

# War on Migration is a War on Society<sup>1</sup>

Migration is one of the most relevant topics of our time. While capitalism and nation states instrumentalise migrants to push their agendas and the narrative portraying 'the other' as a threat is increasingly accepted as reality, the militarisation of borders has become a testing ground for tactics and equipment for the future wars, many people in European movements have yet to realise that every struggle against capitalism must also be a struggle against racism, alongside migrants. This text aims to establish common ground among anti-racist collectives in Greece and beyond, based on our local experiences.

To understand the current border regime and the 'management of migration', we will describe the developments of the last decade, splitting it into two parts. In Greek geography, we will describe the developments of the previous decade. We will also attempt to illustrate some of the challenges faced by migrants and refugees, as well as initiatives promoting solidarity between migrants and locals.

*2015-2019: NGO-isation of solidarity, ghettoisation of migration  
and creation of the Moria hellhole.*

Following the 'summer of migration' in 2015, the newly elected left-wing government attempted to project a progressive image. To counterbalance its alignment with neoliberal policies, it invested in the 'humanitarian' management of migration. At the same time, many progressive-minded people were hired by NGOs to manage migrants, while the migrants themselves were hidden from the

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<sup>1</sup> This text is a slightly edited version of a common text published by three assemblies based in Greece. It was written as a contribution to the panel at the 2025 Balkan Anarchist Bookfair of 2025 in Thessaloniki. The three assemblies that contributed to it are: Open Assembly against Pushbacks and Border Violence (Athens), Open Assembly against Border Violence (Lesvos), Stop War on Migrants (Thessaloniki).

public eye in numerous newly created ‘migrant camps’. Any form of solidarity not organised by NGOs was criminalised. The migrants themselves were objectified—after all, they were the focus of the various NGOs’ work—and segregated from general society. This was either because they were sent to live in camps outside the cities or because, even if they lived in apartments within the cities, they were utterly dependent on NGOs for everything, forcing them to ‘behave’.

Following the EU-Turkey deal in 2016, the situation in the Aegean Islands changed, too. People were either held on the islands until they received asylum or locked up in detention centres waiting for deportation back to Turkey. The geographical restrictions turned the islands into a prison. These policies increased the number of people living in camps on the islands.

The externalisation of Europe’s borders was accompanied by a greater internalisation of the ‘border’. As Turkey began to tighten border control, Greece introduced further restrictions. Following the EU-Turkey deal and the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016, there was a significant increase in pushbacks through the Evros land border, which went unnoticed.

The spatial and social segregation of refugees, coupled with the rapid increase in the number of migrants living in hellish camps (for example, the population of Moria on Lesbos at that time would have made it the second biggest city on the island), made it easier for the right-wing government that came to power in 2019 to replace NGO control with an all-out war on migrants.

### *2020-2025: Open war on migrants*

Over the first six months of the right-wing New Democracy government, the population of the Moria camp increased dramatically, reaching almost 20,000 people. By January 2020, New Democracy and Kostas Moutzouris, the Governor of the North Aegean Region, were ready to manipulate the chaos they had created. The North Aegean Administrative Region called for a general strike and demonstration under the slogan “*We Want Our Lives Back, We Want Our Islands Back*”, joining forces with the far-right.

Over the course of these months, several nationalist narratives came together. We could hear that “*the Greek people, in particular North Aegean islanders and the residents of Moria village, were under siege*”, “*Greece was under attack by Turkey, its old enemy*”, “*migrants posed a demographic and cultural threat to this besieged population*”, “*their arrival was aided by an enemy within, smugglers masquerading as NGO workers*”, “*Greece, as the shield of Europe, should be prepared to take extreme measures to halt migration flows sent by the Turkish president Erdogan.*”

In February–March 2020, the ‘Evros massacre’ occurred: hundreds of migrants attempting to cross the Evros border between Turkey and Greece were

treated as if they were invading the country. Police officers, soldiers and far-right vigilantes used live ammunition, injuring and killing unarmed people. Almost the entire political spectrum aligned with the government in its defence of the country. As reactionary 'citizens' began to take matters into their own hands, the police and coastguard also exceeded what was previously considered acceptable.

Right after the spring 2020 lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, an 'industry of pushbacks' was set up in the Aegean, while restrictions due to the pandemic were used to turn migrant camps across Greece into closed ones. Gradually, all support for asylum seekers, including housing, healthcare, education and EU-funded financial aid, was significantly reduced or completely cancelled. The 'pushback factory' (a supposedly secret matter, but one that is widely known and constantly denied by the government) raised the death toll. Following the massive state crime at Pylos in 2023, in which it is estimated that over 600 people lost their lives, no one can claim ignorance. The appointment of Dimitris Voriadis, a former neo-Nazi, as Minister of Migration and Asylum in 2025, as well as the proposed racist law that will restrict migrants' basic rights and enforce border control, demonstrates an escalation in the war on migrants.

