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Governing irregular migration at the margins of Europe. The case of hotspots on the Greek islands

Article in *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa* · January 2017

DOI: 10.3240/86888

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Governing irregular migration at the margins of Europe

The case of hotspots on the Greek islands

Abstract: The present article discusses the gradual transformation of «hot-spots» for migrants from sites of transit to places of detention and containment. Hotspots are intrinsically linked to the EU-Turkey Statement, as one of the means by which the Greek State now governs irregular migration. These facilities restrict freedom of movement, but also transform the islands hosting them into places of strandedness. The hotspots are thus transformed into a detention space. By exploring the transformation of the spatial, legal and policy framework, as well as the ways in which migrants attempt to overcome it, this piece analyses the reconfiguration of the Northern Aegean region into a buffer zone, and situate migrant agency within a developing policy context at the external borders of the European Union.

Keywords: detention, containment, migrant agency, asylum, borders

1. Introduction

Moria is a small village on the island of Lesbos. Until 2014, it was known for the very well preserved Roman Aqueduct, its main tourist attraction. A year and a half later, however, it was mainly associated with hotspots, detention¹, riots and the so called «refugee crisis».

In 2015, 860,000 persons entered the European Union (EU) through Greece and 153,000 through Italy². The largest migration to Europe in recent years caught Member States unprepared, divided and lacking a European policy response to events unfolding at the external borders. The unprecedented speed and size of arrivals raised to the foreground the deficiencies of the Common

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¹ Throughout the article the term «detention» appears frequently. It is utilized to denote imposed restriction of movement and imposed (by law) immobility of irregular migrants.

² See UNHCR, *Operational Portal: the Mediterranean situation*, available at <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>.

European Asylum System (CEAS) and the Schengen Acquis, both intrinsically pivoted around the idea that the free movement within the EU requires strong external borders to survive. Since the 1990s, the European framework sought to enhance the mobility of EU citizens while restricting the arrival of third country nationals (Kostakopoulou, 2000). Multiple border zones are meant to ensure the protection of the Schengen area, pushing as further outwards as possible the management of mobility. The «gatekeepers» are the frontline states, and specifically Greece, Italy and, although to a much lesser extent, Spain. Their geographical location determines that they receive the overwhelming majority of irregular arrivals and that they act as buffers to the rest of the EU.

The past two years were unique on many levels. The *de facto* opening of the Western Balkan route, and the speed with which migrants moved towards destinations such as Germany and Sweden, caught the Member States and the policy makers unprepared. Greece's acknowledgement that it had failed to register on EURODAC a significant number of arrivals³, coupled with the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 2015, rendered any previous discussion around sharing the burden between Member States irrelevant. The focus shifted quickly to border control, as the last line of defence of Schengen. Vacillating between humanitarianism and deterrence, a toolbox emerged with policy suggestions ranging from the closure of the Balkan corridor, through the temporary reintroduction of border controls between Germany, Austria, Sweden, Denmark and Norway⁴, to the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016 and the application of the hotspot approach in Greece⁵.

The term «hotspot» is a curious concept because it has neither positive nor negative connotations unless associated with a specific subject. In the field of politics and international relations, it is often used with negative connotations to designate an area, a region or a place where instability, potential danger or even violence are emerging or are expected to emerge. However, in its original format, described in the European Agenda on Migration, the hotspot approach had neither positive nor negative connotation; it was simply a migration management tool to ensure that those who reached the EU external borders were registered and identified before processing their asylum claims. In the EU Agenda, the «hotspots» are thus those borders facing «disproportionate pressure» where migration management policy is to be implemented. The hotspot approach describes the policy envisaged and implemented on those sites (see

³ The Commission initiated infringement procedures against Croatia, Greece, and Italy for not registering migrants in the EURODAC upon arrival to the continent. The Commission noted that in Greece, 492,000 arrivals were registered and only 121,000 fingerprinted of the estimated 890,000 that crossed (Zalan, Eszter, *EU launches migration cases against Croatia, Greece, Hungary, and Italy*, 10 December 2015, available at <https://euobserver.com/migration/131479>).

⁴ See Commission's update on the «Temporary Reintroduction of Border Control», available at https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/schengen/reintroduction-border-control_en.

⁵ The hotspot approach was originally proposed in the European Agenda on Migration in May of 2015 but put into practice in late 2015. Information on the *Eu Agenda* available at https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration_en.

section 2). In the present article, we explore in particular the facilities situated in the Northern Aegean islands.

This article explores the development of the hotspot facilities and their transformation into *de facto* spaces of detention and (im)mobility. The hotspots cannot be separated from the EU-Turkey Statement of 18 March 2016, since they are seen as a deterrence mechanism for future arrivals as well as a way of ensuring returns prescribed in the EU-Turkey Statement. The very location of the hotspots contributes to the construction of strandedness, which functions as a deterrent in itself. The islands of Northern Aegean have an important role in the management of migration, functioning as a buffer zone isolated from the mainland. On their part, migrants have sought to overcome immobility through either asylum re-applications, or riots. They demand freedom, speedy asylum processing, and the right to leave from not only the facilities, but also the islands.

