



FROM TRANSIT HUB TO DEAD END

A Chronicle of Idomeni

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Contents

Introduction	5
Phase I: Shifting Routes – Emergence of Idomeni	11
Crossing borders and the absent-present state	19
Humanitarian support and border business	23
Idomeni in the news: how the media came and the border opened . .	28
Phase II: The Absent-Present State and the Rise of an Anarchical Humanitarianism	33
Daily life in the camp: a borderline situation	43
The expanding geography of Idomeni	51
Break-throughs and Push-backs	54
Conflicts, protests and riots	57
The Greek state, humanitarian actors and local society	64
Phase III: (Re-)Gaining Control – Making Refugees Invisible	71
“Filling” the new camps	75
Life in the official camps	78
Hindering relocation and family reunification	90
Humanitarian business as usual	93
Final Remarks: From Time to Space	97
Timeline Idomeni	103
Maps	105
Jungles around Idomeni	106
Idomeni region	107
March of Hope	108

Idomeni camp	109
Official camps in Northern Greece	110

Authors	111
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Introduction

The pictures that went around the world in the winter of 2015 and the spring of 2016 were highly dramatic: A tent camp filled with more than 10,000 people. Cheap igloo tents, sinking into the mud after torrential downpours. Desperate parents relying on cold water from plastic bottles to wash their babies. Frightened children, defeated screaming because they got teargas in their eyes. Hundreds of exhausted people lining up for hours, just to get a sandwich and a small bottle of water. Angry crowds throwing rocks at policemen and soldiers, deployed to protect a razor wire-topped mesh fence. Outraged protesters who are not just holding up banners, but sewed shut their lips.

These scenes took place near Idomeni, a small village in Northern Greece directly at the border with the Republic of Macedonia. Idomeni became famous as a gateway on the “Balkan route”, which hundreds of thousands of refugees followed to reach the countries of Western and Northern Europe. It was their first border stop after arriving on the Greek Aegean islands. Conditions in Idomeni started attracting international media coverage especially when the border was gradually sealed in late 2015-early 2016, and thousands of people remained stranded near the village.

However, the widely reported escalation of events in spring 2016 was merely the most visible culmination of a long-term process that had started years earlier. During this process, Idomeni first became a more and more significant point for informal border crossings, and only later turned into a hub for formal transit migration. Neither did the story of Idomeni suddenly end when the cameras turned away, after the complete eviction of the informal Idomeni camp – or to be more precise, the Idomeni camps, since there was more than one – in May 2016. Telling the full story of Idomeni, in all its many facets,

Introduction

was the main motivation for writing this report. To do so, we identify three distinct, if overlapping phases in the Idomeni story.

Methodologically, the report is based on a series of twelve qualitative interviews we conducted in the second half of 2016 with people who had worked in the field at Idomeni as NGO workers or activists (and sometimes both), migrants who had lived in Idomeni, and a local politician. To protect the confidentiality of these sources, the testimonies of our interviewees are always cited anonymously. In addition, the report relies on personal experience, as all four authors were themselves also engaged in Idomeni, in different positions and for different lengths of time.

The structure of this report mostly follows a chronological order to describe the three phases in the development of Idomeni. The chapter on Phase I will explain how, and why, Idomeni became an important site of transit migration long before it made the news, with a growing number of migrants using the Idomeni region to leave Greece clandestinely from as early as 2010. This chapter will describe who they were, how their composition changed in the years that followed, what difficulties they faced, and how they dealt with them. For years, transit migration through the region took place with almost no notice, going unreported or simply ignored. Only over time did local residents start, more or less spontaneously, to organize some humanitarian support for the migrants who were gathering in growing numbers in this remote region, and who faced perilous conditions as they sought ways to cross the border. They had to hide out for days or even weeks in the woods, in shanties they made out of whatever material they could find (the so-called *jungles*). They were not just met with massive violence on the part of the security forces of the Republic of Macedonia, but also regular attacks and robberies by mafia groups, and the two often seemed to operate alongside each other or even collaborate. Only very slowly did some professional humanitarian actors show up in the region, initially just conducting some first reconnaissance and aid missions.

In Phase II, the situation in Idomeni changed drastically when one South-East European government after another implemented legal, institutional proce-

dures for transit migrants to pass through their countries, creating a *formalized corridor* across the Balkans.¹ In June 2015, the Macedonian government introduced a special document which permitted migrants to reside in the Republic of Macedonia for up to 72 hours, making it possible for them to cross the country legally. Two months later, a transit camp was erected on Macedonian territory – just several hundred meters away from Idomeni. At the same time, the humanitarian infrastructure was expanding on the Greek side as well, but a much more important change was that buses run by private companies were now transporting refugees directly from Athens to the border at Idomeni.

The story of Idomeni was initially only covered by a few international media, but this changed when the Republic of Macedonia shut down the border for three days in late August 2015. The dramatic scenes that ensued at the border when thousands of people were suddenly stranded in Idomeni were captured by the many international journalists who were present in Idomeni at that time, and widely covered by the international press. Once this border closure was lifted, crossing the border in Idomeni again became a fairly simple process for several more months, taking little more than a few hours. But that was not to last: In November 2015, entry to the Republic of Macedonia was restricted to people from the so called “SIA” (Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan) countries, and this was followed by further restrictions in early 2016. In March 2016, the *formalized corridor* across the Balkans was closed entirely. Each of these steps in the gradual closure of the Balkan route made the spatial scope of Idomeni as a site of refugee settlement grow, as new spots kept emerging where hundreds or even thousands of migrants gathered and waited. The use of violence massively increased as well, in particular by the security forces of the Republic of Macedonia, who were conducting push-backs which violated international human rights conventions on a regular basis. At the same time, the border closures and the highly precarious conditions under which enor-

¹ Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović (2017): “Governing the Balkan Route: Macedonia, Serbia and the European Border Regime”

Introduction

mous numbers of people were forced to live in the border camps also led to a wide range of protests by migrants during this phase, which varied greatly in form. The number of NGOs and international activists in the region also increased exponentially, there was a countless number of humanitarian actors, barely controlled by the Greek state or UNHCR.

The resulting *anarchical humanitarianism* was, however, contained and defeated during what we identify as the third phase of developments at Idomeni. In Phase III, the Greek government started to erect official refugee camps, first around Athens and only a little later in the Idomeni region, too. Judging by the results we have seen up to this day, the construction of these camps aimed to “solve” the problem of refugee suffering primarily by making it invisible. Strict controls on who was allowed to enter these camps, keeping out many of the activists, NGOs and even journalists who had been in Idomeni, made documenting the living conditions in these new camps nearly impossible, and allowed the Greek state to reimpose its control over the humanitarian field.

The story of Idomeni is much more than the spectacle of a few months of human suffering and humanitarian aid. It started long before and persisted long after the period that was captured in the media glare, and it continues today. It is that important, fuller story we will tell in this report.

The location

Idomeni is a very small village on the border between Greece and its northern neighbor, the Republic of Macedonia. From here, it's just two kilometers to Gevgelija, a small town on the Macedonian side of the border. Idomeni belongs to the regional unit of Kilkis, which is part of the administrative region of Central Macedonia. Idomeni is located around 70 kilometers from Thessaloniki, the second largest Greek city and the main urban and cultural center of Greek Macedonia and Northern Greece. The village of Idomeni has 154 registered permanent residents, according to the population census of 2011, most of whom have family roots in the region or are descended from migrants who moved there during the so-called "population exchange" between Greece and Turkey in the early 1920s. The Thessaloniki-Skopje railroad line runs right past the village and the Idomeni train station is the last stop on the line before leaving Greece. The land border between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia is more than 200 kilometers long, demarcated partly by a river.

In this text we will generally refer to the state neighboring Greece to the North by its constitutional name "Republic of Macedonia". Since (parts of) different present-day countries have historically been referred to as "Macedonia", the word "Macedonian" may refer to different areas and entities, depending on the context.

Phase I: Shifting Routes – Emergence of Idomeni

Irregular passage through the Idomeni border region is not a new phenomenon. Only loosely monitored by border guards, and characterized by relatively accessible terrain of mostly farmland on both sides of the border, this area has been used by migrants to cross the border for a long time.² That history goes back to at least the 1970s, if not further, judging on informal narratives about life on the border in the past. Anecdotes about this history can crop up out of the blue. An older relative of one of the authors, a Greek man who performed his military service on the border with the former Yugoslavia in his youth, recounted an incident that took place in the beginning of the 1980s:

“I was a soldier in Cherso, in Kilkis, not so far from Idomeni. Once we caught a man in the night; he was not Greek and he was trying to cross the border illegally. A Greek woman was also with him. They were begging us to let them free, but we were just soldiers, we didn’t want to get into any trouble, so we arrested them.”

In the 1990s, irregular border crossings became an almost everyday occurrence in the area around Idomeni. At that time, though, the direction of travel and the motivations behind this informal mobility were different. As it was hard for them to obtain visas for entering Greece legally, citizens of the former Yugoslavia and others like Chinese, Albanians and Bulgarians covertly crossed the “green border” hoping to find seasonal, clandestine work in Greek

² Greek Council for Refugees (2015): “Idomeni report, April-July 2015”

Phase I: Shifting Routes – Emergence of Idomeni



Idomeni region, May 2015 (Photograph: Vasilis Tsartsanis, Source: Asklepeion - Small Room project)

agriculture or jobs in the Greek cities.³ The direction of these irregular border crossings started slightly to change in the years after 2010, when more and more refugees who had become stranded in Greece began to approach the Idomeni area in the hope of finding a way to continue their journeys to Central and Northern European states.

What had changed to make Idomeni a particularly accessible and attractive border crossing point for refugees in Greece at that time? The most significant factor was probably the need for refugees to change the routes they had been using to travel from Greece to other EU countries previously. Immigrants had generally gathered near the two big harbors of Western Greece, Patras and Igoumenitsa, hoping to hide themselves in trucks and find their way to Italy

³ Mezarli, Charikleia (2016): “The profile of foreigners arriving in Idomeni from September 2013 to July 2015: an anthropological approach. Master Thesis at the University of Macedonia”

on ferries. But starting in 2008, it became much more difficult to use these transit routes. Police and local authorities turned openly and more and more brutally against the immigrants. Although there was some rudimentary mobilization of citizens and political groups in support of immigrants' rights, they were generally supported by xenophobic local populations. Immigrants were routinely stopped, searched and arrested, and their temporary settlements destroyed. There were also incidents of violent attacks by (often far right) locals, tolerated or encouraged by the authorities.⁴

In addition, the police launched "Operation Xenios Zeus" in 2012, which focused mostly on Athens, during which it conducted large-scale identity checks in so-called "sweep" operations. Many migrants were stopped and searched, arrested, and often held in police stations and detention centers far away from the city center. According to official statistics, more than 85,000 persons were rounded up and detained, and almost 6,000 of them were then arrested for being in the country illegally.⁵ These operations did not take account of the fact that many potential asylum seekers in Northern Greece did not have affordable and realistic access to asylum procedures. The only possibility they had was to visit the asylum office in Athens, an endeavor which involved extensive waiting times and travel and accommodation expenses many of them could not afford, as well as a high risk of being arrested on the way.⁶ After all, before autumn 2015 most migrants who had entered the country only held an official paper that did not allow them to enter the regions of Achaia (Patras), Thesprotia (Igoumenitsa), Kilikis (Idomeni) or Attica (Athens), the most important points of departure for ships and trains.⁷

Indirectly, the operation "Xenios Zeus" also created another impetus for the emergence of Idomeni as alternative option for migrants, a policewoman who served for years in the Idomeni region, suggested. In close cooperation with

⁴ Human Rights Watch (2012): "Hate on the Streets. Xenophobic Violence in Greece"

⁵ Human Rights Watch (2013): "Unwelcome Guests: Greek Police Abuses of Migrants in Athens"

⁶ Greek Council for Refugees (2015): "Idomeni report, April-July 2015"

⁷ efsyn.gr (17.12.2014): "Egklovismenoi stin poli"

Phase I: Shifting Routes – Emergence of Idomeni



Idomeni region, November 2014 (Photograph: Vasilis Tsartsanis, Source: Asklepeion - Small Room project)

their Turkish counterparts and FRONTEX, the Greek authorities attempted to deter the transit of people from Turkey across the Greek-Turkish land border from 2012 on by sealing the border along the Evros river. As a result, transit routes again moved south to the sea border between the mainland of Turkey and the Greek Aegean islands located nearby. In the course of these attempts to seal the land border with Turkey, however, Greek authorities relocated huge numbers of (special) police forces to the Evros border region, which left other border regions like Idomeni almost “unpoliced”.⁸

Back when transit routes first shifted towards the Northern Greek land borders, the Idomeni region was not the only area where people found ways to cross the border. Local residents told us that people used, or tried using, other

⁸ Mezarli, Charikleia (2016): “The profile of foreigners arriving in Idomeni from September 2013 to July 2015: an anthropological approach. Master Thesis at the University of Macedonia”

transit points along the railroad that runs close to the Greek-Bulgarian border as well, like Promachonas or Ano Poroia. Here too, like with the border between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia, the direction of travel had reversed over time. Where once, before Bulgaria entered the EU, informal border crossings mostly involved people entering Greece, informal border transit is now headed north, especially in the last few years. However, refugees who tried this route told us informally (and our interviewees confirmed) that migrants who tried to enter Bulgaria often ended up being caught and sent back to Greece. Local Greek residents generally agreed that the Bulgarian authorities were prepared quite well for fending off border crossings. Another reason the “Bulgarian route” became more difficult was that regular buses started to refuse carrying refugees without proper papers to the Bulgarian border. After being pushed back into Greek territory, refugees usually traveled to Thessaloniki to re-organize their journey there and seek the financial resources they needed to try crossing the border again after some days or weeks, probably via some other route.

There were also attempts to use a transit route through Albania before 2015. Generally speaking, however, the “way in” seems relatively easy – there are many paths and informal border crossing points that were used by thousands of Albanians over the last three decades on their way south – but the “way out” from Albania is problematic, making it very difficult to continue the journey to countries further north or west. Only for a short period in 2016, after the Balkan route through Idomeni was closed, did Albania appear in media reports as a theoretical alternative route for refugees.⁹

The successive developments in Greek policy created a suffocating environment for many migrants, at that time often young men, who had to find new routes to make their way out of the country. As the “old routes” stopped functioning, having become too dangerous, the country’s Northern borders started looking like a more attractive alternative, and the Idomeni region became a more and more important location for informal border crossings. This shift-

⁹ aljazeera.com (11.3.2016): “Is Albania the next stop for stranded refugees?”

Phase I: Shifting Routes – Emergence of Idomeni

ing of routes is summarized in one of our interviews with a worker of a Greek NGO, who watched the “emergence” of Idomeni closely over the years:

“The story of Idomeni starts in 2011. I remember I went to Patras. In Patras there were spots where people who wanted to leave gathered. In Igoumenitsa too, because there were ships that go to Europe, to Italy. In Patras alone, at some point, there were 10,000 people, but it was not in the news. However, people were turned away from Patras and Igoumenitsa. When the sweeps happened, people started saying, ‘I can go through Albania, Montenegro’, and some did it. Those who started it were from Northern Africa, the Maghreb. Why were they the ones who started it? Because they didn’t have children, families; it was easy for them to walk in the mountains. With the Syrians, they are families, they have children, how can they walk it? These men from the Maghreb started searching for a way through the Republic of Macedonia or through Albania because of the sweeps in 2011. Some got lost in the Balkans, but some arrived, so this route started being heard about on the market.”

It is not surprising, then, that news about the functionality of the Idomeni route – with or without “help” of traffickers – increasingly made the rounds within migrant networks. Especially from 2012 on, a slowly increasing number of Syrians started using the Idomeni passage as well, and from 2014 on families with children could be seen there too. The emergence and intensifying use of new routes often does not go unnoticed by local communities, nor by state officials or human rights organizations. But whether they remain silent bystanders or become active actors, when they take on a more active role, and what kind of role they take on, depends on a complex interplay of often contradictory strands of micro and macro politics. In the beginning, the local community of Idomeni remained silent. Residents knew about the hundreds of people who gathered near the border, often hiding in the forest, and attempted to cross into the Republic of Macedonia almost every day – but with



Idomeni region, June 2015 (Photograph: Vasilis Tsartsanis, Source: Asklepeion - Small Room project)

the exception of a few people, they did not intervene. A local activist from the Idomeni region remembers:

“The first people were from Bangladesh, from Pakistan, from Africa. It was very hard for them. They came like shadows in the night. They followed the highway from Thessaloniki to here. They were walking on the side of the road. Of course, the locals saw the shadows, but nobody paid any attention. Just let them pass. Some years ago, I went to the border. There were shelters everywhere, made from trees, from nothing. When they saw us, everybody ran away. In this period, there were no Arabs, but in late September 2014 I was filming with my crew at the old train bridge [to the Republic of Macedonia]. During the time I stayed there, I saw three groups passing by, and they were Arabs. I asked them: ‘Where are you going?’ And they said: ‘To Europe’.

Phase I: Shifting Routes – Emergence of Idomeni

In this period, nobody was there: no organizations, no NGOs, no volunteers. In the middle of November 2014, I saw some 150 people staying at the border. I had 300 slices of bread and I thought, I will give two to everyone and some water and some milk. And suddenly they were coming from everywhere. There weren't just 150 people, there were 500, 600, 700, 800."

By the end of 2014 or early 2015, as the numbers of people had grown larger, organizations and groups like the Greek Council of Refugees (GCR), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Doctors of the World, and two groups from Thessaloniki called Solidarity Social Clinic and the Anti-Racist Initiative, started conducting field trips to the Idomeni region. What they found was what the migrants called a *jungle*: several hundred people residing in very bad conditions, sheltering in makeshift tents that were often made by hand from rubbish or sleeping out in the open in the rain and the cold, drinking stagnant water, with insufficient food, clothes and medicine, hiding from other people out of fear. Refugees told one of the above-mentioned groups that they also experienced attacks by criminal groups and police officers from the Republic of Macedonia, who invaded their camp, beat them up and robbed them, and destroyed their temporary shelters. People with better financial opportunities at that time usually stayed in Hotel "Hara", a small hotel next to the highway outside the village of Evzoni, only a few kilometers from Idomeni, which soon became famous as a center for smugglers.

