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Hidden infrastructures of the European border regime: the Poros detention facility in Evros, Greece

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06.03.2020

Note: This blog post and the research it draws on date before the onset of the current border spectacle in Evros of February/March 2020. Obviously, the situation in Evros region has changed dramatically. Our research however underlines that the Greek state has always resorted to extra-legal methods of border and migration control in the Evros region. Particularly the violent and illegal pushback practices which have persisted for decades in Evros region have now been elevated to official government policy.

The region of Evros at the Greek-Turkish border was the scene of many changes in the European and Greek border regimes since 2010. The most well-known was the deployment of the Frontex RABIT force in October of that year; while it concluded in 2011, Frontex has had a permanent presence in Evros ever since. In 2011, the then government introduced the ‘Integrated Program for Border Management and Combating Illegal Immigration’ (European Migration Network, 2012), which reflected EU and domestic processes of the Europeanisation of border controls (European Migration Network, 2012; Ilias *et al.*, 2019). The program stipulated a number of measures which impacted the border regime in Evros: the construction of a 12.5km fence along the section of the Greek Turkish border which did not coincide with the Evros river (after which the region takes its name); the expansion of border surveillance technologies and capacities in the area; and the establishment of reception centres where screening procedures would be undertaken (European Migration Network, 2012; Ilias *et al.*, 2019). In this context, one of the measures taken was the establishment of a screening centre in South Evros, near the village of Poros, 46km away from the city of Alexandroupoli – the main urban centre in the area.

The operation of the *Centre for the First Management of Illegal Immigration* is documented in Greek (Ministry for Public Order and Citizen Protec-

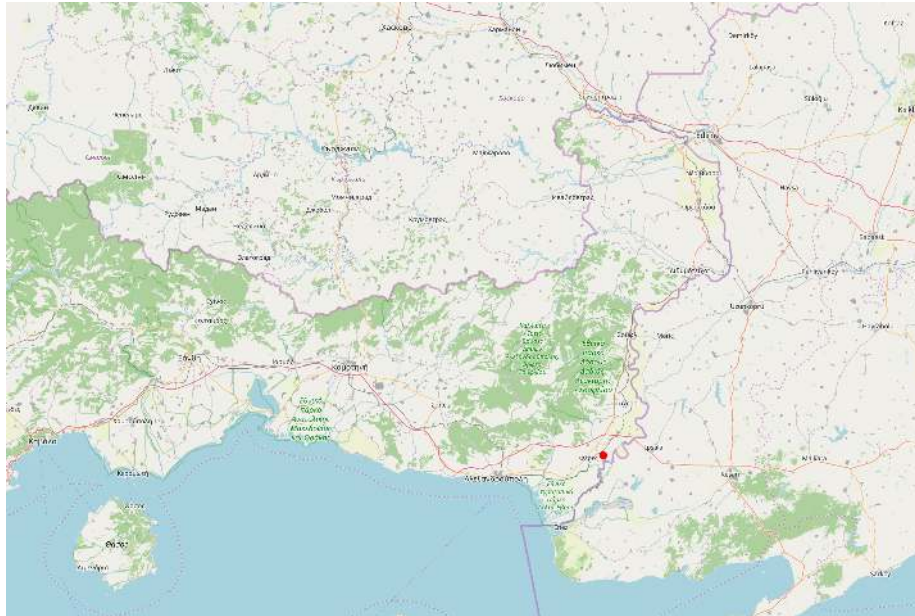


Figure 1: Location of Poros facility in Northern Greece (source: openstreetmap.org)

tion, 2013a) and EU official documents (European Parliament, 2012; European Migration Network, 2013), reports by the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency (2011), NGOs (Pro Asyl, 2012) and activists (CloseTheCamps, 2012), media articles (To Vima, 2012) and research (Düvell, 2012; Schaub, 2013) between 2011 and 2015.

Yet, during our fieldwork in the area in 2018, none of our respondents mentioned it. Nor could we find any recent research, reports or official documents after 2015 referring to it. It was only a tip from someone we collaborate with that reminded us of the existence of the Poros facility. We found its 'disappearance' from public view intriguing. Through fieldwork, document analysis and queries to the Greek authorities, we constructed a genealogy of the Poros centre, from its inception in 2011 to its ambivalent present. Our findings not only highlight the shifting nature of local assemblages of the European border regime, but also raise questions on such 'hidden' infrastructures, and the implications of their use for the rights of the people who cross the border.

