

WHY HUNDREDS DROWNED OFF THE COAST OF GREECE

The tragedy of the Adriana comes amid renewed anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe.

By Nicolas Niarchos

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When the passengers first saw the boat, in Libya, five days before it sank, some of them reportedly wanted to abandon the trip. Photograph from Reuters / Hellenic Coast Guard

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The migrants were mostly Pakistanis, Syrians, Palestinians, and Egyptians. They left the port of Tobruk, Libya, on what their families thought was a “a

V.I.P. boat,” headed for Italy, and what they hoped would be a better life in Europe. Five days later, the *Adriana*—which was actually a fishing trawler, and dangerously overcrowded—became stranded in deep waters to the southwest of Greece’s Peloponnese peninsula. On June 14th, in the middle of the night, it capsized, then sank, while a Greek Coast Guard vessel was stationed just a short distance away. As many as seven hundred and fifty men, women, and children are believed to have been on board. Only a hundred and four have been found alive. It is one of the worst shipwrecks in the Mediterranean’s history.

It was election season in Greece, and the tragedy quickly became political. Kyriakos Mitsotakis, a former financier with undergraduate and business degrees from Harvard, and the leader of the conservative New Democracy Party, was seeking a second term as Prime Minister: he won a first-round election last month and the second round, on Sunday, by a large margin. On a recent campaign stop, he denounced the smugglers who had lured the migrants on to the *Adriana*, then castigated political opponents who criticized rescue services, saying, “We are also very disappointed with those who, with this tragedy, found an opportunity to denounce their own country and the Coast Guard, which made a commendable effort to save hundreds of people in extremely difficult conditions.”

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Nine Egyptian men who had been on board are being held by the Greek authorities in pretrial detention; according to the [Associated Press](#), they are charged with various crimes, including negligent manslaughter and people smuggling. But many questions remain about both the actions of the Coast Guard and the treatment of the survivors. Athena Linos, a doctor who was elected as a Member of Parliament for the center-left party Syriza on Sunday, visited the migrants the day after the shipwreck, when they were being held in a

hangar in the city of Kalamata. Linos, who specializes in epidemiology, has studied refugees and migrants in Greece for the past ten years through the Prolepsis Institute, a public-health N.G.O. that she founded in 1990. Of the survivors, she told me, “Twenty-seven of them were in the hospital. There were no major problems or traumas.” The rest were held in a storeroom. “It was a place that was not for humans,” she said. “There were only a few cracks of light coming in from atop the walls. Everyone was on the floor—they were on military-issue mattresses. It was very small. They were offered much food by the locals, more than from the municipality.” She added, “There was no psychiatric support or translator whatsoever.” The government said that the migrants were held there to be interviewed in order to find the smugglers, she said, and that those who were not charged were released after several days. The survivors were then transferred to a camp near Athens, where their movement is heavily curtailed, and reportedly they have been told not to speak to journalists.

Five days before the *Adriana* sank, according to *Kathimerini*, Greece’s newspaper of record, when the migrants first saw the boat, in Libya, some of them wanted to abandon the trip. The rusted, aging trawler, which was reportedly eighty to a hundred feet long, didn’t look as if it could make the more-than-five-hundred-nautical-mile journey—particularly carrying hundreds of people. But the smugglers, to whom some of the passengers had paid as much as nine thousand dollars, urged them to board. According to the *Times*, dozens of families were below deck, and the Associated Press spoke with a survivor who said that he had paid extra to ride on the upper deck.

Early on Tuesday, Europe’s FRONTEX border agency spotted the *Adriana* in international waters, at a location in the Greek Coast Guard’s search-and-rescue territory. A Greek merchant vessel approached the boat, reportedly at the request of the Coast Guard, and its crew began tossing food and water to passengers on the deck, who scrambled to collect the supplies. “Think of so many people fighting over a glass of water,” a survivor later told *Kathimerini*. “The engine was running, but we were lost.” The Greek Coast Guard boat arrived that night, and the agency later reported that people aboard the *Adriana* had told them they did not want to go to Greece but to Italy. (The asylum-seekers apparently chanted

“Italia! Italia!” to the crew of another merchant ship that supplied provisions.) It is cheaper, another survivor told the paper, to travel from Italy to a wealthy northern European nation. The Coast Guard ship then briefly attached a rope to the *Adriana*, it later admitted, which was then untied, and then it withdrew.