The article draws from several research visits on the island of Lesbos in March and July 2016 and in Athens in June 2016 as well as secondary resources including media sources⁶. While I tried twice to reach the Moria facility, permission was denied from the authorities. This is a relatively new experience for a researcher in Greece, where access to facilities (detention, pre-removal, reception) has been relatively easy in the past. The past two years have been marked by a growing reticence of the Ministry of Migration in offering access to such facilities. As a result, during my visits I was able to observe the space from the outside, and have informal discussions with officials deployed in the hotspot of Lesbos, as well with various NGO field staff⁷. Additional interviews took place with migrants that had either been detained in the hotspots and eventually released (though still stranded on the island – see section 4). I also realized twelve semi-structured interviews with male migrants from Syria and Afghanistan (seven in Athens, five in Lesbos). In Athens, I interviewed migrants who had entered Greece in late 2015, lodged in various informal reception spaces across the city. By that time, the hotspots had turned into registration centres functioning as transit stops for migrants (see below). In Lesbos, as previously noted, the migrants had been released from the hotspots, but were not allowed to leave the island. Thus, through discussions with personnel of various non-governmental organisations as well as with early and recent arrivals, a gradual picture emerged of the hotspot transformation, as well as the ways in which migrants seek to counter the policies in place. Discussions with those deployed in the hotspots in official capacity (representatives of organisations) were perhaps the most valuable in understanding the purpose and role of these facilities. The hotspots became the tool for implementing the EU-Turkey Statement, «sealing» the external border of the Union, at a significant cost to the islands, the local population as well, and of course the migrants themselves. Any discussion around the hotspots in Greece needs to acknowledge the role of EU

⁶ Greek media have extensively covered the situation in the hotspots since the EU-Turkey Statement came into place.

⁷ Full anonymity has been requested from all parties involved. Organisations have been left unnamed to avoid potential identification of participants since, in some cases, the number of deployed field officers is limited.

policies and particularly the EU-Turkey Statement, the way it is implemented by the Greek government, and the multilevel impact at the local (islands), national (Greece) and individual (migrants) level.

The article begins with a discussion of the EU-Turkey Statement and the instalment of the hotspots on the Greek islands. The role of the islands in the imposed strandedness is discussed in Section 3, while Section 4 discusses some of the ways migrants have sought to overcome both detention and potential return to Turkey. Migrant agency emerged in small acts of opposition, which can be analysed to reveal how a policy designed to function as a tool of border management has placed inordinate burden on Greece, the islands and the migrants. The article concludes by arguing that the current policies applied in the Northern Aegean offer a view from the margins of Europe of what future policies (and partnerships) on migration will look like for the external borders and for the neighbouring partner countries.

2 From the hotspot approach to the EU-Turkey Statement

To understand how the concept of hotspot has reshaped the discussion on migration and border spaces, one must turn first to the European Agenda on Migration. The EU Agenda stemmed from a need to create a holistic migration management policy, one that would combine external and internal instruments, tools and policies in addressing irregular migration. The hotspot approach was left undefined, giving emphasis to the operational aspects of the Agencies in the identified hotspots, such as Lampedusa and the Greek islands. In July 2015, Commissioner D. Avramopoulos released an explanatory note outlining what constitutes a hotspot, in line with the European Council Conclusions of June 2015:

A «Hotspot» is characterized by specific and disproportionate migratory pressure, consisting of mixed migratory flows, which are largely linked to the smuggling of migrants, and where the Member State concerned might request support and assistance to better cope with the migratory pressure [...] In principle, an external border section should be considered to be a «Hotspot» for the limited period of time during which the emergency or crisis situation subsists and during which the support of the «Hotspot» approach is necessary (Statewatch, 2015, p. 5).

A specific approach would be implement in these hotspots, according to the EU Agenda, requiring that the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), EU Border Agency (FRONTEX), the EU Police Cooperation Agency (Europol) and the EU Judicial Cooperation Agency (Eurojust) «should work on the ground with the authorities of the frontline Member State» (European Commission, 2015a) in managing irregular arrivals. Specific functions were designated in the hotspots: registration and screening by FRONTEX for nationality determination and fingerprint by the national authorities, followed by a first screening interview. Following the screening, in theory it should be possible to distinguish between

persons who wish to apply for asylum and persons who can be returned immediately. This in turn would lead to different procedures for immediate return and for persons with regard to whom the situation may remain doubtful, where normal procedure applies (Statewatch, 2015). A recent report commissioned by the European Parliament (Neville *et al.*, 2016) notes that after the Paris attacks of 2015 security has become paramount, leading to checks in belonging, physical checks, cross checking data on the Schengen Information System (SIS), Interpol and Europol databases. The attack in Paris proved particularly crucial for Greece. A Syrian passport had been found lying close by the bodies of two other persons identified as responsible for the terrorist attack. At the time, «Greece's citizen protection minister, Nikos Toskas, confirmed that the passport's owner had entered the European Union through the Greek island of Leros on 3 October»⁸. Fears that terrorists will be using the same entry routes as migrants resulted in renewed pressure to Greece to finalise the setting up of hotspot facilities in the islands that would enable various agencies to come together and process arrivals (and their personal information).

According to one of the interlocutors employed by an EU Agency in the hotspot of Moria, the hotspot approach was designed to ensure frontline states perform the roles pre-assigned to them under CEAS and Schengen. This becomes clear if one looks at the operational aspect, which remains grounded in the notion that the responsibility for the processing, screening and processing asylum applications rests in the hands of the country of first arrival; i.e. the frontline State. What was crucial in the early days of the hotspots (autumn 2015) is that the facilities were not designed for long term. At first, they functioned as transit centres for people to register and then move onwards to the mainland. Thus, the hotspot was meant to regulate who is in and who is out of the space of mobility defined by the Schengen Acquis. It was perceived as one more tool in the governance of irregular migration. This policy aimed at ensuring that countries like Greece undertook registration and processing of new arrivals at the border.

Greece was asked to establish the hotspots as early as June 2015. Yet, bureaucratic delays and objections from local societies on the islands delayed the project. The first hotspot, Moria in Lesbos, was introduced on October 2015. The island of Lesbos alone received roughly 140,000 new arrivals between October and November 2015⁹. By the end of November and after the Paris attack, Samos and Leros were also operational, with the hotspot in Chios opening in February 2016. The last hotspot opened on the island of Kos in the Spring of 2016.

