



Photo: Gökhan Balcı/AA



“Pushing Back Refugees” Violence against Humanity on the Greek Borders

Especially since 2015, Greece has been giving a test against the migration flow in her borders. However, the extent to which she complies with human rights in this issue is a matter of debate. Although there was a positive approach especially in the Greek public opinion in the early stages of migration to Europe, as the number of refugees increased, the strict attitude of the Greeks, in particular the police officers, had a great impact in the international media. The Greece has been trying to push back irregular migrants for the past 3 years, blatantly ignoring their rights. Unfortunately, hundreds of refugees have lost their lives due to the unlawful intervention of the Greek military forces on the sea and river borders.

Since the beginning of the migration wave to Europe in 2015, Greece has become one of the key crossing points and an entry territory to access Europe. While it had a relatively moderate attitude towards immigrants in the early stages of the migration crisis, Greece gradually solidified its approach to immigrants due to the economic contraction. In reaction to the

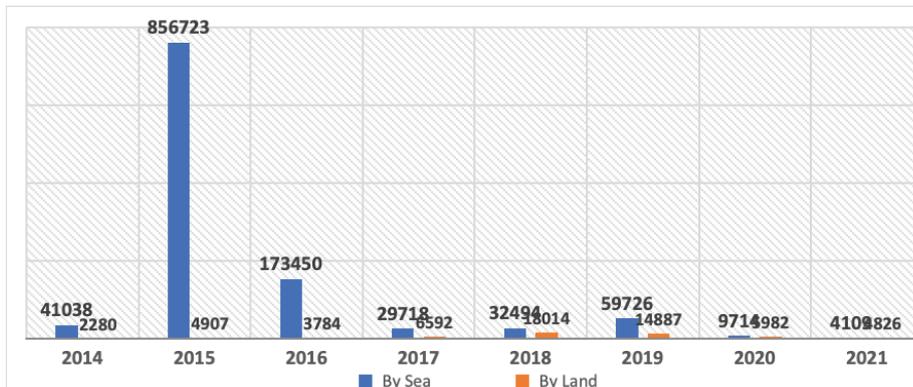


Message of Analysis

- Greece sends back refugees crossing the border after stripping them of their clothes.
- Some of the refugees froze to death during the winter months.
- The Greece approach is against human rights and causes a legal obligation.

the migration crisis, Europe also found itself divided between those who welcome the flow of immigration by supporting the rights of people who has obliged to leave their country and those who regard migrants as a threat. But at the end of the day, Europe decided to raise its walls from Greece and openly refer to Greece as the “shield” of Europe.

Greece’s recent immigration issue began in 2015. More than 800 thousand immigrants trying to reach Europe via Turkey had to cross the Greek territory. Although the first wave of migration succeeded to reach European countries, specially Germany, the agreement signed between the EU, Turkey and Greece, especially after 2016, prevented down the flow. After the agreement, the approach to refugees in Greece became increasingly harsh. Migrants began to be sent to camps or returned to Turkey. This situation caused the migration flow to decrease gradually.



Graphic 1- Number of Refugees Arriving in Greece by Land and Sea [2014-2021]. UNHCR. 2022. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

However, it is possible to state that the migration flow to Europe via Turkey still continues, although it is limited. According to the United Nations, 4,826 migrants reached Greece by land and 4,109 migrants by sea. The vast majority of these immigrants come from distant geographies such as Iran, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Greece is very important for immigrants. Because it is a kind of entrance gate to Europe, which they regard as accessing wealth and prosperity.

According to the United Nations data, in the first month of 2022, 285 people crossed into Greece. But probably a large part of this number was sent to the camps or an unknown part was pushed back by police violence to Turkey. Many reports prepared on Greece’s compliance to human rights show that refugees are subjected to forms of violence such as excessive force, electric discharge weapons, forced undressing, threats or violence with a firearm, inhuman treatment inside police vehicles, inhuman treatment inside a detention facility, confiscation of money and phones. In addition, especially with the winter months, the Greek police started to send back the refugees they caught at the border by stripping their clothes. It is known from official records that many refugees got wet in the Meriç [Evros] River and lost their lives by getting stuck in the mud in the snowy fields.