In both the *jungle* and the hotel, most people did not have valid residence permits, as the document they had been given by the Greek state did not allow them to reside or travel anywhere in the Kilikis region, where Idomeni is located. The fear of being discovered was therefore high, and made their journey to the border more difficult. They could not use public transport, where police often conducted spot checks and arrested those without valid papers, so they usually had to walk along the highway or the railroad, or pay expensive rates for private taxis or buses. One of the more imaginative new enterprises that flourished as a result involved the provision of rental bikes for crossing

the “forbidden” district of Kilkis.¹⁰ By June 2015, when the number of people was quickly increasing and slowly began to attract more publicity, people started to camp more openly at and around the border railroad station. Soon, a local resident started to operate the first, highly lucrative food stall there – right under the eyes of the police, which did not intervene – selling drinks and food to the refugees from an informal mobile shop.

Crossing borders and the absent-present state

Heading for the border from Idomeni, most people followed the railroad tracks into the territory of the Republic of Macedonia, either with the help of smugglers or – if they didn’t have enough money – on their own. Another option for people without money was, as a local activist reported to us, to work as “fishermen” for the smugglers to earn the money they needed to pay them:

“What are ‘fishermen’? They get 50 Euro for each person they bring to the smugglers. They collect the money for themselves, so they can pass.”

Informal border crossings are not only risky but expensive too, our interviewee explained, especially in the case of the Republic of Macedonia:

“In Macedonia, you had to pay twice: once to get in, once to get out.”

The dangers were stark as well. People who were caught by the police of the Republic of Macedonia were regularly pushed back into Greece. If these push-backs followed diplomatic protocol, they were covered by a bilateral agree-

¹⁰ Mezarli, Charikleia (2016): “The profile of foreigners arriving in Idomeni from September 2013 to July 2015: an anthropological approach. Master Thesis at the University of Macedonia”

Phase I: Shifting Routes – Emergence of Idomeni



Idomeni region, August 2015 (Photograph: Vasilis Tsartsanis, Source: Asklepeion - Small Room project)

ment from November 2008,¹¹ but often they were implemented informally and characterized by extreme violence. The local activist recounted how he once responded to a call from a refugee and found a group of eleven people, heavily beaten up, all of them in need of hospitalization:

“What was their story? They crossed the border; the Macedonian police stopped them and told them to sit down. Then people from the mafia came, beat them up and robbed them. That was the practice at this period.”

Local mafia groups in the Republic of Macedonia weren’t only inflicting violence in the Idomeni region, but also further north near the border with Serbia. There were many cases of armed robberies, beatings, thefts of Syr-

¹¹ Mezarli, Charikleia (2016): “The profile of foreigners arriving in Idomeni from September 2013 to July 2015: an anthropological approach. Master Thesis at the University of Macedonia”

ian passports, and even hostage-takings. Such criminal activity spread and intensified when local criminal groups realized that Syrian refugees, in particular, sometimes hid larger amounts of cash in their clothing or on their bodies. The refugees, however, did not remain passive victims of this violence, local activists explained. They tried to protect themselves by traveling in larger groups, with the women and children in the middle, effectively using their own bodies as a last resource for self-defense. As discussed later in this report, witnessing such incidents of violence was part of what pushed activists towards publicizing what was happening to refugees who were crossing into the Republic of Macedonia at that time.

At the Idomeni train station, there was a Greek police station which included a detention room, but our interviewees repeatedly described how the police officers stationed there remained largely passive. What could explain such an *absent-present* attitude¹² on the part of the Greek police, especially when the law was clear about how migrants were not supposed to enter and reside in the border region? As Mezarli reports, the vast majority of the people approaching Idomeni before July 2015 did this “illegally”, since the Greek documents they held were “postponements of expulsion” which barred the holders from entering particular regions, and Idomeni was in one of those regions.¹³ Thus, in legal terms, these people were committing illegal acts just by traveling to Idomeni and being there, and the police was obliged to remove them. But this legal ground was invoked only occasionally to conduct so-called “sweep operations” in Idomeni as well, for example in late June 2015.¹⁴

Beyond the legal prohibition itself for refugees to approach exit-point areas, and occasional central orders to stop, search and arrest people breaking this law, it seems local police lacked the concrete mechanisms or structures to han-

¹² Greenberg, Jessica and Spasić, Ivana (2017): “Beyond East and West: Solidarity Politics and the Absent/Present State in the Balkans”

¹³ Mezarli, Charikleia (2016): “The profile of foreigners arriving in Idomeni from September 2013 to July 2015: an anthropological approach. Master Thesis at the University of Macedonia”

¹⁴ efsyn.gr (26.6.2015): “Epiheiriseis Skoypa stin Eidomeni”

Phase I: Shifting Routes – Emergence of Idomeni



Idomeni region, August 2015 (Photograph: Vasilis Tsartsanis, Source: Asklepeion - Small Room project)

the situation that emerged once people started arriving in Idomeni, and trying to covertly cross the border, in massive numbers. Their attempts seem instead to have been met with silent approval from the Greek state, especially on the local level. Local police authorities on this distant border point, lacking sufficiently organized means to deal with the situation, seemed far from eager to intervene.¹⁵ Instead, they preferred to just let the migrants leave the country, which had in any case been unwilling to integrate them. Even in the case of push-backs from the Republic of Macedonia, when it had to take action, the Greek police was not at all prepared. The result was that people were just being sent back to central urban areas in Northern Greece, mainly the city of Thessaloniki, and local non-governmental organizations were called on to support them. An activist and employee of one of these organizations recounted:

¹⁵ Greek Council for Refugees (2015): “Idomeni report, April-July 2015”

“The police behaved as if nothing was happening. They would only interfere when there were orders from Athens or some report was published. Normally, according to the Greek law, they would have had to arrest all these people, but it was also a question of where to put them. So they preferred to pretend that they didn’t see anything. From the police station of Idomeni, they could see everything, all the fields. They saw everything, it was in front of their feet! Action only took place when there were big push-backs: 100, 200, 90 people, including children, women. Then the police would say: ‘Oh, what to do with them? Let’s call Thessaloniki, the organizations’.”

Humanitarian support and border business

Until the beginning of 2015, humanitarian support in Idomeni – the provision of basic goods and services such as food, medicine and clothing – was provided only by the regional population. As one local activist stated:

“The local society, even if they are conservative in this area, these were the only people who gave support. Without any publicity. Because there was no publicity. The locals reacted very well.”

Local, spontaneous and almost invisible expressions of solidarity first took a more organized shape in the form of two activist groups from the two towns in the district, Polykastro and Kilkis. These groups consisted of local residents who had no relevant experience, but just could not stand watching the dramatic situation at the border unfold anymore without doing anything, and decided to organize some basic, continuous support. They cooked in their own homes and distributed food in Idomeni, collected clothes and medicine, and transported people to hospitals in cases of emergency. In the process they even risked being arrested themselves for alleged people trafficking. Such arrests took place from time to time, most prominently in the case of Evelina Poli-

Phase I: Shifting Routes – Emergence of Idomeni

tidou, an elected member of the administrative board of the region who was among the first people who took action in Idomeni in support of the refugees. She was arrested, and her car was confiscated; at the time of writing she is still waiting for her trial.¹⁶ This spontaneous, more or less organized solidarity of locals was not confined to the immediate surroundings of Idomeni, though. One-off actions and more continuous activities were geographically widespread in the region, launched by very different persons and initiatives, and also played a very important role in limiting fascist and other aggression against refugees.

Although Idomeni became an increasingly popular destination, refugees who entered Greece aiming to head straight to the next border only rarely made it directly there. The urban center of Thessaloniki was a common stopover. Before the Greek-Turkish land border was sealed, refugees coming from the north-eastern border passed through Thessaloniki relatively quickly, only stopping to change trains or other means of transport before continuing on to Athens or Igoumenitsa. After the land border was sealed and travel routes changed, Thessaloniki became much more important as transit hub. From 2013 on, it was not difficult for volunteers of solidarity initiatives to come across refugees in different spots in town. A simple walk through the city center was enough to reach out to refugees: on the streets or in parks, in passageways, in cheap hotels, at bus or train stations, waiting to organize their next move and grateful for useful information and hints about solidarity kitchens and hangouts.¹⁷ When more and more refugees moved to Idomeni, the solidarity initiatives from Thessaloniki also expanded the scope of their activities to include the border region. Among the larger organizations, only MSF became active in the area already in March 2015, sending just a small team of three persons: a translator, a doctor and an employee from the technical team. The team was expanded in June 2015 to include, for example, psychologists as well, and MSF also started to document testimonies and

¹⁶ efsyn.gr (11.3.2017): “Kakoyrgima o anthropismos”

¹⁷ efsyn.gr (17.12.2014): “Egklovismenoi stin poli”



Idomeni region, May 2015 (Photograph: Vasilis Tsartsanis, Source: Asklepeion - Small Room project)

evidence given to them by refugees. In terms of facilities, MSF was struggling for a long time to construct even the most basic infrastructure. In the end it was only able to build two toilets and one water tap. They were hamstrung primarily by the bureaucratic obstacles the Greek state institutions were putting up, an MSF employee told us:

“For four to five months, neither the municipality nor the government, nor anybody else, gave us permission. It is a military zone there, and they used this as excuse to refuse us. So, we managed to get permission from the local authorities to put only one tap there, exactly where the border crossing was, next to the train tracks.”

MSF was not the only actor which encountered bureaucratic obstacles. Back in November 2014 already, local authorities rejected a proposal of the Anti-Racist Initiative from Thessaloniki to build up some infrastructure so people

Phase I: Shifting Routes – Emergence of Idomeni

could find shelter for at least one night. For a long time NGOs and solidarity groups were also not allowed to put up the tents they needed for storage purposes. Only in August 2015, after Idomeni had become a major issue in media coverage, was MSF allowed to erect tents, and UNHCR set up another tent.

Once the situation in Idomeni attracted increasing coverage in the (international) media, further professional aid organizations started arriving. In a way, however, they displaced the local support structures, and from the point of view of local volunteers they took advantage of the situation to raise funds. One local activist described how this *humanitarian business* unfolded:

“From August on, we had the magic box. Everybody was saying: ‘bye bye. Go to Europe’. The media were very active in this period. A lot of the refugees told the organizations: ‘We cannot carry all this food you are giving us. We don’t want more’. And they were forcing people to take more. You know what happened? We found the food on the ground, along the whole way. Everybody wanted to give them something, to take photos. You give them one croissant, 10,000 Euro is coming. That was the game. Everybody was collecting money. And the locals told me: ‘We don’t want to go there any more [to help], because the organizations don’t like us’.”

This kind of competitive relationship, both between NGOs and solidarity groups and between individual NGOs, persisted in the winter when Idomeni grew into an informal refugee camp. The process in which solidarity groups were excluded and eventually expelled from the site was officially completed when Idomeni was evicted in May 2016 and official camps were opened all around Greece, as will be discussed in following chapters.

By the end of what we are defining as Phase I, in the summer of 2015, the economy surrounding the Idomeni refugee sites had started increasing in size. Little by little, mostly through informal means and channels, ever more actors started conducting business with refugees – with the Greek authorities usu-



Idomeni region, November 2014 (Photograph: Vasilis Tsartsanis, Source: Asklepeion - Small Room project)

ally aware of the situation, but choosing not to intervene. They set up shops not only on the border, but along the entire route from the Greek islands to Idomeni, selling refugees all sorts of necessities, in many cases at inflated prices. An activist and Greek NGO worker recounted how commerce came to Idomeni in the summer of 2015 and became more and more formal and visible, providing all kinds of opportunities for profiteering:

“Idomeni also became interesting for businessmen, who thought: ‘Maybe we should pay more attention? There is money here’! Someone established a food stall; one time in the summer when it rained, people drove up in a car to sell raincoats; a woman arrived to sell fruit, charging two Euro for two apples. So, it began to become a village, it began to become Idomeni.”

Idomeni in the news: how the media came and the border opened

Except in some highly local media, there was almost no journalistic coverage of the situation in Idomeni, or the informal transit of refugees through the Republic of Macedonia in general, until spring 2015. This changed quite quickly in the aftermath of several dramatic events. In April 2015, 14 young men died on the railroad tracks in the Republic of Macedonia when a train ran them over.¹⁸ The next month, smugglers in the Republic of Macedonia forced 93 refugees to pay them extra money, 500 Euro each, to board a train which was supposed to take them to Serbia as police officers stood by and watched, according to the testimonies. Instead, the train brought them back to Greece, where they were found piled into three wagons, exhausted and close to suffocation.¹⁹ Both these events were widely reported in the news media.

Witnessing the effects of the regular, cruel attacks by mafia groups on the refugees, local activists and NGOs started to cooperate strategically with (international) media in April-May 2015 to inform them about the situation in Idomeni. They wanted the violence which mafia groups, acting more or less undisturbed in the Republic of Macedonia, were inflicting on refugees to end. More generally, they wanted refugees to be able to travel more safely. MSF also decided that it needed to draw more public attention to the conditions in Idomeni and the Republic of Macedonia. This is how a local activist explains his decision:

“In May 2015, I had enough. It was like war, people bleeding. I took a decision: to bring in BBC, Al Jazeera, Le Monde, Washington Post and ARTE.”

¹⁸ Bez nec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović (2017): “Governing the Balkan Route: Macedonia, Serbia and the European Border Regime”

¹⁹ Greek Council for Refugees (2015): “Idomeni report, April-July 2015”

Idomeni in the news: how the media came and the border opened



Idomeni region, June 2015 (Photograph: Vasilis Tsartsanis, Source: Asklepeion - Small Room project)

Involving the media in such (both literally and metaphorically) borderline situations is not an easy decision to make if you are providing solidarity support of any kind to refugees in such an indifferent and often hostile climate. The question of publicity had bothered solidarity groups and activists from the beginning, as an activist from Thessaloniki who works for a Greek NGO explains:

“At first, there was this ambiguity: what should we do? Do you report these things? Or do you let them roll on the way they do, in secret, so you do not cause unrest in the village? Although they knew what was going on. I really don’t know if publicity helps or makes things worse in such situations.”

In the Republic of Macedonia, the violent attacks and especially the lethal accidents, and the public attention they attracted, became a turning point for official policy on transit migration. Parliament passed a law on 18 June 2015

which introduced a so-called “72-hour paper” after the local NGO Legis, supported by other actors like UNHCR, massively lobbied for such a solution. The regulations of the new law were more or less copied from a similar law in Serbia which had already been introduced years before. The initial concept of such a “72-hour paper” was that people who indicate that they want to apply for asylum when they first encounter officials in the border region are given a legal document that grants them the right to travel in the country for 72 hours, so they can reach one of the reception centers. De facto, however, these papers were used as a kind of transit visas to reach the next border.²⁰

This shift in the Republic of Macedonia’s policy led, at least temporarily, to the disappearance of the smuggling networks, simply because there was no demand for them any more. It also led to an increasing visibility of Idomeni as transit hub for refugees. From now on, buses leaving from Athens brought people directly to Idomeni, dropping them off close to the border so they could cross it on foot. They usually didn’t have to wait for more than a few hours before they could cross the border and walk to the train station in Gevgelija, the small city in the Republic of Macedonia on the other side of the border.

At this point, which we define as the transition from Phase I to Phase II, it is important to briefly summarize the approach of the Greek authorities, which was – to put it diplomatically – ambivalent and eclectic, characterized by a mix of passivity on the one hand, and a particular kind of engagement on the other. The Greek state and authorities were not merely *absent-present* when it came to covering the basic needs of the people approaching Idomeni as their exit point from Greece. It was clear to everybody involved in the “refugee issue” during this period that the spontaneous and massive solidarity of ordinary people and activist groups along the routes and around Idomeni was adequately providing the people who were crossing through with basic goods and services. But the Greek state’s absence in this regard did not mean it was passive in general regarding the “refugee issue”. The Greek authorities actively

²⁰ Bezneć/Speer/Stojić Mitrović (2017): “Governing the Balkan Route: Macedonia, Serbia and the European Border Regime”

pursued a set of laws and policies on migration; it's just that the ones they enforced did not provide relief for the refugees, but rather placed additional burdens on their shoulders. The main example of such a policy concerned the way some one million refugees who arrived on the Greek Islands were "piloted" through Greece via Athens, far from the shortest and most direct way to get from Lesbos, for example, to Idomeni. Forcing a million refugees to detour through the country for 10-15 days was entirely pointless, at least from the perspective of the refugees and their needs. As administrative masterplan, however, it makes more sense if we consider the role of neoliberalism in investing the state with new tasks and roles, not least the task of creating and opening up new opportunities for private profit. After all, forcing a million refugees to trek through Greece does create endless business opportunities for locals and other entrepreneurs. They range from the "special prices" that were being charged for ferry trips from the islands to Athens to the extortionate prices in the illegal food stalls the authorities tolerated at the border station of Idomeni which we mentioned before. Both of these examples of "entrepreneurial" initiative involved transactions that violated Greek law, but when it came to applying this part of their laws the Greek authorities again preferred the approach of absence and passivity.

Phase II: The Absent-Present State and the Rise of an Anarchic Humanitarianism

In the summer of 2015, the *jungles* in the Idomeni region disappeared in the wake of a series of new policies in the Republic of Macedonia. As described in the previous chapter, Macedonian authorities formalized border crossings from Greece into, and through, its territory by introducing the 72-hour-paper in June 2015. In August they opened a special camp directly by the Greek-Macedonian border, in Gevgelija, where refugees were registered and given their 72-hour papers.²¹ Not long after, special non-stop trains started transporting refugees from the camp directly to the Macedonian-Serbian border. This was the government's response to the chaotic scenes that had developed at the Gevgelija train station in the weeks before, with thousands of migrants having to cram on board one of the three short, daily trains leaving Gevgelija.

Just before the new camp in Gevgelija was established, however, the Republic of Macedonia tried to block previously tolerated border crossings. The fields around Idomeni turned into something resembling a battlefield as migrants tried to enter the Republic of Macedonia anyway and Macedonian police and army wielded tear gas, shock grenades and batons in response. As a result of the temporary border closure, thousands of people were suddenly stuck at Idomeni. The border was eventually re-opened after three days,²² but the

²¹ Until then, these papers were supposed to be given to the refugees in the train station in Gevgelija, but in practice people just traveled through the Republic of Macedonia without papers.