From discussions with migrants that entered Greece in late 2015, it is clear that the hotspots functioned as registration centres. Migrants underwent nationality screening and registration, and received a paper to board on ships

⁸ *The Guardian*, «Paris terror attacks 'carried out by three coordinated teams of gunmen», (14 November 2015), available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/14/syrian-greece-refugee-paris-attacks-killers>.

⁹ Data from UNHCR Operational Portal: the Mediterranean situation, available at <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>.

to Athens or Thessaloniki. The large majority aimed to reach the mainland in an effort to continue their journey to northern Europe.

Registration serves multiple purposes. It can facilitate Dublin returns to Greece, since arrivals are recorded in the EURODAC¹⁰. It can also assist with relocation. The idea of relocation of those already on EU territories is defined under the EU Agenda (European Commission, 2015b). In solidarity with front-line States, the Commission proposed triggering the emergency response system envisaged under Article 78(3) of the EU Treaty (*ibidem*). Redistribution of persons in need of international protection would mean suspension of Dublin rules. As early as September 2015, the Commission announced an emergency relocation scheme¹¹ of 120,000 persons in need of international protection from Greece and Italy. Following the establishment of the relocation scheme, agencies in the hotspots were asked to identify people who could participate in relocation (including, notably, Syrians, Iraqis, and Eritreans). Needless to say, relocation from the hotspots never took off, since the facilities quickly changed their role in connection to the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016.

The Statement emerged in a politically polarised environment and was portrayed as a complementary solution to the closure of the Western Balkan route. The Statement should not be treated as exceptional or unique¹². It is consistent with the past decade of EU migration management policy, that consists in outsourcing and externalising responsibility at the front-line states and in neighbouring third countries (Triandafyllidou, Dimitriadi, 2014; Dimitriadi, 2016a). The EU-Turkey Statement prescribes the return to Turkey of all new arrivals after 20 March who either opt out of asylum, or whose applications are deemed inadmissible. It also introduces a 1+1 Scheme, whereby for every Syrian returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled to the EU.

The Statement also requires that Greece ceases transfers from the islands to the mainland, a measure criticized as a «pull factor» for arrivals. Deterrence, according to a field officer interviewed, begins prior to border crossing since «if the migrants know they will be unable to move forward, they will consider twice before crossing to Greece» (July 2016, Lesbos). What is unique about the EU-Turkey Statement of 18 March 2016 is the impact it has had on the islands hosting the hotspots and on the migrants stranded on them. The hotspots have become the main tool to implement and sustain the Statement.

¹⁰ Dublin mechanism was suspended for Greece since 2011; however the expressed will of the Commission was that eventually the rule would be reinstated for Greece.

¹¹ For details see European Commission, 9 September 2015, *Refugee Crisis: European Commission takes decisive action*, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-5596_en.htm.

¹² In the past, Spain and Italy have successfully undertaken bilateral agreements with Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal and Libya respectively. The EU-Turkey Statement resembles to an extent the Italian-Libyan agreement of 2012 in seeking to deter border crossings prior to them taking place, and in offering incentives to the third countries to beef up border controls and maintain the asylum-seeking population in the country.

Under the new policy, asylum processing has changed considerably. For those arriving after 20 March, a different asylum procedure is in place, with the inadmissibility of claims first examined based on the «safe third country» and «first country of asylum» rules. Those whose claims are found inadmissible, or whose asylum has been rejected on merit, are in theory returnable to Turkey. In Greece, the law no. 4375/2016 was passed, establishing the criteria under which the hotspots operate. The SYRIZA-led coalition incorporated in the Law the EU recast Asylum Procedures Directive (APD)¹³ to ensure that the inadmissibility process is applied, and returns take place based on the Greece-Turkey bilateral readmission agreement (signed in 2001). Implementation of returns hinges on ensuring that migrants remain on the islands. Thus, from the moment of arrival until return is achieved, migrants must remain in the hotspots and the islands. Departure to the mainland is only feasible for those who have received international protection in Greece. Those whose claim to protection is accepted are not eligible for the relocation scheme to other EU Member States. Relocation is only limited to Syrians and Eritreans in the mainland prior to 20 March. In summary, the Statement is sternly structured around the Dublin principle: the frontline state is responsible for everything, from processing to returns.

3. Islands as hotspots, hotspots in the islands

Islands are not unique places in the European migration management. The Canary Islands for Spain and Lampedusa for Italy have been sites of detention, screening and «buffer zones» since the early 1990s¹⁴. Alison Mountz (2011) has argued that island detention is one of the ways through which nation-states attempt to manage entry. Their geographical location makes them function as sites of exclusion. In a context in which irregular migration is increasingly «securitised» (Bigo, 2000; Huysmans, 2000, 2006), what matters most is not prohibiting entry, but selecting who enters, when and for how long. Selection takes place at the border and increasingly beyond it, assisted by the proliferation of new technologies and agencies, such as FRONTEX and the new European Border Guard, or satellite systems offering pre-frontier intelligence picture like EUROSUR.

Those who succeed in reaching Europe must first cross a border. The islands of northern Aegean are in fact both *a border* and part of the external border of the EU. Borders are zones where «politics becomes fully entangled in matters of life and death» (Walters, 2013, p. 206). As such, they carry a dual identity: as frontiers, they are both institutions and processes, tools of state policy and markers of identity (Anderson, 1996). The islands of Northern Aegean are currently functioning as tools of state policy as regards the governance of mobility, but also as tools of the EU policy. The islands were asked to accept and carry the burden of hosting the hotspot facilities in their limited territory,

¹³ European Union: Council of the European Union, Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast), 29 June 2013, OJL.180/60-180/95; 29.6.2013, 2013/32/EU («APD»), available online at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/51d29b224.html>.

