



Kiriakos Mitsotakis: 'credit' for 'reducing flows' on the Aegean Sea: Part five – Change in 'flow' – Greece and the EU, or other factors?



Late last week (20 May 2021), some 23 months into his tenure as Greece's Prime Minister, Kiriakos Mitsotakis announced his pride that:

'In the last two years, with the active support of Frontex, we have managed to reduce flows by almost 80% in 2020 and by an additional 72% from the beginning of the year until today.'

He added:

'I would like to warmly congratulate the Greek Armed Forces, the Greek Police, and especially the Greek Coast Guard and my colleagues in the government for the results they have achieved. I would also like to congratulate the Coast Guard and FRONTEX for the protection they provide against the risk of loss of human life at sea. The protection of our borders not only prevents irregular arrivals, but also protects human lives.'

We have seen no analysis of this claim, or indeed of whether such a development could be considered desirable or even legal. As a result, we have compiled our own 'review', within which we conclude:

- Mitsotakis' claim could only be considered accurate if one accepts a definition of the term 'flow' which equates to 'the number of people the Greek government has registered as arrivals in Greece'. This definition is used by absolutely nobody, and would reduce the term to practical uselessness even if Greece and the wider EU were not





breaking the law to prevent people being registered as ‘new arrivals’, which in fact they are

- Bearing in mind the first point, **the figures ‘almost 80%’ and ‘72%’ must be dismissed as inaccurate**: in fact, ‘flow’ has ‘reduced’ by 67.6% and 49.4%, respectively
- This **reduction has been achieved by an enormous increase in illegal pushbacks** carried out by the Greek government – and according to Mitsotakis’ statement, also Frontex – since 1 March 2020: this is the **sole** factor for which he and/or the wider EU can claim *any* responsibility
- Greece (and perhaps Frontex) **illegally pushed back at least 14,324 people in 2020 – 94.9 per cent** as many as the 15,087 men, women and children it registered as new arrivals that year. From 1 January to 19 May 2021, it registered 2,786 people as having arrived: from **1 January to 30 April 2021, it had illegally pushed back at least 3,286 men, women and children: 18 per cent more people (118 per cent) than it registered**
- The Greek government has in fact **reduced the number of people it has registered as ‘new arrivals’** – and thus allowed to enter the legal system and apply for asylum, as is their right – **to just 25 per cent** of people who have attempted to or managed to, reach Greece: **it has denied a staggering 75 per cent of people this right** from 1 January to 30 April this year
- Mitsotakis has **misused the terms ‘irregular arrivals’ and ‘border protection’**: neither have any legal relevance to the conversation he wishes to have, and both should therefore be dismissed and ignored
- Far from ‘safeguarding human lives’, as he claims, **Mitsotakis and his government have overseen the single greatest proportion of deaths per safe arrival of people crossing the Aegean Sea in recorded history**
- While Greece (and according to his statement, also Frontex) absolutely *has* reduced the number of people registered as new arrivals in Greece since 1 January 2020, by breaking international law and denying men, women and children their fundamental human rights, **by far the greatest factor in the reduction on ‘flow’ appears to have been the onset of the global COVID pandemic**

This review has proven to be considerably longer than we first imagined. As a result, we have divided it into five parts, of which this: Change in ‘flow’ – Greece and the EU, or other factors? is the fifth.

You can [access the whole review](#), or [download it as a pdf](#).

The other four parts are also available online or as pdfs:

Part one – [The Data](#)

Part two – [Registered arrivals](#)

Part three – [Deaths](#)

Part four – [‘Irregular arrivals’ and ‘border protection’](#)





Change in 'flow' – Greece and the EU, or other factors?

'In the last two years, with the active support of Frontex, we have managed to reduce flows...'

Of course, in the immediate aftermath of Mitsotakis' statement, many organisations – *Koraki* included – noted that a major factor in the 'reduction in flow' cited by the Greek PM was Greece's illegal and disgusting policy of pushing men, women and children away from its borders, denying them the opportunity to find safe places to live, and endangering their lives in the process.

This policy is being carried out with at best the deliberate ignorance of the European Commission, and at worst its active assistance. Once again, ***the European Union has been in breach of international law on travel and refugees for more than five consecutive years.***

And there is absolutely no doubt, as already outlined, that even with the necessary underestimate of pushback numbers and regularity at the Evros river, the Greek government's policy of enormously increasing pushbacks of people attempting to arrive – and those who actually have arrived – in Greece is a central factor in what Mitsotakis mislabels 'reduction in flow'.

To be clear, in 2020, the Greek government registered 15,087 men, women and children as new arrivals, and illegally pushed back *at least* 14,324 people: 94.9 per cent as many as it registered. In 2021 it registered 2,786 people as having arrived, and – to 30 April – had illegally pushed back *at least* 3,286 men, women and children: it has pushed back 18 per cent *more* people (118 per cent) than it has registered.

In fact, it is vitally important to note and be aware of the fact that this is the *only* 'factor' which Greece and/or the EU can claim as 'its own', particularly given that he congratulates the Greek coastguard, Greek army, Greek police and Frontex for this achievement.

