

ENDING UP IN A CUL-DE-SAC?:
CRITICAL JUNCTURES IN THE EU-TURKEY
“DEAL” ON ITS SIXTH ANNIVERSARY

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Molyvos/Lesbos, 2017; photo by Sibel Karadağ

1. Introduction

In 2011, the Syrian civil war broke out as part of the domino effect triggered by the Arab Spring. Consequently, millions of people have since been displaced, fleeing from persecution, violence, war, conflict, and hunger throughout the last decade. Reaching its climax in the summer of 2015, the mass movement of refugees has not only come to define the relationship between Turkey and the EU but also concomitantly become a landmark in the reconstruction of political landscapes across Europe and its periphery, including Turkey. As reported by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 3,771 refugees¹ perished in the Aegean region during 2015, a tragedy that eventually stirred the attention of international civil society through the widely circulated photo of Alan Kurdi. In the summer of 2015, more than 1.2 million people had arrived inside EU territories,² and the mass movement of refugees was framed as a “refugee crisis” that called for an immediate response.

In March 2016, the EU-Turkey Statement was formulated as an immediate response to prevent the unauthorized mobility of refugees to Europe. This Statement was not peculiar to Turkey but a part of the EU’s broader migration and border regime that has been at play since the early 2000s.³ The transnational infrastructure of migration and border management via bilateral and multilateral agreements—characterized by many as “externalization” or outsourcing of the EU’s migration policies to its neighboring countries—has occasionally involved the countries of origin, transit, and destination.⁴ Despite being a part of the wider European migration project, Turkey represents a distinct and interesting case due to its status as a long-standing EU candidate whose relationship with the Union has been fluctuating since its initiation. Accordingly, the 2016 Statement was neither a straightforward part of the enlargement process nor a European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) agreement with a neighboring country, insofar as the Statement displays inherently contradictory and even unattainable principles with reference to the completion of the accession process amid increasing authoritarianism in Turkey.⁵ In addition to the inherently unachievable political design of the Statement and its

principles being stalled from the beginning, such as the visa liberalization roadmap for Turkish citizens within the EU, the modernization of the EU-Turkey Customs Union, and the revitalization of the accession process, it has substantially transformed the social and political landscape in Turkey and Greece as well as the governance of the Aegean Sea.

Since its implementation, there have been many studies and reports drawing attention to a wide range of concerns over the Statement. The legal basis of the arrangement has provoked serious critiques on the following grounds: i) the binding nature of the Statement as a legal text, ii) the 1:1 resettlement framework, iii) fast-track border procedures, iv) Turkey’s definition as a safe third country, and v) concerns around collective expulsion and refoulement. First, the “deal” has been contested by various parties as it lacked the “formal requirements of an international treaty” contracted between the EU and Turkey.⁶ It was argued that the Statement was formulated as an informal text with certain social/political implications for the parties involved. Second, the content of the Statement has been criticized for its controversial 1:1 agreement on resettlement. In this respect, a quota of 72,000 people was set for readmission to the EU in exchange for every person returned to Turkey; however, throughout this process, only 28,000 people⁷ have been readmitted to the Union. The reluctance of member states to admit refugees has been harshly criticized, and the provision has provoked concerns since the vulnerability criteria has been dubious and discretionary. Third, fast-track border procedures have eliminated the attentive consideration of each case, creating protection gaps in asylum procedures.⁸ Conjointly, the bureaucratic deadlock in asylum services has led to thousands of persons being trapped in the Greek islands, living under devastating circumstances and lacking basic needs in refugee camps.⁹ Fourth, Turkey’s definition as a safe third country has culminated in the rejection of an overwhelming majority of the applications by Greek officials, even though for ethnic minorities, the LGBTQI+ community, and other vulnerable communities, Turkey could be considered a highly dangerous place.¹⁰ Indeed, the discussion on Turkey’s classification as a safe third country can be debated, beginning with its increasing authoritarian rule and precarious temporary protection regime for both Syrian and

non-Syrian communities, which consistently leaves asylum seekers in legal limbo.¹¹ Fifth, the principle of non-refoulement has been repeatedly trampled by both sides, Greece and Turkey, as Greece keeps performing pushbacks; meanwhile, Turkey has accelerated the level of deportations of non-Syrians as well as “voluntary returns” of Syrians.¹²

Despite a sharp decrease in the number of border crossings following the 2016 Statement,¹³ the course of events in the last five years has not displayed a smooth pattern. What was initially framed as an agreement aiming to reduce unauthorized crossings and curb the number of deaths has led us to the current situation in which asylum seekers are beaten and left to die along the Greece-Turkey border in Evros,¹⁴ and collective pushbacks have left people freezing to death in the Aegean Sea.¹⁵ What started with the worldwide outcry about Alan Kurdi’s photo in 2015 has resulted today, on the sixth anniversary of the Statement, in total apathy for the children who are left at sea drifting in life rafts¹⁶ and the permanence of anti-refugee incidences in Turkey and Greece.