¹⁴ See the Special Issue in the Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies (2014), 12:2.

while continuing to perform the security functions as a border. They also carry their own identity, which has impacted their approach towards migrant arrivals. The island of Lesbos for instance carries memories of displacement and forced movement, having received and sheltered the Greeks that fled Asia Minor during 1922 (the so-called Asia Minor Catastrophe). Christodoulou *et al.* (2016) noted that a peculiar power relationship has unfolded on the islands.

On the one hand, the humanitarian aspect (search and rescue, first response and assistance) has been largely organized and maintained by the locals. The sight of arrivals could not be concealed. The islands of the Northern Aegean are not vast territories: disembarkation points are specific and often very close to villages and cities. As such, the sight of disembarking refugees was one most islanders witnessed and motivated them to assist the migrants, the NGOs and local authorities. When, in July 2016, I visited Skala Sykamias, a small coastal village and a common arrival point of vessels, the fishermen I encountered explained that they had stopped fishing in September 2015 and began assisting the coastguard with Search and Rescue. The number and frequency of arrivals was such that it was impossible for locals to remain unaffected. On the other hand, in the same space where the humanitarian response unfolded, the border regime (see Tsianos, Karakayali, 2010 for a discussion of the «European border regime») has been in full force, organizing screening, registration, selection as well as detention. The European response has been Janus faced: people must be prevented from reaching Europe at all costs, but there is a proliferation of emergency humanitarian responses.

The contrast between deterrence and humanitarianism makes the islands function as a tool of governance of irregular mobility: they are both gates and guardians at the gates – a gate that is being «flooded», battered by «migrant influxes», and – as stated by the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk – a «great tide». The continuous comparison of large numbers of people on the move with «flows» (a terminology we have also employed) and «tides» conjures up images of invasion that the hotspots seek to curtail and perhaps deter. In the words of Donald Tusk, «the days of irregular migrants to Europe are coming to an end»¹⁵ – a statement issued following the closure of the Western Balkan route. A week later the EU-Turkey Statement was announced, seeking to seal the maritime border.

There is a long history of islands being used as places of processing (e.g. Ellis Island in the US), detention, selection and resettlement (Nauru, Manus and Christmas Island in Australia's «border enforcement archipelago», Mountz, 2011), spaces of transit (Lampedusa, Italy; islands in the northern Aegean) but also confinement outside the framework of the law (Guantanamo, Cuba). Islands are part of the nation-state but not part of the mainland. Their geographical detachment is one of their key characteristics, enabling in many cases an «out of sight, out of mind» approach. Heyman (1998) has argued that migration presents a moral challenge for both migrants and hosts that can be resolved in different ways. It can result in mutual acceptance and integration or imbalanced

¹⁵ <http://www.balkaneu.com/tusk-thanked-countries-closed-borders-twitter/>.

reciprocity and exploitation, or in a bordering process that places the migrant at a distance. Distance can be emotional, but is first and foremost physical: the migrant is impeded from accessing the mainland. Australia, with the excision of territory and Pacific Solution I & II, is a classic example of islands being transformed into border zones that function as detention spaces (Vogl, 2015; Billings, 2013).

In the Mediterranean Sea, islands have functioned as a «space within a space» for more than twenty years. Spain's Canary Islands, Italy's Lampedusa, Malta, Greece's northern Aegean but also Ionian islands, have been on the receiving end of irregular migratory flows since the early 1990s, though of different volume and nationalities. Different strategies and practices have been deployed to manage irregular migration and reduce arrivals. The Spanish model is perhaps the most successful¹⁶, while Italy's Lampedusa is perhaps one of the most well-known. Cuttitta (2014) considers Lampedusa as a hotspot, referring to the island instead of the specific facilities (see also Bialasiewicz, 2012). Lampedusa is at the same time an external border, a hotspot (since 2016), an island, and part of the externalization of EU policies that reach further out, to Tunisia and Libya. It is also an island where de Genova's «spectacle of the border» has been extensively covered by the media¹⁷: the «scene is set that is about 'exclusion', where allegedly 'unwanted' or 'undesirable' – and in any case, 'unqualified' or 'ineligible' – migrants must be stopped, kept out, and turned around. At the same time, the border appears to demonstrate, verify, and legitimate the purported naturalness and putative necessity of such exclusion.» (de Genova, 2015). The islands of the Mediterranean have had a fluctuating relationship to their respective national centres, as is clearly visible in the islands of the Northern Aegean. Islands recognise the significance of their role and placement in the spatial configuration of Europe's border regime, but are also increasingly frustrated by their role. This has resulted in a new set of conflicts between the islands and the mainland, with the former (unsuccessfully) using their position to resist the opening of detention facilities, and the latter continuously dangling the memory of 2015 and the humanitarian tragedy that unfolded on the Aegean Sea as a reminder and a forewarning to the islanders that their status is fragile and dependent on their cooperation¹⁸.

¹⁶ Spain successfully externalised its migration management through partnerships with countries of origin and transit and simultaneously developed extensive border patrols using surveillance systems and fences. For a discussion of Spanish policies of migration management see Andersson, 2014.

¹⁷ Including migrant deaths. On 3 October 2013, a boat carrying migrants from Libya to Italy sank off the Italian island of Lampedusa. The boat had reported sailed from Libya and was carrying mostly persons from Eritrea, Somalia and Ghana. The death toll was later estimated to be 360 persons. A national day of mourning was declared in Italy, followed by live coverage of the funeral service. The incident drew the attention of world media, that have maintained in recent years a steady coverage of Lampedusa.

