

Marion Bayer: More Than 10 Years in a Highly Contested Space

Alarm Phone Experiences in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean Sea

Watch the Med Alarm Phone was started in October 2014 by activist networks and civil society actors in Europe and Northern Africa. The project has set up a self-organised hotline for people on the move in distress in the Mediterranean and Atlantic seas, and in the Channel. Today, the activists of the project are based in various locations, including Dakar, Tunis, Palermo, Tangier, Marseille, Amsterdam, Barcelona, London, Vienna, Zurich, Berlin, and Istanbul. The project focuses on ensuring prompt rescue missions and preventing human rights violations. We recognise that preventable deaths of refugees and migrants at borders are a consequence of violent border control practices. Without radical change, more deaths will follow the recent tragedies in the Mediterranean Sea. At Alarm Phone, we therefore strive to create open borders and freedom of movement for everyone: Ferries not Frontex!

In June 2025, members of the Alarm Phone collective conducted an interview with Marion Bayer. As part of the Alarm Phone project, Marion's work focuses on the Eastern Mediterranean region.

What is the current situation for people on the move in the Eastern Mediterranean?

Looking at the arrival map for Greece, the situation looks completely different to that of previous years. The most popular route starts in eastern Libya, around Tobruk, with boats moving towards Crete and the smaller, more southerly island of Gavdos. By mid-June, 6.000 people had already arrived. Since the shipwreck in Pylos two years ago, which resulted in hundreds of deaths, fewer boats have been taking the long route from eastern Libya to Italy. Instead, they aim to reach Crete or Gavdos.

At the same time, the number of crossings from Turkey to the Aegean islands is lower than in previous years, and people are also moving further south. This means that Lesbos has fewer arrivals than other islands this year. Being on Lesbos, it is easy to understand why: the number of coastguard and military vessels is immense, and everyone knows about the brutal pushbacks they carry out at sea. Arriving on the Aegean islands has become more difficult. Despite the short distance — you can see the houses on the islands from Turkey in good weather — it is life-threatening due to the violent actions of the Greek border guards.

What was the situation in October 2014, when you started the hotline?

Although we had decided to operate the Alarm Phone throughout the Mediterranean Sea, we struggled to envision how to effectively use our hotline in the Aegean area during our preparation process. Illegal pushbacks by the Greek coastguard were already commonplace at that time. While discussing this issue with refugees and migrants who had experienced such life-threatening situations first-hand, we thought it would be impossible to develop real-time intervention strategies to prevent these practices. The Greek coastguard systematically pushed boats back into Turkish waters. These attacks were accompanied by brutal violence: masked men threatened people with guns, shot in the air, and sometimes at the boats. The attackers stole money, passports, and mobile phones and beat people up, leaving some badly injured. There were even reports of torture, such as waterboarding and pointing a weapon at someone's head and threatening to shoot.

What happened in 2015? What dynamics led to the influx of people to the Greek islands, the first step into the EU, and to the migration crisis along the Balkan route and beyond in the summer of migration?

Even in the first year of Alarm Phone, in 2015, we learned how unexpected and rapid migrant movements can completely change a situation. In late Octo-

ber 2015, just one year after the launch of Alarm Phone, we received 100 distress alerts in one week, 99 of which were in the Aegean Sea. What had happened?

Following the rise to power of Syriza in Greece in January 2015, when people stood up against imposed austerity measures, important changes also occurred in Greek migration policy. The two main consequences were a significant decrease in pushbacks and attacks at sea, followed more slowly by a reduction in detention durations. Nevertheless, in the summer of 2015, Alarm Phone still witnessed cases of criminal attacks at sea committed by coastguards. On several occasions, we received calls from people who had been attacked only minutes or hours earlier by masked men who had stolen the engine and often stabbed the boat, leaving travellers adrift in a damaged boat. These practices, which were less systematic and affected a smaller percentage of boats than before, were documented by the Alarm Phone. We collected all cases that we witnessed directly and included them in our public statements. This was also to inform the Greek ministries directly and request an investigation into these unacceptable violations of human rights. We knew that although the Greek coastguard was carrying out large-scale rescue operations, the same perpetrators responsible for the deaths of women and children in the incident off Farmakonisi Island in early 2014, as well as for all these violent attacks, were still working within the coastguard. In August 2015, the situation improved further, and over the following months, we responded to distress cases almost daily, primarily at night. Our phone contact with the headquarters of the Greek coastguard in Piraeus was very effective; countless boats were rescued to the Greek islands during this period. In 2015, more than 850,000 people finally made it to Greece and onward to Northern Europe.