Publicly, the Coast Guard said that it did not intervene because the migrants had asked them not to, and because the boat appeared to be on a steady course to Italy. This past weekend, [a BBC report](#) cast doubt on the official story. According to the BBC, the *Adriana* barely moved for some seven hours, indicating that it was in distress—it reportedly lost engine power—then capsized at around 2 A.M. (The Coast Guard claimed that the boat travelled some thirty nautical miles.) “You can’t intervene in international waters against a boat that is not engaged in smuggling or some other crime,” a Greek Coast Guard spokesperson said on national television, though it was not clear why smuggling people was not considered a crime or, indeed, smuggling. Several survivors submitted statements and spoke to journalists, reporting that the boat capsized after the Coast Guard tried to attach ropes again and, perhaps, pull it into Italian waters, which the Coast Guard has denied. “I don’t know if they wanted to push us back to Italy or take us to Greece, but, given their attitude, I didn’t feel like they wanted to save us,” a Syrian refugee [told *Le Monde*](#). When the boat sank, a bevy of commercial ships and pleasure craft, as well as Coast Guard vessels and helicopters in the area, rushed to pull drowning people from the sea, but in the darkness and as day broke hundreds drowned.

The captain of a Mexican superyacht that joined the rescue said that the Coast Guard “did all they could.” But many feel that the agency’s actions should be scrutinized. In May, the *Times* published [an investigation](#) including video it had obtained that appeared to confirm reports that the Coast Guard has been involved in what are known as “pushbacks.” In the instance captured on video, twelve asylum seekers fleeing wars in Africa, including a number of children, were kidnapped on Lesbos by unknown men dressed in black, then taken by speedboat to a Coast Guard craft. The Coast Guard boat crossed out of Greek waters in the Aegean, and the refugees were put on a motorless dinghy and set adrift. An hour or so later, two Turkish Coast Guard boats picked them up.

(According to the *Times*, Greek officials often alert Turkish officials about stranded migrants by fax.) Such actions would violate international laws and E.U. rules; a spokesperson for the European Commission told the *Times* that it would take the matter up with the Greek government, which declined to comment.

The sinking of the *Adriana* comes in the context of a rise in sentiment against refugees. More than a million refugees arrived in Greece between 2015 and March, 2016, when the Syrian crisis provoked a mass movement to Europe, and they have been followed by hundreds of thousands in the years since. That influx has been a profound shift for Greece, a relatively traditional country whose economy was devastated by a financial crisis that many felt was imposed on it from the outside. Athens had to enforce capital controls, and people were prohibited from withdrawing more than sixty euros (about sixty-five dollars) from A.T.M.s per day. Since then, Greece has undergone something of a turnaround; last month, for the first time since 2010, its bonds were on the cusp of being promoted to investment grade from junk. But Mitsotakis recently told the German tabloid *Bild* that he wanted to build a wall on the border with Turkey to keep migrants out. “We will build our own fence,” he said, “even if it has to be financed by the Greek taxpayer.” (In the interview, which was published the day after the video in the *Times* report was shot, he added, “We don’t do pushbacks.”) Under the previous administration, led by Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, the leader of Syriza, who was Mitsotakis’s most popular opponent in this election, government policy was also charged with being corrupt, negligent, and cruel—migrants were held in squalid island camps for years before being processed—and Mitsotakis’s government has doubled-down on anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies.

For years, too, European border agencies have been involved in an increasingly perilous game in which migrants have been trafficked into the waters of other nations. This past November, the government of Giorgia Meloni, Italy’s right-wing Prime Minister, refused to help two hundred and thirty-four refugees and migrants on a ship in Italian waters, leaving it to the French to open a port to them. Italy claimed that France’s restrictions at its border mean that Italy is left with too much of the burden of taking care of the migrants. (Meloni finally met

last week with the French President, Emmanuel Macron, to try to repair relations between the two countries.) In March, at least seventy-two people were killed when a boat carrying migrants and refugees sank off the coast of Italy, though the Italian authorities denied that they bore any responsibility for the tragedy. Many Greeks and Italians feel that they are bearing the brunt of migration that is the fault of wealthy northern nations such as France and Germany.

The idea of “Fortress Europe” is promoted by politicians across the continent. But Europe and Europeans have benefitted from movement and migration. According to an O.E.C.D. report, migrants contribute “significantly” to labor-market flexibility in Europe, and in February the vice-president of the European Commission affirmed that migration to Europe “offers numerous benefits.” Much of Germany’s postwar growth has been made possible by guest workers, many of them from Turkey and North Africa. As of February, around eight million Ukrainian refugees had been welcomed almost unanimously across the continent, following the Russian invasion. Their number dwarfs that of Syrian, Afghan, or Pakistani migrants and refugees.

Speaking of the crisis, Pope Francis has said, “The Mediterranean is a graveyard, which should make us reflect.” Sentiment in some parts of Europe is running against immigration, but there is still hope that integration for refugees and migrants is possible, given state and institutional support. Athena Linos mentioned that people had turned up in droves with food and clothes for the survivors of the *Adriana* shipwreck. She told me that local people often try to help, but felt left in the cold by governments. “Because there is not a lot of support to people, especially on the islands, they feel they have to shoulder an unequal weight,” she told me. “This makes the problem harder.” ♦