A genealogy of Poros

The Poros centre was originally a military facility, used for border surveillance. In 2012, it was transferred to the Hellenic Police, the civilian author-

ity responsible for migration control and border management, and was formally designated a *Centre for the First Management of Illegal Immigration*, similar to the more well-known First Reception Centre in Fylakio, in North Evros. The refurbishment and expansion of the old facilities and purchase of necessary equipment were financed through the External borders fund of the European Union (Alexandroupoli Police Directorate, 2011). Visits by the European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Cecilia Malmström (To Vima, 2012), the then executive director of Frontex, Ilkka Laitinen (Ministry for Public Order and Citizen Protection, 2013b), and a delegation of the LIBE committee of the European Parliament (2012) illustrated the embeddedness of the centre in the European border regime. The Commission's report on the *implementation of the Greek National Action Plan on Migration Management and Asylum Reform* specifically refers the Poros centre as a facility that could be used for screening procedures and vulnerability assessments (European Commission, 2012).

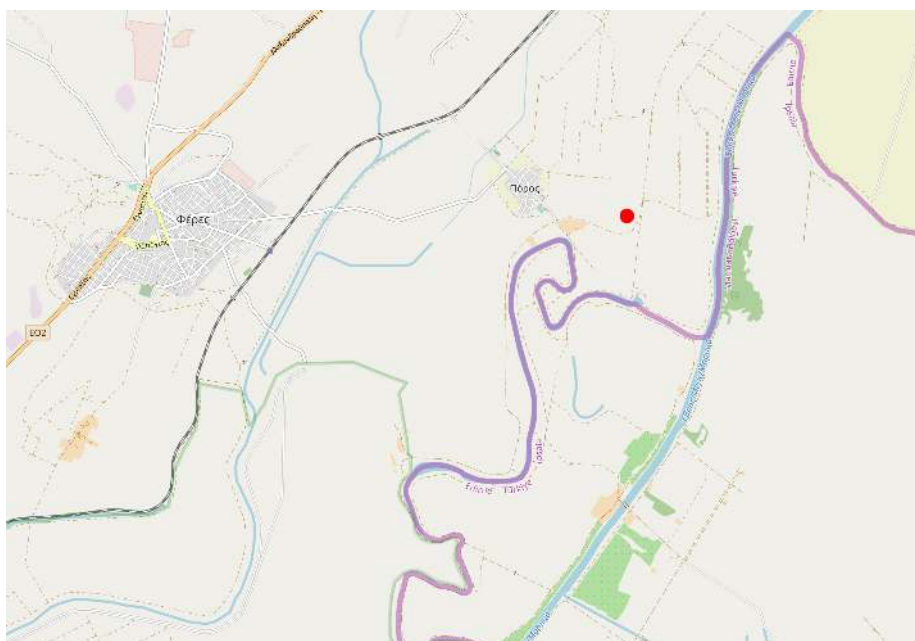


Figure 2: Location of Poros facility relative to the border (source: openstreetmap.org)

The Poros facility was indeed used as a screening and identification centre, activities that fell under both border management and the Greek framework for reception procedures introduced in 2011. While official documents of the Greek Government suggest that the centre started operating in 2012 (Council of Europe, 2012), a media article (Alexandroupoli Online, 2011) and a report by the European Centre for Disease Prevention

and Control (2011) provide evidence that it was already operational the year before, as an *informal* reception centre. When the centre became the main screening facility for South Evros in 2012 (European Parliament, 2012), screening, identification and debriefing procedures at the time were carried out both by Hellenic Police personnel and Frontex officers deployed in the area (Council of Europe, 2012).