How could you establish connections within migrant communities?

How did this cooperation work?

One of the main reasons for this high volume of calls is the immense level of communication within traveller communities. Especially Syrian activists have established a robust communication network to ensure safer sea journeys. The distances from the Turkish mainland to the Greek islands are relatively short, meaning mobile phone coverage is available across almost the entire area. Smartphones have become one of the most important life-saving instruments for these journeys, as they enable users to share their GPS location quickly. The different networks of people on the move and activist groups quickly found each other, forming new connections and collaborations. Many new Facebook groups emerged that strive to support refugees crossing the Aegean Sea. We were particularly happy to establish close ties with friends from Syrian networks, creating mutual support structures.

The full rollback began in 2016 at the Balkan borders, followed by the blockade and eviction at Idomeni. What developments and dynamics occurred in the Aegean Sea during this period?

As early as September 2015, when thousands of mainly Syrian refugees began marching towards the Turkish-Greek land border near Edirne under the slogan 'We don't want to drown any more', European governments started negotiating with President Erdogan, with the sole aim of convincing Turkey to stop refugees from moving towards the EU. The march towards Edirne was another example of collective resistance against the border regime responsible for so many deaths at sea. The Turkish government's response was strict: they blocked the protesters and ultimately forced them back to Istanbul. Negotiations with Turkey continued in the following months, during the EU-African summit on migration in Malta and afterwards. A deal was finally concluded by the end of November 2015. The EU promised to invest €3 billion to support Turkey's practices to deter irregular migration towards EU territories. While the rewards for doing Europe's dirty work are of financial nature and also include the promise to facilitate access to visas for Turkish citizens, the most important aspect is that Europe has agreed to turn a blind eye to the systematic human rights violations perpetrated by the Turkish government against the Kurdish population in Turkey and Syria. The EU-Turkey deal came into effect on 18 March 2016.

Although the death toll in the Mediterranean Sea during the summer of migration was the lowest it had been for decades, compared to the number of crossings, the increasing violence and longer routes people had led to more deaths. During this period, the Turkish coastguard also carried out violent interceptions.

Meanwhile, the EU had exerted considerable pressure on the Greek government to control its external borders. Frontex delegations were sent, and funding was provided for 'border security techniques and equipment', including fences and infrared cameras. Furthermore, the EU has used Greece as a testing ground for harmful new migration policies, such as the 'EU-Turkey Deal' and the so-called 'hotspot' camps at the external borders. In recent years, many people have been unlawfully returned ('pushed back') mostly to Turkey, families have been forcibly separated at the border, and, in some tragic incidents, people seeking protection have even lost their lives.

Nevertheless, the EU-Turkey deal never really worked out as planned. People were trapped on the Aegean islands for long periods of time, which became increasingly deterrent. Images of the Moria camp on Lesbos, which became a symbol of the violence of that period before it was completely destroyed by fire in September 2020, will never be forgotten. Several people died in these camps after surviving the sea crossing, and many more will never forget the long months or even years they had to spend there under humiliating conditions.

How did the situation on the land border develop during the summer of migration and afterwards?

Pushbacks at the Turkish-Greek land border along the 200 km-long Evros/Meriç River have long been a well-known phenomenon. While pushbacks at sea significantly decreased in 2015, those at the highly militarised land border continued.

