

Chapter 12

Crisis Upon Crisis: Theoretical and Political Reflections on Greece's Response to the 'Refugee Crisis'



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12.1 Introduction

In this chapter I attempt to contextualise the so-called 'refugee crisis' within the European Union (EU) border regime. It must be noted from the beginning that I put 'refugee crisis' in quotation marks because neither the number of refugees nor the challenges faced by the EU can justify the reactions of its member states (Spyropoulou & Christopoulos, 2016); not to mention that from a historical perspective the illustration of the 2014–2016 rise of asylum seekers as a 'perfect storm' cannot be justified by the facts, if compared with previous refugee and migrant 'crises' (Lucassen, 2018).

The main objective of this chapter is to reflect upon the developments that occurred in Europe in 2015–2016 and have been included under the heading 'refugee crisis.' This reflection follows a two-fold logic: on the one hand, I attempt a critical examination of the political responses to the 'crisis'; on the other hand, I attempt to disentangle and theorise the shifts that occurred within the management of the 'crisis,' both at the level of operationality and at the level of sovereignty. In order to do so, I focus on the specific case of Greece, since the country has been at the epicentre of the 'refugee crisis,' particularly during the period 2015–2016. In fact, crisis has for a long time been the defining term when describing any development in Greece. The dramatic increase of refugee inflows in the spring 2015 was approached from the very beginning in terms of crisis. It was also coupled with the sovereign debt crisis following the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 in two ways:

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either as an additional burden on a country hampered already by an ongoing sovereign-debt crisis and economic recession; or as another (missed) opportunity for the EU member states to show essential solidarity among each other in order to deal with a ‘European problem.’

Therefore, I focus on pre-existing and emerging internal contradictions between different actors who have been dealing with refugees since the beginning of the ‘crisis’ and throughout the ‘emergency period,’ i.e. from spring-summer 2015 to spring 2016. In other words, I try to capture the contingent character of new geographies of control that occurred with the establishment of the ‘hotspot approach,’ in correlation with the shifts in state sovereignty as it has been repositioned through the active involvement of non-state actors –from Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) to international organisations and EU agencies– in the refugee/migration management.

The analysis that follows is based on empirical material, namely in-depth semi-structured interviews with different relevant stakeholders, as well as volunteers and activists from Greece and other countries. More precisely, it draws on empirical material from two research projects: the first from April to September 2016, entitled ‘De- and Re-stabilisation of the European Border Regime’; the second from July 2016 to July 2017, entitled ‘Volunteering for Refugees in Europe: Civil Society, Solidarity, and Forced Migration along the Balkan Route amid the failure of the Common European Asylum System.’ In the framework of the first research project semi-structured interviews with the following key stakeholders were conducted: two consultants at the Ministry of Migration Policy; two Greek Members of the Parliament; two informants from the Municipality of Athens; one informant from the Hellenic Asylum Service; one liaison officer from the European Commission’s Directorate General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO)¹ in Athens; and, one Frontex officer. Within the second project, field-work was conducted in *Lesvos* and in Athens, including semi-structured interviews with: three American volunteers and one Greek activist in *Skala Sikamias*; one social worker (former activist) in a minors’ shelter run by a Greek NGO in *Mitilini*; one psychologist, employed through the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) in *Moria* hotspot; one Turkish volunteer in *Eleonas* camp in Athens; one Greek volunteer in *Eliniko* camp in Athens; one activist at the City Plaza hotel in Athens; two Spanish activists in a refugee squat at the district of *Exarchia* in Athens and one activist at a warehouse for refugees at the district of *Exarchia*.

¹ Formerly known as European Community Humanitarian Office; it changed its name in 2009 but kept the ECHO abbreviation.

12.2 Situating the 'Crisis' Within the Evolution of the EU Border Regime: Establishing a Control-Humanitarianism Nexus²

A lot has been said and written about the response of the EU as a whole and that of the individual member states to the 'refugee crisis.' Before and after the 'summer of migration' –as it has been defined by activists and critical researchers to distinguish it from the crisis-ridden discourse (Hess & Kasparek, 2017)– the main outcomes of the European Council's resolutions and decisions followed two logics, or an intertwined one: on the one hand, intercepting flows through the enhancement of the 'combat against networks of smuggling and trafficking'; on the other hand, dealing with the 'humanitarian crisis' that emerged in particular places, notably in Greece, where large numbers of refugees were concentrated in order to follow their route towards North-Western Europe. These two principles were guiding EU resolutions and decisions as they were formulated from April 2015 onwards.

As for the response to the emergent 'humanitarian crisis,' which has been a crucial component of shifting dynamics that shaped both state and civil sector scopes of action, the main tool has been the activation of DG ECHO, the Emergency Support Instrument, set up by the European Commission on March 16, 2016. Most of the funding for humanitarian assistance to refugees in Greece was provided by DG ECHO. From March to December 2016, Greece was the only state that allocated 198 million euros to 'address the humanitarian needs', out of the 700 million euros planned over 2016–2018 for any member state that could require funding for humanitarian assistance (European Commission, 2020). The DG ECHO funding was distributed among eight EU humanitarian aid partners, who had already signed a Framework Partnership Agreement with the European Commission (EC). After the heavy 2016–2017 winter that resulted in the death of several people inside camps and even hotspots,³ humanitarian aid partners, both international and non-governmental, have been the subject of severe criticism (Howden & Fotiadis, 2017).