¹⁸ The government has repeatedly stressed that if migrants are moved from the islands the EU Turkey Statement will collapse, and the islanders will be the first to feel the effects.

4. Seeking to effect change in the hotspots

The hotspot in Moria (Lesvos) resembles the detention facility of Amygdaleza in Athens¹⁹. Although originally it was not meant to be a detention facility, its outline, structure and fencing mimic those of migrant detention facilities, signalling from the beginning that the hotspot is a space within a space, a boundary on the island. Containers are lined up and divided into sections, while barbed-wire fences surround each section and the structure as a whole. The site used to be a former military camp that had been abandoned for years. Similar spaces have been used on other islands, such as Samos, to house irregular arrivals. The Moria hotspot is comprised of sectors made up of pre-fabricated shelters and tents. Unaccompanied minors, vulnerable groups (women and families) and single men are held in separate sectors. The hotspot is «divided» internally with razor-wire fences upon which clothes are often hung. As the arrivals continued, the tents expanded beyond the space that was initially provided for those unable to find a place in the shelters. Despite the advent of the winter, not much changed in the facility. Police guarded the outer perimeter and the sectors. Each agency (FRONTEX, Europol, Interpol, EASO, asylum service) had its own container for the provision of services. When the facilities were initially set up, various NGOs were heavily involved in the hotspots. They perceived the facilities as a type of «one-stop shop» for arrivals and offered information on asylum, health care, shelter, identification of needs and the opportunity to accurately record incoming numbers. The EU-Turkey Statement and the indiscriminate detention of arrivals in the facilities (as well as the threat of return) raised significant protests from NGOs, many of which resorted to offering minimum services or opted out entirely of collaborating with the facilities (for example Doctors Without Borders).

During the initial twenty-five days, the facilities are meant to function as standard detention and mobility is restricted to the area of the hotspot (usually in the section where one's container is located). Although this is required by law, it is worth noting that detention can be more of a descriptive rather than factual practice. This is important, since on some islands, the number of migrants greatly exceeds that of police officers with the officers subsequently unwilling to impose order for fear of their personal safety. In the hotspot of Moria, physical immobility is imposed until the limit expires, whenever possible. According to a recent report by ECRE (2016), «The practice of mandatory detention has been applied indiscriminately even to vulnerable cases, such as unaccompanied minors, families with small children, or persons with disabilities». Once the twenty-five days expire, the law establishes freedom of movement and the right to leave the hotspot but not the island. Indirectly, a geographical limitation to mobility is put in place. The Statement, the hotspot and the islands become intrinsically interconnected. Without documents (either an admissibility decision or a positive decision on asylum) the migrant cannot board a vessel for the mainland.

Thus, the figure of the migrant is presented once more in a securitised context, as the threat that has been tackled, but only temporarily, and looms in the distant horizon!

¹⁹ For a discussion on Amygdaleza, see Angeli *et al.* (2014).

Since detention is meant to act as a deterrent for future arrivals and guarantee the potential return to Turkey of those deemed eligible, immobility is associated with onward movement to the mainland. The latter is achieved first through the detention in the facilities and then through the far removed geographical location of the islands. The individual remains immobile, whether in the hotspot or on the island. In other words, the State has found a way to impose immobility without having to restrict physical movement in confined spaces. The islands eventually transform into a space where immobility continues to be imposed.

By September 2016 it was clear that the hotspots were overcrowded and that sanitation and hygiene were inadequate and food was substandard. Lesvos was hosting double its capacity, as were most islands with hotspots. Five hotspots on the islands of Lesvos, Samos, Chios, Leros and Kos had an initial capacity of 6,450 places²⁰. They had consistently exceeded their capacity, with the estimate population in October 2016 reported to be at 15,000. Amnesty International recently issued a warning that conditions on the islands were dangerous and had also proven fatal, with a woman and a child recently dying as a result of a gas explosion²¹.

The hotspots are both temporary and temporal borders- with border here designating a dividing line. They are temporary borders in the sense that they are a result of policies that may very well change in the future. Their creation is the result of specific events and takes place in a specific timing. They are also temporal borders. Tazzioli (2016) argues that «temporal borders do not only generate forms of spatial containment and increase exclusionary partitions, they also shape migrant subjectivities by multiplying differences». The hotspots of Greece precisely do this by dividing migrants in the facilities also according to the different periods of their arrival. There are those who experienced the hotspots as transit centres having arrived before the Statement, those who experienced and continue to experience them as detention facilities (after 20 March) and of course those who arrived early before the hotspot approach was implemented. Simultaneously, in the hotspots there are those who are about to reach the twenty-five day limit and due to be released, but also those who are at the start of their detention period. The same nationalities, with potentially the same claims, the same method of entry and to an extent the same travel accounts are now separated by how they arrive, stay in and transit from Greece. The period after 20 March is characterized by strandedness and immobility. For those arriving prior to 20 March, a significant number continued their journey northwards. The hotspots divide the past and the present in terms of the shift in migration policy, and potentially also differentiate the present from the future. This was clear in

²⁰ Data provided by Hellenic Ministry of Migration, available online at <http://mindigital.gr/index.php/%CF%80%CF%81%CE%BF%CF%83%CF%86%CF%85%CE%B3%CE%B9%CE%BA%CF%8C-%CE%B6%CE%AE%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BC%CE%B1-refugee-crisis/1108-summary-statement-of-refugee-flows-to-eastern-aegean-islands-30-03-2017>.