However, violence reached a new level in and after 2020. In recent years, people have been pushed back even when they are already deep inside Greek territory. Those affected report violent attacks, the theft of all their belongings, dogs being set on them, and many different forms of physical abuse. Many people have also reported being stripped naked before being pushed back.

In March 2020, we witnessed a brutal police operation against refugees and migrants in Edirne. What happened, and what role did the EU play?

In March 2020, rumours of a march to Edirne in Turkey began to circulate, and a call for a 'March of Hope' spread on social media. Turkey announced that it would no longer restrict movement, prompting people to gather at the Pazar-kule border crossing in the hope of entering the EU. The EU reacted promptly: "Our first priority is to maintain order at the Greek external border, which is also a European border," said Ursula von der Leyen. The President of the European Commission promised Greece, which she referred to as a 'European shield', €700 million in financial aid. Meanwhile, on 4 March, Muhammad Gulzar from Pakistan was shot and killed at the Greek-Turkish border. Evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the bullet came from a Greek firearm. Von der Leyen's shield had executed him.

The violence at the land border escalated further, leading to deadly situations, particularly for those who became injured or unwell while stranded on river islets or attempting longer, more perilous forest routes.

On 30 August 2021, Alarm Phone received information about a group of people near Arianna in Greece. Among them was Alaa Muhammad Al-Bakri, a Syrian national residing in Lebanon. He travelled through Iraq and Iran to reach Turkey, and then went on to Greece. While in Turkey, he experienced mild cold symptoms, but since they were not too severe, he still left for Greece. After four or five days in the forest, things got worse. At some point, the group he was travelling with left him behind. Another group of three travellers found him in the forest and tried to help him, making emergency calls to various organisations, including Alarm Phone. When no help arrived, the group handed themselves over to the police in the hope that they would receive assistance for Alaa Muhammad. Instead, they were detained and then pushed back to an island in the

Evros/Meriç river with another group. Alaa Muhammad Al-Bakri died there on 2 September 2021. This was one of several deadly attacks that we witnessed following an increase in brutality from March 2020 onwards.

On 19 August 2023, a wildfire broke out near the River Delta, becoming the largest and longest-lasting wildfire ever recorded in Europe. Greek media outlets and senior government officials were quick to blame migrants for the fire, spreading misinformation and claiming that the region was under attack. In response, local far-right vigilantes launched a 'pogrom', abducting and detaining migrants before posting footage of their actions on social media. The charred remains of 20 asylum seekers were found in the forest once the flames had been extinguished. The victims had been travelling in different groups — one group of 18 and two people travelling alone—and had found themselves stranded in different locations in the forest, unable to escape the blaze. Intensive research by the independent institute Forensis revealed that migrants chose this longer, more dangerous route through the Rhodope Mountains to avoid the risk of being pushed back if they were intercepted near the river.

What was the situation at sea in 2020 and the following years?

This marked the start of a cycle of intense and brutal violence, carried out by coastguards at sea and border guards on land. We, along with many others, documented this in various reports. One year later, we published a report called *Aegean Bordercrimes*, which included a map showing that, out of the 125 distress calls we had received during this period from the border between Turkey and Greece, 79 had involved human rights violations and violence, perpetrated mainly by Greek authorities. We also documented cases of non-assistance by the Turkish authorities and the presence of Frontex and NATO vessels on certain occasions. We presented the systematic violations of rights in detail, based on individual distress cases reported to the Alarm Phone. Rather than analysing the pushback tactics of the state actors involved as isolated incidents, we presented them as striking examples that illustrated the systematic nature of the violence.

It remained important to us to document these human rights violations and crimes along the borders. Nobody should be able to claim ignorance. However, scandalising the issue did not bring about change. Even worse, we got the impression that the authorities wanted it to happen in plain sight and also used the horrifying pictures of their attacks to deter people.

