

HOW LESVOS LEARNED TO LOVE THE PUSHBACKS



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The meetings of the Lesvos Open Assembly Against Border Violence take place every Wednesday at 17:00 at Mpineio squat.

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How Lesbos learned to love the pushbacks

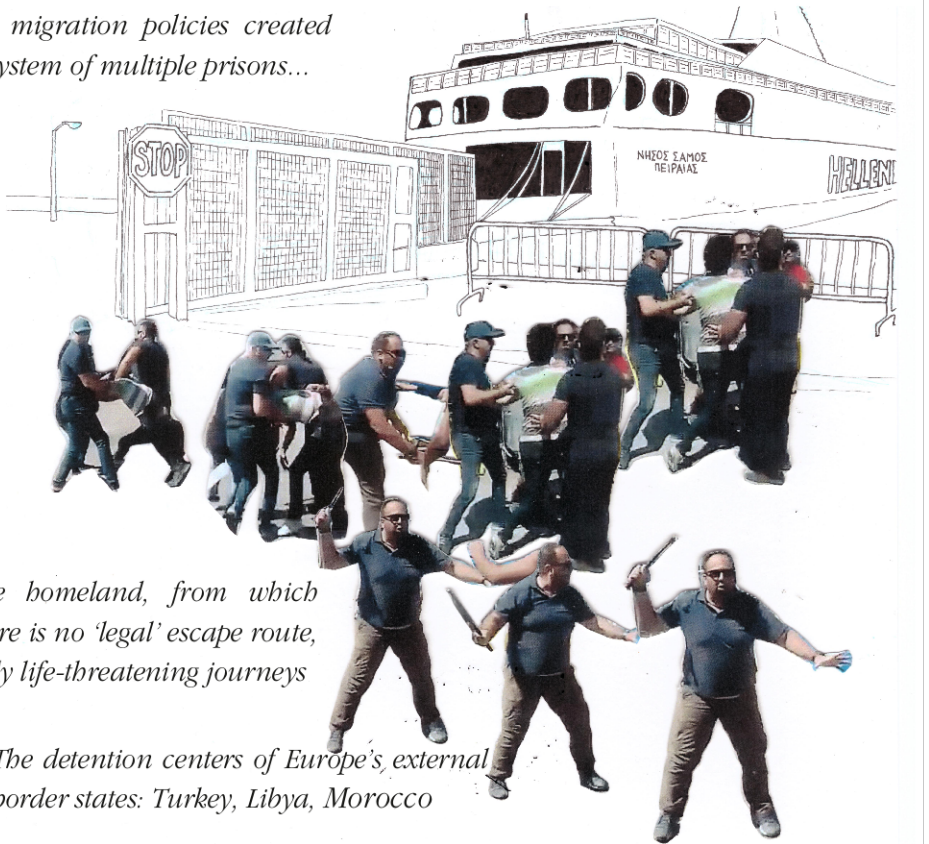
At its closest point, Lesbos is located only 6 nautical miles from the Turkish shore. Therefore it was always a crossing point. What was internationally recognised as the 'refugee crisis' in 2015 was not a new phenomenon; the island had been a crossroads for Kurdish militants, political opponents of Turkey, people from the Middle East, and for Greeks fleeing from Asia Minor in 1922.

In 2015, Lesbos island came into the spotlight of European attention with the arrival of thousands of people during the 'summer of migration'. Until March 2016 the route from the islands to mainland Greece remained open, more or less. The enactment of the EU-Turkey Deal (through which Turkey agreed in exchange for billions in funds to prevent migrant departures from its shores, intercept them at sea, and to accept those deported from Greece) made it harder for migrants to arrive on the island, while the accompanying geographic restrictions simultaneously limited their movement from the islands.

FRONTEX and NATO initiated operations in the broader region of the islands from early 2016. At roughly the same time, Greece took its first big step towards criminalising Search-and-Rescue by bringing smuggling charges against civilian rescue workers. The Balkan route through Europe was 'officially' closed in 2017. Although people were (and are) still crossing the borders, it became more difficult, more dangerous and more expensive.

The externalization of Europe's borders came alongside an increased internalisation of the 'border'. As Turkey started to increase control of its borders, Greece implemented further restrictions.

EU migration policies created a system of multiple prisons...



