



## **Barbed Wires and Human Lives: The Militarization of Migration at the Evros Border**

Druty kolczaste i ludzkie życie: militaryzacja migracji na granicy  
w Evros

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The article delves into the complex landscape of migration dynamics, examining the issue of militarization in reaction to migration as a hybrid threat in Greek and Turkish contexts, particularly along the Evros border. It reaches into the geopolitical difficulties, security problems, and human rights considerations that come with migration militarization. It reveals migrants' hard realities through detailed analysis, while simultaneously questioning the ethical dimensions of securitization programmes. By shedding attention on the human cost of militarised borders and arguing for a more humane and rights-based approach, the article challenges current discourses and advocates for a reevaluation of migration governance developed in values of solidarity and compassion.

**Key words:** militarisation, migration, hybrid warfare, Greece, Turkey, Evros, human rights

As the sun sets over the Evros River, the peaceful beauty hides the tense reality that defines this Greek-Turkish border. Here, the harsh realities of migration merge with the heavy hand of militarisation. Razor wire and surveillance cameras, watchtowers and patrols - these are the components that determine the daily lives of individuals seeking asylum and those in charge of border security. This article looks into the complexity of this militarised border, where the movement of people seeking asylum is increasingly perceived through the lenses of security and threat.

In recent years, the discourse around migration has shifted, with military players taking on duties previously reserved for humanitarian and law enforcement authorities. The concept of migration as a 'hybrid threat' is central to this transition, and key regional organisations such as the EU and NATO are increasingly using it. This narrative portrays migration not only as a humanitarian concern, but also as a security one, linked with human smuggling, trafficking, and the threat of terrorism. Nowhere is this more clear than at the Evros border, where Greece's mandatory military duty mixes with a heightened concern for national security, and the threat of attack shadows every crossing attempt.

This article investigates how migration is portrayed as a threat by studying the techniques and methods used by the EU and NATO. In Greece, where required military service is linked to national security, the Evros border is at the forefront of this militarised approach. The presentation of migration as a 'hybrid threat' has resulted in increased control measures, which frequently have serious ethical consequences and raise human rights concerns. By focusing on the realities at the Evros border, this article emphasises the urgent need to rethink present policies in order to better accord with standards of human dignity and protection.

### **Militarisation of migration – migration as a hybrid threat**

Most authoritative texts of international agencies use the phrase 'hybrid threat' to refer to a wide range of undesirable situations and acts, including terrorism, migration, piracy, corruption, and ethnic strife. The term 'hybrid threat' refers to a variety of undesirable conditions, including terrorism, migration, piracy, and corruption, as ambiguously defined by NATO and the EU.

NATO defines hybrid threats as concerted actions taken by state or non-state actors to exploit vulnerabilities through a combination of diplomatic, military, economic, and technological means while remaining below the level of conventional warfare. This term refers to the intertwining of external and internal security concerns, which blurs the dis-

inction between international and domestic security areas. NATO's plan, in place since 2015, provides readiness to fight hybrid assaults by continuously gathering and reviewing information to detect threats. It helps Allies identify risks and build resilience through civic preparedness, vital infrastructure protection, and counter-terrorism (NATO, 2024).

The EU similarly puts migration in a security context, tying it to counter-terrorism and organised crime, and prioritising border management and capacity-building for third countries. Although the term relates to complex and multidimensional risks, it is still imprecise. Labelling an issue as a 'hybrid threat' implies that society is vulnerable to these issues, shifting the attention away from traditional military dangers to state boundaries and towards risks to societal integrity. The European Union's strategy exemplifies this trend. Migration is increasingly being presented alongside organised crime and small arms trafficking, emphasising the importance of working with third-party countries in the European neighbourhood to address these concerns (Defence Industry and Space, European Commission, n.d.). The 2016 EU Global Strategy document, titled "Shared Vision, Common Action," places migration in a security perspective by tying migration policy to counter-terrorism and organised crime activities. The subsequent Implementation Plan on Security and Defence prioritises border management and third-country capacity-building in future Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, indicating a shift towards protecting the Union and its citizens rather than people in need of protection (Raineri, Strazzari, 2021).