## Militarisation of borders and criminalisation of migration in Greece

### *a) Aegean Islands and the sea border*

As Lesbos is a remote island much closer to the Turkish mainland than the Greek one, a military presence is nothing new. In fact, half of the island is a military base. The port of Mytilene, the main city on Lesbos, is full of Navy, Coast Guard and Frontex vessels, and people have become so accustomed to this constant presence that it has simply become part of the landscape. Some people on the island even see themselves as the protectors of the border against the old Greek enemy, Turkey. Activating this mentality and turning it against people on the move was easy enough in 2020.

Then, Turkish President Erdogan threatened to allow people on the move to travel to the Aegean Islands and the Evros border. The idea of people as bullets in Erdogan's gun aimed at Greece was a straightforward narrative to sell once more.

When it comes to migration, even among conservative and far-right actors on the island, feelings and positions are contradictory. This is evident when we compare the large-scale protests in 2020 against the proposed construction of

a new camp in Karava with the current silence surrounding the plans to open a new camp in Vastria. The camp is built in a fire-prone forest and is under surveillance. If we focus on the far-right participants and the 'concerned citizens' involved in the protests, we will see that the tone has changed completely. These protests were not about locking people up in the most remote prison, but about not wanting any migrants on the island. Nobody seems to care anymore. The new camp had to be built. Key actors were counting on the money that had already been allocated, and they did everything they could to keep tensions low this time. The camp was built without any significant resistance and the only challenge to its opening is currently in court.

On the one hand, vast sums of money significantly influence decisions, but smaller amounts also have a notable impact. The same people who sold fake SIM cards to migrants arriving in 2016 during the so-called 'summer of migration', or rented their houses to migrants at exorbitant prices, were among those who set up violent roadblocks and took action against migrants and NGO workers in 2020. However, when they realised that the absence of migrants and NGOs in the city meant a loss of income, they fell silent very quickly. This time, they either started renting out their land for the new camp or waited for a new working position.

It is also worth mentioning that the migrant population in Lesvos was close to 20,000 in 2020. Following the introduction of systematic pushbacks, the number of people arriving on the island has decreased considerably, and far-right groups (among others) feel that they have the government's backing. At the same time, the EU is funding Greece and the Aegean Islands as the first 'shield of Europe' against migrants. This means that Lesvos must have a closed camp—a prison.

Although pushbacks have always occurred, they have become systematic since 2020. As early as 2014, 11 people were killed at sea while trying to reach Farmakonisi, after the Hellenic Coast Guard attempted to push them back into Turkish waters. Nowadays, however, pushbacks are happening daily, and the number of dead migrants has increased accordingly. In 2015, 799 people were killed or reported missing while attempting to cross the Aegean Sea. A total of 856,723 people arrived in Greece that year. In 2023, 41,561 people arrived, and sadly, 799 people lost their lives. The number of deaths compared to the number of people reaching the islands is exceptionally high and worrying.

If we focus only on the past year, the Hellenic Coast Guard has directly caused at least eight shipwrecks, resulting in the deaths of 33 people. Those deaths are just a fraction of the few that have occurred in the Aegean during that period. Even when the Coast Guard was far away, it is clear that militarisation and securitisation of the borders are directly responsible for these deaths. People are taking more dangerous routes to avoid the Hellenic Coast Guard, only to be pushed back.

## *b) Evros and the land border*

In the Evros region, pushbacks from Greece to Turkey occur daily. These are carried out by the Greek authorities, Frontex and paramilitary gangs working with the police. These pushbacks involve the systematic denial of the right to apply for asylum, as well as unofficial detention, torture, humiliation, theft of money and other personal belongings, and forced transportation across the Evros River to Turkey in rubber dinghies operated by masked militants of unknown origin.

In 2022, at least four fatal incidents were reported in Evros. These included the killing of three Syrians and a four-year-old boy by Greek authorities during illegal pushbacks; people dying of health issues while stranded on river islets in Evros; the shooting of an African woman while attempting to cross the border; and incidents involving severe torture and sexual violence against women and men being stripped naked.

In 2023, research was published estimating that 600 bodies had been found on the Greek side of the Evros border in the last two decades.