In brief, the period between 2016 and 2022 has been an unsteady one that has entailed major turning points, paradigmatic shifts in terms of migration governance, contradictory discourses and implementations, and antagonistic constellations of engagement between different stakeholders. Even though much has been written about the EU-Turkey Statement of 2016, a comprehensive historical trajectory with its critical junctures is still lacking: a gap that this analysis aims to fill.

In that regard, we will delineate the timeline into three distinctive periods: (i) the first period (2016–2017), which transformed the entire political landscape, created a relatively multi-actor and multi-faceted arrangement that entangled security and humanitarian logics; (ii) the second period (2018–2020) gradually brought security and surveillance to the fore along with new legislative frameworks, bureaucratic changes, and practices performed both in Turkey and Greece; (iii) the third period (2020 onward) starts with the Pazarkule events at the Greek-Turkish land border followed by the COVID-19 outbreak, which in return has led to the outright militarization of the landscape and further

deprivation of refugees in Turkey due to the pandemic and economic crisis as well as increasing racism. In addressing these three periods and their critical junctures, we aim to make an in-depth, critical review of the governmental, social and spatial changes both in Turkey and Greece, including border regions, and identify the future challenges that await amid the pandemic, economic crisis, war, and growing racism.

2. The Grand Transformation of 2015/16: The Making of the Security-Humanitarian Nexus

In 2016, a series of policies and practices were introduced that were built on two intimately linked rationales: (i) the transnational security infrastructure aiming to control and monitor migrants heading to Europe and (ii) humanitarian infrastructure seeking to enhance the livelihood of Syrians residing in Turkey as well as asylum services and rescue missions for those entering Greece. These security and humanitarian rationales went hand in hand with the political design of the Statement and its implementation, especially in its initial phase.¹⁷ This led to rapid multiplication of state and non-state actors both in Turkey and Greece, namely non-governmental organizations, international bodies, state-led institutions, and private volunteers. While the vast majority of these actors were involved in the processes of humanitarian assistance and projects implemented in Turkey and the Greek islands/mainland, many shared the same habitus with the armed forces in border spaces, especially in rescue operations in the Greek islands.¹⁸

(i) Transnational security and border infrastructure in the making

Since 2016, the institutions that regulate maritime governance in the Aegean Sea have been equipped with ever-increasing surveillance mechanisms containing remote systems, high-tech radar, large-scale databases, and enhanced capacity of patrols.¹⁹ NATO ships have appeared in the Aegean as observatory ships spying on coastal areas and generating communication between the Greek and

Turkish coast guard teams. The enhanced security and border infrastructure concurrently has generated a contentious cooperation between coast guards from both sides of the sea—the main tasks of which have never before been the monitoring of clandestine mobility at such a level. Across the Aegean space, the number of speed boats has increased; the frequency of patrolling has increased; and supportive air and floating equipment has been enhanced.²⁰ Reciprocally, internal bordering mechanisms and checkpoints have been proliferated in order to reduce transit mobility toward border cities.²¹

In Turkey, four months after the Statement, a coup attempt occurred after which the entire organizational body of the coast guard command was transformed. On July 25, 2016, under a State of Emergency Decree, the Turkish Coast Guard Command (TCG) was placed under the control of the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and categorized as a general armed law enforcement force.²² Since then, the operations of the TCG have adapted a very centralized structure in which its entire surveillance systems are coordinated at the main operational center, which also determines the scheduling of patrols across the Aegean coastline.²³ The TCG has become the sole authority monitoring processes related to migrant crossings, including interception, rescue, landing, and identification both on sea and at ports. The members of IOM are the only outside actors who have access to the military security zone in case they need to provide first aid and translation upon landing.²⁴

On the Greek side, since 2016, the role of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX), which cooperates with the Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG) in border security and rescue, has notably increased. A Greek liaison officer is present in each Frontex boat to authorize certain actions and secure the connection between the two bodies.²⁵ FRONTEX personnel on the Greek islands, including select members of maritime police from each EU country, rotate every six months. Despite the occasionally contentious cooperation between the HCG and FRONTEX due to the different habitus of these armed forces, the latter, as the EU’s border agency, is the one endowed with enhanced smart border technologies and know-how, including hy-

brid aerial surveillance drones, automotive thermal vehicles, and satellite tracking systems and imagery aimed to enhance European border surveillance.²⁶

In a nutshell, since the 2016 Statement, the shifting transnational security and border infrastructure has transformed not only the technological reconfiguration of the Aegean Sea but also internal spaces in both Greece and Turkey in line with new organizational structures in the armed forces.

