

# FROM EXCEPTION TO EXTRA-LEGAL NORMALITY: PUSHBACKS AND RACIST STATE VIOLENCE AGAINST PEOPLE CROSSING THE GREEK–TURKISH LAND BORDER

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**Abstract:** The Greek–Turkish land border became the site of a border spectacle in March 2020, following the “opening” of the border by the Turkish government and its simultaneous closure by the Greek government. The ensuing violence was legitimated by narratives of exception and racist discourses hinging on the notions of “invasion” and “asymmetrical threats.” Yet, the spectacular and highly mediatized nature of the events of March 2020 hid the embeddedness and longevity of border violence in Evros, the area named after the river that constitutes the land border between Greece and Turkey.

Drawing on qualitative research including fieldwork, interviews and document analysis, we focus on the practice of pushbacks as an enduring feature of the local border regime. We argue that pushbacks and other forms of violence should not be conceived merely as human rights violations and therefore aberrations to the laws and values of Europe and its states, but as normalized technologies of border management embedded in the racialized, violent border regimes of liberal states, exemplifying the inherent and unavoidable violence of borders.

**Keywords:** border management; border violence; Greek–Turkish border; pushbacks; racist state violence

## Introduction

On 28 February 2020, the Turkish government announced its decision to “open” its land border with Greece. The Greek government responded to the hundreds of people attempting—and sometimes succeeding—to cross the Greek–Turkish border with violence: the mobilization of police and army, the use of tear gas, stun grenades, plastic bullets and even live ammunition, resulting in at least two deaths and many injured persons (Amnesty International [AI] 2020; 2021). People were

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summarily apprehended and pushed back over the border, the asylum process was suspended for a month, and border crossers were systematically prosecuted for illegal entry (AI 2020; 2021; HumanRights360 2020a; 2020b). Local residents—civilians and members of the National Guard, the army reserves—participated in border control “under the guidance of the Greek authorities,” exercising violence against people on the move but also journalists (Panhellenic Association of Border Guards 2020; Simeonidis 2020; Scavo 2020). Constructed as a “sudden,” “mass” “invasion” by people on the move who were depicted as an unruly, threatening “mob” “directed,” “encouraged” and “manipulated” by the Turkish government, the March 2020 movements were elevated to an “asymmetric,” “hybrid” threat to national security (Hellenic Republic 2020; European Parliament 2020). The mobilization of the securitized tropes of an urgent threat posed by the Other at the border (Tazzioli 2020; Walia 2021), reinforced through nationalist narratives of Turkey as an enemy state, enabled the government to discursively construct a border “crisis” and exceptional situation, where imminent, existential threats to security allowed for the suspension of the rule of law (Aradau et al. 2008).

The violent “border spectacle” (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015; De Genova 2013) of March 2020 drew attention to a section of the EU external border which has—for the last two decades—vacillated between indifference and intense interest, for example during the first ever Rapid Border Intervention of the European Border Agency, Frontex, in October 2010 (Kasperek 2021). The discursive frames of “crisis,” exception and Turkish threats were also adopted by international and national media which flocked to Evros, the region of the Greek–Turkish border, for two weeks, and by EU actors who also visited at the time (European Commission 2020a; Ta Nea 2020; Trilling 2020). The suspension of the right to asylum and the violence of control practices witnessed at the time raised many questions about legality and the rule of law at this remote EU border but was conceptualized as an exceptional event rather than normalized practice (Markard et al. 2020; UNHCR 2020).

However, the spectacular and highly mediatized nature of the events of March 2020, we argue, hid the *longue durée* (Demetriou 2019) of border violence in Evros and the continuity of narratives employed to justify it. Turkey, for example, has been historically perceived in Greece as an enemy state and a cultural Other but also, as Demetriou (2019: 23) notes, as “a malicious actor sending illegals to Greece.” Depictions of migratory movements as invasions and “asymmetric threats” and of migrants as Others threatening Greek cultural identity, economic wellbeing and national security have been dominant representations for over three decades (Demetriou 2019; Karamanidou 2016). While the use of tear gas and live ammunition contributed to the spectacle of March 2020, violence and violations of rights have been enduring features of the Evros border. Since the 2000s, activists, NGOS and human rights organizations have consistently and continuously

documented violations of human rights—the prevention of access to asylum, degrading conditions of reception and detention, and the use of physical and verbal violence against people on the move (AI 2005; 2014; Committee for the Prevention of Torture [CPT] 1999; 2020; Human Rights Watch [HRW] 2008; NOAS et al. 2010; Pro Asyl 2007; 2013).