²² [Beznec/Speer/Stojić Mitrović \(2017\)](#): "Governing the Balkan Route: Macedonia, Serbia and the European Border Regime"



Gevgelija Camp, September 2015 (Source: Moving Europe)

way this first border closure unfolded foreshadowed what the area would become like several months later: thousands of refugees gathering at the border, agony and stress, intolerable living conditions, protests, police brutality, and the mobilization of a solidarity movement to cover rising needs for basic services and goods. A member of the MSF team vividly recounted the consequences of the border closure:

“Suddenly, when the border closed on 20 August, we had 9,000 people there, defecating and feeding themselves in the middle of nowhere: in the dust, in the fields, in the heat, in the rain. There was only the train station, and they found refuge there, filling it with tents – tents they bought to keep their families safe – and we intensified the distribution of non-food items.”

Starting already in June 2015, the situation in Idomeni transformed as a new “paradigm of mobility” emerged. Buses with migrants which came from Athens stopped directly in front of the border, which people generally crossed



Border fence, March 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

within just a few hours. Now the border was open, the way people moved across started to obtain what could be described as some basic bureaucratic characteristics, in terms of how their arrival was processed and they were provided with basic supplies and services. Idomeni was no longer a remote crossing point where refugees arrived secretly and hid in *jungles* while police pretended not to see them. Local community, traders and NGOs were present as well – this time to stay. One of the authors visited Idomeni in September 2015 and described the scenario:

“In Idomeni buses came crowding in, especially in the evening and at night, at a drop-off point close to the railroad tracks, where Greek police officers urge people to leave the buses as soon as possible and point them in the direction of Macedonia. A few hundred meters down, police officers form groups of about 50 people, which then leave in the direction of the border every five to ten minutes. In addition to the police, UNHCR is present,



Police checking documents, November 2015 (Source: Moving Europe)

as well as the Greek Red Cross, MSF and the Bulgarian NGO ‘Orient’. They do not only hand out water, food and clothes, but also medical help [...]. Apart from UNHCR and the NGOs, there are two food stalls and a mobile trader who sells sun-protection gear and camping equipment. On the Macedonian side, the refugee groups pass by some Macedonian policemen and then walk down a dirt road to where mobile traders are selling cigarettes and SIM cards. A few hundred meters further down, they reach a tent camp for several thousand people, which was erected by the Macedonian government with the help of UNHCR. IOM is present there as well.”²³

According to UNHCR data, 687,047 migrants passed through Gevgelija (and by extension Idomeni) between 1 July 2015 and the end of that year.²⁴ However,

²³ bordermonitoring.eu (2015): “Kurzbericht von der griechisch-mazedonischen Grenze“

²⁴ UNHCR (2016): “FYR Macedonia inter-agency operational update 18-31 December 2015”

after the first temporary border closure in August, the “flow” through Idomeni was cut off a second time on 19 November 2015. That day, Slovenia declared it would henceforth refuse entry to migrants who did not originally come from Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan (the so-called “SIA-countries”). This practice of segregating refugees by origin was immediately adopted by the authorities in the Republic of Macedonia as well. In addition, the Republic of Macedonia started building a fence along its border with Greece.²⁵ It didn’t take long before 1,000 migrants were stuck at Idomeni again. Their number rapidly increased as buses kept on arriving at Idomeni which carried migrants from non-SIA countries as well. Some of those who were denied passage across the border went back to the big cities, mostly Athens – and were forced to pay for the bus travel back out.²⁶ Most of them, however, decided to stay at the border. They rallied in massive protests, demonstrating in many different ways to demand free passage (as the section on protests below will describe), and they pitched small tents to stay in while waiting for a new opportunity. Aid organizations also started setting up larger tents, which could provide temporary accommodation to hundreds of people.²⁷ Before then, UNHCR and some NGOs had erected only a small number of tents, which were mostly used for supplies and medical services, or at most to provide a place for people to sit in while waiting, sometimes overnight, to cross the border.

The decision to close the border to all but three nationalities in November 2015 was a turning point for the formation of the camp in Idomeni. The camp started growing and taking shape, not only in terms of space but also as a set of everyday social practices which became normalized in this emergency situation. One worker of a Greek NGO, in a characteristic description of the change, said Idomeni started turning into a kind of village, into a community. But this transformation also brought new manifestations of unrest, violence,

²⁵ euobserver.com (20.11.2015): “Balkan countries close borders to ‘economic migrants’”

²⁶ bordermonitoring.eu (2015): “Live Ticker Idomeni”

²⁷ youtube.com (14.12.2015): “Police remove hundreds of migrants blocked at Greek-Macedonian border”

and human pain and distress to the camp, which in turn affected the people who worked with the refugees as well. He recalled:

“A guy from the UN was there, and he told me: ‘Now we have an issue, it’s what we were expecting’, and after an hour the police told us ‘only Syrians, Iraqis, Afghanis’, and the push-backs started. We said now there will be fights, Idomeni is no longer a pretty place where everybody smiles. We used to smile to the people passing through, ‘bye, have a nice trip’. Now people started to stay in Idomeni, which means you must help them on a 24-hour basis, it is no longer a sandwich, a water and ‘have a nice trip’. Now you will have people who will try to cross the border illegally, they will catch them and they will be beaten up, they will be sent back. It will now be about medicine, doctors, it now needs more care. I remember one night, it was the first time I cried in Idomeni. There was a mother, she was Palestinian, but a refugee in Syria, with a different passport, and she had four children and was pushed back. It was very hard; she was looking at the others and saying ‘why not us?’. We moved into another era of Idomeni, when everything was built, big tents, pebble, it started to become a village: the pharmacy here, the square, the church, things like that. Although it was transit, it had become a camp.”

For twenty days, an increasingly large number of people gathered on the spot while facilities remained meager, often insufficient to provide even a minimum of basic services. UNHCR is reported to have abandoned the area several times under the pressure of circumstances; food supplies were irregular, often managed entirely by solidarity groups and migrants themselves; and new arrivals often had to sleep outside in the cold. One man was seriously injured when he climbed on top of a railroad car; he was electrocuted when he touched the overhead wiring.²⁸ Some of the refugees started trying to cross

²⁸ Greek Council for Refugees (2015): “Kilkis Update 23.11.2015-29.11.2015”

the border in other nearby locations, by themselves or paying smugglers to help them, but they were met with arrests, beatings and push-backs by the police of the Republic of Macedonia.

After beginning of December 2015, the Greek state started demonstrating a more organized approach to controlling developments in Idomeni. The police, which until then had maintained a distant role and barely interfered in the clashes between refugees and police officers from the Republic of Macedonia, now took a more active role in the surveillance of the border crossing. They now appeared on the front line on the border, and together the police forces of the two countries created and maintained a fenced corridor between the borders, with a gate, in order to control the border crossing process more effectively. People continued to converge on Idomeni, however, with buses bringing in hundreds of new refugees every day. Police and UNCHR started informing them that they needed to clear the railroad tracks, where some of them had erected tents, and that they should prepare to leave the camp altogether, as it would be evicted. In addition, police started stopping the incoming buses several kilometers away from Idomeni, and only those passengers who could cross the border were allowed to approach Idomeni. Taxis transporting refugees to the border were also stopped from approaching.²⁹

On 9 December 2015, the informal camp in Idomeni was evicted by the Greek police for the first time. Refugees were moved out against their will, and they were transferred to newly opened camps elsewhere on the Greek mainland. The police seemed intent on avoiding the use of violence against the refugees, but such an operation could not take place peacefully and several beatings and arrests were reported.³⁰ Moreover, the media were barred from covering the eviction. Journalists who were already in the camp were detained and kept away while other reporters and NGO workers who tried to approach the camp were stopped by police.³¹ Once the eviction was complete, incoming buses

²⁹ bordermonitoring.eu (2015): "Live Ticker Eidomeni"

³⁰ sigmalive.com (9.12.2015): "Police detain protesting migrants in Idomeni"

³¹ esiea.gr (9.12.2015): "Epixeirisi kai enantion dimosiograf"

with refugees were stopped at the EKO gas station, 20 kilometers away from the border. Only the groups of refugees who were allowed to cross the border were then directed on to Idomeni, and from there into Macedonia; all others were stopped.³²

After this first eviction, the Idomeni camp stood empty. In late January, however, the Greek authorities once again started allowing people to use the infrastructure there, after the Macedonian authorities had begun to deny entry to all migrants for some time.³³ During the weeks in between, thousands of people had gathered at the EKO gas station.

From late February 2016 on, legal possibilities to cross the Greek-Macedonian border at Idomeni were further limited. Starting on 20 February, only migrants from Syria and Iraq (the so called “SI-countries”) were allowed to cross the border. Afghanis, in particular, responded with partly violent protests in Idomeni (see section on protest below). On 23 February 2016, the camp in Idomeni was evicted once more, but this time only “partly” – meaning that mostly Afghani refugees were forced by Greek police to board buses leaving Idomeni. In practice, however, the infrastructure of the camp in Idomeni remained accessible to all nationalities in the following months, and the number of people staying in Idomeni continued to increase. Their number grew in particular after the Republic of Macedonia introduced even more arbitrary entry restrictions in late February/early March. Entrance was now denied to those holding a visa from Turkey as well, on the ground that Turkey is a safe third country. Authorities also started checking people’s specific place of origin, distinguishing between regions and cities in war-stricken Iraq and Syria that were deemed safe or unsafe.³⁴ In the time up to the complete, permanent closure of the border gate between Idomeni and Republic of Macedonia

³² bordermonitoring.eu (2015): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”

³³ ekathimerini.com (20.1.2016): “Authorities reopen camp as dozens gather at Idomeni in freezing conditions”

³⁴ [Greek Council for Refugees](http://greekcouncilforrefugees.org) (2016): “Brief update from Eidomeni (3/9/2016)”

on 8 March 2016, it is estimated that there were more than 14,000 migrants in Idomeni.³⁵ A Syrian refugee described his experience:

“When we came to the border, the police gave us a number on the paper we’d gotten on the Greek islands. Like: these 100 people get number 20. I waited for my turn; there was a tent at the border where the gate was. All the people sat inside this tent. I stayed inside for two days. There was nearly no place inside. Then it was my turn, in the middle of the night, and I showed the Macedonians my ID. And they said: ‘Ah, you are from Damascus, a safe city’. And I thought, are you kidding me? And then they said: ‘Go back’. They didn’t give you any time to talk with them. In February, every two days there was a new law, for example if you have a stamp from Turkey, you cannot pass. So, in the waiting tent, there was a lot of garbage, a lot of papers, a lot of passports, everywhere.”

The new restrictions were followed by protests, and the total eviction of the Idomeni camp on 24 May 2016. The final eviction was actually a process that took several weeks. Refugees started being informed about the state’s intention to evict the area and move them to other camps almost a month before,³⁶ and people already started being transferred voluntarily to the new camps during this time. However, both in terms of how people were informed and the evacuation itself, the operation seemed to be organized haphazardly. So did the infrastructure in the new camps, and the administrative facilitation of applications for asylum or relocation. All NGOs, solidarity groups and volunteers, even UNHCR, denounced the eviction of Idomeni and the transfer to the new camps.³⁷ MSF representatives, for example, underlined the lack of information that was made available to people during the process; the transfer of

³⁵ theguardian.com (17.3.2016): “Migration crisis: Idomeni, the train stop that became an ‘an insult to EU values’”

³⁶ mollyvalentineblog.wordpress.com (2.5.2016): “Politics & NGOs”

³⁷ aljazeera.com (26.5.2016): “Greece continues eviction of refugees from Idomeni”

refugees against their will to “the unknown and the uncertain”; and the lack of adequate provision for people’s basic needs (food, medical care) during the operation.³⁸ A member of another Greek NGO recalled how the eviction in May unfolded:

“One month before the final evacuation of Idomeni, delegates of the ministry started informing people in the camp. But this was not really done in a very organized way; they did not even have their own interpreters, they used the interpreters of the NGOs. But what was it like to live in the Idomeni camp, especially during this last phase of its existence? They had some leaflets too, translated into the basic languages of the camp, Farsi, Arabic. So, a kind of voluntary transportation of vulnerable people started, with buses that were rented by the ministry, and these buses took people to the camps. After some point, they just put people in the buses and told them, you will go somewhere, without telling them where. We had minors who went into the buses but had no idea where they would end up. They informed us through Google maps where their camp was.”

During the two and a half months between the total closure of the border gate and the final eviction of the camp, the number of migrants who were stranded there grew to 15,000 people. The camp’s visibility in the media and the number of (international) NGOs and volunteers in the area also reached new highs.³⁹ By the end of this period, Idomeni had turned into a peculiar-normal “border community”. But what was it like to live in the Idomeni camp, especially during this last phase of its existence?

³⁸ [msf.org \(26.5.2016\)](https://www.msf.org/26.5.2016): “Greece: Involuntary eviction from Idomeni creates further hardship for refugees”

³⁹ Fully describing the massive, international, multi-media news coverage of the Idomeni camp would require a special report by itself.



Railway tracks in Idomeni, April 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

Daily life in the camp: a borderline situation

As refugee on your way to the border, you first passed the old train station of Idomeni. There, a dozen abandoned, decommissioned railroad cars now provided shelter to several hundred refugees, often whole families, who were trying to protect themselves from the cold, wind and rain. In the old sleeping cars there were beds, but in the freight cars people slept on blankets on the floor, while sheets hung from the roofs to separate the space into discrete “rooms”. One of these spaces served as a first aid station.⁴⁰

All along the railroad towards the Republic of Macedonia, tents covered the spaces between the tracks. Refugees pitched them on top of the rocky railroad bed, and in some places on the actual rail tracks, to provide themselves with a place to stay while they waited for the border to open. Sometimes they also

⁴⁰ dailymail.co.uk (29.5.2016): “Refugees who made a train to nowhere their home”



Train station in Idomeni, April 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

used the tents to block trains from passing, as a means of protest. There were tents to the left and right of the railroad as well; there were tents everywhere. Fields alongside the railroad line were now covered by small tents, as well as a few larger ones which were set up by UNCHR and MSF. Some of those larger tents provided shelter for more people, who slept in beds inside; others were used for storing supplies or as spaces for activities and services such as medical treatment. Yet more tents could be seen along the new razor-wire fence the Republic of Macedonia had built to separate its territory from Greece. As the railroad to the border was mostly surrounded by fields, most tents were pitched on soft soil which quickly turned to mud after rain. It was windy and cold, with temperatures dropping to -15 degrees at night in January.⁴¹

In the tents and containers where NGOs stored the supplies they were distributing, you could find medicine, clothes, shoes, socks, raincoats, blankets, dry food (biscuits, croissants, nuts and dates), bottled water, evaporated milk,

⁴¹ Greek Council for Refugees (2016): “Syntomi enimerosi apo eidomeni”

tea, sugar, children's toys, hygiene items like razors, soaps, shampoos, toothpaste; but often not enough of them. There were first aid stations, but also playrooms for children. At any time of the day, there would be a long queue of people somewhere, waiting to get something they needed, whether it was food, clothes or tea, or the chance to see a doctor, or even just some reliable information. Rumors spread fast in Idomeni, but no one could give clear answers to what was going to happen with the people in the camp, or the borders: Were they going to open? When, if at all? Were the people going to be transported somewhere else? Where, and why? A worker of one of the Greek NGOs reported:

“After February, March 2016, people had gotten used to something that I'd never seen before. They'd gotten used to standing in line to get a piece of information. It would be you and fifty people in front of you, waiting to hear some information. One person had to tell it to the next. There were many rumors, passed on from other refugees, from smugglers. People were looking as hard as they could for reliable information, even more so after the borders closed.”

Even when the borders were still open, the lack of information was pervasive. Anyone who spent time in Idomeni, whether as police officer, NGO worker or volunteer, faced questions all the time – “where are we going from here?”, “what is there, behind this border?”, “do we have to walk a lot?”, “when are we going to cross?” – especially from those who had no access to smartphones and the Internet or did not know how to use them, and could not use social media to inform themselves. This constant search for answers and trustworthy information was something that stood out to anyone who came, however shortly, in whatever position, to this border community.

Between the tents, women and men were cooking on open fires, often the same fires that kept people warm against the cold. The smell of burning materials, often a mix of plastic and wood, was everywhere. NGOs provided some dry wood, but it was not always easy for the people in the camp to find enough,



Idomeni, April 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

especially on rainy days when everything was wet. When it rained, there was mud and puddles everywhere; there were tents full of water, people soaked to the bone for days. Sometimes the weather was good, and people enjoyed having meals or tea outside – maybe making jokes, laughing, discussing. All around, there were children running and playing, in the fields, on the rail-road, by the border fence. But it was also common to see children crying, sick children, even children being born. There were people praying in the mud, or on improvised praying sites. Sometimes there was music, dancing, even weddings. There could even be a concert or a film screening, jugglers and pantomimes entertaining the children. A Syrian woman who stayed in the Idomeni camp with her two children and her husband for three months in February – May 2016, whom we interviewed several months after they left the camp, described the situation:

“Looking back to Idomeni, I remember first of all the rain and the cold. It’s the very worst thing about this place. We started

swimming inside the tent. Everything was wet, and then the wind came. It was a very, very hard wind. Sometimes the tent was blown away. When it was nice weather, we had to clean our clothes, and maybe gather some wood for the worse times. We felt cold. We were sleeping in our coats. The same clothes we were sleeping in, we also wore during the day. And you are packed like sardines in this tent. All together. We can't move. It was very hard. I did not have a shower for three months. Only my head. You had to make fire with wood, heat up the water. It's a very hard thing to do. The official shower was too dirty! And there was no place. It was very crowded and dirty. I never went inside these places. Food: I remember tuna and sardines."

Alongside the refugees, there was a great number of workers, volunteers, police officers and politicians. Volunteers established an improvised cultural center to give classes to children and adults, but also to host performances, film screenings, music. One volunteer group even built an internet hot spot center. Activists and volunteers, solidarity groups, and smaller and larger NGOs from around the world had gathered in Idomeni to provide support – whether it was medical aid or food, clothes, information or entertainment – to the people who had gotten stranded at the border. There were religious groups, politicians, undercover state security agents, all trying to pursue their different interests on the fields of Idomeni.

