

## **Reflection on joining the Commemoration Day**

Being active in migrant solidarity is fraught with contradictions. We are often physically cut off by oceans and walls from those with whom we fight. We are sometimes forced to adopt the position of speaking for those at the blunt end of the struggle, rather than with our siblings in the fight. We denounce experiences that most of us have not personally gone through and, being aware of this, we walk the tightrope between allyship and comradeship, limiting our interventions for fear of hijacking and instrumentalising another's struggle. And still, the struggles against borders and for the freedom of movement for all are some of the most crucial of our times.

For decades we have felt the tremors of Europe's lurch towards the far Right. Once upon a time, as a result of the anti-racist struggles of the '60s, '70s and '80s, northern European states were forced to make concessions. They adopted a watered-down multiculturalism, whose politics went no further than embracing a spirit of "inclusion". This was co-opted, now forming one of the "European values" used to distinguish "us" from our new enemies, a new generation of migrating people from less "enlightened" cultures: Afghanistan, Iran, Palestine, Yemen, Somalia, etc. This warped history has made a truncheon of the political gains of previous generations of migrants, which European states now use to batter the next. The mask of "European values" is slipping to reveal what generations of migrants in Europe have always felt in their bones: that they have been merely tolerated, that their presence here has been conditional, and that when the political wind changes they might be next.

The Hellenic Coast Guard acts as a mercenary army, doing the North's dirty work. Will the boomerang come back? Will the North adopt the same tactics as its mercenaries? The conversations around our dinner tables are about feeling the wind change, and the possibility of moving again. Europe's mask of "inclusivity" has been replaced by the mask that hides an executioner's face in the Aegean sea.

The 6th of February has become an international day to commemorate the people killed trying to reach Europe. On this day in 2014, 200 people tried to cross from Morocco to Ceuta. The Guardia Civil used anti-riot equipment to stop them from crossing, while the Moroccan police watched them drown. Fifteen bodies were recovered and dozens went missing.

Eleven years later nothing has changed but worsened. For years people trying to reach Europe are killed or disappeared, a lot of times with the active involvement of the Coast Guards and Frontex. If we

focus on the Aegean, 2482 people are reported dead trying to cross since 2014. We know that this number is much bigger, as a lot of shipwrecks just happen without anybody noticing. Last year, at least 7 different shipwrecks with 25 people killed were a direct consequence of the actions of the HCG.

We cannot say it often enough, these deaths are not accidents, nor are they natural. It's not the sea killing the people. These deaths are a direct outcome of political decisions. People should not be forced to risk their lives on more and more dangerous routes in the first place. Even before the Hellenic Coast Guard changed their tactics from occasional to institutionalised pushbacks, people died trying to enter Fortress Europe. Now the situation is even more brutal. What we saw with the Pylos Massacre, when the Adriana was sunk by the Hellenic Coast Guard and 600 people were murdered, what we hear from people on the move who were thrown handcuffed into the sea, what we read about children dying in a life raft after a pushback is often beyond imagination. There are no more limits.

As an assembly we speak about the pushbacks and the people killed at sea, often focussing on numbers. Even when it's about people being killed, our words feel cold, technical, and cynical. In our weekly assemblies we speak calmly about them, we mention any shipwrecks that we have learned of, and even bodies that have washed up on our shores. It's one topic among many, and after mentioning the numbers we close the subject, continue with other open topics, and the next week we do the same.

We had to ask ourselves how we could keep working without running into the trap of getting used to the horror and getting lost in the mechanisms of only monitoring and sometimes (in the best case) denouncing. But it took us quite some time to find a (for us) appropriate way to express our grief and anger and finally on the 6th of February 2025 we joined at the international commemoration with a public screening and exhibition.

If it comes to taking the public space, it is crucial to think about the internal intentions as well as the external optics. We had to ask ourselves: How can one visualise something that is so brutal, so monstrous, without being banal? How can something symbolize one of the biggest crimes of our times? Is there any adequate symbol for a human life, or death, anyway? Is it not dehumanizing, whatever one chooses to do? Wouldn't any action smell like something certain NGOs would do (the ones that hand over people to the police without hesitation, but cry fake tears publicly after another killing)?

We have to take into account that we remain witnesses of the deaths, but not of the lives of those killed, and still we feel the need to mourn, to at least remember, even if we have no direct relationship with those who died. We can not even “say their names” as we do not know them. In discussing this action we have reopened old, ongoing questions for which we never found answers. For us, being unable to name each person falls within the scope of continuing the process of erasure to which people on the move are subjected by European states.

We decided to proceed even with all these doubts, since we believe the most dehumanising aspect is total oblivion of those who lost their lives at sea, who will most likely remain unknown. Doing nothing was no longer acceptable for us, so we accepted to do something imperfect instead. We felt that the meaning does not come from the power of the symbol, but from our political speech and from our actions that break the routine normalisation of death for a moment, to remember what we fight for and that we do not have the right to lose hope, even if the situation seems hopeless. And we decided that the only way to do something is to listen to the voices of those who crossed the sea themselves, lost friends and family members, survived and made it to Europe after all. The active memory of unknown comrades who lost their lives in the struggle against Fortress Europe has to be part of our political culture and action.