In this article, we focus on pushbacks as a normalized, enduring practice within the Greek and European border regime (Ilcan 2021; Karamanidou et al. 2020). Pushbacks, that is, illegal returns across an international border, have been documented at many European borders, emerging at different points in time since the 2000s (see Aru 2021; Augustová and Sapoch 2020; Caponio and Capiali 2018; Gazzotti 2020). Yet, at the Evros border they date back to the late 1980s, providing a unique case study for exploring the practice as a technology of border control, interrogating its logic within border regimes, and thus contributing to the further theorization of pushback practices. We contextualize Evros as a borderscape, a space shaped by the complex histories of cross-border mobilities, materialities, assemblages of control, border regimes and narratives of the European and Greek borders (Agnese and Amilhat Szary 2015; Brambilla et al. 2015). The lens of the borderscape and its capacity to capture the spatial and temporal dynamics of a border is an antidote to the presentism of the “crisis” frame (Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins 2016; Tazzioli 2020) which has characterized many analyses of Evros as well as of pushbacks in Greece. By exploring the practice of pushbacks, including their under-researched organizational features, within the borderscape of Evros in a time frame of more than three decades we trace its logics, logistics and justifications. We argue that pushbacks and other forms of violence should not be conceived merely as human rights violations and therefore aberrations of the laws and values of Europe and its states, but as normalized technologies of border management (Ilcan 2021; Karamanidou et al. 2020), embedded in the racialized, violent border regimes of liberal states (Isakjee et al. 2020). Through inquiring why pushbacks have been such an enduring and enduringly tolerated practice in the Evros borderscape, we contend that pushbacks are far from an aberration of border management practices but rather that they represent, paradigmatically, the violence which characterizes and defines the Westphalian border, that is, the national borders of the nation states in Europe (Zaiotti 2011).

The article draws on research on border management in the European Union and the region of Evros conducted within the EU-funded project RESPOND over a period of three years between 2018 and 2020. During six fieldwork visits, we interviewed police officials, had conversations with local people, and observed and documented the local border assemblages and infrastructures. Yet, while fieldwork offered us significant insights into the area, one unavoidable limitation is the near impossibility to research and document pushbacks in situ. Their key

stage, the expulsion to Turkey across the river, takes place in a military zone, inaccessible to all but a few members of the public—mainly local farmers and fisher (Demetriou 2019). Other stages of pushbacks similarly occur in locations such as border guard stations, or semi-official and unofficial detention centres where access for the public is limited (Karamanidou et al. 2021). Any knowledgeable actors—police officers, border guards, locals—are reluctant to admit the practice, even though during our fieldwork it was evident that pushbacks are common knowledge locally (also Lafazani 2006). We thus draw on secondary sources such as official documents, reports by the media, human rights organizations and NGOs, which offer significant insights into pushback patterns in the Evros area.

### **Conceptualising Pushbacks as Border Violence**

Although the term “pushbacks” is used by both academics and activists, there is no agreed definition, and it is not a legal term (Keady-Tabbal and Mann 2021; OHCHR 2021). Rather, it emerged from refugee advocacy as a concept describing violations of the principle of non-refoulement, the ban on returning asylum seekers to a country in which they may be in danger of persecution as laid down in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Keady-Tabbal and Mann 2021). Thus, pushbacks are primarily understood in relation to preventing access to asylum and the individual consideration of claims that international and European law dictates (ECCHR 2021; OHCHR 2021).

Keady-Tabbal and Mann (2021), drawing on the association of the term with non-refoulement argued that its blanket use

risks tacitly agreeing to an objectionable underlying premise: that in order to deserve protection from certain categories of extreme border violence, one must have to be a “refugee” who has suffered persecution, rather than simply a person.