In fact, humanitarianism has very often been criticised in this respect. According to some critics, International Organisations (IOs) as well as Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) are only offering an 'illusion of protection,' which normalises the existence of stateless people and impairs the implementation of political solutions while it classifies people according to their alleged worthiness of protection, aid and relocation (Narkunas, 2015). In this context, the focus is reduced to specific material needs demanding a humanitarian intervention, while the political reasons for which they have become refugees in the first place are concealed (Malkki, 1996). For Walters (2002), humanitarian actions run by IOs, such as the

²Paraphrasing the 'migration-development nexus' promoted in the recent past by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM, 2002; Nyberg Sørensen, 2012; Van Hear & Nyberg Sørensen, 2003).

³The total number is not clear, and numbers vary in international press articles from January 2017, e.g. from Independent, The Guardian, CNN, Aljazeera etc.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and NGOs in conflicting border zones are actually part of a global 'policing of populations.' From a different perspective, border and migration controls are legitimised as 'humanitarian actions' on the basis that these activities serve the identification and hence the protection of refugees (Hess & Karakayali, 2007; Pallister-Wilkins, 2017). In other words, refugee protection through humanitarian interventions is considered as a part of the 'global migration management' (Scheel & Ratfisch, 2014).

The main concern, however, of the EU seems to be the former objective described above, i.e. the management of the flows, in the guise of the vow to combat smuggling networks. This explains why hotspots are very often perceived, and portrayed, as the necessary toolkit for the implementation of the EU emergency response to the 'refugee crisis,' linked in one way or another to the EU-Turkey exchange and collaboration on this matter. However, the very idea of such 'hotspots' can be traced back to the year 2003, when Tony Blair (2003) published the approach of the creation of 'regional protection zones' and 'transit processing centres.' This concept, which was only discussed, but never put into practice by the European Commission, was taken up in 2004 by the German Minister of the Interior, *Otto Schily*, and his Italian counterpart, *Giuseppe Pisanu*. They sketched out a plan to create reception camps for refugees in North Africa. The idea was simple and inspired by the so called 'pacific solution' enacted by the Australian government (Devetak, 2004): those who were eligible for a refugee status would be resettled into the EU on the basis of a quota system, while all those whose asylum applications were rejected were to be deported to their countries of origin. Schily's (2005) paper proposed to move the examination of asylum claims of people intercepted on the high sea to reception centres on the African continent (Carrera & Guild, 2017).

With the publication of the 'hotspot approach' in the framework of the *European Agenda on Migration*, launched in May 2015 (European Commission, 2015a), the above-mentioned ideas were materialised in specific modalities of control, where the hotspots should serve as a platform for the rapid, integrated and mutually complementary cooperation of the different European agencies -the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), the Frontex European Border Guard Agency, the European Police (Europol) Office, the European Judicial Cooperation Unit (Eurojust). The aim was the smooth co-operation between these agencies and the corresponding national authorities of the Member States in order to be able to react adequately to a potential disproportionately high migration pressure on the European external border. The hotspots should help to channel the mixed migratory flows faster and more closely, either to the European asylum system or to a process for the return of persons classified as irregular migrants. In the wake of the long-standing crisis of the Dublin regulation that determines the responsibility of the Member State where an asylum application is initially filed, and its practical collapse in the summer of 2015 (Fullerton, 2016; Kasperek, 2016; Moses, 2016), the hotspot approach represented a new, a more even and therefore more sustainable distribution for the resettlement of asylum seekers within Europe and for the actual implementation of a Common European Asylum System (European Commission, 2016a). Therefore,

hotspots were seen as an elementary tool for an effective and, more importantly, fast-track procedure to deal with flows and classify newcomers (Parsanoglou, 2020b).

By February–March 2016, five hotspot centres were put into operation in Greece. In March 2016, the Balkan route was permanently abolished with the closure of the Greek–North Macedonian border for all refugees in transit and the destruction of the informal transit camp of *Idomeni*. The latter occurred in two phases between 24 to 27 May and 13 to 14 June 2016. With the end of the Balkan route, but even more pressingly with the probable entry into force of an agreement between Turkey and the EU, the functioning of the Greek hotspots changed significantly taking its current form and content. More precisely, until 20 March 2016, the Greek hotspots functioned primarily as registration centres, where identification, fingerprinting and identification of refugees' nationalities was carried out. Until then, the primary objective of the hotspots was indeed to collect and match data of refugees with the existing European databases, i.e. Eurodac and Schengen Information System (SIS) II. In practical terms, arrivals were classified as potentially vulnerable or 'illegal,' depending on their nationality. Apart from persons from Pakistan and the Maghreb, whose right to asylum was collectively denied, most persons received a 30-day residence paper, while Syrians received a six-month paper, which enabled them to transit through Greece.