(ii) Humanitarian actors and space in the making

A state of humanitarian emergency was declared in Greece amid the refugee movement of 2015 and unfolded alongside enhanced border surveillance. In Greece, humanitarian governance of the refugee movement resulted in increasing processes of reception, asylum, and rescue. In the Turkish context, the Statement established funding to provide humanitarian assistance for Syrians through the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRiT)²⁷ in education, healthcare, socioeconomic support (cash transfers, support for employment and entrepreneurship), and migration management. In both states, the establishment of humanitarian assistance led to an increasing number of NGOs and IOs operating in the field of migration, especially during the first two years of the Statement.

In Greece, the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government (2015–2019) was relatively open and welcoming of cooperation with IOs, NGOs and grassroots initiatives under the state of humanitarian emergency.²⁸ In 2016, the Greek parliament made broad changes in national reception and asylum application processes, introducing a “geographical restriction” to asylum seekers, meaning that they cannot leave the Greek islands unless their case is processed. In this context, five islands were identified as hot-spots (Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros, and Kos), and the ESTIA Programme was introduced in 2016 as an innovative flagship initiative for the accommodation and integration of asylum seekers in the urban milieu of the mainland as well as in the Greek islands.²⁹ Despite the relatively welcoming atmosphere in 2016, certain challenges and barriers started to emerge. Concerns such as slow and complex

asylum procedures, overcrowded and substandard conditions, poor quality food and accommodation, deterioration of health services, and increasing incidents of violence, suicide, and mental health problems led civil society actors to fill this gap. These organizations were notably active in the provision of legal aid, basic food, healthcare, training, language courses, etc., by forming the basis of the humanitarian regime under the coordination of UNHCR.³⁰ As the vast majority of civil initiatives operated in camp areas, those that have specific expertise in Search and Rescue missions were called rescue NGOs.³¹ These rescue NGOs operated under the permission of the HCG, provided assistance in safely transferring people to ports, carrying out first aid during landing, and organizing the temporary stay of people until their transportation to the camps. The involvement of the rescue NGOs was significant because they were the only civilian actors in the border space witnessing and observing the actions of border security. Since 2016, rescue NGOs and their connected platforms have kept reporting instances of pushbacks (see the reports of Alarm Phone³²). Yet again, despite their conflictual relationship with HCG and Frontex, they maintained their operations in the islands until 2020.

In Turkey, a total of 6 billion EUR of FRIT funding was allocated to be spent in the areas of education, healthcare, and socioeconomic support until 2021.³³ Most prominently, the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) provided scheduled cash assistance to the most vulnerable Syrians. Additionally, vulnerable families received cash assistance and education assistance to facilitate school attendance. The healthcare sector was the main sphere of assistance. One example of this was the FRIT project SIHHAT, which aimed to improve the health of the Syrian population under temporary protection and related services provided by Turkish authorities. Formally launched in 2017 under the SIHHAT project (with a budget of 300 million EUR), 177 Migration Health Centers (MHCs) providing primary healthcare were opened in 29 provinces across Turkey. In total, MHCs employed 790 Syrian doctors as well as hundreds of nurses and support staff.³⁴ Until 2018, the active involvement of NGOs in the healthcare sector continued, and Syrian-run clinics were allowed to perform under the watch of Turkish associations. Thus, this NGO partnership

in healthcare filled the gap caused by the insufficient capacity of the healthcare system in Turkey.³⁵ However, after 2018, as the SIHHAT project has progressed, the Ministry of Health (MoH) has become the sole authority in the healthcare by gradually eliminating the previously involved NGOs.

As we will outline in the following section, the effects of the 2016 Statement, which entangled humanitarian governance with the security infrastructure, entered a new phase in 2018, after which centralization and surveillance have become the major modes of governance.

3. Doubling down on Surveillance and State Centralization: 2018-Present

Since 2018, Turkey's migration governance has gradually become more centralized and restricted, especially in terms of regulating access to registration and healthcare. The withdrawal of UNHCR from asylum and refugee determination procedures, the de facto closure of metropolitan cities to new registrations of Syrians and non-Syrians (such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, where the vast majority of Syrians and non-Syrians work in informal sectors), and institutional incapacities in satellite cities (assigned provinces of residence for non-Syrians under international protection) have led to slow responses or rejections in registration. Additionally, the 2019 amendments to the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) have restricted access to healthcare within one year of registration for non-Syrians under international protection and reduced time limits for appealing deportation decisions from fifteen to seven days. The July 2019 press statement from the Istanbul governor's office, which was released right after the municipal elections were won by the opposition, announced the return of unregistered Syrians to their provinces of residence.³⁶ The increasing number of checkpoints, security controls, "voluntary returns,"³⁷ and deportations³⁸ are all part of a series of restrictive events that have taken place since 2018. No official figures are available to estimate the number of Syrians that have been forcibly returned since the July 2019 press statement; however, based on several

reports, hundreds of Syrians have been compelled to sign “voluntary return forms.”³⁹ Additionally, these reports underline that the level of deportations, particularly of unregistered non-Syrians, have dramatically increased since 2018.⁴⁰

