



**GREEK
COUNCIL
FOR
REFUGEES**

Borderlines of Despair

First-line reception of asylum
seekers at the Greek borders



Summary

By 2014 the number of people displaced by conflict had surged to almost 60 million - the highest since World War II - sparking a humanitarian crisis as large numbers of refugees risked their lives to reach what they hoped would be the safety of the European Union (EU).

As Europe struggled to cope with the pressures and as hundreds died, part of the international response was an EU/Turkey deal on handling what became known as the 'migrant crisis' at the Greek border.

But with international attention drawn elsewhere, what has that deal delivered?

["Borderlines of Despair: First-line reception of asylum seekers at the Greek borders"](#) is the result of research conducted between November 2017 - April 2018 in Greece. This research focused on the Greek system of first-line reception of third-country nationals and stateless persons arriving and requesting asylum at the country's borders (island and mainland), in the aftermath of the EU-Turkey Statement of March 18, 2016.

The aim of this research was to capture the core issues asylum seekers have been facing since March 2016. The study consisted of a series of interviews, discussions, and field monitoring visits, complemented by recourse to a wealth of published and unpublished resources. The report serves to further substantiate a series of deficiencies and human rights violations which, despite being intrinsically tied to the Statement's implementation and consistently raised by a range of civil society actors have tended to fall through the cracks of an EU (Migration) debate that has increasingly adhered to the "principle" of deterring arrivals and outsourcing Europe's responsibilities for forcefully displaced populations.

The report provides a number of field-based examples, so as to better contextualize the repercussions this policy has had on human life and dignity. It aims to provide an updated analysis of the Greek system of first-line border reception, and an evidence-based critique of its deficiencies. The report concludes with a series of core recommendations, deemed mandatory if a humane system of reception is to become a remote possibility in Greece, and consequently at Europe's southeastern borders.

The research was undertaken by the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR) with support from the Social Change Initiative (SCI) and the Human Dignity Foundation.

The full report is available at: <https://bit.ly/2OuXoeG>

Background of the research

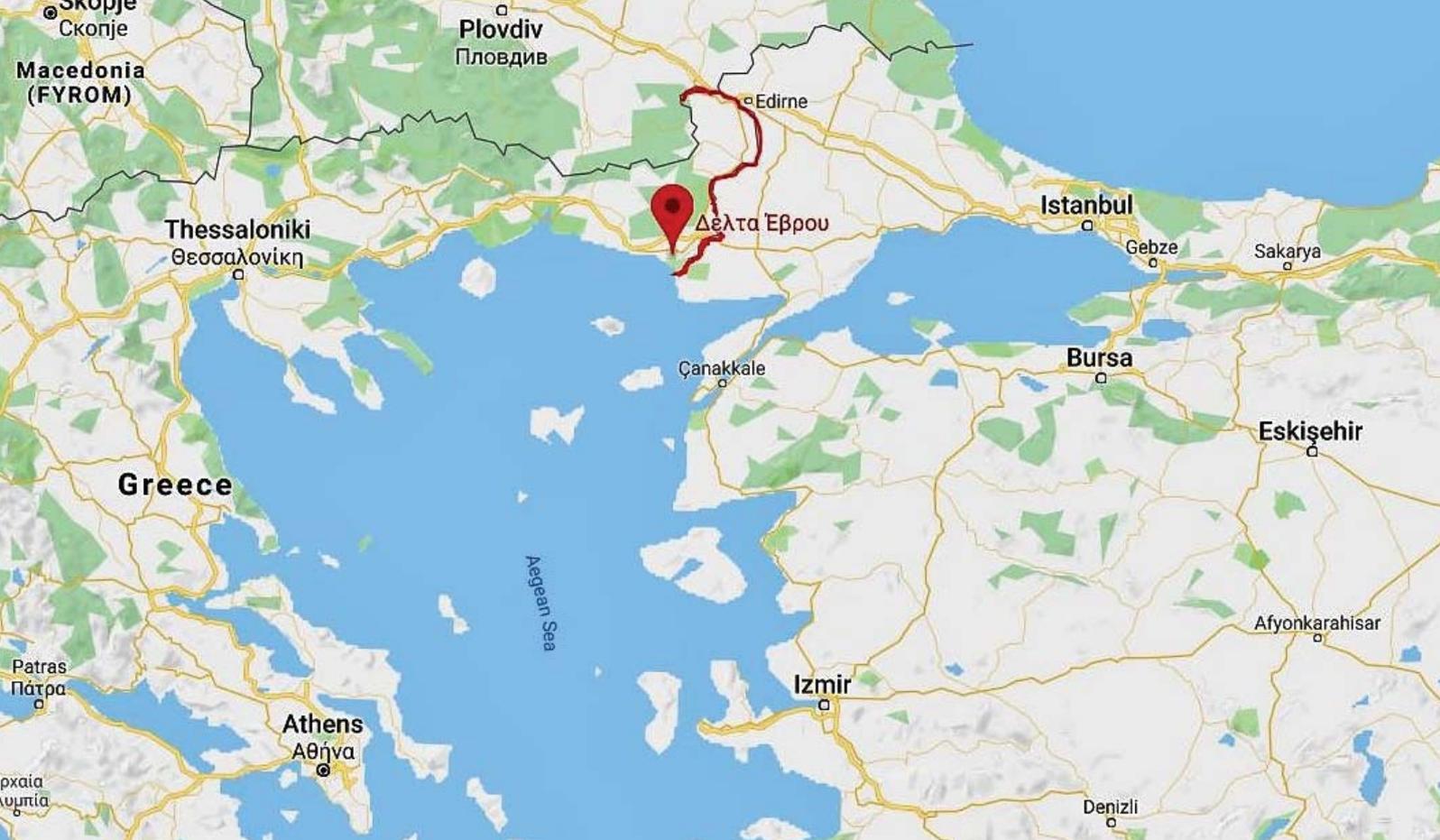
March 20, 2016 – the date of implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement – marked a decisive turning point in Europe’s response to one of the continent’s largest, post-World War II, humanitarian tragedies. From a mostly humanitarian response, driven by the story of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi and encapsulated in the operationalisation of the “humanitarian corridor” from Greece to Germany, the situation gradually changed towards harshness. It culminated in the post-EU/Turkey Statement which entrapped thousands of refugees and asylum seekers on the Greek islands. The overall feeling of a pan-European “welcoming”, towards forcefully displaced populations, had been silenced by the deafening sounds of fear mongering.