However, on March 18, 2016, the EU–Turkey Statement (European Council, 2016), most often described as the 'EU–Turkey deal'⁴ changed everything. Turkey promised, among other arrangements, to stop the departure of migrants towards Greece and to readmit refugees from Greece. In order to facilitate the readmission of Syrian nationals to Turkey, the hotspot centres were declared closed facilities and migrants⁵ were subjected to a 'restriction of freedom,' i.e. to detention, for a period of 25 days as prescribed by the Asylum Law 4375/2016. The immediate result in at least three of the hotspots was an outbreak of violent protests, followed by a peculiar re-opening of the centres. While migrants were legally still subjected to the 'restriction of freedom,' they were free to leave the centres. A second order of 'restriction of movement' though barred them from leaving the islands, while the centres themselves remained largely inaccessible for outside observers, such as journalists, NGOs or researchers. Four years after the EU–Turkey Statement, the hotspot centres in Greece were still operational on all five islands. Already in March

⁴The so-called 'EU–Turkey deal' is in fact nothing more than a common statement of EU and Turkey, which means that it does not constitute a legal document, in the typical sense of an agreement, binding for the states that ratify or adhere to. It is based legally on the 'Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Turkey on the readmission of persons residing without authorisation,' signed in December 2013 (see full text in EUR-Lex, 2014a) and approved by the European Council in April 2014 (EUR-Lex, 2014b). All that has been decided in November 2015 in the EU–Turkey Joint Action Plan (European Commission, 2015b) and in March 2016 (European Council, 2016) is mostly the activation of this Agreement and more importantly the specification of a Joint Action Plan (European Commission, 2016b) which is to be under on-going monitoring (European Commission, 2016c).

⁵Here 'migrants' refers to all people arriving at the hotspot regardless their claims or status, e.g. asylum seekers, migrants and others.

2016, the Commission (European Commission, 2016a) had reported that the aim of a fingerprinting rate of 100% of all arrivals had been reached, while numbers of arrivals had dropped sharply after the deal.

12.3 Greece's Response to the 'Crisis': In the Deal We Trust!

The 'refugee crisis' coincided with the rise to power of the coalition between SYRIZA (*Sinaspismos Rizospastikis Aristeras* [Coalition of Radical Left] and ANEL (*Anexartiti Elines* [Independent Greeks]). The formal Greek position at the beginning of the 'crisis' followed four principles: relocation, resettlement, support to Turkey and other neighbouring countries, and fight against smuggling. Nevertheless, the practical response of the government was tormented by a blatant ambivalence, if not contradiction, between a discourse of solidarity towards refugees and the need for a 'pragmatic' management of a critical situation. In other words, the same time the Greek government was implying that Turkey did not put any barriers to the activity of smugglers in the Aegean Sea and did not offer any substantial help to the refugees, Greek authorities were operating as a travel agency (*KTEL* [public bus service] in the words of a high-rank employee of the Asylum Service), moving people from the islands to *Piraeus* and from there to *Idomeni*.⁶

The EU-Turkey Statement of 18 March 2016 set a new basis regarding both the management of refugee flows and the basic priorities/principles of the Greek government. Particularly during the first months of its implementation, the EU-Turkey deal was considered as the only solution for an effective regulation of the refugee issue. Apart from the recurrent statements at the highest level, most of the officials that we met shared the conviction that there was no plan B; only one plan, that the deal should work.⁷ The spokesperson of the Coordinating Body for the Refugee Issue was adamant about the impossibility of any other alternative plan. In the question whether the government had a Plan B in case the deal collapsed, he repeatedly said that Greece could not deal with hundreds of thousands of refugees. In the question whether he was aware of such plans at the level of the European Commission, e.g. moving the buffer zone from Turkey to Greece in exchange of increased funding, he replied that 'this cannot be done; no matter how much money you get, even if you get 10 billion euros, you cannot enlarge *Chios*'.⁸

⁶Interview with officer at the Hellenic Asylum Service, taken by D. Parsanoglou, September 2016.

⁷Interview with the officer at the Ministry of Interior and Administrative Reconstruction, department for Migration Policy, taken by D. Parsanoglou and V. Tsianos, May 2016; interview with officer at the General Secretariat for Migration Policy, taken by D. Parsanoglou and V. Tsianos, May 2016; interview with an advisor of the Alternate Minister of Interior and Administrative Reconstruction responsible for Migration Policy, taken by B. Kasperek and D. Parsanoglou, June 2016.

⁸Interview taken by D. Parsanoglou, June 2016.