The homeland, from which there is no 'legal' escape route, only life-threatening journeys

The detention centers of Europe's, external border states: Turkey, Libya, Morocco

The Aegean islands of Lesbos, Chios, Leros, Kos and Samos, where geographic restrictions limit who is eligible to leave, leaving the rest to wait years for their turn. Either you have the right to buy a ticket off the prison island, or you have been stripped of every right and might find yourself on another ferry to be deported

Even if you make it to the mainland you end up in an other prison, where migrants have to find a way to survive in a State whose policies deny the ability to work or the necessary support to live. And every day there is the fear of being caught, deported to Turkey or the homeland, living in hiding.

That experience never ends, not in the ‘final destination’, where your right to work is limited, and not for the next generation, which lives with structural racism and discrimination. By defining citizens and non-citizens, the border creates a precarious, rightless, often invisible labour force among those who actually make it into Europe. This labour force is instrumental for the European economy. The border doesn’t affect all equally, it is a hierarchization of citizenship. Actually, the purpose of borders has always been to create different realities regarding the law, administration, policing, rights, and free movement, depending on social class, nationality, gender, skin colour, direction of travel, etc.

The EU discriminates between ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’ migrants beyond its physical borders. It has outsourced and relocated a significant portion of its border management to other countries, establishing specific procedures for border controls (such as obtaining visas) outside its territory and delegating document checks to transport companies or liaison officers in third countries. The implementation of these procedures means that multiple ‘remote’ controls are activated before ever physically crossing a geographic border (at the embassies of the countries of origin, travel agencies, transport companies).

After all this, there are no safe migration routes left, but this does not deter people from moving. Nobody would choose to pay exorbitant fees to cross dangerous waters on inflatable boats if they had the option to buy aeroplane- or ferry-tickets. Instead, the system compels people on the move to seek assistance from clandestine networks. Essentially, the European border regime enables the same criminal organisations that it pretends to hunt. Meanwhile, they randomly arrests migrant boat drivers, usually asylum seekers themselves, immediately after crossing. This group of boat drivers is the second largest category of prisoners in Greece, right now consisting of more than 2,000 people, while the high-ranking mafia are almost never caught (never mind investigated).

From exception to state of exception

As mentioned above, migration policies were always hostile. But when in July 2019 the New Democracy government came into power things deteriorated. The right-wing government implemented a new law on migration that created a massive human backlog on the Aegean islands. This law attempted to establish that Turkey was a safe country for asylum seekers, in order to dismiss most asylum requests as ineligible. While the law was pending approval, the government decided not to answer any asylum application, leaving people on the islands



rather than transferring them to mainland Greece. Over the course of the first six months of New Democracy's government the population in Moria camp skyrocketed, reaching almost 20,000 people. By January 2020, New Democracy and the Governor of the North Aegean Region, Kostas Moutzouris, were ready to manipulate this mess of their own making. The Municipality called for a general strike and demonstration under the slogan 'We Want Our Lives Back, We Want Our Islands Back', sharing a platform with the far Right.



At the same time as the island's Right became more vocal, so too did those living in Moria camp. On 2 February 2020, thousands marched from the camp against the living conditions, demanding transfers to the mainland and an end to deportation. The majority were violently blocked on the way to Mytilene by anti-riot police units and tear gas, while a few hundred people took small dirt roads and managed to reach the city. In turn, the police forced them back to the camp and the group tried to pass through the neighbouring Moria village, where a considerable number of local residents came out to prevent their passing. The church bells rang proclaiming a state of emergency, and that night locals held an emergency meeting. This brought a new period of far-right activity to the island, as road-blocks and street patrols spread over the weeks from Moria village to the entry and exit points of Mytilene city, policing and punishing migrants and those suspected of supporting them. To be clear, this was not the first period of violent incidents. In April 2018 a far-right mob attacked migrants peacefully protesting in Sappho Square, throwing explosives and shouting racist abuse.

Shortly after, the government sent riot police from mainland Greece to secure the land for a new migrant camp in Lesvos, in the region of Diavolorema. The construction of the camp was widely opposed, by those who rejected camps as an inhuman space for hosting migrants, and by those who rejected the presence of migrants outright. The manner in which the government attempted to secure this land, with MAT units brought from mainland Greece behaving as an occupying force, provoked widespread resistance from all social sectors. After two days of pitched battles at the coastal road outside Mantamados, locals – the majority in the anti-migrant camp – attacked the Pagani military barracks where the MAT units were staying, leading to their swift retreat to Athens. After this victory, the far-right refocused their attention to the ‘NGO workers’, volunteers and journalists, who had for months been blamed by government rhetoric for the migrant presence in Lesvos, leading to an intensification of street attacks and harassment over the following weeks.



