

The detention camps on the Greek islands of Kos and Leros

Episode 5/7. Backflow or push back

Podcast: <https://audioblog.arteradio.com/blog/197819/podcast/199663/episode-5-les-refoulements-ou-pushback>

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- **Speaker 1** (in french) : All I can say about this whole system is... the fault lies with Europe, because all European countries are well aware of what is going on here. Because where do you think the money is coming from ? The European Union is financing the new camps.

- **Voice-over 1** (in french) : “Detention camps on the islands of Kos and Leros in Greece” a podcast from the Migreurop network and the Gisti edited by the radio studio la Parole errante. You can listen to the 7 episodes with subtitles on the migreurop.org and gisti.org websites

After two visits to the hotspots of Lesbos and Chios in 2016, then, to Samos in 2019, the Migreurop network and Gisti went to the islands of Kos and Leros in 2021.

This podcast gives voice to exiles stranded in these islands, and to those who work or stand alongside them, in order to highlight and denounce the hotspot system.

In the 5th episode, we will talk about illegal pushbacks committed by the Greek authorities.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : The police pushes back to Turkey exiles who are at sea. They also directly deport people even after they have already reached the Greek coast.

A pushback is the act of sending back a person over the border without any kind of formal procedure, without an individual examination of his or her claim, and without giving her/him the possibility of filing an asylum application, or of challenging any removal order issued against her/him.

In Leros we met Catharina from the organisation ECHO100PLUS. This is an NGO created in 2013 which works with exiles to offer them various activities as language courses, computer courses, cultural activities. She told us about the situation in Leros during the health crisis and the intensification of pushbacks to Turkey.

- **Catharina** : March 2020 was a bit of a breaking point when, first of all, Erdogan announced that the deal is over, and he won't control the borders anymore, and the Greeks reacted with activating a paragraph from the EU-Turkey deal, and suspended asylum applications. And the other thing was of course Coronavirus starting, and then very quickly all those island camps were put under quarantine, there was the first lockdown in Greece so we couldn't bring international volunteers. So we had to stop, but then on the return, the summer after, slowly try to start activities again. But then came the second lockdown. Since then, the road is very bumpy.

And also in the meantime, we had a change of government in Greece, and a different policy, with the new government really trying to come to terms with what they called the "failure of the previous government".

They said : "We control the borders now". I mean, part was also Covid-19 regulations, borders are closed, nobody can come. And then, pushbacks started. They started all over those islands. People wouldn't be let through, or even if they managed to cross the borders or arrive on the islands, they would be taken back.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : We also met Nikos, from the same NGO, who tells us about the pushbacks by Greek and European authorities.

- **Nikos** : Unofficially, we know that it's something that's happening, and it's getting very hard. Officially, it never happened. Pushbacks are not only done by the greek authorities, all the european authorities are well into it: the Frontex boats, that are mainly European, are very heavy on the pushbacks. And the greek coast guards of course.

Even when we had some incidents that we saw with our own eyes, pushbacks very close to the coast, and there was even a video that was posted about that, but then it was taken down by the guy that had placed it, because the coast guard asked him « politely » to take it off. And I think the best monitor of pushbacks is the Aegean Boat Watch.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : The activist who posted the video of a pushback has been prosecuted by Greek authorities. Nikos explains to us that he has faced repression, which is commonplace. He is formally charged with espionage by the Greek government. Another video showing a pushback was published by Solid, a Cameroonian exile we met in Kos. In this video, later broadcast by the BBC, a Greek coastguard boat can be seen circling around the boat in which Solid is a passenger along with other exiles. The Greek coastguard boat tries to make waves and capsize the boat (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4WZGxxDd50>).

In June 2021, following the broadcast of Solid's video and his testimony for the BBC, he was prosecuted by the Greek justice system, accused of being a smuggler a charge which is commonly used in this context. A hearing took place in August at which Solid was represented by a court-appointed lawyer. While waiting for the court's decision, he was put under house arrest and forbidden from leaving the island. That is why he refused to be recorded.

In turn, he filed a complaint against the Greek police and coast guard, saying he was the victim of pushbacks during his attempts to cross the sea from Turkey. These pushbacks took place in very violent conditions. Out of his 15 attempts to cross since February 2021, he was arrested 6 times by the Greek coastguard and subject to pushbacks.

The other times, either the boat had a problem, or it was the Turkish police that arrested him. He says that the Turkish police are actually less harsh – after 2 or 3 days in detention, the police officers take fingerprints and photos before letting people go. During one attempt, Solid nearly drowned. There were 34 people on a boat designed for only 20 people. They were saved by the Turkish.

Another time, the coast guard approached that boat that already had one side deflated, and they pierced the other side. Passengers who had the phone number of the Turkish Navy called them. They arrived very quickly, within around 5 or 10 minutes. It was the smugglers and the Turkish police that gave the number to the exiles.