It seems that for the Greek government, the EU-Turkey Statement constituted the embodiment of what had been supporting as a 'Europeanisation of the refugee issue.' Nevertheless, serious objections were raised around the issue of the deal. A senior advisor of the Minister of Migration Policy resigned from her post after the statement, arguing that it raised questions of possible violations of national constitutions, EU regulations –i.e. the Procedures Directive of 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection– and, above all, the international public law:

The fact that according to the EU-Turkey Statement a person could be returned and the fact that sanctions are imposed to returned people constitutes a direct breach of the Geneva Convention by establishing an à la carte frame. The concept running the statement is the instrumentalisation of refugees. In addition, Turkey is considered quasi automatically as a 'safe third country,' which in many cases is misleading if not dangerous for some people who will be sent back.⁹

Even though the statement of 18 March 2016 was not a legally binding document in the sense of international law, it was, and still is presented in the public discourse almost as such. The Law on Asylum (4375/2016), which passed through an 'express procedure' in the beginning of April 2016, was considered by the public and the parliament to be a sort of adjustment of asylum procedures and structures to the new spirit of refugee emergency that underpins the deal between EU and Turkey. It is important to note that the previous law on asylum was passed in 2011 and some of its aspects, such as the asylum committees and the necessary human resources, did not effectively come into force. However, nowhere in the text of the new law nor in the accompanying report that introduced the bill in the parliament, is there any reference to Turkey and to the EU-Turkey Statement.

It was clear that since March 2016 the maintenance of the EU-Turkey Statement had been the one and only sustainable plan for the Greek government. This means, however, that the main goal of the Greek government had been the containment of refugee flows. When I asked a Senior Advisor of the Minister of Migration Policy whether the deal was an unavoidable development or the Greek government pursued it as such, the deal was defended for the following reasons:

1. The deal effectively minimised the flows
2. Greece could not in any way handle the 'refugee crisis' alone
3. The deal aimed at stopping the smuggling networks
4. Thanks to the deal, Turkey undertook for the first time the responsibility to create some kind of infrastructure to deal with people who arrive in the country and stay there for a certain period of time.¹⁰

Another development that occurred in the summer of 2016 was the modification of the composition of the backlog committees, removing the representatives of the

⁹Interview with a former advisor of the Alternate Minister of Interior and Administrative Reconstruction responsible for Migration Policy, taken by B. Kasperek and D. Parsanoglou, June 2016.

¹⁰Interview taken by B. Kasperek and D. Parsanoglou, June 2016.

UNHCR and the EEDA *Ethniki Epitropi yia ta Dikeomata tou Anthropou* [National Commission for Human Rights]. This happened on 22 June 2016, when this amendment passed through Law 4399/2016 on the ‘Institutional framework for the establishment of regimes for the reinforcement of private investments aiming at the regional and economic development of the country –Establishment of a Development Council and other measures’. The National Commission for Human Rights, which is a public body and its members are appointed by the Parliament, published a statement expressing its concerns for the hastiness of the Minister to pass such an amendment through an absolutely irrelevant bill, particularly just some months after the new Law on asylum (4375/2016) which was the result of long consultation with relevant stakeholders. The Commission also expressed concerns as for the constitutionality of the amendment and its compliance with international legal standards (EEDA, 2016).

The deal which is still largely shaping the regulatory framework of entries and exits in the EU, from Greece through Turkey, has to a certain degree achieved its prescribed goals. Sea arrivals to Greece have sharply decreased, although they had already started to fall after their peak in October 2015 (Spijkerboer, 2016). It must be noted though that besides the deal, a significant impediment to new arrivals was the closure of borders by several countries and the effective collapse of the Balkan route. In interviews conducted in September 2016 representatives of different organisations were insisting on refugees’ ‘agency’ as an explanatory factor for the limited arrivals on the Greek islands:

If there is no field research and [we don’t] ask the asylum seekers themselves, we cannot draw any conclusion. My personal take is that the crucial factor for the sharp decrease of migrant flows, if you compare this with the previous summer, is the closure of the Northern borders of the country. In my opinion, I don’t think that Turkish authorities do something more or something less than what they did before. This is my perception; and it is based on a very simple assumption, that someone might be a refugee, but he is not stupid. Neither he has/has he such a big problem of access to information. Everyone has a mobile phone, with internet access; they read the same things I more or less read (...) I think that they do have basic information. And the basic information is that if you go to Greece, you are stuck!¹¹

In fact, as early as April 2016, arrivals to Italy outreached arrivals to Greece. If in the summer of 2015, Greece was at the centre of the ‘refugee crisis,’ in the summer of 2016 Italy was receiving around ten times more refugees than Greece. In almost less than three months the feeling of crisis, as far as the refugee question was concerned, had been mitigated. Time matters; from month to month, sometimes even from week to week, the challenges that the actors involved in the ‘management of “refugee crisis”’ face changes in terms of intensity and the content of the ‘crisis.’ Moreover, also timing matters; and it matters not only for the classification of refugees, i.e. their eligibility for different kinds of statuses and subsequent possibilities; it also matters for the classification of space. The new mapping of governance that has been introduced because of and within the ‘refugee crisis’ is in fact introducing

¹¹ Interview with officer at the Hellenic Asylum Service, taken by D. Parsanoglou, September 2016.

a new geography of governance, where specific places are linked to specific regulatory frameworks.