The framing of migration as a hybrid threat has allowed the participation of defence and security players in migration management. The EU Global Strategy suggests that exterior policies and tools for border control and homeland security should be integrated with domestic ones. This integration reinforces the notion that migration is linked to terrorism and organised crime, necessitating defence cooperation between organisations such as NATO and the EU (European Commission, 2024).

High-ranking officials and politicians have supported this narrative. For example, in a 2015 speech to the European Parliament, President of the European Council Donald Tusk described migrant waves as tools or weapons against neighbours, comparing them to a new sort of hybrid warfare (European Council, 2015).

This narrative has resulted in a gradual participation of military players in migrant governance, which has increased since the 2016 EU-Turkey refugee pact. One key outcome of presenting migration as a hybrid threat is the weaponization of migrants. Transit states have increasingly threatened the EU with refugee influxes, using migrants as leverage for economic, financial, and political gain (European Parliament,

n.d.). Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has threatened to open borders to Europe, using refugees as a bargaining chip in political negotiations, which consequently have led to the refugee crisis on the Evros border in 2020<sup>1</sup>.

The view of migration as a dual threat has effectively turned refugees to negotiation objects, ignoring their humanity and legal rights. This conceptualization supports militarised responses and activities, which frequently violate human rights. While the openness of globalisation and cyberspace continues to be debated in today's global politics, physical barriers at national borders are increasing. The trend is apparent, with 35 border walls built internationally in 2012, almost 70 by 2017, and even more today. The EU and Schengen region are bordered or criss-crossed by various border walls, which have increased from 315 kilometres in 2014 to 2,048 km by 2022 and continued to grow since (European Parliament, 2022).

The growth of physical barriers, as well as the implementation of advanced surveillance systems, demonstrate border militarization. The EU's Smart Borders Programme seeks to improve border control efficiency while simultaneously raising concerns about privacy and human rights (Migration and Home Affairs; European Commission, 2024). Furthermore, outsourcing border control to third countries frequently results in human rights violations, particularly when the controls are transferred to authoritarian regimes such as Libya or Turkey<sup>2</sup>. The framing of migration as

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<sup>1</sup> Authors comment: In 2020, the Evros border, separating Greece and Turkey, became a focal point of the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe. The crisis intensified following Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's announcement that Turkey would no longer prevent refugees from crossing into Europe. This declaration came amidst tensions between Turkey and the European Union over the situation in Syria. As a result, thousands of migrants and refugees gathered at the Evros border, seeking entry into Greece and, ultimately, the European Union. The influx of people led to clashes between migrants and Greek security forces, escalating the humanitarian and political challenges faced by both Greece and the broader EU. The situation on the Evros border underscored the complexities of migration management, the need for humanitarian responses, and the broader geopolitical dynamics influencing migration flows in the region.

<sup>2</sup> Authors note: In recent years, many European countries have increasingly relied on outsourcing border control to third countries as a strategy to manage migration flows. However, this approach often leads to significant human rights violations, especially when entrusted to authoritarian regimes such as those in Libya or Turkey. These regimes have been known to engage in practices such as arbitrary detention, violence, and exploitation of migrants and refugees. The outsourcing of border control exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and undermines

a hybrid threat justifies militarised measures that violate migrants' rights and dignity, prompting a rethinking of current policies to ensure they are consistent with human rights and ethical principles.

### **Greek Context**

In recent years, Greece has been in the forefront of Europe's migrant challenges. The arrival of approximately 850,000 migrants and refugees in 2015, many of whom entered illegally, underlined Greece's vulnerability to large-scale migration waves. These people embarked on risky travels, frequently passing through Turkey and braving the treacherous seas of the Mediterranean Sea in search of safety and a better life in Europe (International Organization for Migration, 2015). While some migrants continued their trek north, a large number remained detained in improvised camps and holding areas within Greece, putting the country's resources and infrastructure to the test.

Greece, as a gateway to Europe under the Schengen Agreement, plays an important role in regulating migratory movements throughout the continent. The Schengen Agreement, which provides for visa-free travel between 26 European countries, has enhanced economic integration and mobility while also putting additional strain on Greece's security apparatus in terms of migration and border control. Furthermore, the Dublin Regulation emphasises Greece's role, requiring asylum applications to be processed in the first European country of entry (Art. 3. Regulation..., 2016). This provision lays an undue responsibility on countries such as Greece, who are frequently overwhelmed by the sheer amount of arrivals, to manage asylum claims and assure conformity to EU asylum standards. As the major point of entry for many migrants and refugees coming by sea and by land (including the Evros Border), Greece has enormous hurdles in fulfilling its duties under the Dublin Convention while also addressing humanitarian concerns and successfully regulating migration patterns.