In 2024, security at the fence was 'boosted'. Controls at the land border increased by 20-percent, with an additional 150 border guards being recruited. It was also reported that EU funds were being used to expand the Evros fence. The Nea Demokratia government aims to extend the fence by a further 100 km by 2026, which would bring its total length to almost 40 km. The Turkish government has also recently announced plans for an 8.5 km wall in Edirne to prevent migrants from crossing into the EU.

In January 2025, the ECtHR found Greece guilty of systematic human rights violations. As a result, the court awarded compensation to a woman who had been pushed back to Turkey from the Evros region in 2019.

Despite extensive documentation and evidence from human rights organisations, solidarity groups and investigative journalists of the systemic nature of pushbacks and other forms of violence against migrants, the state continues to deny all allegations. Instead, it has adopted a hyper-nationalist narrative portraying a supposed enemy of national security and state sovereignty. Those who are fighting for their freedom of movement and who have experienced the brutality of border guards are erased as the state and the mainstream media speak of the 'instrumentalisation of migration' and the escalating geopolitical tensions with neighbouring states. These narratives are used to justify the increasing militarisation of the border.

The perpetrators of pushbacks and border violence in Evros include the Greek police and military forces, Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency), the Hellenic Coast Guard, local vigilantes and gangs recruited by the Greek

police, often comprising other migrants granted temporary residence permits by the Greek state. Pushbacks often involve torture. People are detained without food and water, robbed of their belongings, humiliated, and brutally beaten before being forced to cross the Evros River to Turkey. The border detention centres are often located in remote areas and are not officially registered.

For Kurdish and Turkish political refugees fleeing Erdogan's regime, being pushed back to Turkey can mean life in prison or even death. Hundreds of Kurdish and Turkish politicians, activists, and journalists have ended up in political prisons after being pushed back. Turkey has become an increasingly unsafe place for refugees. They have been denied aid and are exposed to illegal deportations, racist attacks and even lynchings.

In the Evros region, fascists blamed migrants for the fires and incited racist violence. There have been calls for militias to support the army in 'protecting the border'. In one particularly brazen incident, local fascists kidnapped migrants and broadcast the incident live on social media. Ultimately, it was the migrants who were prosecuted for arson. In a region that is a geostrategic hub for NATO and energy business interests, the ruling class organises and funds local fascists to divert society's attention away from the region's real problems. They have become the vanguard of capital, committing murder with impunity and incurring no political cost to the system they serve.

### *c) The exploitative camp-prison complex and its link to labour*

Even if someone manages to cross the border against all odds, the violence doesn't stop due to the elaborate prison-camp system on the Greek mainland and islands. Since the 2020s, the Greek state and EU authorities, along with international institutions such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), have not only turned the borders into war zones, but have also continued to wage war on those crossing them through imprisonment and systematic oppression.

Over the past eight years, we have witnessed the development of camps in and around Athens. What began as an emergency solution in 2015/16 has become permanent housing without any further improvements to make the spaces more habitable. The camps are increasingly resembling prisons, neglecting people's basic needs such as food, money, healthcare, childcare, education, security and transportation. Deaths in the camp system are frequent and always occur under unclear circumstances, receiving minimal media coverage.

Some examples of the increasing repression in the camps since 2020 are: (1) the lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to major isolation and

the construction of barbed wire fences around the camps; (2) the eviction of the Eleonas camp, the last urban camp, in 2022; and (3) the cancellation of the EU-funded Hestia housing programme in spring 2023. Throughout this period, management of the camps was transferred to Greek private companies.

These remote camps are deliberately placed far from urban centres, where access to employment and basic services would be possible. Without essential infrastructure, they are systematically excluded from social life. Cut off from society, workers are transported directly between the camps and industrial zones, losing their autonomy and visibility in the process. This enforced isolation creates a disenfranchised labour force that large corporations can exploit in warehouses and in urban areas under degrading conditions. In Athens, employment contracts are often only available in Greek, without any translation provided. This effectively strips migrant workers of their legal rights. Many migrants working in the city's tourist restaurants receive no pay and are often forced to clean toilets and carry out other degrading tasks that fall far outside their contractual duties. Verbal harassment and racist assaults are an everyday occurrence.

The indefinite and arbitrary imprisonment in detention centres further exacerbates the prison-camp complex. Although these prisons were designed to support deportation, they have effectively become an extension of Greece's general prison landscape. Incarceration of migrants without giving any clear release date is made possible through the concept of administrative detention, which is a form of non-judicial imprisonment separate to the criminal system. It has colonial roots and was used to oppress dissent by applying foreign, inaccessible legal systems. Today, it is widely used by countries in Europe and the US, specifically for the detention of migrants. It is particularly notorious in the treatment of Palestinians by Israel today. This regime of fear and punishment looms as a constant threat over people's lives, playing a key role in repressing resistance and maximising labour exploitation.

