

Brussels, 6 July 2022

Dear Commission President von der Leyen,

With this letter, we intend to draw your attention once again to the appalling fundamental rights situation at Greece's external borders, and to the worrying inaction of your European Commission.

According to the article published in *The Guardian*ⁱ on 28 June, Greek authorities detain refugees and force them to use violence against other people seeking protection. The described practice is to hold refugees in police stations along the Evros and force them to forcefully push others back at night. Interviewees explain their experience of slave-like treatment by Greek authorities and this system of forced labour is confirmed by both residents and police as well. It has also been well-documented that Greek border police is involved in human smuggling and trafficking in human beings.

This is yet another scandal on a long list of violations of EU law and international human rights law at the external borders of Greece for the government to deny rather than insisting on independent investigations and accountable follow up. Representatives of the Greek government tend to accuse journalists of spreading lies and Turkish propaganda. The attack on free journalism in the country has become so extensive that Greece was ranked on the 108th place out of 180 countries on the Reporters Without Borders' press freedom ranking, followed only by two other European countries, Russia and Belarus.ⁱⁱ

Despite numerous reports and assessments by various renowned organisation and institutions detailing systematic rights violations by Greece, there has been a surprising lack of consequences from Brussels. Some reports originate from smaller organisations that face unjustified and diffuse accusations and there are also reports from the United Nations,ⁱⁱⁱ the Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe,^{iv} the Anti-Torture Committee of the Council of Europe,^v the United Nations Refugee Agency,^{vi} the International Organisation for Migration,^{vii} Human Rights Watch,^{viii} Amnesty International^{ix} and others.

All this evidence shows that we are not faced with a matter of sporadic events or individual cases but with a highly visible, widely known practice on the ground, clearly contrary to the EU's values and law. Despite Frontex or aid organisations and representatives of the press being denied access and to observe certain regions of the border area, thereby hampering their work, the evidence of systematic abuse of rights is clear and substantiated. In view of this disastrous situation, the European Commission's communication is astonishing.

We were shocked to read an interview in "de Volkskrant"^x in which the Vice-President of the Commission, Margaritis Schinas, suggests that numerous pieces of evidence of pushback by the press or NGOs are invented or products of Turkish propaganda. In a climate where press freedom is restricted and aid organisations live in constant fear of being criminalised or punished for providing humanitarian assistance, such statements encourage the further discrediting of journalistic work and the work of human rights monitoring on the ground while putting a veil of impunity over serious deficiencies of the rule of law in Greece.

Therefore, we ask:

1. Is it the opinion of your European Commission that the numerous reports of systematic crimes at the external borders of Greece are fabricated or manipulated?
2. Is it the position of the Commission that media outlets like the New York Times,^{xi} The Guardian,^{xii} Tagesschau,^{xiii} Spiegel,^{xiv} Lighthouse Reports,^{xv} Le Monde^{xvi} and others are spreading lies or Turkish propaganda, as claimed by representatives of the Greek government on several occasions?^{xvii}
3. What is the European Commission doing to counter the smear campaigns directed against the freedom of the press and against the work of aid organisations?
4. Why have infringement procedures not been initiated against Greece yet, despite the knowledge that EU law has been systematically violated for years?
5. Will you call on the Greek government to finally initiate criminal proceedings against the perpetrators of pushbacks and mistreatment of people arriving to its borders?

President von der Leyen, we very much look forward to your answers to our questions as well as your clear positioning regarding the mistreatment of asylum seekers and refugees at the European Union's external borders, followed by action of your European Commission to end this dangerous impunity.

Yours sincerely,

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- ^{vi} see under iii
- ^{vii} IOM Alarmed over Reports of Pushbacks from Greece, 11.06.2020, online: <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-alarmed-over-reports-pushbacks-greece-eu-border-turkey>
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