This means **Mitsotakis was literally parading his own, his government's and the EU's systematic, cynical and immoral breaking of international law as something for which he and they should be congratulated.**

But once we have factored that in, there has still, undeniably, been a wider 'reduction in flow', of 67.6 per cent, from 2019 to 2020, and 49.4 per cent from 1 January-19 May 2020 to the same period of this year.

There is no single definitive reason 'why' this should be so. Although there certainly *is* one which would appear to be more likely than any others.

It – and every single other possibility – is nothing to do with Greece, and can only be 'claimed' by the EU if the latter is prepared to admit breaking international law and placing barring people from entering whatever the cost ahead of that law, and human lives.

➤ Things are 'better in Turkey'





The first reason might be that things have improved for Syrians in Turkey.

This would of course be nothing to do with Greece, or indeed the EU, whose last payment for the care of Syrians in Turkey was supposed to be made in December 2018 and was in fact finally paid several months later.

And the Greek government itself, when not speaking about Syrian or other (there are more than 3.6m Syrian people in Turkey, along with at least one million Afghan and Iraqi men, women and children) refugees, regularly dismisses this as a possibility, preferring instead to paint Turkey as an increasingly authoritarian and religiously-driven nation (quite a claim from a party whose own slogan is 'family, church, state').

In fact, in recent years (perhaps starting, but certainly increasing, in late 2019) Turkey has been [systematically removing Syrian men, women and children](#) and forcing them back to Syria against their wishes.

Simultaneously, the political atmosphere in Turkey has become increasingly 'anti-Syrian', with the victory for the 'liberal' CHP over Erdogan's AKP in Istanbul in June 2019 celebrated by many with the phrase 'send Syrians home' – a phrase also used by the Iyi Party leader Meral Aksener in successive elections.

And for others, the situation is arguably worse. Turkey is not a signatory to the 1967 Refugee Protocol and as a result does not offer people refugee status. Instead, it confers 'protected' status on them. While technically, this is very similar, it does mean that many people live in fear of being removed when the state decides it wants to remove them, and hold fewer rights than refugees in other parts of the world.

But Syrian people in Turkey have at least been granted 'protected status'. Afghans, Iraqis, Pakistani people and others, including Somalis, are denied it.

The idea that Turkey is a 'safe state' for refugees – and certainly that things 'have improved' for refugees in Turkey in recent years, can hardly be considered a sensible suggestion or reason why fewer people have attempted to reach Greece.

➤ Things are 'better in Syria' (and other states)

A second reason might be that things have 'improved' in Syria for Syrian people. This is certainly a claim supported by the state's dictator Bashar Al Assad (although members of his own government have said they would rather rule a country of ten million 'loyal' Syrians, than welcome back 'traitors' who have left the country) and Denmark, along with fascist organisations across the EU including Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).

(It is unclear whether the Danish government is privately embarrassed that its policy on Syrian refugees is identical to that of a German fascist organisation.)

The simple fact is, however, that they have not. The war continues in the north of Syria, where the sometime-Assad-collaborating SDF is in tense negotiations with Assad over the region's future, and the Turkish government continues to attempt to wipe out the group which it claims is a terrorist organisation.





In Idlib, into which Assad and his Russian, Iranian and Hizbollah allies systematically herded millions of his opponents in the last five years, a two year-long stand-off continues between Russian and Assadist forces and the National Front for Liberation and fundamentalist Islamist militia organisation Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham. Life under the latter, particularly HTS, is often brutal, while the UN has repeatedly warned that it fears that if allowed to, Assad and his allies will carry out a 'massacre' of the region's 3.2m people.

And elsewhere, Assad is back in control. He has, in the last ten years, been responsible for well over 95 per cent of all killings in Syria, and is the major reason most Syrian refugees fled their homes in the first place. He has also consistently jailed forced returnees from Turkey, many of whom have never been seen again.

Things are simply *not* 'better' in Syria – for the majority of Syrians – than they were in, for example, 2018. Nor have things significantly improved in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, DRC or a number of other countries. This, too, would seem not to be a 'reason' we should consider seriously for a 'reduced flow' of men, women and children to the EU from Turkey.

➤ Things are 'better in Turkey' (part two: they are 'better' than in the EU)

This does not mean, however, that there are not people in Turkey who *are* happy there, or who are at least happy to 'wait' there until things *do* improve in Syria or another state.

Despite the images of seeming to portray large numbers of people at the Evros border, and people arriving by boat, after Erdogan announced the 'border to Europe' was open in early March 2020, the actual numbers of people who attempted the journey even then was tiny compared with the number who *could* have attempted to cross.

This could be a part of the reason for the 'decrease' in flow: that most of the *Syrian* people who want to, have already reached or are trying to reach the EU. Indeed, as early as 2017, the Turkish '[Syrian Barometer](#)' survey found that more than 76 per cent of Syrian responders said their plan was to return to Syria 'if war ends and a good regime emerged'; 'if war ends even if a good regime did not emerge'; or 'even if war did not end'.