The major outcome of these changes has been the growing number of Syrians and non-Syrians without legal status and access to public services and healthcare in Turkey. Due to institutional and bureaucratic barriers, the registration system in Turkey has turned to the politics of deterrence, which has produced a set of barriers keeping people out of the legal protection sphere and thus prohibiting both unregistered Syrians and non-Syrians in the country. Concomitantly, since 2018, the increased centralization of migration governance under the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) and the Ministry of Health has contributed to the lack of transparency and information sharing as well as the increasingly limited space of international and civil society organizations to maneuver and fill the gaps.

A similar policy shift occurred in Greece in 2019. With the election of the New Democracy (ND) government, the new law of International Protection Act (Law No. 4636/2019) came into force, replacing the previous legislation introduced by the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition. The new law and its amendment initiated the establishment of the “closed camp policy”: it eliminated some categories of persons who were previously subjected to regular asylum procedures and eligible for the lifting of geographical restrictions, reducing the time limit for appeals against negative decisions, replacing social security numbers (AMKA) with Temporary Aliens Provisional Insurance and Healthcare numbers. This has made asylum procedures extremely difficult, at times practically impossible, as migrants lack access to proper information.⁴¹ As stated in the reports on Greece, the country’s Asylum Service became considerably dysfunctional and unable to process applications and appeals. Alongside devastating legal protection gaps, the Asylum Service stopped publishing monthly statistics of asylum procedures and became practically inaccessible. Additionally, pressure on the operations of rescue NGOs increased, especially after FRONTEX’s accusation that NGOs were colluding

with human traffickers.⁴²

All in all, we argue that since 2018, the comparably multi-faceted nature of the first period has eroded as the space for non-state actors has been gradually restricted, and the logic of surveillance has conquered humanitarian discourse.

4. The Year 2020: Is the “Deal” Now Obsolete?

The year 2020 is a turning point in the trajectory of the 2016 Statement. While the Pazarkule events in February/March 2020 illustrate a de facto infringement of the major objective of the Statement, which was the prevention of mobility, the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the already existing precarity of refugees and migrants. The impoverishment of refugees has grown, which has ushered in a defining moment in protection efforts in Turkey since 2016.

On February 27, 2020, following the death of 34 Turkish soldiers in Syria’s Idlib province, the Turkish government announced that Turkey had not received enough support in hosting refugees and would no longer prevent asylum seekers leaving Turkey from entering the EU.⁴³ Immediately after the announcement, thousands of people rushed to the Pazarkule border gate located at the Greek-Turkish land border and to the Evros River. Turkish police, gendarmerie, coast guard, and border guards were ordered to stand down and not to intercede.

Approximately 13,000 migrants⁴⁴—the majority Afghans, followed by Iranians, Syrians, Somalis, and Iraqis, respectively⁴⁵—gathered at the border gate. A wide spectrum of nationalities was observed, additionally including Pakistanis, Congolese, Cameroonians, Nigerians, Moroccans, and Algerians.⁴⁶ Undocumented persons comprised the majority along with Syrians under temporary protection and non-Syrians under international protection. Based on the survey conducted in the area, 71% of the population were men, 13% were women, and 16% were children.⁴⁷ Some were released from emptied removal centers and transported to the border by buses arranged by the DGMM, while others used

private transportation to reach the border through their own means.⁴⁸ After a month of staying in the buffer zone, on March 26, Turkish authorities emptied the border area and evacuated the remaining persons in the area to be transferred to removal centers in random cities for a 14-day quarantine following the official announcement of the COVID-19 outbreak in the country. After staying in quarantine in various provinces, they were released. However, the post-Pazarkule period produced considerable legal uncertainty for them.⁴⁹

The reaction of Greece has been extremely harsh at its borders since the Pazarkule events. New asylum applications have been immediately suspended; and Greek security forces have employed a plethora of unlawful techniques ranging from shooting rubber bullets and tear gas to arbitrary detentions and beatings.⁵⁰ The paradigmatic shift of border management also spread to the maritime borders in the Aegean, where the local xenophobic and racist discourse reached a peak and culminated in vandalism and attacks against displaced people as well as humanitarian actors.⁵¹ Xenophobic attacks along with the explicit political pressure of the Greek government through the criminalization of humanitarian grassroots activism in Lesbos

and other islands led to the gradual expulsion of NGOs, IOs, and volunteers from the region.⁵² Arbitrary arrests, inhumane treatment in detention centers, and collective pushbacks have increased in the absence of these civil society organizations in the field.⁵³

