



## JOINT CIVIL SOCIETY STATEMENT<sup>1</sup>

### Fires, Pushbacks and the Far Right: Misplaced Blame and the Mobilisation of Violence Against People on the Move in Evros

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**24 August 2023**

Year upon year Greece is impacted by deadly wildfires, but this summer has reached devastating levels. The average total of land destroyed each year stands at 43,000 hectares since 2009, but by the 15th August this year that average had already been exceeded. When we take the fires of the last few days into account, over 94,800 hectares of land have been burned this year, with nearly half of the destruction occurring in three days between the 19th and 21st of August. That puts Greece at the top of the leaderboard when it comes to wildfires across Europe in 2023.

90% of the destruction that occurred in those three days is located in the Evros land border region, where the fires enter their sixth day. The Evros fires were not unexpected, in fact the Eastern Macedonia and Thrace Autonomous Directorate for Civil Protection raised the alarm for a [“very high risk of fire”](#) on the 18th August. That warning turned to reality in the early hours of the following day and, despite increased deployment of fire fighting forces in the area, it [continued to spread](#) into the evening. By the following day the fire was [uncontrollable, moving closer](#) to Alexandroupoli, eventually burning the [area surrounding](#) the city, causing the [evacuation](#) of the University Hospital and moving towards [the south west](#) of the Evros prefecture and [towards Rhodopi](#). Whilst there has been a significant show of support from other Member States, with the [EU mobilising personnel, vehicles, helicopters and equipment](#), these measures are reactive rather than preventative.

Fires in Greece, or across Europe, are not new and [with climate change the situation is only set to deteriorate](#). Yet this reality hasn't inspired at-risk Member States like Greece to sufficiently prepare themselves; for 2023 the Greek state poured [29 times](#) the amount of funding into its police force than was given to fire fighting services. The impacts of this reality are nowhere starker than in the Evros region: a [severely restricted militarised zone](#) characterised by [proliferating human rights violations](#) and networks of local actors, some with far-right associations but others belonging to the political mainstream, collectively hostile to people on the move who they perceive as a threat to the security and identity of the border area and consequently, Greece. Despite the [fire department confirming on 23rd August](#) that the fire began near the border and was caused by lightning, dangerous narratives and racially abusive posts have [proliferated across social media](#), placing the blame on people on the move. As a result of these claims, and taking advantage of the chaos caused by the wildfires, far right groups have actively mobilised against transit groups.

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<sup>1</sup> With additional research by Lena Karamanidou



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Elleniki Lysi MP, Papadakis, [called for](#) members of the Anisio Delta (the association of hut owners in the area of the Evros delta) to “take measures” and “do what they know well”. His statement alludes to the association’s role in the events of late February and March 2020, when, in cooperation with the [police](#) and [army](#), they [patrolled](#) the delta of the Evros river [preventing crossings](#) and [apprehending people](#) on the move according to statements of members to the media. Two days later Papadakis [claimed](#) that “20 illegal immigrants were setting fires” behind a Lidl shop in Nea Hili, a suburb of Alexandroupoli. Within two hours of the post, local news outlet e-evros, published a video about “flammable [material](#)” - consisting of two tyres, wooden planks and foam material - at the same location. In an [interview](#) to the same media outlet, Papadakis claimed that ‘illegal immigrants’ started ‘fires in more than ten locations’. On 22nd August, [a video was published](#) with a man dressed in military clothes giving instructions and advice to a group of local civilian patrollers in the car park of that same Lidl.

In this context, [another video](#) was published showing an individual who claims to have ‘arrested’ “25 pieces” and opens the door to a trailer attached to his truck inside which he has locked people on the move. The speaker in the video accuses those in the truck of setting the fires, saying “they will burn us” and the video itself was shared by Konstantinos Velopoulos, the leader of far-right party Elliniki Lysi. Those responsible have since been arrested and [an investigation has been ordered](#) by the Greek Supreme Court, a move that resulted in outrage from Velopoulos who asserted that the individuals in the video were protecting [“the forests, their property and their country”](#). He has called for individuals to shield the border by any means, [including mine-laying if necessary](#), continuously inciting the mobilisation of far-right networks in the region on [his Twitter](#). The citizens’ arrest captured in the video is not an isolated incident. [Evros News reported](#) that such an act took place in the village of Lefkimi the previous day. These acts are not only tolerated, but directly incited by elected members of Greece’s Parliament who are proliferating false information across social media to scapegoat people on the move for the government’s failure to adequately prevent fires in the region. In more [recent developments](#), the Alexandroupoli First Instance Prosecutor's Office brought felony prosecution for attempted arson against 13 members of the captured transit group last night. This, despite the vague accusations based on ‘evidence’ found by the same individual who captured the transit group and expressed racist views in the video. His lawyer subsequently presented a [statement](#) claiming that he was “guided by a sense of responsibility towards human lives...and took action to prevent criminal behaviour”.