12.4 How to Deal with All This? New Kids on the Block

Coming to the question of how society has responded to the crisis, the summer and the autumn of 2015 generated a series of images that will not easily abandon collective memory. However, despite the dramatic and sometimes tragic content of these images, the 'summer of migration' will also remain in people's memories as an event that triggered an unprecedented outbreak of solidarity and humanitarianism that challenged the ways that we perceive both individual/collective agency and structural/institutional interventions in the field. Particularly, the intensity of border crossings in the East Mediterranean has de facto produced strong intersections between border/asylum politics and humanitarian action, which raised a series of humanitarian dilemmas that concern all types of actors involved (Scott-Smith, 2016).

In Greece, from the beginning of the 'refugee crisis' and particularly from the early summer of 2015, multiple actors, individual and institutional, local and international, governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental, technical and humanitarian, have been present wherever emergency situations occurred. This humanitarian outbreak, in particular the reaction of local societies on the main points of arrival, i.e. the islands of the East Aegean Sea, led some, such as the social anthropologist E. Papataxiarchis (2016a), to speak about a 'new patriotism of solidarity,' referring to the dominant attitude towards the refugees.

If we tried to provide a rough typology of the actors who were and, in some cases, still are present in the broad field of "'refugee crisis" management,' we could distinguish several types of actors, from representatives of IOs and EU agencies to activists and volunteers in local assemblies and community kitchens (Parsanoglou, 2020a). A lot has been written (Oikonomakis, 2018; Papataxiarchis, 2016b; Parsanoglou & Philipp, 2018; Rakopoulos, 2014; Rozakou, 2016; Zavos et al., 2017), particularly on the grassroots movements and solidarity structures that were formed within the financial/economic crisis in Greece and constituted the knowledge base for the establishment of robust *infrastructures of solidarity* (Schilliger, 2020) towards the asylum seekers and refugees. Solidarity that can also be seen as a 'bottom-up governmentality' that involves both 'formal charity, NGOs, or humanitarian assistance,' but also 'grassroots organisations, a variety of local solidarity initiatives, and even transnational movements' (Mantanika & Arapoglou Chap. 10 in [this volume](#)).

If we examine the motivations and the content of the work/services that all these people have been offering, we could better understand the criteria on which the above categorisation is based (Parsanoglou, 2020a). One might also suggest different categorisations. What is most interesting is the fact that in the specific spatio-temporal conjuncture of the double-or-multiple-crisis Greece, all these actors have been coexisting and interacting for specific moments in specific spaces where the

refugee drama occurred. From the northern coasts of *Lesvos* to the port of *Piraeus* and the camps at *Idomeni*, a bunch of people who might never have imagined coexisting and working together under any circumstances constituted a heterogeneous and heterodox continuum.

Quite revealing and illustrative is the example of *Lesvos*. In its 1632.8 km² *Lesvos* received during 2015 more than 0.5 million refugees and some thousands of volunteers, activists and NGOs-IOs' professionals. During the emergency period, i.e. from spring 2015 to winter 2015–2016, one could find all types of actors mentioned above. They were deployed all along the island, but particularly in some specific localities where specific acts of the refugee drama were performed. The first act, that of arriving and being rescued, was mostly taking place on the north shore of the island. The bulk of arrivals were taking place on the coasts of a small fishing village, *Skala Sikamineas aka Skala Sikamniyas*. There, local fishermen along with activists and international volunteers participated in everyday rescuing and hosting actions. A Greek volunteer with activist background who went to *Lesvos* in November 2015 and stayed there until March 2016, describes a typical day at the coast as follows:

Let's say that on a regular day seven-eight boats were arriving, which is not much/many, neither few. *Platanos* [the ad hoc collective that people from different places created there]¹² had a space of around 200m², a squat behind the municipal pumping station and in front of a small park. (...) When we were done, UNHCR vans would come and take them to Camp one, on the outskirts of the village, about one kilometre away. (...) It was there that the registration would take place. (...) I don't know for how many hours they had to wait before they got on the big buses to go to *Moria*. (...) There, there was another registration; more formal this time. They were given papers, Police was also there. (...) Those who had money found a ship and left; those who didn't have waited for their folks to come from the other side [Turkey], or stayed inside *Moria* or in *Kara Tepe*, in a space owned by the Municipality. (...) There were times that *Moria* was full, so they were going to another camp, we were calling the Afghan camp, at the 'Better days for *Moria*.' A guy who had created an NGO and was running it is now in *Eleonas* [camp in Athens], a Greek-Cypriot. (...) At *Tsamakia*, there was a 'no border kitchen.' This is near the port. German antifa had created this.¹³

The extended passage from the above excerpt shows the diversity of actors who were interplaying within the 50 km trajectory of refugees from the coast to the capital city of *Lesvos*. What is interesting is that in this trajectory, which looked like an assembly line of refugee processing, different kinds of mandates, activities and even sovereignties emerged, creating a fascinating *assemblage* of heterogeneous components. It is quite interesting that this coexistence of different actors could and did in fact lead to misunderstandings regarding mandates and responsibilities. An American volunteer was fascinated by the efficiency of the 'Spanish coastguard' that provided more than assistance in rescuing refugees:

This was fascinating...The Spanish coastguard was the one managing the whole thing. I remember asking why the Spanish coastguard was the one in charge. And apparently, this has been happening since back in 2015 when [the situation] was getting out of control, the

¹² See Solidarity Team *Platanos* (2015).