Since the Pazarkule events in 2020, the border space between Greece and Turkey has become hyper militarized. Against the flexibility of Turkish borders and ipso facto open border policy, Greece has started to perform ever increasing levels of pushbacks to the Evros River and the Aegean Sea. On March 23, 2020, the first case of using life rafts in pushbacks was reported by the TCG: thirty-one asylum seekers were left drifting on the waves of the Aegean in a life raft.⁵⁴ Life rafts are designed for emergency and rescue to keep survivors afloat and alive until assistance arrives. Paradoxically, the HCG has used them to deport people, both those who arrive the islands and those who are intercepted and then transferred from their rubber boats (dingy) to life rafts on the sea. Since 2020, the practice of pushbacks via life rafts has become notably widespread in the Aegean Sea (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 1: Number of Pushbacks

The Aegean Boat Report registered 324 cases of pushbacks (involving 9,741 people in total) in the Aegean Sea in 2020, while this number increased to 629 pushbacks (involving 15,803 people in total) in the year 2021.

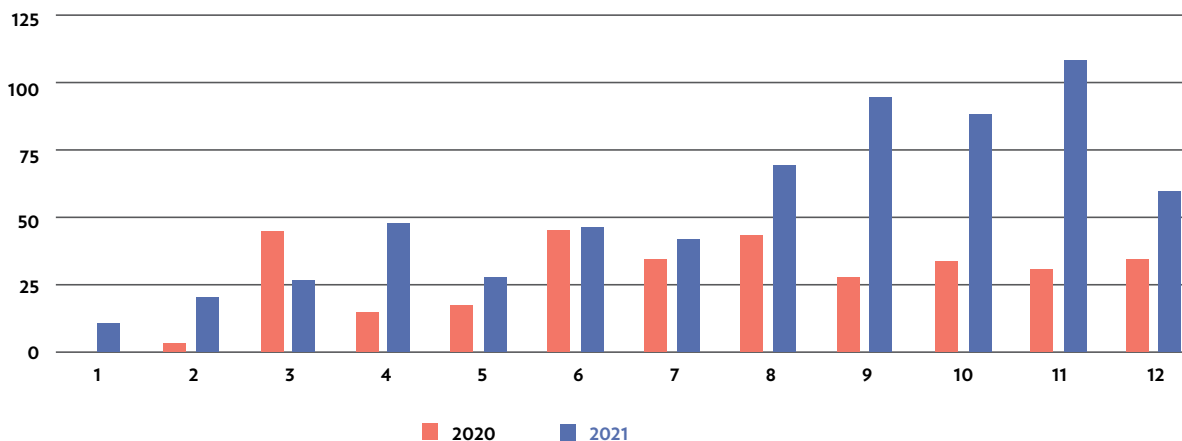
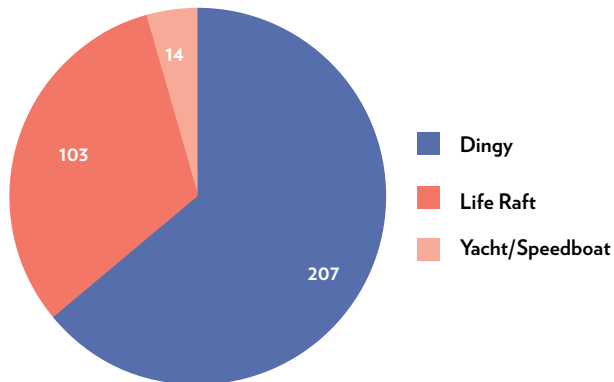


Figure 2: Pushbacks by craft type (2020)

In 2020, out of 324 cases of pushbacks, 207 rubber boats were pushed back at sea, often with their engines or petrol removed, and left drifting. In some cases, these boats were towed back to Turkish waters. In 103 registered cases (one third of the estimated total), people were left drifting in the Aegean Sea with only life rafts. Source: Aegean Boat Report