While the term may have been utilized in a manner that privileges violations against people with a potential claim to international protection, as Keady-Tabbal and Mann rightly observe, pushbacks may also involve multiple other violations of human rights such as the prohibition of collective expulsion, degrading treatment and endangerment of the right to life. Indeed, pushbacks often involve the use of physical, verbal and sexual violence, deprivation of food and water during detention, confiscation (or theft) and destruction of personal belongings and identity papers, abductions from detention facilities, and practices that endanger human life such as incapacitating boats and forcing people to swim back through open sea and rivers (HRW 2008; Border Violence Monitoring Network [BVMN] 2020). On many occasions, the use of violence has resulted in serious injury or

death. Thus the conceptualization of pushbacks as primarily violations of the non-refoulement principle privileges their impact on protection seekers, while their violence affects border crossers irrespective of claims to protection (Keady-Tabbal and Mann 2021). Further, this conceptualization has allowed for allegations of pushbacks to be circumvented by claiming that border crossers are returned to countries considered “safe,” where they do not face risk of persecution or degrading treatment (ECRE 2016; Graf and Budelmann 2020).

Nevertheless, we do not wish to define pushbacks as merely violations of human rights for two reasons. First, conceptualizing pushbacks in this manner situates them as an aberration within border regimes. The legal frameworks governing European borders and practices of state agencies and other actors—such as Frontex—all invoke respect for refugee law, human and fundamental rights, which are presented as core elements of practices of European border management (Isakjee et al. 2020). Even though the role of borders in European migration policy largely follows a logic of policing, securitization and risk management owing to its genesis through the Schengen process, it was also an attempt to create a rule-based process of border management. Indeed the very introduction of the term “integrated border management” (Hobbing 2005) at the EU level represents a strategy of introducing rules, procedures and laws that should govern daily border work in compliance with international and European human rights obligations: the introduction of an “integrated border management” concept in 2006, along with the passing of the Schengen Borders Code (SBC) into law, the introduction of more formalized Schengen evaluation mechanisms in 2013, and the introduction of a legally binding concept of “European Integrated Border Management” (EIBM) in 2016.

Juridical developments equally reinforced the designation of EU borders as subject to international and European law rather than as spaces of absolute (national) sovereignty. In particular, the pivotal judgment in the case *Hirsi Jamaa vs. Italy* in 2012 by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) affirmed, unambivalently, the illegality of pushbacks towards Libya which were carried out by the Italian state. In this context, pushbacks appear as a practice contra European liberal laws and values, which could be eliminated if border management practices were better (see Vaughn-Williams 2015). Consequently, the solution proposed for fixing the “problem” of pushbacks is better border management and stricter compliance with human rights, implemented through mechanisms such as enhanced border monitoring and better training of border guards (see, for example, Meijers Committee 2021).

Second, conceptualizing pushbacks as human rights violations does not capture the nature of pushbacks as a violent technology for governing the border and its consistency over time. Pushbacks have been systematically practised at multiple border sites in Europe for a long time: at the Spanish–Moroccan border at Ceuta

and Melilla since the early 2000s (Gazzotti 2020); in Italy since the tightening of migration controls with the 2002 Bossi-Fini law and, at sea, since the 2008 bilateral agreement with Libya (Caponio and Capiali 2018); at the French–Italian border of Ventimiglia, following the Arab Spring and since the introduction of temporary internal border controls in 2015 (Aru 2021); in Hungary and Croatia since the closure of the Balkan route in 2016 (Augustová and Sapoch 2020; Karamanidou et al. 2020). Their prevalence suggests they are embedded in the European border regime as yet another technology for impeding mobility into European territories (Ilcan 2021; Karamanidou et al. 2020; Mountz 2020). The systematic occurrence of pushbacks after 2015 at different European borders underlines our proposition that they constitute a default mode of border management, rather than being an aberration or exceptional practice.