The 2016 deal between the European Union and Turkey, intended at slowing the flow of migrants and refugees into Europe, brought a momentary relief (International Organization for Migration, 2015). This agreement resulted in a significant decline in refugee arrivals, indicating a shift in migration patterns in the region. However, it also highlighted the complexities of geopolitical relationships and interdependence in migration management.

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the protection of human rights, raising serious ethical and legal concerns.

In addition to geopolitical and security concerns, Greece's approach to the migration crisis has been influenced by local political dynamics, as evidenced by its immigration legislation. Under Mitrakis' nationalist government, migration has been a key subject in political discourse, with severe asylum legislation adopted as part of larger populist campaigns. These rules, considered some of the most restrictive in the area, indicate a harsh posture aimed at reducing irregular migration and strengthening national borders. The new immigration legislation imposes harsher restrictions on asylum seekers, such as faster procedures for evaluating asylum claims and greater custody and deportation powers for authorities. While supporters claim that these restrictions are vital to safeguard security and sovereignty, critics have expressed concerns about their impact on human rights and the protection of vulnerable migrants and refugees (Refugees International, 2023).

In parallel, Greece has made changes to its military conscription regulations. Since 2021, all conscripts in the Army, Navy, and Air Force have been assigned a standardised 12-month service term. However, there are exceptions for conscripts serving in units with unique operational and geographical circumstances, which allow for a shorter nine-month service tenure. This exception mostly affects conscripts stationed along Turkey's border and on the Aegean islands, where migration pressures are highest, particularly at hotspots such as the Evros border (Kokkinidis, 2021).

The intersecting fields of migration, security, and domestic politics emphasises the complex issues that Greece and other European countries have in regulating migrant flows and meeting the humanitarian needs of refugees and asylum seekers. As Greece continues to manage these problems, the execution and impact of its immigration laws will remain a subject of significant debate and attention, both domestically and internationally.

### **Turkish context**

Turkey, as a significant transit country for Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan migrants, is critical to Europe's migration dynamics. In 2015, approximately half of all refugees entering into Europe came from these conflict-torn countries. To resolve the situation, the European Union reached an agreement with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in March 2016 to reduce the large influx of migrants travelling north through Turkey. The EU-Turkey agreement included several key provisions: the European Union would provide Turkey with 6 billion euros to assist approximately 3.5 million

refugees and migrants; the EU would expedite Turkey's EU membership considerations; Greece would be allowed to redirect migrants to Turkey; and Turkey would be responsible for preventing further irregular migration to the EU. While this agreement has greatly reduced migratory flows, its inconsistent implementation calls into question its long-term usefulness (Kokkinidis, 2021).

The Turkish government's ability to sustain this additional humanitarian responsibility remains uncertain, particularly given rising unemployment, which reached 12.1 percent in November 2016, and the significant financial burden of supporting migrants, which is estimated to be more than \$500 million per month as of February 2017 (Migration Policy Institute, Terry, 2021). Furthermore, President Erdoğan has often used the threat of releasing a new wave of migrants and refugees as a bargaining chip to build domestic support and obtain additional concessions from the European Union.

This threat materialised in early 2020, when Erdoğan said that Turkey would no longer prevent migrants from crossing into Europe, effectively opening the borders and starting a fresh migratory crisis at the Evros-Greece border. Thousands of migrants and refugees rushed towards the border, causing tense stand-offs, humanitarian misery, and clashes between migrants and Greek security authorities. This decision was largely interpreted as Erdoğan's geopolitical manoeuvre to pressure the EU for additional help and concessions. The 2020 border opening exposed the fragility of the EU-Turkey migration deal and the continuous instability in migration management between Turkey and the EU.