In the meantime, Greek-bound third-country nationals and stateless persons – who kept risking and losing their lives in hopes of finding shelter and a better life – were left stranded and alone to cope with the country’s unpreparedness to either receive or assist them under anything but the most deplorable conditions.

Two years on, amidst a range of problems, such as the increasing obstacles placed by some EU member states to the reunification of separated families, or the severe overcrowding of reception and accommodation facilities in Greece, it would appear that the situation is further deteriorating, despite a range of ad hoc efforts to address it.



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Push-backs at Europe's forgotten frontiers

Although the refugee issue in Greece has become synonymous with the five main island points of entry (Lesvos, Samos, Chios, Leros, and Kos), some of the grossest violations of the rights of third-country nationals and stateless persons have been committed at Greece's northeastern land borders with Turkey (Evros). Unlike the islands, which have dominated mass media attention as they epitomise Europe's "hotspot" approach to Migration and the resulting human despair and suffering, the Evros land border with Turkey has largely remained out of the international (and national) limelight.

Yet it is at this border that we and others have found evidence of 'push-backs' of forcefully displaced populations who managed to reach Greece and request asylum only to find themselves deprived of their right to do so. Most worryingly, this arbitrary practice has reportedly led to the further exposure of refugees to life-threatening dangers: i.e. their violent return by uninformed, masked and hooded personnel of the Greek police and military to the wilderness of the Evros river banks that form the natural borderline between Greece and Turkey.

Despite the increasing number of reports and articles on the matter and near-identical testimonies (including this report) a concerning silence has been the state's sole reply, broken on occasion by scarce and unsubstantiated official statements repudiating the allegations. Indeed, up to this day, and despite significant indications of a marked increase in terms of the number of push-back operations throughout 2017, no official investigation has been initiated.

Recommendations for the Greek government:

- i. Order an investigation on the allegations regarding push-back operations at Greece's northeastern land borders and ensure that all perpetrators are found and brought to justice.*
- ii. Establish an independent body responsible for monitoring the situation at Greece's borders, at least until such time as it can be safely and unambiguously argued that no newcomer is arbitrarily stripped of their right to seek asylum.*

“Discipline and Punish”: The norm of first-line reception

The Greek and European system of reception has been inappropriately used to detain and restrict freedom of refugees and asylum seekers. Rather than being an absolute exception – as should be the case based on national and international laws, conventions and guidelines – detention and confinement have been the prevalent norms of a Greek system of first-line reception. Its primary characteristic has been the further aggravation of asylum seekers' state of health and mind. The predominance of this kind of punitive treatment, enforced as it is against vulnerable populations on the move, is first and foremost the result of the aims and practical implications of the EU-Turkey Statement. Implementation of the statement has made island-based confinement of newcomers the top priority, an ongoing process to deter arrivals and swiftly return Europe's “undesirables” to Turkey.