This conceptualization enables us to locate pushbacks within the European border regime and its inherently violent and racialized character. The institution of the border is structurally violent (Isakjee et al. 2020; Ilcan 2021; Topak 2021), rooted in violent processes of colonialism, global capitalism, racism and nationalism (Sharma 2020; Walia 2021). While in liberal democracies violence is disavowed unless legitimately exercised by the state, it is a structural feature of the governance of populations, in particular those gendered, marginalized and racialized, mirroring the governance of colonized territories in the past (Isakjee et al. 2020; Walia 2021). Technologies of border governance such as containment, detention, border surveillance and militarization, non-rescue, illegalization and bureaucratic classification are violent in that they result in loss of life and many physical, psychological and social harms for people on the move and migrant populations (Isakjee et al. 2020; Ilcan 2021; Schindel 2019). The liberal governance of EU borders illustrates these contradictions: on the one hand, it attempts to regulate and legitimate the use of violence through the establishment of a common border governed by legal frameworks adhering to European and international human rights norms, ostensibly protecting people on the move from the violent excesses of the national sovereign border. On the other, the same laws conceal rather than eliminate the violence innate to the institution of the border. Following Achiume (2019), we understand this as the inherent contradiction that underpins the tensions in the Europeanization of border policies: despite all attempts to “civilize” border work, the function of borders is to categorize people and to allow or deny entry into the territory based on this categorization. We may refer to this function as filtering, division or even differential inclusion. Yet confronted with the movements of migrants that challenge these categorizations, border work necessarily needs to resort to violence in order to enforce the categories and their consequences. The crisis of Schengen after 2010, and the Summer of Migration in 2015, have made that abundantly clear.

Further, borders are racialized and racializing because they sustain and reproduce racial and colonial boundaries between populations (Sharma 2020; Walia 2021). Bordering regimes stratify populations within states through interlocking ideologies of nationalism, racism, territoriality and patriarchy, and seek to filter and exclude populations on the basis of racialized hierarchies, manifested, for example, in visa and asylum regimes regulating the mobility from the Global South to the Global North. Illegalized through the global border regime, mobile subjects are politically and discursively constituted as the Other, culturally different, threatening the order and security of the state and the boundaries of identity and belonging shaped by nationalism and racism (De Genova 2017; Walia 2021). These exclusions situate mobile populations outside the liberal state and legitimate the exercise of border violence against them (Isakjee et al. 2020; Walia 2021).

Despite the problematization of Greece as a state subject to, rather than part of a hegemonic position within the global and European postcolonial order (Koutouza 2019; Sammadar 2016), the Greek state has been both a geopolitical space and an agent of technologies of mobility control in the context of the European border regime (Demetriou 2019; Topak 2021). Narratives of protecting the Greek and the European border against external enemies, whether Turkey or people on the move, have been employed to legitimate violent practices (Demetriou 2019; Karamanidou 2016). The securitization, illegalization and criminalization of migrant groups, informed by Greek exclusionary ethnic nationalism, have been a constant pattern since the 1990s (Demetriou 2019; Karamanidou 2016). In addition to cultural boundaries built around language, whiteness and ethnicity, Greek identity relies on the juxtaposition between Christianity and Islam, the latter being associated with Turkey, designated as an enemy country through histories of nation building (Demetriou 2019; Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2018). Mirroring the bordering of ethnic minorities, and in particular the Muslim minority of Thrace, migrant populations have been constructed as a culturally different and dangerous Other, associated with Turkey on the basis of—often assumed—religion, likely to be manipulated by Turkish interests and thus posing threats to national security (Demetriou 2019; Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2018).

These racialized bordering dynamics are heightened within the borderscape of Evros. Being part of Thrace, where predominantly Muslim minority populations historically lived, bordering and Othering processes drawing on hostility to Islam and Turkey shape encounters with border-crossing populations (Demetriou 2019; Lafazani 2006). By virtue of containing the territorial land border with Turkey, Evros has been mythologized as a heroic borderland of *akrites*—the border guards of the Byzantine empire—defending Greece against the “double threat of migration and Turkish aggression” (Demetriou 2019: 26; Lafazani 2006). Histories of border violence and pushback practices, which we explore in the following



sections, are thus situated within a borderscape shaped by the logic of defence against perceived migratory and territorial threats. Drawing on these theorizations of the border as a global, European and localized institution, we situate pushbacks as a violent and racialized technology whose prevalence and the extent of harm its violence produces, is a technology that liberal states often seek to deny and render invisible (Isakjee et al. 2020), or legitimate through narratives of the (b)order, legality and national sovereignty (Sharma 2020; Walia 2021). In the following two sections, we explore the violence of pushbacks in the borderscape of Evros.