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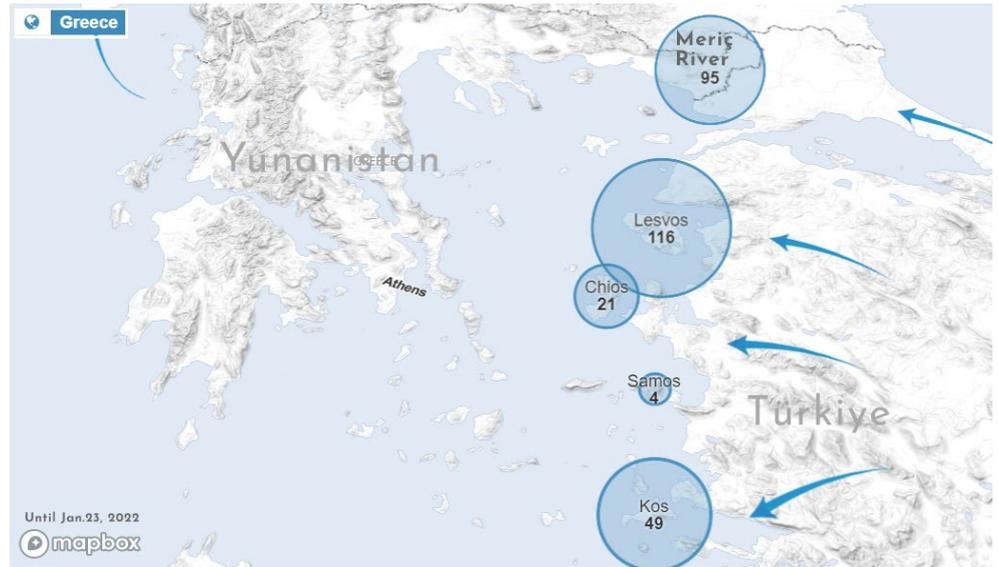


Info

Currently, more than 20,000 refugees are trying to stay in unhealthy conditions in refugee camps on the Greek islands. Currently, more than 20,000 refugees are trying to stay in unfavorable conditions in refugee camps on the Greek islands. According to UN data, 314 refugee refugees arrived only on the Greek islands in January 2022.



Although the Greek authorities denied claims, the IRRA researchers confirmed in field investigations that the refugees froze to death.



Map 1 - Latest Arrivals to Greece. Until Jan. 23, 2022. Source: UNHCR

As a matter of fact, this information note was written in order to enlighten the public opinion and the international community about 19 refugees who froze to death as a result of the pushback by the Greek border forces on February 2, 2022. The Minister of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Turkey also reacted to the deaths on border and tweeted "12 of the 22 migrants pushed back by Greek Border Units, stripped off from their clothes and shoes have frozen to death. EU is remediless, weak and void of humane feelings. Greek border units thug against victims, tolerant towards FETO ". However, the Greek authorities denied the allegations. However, the interviews conducted by the International Refugee Rights Association on the ground show that the Greek authorities are wrong.

What the interviews tell us?

On Wednesday, February 2, 2022, the Turkish press organisations released that 9 migrants pushed back by Greek law enforcement agencies froze to death within the borders of Edirne province, İpsala. In the statement made by the Edirne Governorship, the dead bodies of 9 migrants who were pushed back by the Greeks and froze to death on 02/02/2022 in the Mandakoru locality of İpsala District, Paşaköy Village were found. A migrant at risk of frostbite was rescued and transferred to the Keşan State Hospital. The Govership's stated that their search and scanning activities in the region continue for migrants who may need medical assistance.

As the International Refugee Rights Association, a research committee was assigned to make a preliminary assessment of this event and to conduct an investigation in the region. The IRRA research team went to the İpsala district of Edirne province in order to investigate the incident in detail and to get information from the official institutions related to the incident. Therefore, they visited the İpsala District Gendarmerie Command, İpsala District Police Department, İpsala Courthouse and İpsala State Hospital and held interviews about the incident.



Photo: Frozen bodies, found by the Turkish villagers in the Greek Border, Feb. 2, 2022.

The following information was obtained from the unofficial statements of the İpsala District Gendarmerie Command, District Police Department and the prosecutor's office:

On February 2, 2022, upon the notification of a person in the vicinity of the Paşaköy Village, Mandakoru locality of İpsala district, the law enforcement officers who went to the crime scene found the frozen bodies of several persons who were presumed to be foreign nationals. The law enforcement officers started a comprehensive search at the crime scene thinking there might be other people in the same situation. They also reached other corpses that were frozen from the cold and determined that these people were pushed back by the Greek forces after crossing the Meriç River. The law enforcement officers, who found the bodies of 12 people on the first day of the incident, continued their search efforts the next day and found 7 more frozen bodies. Thus bringing the total number of deaths to 19. Although a person who was found alive during the searches was taken to the Keşan State Hospital, he could not be saved despite all the interventions. Searches are continuing since there may be more people frozen from the cold or waiting for help.