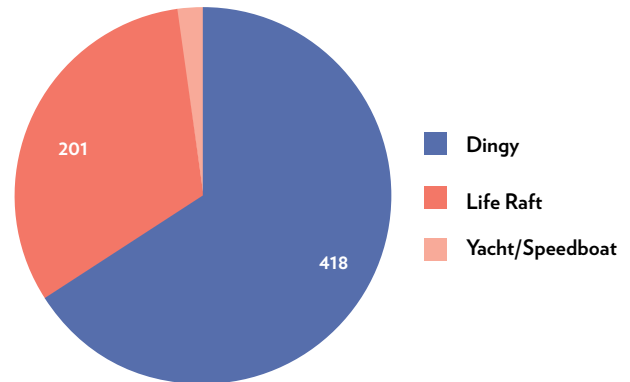


Adding to the severity of the conditions at the Greek-Turkish border space, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the implementation of containment strategies in both countries. Greek officials declared the suspension of asylum applications for one month, and Turkish officials announced a de facto suspension of readmission operations from Greece as a part of its pandemic precautions.⁵⁵ In addition to the discriminatory implementation of quarantine measures and closed-camp policies against refugees in the Greek islands, the healthcare provisions in both countries lacked the infrastructural capacity to effectively combat against the spread of COVID-19 and social distancing measures could not be applied properly in overcrowded camp zones.⁵⁶ Inhumane and unsanitary conditions were coupled with increasing incidences of gender-based violence and intra-camp conflicts between different communities. In addition, due to the pandemic, bureaucratic procedures such as opening a bank account, issuance of tax IDs, and legal procedures for the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) and the like came to a serious deadlock, if not a complete halt.⁵⁷

When the Moria refugee camp in Lesbos was set on fire in September 2020, Greek authorities failed to provide the urgent provision of shelter, food, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities, and thus, the residents of Moria were left on their own in the streets to survive under COVID-19

Figure 3: Pushbacks by craft type (2021)

In 2021, out of 629 cases of pushbacks, 201 boats were pushed back through life rafts, in which 5,220 people were left drifting in life rafts (one third of the total pushbacks). Source: Aegean Boat Report



conditions until their resettlement in a new temporary camp, namely the Mavrovouni refugee camp.⁵⁸ Yet, the situation in the new camp was no more secure and humane due to the absence of a sewage system, proper electricity, and catering facility.⁵⁹ In the meantime, the anti-refugee discourse vocalized by government officials in the media had significant repercussions on the islands, leading to the criminalization of NGOs on allegations such as human trafficking. By extension, local actors gradually receded from humanitarian involvement. All these pressures caused rescue NGOs to terminate their rescue operations on the islands. Overall, the ad hoc lockdown measures, increasing pushbacks, suspension of legal procedures, and serious restriction of mobility in camps in the absence of NGOs and international actors culminated in serious violations of human rights in these regions.⁶⁰

In the Turkish context, prior to the pandemic, the provision of urgent and basic needs was almost non-existent. Thus, the rich array of programs and projects funded by FRIT and the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) as part of the EU-Turkey Statement focused primarily on social cohesion programs, integration efforts, entrepreneurship, and long-term vocational training.⁶¹ However, the sharp economic downturn and increasing unemployment during the pandemic disproportionately affected Syrians

in Turkey, with the unemployment rate among Syrians in Turkey rising from 18% and reaching 88% in the first period of pandemic.⁶² Hence, the pandemic situation led to increasing poverty and deprivation among displaced persons, where even basic needs such as shelter, food, and healthcare could not easily be met.⁶³ In general, overcrowded houses, poor sanitation conditions, food insecurity, and inadequate access to healthcare services, vaccinations, and online education became visible obstacles for Syrians during the pandemic. The situation has been even more precarious for those who do not hold a legal status in the country. Due to their inability to access healthcare, some migrants have had no opportunity to receive COVID-19 treatment and vaccination.⁶⁴ Throughout the pandemic, lack of information and transparency was one of the major obstacles with respect to the official statistics of COVID-19 infections, access to healthcare, and access to vaccinations.

5. Conclusion

In the year 2021, amid these exacerbating challenges, the EU-Turkey Statement expired on its fifth anniversary. Still, a new agenda is not on the table as we approach the sixth year of the “deal”. Having passed through plenty of ups and downs and critical junctures, the current moment manifests the remarkably peculiar nature of such a “deal” compared to the context in 2016. In conjunction with the aforementioned dynamics discussed throughout the analysis, the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan and subsequent atmosphere in Turkey throughout the year 2021 have made the already thorny conditions even more inextricable.