As mentioned, the so-called EU-Turkey agreement never really worked out. Compared to the number of arrivals in Greece, very few people were deported under the deal, and hardly any Syrian refugees were resettled from Turkey to the EU. According to current legislation, if you are from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia,

Pakistan, or Bangladesh, you will first undergo an 'admissibility procedure', during which you will be interviewed about Turkey and whether it is safe for you to return there. This Greek law incorrectly asserts that individuals from these five nationalities are generally safe in Turkey. However, readmissions to Turkey are not being implemented, as Turkey has not cooperated with the Greek government in taking people back since 30 March 2020. In March 2025, Greece's highest court even annulled the law designating Turkey a 'safe third country' for asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, following legal challenges brought by two Greek human rights organisations. All affected asylum procedures were halted for about two months. Unfortunately, only three weeks after the court ruling, a new version of the law was published. As of June 2025, the so-called admissibility procedure is in effect again.

In parallel, there was a constant process to establish a push-back regime. This was most evident in the tactic employed by the Greek coastguard to 'rescue' people on boats, only to abandon them in life rafts in the sea and force them back into distress. In many cases, people who were already on land and had been found by the Greek police were handed over to the coastguard and found themselves back in the sea.

In June 2023, the Pylos shipwreck happened. What were the consequences?

At exactly 14:17 CEST on 13 June 2023, Alarm Phone received the first call from Adriana, an overcrowded boat carrying around 750 people, that had departed from Libya bound for Europe and was in distress. It soon became clear that the boat was unstable and that the people on board needed urgent rescue. We alerted the relevant authorities in Greece. We also realised that the Hellenic Coast Guard's past actions in the region could have lethal consequences for an overloaded boat like this one. To our horror, the crime we had feared occurred. It took place in the early hours of 14 June 2023. The boat capsized. Of the estimated 750 people on board, only 104 survived. Over 600 people lost their lives that night.

In a blatant attempt to absolve themselves of any responsibility, the Hellenic Coast Guard—supported by the Greek government—made false accusations against the nine Egyptian survivors, claiming that they had been 'smuggling' and had caused the shipwreck. However, similar to other recent state crimes in Greece, it was only thanks to the relentless efforts of the survivors, the families of the missing, lawyers, journalists, and civil society that the false narrative was exposed and the nine survivors were finally released.

In May 2025, lawyers representing survivors and victims of the shipwreck were informed of criminal proceedings and a referral for a full investigation

into felony charges against 17 Hellenic Coast Guard members, including senior leadership officers.

The survivors and family members of the missing had organised continuously, building alliances with other families of victims from the Tempi train disaster and other tragedies linked to the state.

In the months after the Pylos shipwreck, policy of pushbacks continued, but there were fewer recorded pushbacks over long distances.

You visited Crete in March 2025. What was the reason for your visit, and what were the latest developments there?

Following Pylos, there was another development: a new shift in migration routes. An increasing number of boats from eastern Libya attempted to reach Greece directly. As mentioned above, Crete has become the main arrival point in the Eastern Mediterranean so far this year. We therefore sought to enhance our connections with those in solidarity with people on the move in this area, and discovered a small but active network of activists there.

We have been active in this highly contested space for more than 10 years. Refugees and migrants are still on the move, fighting for their freedom of movement. The Alarm Phone will continue to support them on this part of their journey. We see ourselves as a network that builds infrastructures for the right to move. There are many other projects, as well as many of us at Alarm Phone, who support these struggles throughout the many stages of this long journey. This support is provided in border regions, such as along the Balkan route, as well as in subsequent struggles for a Europe formed from below, where everyone who lives here will finally have the same social rights. We also support struggles before and on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea that contest border militarisation and Europe's war on migration.

Additional Information

Alarm Phone: <https://alarmphone.org/en/> (30 November 2025)

Aegean Bordercrimes: <https://aeg.bordercrimes.net/> (30 November 2025)

Welcome to Europe: <https://w2eu.info/en/countries/greece/overview> (30 November 2025)

Forensis, The Pylos Shipwreck: <https://counter-investigations.org/investigation/the-pylos-shipwreck> (30 November 2025)