Erdoğan's activities at the Evros border reflect his overall political strategy, which uses migration as a tool in hybrid warfare. By presenting migrants as part of a "hybrid threat," Erdoğan uses anti-migrant narratives to destabilise and undermine the EU. This technique is consistent with broader hybrid warfare patterns in which state and non-state actors utilise a combination of conventional and unconventional means to exploit vulnerabilities. In this environment, migration is used not only as a humanitarian concern, but also as a strategic tool for achieving political and economic goals.

In addition to migration trends, Turkey's internal policies, including obligatory military service, reflect its strategic approach to national security. In Turkey, all male citizens aged 21 to 41 must serve in the military. Until 2014, the standard conscription length was 15 months, which was later decreased to 12 months. Individuals with two years of vocational training or lower education serve the full twelve months, whereas those with four years of secondary school or higher education can serve twelve months as an officer (Third Lieutenant) or a six-month term as a non-commissioned officer (Caya, 2015).

This multidimensional approach to migration and security emphasises Turkey's critical position in the regional migration environment. The complicated reality at the Turkey-Greece border, particularly at the Evros border, is shaped by the interaction of domestic policies, international agreements, and geopolitical strategies, highlighting the regional ramifications of migration management. The anti-migrant narratives and the strategic use of migration in hybrid warfare highlight Erdoğan's complicated and frequently contentious politics, which affects not just bilateral relations with Greece but also the broader European and regional security environment.

### **Context of Evros - A Flashpoint in the Migration Crisis**

For years, building up to the peak of the refugee crisis in 2020, the Evros border between Greece and Turkey was a major migration point and cause of tension. The fast-flowing Evros River serves as the primary border, but a 12-kilometer stretch of land allows for crossings. This area has become one of Europe's most militarised borders, with a wire barrier and continuous patrols by Greek and Turkish forces. In 2012, Greece built a 10.3-kilometer barrier with electronic surveillance along the land border between Kastanies and Nea Vyssa. This measure attempted to send a message that Greece was not an open door for irregular migrants, as well as to stress Greece's responsibility to control its borders as a sovereign state and EU member. The same year, 'Operation Aspida' (Shield) saw the deployment of 1800 border guards to strengthen border control (Grigoriadis, Dilek, 2019).

The situation at the Evros border remained reasonably calm until 2020, despite the continued presence of refugees in Turkey attempting to access Europe. The 2016 EU-Turkey deal initially limited the flow of migrants, but with deteriorating conditions in Syria and Libya, as well as Turkey's economic problems, President Erdoğan chose to capitalise on the migration issue. In March 2020, Erdoğan directed Turkish authorities to let refugees and migrants to enter Greece, causing thousands to flood the border. Greece responded by closing its borders, stopping asylum applications for a month, and strengthening its defences. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis accused Turkey of using migrants as "geopolitical pawns" to advance its own agenda (Grigoriadis, Dilek, 2019).

In reaction to the massive number of migrants attempting to cross the Evros River in March 2020, Greece greatly reinforced its military presence in the region. Migrants who managed to cross the border found themselves in a militarised zone where NGOs were prohibited, making it impossible for them to receive assistance. For years, the



Greek army has had total control of the 500-kilometer-long Evros River, which serves as a natural boundary between Greece and Turkey. The tough terrain and advanced surveillance systems make it almost impenetrable.

Despite these hurdles, migrants have long attempted to cross the Evros River into the European Union. However, the migration crisis of March 2020, when tens of thousands of migrants entered Greece through Kastanies after Turkey opened its borders, aggravated the problem. Greek authorities resorted with severe tactics such as tear gas and resistance, and claims of human rights violations emerged. The militarised border, which is equipped with advanced surveillance and patrolled by 850 soldiers, has created a climate in which asylum seekers' fundamental rights are at risk. Despite international criticism, Greece continued to prioritise border security, rejecting requests for a "monitoring mechanism" and claiming that such measures harm its sovereignty (Oxford Law Blogs, 2021).

Pushbacks and tensions at the border have led to death of an unknown number of migrants and asylum seekers<sup>3</sup>. Many people died as a result of cold weather in March 2020, when the region's temperature fell below zero degrees Celsius. According to Amnesty International, Greek and Turkish officials have driven people onto islets in the Evros River, most likely to escape responsibility for them and their safety. These underwater islets, which lack shelter, food, and drinkable water, represent the difficult conditions that migrants encounter. This was when for the first time in history, the European Court of Human Rights issued an interim measure in Evros, ordering Greek authorities to rescue 30 Syrians who were stranded on an islet in life-threatening conditions. Unfortunately, one four-year-old boy died while being compelled to return to the island from Greece (HumanRights360, 2022).