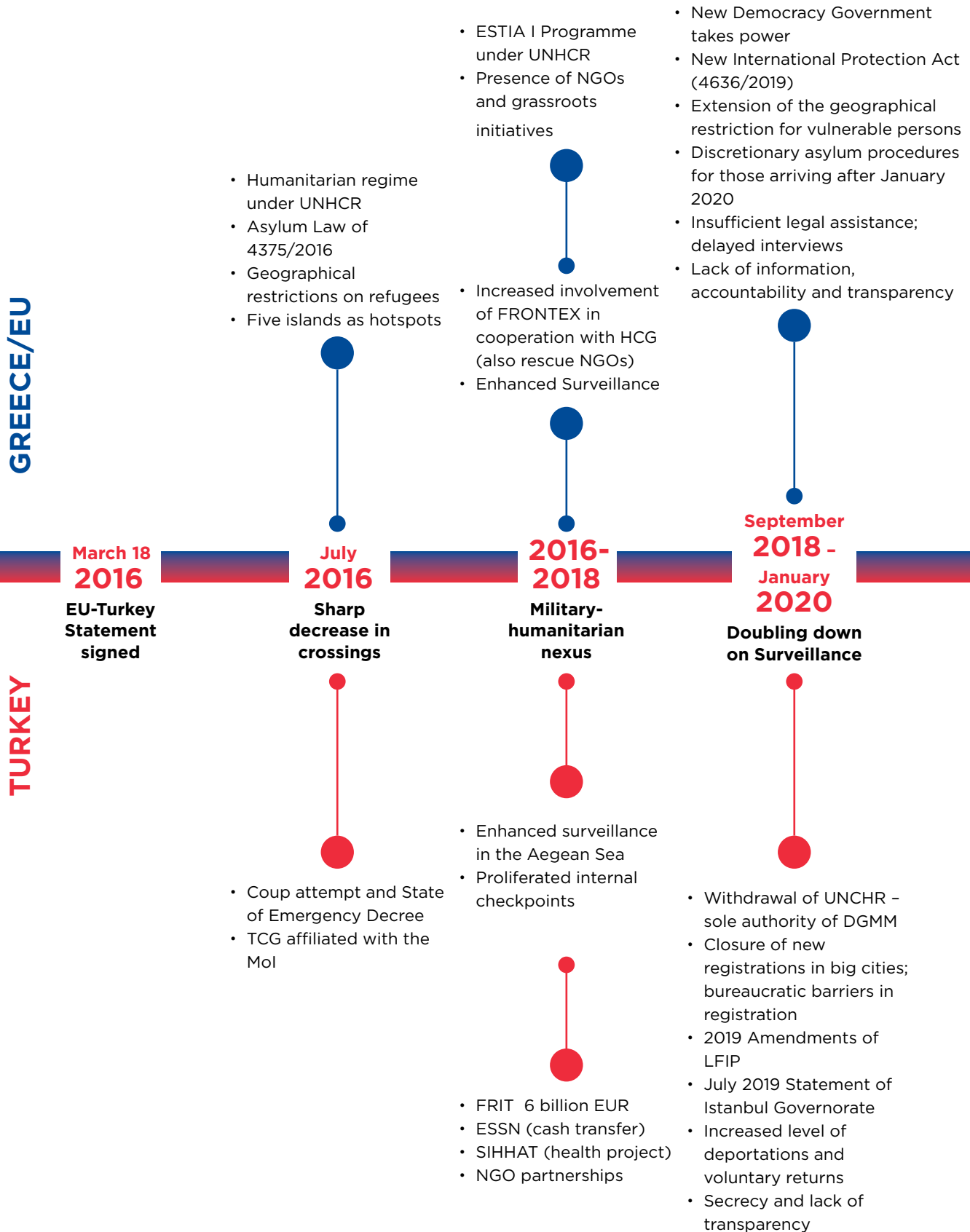
The rhetoric that the “Afghan invasion is coming” following the mass movement of migrants from Afghanistan after the fall of Kabul spread so rapidly that racist attacks have started one after another. Coupled with the economic downturn, hyperinflation, and extreme impoverishment of the vast majority of the country’s population, public opinion and the discourse on refugees in Turkey has become much more discriminatory. Investigating the tendencies of Turkish citizens in 2021, research indicates that the most concerning issue among Turkish citizens was economic trouble (22.7%),