## **A History of Violence at the Evros Border**

Located at the north-eastern edge of Greece and established in 1923, the Evros border has always been a locus of cross-border movement. Cross border social visits, especially of the local Turkish/Muslim minority, tourism, trade and occasionally military infractions have all been part of the mobility landscape of the Evros borderland (Demetriou 2019; Kasli 2014). Turkish and Kurdish people escaping oppression in Turkey were the key groups using the route in the 1990s (Dimitriadi 2013; Papadopoulou 2004), but not the only ones. An informant who did his military service in Evros in 1996 encountered a group during a patrol that included Rwandan, Syrian and Lebanese nationals. Armed conflicts and oppressive regimes in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Syria, but also economic inequalities and other forms of oppression shaped migratory movements in the area from the 2000s onwards (Dimitriadi 2013).

At the same time, Evros became increasingly incorporated into the European border regime. The accession of Greece to the European Union and later the Schengen Area rendered Evros a key entry point into Europe (Dimitriadi 2013; Grigoriadis and Dilek 2019). The expansion of border technologies reflected both the increasing importance of external borders within the EU migration governance as well as domestic policy imperatives (Fotiadis 2015; Grigoriadis and Dilek 2019). Since the 1990s, detention spaces in police units and border guard stations, a Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) and a pre-removal detention centre near the village of Fylakio, and other temporary facilities, have been expanded (Karamanidou et al. 2021). Since 2012, police presence in the area has been reinforced by Operation Aspida, and for a shorter time the notorious arrest-and-deport policy, Operation Xenios Zeus (Fotiadis 2015; Grigoriadis and Dilek 2019). The construction of a fence between the villages of Nea Vyssa and Kastanies in 2012 further exemplified the deepening securitization of migration in Greece (Grigoriadis and Dilek 2019). EU funds were used to finance local border infrastructures such as the automated border surveillance system, five operational centres, a coordination centre at the village of Nea Vyssa, thermal cameras and thermovision vans (Fotiadis 2015; Pallister-Wilkins 2016).



The intensification of migratory movements in the late 2000s, helped by the demining of the border, led to the launch of the first ever Frontex Rapid Border Intervention in October 2010, signalling the attempt to deepen the Europeanization of the local border regime. Frontex has had a permanent presence in the area since then, and the increased cooperation between Greek and EU actors was facilitated by the creation of two regional border management coordination centres (Fotiadis 2015; Ministry for Public Order and Citizen Protection [MPOCP] 2014). While the Hellenic Police is the state authority responsible for migration control, the military plays a significant role in border surveillance and migration control (Levidis 2020; Pallister-Wilkins 2016). Local farmers and fishers, bus drivers and conductors and hotel staff, all play a part in informing the police of the presence of people on the move (Karamanidou and Kasperek 2018; Lafazani 2006) Since March 2020, the border has been further reinforced with a new wall in the south of the prefecture, while surveillance infrastructures have been expanded, with more border guards hired and armoured vehicles, sound cannons, drones and a Frontex zeppelin aircraft deployed (Gatopoulos and Kantouris 2021). Thus, Europeanized and local modes of control co-exist in border assemblages.

These expanding border assemblages have rendered the Evros borderland particularly violent and deadly. Between 2000 and 2008, at least 49 people crossing the border were killed by landmines, a legacy of the border crisis of 1974 triggered by the Turkish invasion of Cyprus (Levidis 2020; Pavlidis and Karakasi 2019). While landmine deaths declined after demining was completed in 2009 (Topak 2014; Ulusoy et al. 2019), the death toll remained high, making Evros the deadliest land border in Europe (Fundamental Rights Agency [FRA] 2020). At least 398 people were found dead between 2000 and early 2019, the main causes of death being drowning and hypothermia, and more recently car and train accidents as people try to move inland (FRA 2020; Pavlidis and Karakasi 2019).

The construction of the fence in North Evros and the expansion of surveillance technologies pushed border crossers into the more dangerous route of crossing the river (Topak 2014; Ulusoy et al. 2019). We observed a similar dynamic during fieldwork: while people used buses and trains to move from Orestiada to Alexandroupoli and Thessaloniki in 2018 and early 2019, the risk of ID checks and arrest appeared to push them towards using the mountainous routes of inner Evros, thus increasing the risk of death by exposure, or following the railway lines, which resulted in several deaths in train accidents. Police violence against border crossers is extensively documented, as are incidents of violence by civilians and paramilitaries (BVMN 2020; Human Rights360 2020b; Scavo 2020). Arbitrary detention and degrading detention conditions have been documented continuously since the late 1990s, as were practices of preventing access to asylum, legal assistance, interpretation and healthcare (ARSIS et al. 2018;

CPT 1999; 2020; Pro Asyl 2013). Within this landscape of multiple and interlocking forms of violence, pushbacks are one of the most violent practices encountered at this border.