²¹ Amnesty International Press release (2016) *EU: Asylum-seekers must be moved from appalling conditions on islands*, available online at; <https://amnestyusa.org/news/press-releases/eu-asylum-seekers-must-be-moved-from-appalling-conditions-on-islands>.

the discussions with participants in Athens who have very brief recollections of Moria, having only stayed there for a day until they registered. The words of a refugee from Afghanistan I met in Athens are evocative in this sense: «It is different now. I came before 20 March, spent the night waiting in line, a big line, and got papers. Then I came here [Athens]... My friends that came after the deal with Turkey say it's different now. They must apply for asylum first. They do not let them on the boat they are in Moria now, they cannot come here» (June 2016).

Those who were released due to the expiration of the twenty-five days but who were still stranded on the islands often made indirect reference to the temporal role of the hotspot. One of my informants from Syria lamented that «if only I came on the first boat. I would not still be here. My brother came on the first boat, he is now in Thessaloniki» (Lesvos, July 2016). The «first boat» left Turkey before the implementation of the Statement. His brother registered and was moved to the mainland²². He arrived on Lesvos on 21 March, nine days later, and when we met in July 2016 he was still stranded on the island. The very purpose of the hotspots is to differentiate, categorize and thus temporarily govern movement²³, through the screening process on the basis of nationality but upon the assumed category of mobility (migrant or refugee²⁴). The immediate impact is felt on the processing of asylum claims. Syrians are being prioritized, and in a discussion with an asylum service officer it became clear that their prioritization is linked to the Statement. Syrians are the only nationals who in theory receive protection in Turkey, equivalent to that offered by the 1951 Convention²⁵, which makes the processing of their claims simpler. Until the end of 2016 there were hundreds of nationals of other countries that had not been interviewed by EASO and the Greek asylum case, and many had not even managed to file a formal asylum claim (with only their intention to do so having been recorded). This is a pattern common to all the hotspots, with non-Syrians in many cases waiting for three months or more to lodge an asylum application. There are two dimensions to this differentiation that moves beyond exclusion. The first regards the status of those who wait for their application: while they wait, they are treated as irregular subjects. The second dimension concerns those in the hotspots who live with the fear of being sent back to Turkey: a spectre that haunts only those contained on the islands and that reinforces their spatial but also legal distance from those in the mainland.

The hotspots and the islands perpetuate the immobility of the migrants. However, migrants have also found means of demonstrating their opposition to their detention, as well as ways of effecting, delaying or preventing change depending on the circumstances. I consider all the above as integral part of

²² The Greek government wanted to move all migrants from the facilities to ensure adequate space for the implementation of the Statement.

²³ See also Tsianos, Karakayali (2010) for a discussion of how detention camps in border areas appear to implement «a rigid system of mobility control» but in reality they are a «spatialized attempt to temporarily control movement» (p. 384).

²⁴ See Carling (2015) for a discussion of the problems related to the traditional distinctions employed to understand contemporary migration.

²⁵ For details on how the safe third country rule is applied to Turkey, see Dimitriadi (2016a).

«migrant agency», and I use the term agency to indicate the decision-making process, but also the desire, attempt and/or at times ability to impact upon the pre-existing practices of migration management and governance of mobility (see also Squire, 2016). The result is crucial in relation to the hotspot and the island. There is a significant body of work on migrant agency in the analysis of irregular migration. There are also numerous important studies that draw on the Agambenian tradition that view spaces of contained mobility (such as detention facilities and camps) as sites where biopolitical control is exercised (Agamben, 1998). The hotspots are both spaces where migrant agency is mobilized and where biopolitical control is exercised.

Small acts in the hotspot can reveal to an outside observer the efforts of migrants to maintain a level of autonomy. For example, clothes were hanging on the wire fence surrounding the containers. Although this was not the purpose of the wire fence, it can be argued that migrants had found a way of minimizing its forbidding role. Many of those who had been allowed to leave the hotspots, had been unable to find accommodation and thus returned at night to sleep in the hotspot. This created further friction between those who remained «immobile» for twenty-five days and those returning voluntarily to sleep at night. I find that this act of voluntarily going back to the very place of detention to sleep for the night is significant. It reveals the inadequacy of the Greek reception system but it also shows the capacity of migrants to effect change: the hotspot for those returning is no longer just a space of detention but a space of temporary shelter. An NGO discussant explained that tents gradually appeared outside the wired fence and near the hotspot. Relatives and friends returned to the area to camp for the night, near friends and relatives in the facility. This subtle repurposing of the space around the hotspot is a result of the migrants' opposition to both the facility and the fact that some can be mobile outside while others remain detained on the inside.

The most visible sign of opposition to the policy were the riots that broke out in the late summer of 2016. Moria was the epicentre of these uprisings. The migrants were protesting against the conditions of detention as well as against detention itself. The most recent progress report by the Commission (2017) acknowledges that:

The number of persons returned remains much lower than the number of arrivals, thus adding pressure on the hotspot facilities on the islands. This is due to the accumulated backlog in the processing of all stages of asylum applications on the Greek islands and difficulties in locating migrants at various stages of their asylum and return procedures (p.5).

The report further admits that for returns to increase, it is imperative to continue enforcing the geographical restriction on migrants on the islands, and to create a sufficient reception capacity including closed centres on the islands (*ibid.*).

One wonders whether detention loses its credibility if it does not lead to the expressed outcome-return. Riot is a form of «physical resistance» (Hollander,

Einwohner, 2004, p. 536), a way of becoming visible and seeking to effect change. Riots are a way of responding but also participating in these power relations. Already in July 2016, my last visit to the island, a field officer from an NGO based in the hotspot noted that tensions were escalating. The field officer expressed concerns about the limited police presence and the physical confrontations between certain nationalities. If the situation escalated, there was insufficient protection for both staff and migrants.

