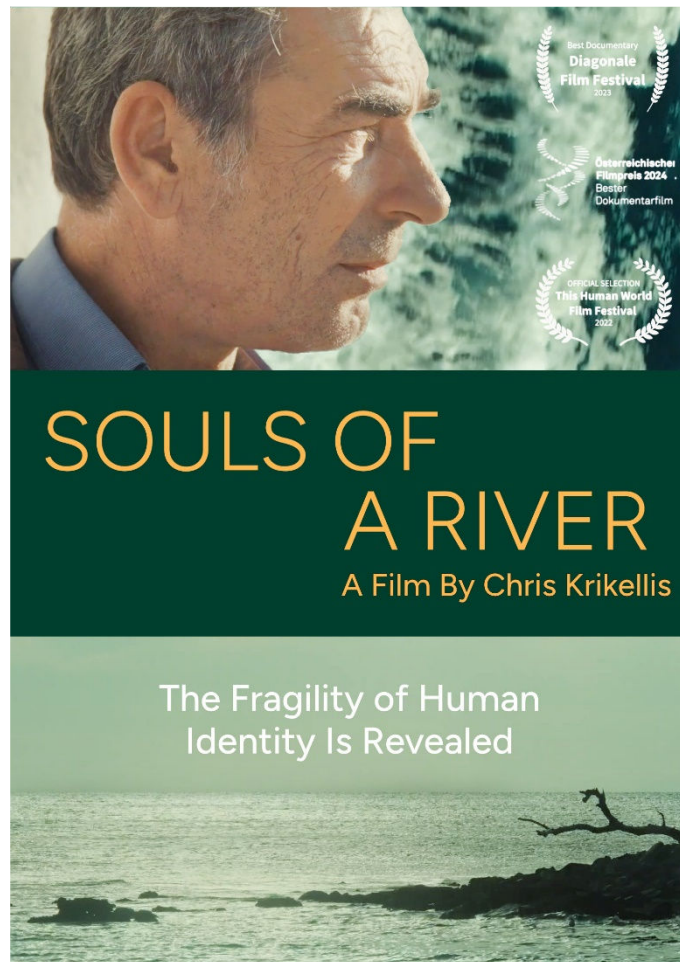




## SOULS OF A RIVER



### STUDY GUIDE

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## **Souls of a River**

The Evros River forms the border between Greece and Turkey. Forensic pathologist Pavlidis Pavlos works along this river. He sees it as his duty to try and bring closure for the families of the dead by identifying their missing relatives. The boundary between native and foreigner, life and death, remembering and forgetting, and the fragility of human identity is explored.

## **About Greece and Turkey**

Greece is located in southeastern Europe. The country has a population of more than 10 million people. About one third of them live in and around its capital city, Athens. It shares a border with Albania, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Turkey. Greece has Europe's longest coastline and its land includes hundreds of islands. The government of Greece is a parliamentary republic, with both a president and a prime minister. Legislative power is held by a parliament.

Turkey is located in both southeastern Europe and southwestern Asia and connects the continents of Asia and Europe. It shares a border with Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Greece, and Bulgaria. It also borders the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, and the Aegean Sea. The population of Turkey is more than 84 million. It is a presidential republic.

The Evros River—also known as the Maritsa, Maritza, or Meriç River—begins in the Rila Mountains in Bulgaria. It flows for 275 km across Bulgaria. It then forms the border between Greece and Bulgaria for 16 km. After that, it flows for 185km as the border between Greece and Turkey. It ends at the Aegean Sea, between Greece and Turkey.

## **Refugees and Migrants**

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people, from a variety of different countries, leave their homes and become refugees and migrants. Migrants and Refugees leave their homes for many different reasons. Refugees often leave because of war, violence, or repressive governments in their home countries. For instance, large numbers of refugees leave Syria because of conflict there. This country is believed to have the largest refugee crisis in the world.<sup>1</sup> Migrants leave their homes for reasons other than being in danger.