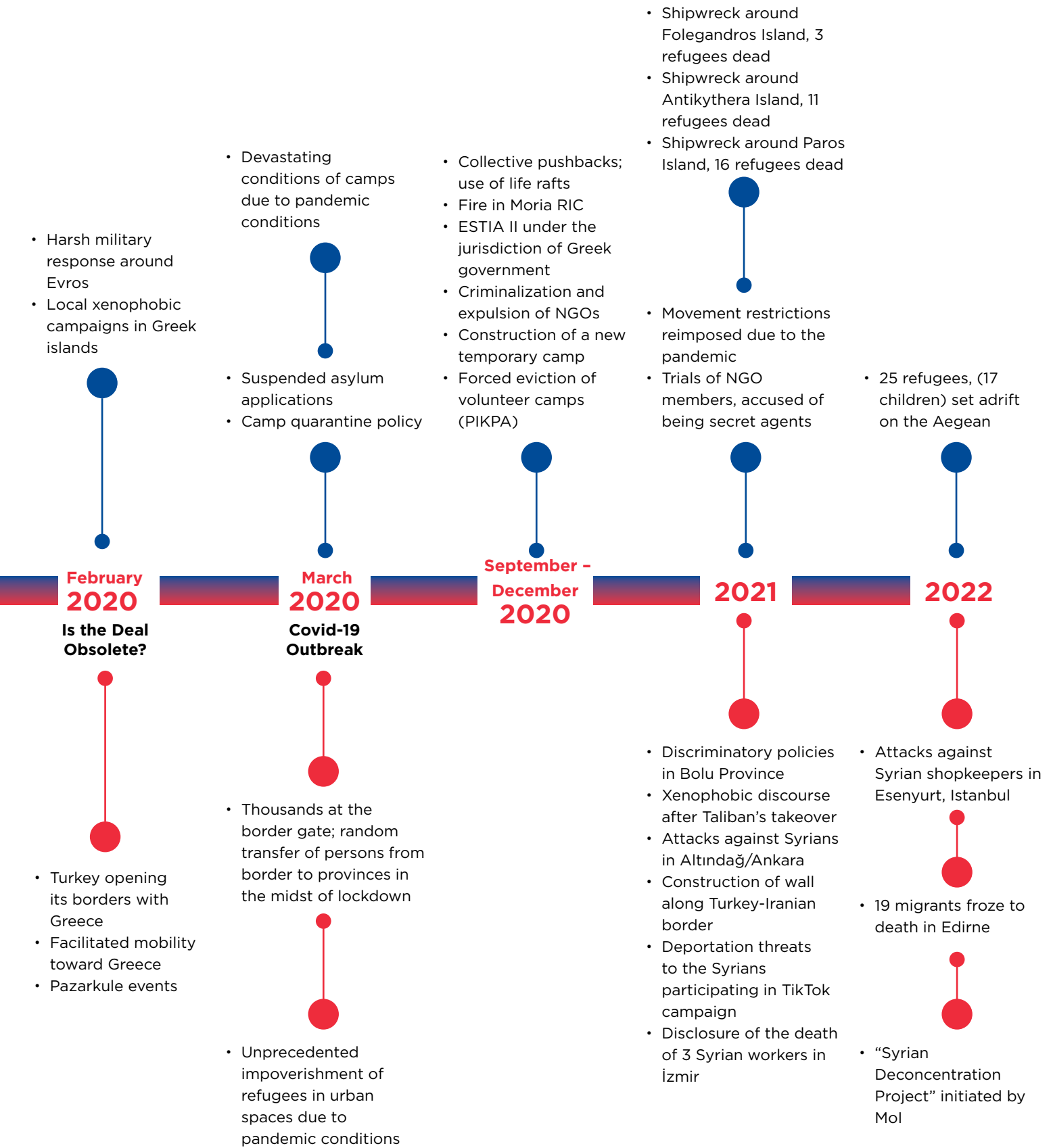
followed by the issue of refugees (rising to 17.9% from 6% in 2020).⁶⁵ Tensions within society have recently manifested in successive troubling events: the attacks on Syrians’ homes and businesses in the Altındağ district of Ankara, which were reminiscent of a pogrom⁶⁶; three Syrian workers who were burned to death while sleeping in the warehouse of their workplace⁶⁷; the deportation of Syrians who were involved in a TikTok campaign in which they recorded themselves eating bananas⁶⁸; discriminatory municipal policies in the Bolu province⁶⁹; attacks targeting Syrian shops in the Esenyurt district of Istanbul⁷⁰; and most recently, the “deconcentration project” declared by the Ministry of the Interior, which aims to close 16 cities to the registration and transfer of Syrians from their districts to other assigned places.⁷¹ The upcoming election in Turkey will likely even further aggravate this conjuncture, as the main opposition bloc frequently utilizes anti-refugee and populist discourse to widen their electoral base. Furthermore, the news announcing shipwrecks and dead bodies in the Aegean Sea and Evros River has continued into the year 2022 (see Table in the Appendix).

To conclude, this study aims to provide an academic and policy inquiry into the Turkey-EU Statement by drawing attention to the current challenges at stake. The novel circumstances discernibly call for a substantially new framework in migration governance, compromising new methods, partnerships, and approaches that are nourished by bottom-up reflections rather than centralized, top-down, secret modes of governance. A new composition of partnerships and the establishment of epistemic communities putting pressure on policy makers in Turkey and across Europe are urgently needed to create a comprehensive and long-term response in accordance with human rights and the dignity of displaced populations. It should be noted that the current events in Ukraine—where approximately three million people have already been displaced, with this number expected to increase to five million—aptly illustrate the EU’s double standards in its migration policy. The two starkly different responses that Europe has given in the face of these two situations, namely, the 2015 refugee “crisis” and the “welcoming” of “real” refugees fleeing Ukraine, provide a cautionary lesson for the future trajectory of the EU-Turkey Statement.

Appendix

Table: Timeline of events in Turkey and Greece, 2016–present





Notes

- 1 | “IOM Counts 3,771 Migrant Fatalities in Mediterranean in 2015,” IOM, January 5, 2016, <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-counts-3771-migrant-fatalities-mediterranean-2015>.
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