greek borders".⁶ Greece's policy of closure⁷ has also received the backing of the EU. Charles Michel, President of the European Council, has applauded Greek efforts "to protect the European borders"⁸ while Ursula von der Leyen, European commission president, has referred to Greece as a "European shield" – thus suggesting that unarmed migrants and refugees constitute a physical threat to Europe.⁹ Finally, Frontex, the European border agency, is preparing "a rapid border intervention" squad.¹⁰ In short, Greece and the EU appear ready to resort to any means necessary to deter migrants and refugees and prevent the repetition of the 2015 large-scale arrivals in Europe – and of the European-wide political crisis it triggered.

We firmly condemn the instrumental use of migrants and refugees by the EU and Turkey, and the Greek and EU operations deployed to prevent them from reaching European soil. No policy aim can justify such gross violations. Exiles fleeing violence must not face the violence of borders while they seek protection. Our organisations are joining their efforts to hold states accountable for their crimes. We plan to document and take legal action against those responsible for the violations of migrants and refugees' rights, as well as those of activists acting in solidarity with them. We will employ our investigative and legal instruments to block state violence and reverse the deeply worrying trend towards the multiplication of push-backs in Greece, – a trend observable to different degrees across the EU's shifting borders. Migrants and refugees are not a threat the EU should shield itself against, but are themselves threatened by state violence all along their precarious trajectories. We aim to use the tools of human rights to shield migrants and refugees from the brutality targeting them.

⁶ <https://www.euronews.com/2020/02/29/greek-police-fire-tear-gas-at-refugees-amid-violence-at-turkish-border>

⁷ <http://www.ekathimerini.com/250097/article/ekathimerini/news/greece-freezes-asyulum-applications-from-illegally-entering-migrants>

⁸ <http://www.ekathimerini.com/250097/article/ekathimerini/news/greece-freezes-asyulum-applications-from-illegally-entering-migrants>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/03/migration-eu-praises-greece-as-shield-after-turkey-opens-border>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/03/migration-eu-praises-greece-as-shield-after-turkey-opens-border>