## **Pushbacks as a Routine Border Technology**

While there is little information about numbers of pushbacks at the Greek–Turkish border, unsurprisingly, given the clandestine nature of such operations, the practice has been known for over three decades. The earliest testimony we found refers to pushbacks of Kurdish asylum seekers in the late 1980s (Kokkinidis 2009). Similarly, a respondent stated that pushbacks were openly talked about among soldiers during his military service in the area in the 1990s (Reidy 2018). Yet, there is considerable vagueness surrounding the use of the term. The word for “pushback” in Greek (επαναπροώθηση) also signified deportations, especially of Albanian migrants, in the 1990s (e.g. Hellenic Parliament 1994), and later returns under the 2002 Readmission Agreement between Greece and Turkey (National Commission for Human Rights [NCHR] 2002a). Further, the legal framework at the time allowed for deportations of illegalized migrants without legal process (Baldwin-Edwards 2005). In this context, it is difficult to ascertain whether the term “readmission” in official documents and statements refers to pushbacks, deportations in line with the then legal framework, even if violating international law, or returns under the 2002 Readmission Agreement (AI 2011). This vagueness highlights another definitional difficulty: pushbacks are not always clearly differentiated from other similar violent practices such as illegal returns from further inland, or other border control technologies such as refusals of entry at the border.

The practice of pushbacks, in the sense of extra-legal returns to Turkey, was established by the early 2000s (Lafazani 2006; NCHR 2002a; 2002b). From the mid-2000s onwards, pushbacks in Evros begin to be documented extensively by human rights organizations, activists and NGOs (AI 2005; HRW 2008; Pro Asyl 2007). While the FRA claimed that the 2010 Rapid Border Intervention “seem[s] to have reduced the risk of informal pushbacks to Turkey” (FRA 2011: 8), a view repeated later by the UNHCR (Omonira-Oyekanmi 2012), pushbacks continued to be reported in subsequent years (AI 2014; Pro Asyl 2013; Council of Europe 2019). In our view, it was not the practice of pushbacks that diminished, but the interest in it, as attention since 2009, and especially since 2015, shifted to the Greek islands. From 2017 onwards, however, pushbacks appear to intensify again, in tandem with increased crossings triggered by the impact of the EU–Turkey Statement of March 2016 and political persecutions in Turkey (interviews with police directors; Souli 2018). NGOs, journalists, activists and border crossers themselves begin yet again to document multiple incidents but now increasingly

involving social media content open-source technologies and situated testimonies (ARSIS et al. 2018; Forensic Architecture 2020; Mobile Info Team [MIT] 2019).

The organization of pushbacks has remained largely the same. Pushbacks normally begin with the apprehension of border crossers by the police or the army, normally within the area of Evros, occasionally further inland. Although abductions from detention facilities in northern Greece and transfer to Evros were described as a new pattern since March 2020 (e.g. Bathke 2020), they were also observed in earlier years (AI 2011; NOAS et al. 2010). Apprehensions are followed by detention, usually for one or two days, in police or border guard stations and also, as suggested in testimonies, in unofficial sites often described as military or agricultural facilities (ARSIS et al. 2018; BVMN 2020). People are then taken to the river Evros, put into inflatable boats which are driven back to Turkey or abandoned on islets on the river (Arsis et al. 2018; BVMN 2020). Pushbacks immediately upon apprehension have also been documented (AI 2014). Transportation to detention sites and to the river involves police and army vehicles (ARSIS et al. 2018; BVMN 2020). The use of verbal, physical and sexual violence during pushbacks, including the deprivation of food, water and access to sanitary facilities is a constant in testimonies since the mid-2000s and is often serious enough to amount to torture (AI 2014; BVMN 2021; Pro Asyl 2007; 2013). Other violent practices include the confiscation and destruction of mobile phones—in order to prevent evidence being collected by border crossers and third parties—and of identity papers and belongings (ARSIS et al. 2018; BVMN 2020).