¹³ Interview with Greek activist in *Lesvos*, taken by D. Parsanoglou, March 2017.

Spanish coastguard people came and started doing such a good job that none ever replaced them.¹⁴

The Spanish Coastguard (as named by the American volunteer) actually was just a Barcelona-based NGO called Open Arms (n.d.) The organisation, in September 2015, had sent two boats to *Lesvos* and was very active in rescuing refugees during the busy months of autumn-winter 2015–2016.

It must be noted, however, that by 2016, even before the EU-Turkey Statement, the situation improved. On the one hand, arrivals had already decreased, and, on the other hand, controls had started to be stricter. In this sense, assistance became more *professionalised* and people who were getting involved were to a lesser or greater extent linked to international organisations or local organisations which acted as partners or subcontractors of the international ones. During this process, interesting shifts emerged, where people who were previously activists were recruited by NGOs¹⁵ or even by the Hellenic Asylum Service through the UNHCR.¹⁶ People from abroad, i.e. international volunteers and activists, continued to arrive in the country, but since March 2016 the focus was not necessarily *Lesvos* and the other islands; instead, they would move towards *Idomeni* or, after its evacuation, towards other camps and spots of interest in Athens and elsewhere. In addition, cracks on refugee solidarity appeared in *Lesvos*, leading to its actual collapse since spring 2018 (Papataxiarchis Chap. 8 in [this volume](#)).

12.5 Sovereignty and Its Discontents

Two metaphors, among many others, have extensively been used even within critical discourses in order to describe the two-fold crisis that erupted in Greece during the last years: the one referring to the economic crisis is the metaphor of ‘debt colony,’ accompanied very often by the notion of (German) protectorate; the other referring to the ‘refugee crisis’ is the metaphor of a ‘warehouse of souls’, generally used by diverse actors, from Amnesty International to right-wing actors. So, Greece is very often represented as a garbage can: ‘Greece is not Europe. This is not Europe. *C’est la poubelle de l’ Europe. C’est la poubelle de la poubelle de l’ Europe.*¹⁷ This is what young North-African migrants in *Igumenitsa*, who were trying to get on a ferry to Italy, were exclaiming some years ago (Tsianos & Kuster, 2012).

¹⁴Interview with American volunteer in *Lesvos*, taken by D. Parsanoglou, February 2017.

¹⁵This is the case of one interviewee, active in the local antiracist and solidarity movement for several years, who started working as social worker at a shelter run by a Greek NGO: Interview taken by D. Parsanoglou, February 2017.

¹⁶This is the case of one interviewee, a psychologist who started working at the asylum service at the *Moria* hotspot, interview taken by D. Parsanoglou, October 2016.

¹⁷‘It is the garbage can of the garbage can of Europe.’

Paradoxically enough, all these metaphors were adopted also by the government and to a certain extent by Greek authorities and public services. Although during the years of opposition and during the negotiations with creditors in the long first semester of 2015, Prime Minister *Alexis Tsipras* was repeatedly defending national sovereignty exclaiming that ‘Greece is not a colony and Greeks are not the pariahs of Europe,’ the government’s position during the ‘refugee crisis’ seemingly shifted towards a less-sovereign stance, arguing that ‘the logic of national sovereignty cannot prevail over the common European rules, when it comes to the refugee problem.’¹⁸

One of the main questions that was posed was to examine whether the ‘refugee crisis’ has had an impact on state sovereignty, and more particularly on the *acts of sovereignty*, if we could think in terms of Isin and Nielsen (2008) with regard to ‘state agency.’ Or, using the logic of Yasemin Soysal (1994), but adopting the perspective of the state, I wanted to see how sovereignty was challenged or even undermined by developments closely linked to core state operations. Here, apart from the international interventions, mainly within EU instances including Turkey, one can find processes of reformulating and reconfiguring mechanisms of adjustment and readiness towards the new facets of the European border regime as it has been challenged by refugees and migrants. In other words, sovereignty has been brilliantly challenged when we see how policies and procedures have been practically implemented in Greece.

To start with the financial situation of the country, budgetary limitations have been present within the whole range of initiatives that Greek authorities had to undertake from the beginning of the ‘refugee crisis.’ Recruitment of personnel in order to meet the increasing needs in several services, e.g. the Asylum Service and its local branches, the hotspots etc., creation and maintenance of infrastructure around the country in order to host refugees, as well as material support and assistance, all required a financial cost unbearable for the government budget. The inescapable reality of financial restrictions has been a constant matter of concern.