There were also a lot of media: journalists, photographers, TV crews and radio reporters. Refugees took advantage of the media presence to spread their message: open the borders. They recounted their stories, they communicated their hardships and hopes. In turn, the media took good advantage of this opportunity as well: for several months, dramatic photos and videos from Idomeni appeared in the news almost every day – nationally and internationally. However, over time the dramatic reportages shifted slowly from a compassionate portrayal of the refugees to greater skepticism.

Both inside the camp and around it, a lot of informal business and shady dealings took place. Idomeni had its own economy, its own market place. There were stands or kiosks where refugees sold falafel, tea or small pre-packaged snacks.⁴² Around the camp, food stalls sold sandwiches, soft drinks, and ice-cream in the spring; traders drove in to sell fruit, raincoats, clothes and tents from their car boots, and entrepreneurial refugees joined in as well; mobile telephone companies were selling sim cards. But there was another, darker side to this market as well: smuggling, prostitution, human trafficking, drugs. This side was described in dramatic terms by a worker of a Greek NGO:

“Idomeni started to develop some kind of normality, but this was also dangerous. It slowly turned into a village, there were shops, but there were also parents who would give up their children, or prostitute them, women locked in railroad cars who were trying to make money in order to continue their journey, smugglers everywhere trying to persuade people. The border has a lot of bad things: trafficking, sexual exploitation. I have two cases in mind, two women who did not have any money anymore to continue on their way, and the smuggler told them: ‘Don’t worry, we will find a way’.”

During the interviews we conducted, this idea of a kind of permanence or “normality” settling in was often mentioned, especially by the activists and aid or NGO workers who had been on the field, even if it wasn’t always as dramatically as in the above quote. The closing of the border undoubtedly transformed Idomeni, little by little, into a kind of small community. This was, however, a community of great contrasts. On the one hand, one could witness a massive mobilization of groups and individuals who created a solidarity network of physical and psychological support for the refugees, but on the other hand the situation that had been created in Idomeni was full of exploitation, deprivation, physical and psychological harm and suffering. This is how one

⁴² munchies.vice.com (25.5.2016): “Meet the Falafel King of the Idomeni Refugee Camp”



The closed gate to the Republic of Macedonia, April 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

worker in a Greek NGO summarized the transformation of Idomeni from a transient point of border transit into a semi-permanent community:

“In the beginning the border gate was just two trees, but then it became like in jail. A proper door that opens and closes. At some point, the borders closed completely. A lot of sadness, a lot of mud, everybody sick, children crying, illness, cold, tents. There were ten food stalls, and people started to sell tents, clothes, mobile phones, SIM cards, there were even hairdressers. Companies sent in people to sell card phones. Someone sold vegetables, someone else fruit, it had become a village. They started to feel like it was their home. It was cold and rainy and the journalists used this image: sick children, without shoes. From pretty Idomeni, it had become tired. Smugglers returned, secret agents, religious groups. The people were exploited. Among them, you’d have the educated one, the crazy one, the drug addict, the fanatic.

Phase II: The Absent-Present State and the Rise of an Anarchical Humanitarianism

It was a society. The people needed psychological support. Some wanted to kill themselves, some wanted to set fire to themselves. People stopped smiling, felt lost, they had become like zombies. They didn't know what would happen. Some would say the borders will open again, some that they won't, some would say it's better to go across the river. Idomeni had a lot of noise, everyone shouted: police, NGOs, refugees, little children crying. It was a small place, but the noise it made was like a whole country."

The same NGO worker also described the physical and psychological effects working in Idomeni had on himself:

"I was very angry. I lost 13 kilos. I had no appetite, I started not to like my colleagues anymore. We didn't like going to work anymore, when in the beginning I was doing extra hours, I had a lot of energy. You became a machine – not only the people who worked for the NGOs, the volunteers too. I had a refugee who was my psychologist. We became friends and he supported me psychologically. He told me: 'Don't be sad'. Think about it: you have your house, you will go and have a bath, rest, sleep; and the one who lives there supports you."

Despite the worsening conditions, many people decided to stay in Idomeni instead of leaving for other places (see the section in this report on Phase III). Apart from the fact that most of the time conditions elsewhere weren't any better than in the Idomeni camp, if not worse, it is important to highlight the psychological importance for many refugees of being as close to the border as possible and staying "visible", as a young man from Syria explained to us:

"People stayed in Idomeni because they wanted to keep their eye on the door. Every day you woke up and put your head out of the tent: is there any movement at the border? And also because there were a lot of journalists, so the people knew that they could

call attention to their situation there, so the world would not forget about us.”

The expanding geography of Idomeni

After the *formalized corridor* that had helped refugees cross the Balkans was limited to migrants from SIA-countries in November 2015, and the Idomeni camp was evicted for the first time, new “smaller Idomenis” sprouted up in several nearby locations. One of them was again in the forests. Once people from non-SIA countries were barred from entering the Republic of Macedonia, some of them started gathering in the woods to find informal ways to cross the border, just like refugees had hidden in the forest during the first phase of Idomeni, before the informal camp grew there and gained global notoriety. The German newspaper “Süddeutsche Zeitung” reported on this development in January 2016,⁴³ describing how *jungles* had started to emerge even as the by then greatly expanded infrastructure of the Idomeni camp was left unused:

“[MSF] constructed a camp in the open countryside. Since then, there are showers and sanitary facilities, childcare and large, heated tents – within which they set up smaller ones to provide some privacy. Once a day, everything is cleaned and the garbage collection service hauls off the waste. But no refugee is allowed to sleep or have a shower there anymore. The Greek authorities do not allow it. [Instead,] many of those who try to make their way north through the wilderness are holding out in the forests around Idomeni. They stay in abandoned houses and haystacks, or squat in makeshift, self-built shelters [...]. Despite all the risks, the number of people who move into the forest increases every day. How many of them are there is unclear. But when the smug-

⁴³ sueddeutsche.de (13.1.2016): “Flüchtlinge in Idomeni – wo der Traum von Europa endet”



Polikastro gas station, April 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

glers come to pick them up at the collection points, hundreds of them are waiting there. They are often people who were already caught by the Macedonians repeatedly, but who are not giving up.”

In December 2015, Greek authorities introduced the new policy, described in the first section of this chapter, of stopping buses that brought new people to the border at a gas station on the highway near the town of Polykastro, some 25 kilometers from the Greek-Macedonian border. This way, the authorities hoped to prevent the Idomeni camp from growing again, and gain more effective control of the border crossing. Time and again, however, larger groups of migrants – tired of waiting and being barely provided with basic necessities – started marching along the highway on their own in the direction of the border. In some cases, they blocked the highway in protest, demanding immediate transfer to the border. In the meantime, although the number of people at the gas station was increasing rapidly and weather conditions were

deteriorating, the necessary humanitarian infrastructure was slow to materialize. An MSF employee witnessed the creation of the gas-station camp on 9 December 2015 after the first eviction of Idomeni camp:

“The police stopped the buses at the EKO station, which is 25 kilometer away from Idomeni. A second camp was created there, again in the middle of nowhere. Horrible: everything at random, at a gas station where there could be a fire and all the people would explode. We had 6,000 people there. 250 buses arrived. There were quarrels, there was no line for the bus, the buses left with the refugees’ bags, they left the people out, the small children, out in the cold. We opened a second camp in the yard of the gas station, where we tried to feed the people. We had heated tents, medical stuff, cleaning service, guards. It was unmanageable. We tried to provide for the most vulnerable cases with tents, for women, children, pregnant women. At some point UNHCR was there too; they wanted to create a huge camp, but that idea failed because they did not want that, the government did not agree, maybe the local authorities, who knows. As a result, people were being stopped at a gas station or in the middle of nowhere. We had 120 buses every day. Many times people became disgruntled, they blocked the roads, they fought with police. There were fires everywhere, right near the gas station. We distributed wood so people could warm themselves and cook. 15 tons of wood every day, and it was still not enough.”

In addition, a new camp started growing around “Hara”, a small hotel outside the village of Evzoni which had been a widely known meeting point for smugglers and their clients before the *formalized corridor* was established. The hotel regained its importance after the border was closed and people started depending more on the “services” of smugglers again. Soon, the parking lot in front of the hotel and the hotel’s immediate surroundings were full of small tents, while the hotel reception transformed into a small improvised shop for

snacks and camping equipment. Just opposite the hotel, on the other side of the highway, at a shutdown BP gas station, small tents were set up, too. Like at the other locations, a chaotic situation developed. A member of an NGO recounted how the refugees did what it took to survive, while others made money off their vulnerable situation – with the exception of some of the local farmers, who could not work on their fields anymore now those were filled with tents and being trampled on:

“Some of the little tents there [at Hara Hotel] were destroyed, and people squatted a big building close to the Idomeni camp which the Ministry of Agriculture used to examine imported cattle. They cut down trees to make fires. They did everything you do to survive when you are in the rain, with nothing on you. Refugees also squatted the surrounding fields. The farmers were complaining. They suffered losses. They lost their wheat harvest. They did not get any compensation. Some made profits, but others did not.”

Meanwhile, even before the second eviction of Idomeni in late May 2016, the Greek state had started to construct official camps elsewhere in Northern Greece. In this report's chapter about Phase III of developments at Idomeni, we will describe some of them in more detail.

Break-throughs and Push-backs

After November 2015, it again became common practice for the Macedonian police to push back migrants on a daily basis, transporting them immediately back to Greek territory if they caught them crossing the border informally. Those migrants were not given any chance to apply for asylum or pursue legal remedies in the Republic of Macedonia, and in many cases they were even beaten up. A member of the Greek Council for Refugees remembers:

“Away from the official border gate, people from the nationalities that were denied entry were crossing the border illegally. These people were then pushed back. The push-backs were illegal. They usually happened during the night, when the door was officially closed; it would be opened, not to let people pass through, but to send people back. There were buses waiting for those people, from private companies, to take them to Athens. Not always to camps, sometimes they dropped them off on the squares, and then they camped there. Some came back to Idomeni and tried to cross the border again. Some came back from the Republic of Macedonia beaten up. The police forces of the two countries seemed to be cooperating on these illegal push-backs, as the Greek police would be accompanying the people that had been pushed back and would not let us talk to them. There were cases of people who were bitten by dogs. We once talked to a group of nine men, one of them had been badly bitten in the shoulder by a dog and he explained to us that others had been bitten in their arms because they tried to protect their necks. It seemed the police used dogs that were trained to bite people. We tried to find out where the people were, whether they got beaten up. Typically, the more money people had on them, the more robberies we had and the more people came back with their head split open. There were very brutal scenes. I could not stand it. It was like in a horror film. You went in the afternoon to distribute water and milk for children and you didn’t know whether you would see half-dead people.”

Many people had to make multiple attempts to cross the border, and then the territory of the Republic of Macedonia itself, before they were successful. They needed to try again and again, with the help of smugglers who had again become very active in the area. Making it through did not just require money, it also involved being arrested, threatened, beaten, being pushed back several



Migrants caught by Macedonian police waiting to be pushed-back to Greece, April 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

times before they finally succeeded. A family from Syria told us about their experience:

“We tried seven times to go to Macedonia. The seventh time we succeeded. Once, we spent two nights in the forest and we were walking like hell. When we reached the point where the car should pick us up, there was police. It’s a big lie when everybody told you, we went by ourselves. It’s so difficult. It’s impossible. Alone, you can’t cross these places. Impossible. We paid only once: we gave the money to a third person, and if we succeeded we would call him and he would hand over the money. On one of our attempts, we tried to reach the border. But there were too many people, maybe a hundred. I was talking with my family, let’s go back, this is not going to work. And then we heard somebody saying ‘stop, stop’. It was two policemen from Greece.

They pointed their guns at us. And everybody stopped, only the smugglers ran away. Other policemen came and we had to walk for three hours. There were two big buses alongside us, empty, but they wouldn't let anybody get in. They made us walk, in the rain, until we reached Idomeni. And they were very rude with us. The seventh try, we walked about ten hours. Until we reached a point where a car was supposed to be waiting for us. The car was late. Thirty-two people in a small van. And then one of the wheels broke. The driver stopped, opened the door and said 'get out, hide behind this tree and I will come back'. It was about five in the afternoon. Until five in the morning, we stayed behind this tree, in the rain, without water, without eating, without anything, because the smuggler had told us, in the car you can't bring anything. So, we only took the very important things and left the food and the sleeping bag behind, everything. We stayed in the rain for twelve hours. At five in the morning, the smuggler came and picked us up and took us to the Serbian border."

Conflicts, protests and riots

Developments like the border closures, the limitation of legal transit to specific countries of origin, and the lengthening of waiting periods often provoked migrant protests in the Idomeni region. The concrete forms of protest varied widely. Sometimes, people would carry banners and shout slogans, or block the highway, the railroad tracks or the border crossing. Other times, however, people went on hunger strikes or sewed their mouths shut in protest, and violent clashes took place with the police and military of the Republic of Macedonia.

Directly after the border was closed to non-SIA nationals on 19 November 2015, people from the newly excluded countries rallied for days at the border



Sewed mouths, November 2015 (Source: Moving Europe)

crossing, holding banners and shouting slogans. A lot of media coverage focused on a group of Iranians who had sewn their mouths shut.⁴⁴ After days of non-violent demonstrations, the protest repeatedly escalated, with hundreds of migrants trying to break through Macedonian police lines.⁴⁵ The escalation first peaked on 28 November 2015, after Macedonian soldiers began constructing a three-meter-high fence where there had previously only been some coils of NATO razor wire on the ground. One person was hit by an electric shock while standing on top of a railroad car. During one heavy riot, migrants pelted rocks at Macedonian police forces, which responded with tear gas and stun grenades, and even entered Greek territory.⁴⁶ Tensions spread quickly, not only between the Macedonian police and migrants who were not allowed to enter anymore, but also between those who were allowed to cross the bor-

⁴⁴ [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...) (23.11.2015): "Migrants near Macedonia border hold hunger strike"

⁴⁵ [telegraph.co.uk](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/...) (26.11.2015): "Clashes between migrants and police break out on the Greek-Macedonian border"

⁴⁶ [reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com/...) (28.11.2015): "Police, migrants clash on Macedonia border; soldiers build fence"

der and those who were not, but were still arriving at the camp. Protests and blockades of the railroad tracks and the border crossing continued on a daily basis until the first eviction of the Idomeni camp on 9 December 2015.⁴⁷ A Gambian migrant who stayed in Idomeni for three weeks during this time gave us a simple explanation for the ongoing protests and tensions:

“The state was present there with police, and what the state did was to stop people from crossing the border. People fought, they threw stones, held demonstrations, fighting for their rights. People saw it as injustice that only three nationalities could pass.”

A member of the MSF team also recalled the events:

“The others, including Iranians, Moroccans, Algerians and Sudanese – or Somalians, who also have a war in their country – could not pass. They organized, they closed down the railroad, some sewed their mouths shut, 14 of them, and they said: ‘no one will pass; either we all pass or no one will pass’. Can you imagine being on the border and seeing the others passing? You could see the tensions escalating. On 9 December, the police came and evacuated Idomeni. They put everybody in buses and sent them away, to Athens. They said, enough, only three nationalities will be allowed through.”

Protests continued to take place after the first eviction of the Idomeni camp, but their location, intensity, form and goal were different. From December 2015 to February 2016, protests mainly broke out when migrants at the Polykastro gas station became tired of waiting for many hours, even days, before the Greek police allowed their buses to approach the border crossing. They staged repeated attempts to block the highway in front of the gas station, demanding to be transported to the border immediately.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ bordermonitoring.eu (2015): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”

⁴⁸ bordermonitoring.eu (2016): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”



Blocked highway in front of the Polikastro gas station, April 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

When the *formalized corridor* across the Balkans was limited further in late February 2016 and only migrants from Syria and Iraq were legally allowed to pass through, it triggered a new wave of protests, this time directly in front of the border fence. Many people – especially Afghans, who were barred from crossing the border by the new measure – walked down the highway to Idomeni from the Polykastro gas station (and even places further away) in the hope that they could nevertheless cross the border. When the border gate was kept closed to them, it spurred border blockades and protests. The railroad tracks were also blocked several times. Protests continued after the partial eviction of the Idomeni camp on 23 February 2016, when Afghans were forced to enter buses that took them away from Idomeni. That day, many new people arrived in Idomeni who were not allowed to cross the border, and people who were already in the camp and those who just returned joined in new



Blocked highway in front of the border crossing point, April 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

protests. Those protests grew in the following days⁴⁹ and turned violent in particular on 29 February, when protesters broke down a gate over the railroad tracks and Macedonian security forces responded with tear gas, causing mass panic.⁵⁰

As access to the Republic of Macedonia decreased over time, even for migrants from Syria and Iraq, protests at Idomeni intensified. They often took the form of temporary blockades of the railroad tracks. Many people still held out hope that they would eventually be able to legally cross the border, but they lost this hope more and more after 8 March when the gate was closed once and for all. Around the same time, weather conditions became much worse, with heavy rains setting in.⁵¹ With courage fueled by desperation, several thousand peo-

⁴⁹ bordermonitoring.eu (2016): "Live Ticker Eidomeni"

⁵⁰ spiegel.de (29.2.2016): "In Idomeni zeigt sich Europas Versagen"

⁵¹ bordermonitoring.eu (2016): "Live Ticker Eidomeni"



March of Hope, March 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

ple who had been stuck in Idomeni for days or even weeks set off on 14 March 2016 on what was soon called a *March of Hope*, and tried to cross into the territory of the Republic of Macedonia at a place several kilometers away from Idomeni, where no fence had been built.