The tension escalated again on 1 March 2020 when Erdogan attempted to flex his muscles, announcing that Turkey’s borders were open for migrants to cross. Migrants became a pawn in a political game between Turkey and the EU. Meanwhile, the European Commissioner, having created a new post for ‘Protecting our European Way of Life’, announced that Greece was now ‘the shield of Europe’. Greece, declaring the migration flows an ‘asymmetric threat’, began using even more extreme methods: the killing of Muhammed Gulzar by Greek troops at the Evros border; the suspension of the right to apply for asylum and therefore the Geneva Convention; and the systematic use of pushbacks. Over the following weeks, migrants who landed on the island were locked in Mytilene port, detained on a warship or held out in the open near their point of landing for days. Migrant hosting facilities were burned down, and a group of fascists at Thermi attempted to push back a dinghy while shouting racist abuse. For a few days the island became an international hub for European fascists looking to protect their European way of life, who soon understood that there was an anti-fascist resistance on the island when they were left with bleeding noses.



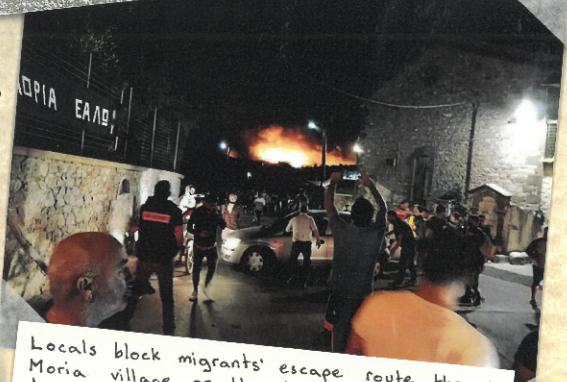
'IS MORIA CONQUERED?' This banner was hung in July 2020 on the outer wall of Moria village and recalls the phrase 'Εάλω η Πόλις' - the city is conquered - that signalled the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453.

Over the course of these months, a number of nationalist narratives came together.

That the Greek people, in particular its North Aegean islanders and the residents of Moria village, were under siege.

That Greece was under attack by Turkey, its old enemy.

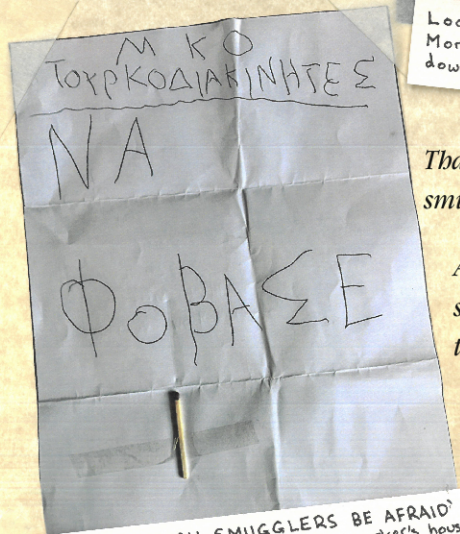
That migrants posed a demographic and cultural threat to this besieged population.



Locals block migrants' escape route through Moria village on the night the camp burned down, sending them back to the flames.

That their arrival was aided by an enemy within, smugglers masquerading as NGO workers.

And that Greece, as the shield of Europe, should be prepared to take extreme measures to halt migration flows sent by Erdogan.



'NGO TURKISH-SMUGGLERS BE AFRAID' Arson threat sent to NGO worker's house

As reactionary 'citizens' began to take matters into their own hands, so too did police and Coast Guard, stepping beyond the limits of what was previously acceptable.

In the middle of March 2020 the Covid-19 lockdown began in Greece. While for the general population the measures were eased over time, migrants living in Moria camp faced a permanent lockdown. For those living there, it was clear that the lockdown was never about their health, but about containing and isolating them. The camp was extremely overcrowded and the living conditions, which were never acceptable, became even worse as tensions escalated. Over these months, the residents of neighbouring villages controlled the exit of migrants from the camp: one shot a man in the back for crossing his field, another chased a migrant from his land using industrial machinery, and an arson took place on an abandoned property squatted by migrants. The villagers even started to hunt themselves as a farmer shot his neighbour after confusing him for a migrant. They also targeted the camp as a structure itself by trying to block the opening of a new medical facility.

