AVİM Commentary • No: 2023 / 22 •

THE EU DISCARDS THE IRREGULAR MIGRATION ISSUE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Hazel ÇAĞAN ELBİR

Analyst

**Translation by Ahmet Can ÖKTEM*

The issue of immigration is among Europes most severe ones. Especially within the last ten years, the Mediterranean has turned into a grave for immigrants. Despite that the migrant crisis has never lost its urgency for those who have to migrate, Europe and the governments concerned have been silent, and even negligent regarding the situation for years. In recent days, a colossal amount of death and tragedy has occurred at the Mediterranean. Following the incident of a fishing boat sinking in the South of Greece, together with approximately 700 people on board, who are believed to have drowned, eyes are once again turning towards the worlds deadliest migration route and Europes failure tackle one of its biggest issues.[1]

The Central Mediterranean is known as the worlds deadliest migration route with more than 17,000 cases of deaths and disappearances recorded by the Missing Migrants Project (MMP) since 2014. The reasons behind this brutal fact are the length of the overseas voyage (which can last for days), the increasingly dangerous smuggling activities, the gaps within the search and rescue operations capacity and the restrictions brought on to the non-governmental organizations life-saving initiatives. Migrants generally cross the Central Mediterranean with inflatable boats that are unsuitable for open water and are loaded beyond their capacities. There are instances in which multiple boats are put to sea at the same time which significantly complicates the search and rescue operations. The Central Mediterranean is also the route with the highest number of disappearances. It is probable that a much higher number of deaths remain unrecorded. The MMPs data since 2014 indicates that more than 12,000 people have disappeared at sea on this route.

Since the International Organization for Migration (IOM) launched its Missing Migrants Project in 2014, it has been reported that an estimate of 27,000 people have died or disappeared while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. In short, more than 21,000 of these deaths occurred in attempts to cross the Mediterranean Sea with boats that were unfit for open water and were over-loaded.[2]

Thus far, the majority of the immigrants that have migrated to Greece have passed through Türkiye and have either reached the Greek Islands by boat or have crossed the Evros River along the land border. Following Türkiyes efficient observation, Athens increasing maritime patrols and construction of a border fence, the number of people using this route has dropped steeply. Just three years ago, Greeces negative treatment towards asylum seekers was widely reported. Despite that there is footage of the incidents, Greece denied the accusations. In 2020, Harward Professor Vasileia Digidiki drew attention to the issue through her article in the *The Financial Times* titled Europe Shows a Janus Face to Migrants.[3] In her article, Digidiki criticized Greeces inhumane treatment towards the migrants while expressing that Europe, which remained silent, was not innocent. Following the anti-immigrant protests in Greece and in the various European countries, the impact of the pandemic and the European countries closing their borders to the immigrants, the problem became unmanageable.

Three years after the events above, the deaths of the immigrants are being condemned in the current protests taking place in many cities in Greece. The protestors accused Greece and Europe for turning the Mediterranean into a sea of the dead.[4] In spite of the records, Greece continuously denies the allegations that it is pushing back the immigrants to Türkiye and illegally preventing them from seeking asylum.[5] Other central and eastern European countries known for implementing harsh policies towards the migrants, such as Hungary and Poland, are firmly rejecting asylum seekers from the south. As for the UK, it is already planning to send the irregular migrants to Rwanda, in violation of international law.[6]