Many (international) media reports suggested that international volunteers had provoked and “implemented” the march, pointing to an Arabic-language leaflet with a detailed map that had been distributed in the Idomeni camp in the days before. It was also reported that three people died during the march, while crossing the river into the Republic of Macedonia. In reality, that tragic accident took place the night before, but the leaflet did exist. In addition, a number of international volunteers (as well as journalists) spontaneously joined the march when they realized thousands of people were leaving the Idomeni camp.⁵² Nevertheless, the march was primarily the result of

⁵² [vice.com](https://www.vice.com/en/article/2016/3/17/haben-helfer-in-idomeni-wirklich-das-leben-von-fluechtlingen-riskiert/) (17.3.2016): “Haben Helfer in Idomeni wirklich das Leben von Flüchtlingen riskiert?”

autonomous organization of migrants in Idomeni, as a report from Idomeni on the “Time” website confirms.⁵³

The marchers successfully reached Macedonian territory, but all participants were arrested by Macedonian security forces. After separating the journalists and volunteers from the group, the Macedonians pushed back the refugees to Greek soil. A Greek NGO worker describes what happened after the *March of Hope*:

“They sent them back in the night. I worked that night. I went to collect people with my car. I talked to a policeman and told him, ‘people are coming from the bridge, it’s better to go and take them, give us permission’, because it was forbidden to take somebody in your car between Idomeni and Thessaloniki. They would take your license, and we used our own cars. I took a woman to Idomeni who was nine months pregnant, and when we arrived the ambulance came and she went to hospital to give birth. The next day people understood there was no hope, even if hope dies last. People understood that the border will not open again. However, they stayed there; they had no other choice, where should they go?”

More than two months still followed before the Idomeni camp was evicted for good in late May 2016, and during this time migrants kept staging protests and blockades at the fence, on the railroad tracks and on the highway, and acts of self-harm continued to take place. To mention but two examples: On 23 March 2016, around 500 migrants blocked the highway from Thessaloniki to the Republic of Macedonia, only one day after two migrants tried to set themselves on fire in the Idomeni camp.⁵⁴ On 10 April, tear gas was fired at

⁵³ [time.com \(16.3.2016\)](#): “Inside the Harrowing Night Hundreds of Refugees Tried to Escape Greece”

⁵⁴ [zeit.de \(23.3.2016\)](#): “Hunderte Flüchtlinge blockieren Autobahn bei Idomeni”

migrants on Greek territory after they tried to scale the border fence, and MSF recorded over 200 injuries, including women and children.⁵⁵

The Greek state, humanitarian actors and local society

During the second phase in the development of refugee settlement at Idomeni, it was not only the geography of the camps that expanded, the number of non-state actors that were involved multiplied as well, from major international organizations such as MSF and UNHCR to volunteers from many different countries and local activists. The expanding role of these non-state actors can be interpreted primarily as a result of the peculiar *absent-presence* of the Greek state, in two different ways. On the one hand, since the Greek authorities were not administering any aid or services, it was simply very necessary for others to step in and provide humanitarian support. On the other hand, the peculiar non-existence of state structures also gave various non-state actors the opportunity to act relatively freely, if often also in very uncoordinated ways, as witnessed by a member of a Greek NGO:

“From time to time, Ministers visited Idomeni, Members of Parliament, local delegates, with other people following in tow, promising things in front of cameras that never happened. The state was absent, which in a sense conformed to the letter of law since the camp was unofficial, yet the camp existed under the tolerance of the state. The police constituted the only official presence of the state in Idomeni, and it had the order not to intervene. From time to time, the police in the camp would take on different roles, grouping together people who could cross the border, checking people’s papers. They also cooperated with nearby police stations. But even if there were big fights they would keep out, only intervening if the situation became

⁵⁵ [youtube.com \(11.4.2016\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11.4.2016): “Idomeni: Tear gas as migrants try to scale Greek border fence”



Migrants trying to get some information, April 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

extreme; then they would intervene, but without using violence, mostly through intimidation.”

The near-complete absence of governmental structures in Idomeni also resulted in a lack of information for the people who were stranded there. This was one more element that contributed to the confusion and stress, as described earlier in this. Someone who worked for another Greek NGO told us:

“For me the state didn’t exist. It was two containers, where the police were. There were no plans, nothing about what they would do, only what was on TV – Merkel will meet Tsipras, the EU – this is what people heard. There were no plans, no information. I remember how they asked me, what will happen with us, what does the Greek TV say? I told them that the TV isn’t saying what will happen, but what can be heard is that they will create camps. And they asked me, ‘what camps? It’s a camp here’.”



Idomeni, May 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

A local elected representative we interviewed also pointed to the “non-existence” of the state in Idomeni, as well as the difficulties in communication between the local and national authorities:

“In Greece we usually chase after the problems, we don’t think in advance about what happens later. We take action when it is needed to solve problems. This is why we had this issue in Idomeni. We were always chasing after the problems. The central state did not cooperate with the municipality. I could say it was mostly the NGOs and the UN who were interested in the situation, rather than the state. The state should have organized things better, but the central state was not here. There was no plan, no consideration of what might happen tomorrow, the next day, the next week, etc. Everything was very provisional. Then the stream of people disappeared and so did the issues. No organization and, if not a total, at least a significant absence of the

state. But crossing the border there was illegal, this may be a reason why the state was not so present.”

The peculiar *absent-presence* of the Greek state in the informal camps in the Idomeni region made it possible for something to emerge that could be defined as *anarchical humanitarianism* – a form of horizontal humanitarianism, undertaken by a multitude of individual and collective actors, which could develop “freely” because there was very little bureaucratic control. It led to multilevel cooperation, sometimes even a total blending of roles, a Greek NGO worker explained:

“After some point, everybody cooperated with everyone else. I’d never seen an anarchist handing out numbers to groups in collaboration with the police before, and I’d never expected to see it. We just did whatever needed to be done for the sake of the people there. It was important to talk with each other, in informal groups with technocrats, you could talk with them and your opinion would be heard.”

But this cooperation was not always easy and fruitful, especially in such a demanding, chaotic and sometimes even competitive context, an employee of another Greek NGO pointed out:

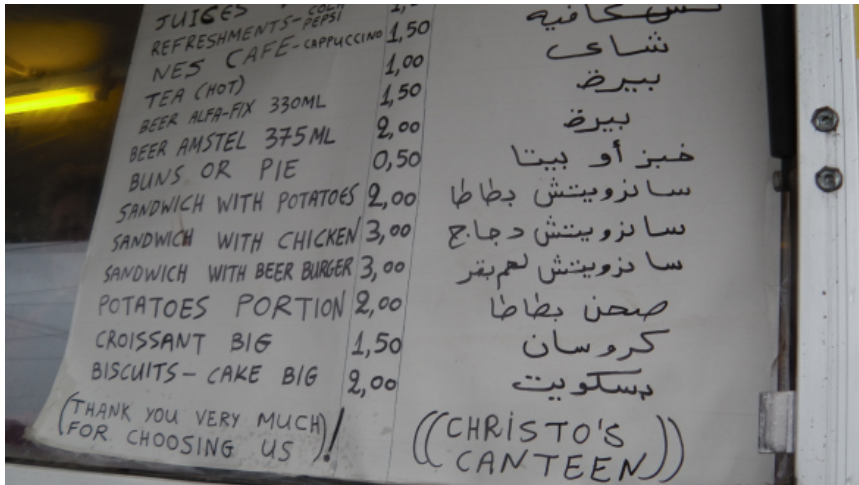
“Relations with other NGOs and groups were multileveled and very difficult. There were often tensions, but in some other cases good neighborly cooperation. Personally, I saw it function on a more personal level. It had to do with the individuals. Maybe the relations with an NGO were bad, but with some people working for that NGO the cooperation was good. As the situation in the camp got worse, the problems grew and the population increased, from the moment the border was closed to the final evacuation, relations with the other organizations got more and more difficult too. There were a lot of people who had come to Idomeni as volunteers because they thought it was trendy, but

there were also volunteers in groups that knew very well where they were, and why they were there. There were volunteer organizations that offered very good support. They created a cultural center, a school, a kitchen where they made much better food than the catering.”

To some extent, the difficulties in cooperation appeared after the intervention of UNHCR, which is usually appointed the leading role in refugee camp management, internationally. In the case of Idomeni, UNHCR seems to have appeared quite early on, but it did not really manage the organization of facilities and activities in the field. Especially when questions of funding arose, a sense of competition between NGOs and solidarity groups became evident, and tensions emerged. A local activist from Thessaloniki who volunteered in Idomeni expressed frustration with the accusations the government and media leveled at the solidarity movements, and the way they were excluded from the new camps after the evacuation of Idomeni:

“UNHCR was trying to put up barriers and send away the solidarity people. They were saying that we should stop and they would take full responsibility. But that didn’t happen and more groups came from abroad, for example the No Border Kitchen, which ended up cooking, together with other groups, 10 to 12 thousand meals per day. With the NGOs, during the first period, we were all together, but then UNHCR came and things changed. They didn’t want the solidarity groups there. The cooperation started to break up, the NGOs did what UNHCR wanted, because that is where the money was. What drives me crazy is that they all now blame the solidarity people. But believe me, the one million people who passed through Idomeni, they were mostly fed and provided with water and clothes by solidarity people.”

The role of the local community was initially, as described in the chapter about Phase I, limited to a few citizens from the Idomeni region who showed an interest in the conditions the migrants were living in, and tried to help them



Price list of a food stall in Idomeni, April 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

with basic supplies. This changed, however, when more and more migrants became stranded in the area, and more and more people arrived to support them as well. A member of a Greek NGO described the impact of how all this became a more and more relevant part of the local economy:

“What happened is, they learned to tolerate the refugees and co-exist, since a lot of money was coming into the area. Can you imagine all these organizations in the camp, from around the world, plus volunteers and solidarity groups, all the missions staying in the nearby villages and the small town? A lot of people from the area were also working for the NGOs, even the catering was local. A lot of money, very much money. It was a difficult relationship, with tensions and conservative and xenophobic tendencies, but at the same time there was a silent agreement that, as long as the refugees are here, let's take advantage of the situation.”



Western Union in a garage in the Idomeni village, April 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

On the other hand, a member of another Greek NGO emphasized that there were still local people who were not driven by profit and provided charitable support, which was not reported by the media:

“It was very moving to see the support from common people, the way they opened their houses. There were old people who came in their cars and took people from Idomeni to their houses, at first for a few days, and later to stay with them. Support that I did not expect to experience in such intensity! But this was glossed over. Idomeni was in the news only when there was teargas, or somebody died or a baby was born, or a famous singer or actor visited.”

Phase III: (Re-)Gaining Control – Making Refugees Invisible

The second phase of developments at Idomeni could essentially be characterized as a combination of (a) uncontrolled movement of refugees to the main camp at Idomeni, directly at the border with the Republic of Macedonia, as well as between that camp and other camps nearby, (b) the informal character of these camps, (c) a massive proliferation and greater variety of non-state actors (NGOs, domestic and international activists/volunteers) engaging on these sites, and (d) a peculiar *absence-presence* of the Greek state and its structures. The resulting *anarchical humanitarianism* receded again, however, when new, state-controlled camps were established in parallel to the imposition of ever stricter limits on access to the Republic of Macedonia – a process that started in late 2015 and constituted a third phase of developments. For several months, though, Phase II and III overlapped in different ways, suggesting that Phases I, II and III are less chronologically clear-cut time periods than substantively mingled chronotopes.

The first serious attempt of the Greek state to (re)gain control in the Idomeni region through infrastructure measures could be observed after the border crossing was officially closed for people from non-SIA countries. The state launched an effort to convince people who were denied the right to cross the border to leave the area voluntarily. This effort was not very successful. After the Idomeni camp was first evicted on 9 December 2015, however, around 2,000 people were compulsorily transported in buses to Athens. Some 1,000 of them were brought to the former Olympic Tae Kwon Do Stadium, which had been turned into a refugee camp.⁵⁶ The infrastructure, living conditions

⁵⁶ ekathimerini.com (14.12.2016): “Migrant center to open at site of old airport”

Phase III: (Re-)Gaining Control – Making Refugees Invisible



Orfanotrofio after its demolition, July 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

and hygiene standards in the Tae Kwon Do Stadium were extremely poor, and there was a significant lack of information and little evidence of future planning. An “Al Jazeera” report described the chaotic situation there in those days:

“Inside the stadium, blankets were scattered across the floors, many of them nestled next to overflowing rubbish bins. Dirty water seeped from the bathrooms and into the hallways where families were sleeping [...]. Speaking to local media on Thursday, Greek Migration Minister Yiannis Mouzalas admitted that authorities were ill-prepared for the return of refugees and migrants to the capital, where they have been put in three different temporary facilities. ‘I don’t know where the migrants will go from here’, Mouzalas said. ‘You’ll find out when it happens’.”⁵⁷

⁵⁷ aljazeera.com (12.12.2015): “Anger in Greek refugee camp after Idomeni eviction”

As the number of people stranded in Greece kept increasing, and the conditions in Idomeni and other camps remained unbearable day after day, the solidarity movement grew ever larger, and some solidarity groups decided to squat several empty buildings in Athens and Thessaloniki. Their goal was to provide spaces for refugees within the urban areas where they could reside in more humane conditions, and where the refugees themselves could take on an active role in determining the way their living conditions were organized.⁵⁸ The first and best-known squat in Thessaloniki which offered temporary shelter to refugees who had been turned away from the Macedonian border was “Orfanotrofio”. This was an abandoned, state-owned building which had been passed on to the local orthodox diocese. It was squatted in early December 2015, at the time Idomeni was first evicted. Several dozen people lived in “Orfanotrofio”, in a self-governed structure and in cooperation with local civil society, for seven months. The squat was violently evicted in late July 2016, using bulldozers which destroyed the building and buried large amounts of clothes, food and medicine that had been collected by the grassroots solidarity movement. The brutal way the building was evicted, immediately after a “No Border Camp” in Thessaloniki took place (visited by several thousand participants from various countries), illustrated the spirit in which the Greek state launched its attempt to (re)gain control over the “refugee issue”. It was characterized by the criminalization of solidarity⁵⁹ and a clear preference for *humanitarian business*, a choice which also revealed what position the state envisioned for refugees in Greek society: invisible, outside the urban space, and far away from the international media glare that had exposed conditions in Idomeni. At the time of writing (late summer 2017), clear signs have emerged that the Greek authorities will also evict the remaining squats in Athens where refugees live.

Taking into account the extraordinarily difficult conditions and the problems which inevitably arise in such projects, the “Orfanotrofio” squat seems to have

⁵⁸ www.washingtonpost.com (5.8.2016): “Welcome to Greece’s refugee squats”

⁵⁹ roarmag.org (2016): “Criminalizing solidarity: Syriza’s war on the movements”

Phase III: (Re-)Gaining Control – Making Refugees Invisible

functioned fairly well. Not only did it provide refugees with shelter and access to basic necessities, it also served as a space for participation and inclusion. Residents of the neighborhood accepted their presence and often provided support for the project. An activist from Thessaloniki recalled how “Orfanotrofio” operated:

“I think a very good job was done in Orfanotrofio. There was a kitchen, there were rooms, there were common spaces, there was a health center and a storage place. I think it was a big mistake to evict the occupied buildings, especially Orfanotrofio. It was an example of how immigrants can integrate in society. They all had their financial service numbers, their AMKA, their card to go to the doctor. Relationships to society had been developed; a space which had been abandoned was now being used. The squats provided good accommodation, and they annoyed nobody. Orfanotrofio was very well accepted by the people who lived in Toumpa, which is a workers’ neighborhood: people came round, old ladies visited, they talked to the people and brought stuff.”

From late February 2016 on, when access to the *formalized corridor* was denied to Afghani citizens as well and it became more and more obvious that the corridor would soon be closed entirely, leaving tens of thousands of migrants stranded in Greece, the Greek state began to build official camps in Northern Greece. Most of these camps, a lot of which still exist at the time of writing, were meant to be provisional, and in some cases built almost overnight. The government would identify potential locations, often large spaces that were located in remote areas on formally military grounds or in former warehouses in industrial areas; rent them at very expensive rates when necessary; and erect tents there. In many cases, none of the other necessities for housing people were put in place: there would be neither running water nor electricity, and sometimes there weren’t even enough toilets or hygiene facilities. Nonetheless, these places were then declared camps and opened up. The in-

adequate infrastructure and services in these new, official camps were widely criticized, and the conditions there often merely reproduced the situation in the Idomeni camps. One worker of a Greek NGO who had also worked in Idomeni described the conditions:

“Little by little, new camps appeared. Set up hastily, without basic services, no medical support, no cleaning or potable water, no toilets. In these camps, they have created nothing more and nothing less than small Idomenis. People were no longer at the border, but the living conditions remained awful. In some camps, there is only one medical shift. Food was equally horrible everywhere, as one company received the contracts for all the camps. Especially in summer, people ate rotten food.”

In contrast to the informal camps in and around Idomeni, however, the official camps did not only tightly control the access of migrants, but also limited and often denied access to volunteers, NGOs and journalists. This was further evidence of the new approach the Greek authorities had adopted, as they attempted to (re)gain control of the “refugee issue”: make refugees invisible by keeping them far away from the rest of society, while keeping the door open for *humanitarian business* opportunities.

“Filling” the new camps

The Greek authorities initially pursued two strategies to populate the new official camps. The buses that had been transporting migrants from the ports to Idomeni stopped doing so, and started bringing people directly to one of the official camps, often without their knowledge or against their will. When they arrived at the official state camps, it was not only the destination which disappointed them, but also the conditions they were confronted with. A member of a Greek NGO who has worked with refugees for a long time remembered their disbelief and anxiety:

Phase III: (Re-)Gaining Control – Making Refugees Invisible

“There were people who came to the office and told us: ‘I didn’t know where I was taken to, I got out of the ship and they put me on a bus and now I am here, in Diavata’. They thought they were going to Idomeni. The conditions were so bad, the first people who were forced to go to these so-called camps could not believe that this was it! How can I trust the procedures of a country, Greece, and of the European Union, when they put me and my five children in a tent in the mud?”

At the same time, people in the informal Idomeni camps were encouraged to move to the new camps voluntarily. UNHCR also advertised this possibility, informing people in the informal camps that the conditions in the new camps were much better, and that moving there would also allow them to apply for relocation and family reunification to other European Union member states. But as those who took up the offer would soon discover, there was *de facto* no possibility to apply for anything, and the conditions in the new camps were so outrageously bad that they were often no better than the informal camps of Idomeni.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, efforts by both UNHCR and the Greek state to persuade people to leave Idomeni voluntarily and move to one of the official camps intensified. In late April 2016, for example, Greek authorities distributed a leaflet in Idomeni,⁶¹ translated in different languages, which claimed:

“This settlement does not cover any of your basic everyday needs. It will stop operating. You should move to the camps run by the Greek state, in a quick and orderly manner [...]. Soon after you enter the reception facility, the Greek authorities will give you information about your right to apply for asylum in Greece.”

