

"GIVING FORM TO CHAOS": THE FUTILITY OF EU BORDER MANAGEMENT AT MORIA HOTSPOT IN LESVOS

BARAK KALIR AND KATERINA ROZAKOU

HOME / UNCATEGORIZED / "GIVING FORM TO CHAOS": THE FUTILITY OF EU BORDER MANAGEMENT AT MORIA HOTSPOT IN
LESVOS

This essay is part of the forum
"Governing mobility through
European Hotspot Centres."

On October 15, 2015, the EU Migration Commissioner, Dimitris Avramopoulos, inaugurated the hotspot in Lesvos. Along with the Commissioner were the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Luxembourg (the state then holding the EU Presidency) and the Greek Alternate Minister of Immigration Policy. The presence of the three officials during the inauguration, and the declared operational support of EU agencies (EASO, Frontex, Europol, and Eurojust) to the Greek authorities in running the hotspot, reflected the mixed national and supra-state character of the new border control structure.



Fenced basketball court for unaccompanied minors in Moria hotspot.

Situated in the premises of the former registration and nationality identification center, Moria hotspot was proclaimed as the utter contrary to its chaotic predecessor. In the previous months of the “European refugee crisis,” the registration camp at Moria—in operation since 2013—had become known for its inadequate infrastructure, despicable living conditions, and slow and incomplete bureaucratic procedures. In the Commissioner’s words: “If this [the creation of the hotspot] had taken place ten months ago, we could have avoided what we went through this summer (...) we would have been able to treat in a more humane manner all those people who are seeking a better life in Europe.” In the next months, restrictive migration policies gained ground, as the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2015 took effect. Instead of serving the purposes of the EU Relocation Scheme, hotspots in Greece programmatically became a crucial part in the plan of immediate and collective expulsion of border-crossers.[1]

The Greek Alternate Minister of Migration frequently states the urgent need to “give form to chaos.”

Nevertheless, almost a year after its inauguration and six months along its post-EU-Turkey “Deal” function, the Moria hotspot is far from the proclaimed fantasy of a regularizing facility that aspires to bring order to chaos and to ensure the streamlining, absolute knowledge and control of populations on-the-move. Until 10 October 2016, 643 people in total were readmitted to Turkey on the basis of the “Deal.” The majority of border-crossers who arrived after 21 March 2016 remain stranded in camps across the island of Lesbos under administrative restrictions of movement. The hotspot’s operations significantly depend on donations and humanitarian organizations for the provision of goods and services. Border-crossers have been protesting against the living conditions and the delays in asylum procedures. What was planned as a new efficient form of registration and pre-removal camp has turned out to be an overpopulated and impaired formation.

The Moria hotspot is situated eight kilometers from Mytilene, the capital of Lesbos, in an area full of olive groves and warehouses. It is placed in a former military compound encircled by barbed wire. The facility comprises of prefabricated housing units and tents where border-crossers reside for indefinite periods. In the hotspot's premises all bordering bureaucratic procedures take place: identification, registration, fast track readmission processing and examination of asylum claims. In a puzzling interpretation of protection, unaccompanied minors (the main, if not only, identified vulnerable group) under protective police custody are detained in a separate section in the First Reception Service area. The minors' section is secluded and surrounded by towering fences and barbed wire. Minors are obliged to stay there for several months until they are transferred to one of the few appropriate shelters in the mainland. In the Moria compound there is also a detention area, designated for border-crossers under readmission to Turkey or transference to pre-removal centers in the mainland. NGOs provide assistance and services, even though after the "Deal" the vast majority of humanitarian organizations withdrew from the Moria hotspot in protest. Violence and rivalries are part of everyday life in the Moria hotspot as residents compete for space, provisions, or against discriminations in the bureaucratic procedures.[2]



Kara Tepe "hospitality center", located next to Moria hotspot and run by the

municipality of Lesvos with the assistance of numerous local and international NGOs.

Hotspots along the EU borders aspire to become sites of order, absolute surveillance and humanitarian care.

Hotspots are thus at the heart of what can be proclaimed as the “new frontierization of the border control regime”

(Fassin, 2016). Fully implemented, border-crossers will be

rapidly identified, properly registered, and competently

divided to refugees and deportable subjects. In this essay,

we focus on the meso-level of the implementation of

border policies on the ground in the Moria hotspot. We

leave aside the NGOfication and IGOfication of EU

migration management (Cuttitta, 2014; Geiger and

Pécoud, 2010) and the perspective of the border-crossers

who are subjected to this emerging archipelago of

containment and streamlining. As we go on to show, the

Moria hotspot retains and reinforces the features of its

forerunner registration center, its makeshift character, and

the precariousness of its populace. We argue that the

hotspot is both a symbol of supreme state and supra-state

sovereignty that manifests the increased securitization of

borders, and a site where the limits of the EU management

of mobility are crucially revealed. These limits are not

only a matter of operational insufficiencies

(malfunctioning bureaucracies, lack of material resources

and personnel) commonly evoked by EU and Greek

migration officials. We argue that these limits are

entrenched in the enduring ill-treatment of border-

crossers at the gates of Europe. Moreover, the situation

resonates the abandonment of border-crossers in a zone of

prolonged precariousness and limbo. The new hotspot

thus compounds systemic chaos instead of producing

legibility and order.