Pushbacks are conducted primarily by police, border guards and army officers identifiable by their uniforms as members of the Greek security forces. Further, testimonies refer to the presence of Frontex officers who speak German and other European languages (BVMN 2020a; Karamanidou and Kasperek 2020). Several reports refer to the involvement of paramilitary groups or civilian actors (AI 2014; 2021; ARSIS et al. 2018; Pro Asyl 2013; Frontex 2019; Greek Ombudsman 2021). However, while the Greek authorities have suggested that paramilitaries are responsible for pushbacks (Frontex 2019; Greek Ombudsman 2021), ostensibly in an effort to deflect responsibility, such groups are likely to be members of the security forces—albeit often masked—or work under their orders (AI 2021; BVMN 2021). Similarly, Frontex officers appear to work with or under the guidance of the Greek police (Karamanidou and Kasperek 2020). Since March 2020, testimonies suggest that people on the move are involved in the last stage of pushbacks, the transportation across the river to Turkey, coerced by the Greek authorities through financial incentives and promises of legalization (AI 2021; BVMN 2020; also confirmed by an informant).

The analysis of pushbacks in Evros has rarely explored their racialized character. However, as at many European borders, people who are pushed back are from the

Global South and placed outside the remit of European whiteness. During fieldwork, we observed practices of racial profiling on local transport: police, coach drivers and conductors “selected” people for identity checks by judging their appearance and perceived racial or ethnic markers. On one occasion, we overheard a driver and a conductor discussing calling the police about a fairly dark-skinned man we saw running towards the bus stop. Highlighting the ambiguity of bordering in a racially mixed area, it later transpired that the man was a Greek citizen, possibly of Turkish or Roma ethnicity. Further, testimonies describe the use of verbal violence that contains racist language and tropes (BVMN 2020; MIT 2019).

While it has been claimed that pushbacks in Evros, similarly to the Aegean border, have intensified since March 2020 (e.g. *Are You Syrious* 2020; *Refugee Rights Europe* 2021), it is difficult to substantiate such a claim. The confiscation of mobile phones of border crossers and inaccessibility of Evros makes the gathering of evidence extremely difficult—in contrast to documentation practices in the Aegean. More active monitoring in recent years by NGOs and activists resulted in a greater number of reported incidents (NCHR 2021). However, the material we have analysed highlights the persistence of pushbacks over time and the consistency of their organizational aspects, suggesting they are a routine technology for governing the Greek–Turkish land border.

### **Situating Pushbacks in the Contradictions of European Borders**

The routine practice of pushbacks has been paralleled with an equally long-standing practice of their denial by the Greek authorities. The New Democracy administration, elected in 2019, attracted a lot of media attention for its denial of pushbacks as “fake news,” produced invariably by the Turkish government, NGOs or “smugglers” (European Parliament 2020; Minister of Citizen Protection [MCP] et al. 2021). Indeed, Greek governments regardless of their political orientation, have consistently denied the practice of pushbacks, claiming that there is no evidence to support such assertions and invoking the presence of Frontex in the area (Ministry of Citizen Protection [MCP] 2017; MCP et al. 2021; MPOCP 2014; Omonira-Oyekanmi 2012). Official replies also deny other forms of violence such as the verbal and physical assaults accompanying pushbacks (MCP 2019; UNCAT 2020) reflecting a long history of denial of racism and racist violence (Karamanidou 2016). Despite the denials, the Greek authorities have also legitimated pushbacks through invoking the sovereign imperative of protecting the border (BBC 2020; Omonira-Oyekanmi 2012).

Such denials reflect, on a surface level at least, that pushbacks are considered a practice contrary to international and European law, a form of violence to be disavowed as incompatible with liberal norms. While pushbacks were possibly

practised in the late 1980s, the Europeanization of Evros since the 1990s brought additional pressures, with the Schengen and Dublin systems designating Greece, as a country of entry, primarily responsible for both border control and managing asylum (Demetriou 2019). In this context, pushbacks can be seen as a way of managing these multiple pressures, while circumventing the human rights obligations embedded in the EU's legal frameworks.