This strategy of “voluntarily evicting” the informal Idomeni camps largely failed, however, and it was not only because word spread about how bad con-

⁶⁰ bordermonitoring.eu (13.3.2016): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”

⁶¹ bordermonitoring.eu (26.4.2016): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”

ditions in the official camps were. For psychological reasons, many people did not want to leave their spot close to the border, where many of them had already stayed for weeks. According to UNHCR data, around 20,000 migrants resided in Northern Greece by the end of March 2016, half of whom still lived in the informal Idomeni camps. The other half was dispersed among the five official camps that had been established in the region at that time. Some 4,000 lived in Cherso (official capacity: 2,500); 3,500 in Nea Kavala (official capacity: 2,500); 2,300 in Diavata (official capacity: 2,500); 800 in Giannitsa (official capacity: 900); and 400 in Veria (official capacity: 400).⁶² These numbers were far from static, however, because there was a permanent flow of people between the official and unofficial camps. Many refugees struggled to identify where they would be better off. Where could they find an adequate place to stay, but still be able to pursue their goal of continuing their journey, or even applying for a better status? An activist who worked for a Greek NGO in Idomeni described the push and pull factors that were at play:

“Idomeni was like a magnet: ‘I must go to Idomeni, whether the borders open or not’. But in Idomeni people were thinking, I need to find a better tent, a better place, a house, a room. So those from the camps went to Idomeni, even as those in Idomeni left. There was no information.”

The proportions of people staying in unofficial and official camps only changed sharply after the informal camps were evicted in May 2016, when most of the people who were staying there were forced to enter one of the official camps – or to “disappear”. A member of a Greek NGO described what this meant in practice:

“The people in the camps are mostly people who arrived in February or March, only to find that the door was shut in their face. Some of them are still holding on to the paper with the number their group had gotten for crossing the border. Some of

⁶² UNHCR (2016): “Site profiles – Greece“

them had literally been in front of the door when they were told that people could no longer cross. In Idomeni we could at least somehow say that people chose to be there, but now you are forcing them to go to these camps. The more pressure people are under, the worse their conditions are, the more other kinds of tensions arise too. This is what we are experiencing now. Everybody mentions bad nutrition, bad conditions. The state says they should be patient, we cannot do better at the moment. But I do not know if it is rational to ask that of people who have been living – on top of their time in Idomeni – from June to September in a tent with their children, in a place where the food is not good, where it rains and their tent gets water inside, under the sun, in camps with not a single tree.”

Life in the official camps

In order to give an impression of what the official camps looked like and what the living conditions were there, at the time they were opened and later on up to today, we will describe three of the first camps that were opened in Northern Greece in more detail: Cherso, Nea Kavala and Diavata. In addition, we will describe the camp in Lagadikia, which stood out because of the efforts of the refugees there to participate in organizing daily life in the camp – an initiative that was not at all met with enthusiasm by the official actors who were in charge of running the camp’s facilities and activities.⁶³ Finally, we will highlight some key points our interview partners emphasized about the general conditions in the official camps.

Cherso is a village 20 kilometers away from Idomeni, with less than 1,000 inhabitants. A few hundred meters away from the village, on an old military

⁶³ Some of the authors visited the camp in July 2016, two months after the informal Idomeni camps had been evicted in May 2016.



Cherso, March 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

compound that could be easily reached on foot but not by public transport, small tents were set up to host several thousand people. The camp was surrounded by a fence, and everyone who entered was checked at the gate. The camp was opened on 24 February 2016.⁶⁴ When *Moving Europe* visited the location a few weeks later,⁶⁵ it reported that infrastructure was very poor and there was a complete lack of opportunities to apply for asylum or relocation, in spite of the promises that had been circulated by officials in Idomeni to motivate people to leave the unofficial camps:

“There is about 20 centimetres of mud, caking the ground of the whole camp, including the insides of tents. The food that has been distributed there for the past days was cold and out of date. There is trash everywhere. And there are absolutely no NGOs

⁶⁴ [Greek Council for Refugees \(2016\)](#): “Brief Report from Eidomeni (2/3/2016-1/3/2016)”

⁶⁵ [bordermonitoring.eu](#) (13.3.2016): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”

Phase III: (Re-)Gaining Control – Making Refugees Invisible



Cherso, April 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

to be seen. The UNHCR came a few days ago, walked around and left. The relocation registration promised in Idomeni by the UNHCR consists in one abandoned small white booth, forgotten in a desolate corner of the camp, next to the military quarters' tent."

Several weeks later, *Moving Europe* visited the place again and reported that conditions seemed to have improved – but only very slightly. More than a month after it was opened, the camp still had very few toilets and showers. According to *Moving Europe*, there were 2,500 people in the camp at that moment who lived in 440 tents without mattresses, even the seriously ill people among them who needed special treatment. Many people had already started leaving the camp, without informing the camp administration, which resulted in a discrepancy between the official data about the number of inhabitants and the much lower actual number.⁶⁶ Protest erupted in the camp in late

⁶⁶ bordermonitoring.eu (24.4.2016): "Live Ticker Eidomeni"



Nea Kavala, April 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

April 2016, when the migrants living there temporarily kicked out the camp administration. The protest was motivated most of all by the extreme uncertainty people were experiencing, having stayed for weeks or even months in the camp in very harsh conditions without any possibility to formally apply for asylum in Greece, relocation, or family reunification. They were not even provided with any information about what would happen to them in the future.⁶⁷ By October 2016, the official number of people residing in the Cherso camp had decreased to around 1,000,⁶⁸ suggesting that many of the residents had left the camp, either disappearing into informality or successfully crossing the border by irregular means. The camp was officially shut down in December 2016, when the last people who remained there were moved to housing projects, hotels, or other camps.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ bordermonitoring.eu (29.4.2016): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”

⁶⁸ UNHCR (2016): “Site Profile: Cherso”

⁶⁹ greecevol.info (7.9.2016): “Cherso”

Phase III: (Re-)Gaining Control – Making Refugees Invisible

The Nea Kavala camp is located close to the former informal camp at the Polykastro gas station, on the grounds of an old military airport. It still exists to this day, despite official announcements that it would close dating back to September 2016.⁷⁰ It opened on 28 February 2016, just a few days after the Cherso camp.⁷¹ In the beginning, people lived in over 600 small tents and conditions in the camp were marked by poor facilities and services, while the general administration of the camp did not function adequately either.⁷² The situation closely resembled the conditions in Cherso described above. *Moving Europe* described conditions⁷³ in the camp in April 2016:

“At the moment, about 3500 people are living in the Nea Kavala Camp close to Polikastro – according to official data. But nobody knows, how many people are living there actually. We were told that many people who register in the camp leave from there again after some days and move back to Idomeni or somewhere else without informing the camp administration. In the camp, there are several hundred small tents and some big tents. At the entrance of the camp, the ‘camp-ID’ or the permission to enter the camp is checked by police/military, but there are already some holes in the fence which is surrounding the camp. Camp residents told us, that they get noodles every day. The persons who have money, can also buy snacks/drinks at a snack car parking on the territory. There are not enough showers and toilettes available. There is no possibility to apply for asylum and/or relocation/resettlement in the camp [...]. What is currently going on in Nea Kavala, who is responsible for what and what will happen there in the future is largely unclear. Or in the words of the

⁷⁰ stokokkino.gr (6.9.2016): “Poia kontra filoksenias stin Kentriki Makedonia kleinoun kai poia anabathmizontai”

⁷¹ [Greek Council for Refugees](http://greekcouncilforrefugees.org) (2016): “Brief Report from Eidomeni (2/3/2016-1/3/2016)”

⁷² bordermonitoring.eu (24.4.2016): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”

⁷³ bordermonitoring.eu (7.4.2016): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”



Diavata, April 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

UNHCR-staff, we met in front of the camp: ‘Nobody knows anything’.”

For months, conditions in the Nea Kavala camp did not improve. It was therefore hardly surprising that only 1,500 people remained in the camp by July 2016, mostly Kurds and Yezidis who had been transferred to the camp directly after their arrival in Greece.⁷⁴ Only much later were the tents in the camp replaced with containers.⁷⁵ Like in Cherso, conditions in the camp triggered protests by inhabitants, who blocked the highway in March 2016⁷⁶ and marched to the nearby town Polykastro in April.⁷⁷ By February 2017, only 853 people remained in the camp.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ travellingbureau.blogspot.eu (24.7.2016): “Nea Kavala: Abgedrängt auf Militärcamp ohne fließendes Wasser”

⁷⁵ weareherecentre.org (2016): “Nea Kavala camp”

⁷⁶ bordermonitoring.eu (23.3.2016): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”

⁷⁷ bordermonitoring.eu (24.4.2016): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”

⁷⁸ [aida](http://aida.org) (2017): “Country Report: Greece”

Phase III: (Re-)Gaining Control – Making Refugees Invisible

The Diavata Camp was the first camp to open in the Thessaloniki region, where many more camps would open after the eviction of Idomeni. Located on the outskirts of Thessaloniki, it was established on a military site, just like the camps in Cherso and Nea Kavala. The camp opened on 24 February 2016 and still existed at the time of writing. The Diavata camp has a total capacity of 2,500, and hosted 1,804 refugees in 171 tents and 134 “Refugee Housing Units” in June 2016.⁷⁹ Just one day after the camp opened, defying the police and military units that were deployed to prevent people from leaving, hundreds of migrants broke down the fence and started walking towards Idomeni.⁸⁰ *Moving Europe* described the conditions in the Diavata camp⁸¹ in early April 2016:

“The area is surrounded by a fence, which actually cannot stop anyone from leaving or entering the camp unofficially, because there are already many holes in it. However, there is an official entrance, where people entering the camp are checked by police/military [...]. A person who is living in the camp told us, that they receive only a juice in the morning and noodles with a bread for lunch – nothing for dinner. Furthermore, he reported that in many tents not only one family is accommodated: In many tents two families are accommodated – in some of them even three. Single men are accommodated in the building on the territory.”

In April 2016, about two dozen tents in the Diavata camp burned down completely. Although nobody was injured, the inhabitants lost their belongings, including clothes, passports and money. It is believed the fire broke out when people were cooking on open fire, and spread quickly because of the strong wind and the fact that the tents were set up very close to each other.⁸² After a long period of unrest and protests, only 363 people remained in the Dia-

⁷⁹ UNHCR (2016): “Site Profile: Diavata“

⁸⁰ bordermonitoring.eu (25.2.2016): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”

⁸¹ bordermonitoring.eu (5.4.2016): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”

⁸² bordermonitoring.eu (21.4.2016): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”



Lagadikia, August 2016 (Source: Moving Europe)

vata camp on 21 February 2017, as the tents were being replaced by containers.⁸³ UNHCR data suggest the number of people residing in the camp did not change between then and early summer.⁸⁴ On 17 August 2017, residents of the camp blocked the entrance, demonstrating for their right to sufficient space. They protested against the arrival of newcomers from the island camps, with whom they would have to share the two-room containers they were staying in, mostly as families.⁸⁵

In April 2016, another camp opened in the Thessaloniki area, near the village of Lagadikia, some 40 kilometers away from the city. The camp is run jointly by the Greek Ministry of Migration and UNHCR on a former military site. Most of the just under 1,000 people, mainly families, who stayed in the camp in the first months of its existence had previously lived in the informal

⁸³ [aida \(2017\)](#): “Country Report: Greece”

⁸⁴ [UNHCR \(2017\)](#): “Site Profiles June 2017”

⁸⁵ [kathimerini.gr\(17.8.2017\)](#): “Diamartyria prosfygwn sto kentro filo3enias diavatwn”

Phase III: (Re-)Gaining Control – Making Refugees Invisible

Idomeni camps. They had been promised, in particular by UNHCR, that the conditions in Lagadikia would be much better and that they would soon get access to family reunification and relocation procedures. UNHCR even produced and disseminated a video, advertising Lagadikia as a place of “full dignity”. But most of the promises people were given turned out to be false when they moved there.⁸⁶

When some of the authors of this report visited the camp, the first thing that caught our eye was the large number of parked cars from car rental agencies. The cars were lined up along the small street leading up to the camp entrance, revealing the sizable presence of international teams – both professionals and volunteers – working in the camp. After a short discussion at the entrance with security staff of three different kinds (Greek police, military security and private security personnel), they checked our IDs and we were allowed to walk around the site for 30 minutes. We saw UNHCR tents which each housed six persons, as well as containers with showers and toilets. The entire site was fenced off, but one section within the camp area with several containers was enclosed with additional fencing, twice as high as the fence surrounding the camp, which was even topped with barbed wire. In an interview we conducted outside the camp with two members of the self-governed refugee NGO “Jafra”, they provided an explanation of the purpose of this second fence that illustrates the perspective of the refugees and their experience of life in the camps:

“They created this special area, because sometimes people stole clothes they needed and they did not distribute. Last time, when we brought a lot of clothes, they said no, you cannot bring them into the camp. So we went to the mountain next to the camp. Suddenly, all the people from the camp came up, and we gave out everything the same day. This fence is not to protect their items, it is because they are afraid.”

⁸⁶ bordermonitoring.eu (15.5.2016): “Live Ticker Eidomeni”

Set up by refugees in Lagadikia themselves, “Jafra” was an encouraging, innovative volunteer organization, but the cooperation between “Jafra” and the official NGOs in the camp was very difficult. “Jafra” had renovated one of the barracks in the camp and ran a school and cultural center there, organizing welcome parties for newcomers, movie screenings, activities for women and children, and other events. The organization’s activities were never officially registered, however, since all its members lived in the camp themselves – their work just unfolded spontaneously. Their relationship with the officially registered organizations operating in the camp was not free of conflict. One of Jafra’s members described these relations as marked more by competition than by cooperation:

“There is UNHCR, Danish Refugee Council, Arsis, Metadrasi and a Spanish group. We said to the Danish Refugee Council: ‘Please do not bring somebody from outside’. But they brought ten volunteers from Spain to create a school for refugees. They said, we will work every day from noon to 2 PM with the children. After one week, there were 20 of them and they were working from noon to 4 PM. They created another group of refugees, with another logo and another name. We told them about our ideas for the next few months, and the next day they would be announcing the same things. We showed movies, they started to show movies. We started to work with women, they started to work with women. We keep creating things, but we feel like we are people they would prefer to control. The Danish Refugee Council even has security.”

In July 2016, months after the new, official camps were opened in Northern Greece, the Hellenic Center for Disease Control & Prevention (KEELPNO) visited sixteen of these camps and issued a report on hygiene conditions and health risks in the camps. The report stressed that the conditions in the

Phase III: (Re-)Gaining Control – Making Refugees Invisible

camps,⁸⁷ including those around Thessaloniki, were so bad that they didn't just pose serious health risks to their inhabitants, but to the general public outside the camps as well:

“They concluded that the venues offered inadequate ventilation to the hundreds of migrants residing there, with little more than a blanket or curtain separating one family from another. They noted inadequate access to running water, while stressing the accumulation of large quantities of trash and waste on the premises [...]. The report called for all reception to be closed down gradually and the migrants to be inducted into local communities. ‘The previous uses of these warehouses multiply the potential health risks faced by refugees’, the report said.”

The mental health of those living in the camps was affected as well. Living permanently in the camps goes hand in hand with psychological stress, inflicted both by the deprivation of bare necessities such as sufficient food and shelter, and the absence of goods and services that provide people with opportunities for learning and developing. One of the migrants who was stranded in Greece and spoke to us emphasized the mental and psychological consequences of spending one's days in an isolated camp, bereft of activities and facilities, and compared it to being in prison:

“Life in the camps is not easy, you don't have access to the necessary things you need in your everyday life. Food is a typical example: they give you very bad food that doesn't cost anything. If you are a student, you don't have access to the internet, to listen to radio stations for example. If you are there, it is like you are in prison. You feel like you have been tortured mentally. You hardly go out; rough things are happening.”

⁸⁷ thenationalherald.com (27.7.2016): “Greek Health Agency Says Refugee Centers Unsafe, Should Close”

By locking people into structures with such lack of facilities and opportunities, the official camps not only magnify the separation between the camps and the outside world, but also the class divisions and inequalities within the camp populations. By providing people with only very little and depriving them of basic necessities as well as broader opportunities, the contrasts between those in the camp who nevertheless manage to sometimes find easier, faster, more legal ways to get by, because they are more educated or have more material resources, and those who can not, becomes all the more stark. As an activist and Greek NGO worker explained, education and communication skills are privileges some refugees can put to use to gain access to necessities while those who may lack such skills remain stuck and isolated in the camps:

“The last people who came were poor. They came when the price [for the trip from Turkey to Greece] fell from 2,000 Euro to 500 Euro. So in the camps you see that there is a middle class, those who have money from abroad, there are poor people, and there are the illiterate. Even in a small camp of 400 people, you can see social layers: if you speak English, you are covered medically, they may take better care of you, because you can communicate. Communication became an issue. Those who can communicate better, will have more. They can leave the camp because they can ask what bus goes to the city, they can go to the city and explore, they find out where they can get clothes for free.”

Especially for minors and their further development, the conditions in the official camps are highly problematic. Stress, insecurity, violence and a life on the go, in very poor living conditions and with scarce opportunities for learning and inclusion, create a grim setting for children and teenagers. Another Greek NGO worker described the difficult situation of children growing up in the camps in the summer of 2016:

“Then there are the children. A generation that will be destroyed. They haven’t been in school for many years. They are moving, going from camp to camp. The only game they know is throwing

rocks at each other. They have no goals, no rules, no limits, no program. They don't have what they want, they live in a tent. I talked with parents who said: 'I am afraid my child will be in the mafia, in ISIS', because the child has nothing that's good, no context for recognizing, this is good and this is bad."