In September 2020 Moria camp burned down. Even on the night of the fire people fleeing the camp were harassed and attacked in the streets of Moria village. Some locals blocked the road and sent people back towards the burning camp. Despite the huge scale of the fire there were somehow no casualties as far as we know. Moria rose from its own ashes: within a few weeks the ‘temporary’ structure at Mavrovouni was built and people, after gaining once more the hope of being evacuated from the island, were forced to enter and were locked in again. Six young men from Afghanistan were accused of starting the fire, and found guilty before a trial had even taken place when Notis Mitarakis, Minister of Migration and Asylum, announced on CNN that ‘The camp was set on fire by six Afghan refugees who were arrested’. These young men, the Moria 6, were scapegoated for the failure of European migration policy.



The tensions on the island have since calmed down. Some of the perpetrators now regret having brought the label of fascist upon themselves, others are happy that the State does what they wanted all along. A new camp in Vastria, supposed to open by the end of 2023, is now widely accepted even by those who previously opposed it. Vastria camp is being built in the middle of nowhere, in a pine-forest at high risk of wildfires. It gives in to the pan-European far-right demand that migrants, if they must be in Europe at all, should be kept out of sight and denied access to society.



**RACIST EUROPE
GIVES COMMANDS
COAST GUARD HAS
BLOOD ON ITS HANDS**

All this prepared the ground upon which State crimes such as pushbacks are welcomed (or at least tolerated) as a necessary measure.

Which of our neighbours are murderers?

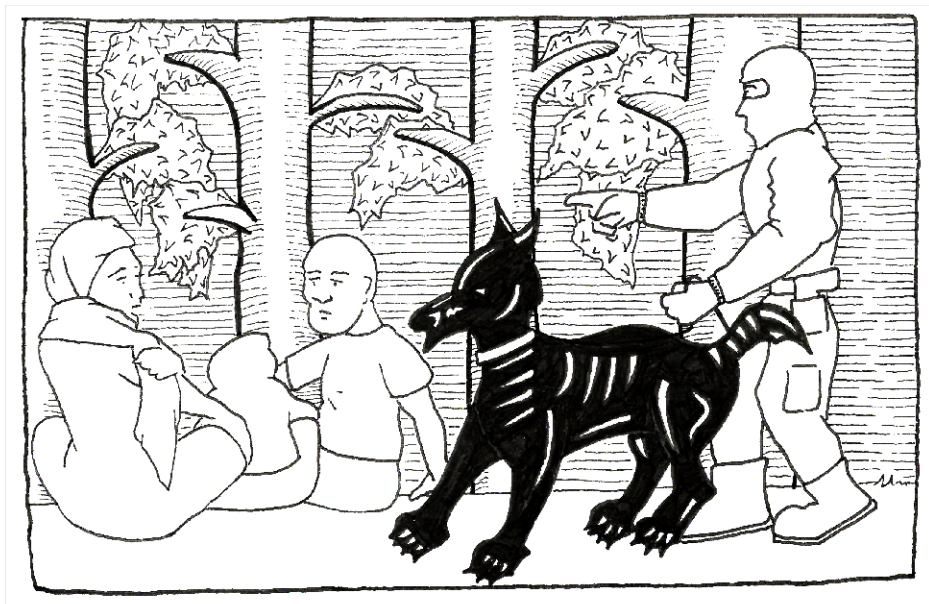
Pushbacks were used even before the start of the so-called refugee crisis. However, under New Democracy they have become the standard tool of migration management. Pushbacks are explicitly denied by the Greek State at the same time that it claims that, hypothetically, their use would be legitimate, because the goal is to protect the national and European borders by any means necessary. The lies are for the benefit of its European audience, to help them sleep at night. But at the same time, pushbacks send a very direct message to a different audience, those who would attempt to enter the EU: do not even try.

Speaking about pushbacks in the Aegean region refers to the violent abduction of people either from sea or from land:

At sea, a Hellenic Coast Guard vessel, often supported by Frontex, intercepts a boat carrying migrants in Greek waters and pushes the boat into Turkish territorial waters. Sometimes people are picked up from small vessels and abandoned on inflatable life rafts;



On land, the authorities hunt migrants hiding in the forests of the islands, apprehending them, sometimes stealing from them, beating them, or handcuffing them, before abandoning them at sea in inflatable rafts to be picked up by Turkish Coast Guard, if lucky. Broken families are broken even further: children are separated from their parents (we know of cases where parents remained in Lesbos while their children were pushed back to Turkey, or vice-versa), or family members are lost at sea.



We have seen a number of violent practices. People have been abandoned on uninhabited islands. While this mostly happens on the islets of the Evros river border, there have also been reports of people being left on uninhabited Aegean islands. People have even been thrown directly into the sea, usually without life vests and sometimes handcuffed. At least three people have died through this method.