That is, despite the claims of far-Right nationalists across Europe, including in Greece, the vast majority of Syrian people intend to and plan to return to Syria as soon as possible. And despite the embarrassment this might cause people within the EU, the vast majority prefer to wait in Turkey, rather than the EU, for this to happen.

It is of course difficult to put a precise figure on the exact impact of 'people don't want to come to the EU', or indeed to be certain that this *is* a major factor in the reduction in 'flow'.

But it does seem to be a factor, and if it *is*, this could hardly be claimed by Mitsotakis as a 'victory' for him, his party, or the EU, let alone the Greek police, Greek coastguard, Greek army, or Frontex, as he attempts.

➤ COVID

Of course, so far, we have ignored the elephant-sized global pandemic in the room: COVID-19.





Because there is a remarkable coincidence between Mitsotakis' claim that we should compare '2019', with 2020, and that there was not a global pandemic in 2019, and the greatest international health scare in a century began (for most of Europe and the 'near East') in March 2020.

Of course, we note with openness that this period happens to coincide also with the rise of Nea Dimokratia to power in Greece. We simply mention that it would be odd not to mention a global pandemic which was characterised by massively increased state restrictions on people moving in the context of a claim that the Greek government was 'responsible' for a reduction in the number of people moving.

It would be similarly remiss not to note that the specific moment at which the most significant drop in new arrivals into Greece took place, coincided almost exactly with Greece's first lockdown which began on 23 March 2020.

The figures are clear. From 1 January to 23 March 2020, inclusive, 7,154 men, women and children were registered as arriving in Greece by sea, and 2,051 by land: a total of 9,205 people.

From 24 March-31 December 2020, just 1,951 more people were registered as having arrived by sea, and 3,822 by land – 5,773 in nine months.

The nature of the reduction in figures also suggests COVID was a major reason, as the sea journey – already extremely tightly policed – would have been even harder to make as people's movement to setting-off points (and other locations) were themselves under observation to a far greater extent than previously, while the (relatively) harder to police 'land route' would have been slightly more easily made (at least on foot).

In any case, this – through to today – is the only period on record in which a greater number of people have been registered as entering Greece by land than by sea.

Equally, we should note that the number of people registered as new arrivals after the COVID lockdown in Greece was highest in October.

This is a relatively common occurrence, but the increase (from zero arrivals by land and 39 by sea in April) builds slowly from late May, when Greece's first lockdown was lifted, reached a peak in October, before reducing by 2.5 times (October 1,171, December 463) by December. This is an unusually large decrease between these two months, and we should note that Greece's second lockdown began in the first week of November. It lasted until 2 May.

We might also note that the connection between lockdown in Turkey and the number of sea journeys also seems to be borne out by the numbers of people registered as arrivals in Greece.

In October 2020, the number of people arriving in Greece by land was in fact four times higher than that in December: 1,089 people were registered as arriving by 'land' in October, compared with 272 in December. But entry by sea actually more than doubled: 82 people were registered as arriving by sea in October, and 191 in December.

(We must bear in mind that these numbers are exceptionally tiny compared to recent years: in October 2017, 3,972 people were registered as arriving by sea, in October 2018, 4,052, and in





October 2019, 9,154, compared to 82 in October 2020: in December 2017, 2,347 people were registered, in December 2018, 3,054, and in December 2019, 6,416).

One factor which might explain this ‘bucking of the trend’ – and which might explain why sea arrivals slightly increased while ‘land’ arrivals significantly decreased – is that while Greece’s second lockdown began in early November, Turkish movement restrictions were re-introduced only late in November, and increased in December.

It seems overwhelmingly likely that the ‘reduction in flow’ – significantly lower than Mitsotakis claimed it was (he claimed ‘almost 80 per cent’ from 2019-2020 and ‘72 per cent’ from 1 January-19 May 2020 to the equivalent period this year: the actual figures are 67.6 per cent and 49.4 per cent, respectively: the *only* way to come to Mitsotakis’ claim is if one redefines ‘flow’ to mean ‘the number of people the Greek government has registered as arrivals’, which is an entirely new and practically useless definition of the term) – but significant nonetheless, may be attributed to three possible (or likely) causes:

- illegal pushbacks by the Greek government and Frontex;
- the fact that most people who *want* to come to the EU from Turkey have *already done so*
- and – the largest in impact – COVID-19.

Mitsotakis *already* – by attributing credit to the Greek police, Greek army, Greek coastguard and Frontex – apparently accepts that his government and the EU is guilty of breaking international law *and should be given credit for doing so*.

The only questions remaining are whether he also believes he should be congratulated for making the EU so undesirable a destination that men, women and children fleeing a decade long, bitter and chaotic conflict in which well over a million people have been killed and well over half the population have been killed *still* don’t want to go there, and whether he is claiming credit for a global pandemic which has killed more than 3.5m people worldwide.

It remains unclear, to date, whether Kiriakos Mitsotakis is now claiming responsibility for COVID.