Not all victims died in the same area. It is because people who stopped walking in groups got lost and started to move in different directions with the effect of cold and darkness. Except for one the person whose body was found separately, all of them died in the field of duty of the İpsala District Gendarme Command. For this reason, the relevant procedures are carried out through the İpsala District Gendarmerie Command. The file of the person who died in the field of duty of the İpsala District Police Department is kept by the İpsala District Police Department.



The officials confirm that the immigrants froze to death at different points on the Greek border.



The Greek military officers continued their inhuman attitude for the last few years crossed into Greece

There was no clear information about the ages and nationalities of the individuals. The necessary procedures for identification are continuing. However, the individuals are adult males aged 25–30 years. There were no women or children among the dead bodies.

According to the information obtained, all of the individuals reached Greece on the Evros river, but were exposed to the unlawful treatment of the Greek law enforcement officers there. The Greek law enforcement officers continued their inhuman attitude for the last few years, confiscating the valuables of individuals and pushing them back into the Meriç River. Indeed, some of the people whose corpses were found were without coats, shoes or socks, and some of them were almost naked. In addition, the Greek border forces also seized the identity documents of the individuals. The absence of any documents on the identity information of all those found makes it difficult to determine their identities.

In the interviews, it appeared that this is not the first case and that such cases are frequent. However, the authorities stated that the cases that have occurred so far have been on an individual basis which explains why they have not been sufficiently reflected in the press.

The research team of IRRA learned that the bodies were taken to the İpsala State Hospital before being sent to the Forensic Medicine Institute in Istanbul/Bahçelievler. The research team went to the hospital to meet with the authorities. However, because seven bodies found on the second day of the incident were brought to the hospital, the necessary procedures were still ongoing and the authorities were working for the overcome push-back crisis. Therefore, no meeting could be held. For this reason, no information could be obtained on whether the victims were subjected to any physical violence by Greek border forces.

The IRRA also tried to get information from the people of the region by going to the settlements close to the Mandakoru location where the incident took place. No specific information could be obtained. However, the people of the region explained that they gave food and clothes to the foreigners when they were about to freeze that these foreigners prayed for them and said they were very afraid of dying by freezing.

As previously stated by the İpsala District Gendarmerie Command, İpsala District Police Department and prosecutor's office, the people of the region also said that the Meriç River is 8–9 km away from the settlements and that many foreigners walk this distance many times under normal weather conditions. However, the current weather conditions did not allow the victims to reach their settlements. Most of the areas from the Meriç River to the settlements are covered with paddy fields. These fields are covered with water due to their structure and are swampy areas. Due to the snow and rain, these swampy areas have turned into ponds. The fact that the clothes

of these people were taken off by the Greek border forces had already made the weather conditions unbearable for the victims. These people who had to travel half-naked on an average of 8–9 kilometres covered by swamps and waters in freezing temperatures to reach their settlements could not make it and froze to death.

However, the residents of the region said that it is possible that many people froze to death within the borders of Greece or that they had not yet crossed the river. They also stated that it is highly probable that they were lost in the river waters while passing through.

Greece must not forget its humanitarian obligations

Although all information could not be reached because the incident is recent, there is no doubt that it violates international conventions to which Greece is a party, especially the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Legal Status of Refugees, the European Convention on Human Rights and the Dublin Convention.

People who froze to death are victims of Greece's inhuman and unlawful treatment. Especially since the Greek military confiscated their valuables, clothes and identity documents. Rather than pushing back foreigners who have reached its borders, it is one of Greece's legal obligations to give them the right to apply for asylum and to provide them with the necessary protection until their applications are concluded. Greece's pushback, which ignores the violations of refugee rights, should be followed by all non-governmental organizations in the surrounding countries. The public and legal authorities of the European Union should also follow the process with its legal dimension and punish those responsible.



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Rights-based
NGOs in Turkey,
also IRRRA,
express that they
will follow the
legal process.

Endnotes

¹Lea Fournier. "Is Greece Violating Refugees' Rights." (Istanbul, 2021). https://umhd.org.tr/en//upload/Dokuman/opt-is_greece_violating_refugees_rights_a_cr-FY0B7E56DXSUHJOVBLY3.pdf.

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³Kyjilah Terry. "The EU-Turkey Deal, Five Years On: A Frayed and Controversial but Enduring Blueprint." Migration Policy Institute, 2021. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/eu-turkey-deal-five-years-on>.

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⁵Süleyman Soylu. "12 of the 22 Migrants Pushed Back..." Twitter, 2022. <https://twitter.com/suleymansoylu/status/1488828785722105862>.

⁶BBC News. "Turkey-Greece Border: Twelve Migrants Die in Freezing Conditions." February 2, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60229206>.

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*Whoever
saves a life,
it will be as if they
saved all of humanity.*



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