There have been riots between migrants of different nationalities, against guards and NGO workers, as well as against asylum service personnel. Crucially, they are not solely the acts of specific nationalities. The Syrians for example have also participated in riots in anger against the EU-Turkey Statement and their sudden relegation to a lesser status that compels them to seek protection in Turkey rather than in Europe. For others, it is a way of expressing frustration but also a means of bringing about change: during the media coverage of the riots migrants made a clear demand for the acceleration of the processing of asylum claims. As previously discussed, a decision on the asylum application is the only way off the island, either as a result of deportation or thanks to the issuing of papers that allow for the transferral to the mainland. The current legal status of many is one of limbo, for they are neither deemed inadmissible nor offered international protection. Finally, for some, rioting is a way of demanding radical change to the status quo, through the opening of the border, the transfer to the mainland, or their selection (rather than exclusion).

As the largest hotspot in northern Aegean, Moria has witnessed the most riots²⁶. In October, Pakistanis rioted in protest at the delay in the processing of their asylum claims and after months spent in detention on the island. They moved against asylum officers and proceeded to light fires. Their nationality is important because it affected the manner in which their asylum claims were processed. Thus, their rioting was a means of reaffirming that migrants from Pakistan *did have* the same right as others. Riots are common in closed spaces of limited mobility, whether hotspots, detention centres or pre-removal centres. As noted by Campesi (2015, p. 429), «Italian pre-removal centres» have become «the main stage of migrants' struggle against deportation». Similarly, the hotspots in Greece have transformed into the space where not only mobility but also asylum have been increasingly contested. Who is allowed in the territory and who will be kept at the border until the time they are deemed returnable? Thus, transit re-emerges in the Aegean Sea, which no longer functions as a transit space (see Dimitriadi, 2017) in the sense of onward mobility but as a transit space for those who wait to be selected or to be returned. The riots mobilized the locals – the citizens – who until recently had supported the migrant struggle but increasingly saw the acts of violence as a security threat to themselves. Citizens have also protested the policy put in place, as do the migrants. Neither is particularly successful in bringing about the desired (or least publicly declared)

²⁶ See <http://www.lesvosnews.gr/21048/lesvos-ora-miden-taraches-ke-olokaftoma-sti-moria-sto-dromo-5-700-metanastes-vinteo/>; <http://www.cnn.gr/news/ellada/story/45239/moria-ti-symvainei-piso-apo-ta-syrmatoplegmata> (available in Greek only).

change. However, the riots have been effective in pressuring the State to seek alternative solutions, including their potential transfer to the mainland. They have been less effective in curtailing the application of detention. In Greece, a discussion has recently begun regarding the setting up of detention spaces on the islands with no freedom of movement to «host» those that either destroy public property, engage in criminal acts or participate in riots and pose a threat to safety and security.

If riots are a physical form of resistance, asylum has emerged as a way of delaying/preventing change: here I refer to the potential return to Turkey.

The Common European Asylum System and specifically the Dublin Regulation prescribe that an asylum application must be lodged and processed in the first country of arrival. Thus, while the right to asylum remains the right to choose the country is curtailed. The Dublin rule, initially set up to avoid «asylum shopping», had an unintended consequence. Frontline States like Greece received an uneven burden and responsibility. With little preparation (or willingness), Greece has for years consistently possessed a deeply flawed asylum system²⁷. From 2007 to 2013 when the new asylum service came into force, the overwhelming number of arrivals sought to avoid/escape the Greek asylum system on the fear that they would remain stranded in Greece. Opting out of asylum has been a consistent way of bypassing the border regime of Europe. Aware that fingerprints are recorded for the asylum application, many migrants have avoided registration in the EURODAC database, which thus enabled them to undertake secondary movement to another Member State.

On the other hand, lodging an asylum application has also been used as a way to extend one's stay in the country, particularly for those who enter undocumented. Precisely because an asylum decision could take as long as six to ten years (Cabot, 2014), it was a way to remain legally and often collect the capital necessary for onward movement. Greece has had a recent experience of broad and indiscriminate application of detention. In the period between 2012 and 2014 the then conservative government of New Democracy implemented a system of «show me your paper» policy, named Xenios Zeus, coupled with the set-up of pre-removal facilities as they were called to hold irregular migrants until their forceful or voluntary return. At the time, asylum applications in Greece were low and the new asylum service had yet to be set up. However, those in detention, particularly Afghans who made up the main asylum-seeking population at the time, sought to delay their return and find ways out of detention either by applying for asylum and in some cases going on hunger strikes and inflicting bodily self-harm (Dimitriadi, 2015; Angeli *et al.*, 2014). The use of the body to make one noticeable but to also voice one's protest is common in detention facilities – including hunger strikes, body mutilations and suicide attempts (see Puggioni, 2014). It is a way of engaging politically, particularly for those who are considered to be outside the realm of the political, namely the undocumented, irregular migrants.

²⁷ On the legal framework and the transformations in the Greek asylum system, see the AIDA report of 2013, online at <http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece>.

In 2015 860,000 persons entered the country. Of those only 13,197 filled an asylum claim²⁸. Greece, traditionally a transit country for asylum seekers (Dimitriadi, 2013; Dimitriadi, 2016b), had a new asylum system but limited capacity. It was woefully unprepared for a large volume of asylum applications, and lacked staff on the islands. Asylum applications have increased since January 2016, an expected effect of the on and off border closure of the Western Balkan route, but they remained at a monthly rate of around 1000 persons. In March 2016 and a few days following the announcement of the Statement, roughly 3,000 persons applied for asylum, the overwhelming proportion of these on the islands, with many others having indicated a willingness to apply²⁹. Syrians made up a significant portion of applicants, as to be expected, but Afghans, Iranians and Iraqis and other nationalities from sub-Saharan Africa were represented in the applications as well. This time asylum was linked with the efforts to avoid change – another form of migrant agency. Change in this case would mean return under the EU-Turkey Statement for all persons irrespective of nationality. The migrants resisted the new policy that the EU had asked Greece to implement. By launching an asylum application, they bought time and thus far it has been a successful strategy.