The first time he arrived on Greek soil, in May 2021, the police took everything : bag, phone, money. They were take to the port, held inside a shed. The officials explained that everything was 'normal', that was how refugee arrivals took place, that the NGOs were going to come, and that because it was a Sunday, at the end of Ramadan, that was why everything was taking time. It was undercover officials and coast guard.

- **Solid** (in french) : People said they wanted to claim asylum. The police said there was no problem. People started to show that they were unhappy because we didn't have anything to eat

or drink. They pulled out a gun to calm people down. A man from Ivory Coast and a woman were able to bring some biscuits and some water around 6pm.

At night, they brought the boats. They surrounded us, they hit us with truncheons. They also had Taser. They restrained us with handcuffs. A Congolese woman who was 6 or 7 months pregnant was feeling really unwell. They 'revived' her and put her in the boat with us.

After around an hour, they took off the restraints and put us in a little dinghy with no motor, even though the sea was rough. The dinghy drifted as far as Turkey.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : On arrival in Turkey, Solid was taken to hospital and then to prison. In June 2021, he made another attempt to cross. It is that crossing from which the video was broadcast by the BBC.

- **Solid** (in french) : The Greek police fired shots into the air and made waves around the boat. The passengers were screaming that they wanted to claim asylum. Some tried to get onto the police boat. The police targeted them directly with their guns. I had to fight to keep hold of my phone, because I had filmed everything.

You need to understand that once you have been pushed back to Turkey, people are arrested by the police and released as far as possible away from the sea so that it takes them longer time to get back there. Turkish taxi drivers are under orders not to pick up migrants. Every attempt is very expensive. In Turkey, Africans are very poorly paid. They earn 10 euros per full day of work.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : Solid's final attempt took place in July 2021. The boat people arrived in Kos around 7 or 8 in the morning and they split up. One of the smaller groups then managed to contact an organisation that informed the police these were people wishing to claim asylum. The exiles were beaten again, but this time they were taken to the camp.

- **Solid** (in french) : We were interrogated by the coast guard. The interrogation lasted a long time, as the police were trying to get information about our journey. It was at that point that I was accused of being a smuggler. I was placed in quarantine. I was then freed relatively quickly from the camp, but I was forbidden from leaving Kos.

Confined to house arrest, I had to register with the police station twice a month. One week after my asylum interview, I received a rejection. I appealed.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : Solid confesses to us that he doesn't feel like he is in Europe. He was better treated in Turkish prisons than in the Greek camp. On Leros, we met the mayor, Miraklis Koliass, in his office. He was accompanied by an interpreter. He also told us about pushbacks, but used alternative language. He assured us that he had no knowledge of refoulements taking place.

- **Miraklis Koliass** (in greek translated) : We worked very hard. In 2015, the same day, 5 000 to 6 000 people arrived. And from Leros, over 100 000 people passed our way in the last five years. So we did quite a job trying to help as much as we could considering our circumstances.

We showed a very human face, which is true. He is saying that... between the church, the coast guards, everybody, they really did the very very best of they could, under whatever tools we had, which were very few. And we did it all by ourselves.

- **Interviewer** : Correct me... You say « if » it's happening, so it means you contest the reality of pushbacks, so what is your explanation? How people don't come ?

- **Interpreter** : He does not know. If it had happened, they might have had some kind of link with Turkey, but he's not aware of this at all.

- **Interviewer** : So you contest the reality for the moment, you say "you don't know".

- **Interpreter** : He does not know. It's not his job as he mayor here.

- **Interviewer** : What is your responsibility actually as a mayor ? I don't know how this works in Greece. If you are aware of the pushbacks?

- **Interpreter** : He says something true, which is that what he finds is not right is that it should be a joint effort between Greece and Turkey and other European countries and they should all come to a common ground where we're not stuck with the problem as Greece, and as Leros alone to take care of everything on our own.

- **Interviewer** : Even though the authorities officially deny the existence of pushbacks, these practices are common and extremely violent. Aegean Boat Report documents and denounces them by regularly publishing videos and reports on pushbacks between Greece and Turkey.

In April 2022, the director of Frontex – the European border and coast guard agency created in 2004 – left his functions in the face of numerous accusations of complicity with regard to their role in pushbacks at the EU's maritime and land borders. Over the past 15 years, the European institutions have continuously increased the budget of Frontex from 5 to 543 million euros. They have also strengthened its powers of control and expulsion.

In 2020, Frontex is for the first time publicly questioned on its activities and governance and partly dropped by its supporters. The agency stands accused of repeated rights violations, in particular pushbacks at European borders, breaches of its regulatory obligations, internal malfunctioning and inefficiency by the Court of Auditors.

The Migreurop network has been calling for the abolition of Frontex for more than 10 years, because of the incompatibility of its mandate with the respect of the rights of exiles. After the "Frontexit" campaign, Migreurop has joined the international campaign "Abolish Frontex", launched in June 2021, which calls for the abolition of this European agency, a key player in the European Union's war against migrants.

- **Speaker 1** (in french) : When people finally arrive in Greece, as we have seen in previous episodes, the asylum procedure can take several months or even years. What happens next for these people? This is what we will discover in episode n°6.

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