United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on the European Union (EU) to adopt an effective migration policy following the tragedy off the coast of the Peloponnese in Greece (mentioned above) in which many people lost their lives.[7] Even three years prior to this call, accusations were made concerning the lack of a humanitarian plan across the EU. Such a plan is still not on the EUs agenda. UN Secretary-General Guterres, similarly to the critiques of Harvard Professor Digidiki in her article three years ago, stated that the issue does not only concern Greece, but that it is also a problem of the EU. The Chancellor of Germany, Olaf Scholz, also conveyed that the EU needs to act in unison towards this issue. Following these developments, on June 18th, 2023, Germanys Minister of Interior Nancy Faeser and Frances Minister of Interior Gérald Darmanin held talks in Tunisia on measures to deal with illegal migration in the Mediterranean. In the written statement, they expressed their aspirations to establish legal migration routes to abolish the inhumane activities of human traffickers, to protect the rights of the refugees and stop the horrific deaths in the Mediterranean.[8] Nonetheless, tensions are increasingly rising due to populist policies, particularly as Greece builds a wall, similar to the wall that former US President Donald Trump established along the Mexican border, along its border with Türkiye and emphasizes that it will continue along this trajectory.[9]

Recently, the UNHCR reported that there has been a record increase of 19,1 million in forced displacement compared to the previous year. Europe is refusing to take accountability in this situation, which is tarnishing its image, and is expecting the worlds

most underdeveloped countries to manage it. Even though solemn promises were made during World Refugee Day on June 20th, 2023, the EU and the prosperous EU states have been pursuing an even more ruthless and populistic course over the past decade. Moreover, they persist in their stances, regardless of the reports and calls of the UN.

*Image: *https://stock.adobe.com/images/migrants-and-refugees-in-a-boat-on-the-ocean-global-migration-concept-ai-generated-art/577340334*

[1] Jon Henley, Greece Shipwreck Disaster Exposes Europes Deadly Failure, *The Guardian*, 15 June 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/15/greece-shipwreck-disaster-exposes-europes-deadly-failure.

[2] Migration Within The Mediterranean, International Organization for Migration, 14 June 2023, https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean.

[3] Vasileia Digidiki, Europe Shows a Janus Face To Migrants, *The Financial Times*, 20 June 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/7befe84b-6469-4297-abd9-cda45fd842c6.

[4] BM'den Yunanistan'daki göçmen faciası sonrası AB'ye çağrı: Etkili bir göç politikası belirlenmeli, *EuroNews*, 16 June 2023, https://tr.euronews.com/2023/06/16/bmden-yunanistandaki-gocmen-faciasi-sonrasi-abye-cagri-etkili-bir-goc-politikasi-belirlenm.

[5] Henley, Greece Shipwreck Disaster Exposes Europes Deadly Failure.

[6] The Guardian view on migrant tragedy: pieties are not enough, *The Guardian*, 15 June 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jun/15/the-guardian-view-on-another-migrant-tragedy-pieties-are-not-enough.

[7] BM'den Yunanistan'daki göçmen faciası sonrası AB'ye çağrı, *EuroNews*.

[8] Alman ve Fransız Bakanlar Göçle Mücadele İçin Tunusta, *EuroNews*, 18 June 2023, https://tr.euronews.com/2023/06/18/alman-ve-fransiz-bakanlar-kacak-gocle-mucadele-icin-tunusta.

[9] The Guardian view on migrant tragedy: pieties are not enough, *The Guardian*.

About the Author :

Hazel Çağan-Elbir is an analyst in AVİM. Çağan-Elbir continues her studies in Political Economy doctorate program at Atılım University.

To cite this article: ELBİR, Hazel ÇAĞAN. 2026. "THE EU DISCARDS THE IRREGULAR MIGRATION ISSUE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN." Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Commentary No.2023 / 22. August 08. Accessed November 22, 2026. https://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/THE-EU-DISCARDS-THE-IRREGULAR-MIGRATION-ISSUE-IN-THE-MEDITERRANEAN

Süleyman Nazif Sok. No: 12/B Daire 3-4 06550 Çankaya-ANKARA / TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 (312) 438 50 23-24 • **Fax**: +90 (312) 438 50 26
@avimorgtr
https://www.facebook.com/avrasyaincelemelerimerkezi
E-Mail: info@avim.org.tr
http://avim.org.tr

© 2009-2025 Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM) All Rights Reserved