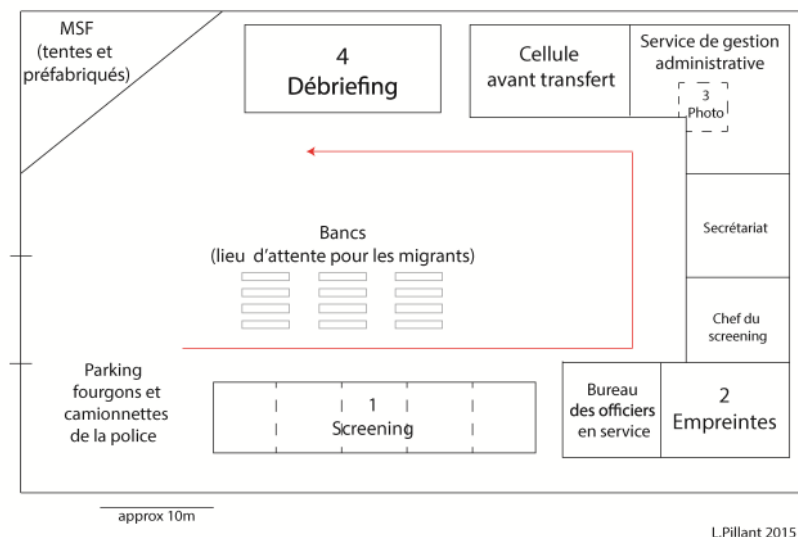


Illustration 4 - Croquis de l'organisation du *screening* centre de Poros (Évros)

Source : Observations L. Pillant juillet 2012

Figure 3: Diagram of activities in the Poros facilities (reproduced with kind permission of Laurence Pillant)

One of the very few research sources referring to Poros, a PhD thesis by Laurence Pillant (2017) provides a detailed description of the space and the activities carried out in the old wooden building and the white containers (image 3), visible in the stills from the video we took in December 2020 (image 4). A mission of *Medecins sans frontières*, indicated in Pillant's diagram, provided health screening in 2012 (European Migration Network, 2013).

The organisation and function of the centre at the time is also documented in a number of mundane administrative acts which we located through diavgeia.gov.gr, a website storing Greek public administration decisions. Containers were bought to create space for the screening and identification procedures (Regional Police Directorate of Macedonia

and Thrace, 2012). A local company was awarded contracts for the cleaning of the facilities (Regional Police Directorate of Macedonia and Thrace, 2013). The last administrative documents we were able to locate concerned the establishment of a committee of local police officers to procure services for emptying the cesspit of the centre (Regional Police Directorate of Macedonia and Thrace, 2015) – not all buildings in the area are linked to the local sewage system. This is the point when the administrative trail for Poros goes cold. No documents were found in diavgeia.gov.gr after January 2015.



Figure 4: Video Still of the Poros facility (source: LK)

So what happened to the Poros Centre?

After 2015, we found a mere five online references to the centre, despite extensive searches of sources such as official documents, research or reports by human rights bodies and NGOs. A 2016 newspaper article mentioned that arrested migrants were led there for screening (Ta Nea, 2016). A 2018 article in a local online news outlet mentioned a case of malaria in the village of Poros (Evros News, 2018a), while in another article (Evros News, 2018b), the president of the village council blamed a case of malaria in the village on the lack of health screening in the centre. An account of activities of the municipal council of Alexandroupoli referred to fixing an electrical fault in the centre in May 2019 (Municipality of Alexandroupoli, 2019). The Global Detention Project (2019) also refers to Poros as a *likely* detention place.

These sources suggested that the centre might be operational in some ca-

capacity, yet they raised more questions than they answered. If the centre has been in operation since 2015, why is there such an absence of official sources referring to it? Equally surprising was the absence of administrative acts related to the Poros centre in diavgeia.gov.gr, in contrast to all other facilities in the area where migrants are detained, such as the Fylakio Reception and Identification Centre and the pre-removal centres and police stations. It was conceivable, of course, that the centre fell into disuse. Since the deployment of Frontex and the border control measures taken under the *Integrated Plan*, entries through the Greek-Turkish land border decreased significantly – from 54,974 in 2011 to 3,784 in 2016 (Hellenic Police, 2020), and screening procedures were transferred to Fylakio, fully operational since 2013 (Reception and Identification Service, 2020).

Trying to find answers to our questions, we contacted the Hellenic Police. An email we sent in January 2020 was never answered. In early February, following a series of phone calls, we obtained some answers to our questions. The police officer who answered the phone call did not seem to have heard of the centre and wanted to ask other departments for more information, as well as the First Reception and Identification Service, now responsible for screening procedures. The next day, he said it is occasionally used as a detention facility, when there is a high number of apprehended people that cannot be detained in police cells. According to the police officer, they are detained there for one or two days, until they can be transferred to the Reception and Identification Centre of Fylakio for reception procedures, or detention in the pre-removal detention centre adjacent to it. At the same time, he stated that he was told that Poros has been closed for a long time.