Migrant women are particularly affected by lower wages and intensified exploitation. They work under worse conditions, earn less than men and local workers, and frequently experience racist and sexist violence. Employers intentionally exploit structural vulnerabilities, such as language barriers, insecure residency status, inadequate housing, and systemic social exclusion. Single mothers, in particular, are often forced to accept the most degrading forms of labour to provide for their children.

#### *d) Criminalisation and oppression*

In 2025, over 2,700 people are currently detained in Greece on charges of 'smuggling' simply for exercising their right to freedom of movement, or for helping others to do the same. This systematic criminalisation is the result of racist laws and border practices. It has a lifelong impact on the lives of those affected. These trials usually take place behind closed doors. State lawyers are assigned to their clients and learn about them and the details of their cases just 15 minutes before the trial is due to start. Court cases often take place without adequate translation. Verdicts are reached after an average procedure lasting 38 minutes, resulting in an average prison sentence of 44 years. The lack of legal assistance and the short, sudden procedures are some of the tools used in the system of imprisoning migrants. This has left many people without support, imprisoned for years with no further legal recourse after their appeal.

The criminalisation of migrants is often invisible, and detention and imprisonment silence their voices. This enables the EU and its member states' authorities to violate their rights further and exercise violence against them, even after their release. On the other hand, the authorities broadcast their message through the mainstream media, perpetuating common stereotypes about people on the move. These people are either depicted as poor victims, exploited and endangered by an evil smuggling mafia, or as the perpetrators themselves. Alternatively, they are portrayed as tools sent to destroy our 'superior' European culture... To reinforce these ideas, media pundits deliberately misuse terminology, using phrases such as 'human traffickers' when there is no legal basis for doing so. This creates the impression that people have been smuggled against their will. Neither the media nor its audience seem to care about the contradiction in the idea that the 'smuggler' and the 'invader' are the same. At the same time, they are creating a counter-narrative in society that portrays a 'war against smugglers endangering poor refugees', and that the measures taken at the border—including shootings and direct or indirect killings—are necessary to stop them.

## Moving towards common struggles and solidarity between migrants and locals

### *a) Resistance against the prison-like camps and detention centres*

We believe that migrants' resistance to the camp-prison system is fundamentally rooted in the fight against racial capitalism. This system exploits labour and enforces control through borders, surveillance and prisons. The system exploits the lives of those in prison by testing surveillance and AI technologies on migrants, and by exploiting their cheap labour. Therefore, organising a joint struggle between migrants and locals means resisting the capitalist structures that the Greek state and Fortress Europe depend on. We can see examples of these struggles in places such as the Eleonas camp in 2016. Residents, especially mothers, fought for almost a year against forced relocation. They were not trying to preserve the camp; they were trying to oppose more deeper isolation and delays to their asylum claims. We also see it in 2023 in the Ritsona camp, one of the largest camp structures on the Greek mainland. Migrant workers in this camp went on strike after months of unpaid labour. They confronted the camp management and GI-Express, a company embedded in this exploitative system, by blocking transport from the camp to the factory.

Detainees in detention centres have been fighting against their imprisonment through uprisings and hunger strikes. For example, several large revolts occurred in the period before 2016. In one instance, ten people successfully escaped from the Amygdaleza detention centre on the outskirts of Athens. In recent years, riots have mostly been replaced by hunger strikes, with more than 600 people refusing meals on several occasions. The last large-scale hunger strike was in March 2024 at the Korinthos detention centre, in protest at the poor living conditions, terrible food, and violence perpetrated by detention staff. In April 2025, prisoners at the Drama Detention Centre in northern Greece protested against the removal of medical staff following the death of an inmate. This took the form of hunger strikes, setting fire to their cells, and self-harm.

These weren't just protests; they were uprisings. They were met with violence and repression. The police responded with direct violence and by relocating detainees to other prisons or charging them with felonies in cases of rioting. Camps were evicted and shut down. Migrants were moved to even more remote and controlled spaces. The aim is clear: to break the spirit of resistance and make it harder to show solidarity. Meanwhile, corporations such as Zara, Lidl, and GI-Express, as well as military contractors, are profiting. Their operations are not separate from this system — they are central to it. Military technology is tested

on imprisoned people. Companies grow richer from migrant labour and the suffering of migrants. This isn't just bad governance. It's structural oppression.