The Committees processing asylum claims had found in most cases the application admissible, which means it will be processed in Greece. Those who have expressed intent to apply, but have been unable to do so due to the limited personal of the asylum service must also remain in Greece until the process is completed. Thus, the low figure of returns to Turkey appears to be based on two elements: the hesitancy of the Greek authorities to return non-Syrian rejected or inadmissible asylum seekers to Turkey (as it is not considered safe for non-Syrians) and the migrants utilizing the asylum system as a way of preventing change, i.e. return to Turkey.

Simultaneously, if the idea of asylum in Greece was directly related to that of strandedness, now it has acquired multiple representations: on the one hand the desire to remain stranded in the country rather than to be deported to Turkey; on the other hand, asylum signifies hope that the claim will be accepted and the individual will be allowed to leave the island for the mainland. As this is one of the two ways (see above) to leave the islands, asylum is the far better option. Yet, the migrants I spoke to on the island, released from the hotspot but with their applications pending, all expressed a desire, if offered protection, to use the papers to reach northern Greece and then to transit to other EU member states. «No one wants to stay here. Nothing for us», as a refugee from Syria said; «If they give me papers I will go to Thessaloniki, you know the city? Yes, that's why I applied, so I can leave. You cannot leave without one» (Lesvos, July 2016)

²⁸ Greek Ministry of Interior, *Asylum Service Statistical Data 2015*, http://asylo.gov.gr/en/?page_id=370.

²⁹ UNHCR ran a pre-registration program in the summer of 2016 in an effort to assist the Greek asylum service.

In the summer of 2016, I encountered a group of Afghans at the Castle of Mytilene, on the island of Lesbos. They had climbed the walls of the castle, brought in tents and settled in for the anticipated long wait. They explained that they had applied for asylum aware of not being wanted in Europe³⁰. When asked if they wanted to stay in Greece they emphatically replied «no» though they did stress that asylum was a way off the islands.

Asylum is also a way of being seen by the Greek State, especially for those that feel the system prioritizes and caters more to the Syrians. This has been repeatedly stressed by the Afghans, who feel they are twice unseen by the State, first as irregular arrivals and secondly as Afghans (Dimitriadi, 2017) delegated to the status of the migrant – a term that is acquiring negative connotations instead of denoting simply mobility. The swift and high number of asylum applications after the announcement of the Statement was not surprising: many had already warned the Asylum service it should expect an increase, since realistically this was the only viable option for migrants seeking to either prevent return to Turkey or reach the mainland. It would be wrong to assume that migrants were unaware of the vulnerability of the Greek asylum system or that huge delays would ensue. Migrants who have arrived in Greece during the last two years have been relatively well-informed of what to expect especially in relation to previous years and most were aware of the improvements to the asylum service but also its limited capacity³¹. In other words, the large volume of asylum applications was not coordinated but it was expected (experts and the Greek asylum service had warned that migrants would apply for asylum) since for many it was the only way to resist the EU-Turkey Statement and the indeterminate detention on the islands.

Conclusions

This article has described the hotspots on the Greek islands and their interconnection with the EU-Turkey Statement. Both are part of the broader policy of governing irregular mobility at the EU borders. Both have had significant impact on Greece and the migrants who are directly affected by the hotspots and the Statement.

Greece has had detention facilities as well as pre-removal facilities in the past but hotspots are a novelty that transcend the spatial characteristics of a facility and encompass an entire geographical space. The transformation of the islands into hotspots is a new phenomenon. It also contrasts to the Italian model, since the hotspots in Greece are intrinsically tied to the EU-Turkey Statement. Moving the migrants from the islands to the Greek mainland would result in the collapse of the agreement, or at least this is the official line of the Ministry

³⁰ The Afghans are increasingly facing exclusion in Europe as a result of being considered economic migrants rather than refugees in sharp contrast to previous years. See Donini *et al.*, 2016.

³¹ See ESRC project, *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat: Mapping and Documenting Migratory Journeys and Experiences*, available at <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/research/researchcentres/irs/crossingthemed/output>.

of Migration. The argument is that many migrants would abscond (and thus Greece would not be able to implement returns) but also that it would be a «pull factor» for others to undertake the journey. Thus, immobility is a necessity for the success of the Statement: it acts as a deterrent to those who would otherwise consider undertaking the journey.

Migrants have reacted to the conditions imposed on them by seeking to either effect or delay change. From riots to asylum applications, migrant practices reflect both the need to protect their interests but also to seek change in the politics and policies in place. Sandro Mezzadra has coined the notion of «right to escape» as the «individual motion [...] of desertion from the field» (2004, p. 270). Without it, there can be no mobility. It is perhaps even more pertinent in the case of the island-hotspots, since the various acts discussed in the paper reveal a desire and a claim of the «right» to escape, to asylum, to equal treatment, to better conditions.

The EU-Turkey Statement instead has transformed the islands into vast hotspots where migrants wait in limbo. The islands are not exempt from or above the law. Rather, the legal framework of Greece has been adjusted accordingly. Law 4375/2016 established the criteria under which the hotspots operate, impose immobility and process (in)admissibility. This has given rise to a unique landscape where the EU's external borders multiply internally, where transit is achieved without affecting the mainland, and where detention is used in conjunction with returns as a tool of punishment as well as a deterrent. The Aegean Sea is transforming once again into a space that reveals emergent power relations between the State and migrants and involves multiple actors across different spatial settings. As such, the EU's external borders are once again a testing ground of how the EU sees migration and what it envisages for the future.

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