

Hotspot approach: context

Since spring 2015, hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees have been arriving at Europe's maritime borders, mainly in Greece and Italy. This phenomenon, a logical consequence of a war that has been going on since 2011, has disrupted the European Union's asylum policy, which has tried to stop it.

Hotspots were born in this context. "The "hotspot approach" is supposed to help the so-called frontline countries, those who see migrants arriving at their doors, to fulfil their obligations to control and "receive" the arrivals." Several European agencies are involved, including Europol for police cooperation, Frontex (the European border surveillance agency) and EASO, the European asylum agency, to sort out those in need of international protection from so-called economic migrants. The fight against terrorism is also targeted, with extremist rhetoric spreading the idea that jihadists could pose as asylum seekers in order to enter Europe.

Hotspots are designed as registration centres where migrant people arriving are grouped together to deal with administrative formalities, and where, in principle, they can lodge an asylum application. In practice, they are camps that prevent people fleeing their countries from entering the European territory. The "hotspot approach" has rapidly become a dehumanising system that violates people's most basic rights, starting with the right to access asylum. In the name of border protection, solidarity between states takes precedence on the dignified reception conditions that migrant people should be granted.

At the same time, the Greek authorities, sometimes assisted by the Frontex agency, intercept the new boats and push them back to Turkey. Illegal and undignified, these extremely violent pushbacks, which can lead to death, are nevertheless massively used by the Greek authorities to discourage migrants from entering European soil.

The "hotspot approach" is linked to a change in the asylum procedure in Greece in 2021: by considering Turkey a "safe" country in their case, it excludes many nationalities such as Syrians, Afghans, Somalis, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis from the possibility of seeking asylum in Greece. While the agreement is currently frozen, preventing many deportations to Turkey since March 2020¹, these people continue to be detained in the hotspots. Most of them are locked up on arrival for 18 months (for illegal entry), which can be renewed (for staying without authorisation), for a total of three years in detention.

Very little is known about the hotspots of Kos and Leros, these islands therefore contribute to the invisibilisation of migrant people who arrive in Europe.

¹ Fact Sheet Greece 1-31 December 2020