Asylum is a type of protection that can be given to refugees. It allows them to remain in the country that they have arrived in rather than being deported back to a country where they are afraid that they will be harmed. According to official statistics, in 2023 about 64,000 people applied for asylum in Greece and about 76 percent were granted refugee status.<sup>2</sup>

Most countries accept a certain number of both migrants and refugees every year, however, overall there are far more refugees and migrants than the number that are accepted by other countries. For instance, UNHCR estimates that since 2011, 14 million Syrians have fled their homes.<sup>3</sup> Because they cannot obtain legal permission to travel, many migrants and refugees travel illegally, often paying smugglers to guide

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/statistics/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>

them. UNHCR explains, “Given increasing obstacles to access safety, however, refugees, asylum-seekers and other persons in need of international protection are often compelled to use smugglers as their only means to flee persecution, conflict and violence.” However, it adds that using a smuggler can be dangerous. It says, “Smugglers can also violate the human rights of those they smuggle, ranging from physical abuse to withholding food and water.”<sup>4</sup>

## **Migration Through Greece**

Greece is one of the main countries of arrival for migrants and refugees trying to get to Europe. UNHCR publishes data on refugees and migrants entering Greece. According to its website, as of August 25, 2024, 31,598 migrants and refugees had arrived in Greece. Of those, 27,414 arrived by sea and 4,184 arrived by land—via the Evros River. UNHCR reports that about 33 percent of the total arrivals came from Afghanistan, 27 percent from Syria, and 12 percent from Egypt. Other countries of origin include Eritrea, the State of Palestine, and Yemen.<sup>5</sup> According to UNHCR statistics, Greece has been receiving tens of thousands of migrants and refugees every year for the last decade. In 2015, there were hundreds of thousands.

Because it receives so many refugees and migrants, Greece struggles to deal with them, and is often referred to as experiencing a migration crisis. Every day, large numbers of migrants and refugees arrive in Greece, and they are placed in detention camps until they can be processed and moved elsewhere. Unfortunately, many other nations in Europe have refused to accept any of these people, or have only accepted small numbers of them. As a result, many people remain stranded in the detention centers for months. There has been widespread criticism of the treatment of these people and the conditions in the camps.

Not all refugees and migrants make it to their destinations. Thousands die or go missing. For those who try to cross via the Evros River, drowning is a common cause of death. In the winter, many people also die from hypothermia.

## **Economic Problems in Greece**

From about 2009 to 2019, Greece suffered a serious economic crisis. Numerous factors contributed to this crisis, including the global recession of 2007 and 2008, and the policies and spending habits of the Greek government. Over years, these factors caused Greece’s government to continuously spend more money than it had, and it was forced to turn to other European countries for loans.

To help it recover, Greece was given a number of bailout packages. As a condition of receiving these bailout packages, Greece’s government was forced to take a number of actions in order to reduce its budget deficit. These actions, also known as austerity measures, included reforming the pension system, reducing tax evasion, and cutting social programs and other types of government spending. Austerity measures were very unpopular with the Greeks. Throughout the crisis, the country experienced high unemployment and low wages. Taxes were increased and pensions were reduced, and many people suffered significant economic hardship. For instance, in 2013, the youth unemployment rate was more than 50 percent.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/us/what-we-do/protect-human-rights/asylum-and-migration/people-smuggling>

<sup>5</sup> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

In recent years, the economy has improved substantially, however, many young people believe that unemployment remains too high and their opportunities too limited and have decided to emigrate to other countries.

### Study Questions

1. After watching the film, why do you think people are trying to cross the Evros River?
2. Why do you think so many are dying in the process of trying to cross the river?
3. How do the forensic pathologists help the families of the dead, as shown in the film?
4. What is the importance of the personal items collected by the forensic pathologists, as explained in the film?
5. It is argued in the film that Turkey may not be trying to identify the dead found on that side of the river. What do you think would be the effect of not doing so?

### Additional Resources

#### Books

- Helen Benedict and Eyad Awwadawnan, *Map of Hope and Sorrow: Stories of Refugees Trapped in Greece*. London: Footnote, 2022.
- Lauren Markham, *A Map of Future Ruins: On Borders and Belonging*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2024.
- Ai Weiwei, interviewer, and Boris Cheshirkov, Ryan Heath, and Chin-chin Yap, eds., *Human Flow: Stories from the Global Refugee Crisis*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.

#### Online Resources

- Maria Delaney, "It's Unbearable': Young Greeks Speak Out About Lack of Prospects 15 Years After Crisis," *The Journal*, April 13, 2024.  
<https://www.thejournal.ie/greece-crisis-young-people-impact-6347115-Apr2024/>
- Florian Elabdi, "The Untold Refugee Stories on the Edge of Europe," *Refugee Today*.  
<https://www.refugee.today/stories/the-untold-refugee-stories-on-the-edge-of-europe>
- UNHCR, "Figures at a Glance."  
<https://www.unhcr.org/us/about-unhcr/who-we-are/figures-glance>
- UNHCR, "Mediterranean Situation: Greece."  
<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>
- UNHCR, "Refugee Crisis in Europe." <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/europe/>

### Contact

For inquiries, please contact:  
EPF Media - [info@epfmedia.com](mailto:info@epfmedia.com)

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