★

We are walking into the air-conditioned office of the director of the First Reception Service at Moria. It is an especially hot day with high humidity in mid-July 2016. The cool office feels like a small oasis amid a maze of caravans, bounded by metal fences and barbed wires all around. One of the three secretaries offers us immediately a bottle of mineral water as we sit down to wait for our appointment. The director is having a meeting with some people in his office and we can hear loud discussions through the thin plastic partitions within the caravan-office. More people go in and out of the director's office with some papers for him to sign, a question to ask, or an update to report. At a certain point there seems to be a quiet moment and the director walks out of his door to warmly shake our hands and lead us to his office where we are seated at a small round table next to his rectangular larger bureau. "Please excuse the delay," he mutters, "it is always very busy here."

Mr. Kourtis talks with us about the work in Moria. The coast guards transfer to the hotspot all the border-crossers who are brought to shore everywhere across the island. Here, the border-crossers undergo nationality verification, medical exams, socio-psychological assessment, fingerprinting, registration in the Eurodac database, and an opening of their asylum procedure. Almost everyone is requesting asylum upon arrival. We ask the director about the main differences that the hotspot brought about to the handling of the so-called refugee crisis. "In the [previous] summer because of the numbers it was impossible to implement the provisions in the law. People were getting a piece of paper that they didn't know what to do with and looked to leave the island. Now everyone has a file." He pulls from a cupboard next to his desk a green folder to show us an example of how the different documents are placed in one single file.



“The most important thing for people [border-crossers] is to have papers. To know, to leave, to go, to plan, to make their lives. To have certainty.”

Under the EU-Turkey “Deal” all border-crossers are obliged to remain on the island of Lesbos until their cases are processed. They can be detained up to 25 days after their arrival and afterwards they are under restriction of movement within Lesbos. We mention to the director that on our visit to Kara Tepe camp we met many border-crossers who were notified that their asylum application would not be resolved before Christmas. We ask the director for the logic behind the hotspot while keeping these asylum-seekers in a camp for months without clarity on their status. “You have to ask them [those we process asylum applications] about this. Everyone should take their own responsibility. I can’t do a thing about that.”

Mr. Kourtis took office a few months ago, just a couple of weeks before the transformation of Moria registration camp into a hotspot. He arrived at Moria without any special training for the job he was about to perform.

“From the office to the field in one day,” he tells us. “In one month we had to build the hotspot. Without training, without help, without resources.” His frustration with the situation is palpable and he makes no effort to hide it. In fact, much to the contrary, Mr. Kourtis is thwarted by the situation in the hotspot and he is very willing to share it with us. When we ask him about the facilities at Moria, the director is clearly agitated and he asks us almost in condemnation: “Have you been around in the camp?... Go outside and see! You will then understand what I mean.” In our walk around the camp later, we were struck by the dozens of tents pitched on the scorching asphalt and the gravel roads all around. People were lying on the ground; some were listening to the radio while others were jadedly looking at us as we passed by. A few bored children showed interest in our presence and approached to play with us.

The director then tells us about the issue he considers most disturbing in his work. “We have minors here that we keep until there is a solution for them. Do you know that in the whole of Greece there are only 430 beds for minors [in shelters]? And here in Moria we have 250 beds!” he exclaims waving his finger in the air in fury. “But there are no facilities, no television room, nothing. This leads to tensions, problems, riots.”^[3] The hardest moments of his time at Moria have been the suicidal attempts of some minors.



Kara Tepe “hospitality center”, located next to Moria hotspot and run by the municipality of Lesvos with the assistance of numerous local and international NGOs.

The director stresses that he is only responsible for the First Reception Service and not for the entire camp. In fact, there has not been an actual general director in charge of the Moria hotspot for more than a month. We ask him whether there are good communication channels with high ranked officials in the Ministries who might be able to help improve the situation. “The Ministry people were here last month. They are aware of the situation,” he tells us with unconcealed contempt towards the “Ministry people.” “Even my reports, my letters to the Ministries [get] no answer! So what can I do? The only way is to rely on the NGOs and the local community.” There can indeed be no doubt that the daily running of the hotspot greatly depends on NGO support.[4]

The biggest challenge for Mr. Kourtis is the lacking facilities at Moria. “We need beds!” he shouts at us in anger, “some of the people here stay for a long time, maybe three months. We need beds...”, he repeats the same call now with a lower voice that exposes his irritation with a system that prevents him from running the hotspot as he believes it should professionally be done.