The responses of European actors regarding pushbacks and border violence in Evros further illustrate the conflicting logics of the border as an inherently violent institution and the EU vision as regulated by human right norms and rules. Until 2020, we could find few specific statements of concern about pushbacks (e.g. Kokkinidis 2009). Frontex has denied its own involvement in such practices (AI 2014; Karamanidou and Kasperek 2020), while one of the EU commissioners with responsibility for migration, M. Schinas, has been openly dismissive of evidence of pushback practices (The Left 2020). More significantly, during the border spectacle of March 2020, EU actors affirmed conceptions of the EU borders as a site of Europe's defence against migration—"our European shield" as Commissioner Von der Leyen famously said (European Commission 2020)—ignoring the violence that was taking place. While Migration and Home Affairs Commissioner Johansson expressed concern for the violence and violations at the Evros border (Rankin 2020), the internal investigation into the Frontex involvement excluded Evros from its remit, focusing on pushbacks in the Aegean instead (Frontex 2020).

These contradictions—between the normalization and denial of pushbacks and border violence, between condemnation and legitimation through the logic of the border as an institution for governing and arresting movement, between Europeanized and national modes and assemblages—resonate beyond the Evros borderland. Since 2015 we have seen these tensions heightening across Europe in the context of the crisis of the European border and migration regime in response to the migrations of that year (Hess and Kasperek 2017). The rule-based approach of integrated border management had proven ineffective at inhibiting migration, and member states began to resort to the national-sovereign modes.

Developments around pushback practices across European borders, which have proliferated since 2015, are exemplary of these conflicting rationalities. In October 2021, 12 interior and migration ministers of EU member states signed a joint letter where they detailed how the Schengen Borders Code constitutes an obstacle to countering "hybrid threats" such as politically instrumentalized migration (Nielsen 2021). This was a reference to the events at the Polish–Belarusian border in October 2021 but was also reminiscent of the Evros border spectacle in March 2020. The letter actually demanded the legalization of pushbacks and thus a return of the despotism of the Westphalian border and its modes of absolute sovereignty. Like Hungary in 2016, Poland introduced legislation legalizing the practice of

pushbacks and undermining human rights protections at the border (Politico 2021). An ensuing European Parliament debate on 20 October 2021 (European Parliament 2021) illustrated the deep divide between the different rationalities of the European border and the failure of the European border regime. While the European Commission argued that a non-violent, human rights-compliant border is possible, representatives of national governments defended pushbacks and border violence as a necessary response to migratory movements.

## Conclusion

Because of its status as an often-forgotten border of Europe, the Evros border is a suitable case study in order to understand the ongoing normalization of pushbacks in the European border regime after 2015. As we have shown, pushbacks have been a routine border practice for more than three decades. Despite attempts to Europeanize the border, that is, applying the procedure and rule-based approach promised by “integrated border management,” notably through the first crisis intervention of the European border agency Frontex in the winter of 2010/11, pushbacks have remained routine. Therefore, European border management and national sovereign modes of bordering have uneasily co-existed in Evros for more than a decade. Focusing on the Evros borderland has allowed us to conceptualize pushbacks as border violence. Moving beyond the effects of this practice on people seeking protection, we situated pushbacks in a global order characterized by racial and (post)colonial divisions which are upheld and reproduced by borders. We thus argue that pushbacks do not constitute an aberration of a supposedly non-violent, post-national practice of border management. Rather, pushbacks are representative of the inherent violence of national borders.

The resurgence of this practice, after many decades of it being illegal even if, as in Evros, used as a routine border control technology, paints a bleak picture for the immediate future. The prohibition of *refoulement* through—*inter alia*—the Geneva Refugee Convention was one of the momentous consequences of the Second World War, and the failure of European states to protect millions of refugees. The other momentous consequence was the initiation of the European project, supposed to create lasting peace on a continent ravaged by wars for many centuries. Situating the borders of Europe in a global and postcolonial context reminds us that the violence of the Westphalian borders and the violent segregation of the globe they enforce remains the norm. The attempts to Europeanize the European border led to violence, suffering and death being dominant features. The promise that a European way of managing borders could “civilize” them and tame their inherent violence never materialized. The normalization of pushbacks is thus at the same time a resurgence of national-sovereign modes as well as a failure of the European project to depart from the despotism of its borders.

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