This contradictory information could be down to the distance between the central police directorate in Athens and the area of Evros – it is not unlikely that local arrangements are not known in the central offices. Yet, it was also at odds both with the description of the use of the centre that our informant himself gave us – using the present tense in Greek –, with what the local media articles suggest, and with what we saw on site. Stills from the video taken during fieldwork in December 2020 suggest that the Poros centre is not disused, although no activity could be observed on the day. The cars and vans parked outside did not seem abandoned or rusting. The main building and the containers appeared to be in a good condition. A bright red cloth, maybe a canvas bag, was hanging outside one of them. The rubbish bins were full, but the black bags and other objects in them did not seem as they have been left in the open for a long time (image 4).

The police officer also asked, however, how we had heard of Poros – a question that alerted us to both the obscure nature of the facility and the sensitivity of our query.

A hidden infrastructure of pushbacks?

The Poros centre, at one level, illustrates how the function of such border facilities can change over time, as the local border regime adapts and responds to migratory movements. Fylakio has become the main reception and detention centre in Evros, and between 2015 and 2017, the Aegean islands became the main point of entry into Greece and the European Union. Yet, our findings raised a lot of significant questions regarding the new function of Poros, given the increase in migratory movements in the area since 2018.

While we obtained official confirmation that the Poros centre is now used for temporary detention and not screening, it remains the case that there are no official documents – including any administrative acts on diavgeia.gov.gr – that confirm its use as a temporary closed detention centre. Equally, we did not manage to obtain any information about how the facility is funded from the Hellenic Police. Our respondent did not know, and another departments we called did not want to share any information about the centre. It also became evident in the course of our research that most of our contacts in Greece – NGOs and journalists – had never heard of the facility or had no recent information about it. We found no evidence to suggest that Greek and European human rights bodies or NGOs which monitor detention facilities have visited the Poros centre after 2015. A mission of the Council of Europe (2019), for example, visited several detention facilities in Evros in April 2018 but the Poros centre was not listed among them. Similarly, the Fundamental Rights Officer of Frontex, in a partly joined mission with the Fundamental Rights Agency, visited detention facilities in South Evros in 2019, the operational area where the Poros centre is located. However, the centre is not mentioned in the report on that visit (Frontex, 2019).

The dearth of information and absence of monitoring of the facility means that it is unclear whether the facility provides adequate conditions for detention. While our Hellenic police informant stated that detention there lasts for one or two days, there is no outside gate at the Poros centre, just a rather flimsy looking wire fence. Does this mean that detainees are kept inside the main building or containers the whole time they are detained there? We also do not know if detainees have access to phones, legal assistance or healthcare, which the articles in the local press suggest that is absent from the Poros centre. Equally, in the absence of inspections by human rights bodies, we are unaware of the standards of hygiene inside the facilities, or if there is sufficient food available. Administrative acts archived in diavgeia.gov.gr normally offer some answers to such questions but, as we mentioned above, we could find none. In short, it appears that Poros is used as an informal detention centre, hidden from public view.



Figure 5: Video Still of the Poros facility, showing black cars (source: LK)



Figure 6: Video Still of the Poros facility, showing white vans (source: LK)

The obscurity surrounding the facility, in the context of the local border regime, is extremely worrying. Many NGOs and journalists have documented widespread pushback practices (Arsis *et al.*, 2018; Greek Council for Refugees, 2018; Koçulu, 2019), evidenced through migrant testimonies (Mobile Info Team 2019) and, more recently, videos (Forensic Architecture, 2019a; 2019b). Despite denials by the Hellenic Police and the Greek government, European and international human rights bodies (Council of Europe, 2019; Committee Against torture 2019) have accepted these testimonies as credible. We have no firm evidence that the Poros facility may be one of the many ‘informal’ detention places migrant testimonies implicated in pushbacks. Yet, the centre is located no further than two kilometres from the Greek-Turkish border, and the layout of the area is similar to the location of a pushback captured on camera and analysed by Forensic Architecture (2019a): near a dirt road with direct access to the Evros River. Black cars and white vans (images 5 and 6), without police insignia and some without number plates, such as those in the Poros centre, have been mentioned in testimonies of pushbacks (Arsis *et al.*, 2018). Objects looking like inflatable boats are visible in our video stills. While there might be other explanations for their presence (used for patrolling the river or confiscated from migrants crossing the river) they are also used during pushbacks operations, and their presence in a detention centre seems odd.

These uncertainties, and the tendency of security bodies to avoid revealing information on spaces of detention, are not unusual. However, the obscurity surrounding the Poros centre, located in an area of the European border where detention have long attracted criticism and there is considerable evidence of illegal and violent border control practices, should be a concern for all.

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