“It is very difficult to work here. It is chaotic,” he concludes with his eyes looking at us in a mix of desperation and pride. He is proud of the fact that he and his staff manage to uphold the functioning of the Moria hotspot, but this, he repeatedly explains to us, is in spite and not because of the support they receive from the Greek government.

During our visit, the director constantly referred to the absence of the state. This baffled us, as he was at that point in time the highest-ranked official in Moria and the one to whom we were referred by the Alternate Ministry of Migration Policy as its in-situ representative. As Herzfeld notes (1992), blaming a reified state is part of a clichéd narrative of powerlessness that bureaucrats commonly evoke when trying to defer responsibility for dysfunctional state procedures. Yet the director was not avoiding responsibility. In his eyes, the “absence” of the state in the hotspot indicates a state of abandonment. Not only border-crossers are deserted there in a prolonged zone of limbo and precariousness,[5] but state agents are also abandoned by the government to execute their duties with little resources and direction. The director’s frustrations painfully echo the camp’s contradiction between a formation designated to produce order and control, and a lived experience of futility and disarray.

As we leave the premises of the Moria hotspot, the gate behind us remains half open to allow the traffic of humanitarian workers, secular and Christian volunteers, and EU officials. We walk past people wearing blaze orange, blue, yellow, and green vests—the humanitarian identification mark and a symbolic pass for moving through the guarded doors of this cutting-edge border technology compound—still captivated by the director’s exasperation.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the European Research Council [ERC-Starting grant 336319]: The Social Life of State Deportation Regimes: A Comparative Study of the Implementation Interface.

Notes

[1] We use the term border-crossers in order to avoid the polemic around the categorization of economic migrants vs. political refugees, and additionally to stress the borderzone context of our account.

[2] Apart from the Moria hotspot, there are the following camps and shelters for vulnerable groups in the island of Lesvos: the self-organized PIKPA camp (run since 2012 by local citizens' groups and international volunteers), Kara Tepe "hospitality center" (run by the municipality of Lesvos with the assistance of numerous NGOs) and the Mantamados temporary camp for minors (run by NGOs). Small numbers of vulnerable groups are also hosted in temporary shelters and hotels in the town of Mytilene.

[3] A few days prior to our visit, riots had broken out between minors and the police, and several minors were transferred to the local police station. Doctors of the World, the NGO providing medical assistance in the First Reception Service gave out a press release denouncing the use of police violence during their custody.

[4] The "refugee crisis" has motivated remarkable local and international responses. The island of Lesvos, in particular, became the solidarity destination for an array of volunteers and material aid in 2015 and 2016 (Rozakou, 2016).

[5] Long before what has come to be known as the “European refugee crisis” in 2015, there was already an established “asylum crisis” in Greece in the 2000s. Heath Cabot’s ethnography of the asylum system illustrates the violence as well as the possibilities of this legal limbo (Cabot, 2014).

References

Cabot H (2014) *On the Doorstep of Europe: Asylum and Citizenship in Greece*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Cuttitta P (2014) “Borderizing” the island setting and narratives of the Lampedusa “border play.” *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 13(2): 196–219.

Fassin D (2016) Hot spots: What they mean. In Hot Spots, Cultural Anthropology website. (accessed 3 October 2016).

Geiger M and Pécoud A (2010) The politics of international migration management. In: Geiger M and Pécoud A (eds) *The Politics of International Migration Management*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.1–20.

Herzfeld M (1992) *The Social Production of Indifference: Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Bureaucracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kalir B (2014) The deportation mess: A bureaucratic muddling of state fantasies. In: Border Criminologies. (accessed 4 October 2016).

Rozakou K (2016) Socialities of solidarity. Revisiting the gift taboo in times of crises. *Social Anthropology* 24(2): 185–199.

Barak Kalir is Associate Professor at the Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam. He is the Co-Director of the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies (IMES) and the Program Director of the research group “Moving Matters: People, Goods, Power and Ideas”. He currently leads a 5-year ERC-funded project: “The Social Life of State Deportation Regimes,” in which the implementation of deportation regimes is ethnographically examined in 7 states: Belgium, Ecuador, Greece, France, Israel, Indonesia, and Spain.

Katerina Rozakou is a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Amsterdam. As part of the ERC research project “The social life of state deportation regimes,” she is responsible for the research conducted in Greece. She explores the treatment of irregular immigrants during registration, detention, and voluntary expulsion in Athens and in Lesvos.