There are also transit groups that have met more tragic fates. The local coroner, Pavlos Pavlidis, has [confirmed a total of 18 bodies](#) from the Dadia forests, two of which were children and another belonging to [a man who was found burned](#) near the village of Lefkimi. Pavlidis stated that they were found within a 500m radius of one another, near a sheep pen and in groups of two or three, indicating that they were trying to flee or trapped in the barn when they burned to death. Their bodies have been taken to Alexandroupolis for post mortem examination, but identifying them will be difficult and authorities will need relatives to come forward. Other [sources](#) refer to the potentiality of another nine bodies, but the real



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numbers will be impossible to ascertain for some time. Rather than mourn with respect for the lives lost, Greece's Migration Minister Dimitris Karidis [took the moment to denounce](#) what he called the "murderous activity of criminal traffickers" which is "what endangers the lives of many migrants both on land and at sea every day." Yet again, a tragic situation has been manipulated to blame people on the move themselves for their own deaths, and to strengthen links between migration and criminality that has led to the proliferation of mobilised right-wing groups in the region.

Furthermore, there are transit groups whose fates still await to be seen, while reports of pushbacks persist amidst the dangerous fires. [Alarmphone](#) reports being in communication with four groups over the last few days. [28 people who reached out on the 22nd August](#) from near Sidiro were no longer reachable on the August 23rd, after the police claimed to have been unable to locate them. Recent updates suggest that they were pushed back to Turkey. [Eight people near Soufli also reached out on the 22nd August](#), but also lost contact with Alarmphone on the 23rd. Later that evening, they too reported that they were pushed back. Both groups had told the collective that the fires were nearing and they feared for their lives. Alarmphone additionally reported a total of approximately 250 individuals trapped on islets in the Evros river. [One group of 60-150 individuals](#) described being surrounded and [brutally attacked](#) by Greek authorities several times, despite the police claiming that the group were not on Greek territory. The latest [update](#) suggests that they were pushed back to Turkey last night. [The second group of 100 individuals](#) have been in contact with Alarmphone for a period spanning five weeks, subjected to cycles of pushbacks, relocations and attacks including [sexual violence](#). Despite their proximity to the spreading wildfires, the indication of a Rule 39 measure by the European Court of Human Rights as well as the exacerbated vulnerabilities of the groups and the life-threatening conditions they find themselves in, search and rescue operations are being systematically denied, and violent pushback operations proliferate.

The fires in Evros, the deaths, and the attacks on people on the move, were preventable. Warnings were given days before, the conditions analysed as particularly dangerous, and wildfires have spread across the country for consecutive summers in a row. Yet the country's firefighting services were not well [resourced](#). Greece's intense focus on migration has come at the cost of its land and its citizens, with tens of millions of euros poured into high-tech Closed Controlled Access Centres and the Automated Border Surveillance Systems used to [prevent entry](#) of 2,170 undocumented persons between the 14th and 17th of August, and arrest 29 alleged smugglers. Yet there were few fire-preparedness measures implemented for the wildfires that have destroyed Greece's natural landscape and razed homes and livelihoods to the ground. Instead of attributing blame where blame is due, right wing groups, mainstream media and politicians have capitalised on the fires to scapegoat and 'hunt down' people on the move who are already navigating the region in a context of exacerbated risk. Instances of 'crisis' consistently result in further derogations from protection obligations, and sadly this case has proven to be no different - lives have and will continue to be lost and the full scale of devastation is yet to be revealed.



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## **Signatories:**

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Be Aware And Share (BAAS)  
Europe Cares e.V. / Paréa Lesvos  
Border Voices  
Lighthouse Relief  
One Bridge to Idomeni  
Aletheia RCS  
I Have Rights  
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Seebrücke Switzerland  
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Northern Lights Aid  
Reclaim The Sea  
Project Armonia  
Glocal Roots  
CPT - Aegean Migrant Solidarity  
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Project ELPIDA  
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