We must ensure that these struggles form part of our collective memory and movement, not as stories of charity, but as tales of solidarity and resistance. At the same time, we must acknowledge that we rarely see or hear about the day-to-day resistance of those locked away. Organised support and solidarity are needed when people face years in prison on arbitrary charges, cross militarised borders, demand healthcare, or go on strike for better wages. The social struggle begins with the residents' own resistance. As solidarity movements, our task is to recognise, amplify and organise alongside this resistance, not around it. This is how we can build a truly collective movement for justice.

### *b) The Pylos massacre, state crimes, and the solidarity movement in response*

The Pylos massacre on 14 June 2023 was a critical moment of murderous state violence at the Greek and European borders, and a turning point for solidarity and anti-racist struggles. News of what happened has spread widely within the movements and throughout broader society. Testimonies of survivors and their families' ongoing struggle for justice have been at the forefront of the Pylos movement throughout Greece, Europe, and the victims' places of origin.

In the days following the Pylos state crime, dozens of protests took place in many different cities in Greece and other countries. In Athens, the main demonstration the day after the shipwreck saw thousands of people take to the streets. Police violence that day resulted in 21 arrests. Three days later, another demonstration took place in the port of Piraeus, leading to the offices of the Hellenic Coast Guard and Frontex in Athens. Both offices were guarded by at least a hundred naval and land police officers. To mark the first anniversary of the Pylos massacre in June 2024, another round of protests took place across Greece, Pakistan, and Europe. A month earlier, the trial of the nine migrants, who were wrongfully accused of people smuggling, took place in Kalamata. The nine were eventually acquitted, after which a demonstration involving hundreds of supporters began outside the courthouse.

The struggle in Pylos is ongoing. One aspect of this struggle is the fight for the rights of the survivors, many of whom—mostly those from Egypt and Pakistan—still demand basic rights like asylum, decent housing, and the right to work. At the same time, more than half of the survivors have officially condemned the HCG for the shipwreck. However, it is still unclear when the trial will take place and who will ultimately be accused of what happened.

### *c) Solidarity with criminalised migrants and legal advice*

For years, solidarity lawyers, people monitoring trials, and people launching campaigns have been active. Recently, networks have been established to organise joint support for prisoners, their trials, and legal expenses. They aim to visualise and confront the criminalisation of people on the move, who are often detained or imprisoned without legal assistance. They struggle to find the money needed to support their campaigns and legal efforts. This means they face major contradictions when trying to be autonomous or engage in organisation beyond state structures.

Regardless of their political ideas and background, we consider people who cross borders to be resisting Fortress Europe. Without our focus on court and prison support, they would be forgotten. Despite the existence of these legal support structures and the efforts of many people to continue supporting those criminalised, Greek prisons are still full of people accused of 'facilitation'. Those arrested upon arrival and tried without proper legal representation, having exhausted all appeals, will spend their lives in prison.

We need to recognise and expose the state's tactics, which target specific groups, define them, and attempt to separate them, including resistance. Working together with people on the move and supporting those who have been criminalised is one of the main ways of fighting against a system that separates, imprisons, and kills.

### *d) Struggles against the invisibility of state crimes and border violence*

The social and political movement against border violence is not a new phenomenon, given that border violence against migrants is also not a new occurrence at the Greek and EU borders. However, in recent years, the intensity and visibility of state violence have increased for various reasons. Despite the increased militarisation of borders and confiscation of mobile phones by state and parastatal groups, migrants use their own or solidarity networks to expose state murders, pushbacks, violent incidents, and safe arrivals.

In February and March 2020, the nationalistic and racist situation in Evros and the Aegean Islands brought the borders to the forefront of politics in the form of violent state practices. However, this has also given rise to a movement fighting for freedom of movement. In Athens alone, dozens of demonstrations, gatherings, and actions have taken place outside Greek state and EU buildings, as well as other institutional buildings and public events, all of which are against

the ongoing border violence that has resulted in numerous deaths. These events have included testimonies from migrants who have experienced the violence firsthand.

In conclusion, we believe that solidarity movements should understand the situation faced by people on the move at the borders, in camps and detention centres, and in everyday life, not as a humanitarian crisis, but as a social struggle embedded in the reality of militarisation and racial capitalism. Presenting the fight against exploitation as a matter of charity or aid can lead to migrants being seen as either helpless victims or criminals. This approach fails to acknowledge migrants as people actively resisting systemic exploitation. We must recognise this struggle as part of our common resistance. The war on migrants is part of a generalised war on society, serving the interests of the economic and political elite. We need to fight against it collectively.