These practices have in common that they deny the right to ask for asylum and other fundamental rights through the use of violence. Pushbacks are violent per se. But their existence outside the law has created a dynamic in which the perpetrators feel free to feed their sadistic impulses without fear of repercussion. People who were pushed back describe, for example:

- having their faces pushed into the carcass of a dead dog and asked ‘do you like being in Europe now?’
- women being strip-searched in front of the whole group, harassed and even raped
- being abandoned naked
- being viciously beaten
- being given electric shocks
- several other practices designed to humiliate the victims and entertain the perpetrators.

Meanwhile the extreme violence also serves the purpose of terrorising people on the move in order to discourage more people from coming.

While there is overwhelming evidence for the existence of pushbacks, there are many unanswered questions about who carries them out. We don't know their specific organisational identity - are they a paramilitary group? Are they Coast Guard officers? However, we do know they are Greeks (mainly) and that they are armed. We know that FRONTEX and the Hellenic Coast Guard are aware and are involved. We know that migrants have been blackmailed to assist in carrying out the pushbacks.

A shadow army of masked man is not afraid to show their weapons to locals, nor to the police who do not intervene. We live among the perpetrators.

ΠΟΙΟΣ ΑΠΟ ΑΥΤΟΥΣ



ΕΧΕΙ ΣΚΟΤΟΣΕΙ;

Pushbacks and kickbacks

The border regime is very profitable. First, the border requires technology: surveillance, fences, vessels, weapons, and other equipment such as the life rafts used in pushbacks, along with the personnel to operate all of this. Often the same companies providing the border apparatus also take part in destabilising the countries people are leaving.

The cheapest of all this equipment is the infamous liferafts. According to the Turkish Coast Guard, in the first two months of 2023, an estimated 56 liferafts were used in pushbacks. These liferafts cost more than €1,000 each. Lalizas, one of the companies selling them, would have received over €56,000 in two months. We can assume the Greek Coast Guard has a good bulk-purchase discount by now, but in any case they are careful to cut costs by cramming them full with up to three times the safe number of people, or by throwing people directly into the sea, if they are only a few and a liferaft doesn't seem worth it.

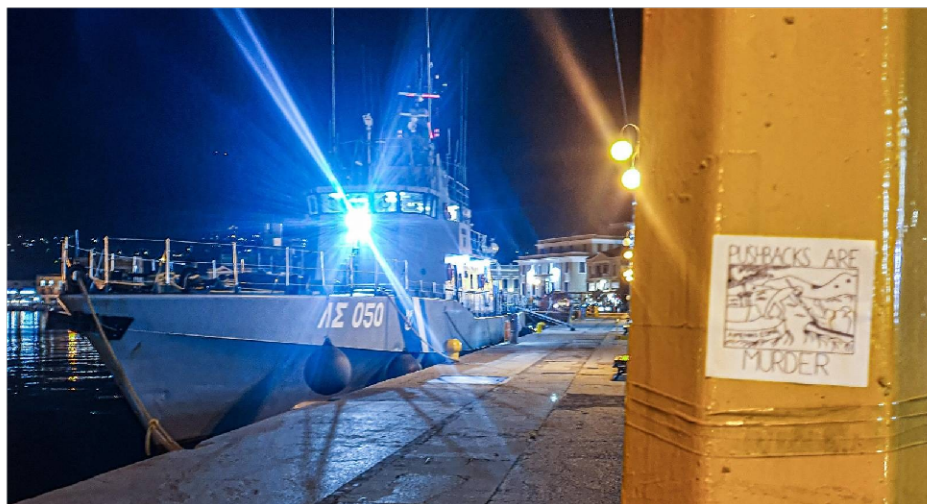
The border regime also creates a shadow economy around the border, smuggling for example, which justifies further investment in control of the borders. Even the police officers are taking a cut. Robberies of money, cellphones and any kind of valuable object carried by migrants are common practice and a regular supplement to their income. A conservative estimate by researchers is that, in the last six years, between 2.2 and 2.8 million Euros have been stolen by police from people on the move during pushbacks in the Evros region alone. We know that this also happens on the islands.