Hindering relocation and family reunification

As long as the *formalized corridor* across the Balkans existed, almost no migrant applied for asylum in Greece. For good reason: the overwhelming majority of people who arrived informally on the Greek islands could easily find possibilities to continue their journeys towards their destination countries, usually in Northern or Western Europe, within just a few days. Access to the Greek asylum system became much more important, however, after access to the *formalized corridor* was limited from November 2015 on, and especially after the corridor was entirely closed in March 2016.

Already back in 2014, the Greek government introduced a system for granting appointments to register asylum claims via Skype, but it failed to work properly from the very start. Nevertheless, it was made obligatory to register via Skype in May 2015. When the closure of the *formalized corridor* left 50,000 people stranded in Greece, the Skype approach collapsed completely. It became practically impossible for anyone to connect to the Greek Asylum Service, which could only be reached on Skype for a few hours per week. It was not until June/July 2016 that a so-called "pre-registration" process was introduced in cooperation with UNHCR and EASO. A total of 27,592 people were pre-registered, granting them at least a temporary right to stay in Greece. Those who pre-registered were then informed via SMS or an online application about the date of their appointment for completing their registration. By the end of 2016, only 12,905 of the pre-registered applicants had completed

their registration, while a further 6,083 persons were given an appointment but did not appear.⁸⁸

Here, it is important to stress that only a complete registration allows asylum seekers to apply for family reunification under the Dublin III regulation, or for relocation. According to the Dublin III regulation, asylum seekers who have close relatives who already received refugee or subsidiary protection in another Dublin III country, or who have already applied for asylum in another Dublin III country but not yet received recognition, have a right or possibility to be reunited with them there. However, the asylum seeker in question cannot directly appeal for family reunification. Instead, the procedure is handled by the “sending” and “receiving” states; but they will not start the procedure before official asylum claims have been registered in both countries.⁸⁹ In practice, this meant that thousands of migrants who were stranded in Greece but had relatives in other EU countries could not even enter the family reunification procedure for many months or even over a year, simply because they could not register their claims in Greece. This reality contrasted harshly with the promises the Greek state and UNHCR had made in Idomeni, when they informed people there that moving to the formal camps would allow them to start the family reunification procedure.

The same shortcomings appeared in the relocation program, which makes it possible for asylum seekers to seek a transfer from Greece to another European Union member state. This option is formally restricted to citizens of a select few countries. Only if asylum seekers from a country are granted international protection status in European Union member states on average more than 75% of the time, do citizens from that country qualify for relocation. It is therefore primarily Syrians who benefit from the relocation program. Moreover, applicants cannot choose the destination country themselves. Finally, as with family reunification under the Dublin III regulation, relocation is only

⁸⁸ [aida \(2017\)](#): “Registration of the asylum application: Greece”

⁸⁹ [familie.asyl.net \(2017\)](#): “Grundsätze nach der Dublin III VO”

Phase III: (Re-)Gaining Control – Making Refugees Invisible

possible once an official asylum claim has been registered in Greece.⁹⁰ The Greek government provided the following statistics⁹¹ for the year 2016:

“As of 27 December, the Asylum Service had registered 21,431 applications from individuals who were eligible to participate in the [relocation] program, while it had received 13,634 pledges from other EU Member-States. Thus, there are 9,000 individuals who are ready for relocation and for whom there are no pledges, while the acceptance by Member-States of outgoing requests, which should be done within 10 working days, in practice takes much longer – up to six months. While Greece has sent to other Member-States 13,345 requests, 10,712 of these have been accepted and only 7,000 individuals have departed from Greece [...]. [T]he National Dublin Unit sent in 2016 4,886 outgoing take-charge requests for family reunification. Of these, 2,462 have been accepted up to now while, conversely, 1,001 have been rejected [...]. 1,107 individuals have traveled to the country of final destination.”

The numbers presented here indicate that it is not only the failure of Greek authorities to register asylum claims in a timely manner, but also the “practical resistance” of other European Union member states that has contributed to tens of thousands of people being stranded long-term in the formal camps in Greece. This “practical resistance” is further illustrated by later data. Although the Council of the European Union decided in 2015 that a total of 160,000 people from Italy and Greece should be relocated to other European Union member states within two years, only 20,869 people had actually been relocated by 13 June 2017, 13,973 of whom were relocated from Greece. Some of the other EU countries did not even accept a single migrant.⁹² In

⁹⁰ w2eu.info (2016): “Greece – Relocation”

⁹¹ [Hellenic Republic – Ministry of Migration Policy \(17.1.2017\)](#): “Press release: The work of the asylum service in 2016”

⁹² [European Commission \(13.6.2017\)](#): “Relocation and Resettlement”

2016, only 739 persons were relocated from Greece to Germany (where many refugees have relatives) under the Dublin III regulation, even though Greece filed 3,179 relocation requests that year, and Germany approved 2,483 of them.⁹³ In May 2017, a leaked letter from the Greek Migration Minister Yiannis Mouzalas to German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizi re revealed that the two governments had, on Germany’s request, concluded an informal agreement to slow down family reunification transfers.⁹⁴

Humanitarian business as usual

“What I didn’t like about my NGO, where I was a volunteer, was when the funds which arrived for Diavata came from abroad, the people who were in Idomeni or who had been offering help for years were pushed aside. Staff and managers who came from abroad earned a lot of money – 3,000, 4,000 or 5,000 Euro – while their Greek colleagues earned only a third of that, or even worked for free in the nights. I don’t mean that there aren’t any NGOs that do good work. But I want to express my complaint that I wouldn’t like human pain to become a business.”

This statement, made by a Greek activist who volunteered for a big NGO in Idomeni, illustrates how funding for humanitarian projects skyrocketed as more and more people became stranded in Greece for a longer time, and how this lead to competition: within humanitarian organizations, between different organizations, and between them and the Greek state. Moreover, despite this inflow of funding, conditions in the formal camps did not substantially improve, or at best – to put it diplomatically – only very slowly. According

⁹³ [Bundesregierung\(21.2.2017\)](#): “Erg nzende Informationen zur Asylstatistik f r das Jahr 2016”

⁹⁴ [www.thelocal.de \(29.5.2017\)](#): “Greece, Germany agree to slow refugee family reunification: report”

Phase III: (Re-)Gaining Control – Making Refugees Invisible

to calculations by “Refugees Deeply”,⁹⁵ 803 million Dollar were spent or allocated to Greece in 2015-2016, the biggest share of which (541 million Dollar) was provided by the European Union. Dividing this amount of money by the estimated 57,000 people who were stranded in Greece after the Greek-Macedonian border was closed entirely (to whose needs the bulk of this funding was addressed) translates into more than 14,000 Dollar per beneficiary.

Against this financial background, it is hardly surprising that UNHCR expanded from having one office in the country with a dozen staff to an operation of 600 employees in twelve offices. Just like it is not surprising to read about the unimaginable sums the Greek authorities spent on renting empty warehouses and other facilities that were completely inappropriate for housing human beings. The authors of the “Refugees Deeply” report are right to point out that such a massive, uncontrolled growth of funding streams inevitably results in conflicts of interest, for example when organizations start balancing out what’s in the best interest of the refugees and what serves the interests of one of the biggest funding bodies, the European Union. It is also hardly surprising that a situation in which a large part of humanitarian funding is awarded directly to non-state bodies, operating parallel to the structures of the de facto bankrupt Greek state, provides fertile ground for mistrust and mismanagement, as well as numerous opportunities for private profit.

It must be stressed, however, that the Greek state itself was extremely ill-prepared for the full closure of the *formalized corridor*, even though it was very clear that this would happen sooner or later. A significant factor in its inept response were the conflicts which played out within the Greek government regarding the “management” of the “refugee issue” and the anticipated crises. Defense Minister Panos Kammenos, leader of the right-wing junior government party, according to “Refugees Deeply”, only agreed to take any initiative to build tent camps on military grounds or otherwise use military

⁹⁵ [newsdeeply.com \(6.3.2017\)](https://newsdeeply.com/6.3.2017/): “The Refugee Archipelago: The Inside Story of What Went Wrong in Greece”

facilities after 74 million Dollar was added to his ministry's budget. Another, more personal conflict developed between Migration Minister Yiannis Mouzalas and Odysseas Voudouris, who was appointed by the Prime Minister to head a new General Secretariat under the umbrella of Mouzalas' Ministry.

As a result of such pervasive dysfunctionality, many people were still residing in tents in the winter of 2016-2017, even when snow started to cover some of them. As "Refugees Deeply" reports, at that point, several hundred people were hastily transferred to seafront hotels or luxury ski resorts in Northern Greece. This panicked response could not hide, however, that the overwhelming majority of the promises which the Greek government and, in particular, UNHCR had given people in the informal Idomeni camps in spring 2016 had turned out to be hot air.

Final Remarks: From Time to Space

By distinguishing three chronological phases in the history of Idomeni, we have attempted to establish the context of the tragedy that unfolded in the spring of 2016, which gained global notoriety when more than 10,000 people were stranded in the mud of an informal refugee camp at the border between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia. As we have shown in this report, the events at that point – which TV viewers around the globe could witness just by switching on the evening news – were merely the most visible manifestation of a longer story that started before and continued after. What happened in Idomeni at that time did not happen by accident. On the contrary: the fact that the camps of Idomeni appeared in this region, at that time, was the direct result of critical developments and policy changes in the years before. Moreover, as documented in this report, the story of Idomeni did not end when the camps were evicted. It continues in the new, official camps that have been constructed in Greece since the beginning of 2016, where many former Idomeni residents now live.

Our aim in these final remarks is not to chronologically summarize the report's findings, as laid out in the text so far. Instead, we would like to use this point to change the perspective from time to space. Space is not simply something that just exists, but rather a social product and as such, always contested. Before we identify the different aspects or dimensions whose intersections served to produce the *Idomeni space*, however, some preliminary remarks are in order. According to our understanding of Idomeni as a space, it is not physically limited to a small field near the village of Idomeni, located at the border crossing point. Rather, Idomeni is a complex space which materialized in different ways, contextually shrinking or expanding. The various *jungles*, the

main camp at the border crossing, hotel “Hara”, the EKO and the BP gas station, and the official camps are merely the most important and best-known ones. Furthermore, as a space, Idomeni was never independent from the spaces surrounding it, especially the Turkish-Greek maritime border (including the Greek islands) and central Greece on the one side, and the so-called “Balkan route” on the other. Transport measures like the buses that brought refugees to Idomeni, border closures and openings, and push-backs from Macedonian territory constituted just some of the ways those spaces were connected to each other.

Several *actors* played an important role in the *Idomeni space*. Its emergence first resulted from shifting migratory movements that were provoked in part by Greek government measures to clamp down on refugees elsewhere in the country. The arrival of migrants in the *Idomeni space* was met by a surge of activity by smugglers and mafia groups, which were mostly left free to operate by the local Greek police. In contrast, the Macedonian border authorities took on a more active role, both in terms of cooperating with smuggling and mafia groups, and by regularly conducting push-back operations. Those push-backs were among the few events that forced the local Greek police to take action as well, but otherwise the approach of the Greek authorities to the situation in Idomeni mostly remained characterized by passivity, interrupted only by the temporary evictions of the main Idomeni camp in December 2015 and February 2016, until they launched the final eviction of the Idomeni camps in May 2016. *Humanitarian actors* initially were few, and support was exclusively provided by locals until a few NGOs and solidarity initiatives from the region started operating. However, the number of humanitarian actors surged to a record high in early 2016, when the arrival of ever more NGOs and (international) volunteer structures built up to a massive presence in the *Idomeni space*, which also had the effect of pushing out local support initiatives. The resulting situation, which we have labeled *anarchical humanitarianism*, was in turn dismantled step by step in a process that already started when the first official camps were set up in the beginning of 2016 and was completed with the final eviction in May 2016. It was replaced by an increasingly state-

controlled implementation of humanitarian measures in official camps with highly restricted access.

Over the course of all these manifestations of refugee settlement in the *Idomeni space*, a wide variety of *infrastructures* could be observed. The shanties in the first *jungles*, built out of trash by the migrants themselves, were replaced by the organically growing, chaotic jumble of the informal camp at the Idomeni border crossing, with small tents erected by migrants, bigger tents set up by NGOs or UNHCR, kitchens, children's spaces, and even a cultural center run mainly by volunteers. Very different, again, are the long rows of identical white tents, laid out with military discipline, that filled the official camps where people were moved to next. On the one hand, these different types of infrastructure emerged as the reflection of different arrangements of everyday social life, but on the other hand they also themselves determined what forms it could take. The open, chaotic, organically grown infrastructure of the informal camps offered different opportunities for the development of social life (including its dark sides, like prostitution and drug trafficking) than the fenced-off and highly controlled official camps.

The changes in infrastructure directly affected the *visualization* of the *Idomeni space*, especially in media coverage, as well. Contrary to the hidden shanties in the woods, the open areas of the Idomeni camps, easy to reach and enter, offered direct access to images of human suffering for hundreds of journalists, frequently live-broadcasting from the spot. At the same time, the permanent media presence opened a wide window of opportunity for migrants to have their protests and demands seen and heard. The resulting media spotlight on conditions in the camps ended up changing the *Idomeni space* once again, however, as it undoubtedly motivated the Greek state to adopt a strategy whose dominant concern was with solving the "problem" of how Idomeni attracted negative attention, in particular in the media. In order to regain control over the public discourse, the Greek state implemented highly restrictive access

Final Remarks: From Time to Space

measures in the new official camps, not only for the media but for any kind of independent observers, aiming to make the human suffering there invisible.

Protest was another highly constitutive element in the *Idomeni space*, especially in Phase II when the successive border closures – from the initial temporary ones to the permanent restrictions on specific groups and the eventual total border closure – almost always triggered a wide range of protests. They varied in scope from shouting and holding up banners to blocking the highway and the railway tracks, and even self-harm, hunger strikes and physical confrontations with especially the Macedonian soldiers and policemen. But all protests expressed the same, single demand: let us go, now. The most famous of these protests, the *March of Hope* which took place just days after the total border closure in March 2016, in a way even embodied this demand, as more than a thousand people demonstratively crossed the border into the Republic of Macedonia. This action also hinted at the underlying fact that the agency of migrants stranded in the *Idomeni space* was at no point limited to raising their voices in protest. For many, there was also the option of “silent exit”: finding informal ways to travel onward, often by using the services of smugglers. This had been their dominant strategy in Phase I (when almost no protests could be observed), and unsurprisingly became much more important again after the border was closed entirely. The erection of the official camps, meanwhile, may not have made public protests entirely impossible, but did make them much more difficult because of the often isolated location of the camps and the access restrictions that were put in place. Furthermore, a sense of resignation set in when it became very clear that there was almost no chance that the border would formally open again.

Last but not least, Idomeni as a space for refugee settlement had a clear economic dimension, in two ways. On the one hand, as described in this report, this space had (and still has) its own economy, with specific dynamics of supply and demand that spanned a wide range – from refugees in the informal camps selling cigarettes, basic cooking equipment and staple foods to other refugees, to local residents running stalls selling overpriced food and other

items, all the way up to the criminal networks of human trafficking. On the other hand, the *Idomeni space* itself, as a whole, is situated within the context of the far-reaching changes Greek society has gone through in the recent past, which can be tentatively defined as processes of neoliberalization. Not only did, for example, private transportation companies earn millions of Euros by transporting migrants into the *Idomeni space*, but the transformation of that space into what we defined as *anarchical humanitarianism* in Phase II opened up a wide window of opportunity for generating humanitarian profit for national and international NGOs.

Although this process of institutionalization within a neoliberal context eventually all but removed any place for the kind of local solidarity initiatives that acted without budget plans, project tenders and public relations officers, there was still for a long time some coexistence of NGOs and the international solidarity movement. Barely present on the spot at all, however, was the Greek state. Only in Phase III did the Greek state appear again in the humanitarian sphere, but it took on the role of a kind of bouncer, restricting not only physical access to the official camps, but also access to financial resources in the form of project tenders. UNHCR also played an important role in the allocation of resources. Only recently UNHCR seemed to lose its position as gatekeeper, serving as middleman for channeling funding from especially the European Union to NGOs and their projects. The re-emergence of the Greek state in handling funding processes does not mean, however, that it is acting as some kind of “ideal welfare state”, but rather that it is now taking more control over structures and practices and who are deemed to be “legitimate” actors. The resulting NGO-ization is proving far from efficient, however. Thousands of people had to spend the winter of 2016-2017 in tent camps, and although the conditions in the camps on Greek mainland have slightly improved recently, they generally remain miserable (and especially on the Greek islands) – despite the hundreds of millions of Euros which have been issued for their improvement.

Timeline Idomeni

until 2000s Informal passage for migrants from former Yugoslavia, looking for seasonal work in Greece. Only very few irregular migrants heading from Greece to Northern and Western Europe through Idomeni.

2009 Demolition of the informal migrant settlements near Patras harbor.

2011 Demolition of the informal migrant settlements in Igoumenitsa.

2010–2011 Migrants stuck in Greece start turning to Idomeni, using it as an exit passage towards Northern and Western Europe.

2012 Construction of 10.5 km fence in the Evros region, at the land border between Greece and Turkey.

2012–2013 “Xenios Zeus” Police Operation in Athens & Patras: 85.000 migrants controlled, 6.000 in detention.

2012–2014 Intensification of the Idomeni passage. 2014 more and more families arrive to Idomeni.

2013–2014 Informal migrant settlements in the forests near Idomeni. Local groups start humanitarian support.

end of 2014 First visits of NGOs and antiracist initiatives in Idomeni.

April–May 2015 First articles about Idomeni in international media.

June 2015 Republic of Macedonia introduces the 72-hour paper.

August 2015 First closure of the border by the Republic of Macedonia for three days. Official camp opens in Gevgelija. First tents of MSF and UNCHR in Idomeni. Numerous NGOs start to operate in Idomeni.

Timeline Idomeni

November 2015 Passage only for Syrians, Iraqis and Afghanis. Construction of a fence at the Greek-Macedonian border.

December 2015 First eviction of the informal Idomeni camp. Emergence of the informal camp at the EKO gas station. “Orfanotrofio”, a refugee solidarity squat in Thessaloniki, opens.

February 2016 Idomeni camp reopens. Passage only for Syrians and Iraqis. Second eviction of the Idomeni camp. First official camps open: Cherso and Nea Kavala near Idomeni, Diavata in Thessaloniki.