The cost of the ‘refugee crisis,’ which among others triggered the conflict between the first General Secretary for First Reception and Identification and the Deputy Minister of Migration Policy that led to the resignation of the former in September 2016 five months after his appointment,¹⁹ was not at all a cost that burdened entirely and directly the Greek government. Aside from voluntary work offered by individuals both on the islands and on the mainland, much of the services to refugees have been provided by international organisations and international and local NGOs. Particularly in the case of humanitarian assistance actions, funding was going directly to organisations, without any involvement of the Greek state.

¹⁸ *Alexis Tsipras* speaking in a meeting of the European Radical Left and Ecology, in Paris, on 11 March 2016 (Lifo, 2016).

¹⁹ In his words: ‘Norway has more refugees in proportion to its population than Greece. How much does the Norwegian government spend annually per refugee? It spends less than the money we spend. The average annual cost for a refugee in Norway is about 12,000 (euros). In Greece it is 15.000.’ See The Vima Team (2016)

As I mentioned above, the European Commission described the Emergency support instrument as:

a faster, more targeted way to respond to major crises, including helping Member States cope with large numbers of refugees, with humanitarian funding channelled to United Nations (UN) agencies, non-governmental organisations and international organisations in close coordination and consultation with Member States (European Commission, 2020).²⁰

However, the question whether the 'refugee crisis' resulted among others in the establishment of a parallel structure of governance in Greece was widely open. Government officials have been insisting on two things: the assessment of the needs and the monitoring of the use of resources was a responsibility of the Greek government and more specifically of the Ministry of Migration Policy. Secondly, the system of hotspots and this kind of collaboration between state and non-state actors did not constitute a precedent, a sort of model for the future, but just an experience. On the other side of the coin, representatives of IOs and NGOs, particularly of EU agencies, such as the EASO and Frontex, were insisting that all they did was providing assistance to Greek authorities. Formally, the role of EASO, both on the islands and in the mainland was 'to assist the EU relocation process, in particular through the provision of information on relocation, assistance provided to the Dublin unit, and detection of possible document fraud' (EASO, 2016).

In the field, however, it is well known that both EASO and Frontex officers were very often providing more than auxiliary services in the sense that both identification of nationality and initial investigation of someone's demand were undertaken by their officers. Since it was difficult, if not impossible for Greek officers, particularly during the 'hot periods of the crisis' to re-examine in depth the initial report/opinion on every case, it was a common secret that the international experts' role was very significant in the process. It is revealing that, on 7 June 2016, the *Mitilini* Bar Association lodged a complaint against EASO officers in *Moria* when the latter denied access in the hotspot to local lawyers, requesting a clarification of EASO's competences in the hotspots (Aggelidis & Fotiadis, 2016). Further clarification was provided by the Law 4399/2016, passed in June 2016, where beside the modification of backlog committees' composition, a major development referred to EASO officers' competences:

The element b of paragraph four of article 60 of Law 4375/2016 [the Asylum Law passed on 1 April 2016] is amended as follows: b. The interview with the applicants for international protection can be conducted also by personnel provided by the European Asylum Support Office.²¹

It is also well known that there have been points of conflict –more or less latent– when it came to boundaries of competence and to existing discrepancies. The former lies upon the novelty of the situation in which IOs and NGOs found themselves:

²⁰Underlined by the author.

²¹Law 4399/2016.

All the NGOs I think, are facing this problem. They're trying to do something for the first time, but they have the experience from other countries, with different legal frames, with different procedures and they think... I think that it's very difficult for them to adapt to the new reality. And this is something that you can understand. That's why if you are not there, you face the problem that something like, I don't know, something very strange is going to happen. That's why you have to be there to... set some guidelines: 'No, you cannot do that, you have to do that.'²²

Moreover, discrepancies and inequalities have arisen between personnel of Greek authorities and European agencies. It is important to note here that EU agencies, such as Frontex and EASO, have not recruited local people in order to facilitate their operations. The staff remained mainly international, without involving Greek personnel, which is working under more pressure and worse conditions:

But I think that a lot of them are coming from different countries, especially from Germany, Holland. A lot of people from Holland, Italy, Spain, different countries. But they don't have a lot of staff from the local communities. No. And this is an issue also, because they're coming here like experts from different countries, they have a huge amount for salary, different level from the Greek Police, they're working different hours, less hours. They work in better conditions.

12.6 Conclusion: What Has the 'Refugee Crisis' Left Behind?

The recent 'refugee crisis' triggered a series of repercussions and shifts as far as the EU border regime and asylum policies are concerned. Greece has been at the centre of these transformations bearing the essential burden of the 'crisis' and experimenting significant shifts as far as governance of mobility is concerned. Having seemingly left behind the 'emergency period', our findings contribute with the following insights regarding the impact of the 'refugee crisis' on the EU border regime as it is exemplified in the case of a specific member state.