The border regime is clearly profitable, but profit is not its sole purpose. To lend credibility and integrity to their migration and asylum policies, European institutions allocate billions of Euros to fortify the borders and demonise irregular migration. Member states declare migration a threat to sovereignty, identity, and national security. The use of this rhetoric is not a new trend or political orientation; rather, it is a reinforcement of the dynamics that have accompanied the process of European integration. Since the Schengen Agreements (1985), the control of external borders has been closely linked to the safeguarding of internal security and the protection of the European community against external threats. The linking of migration to an 'external threat' is not innocent and has serious consequences: as long as the authorities present migration as a 'threat', they will not have to explain irregularities in the expulsion processes of migrants, nor the violation of human rights suffered by this group.

Living on a crime scene

It is not enough to simply criticise the obviously inhuman practices of Orban, Meloni and Mitsotakis. We have to understand that the militarization of borders and detention centers surrounded by barbed-wire fences is, by definition, incompatible with human rights. Salvini's proposals are no different from what 'progressive' Pedro Sánchez did in Melilla in 2022 by sending the army to fight unarmed people. Borders are inherently discriminatory, racist tools. That is why the discourse of European progressive parties regarding border management is two faced. A choice must be made: unless you support freedom of movement, you support the border regime and its paranoid and militaristic security policies. It is time for resistance that goes beyond nuance.



Pushbacks not only affect people on the move. We have to ask ourselves what it does to a society to live in the scene of a crime whose existence is denied.

We are lied to so blatantly, yet we see the evidence all around us, the unmarked cars driving through the coastal villages in the middle of the night, the migrants found handcuffed in the forests, and the bodies that wash up on the shores.



The violence has been accepted as a necessity, and the murder count considered by some among our island as the price to pay for a quiet life.

These migration policies shape the societies we live in. Ignoring the pushbacks normalises extreme violence and accepts fascism creeping into daily life.



The situation at the borders is sinister. While people are tortured and abducted right in front of us, we find ourselves in a position in which we feel that we simply have to prove that pushbacks even happen. We have done info-sessions and interventions in public spaces, distributed flyers, put posters on every wall in town, published texts, and organised a demonstration. The whole island should know by now. Still people prefer to ignore the facts, as the moment they would acknowledge them they would have to act. And very few people are willing to do so. Right now only some legal-organisations are trying to support the people arriving, alongside one big medical NGO protected by its reputation and political weight. The number of people pushed back from the islands proves that this is not enough. Neither NGOs, nor private people will risk being criminalised. Even many of our more organised 'comrades' do not consider the topic important enough. Some might believe that the struggle around migration is a humanitarian issue, not a political one. They ignore the fact that the extensive violence at the border is one of the biggest expressions of fascism today.

Fighting against pushbacks is fighting against state oppression.

Fighting against pushbacks is fighting against authoritarianism.

Fighting against pushbacks is fighting against fascism.

This has to be a matter for our movement.

So, what can we do?

Open Assembly Against Border Violence Lesbos - May 2023

In 2022, 27984 people were pushed back from Greek waters.* 326 people have died or gone missing in the attempt to reach Greece via the Eastern Mediterranean from Turkey and other states in 2022. That's nearly three times as many as in 2021.**

27984

It is impossible to say how many people died as a direct consequence of the violence they faced during a pushback, from the cold while hiding from the masked men hunting them, in ship wrecks that happened due to more dangerous routes. At least 14 deaths have been reported as directly linked to pushbacks.*

PUSHBACKS ARE MURDER

*according to Turkish Coast Guard

** according to The UN refugee agency

Further Media and Links on Border Violence and Pushbacks

Al Jazeera, 'The shadow army' (November 2022),
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-AvYyyVP98>

Border Violence Monitoring Network, borderviolence.eu

Community Peacemaker Teams, 'Incarcerating the Marginalised' (November 2020),
<https://cpt.org/wp-content/uploads/Incarcerating-the-Marginalized-Report-20201.pdf>

Forensic Architecture, 'Drift-backs in the Aegean Sea' (July 2022),
<https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/drift-backs-in-the-aegean-sea>

Kino Mosaik, 'What is a Pushback?' (January 2023),
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnqKfvqr_Yk

Lighthouse Reports, 'Frontex: the EU pushback agency' (May 2022),
<https://www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/frontex-the-eu-pushback-agency/>

Solomon Magazine, 'The Great Robbery' (March 2023),
<https://wearesolomon.com/mag/format/investigation/the-great-robbery-during-illegal-pushbacks-in-greece-refugees-are-robbed-by-border-guards/>

Solomon Magazine, 'Surviving hell in Samos' (April 2023),
<https://wearesolomon.com/mag/format/investigation/surviving-hell-in-samos-beaten-robbed-and-pushed-back-from-greek-paradise/>

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