March 2016 Passage denied for all nationalities. EU-Turkey Deal. March of Hope from Idomeni to the Republic of Macedonia.

April 2016 First returns of refugees from Greece to Turkey. Opening of the Lagadikia camp near Thessaloniki.

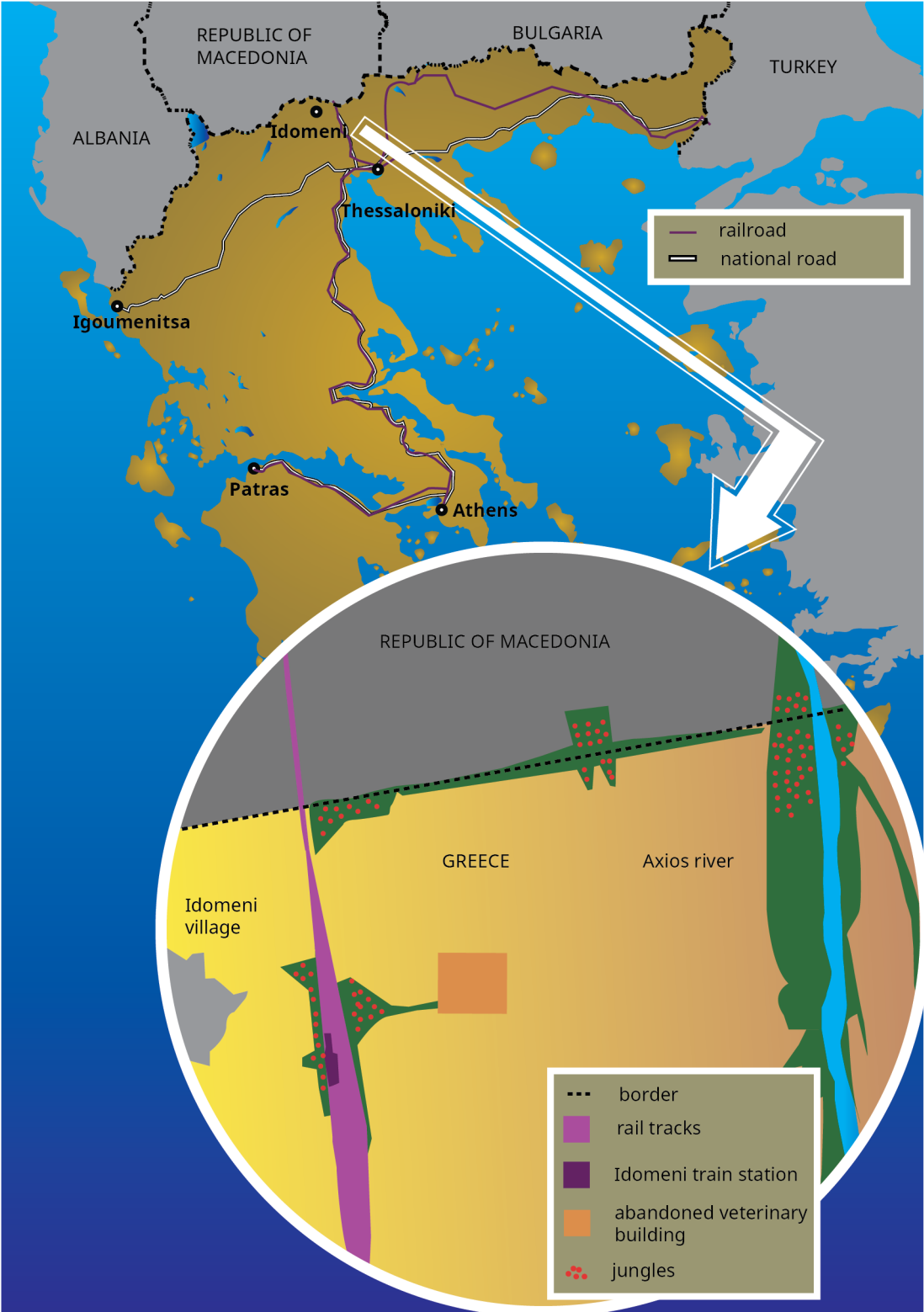
May 2016 Final eviction of the Idomeni and the nearby camps. New camps around Thessaloniki and in Northern Greece.

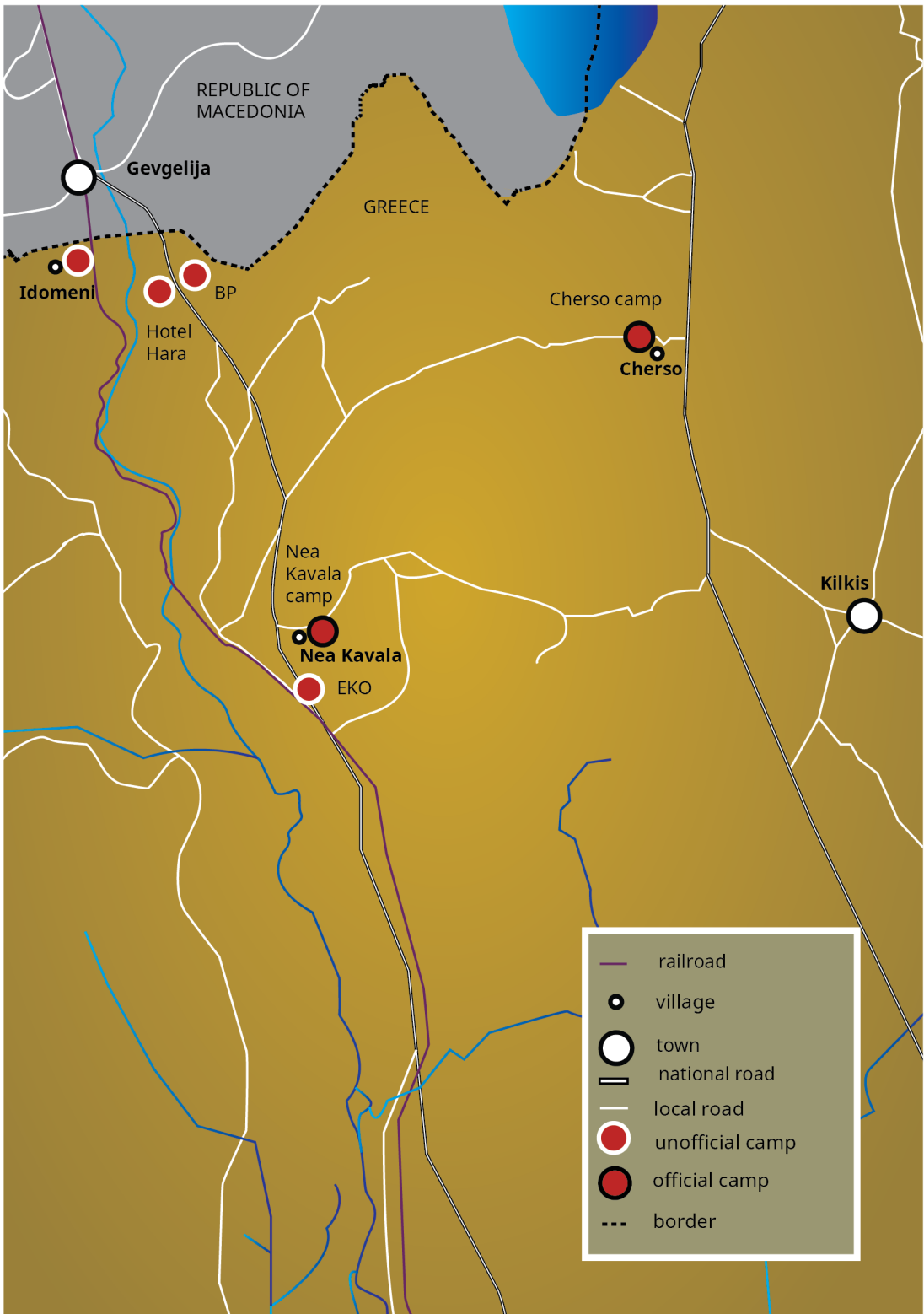
July 2016 Eviction of the refugee solidarity squats in Thessaloniki

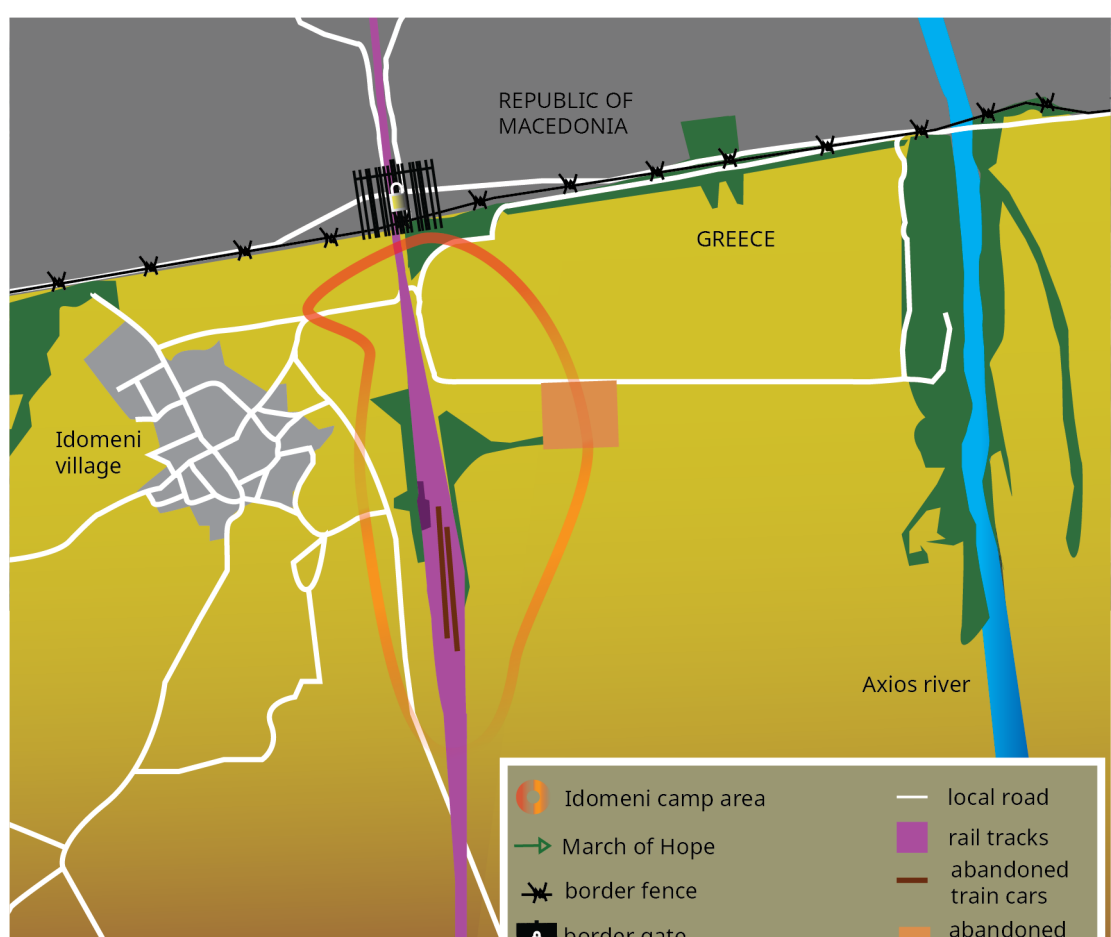
Maps

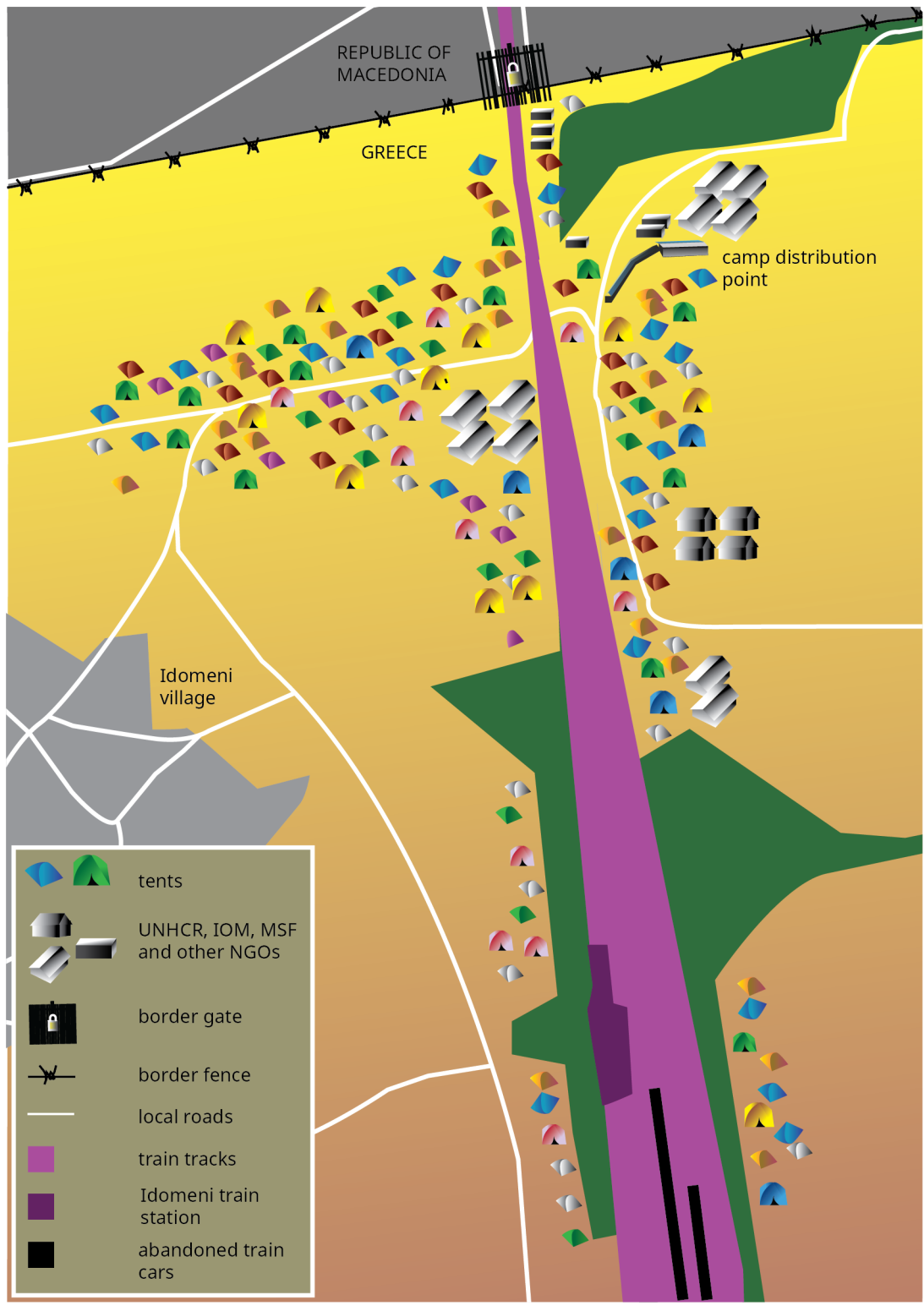
1. Jungles around Idomeni, page 106
2. Idomeni region, page 107
3. March of Hope, page 108
4. Idomeni camp, page 109
5. Official camps in Northern Greece, page 110

All maps created by Giorgos Kondylis.









REPUBLIC OF
MACEDONIA

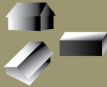
GREECE

camp distribution
point

Idomeni
village



tents



UNHCR, IOM, MSF
and other NGOs



border gate



border fence



local roads



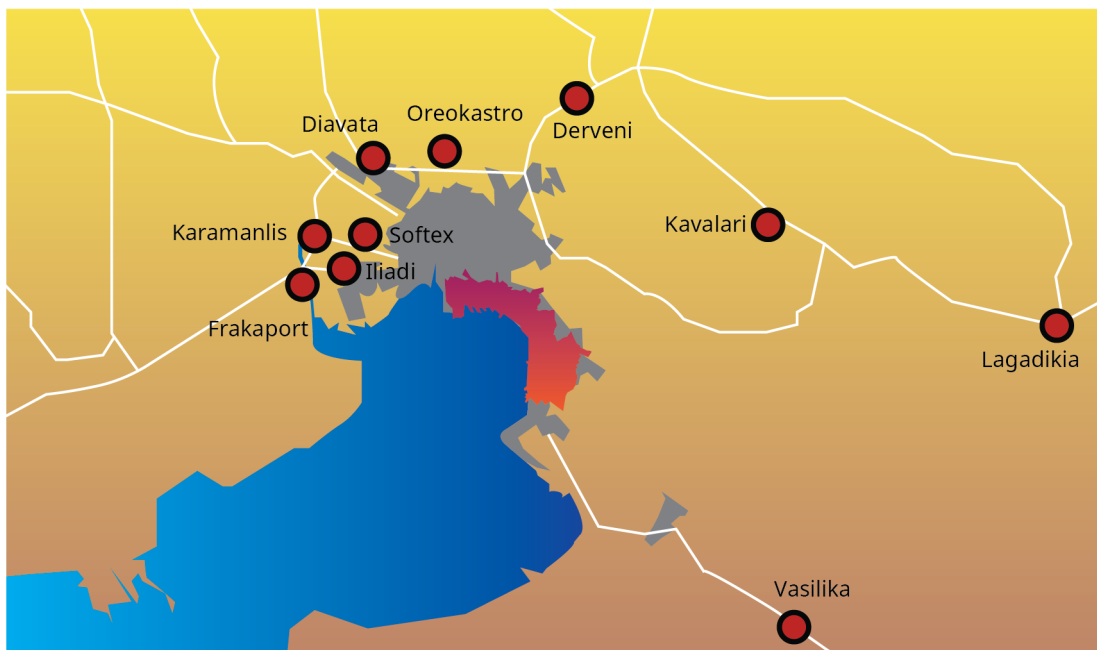
train tracks



Idomeni train
station



abandoned train
cars



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About bordermonitoring.eu e.V.

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— Border crossing point ▲ Camp