More precisely, the EU-Turkey Statement of the 18th March 2016 resulted practically in the construction of a particular regime of inadmissibility and readmission. The former was constituted by yet another administrative obstacle to the institutions of asylum, while the latter manifested as a constant threat—even though only rarely enforced—of deportation to Turkey. It is noteworthy that the exceptionalism of this regime was not confined to the very hotspot centres but applied to the whole islands. As I have ascertained during our fieldwork, the hotspot centres could not function as closed centres of detention, which in turn lead to the islands being bounded spaces as a whole. Migrants who arrived on the island and were registered in the hotspot centres were under a police order of 'restriction of movement,' meaning that

²²Interview with an advisor of the Alternate Minister of Interior and Administrative Reconstruction responsible for Migration Policy, taken by B. Kasperek and D. Parsanoglou, June 2016.

they were not allowed to leave the island. Greek police and Frontex enforced this order at both ports and airports.

From the above and from our research findings, the chapter concludes with some general speculations concerning the territorialised aspects of the reconfiguration of the European border regime. A lot has been said about the ex-territorialisation of the European border regime. It has been pointed out from the early 2000s that the European borders, more accurately the control of European borders, has been shifting outwards depicting extra-European 'wardens of the European border regime' (see among others: Andersson, 2014; Bialasiewicz, 2012; Casas-Cortes et al., 2011; Tsianos & Karakayali, 2010; Walters, 2009) In this framework, several attempts have been made in the past for outsourcing detention and control in both Africa and Middle East. Through this lens, the EU-Turkey Statement seemed to be the first comprehensive plan for a systematic, holistic extra-territorialised control and processing of refugee and migrant flows. In other words, through the EU-Turkey Statement a buffer zone was, for the first time, officially established at the very external border of the EU. In this sense, hotspots as configurations of condensed control in terms of space and time could provide new insights into the transformation(s) of the European border regime. Along with the tendency towards an *exterritorialisation* or *externalisation* –pointed out since the mid-1990s in critical migration studies– the hotspot system inaugurated a systematic endeavour for a comprehensive processing of bodies and data *inside* the EU borders. Apart from the reconfigurations of geographies of control, exemplified in specific territories of enacted sovereignty, i.e. hotspot-non hotspot, islands-mainland, country of entry-country of relocation and so on, the concentration of different actors in specific spatialities and temporalities, lead to constant renegotiations of the margins of both mobility and control within the European border regime and pointed to a deeper restructuring not only of the European border regime, but the European space itself (Dimitriadi Chap. 11 in [this volume](#)).

What is even more interesting, however, is the fact that the new regime introduced by the EU-Turkey Statement and the hotspot system was not only shifting outwards; it was also creating *internal buffer zones* within the EU territory, and particularly within a specific EU country; and even more particularly within specific spaces of detention and processing. This internalisation of control was exemplified in different moments and different spaces: the first moment/space where someone was confined if she/he would manage to cross the external buffer zone erected by Turkish authorities, was the hotspot system deployed in the five famous Greek islands. The first spatial distinction that one faced arriving in the EU was the one between 'hotspot' and 'non-hotspot' territory; in terms of time, the distinction between pre-identification and post-identification, including initial investigation of one's condition. Then one came across the distinction between island and mainland, Greek or Turkish depending on the outcome of her/his demand; in terms of time, a month or less or more that their application was examined. And then came the distinction between Greece and other EU and European Economic Area (EEA) member states, i.e. the distinction between application for relocation (until June 2018) or family reunification, acceptance or rejection of the demand, transmission of the files

to other countries, acceptance or rejection, trip to the destination, while living in formal or improvised camps in the Greek mainland, in accommodation places provided by the UNHCR, local authorities, international or national/local NGOs or informal projects of housing provided by activists and people in solidarity with refugee and so on. Unless, both in terms of time and space, the ‘infinity in confinement’ exhausted someone and lead her/him to ‘chose’ the way back home, sponsored by the IOM.²³

According to our research findings, the hotspot centres could not be analysed as merely isolated spaces. While they should by no means be misconstrued as mere ‘welcome centres’ at the EU border enabling access to EU territory for everybody, the hotspot approach put emphasis on: (a) the processing and registration of all arriving persons in a fast and timely manner and (b) the accelerated onward transportation of selected persons in accordance with the relocation scheme and the family reunification mechanism of the Dublin system. Furthermore, the placement of the hotspot centres inside the EU territory lead to a different spatial category, especially if considered relative to the various overlapping and relevant legal orders that came with this inward move of the processing centres. This means that both in the temporal and spatial dimensions, there are stark conceptual differences which need to be considered in any assessment of the overall hotspot system. For these differences are not merely discursive, but indeed point to a changing configuration of central governing rationalities within the EU border regime, which are translated into concrete practises and materialised into an actual infrastructure of control.

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²³I am referring to the IOM (n.d.) Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes.

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