Reports from the Border Violence Monitoring Network illustrate refugees' terrible experiences, stating how they have been used as "a football between the Greek and Turkish army," often with pushback from both sides. In August 2020, a group reported being ambushed by "mercenaries" and forced to flee to Turkey, only to be returned to the islet by Turkish forces. They were subjected to severe physical and psychological abuse, with some members of the gang, including a pregnant woman, in critical condition. The group remained in considerable suffering, demonstrating the high human cost of the geopolitical conflict at the Evros border (BVMN, 2023).

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<sup>3</sup> Authors note: Pushbacks are a number of state actions aimed at driving refugees and migrants out of their territory while preventing access to relevant legal and procedural frameworks. States bypass safeguards controlling international protection (including minors), detention or custody, expulsion, and the use of force.

Since the beginning of 2020, there have been several complaints of violations of the non-refoulement principle<sup>4</sup>, as well as physical aggression by both Greek and Turkish border guards. Incidents of border guards opening fire on individuals gathered at the border have heightened tensions between Greece and Turkey, resulting in an information war. Documented examples of asylum seekers' deaths are rare, but those that have been documented, particularly in early March 2020, have become symbols of the 2020 Evros border crisis. The presence of migrants near the Evros border in 2020 likely exacerbated long-standing Greek-Turkish tensions, emphasising the human cost of geopolitical manoeuvring.

The Evros border issue is a vivid example of Greece and Turkey's militarization of migration, with border security concerns frequently taking precedence over human rights and humanitarian considerations. As global tensions remain high, vulnerable migrants continue to face the brunt of the war, imprisoned in a perilous limbo at the crossroads of political power struggles.

The militarization of migration has a direct connection to the broader landscape of global conflict and political oppression. Forced migration and displacement are frequently used as weapons of war, maintained by organised political violence, authoritarian regimes, and long-running armed conflicts. The overwhelming number of people forcibly displaced around the world demonstrates the obvious link between conflict zones and refugee populations. However, what is frequently missed is the deliberate use of civilian non-combatants as pawns in the pursuit of political and military goals.

In the Mediterranean region, migratory militarization has grown into a sophisticated framework with elaborate control systems and border management methods. The concept of 'hybrid threat' has been used to legitimise these policies, resulting in the development of containment zones that prioritise security over migrants' rights and protections. In Greece, and Turkey where military service is mandatory, the narrative

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<sup>4</sup> Authors note: The non-refoulement principle is a key notion in international refugee law that bans nations from returning or expelling refugees to countries where they risk persecution, torture, or other significant human rights violations. This idea is incorporated into numerous international treaties and conventions, notably the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, as well as regional human rights agreements. It is a foundation of refugee protection, guaranteeing that those escaping persecution have the right to seek asylum and are not returned to dangerous or harmful conditions.

of migration as a threat has led to brutal measures, particularly along the Evros border. Special arrangements, such as reduced military service terms for individuals stationed in particular locations in case of Greece, reflect the increased urgency and severity of security activities.

In the particular case of Evros, this pattern is especially prominent as asylum seekers have become unsuspecting pawns in the geopolitical power struggle between Greece, which is supported by the EU, and Erdoğan's Turkey. The militarization of the border and the securitization of migration have turned the Evros region into a battleground where asylum seekers' rights and lives are sacrificed in pursuit of political goals. This harmful circumstances highlights the critical need for ethical reflection and action to guarantee that human rights and dignity are not jeopardised in the pursuit of national security goals.

The ethical consequences of militarising migration are significant and require careful consideration. By portraying migration as a security issue, governments risk prioritising militarised measures over humanitarian concerns, undermining vulnerable communities' rights and dignity. It is critical to fight the normalisation of militarization and argue for measures that preserve human rights, dignity, and protection for all people, regardless of immigration status. Only by working together to address the core causes of forced migration and displacement will we be able to achieve a more just and compassionate approach to migration crisis management.

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