1. The quoted title serves as homage to Michel Foucault's seminal work on relations of power and the evolution of the western penal system. See M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage Books, New York, 1995.

Table 1: Demonstration of the management of Greek-bound refugees & asylum seekers

Examples of Methods Used

Rationale

<p>Primary focus on island-based accommodation in hotspots, which more accurately constitute a (quasi-)detention means of crowd control under the guise of restricting freedom of movement of newcomers on the islands</p>	<p>Curbing secondary movements and enforcing implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement (Turkey does not accept back asylum seekers from the Greek mainland)</p> <p>Infrastructural & administrative gaps & deficiencies (e.g. lack of reception and alternative accommodation spaces)</p>
<p>De facto 'reception' of categories of asylum seekers (i.e. so-called 'low-recognition rate' nationalities & single, healthy, men) in detention (on the islands)</p>	<p>Predetermined views as to the "chances" of being recognized as beneficiaries of international protection. Closely tied to nationality & the extent to which their country is conceived as a 'refugee or migrant producing' one.</p> <p>Based on asylum statistics, rather than individualized examinations of each case, and on intrinsic/systemic biases as to the motives propelling newcomers to request asylum.</p>
<p>Excessive use of detention for the management of all land-based arrivals (including minors) in the region of Evros</p>	<p>Only one, small-scale and closed Reception and Identification Center (RIC) in northeastern Greece, and unavailability of alternative reception and accommodation spaces.</p>

Recommendations towards the EU and Greece:

- i. Immediately and without delay cease all detention (and/or other) practices discriminating between persons on the basis of their nationalities and/or genders.*
- ii. Immediately transfer all asylum seekers out of detention cells and Pre-Removal Centers into suitable accommodation. It is unacceptable for any one person to be exposed to the kind of inhumane and degrading conditions characteristic of cells and Pre-Removal Centers throughout Greece, let alone persons fleeing persecution.*
- iii. Ensure that vulnerable asylum seekers and especially children are never detained.*
- iv. Abolish and/or reduce the use of geographical restriction to only the absolute minimum needed for the identification and registration processes.*

Problems of reception

Reception procedures – consisting of the registration-identification of newcomers, the provision of information on their rights and obligations, and their screening for potential vulnerabilities – provide the groundwork for accessing international protection. They not only serve to identify who has entered a country's territory, but primarily serve as a first step towards ensuring that anyone who wishes to apply for asylum can do so in an equal-for-all manner (for instance, by making it possible to channel vulnerable asylum seekers to the additional support necessary for their uninhibited access to international protection).

Compared to 2015 - 2016, when the island-based system of first-line reception was virtually non-existent and primarily "managed" by the volunteer-led, solidarity movement, some marked improvements – primarily related to the standardization of reception practices – have been made. Nevertheless, with the exception of the predominantly security-related systems (registration and identification), those pertaining to newcomers' awareness of and access to the basic and more specialized rights (i.e. information provision and vulnerability screening), have remained largely dysfunctional. Understaffing and gaps in specialized medical personnel (e.g. psychiatrists) all obstruct the systems smooth functioning.

Throughout first-line reception and accommodation – which for many can last for months and at times even years (in the case of accommodation) – asylum seekers remain virtually oblivious to the reasons for their confinement, or the specifics of the processes they must undergo (e.g. what is it they must ultimately disclose in an asylum interview). For many, however, – and especially for some of the most vulnerable – this "moving on" remains nothing but a hopeless dream, in a system still struggling –and failing – to tend to their most basic needs.

Recommendations towards the EU and Greece:

- i. Undertake all necessary actions to ensure that, upon arrival in Greece, all third-country nationals and stateless persons are swiftly transferred to an open RIC or other competent, short-term, transit facility, where they can be registered, provided with the necessary primary care, informed of their rights and obligations and granted access to international protection.*
- ii. Significantly enhance Reception and Identification Center's capacity to assist and process arrivals, by deploying additional staff (especially doctors, interpreters and cultural mediators) and enhance their effectiveness through continuous training.*
- iii. Ensure that all newcomers are assessed for potential (medical and/or psychosocial) vulnerabilities as a priority following their arrival, and prior to their asylum interview.*



Canvas dwellings are often packed together, next to waste, without access to basic amenities. ©Dimitris Michalakis/GCR

Life at the “Trenches”

Much like reception procedures, reception/living conditions at the border RICs (Reception and Identification Centers) have remained significantly below par in the period following the Statement’s implementation.

At the height of the so-called “Refugee Crisis” (summer of 2015), the Greek system of island-based reception was not only unprepared to cope with the number of arrivals, but was virtually non-existent, with island RICs (or hotspots) being very much in the making. This largely remained the case in the wake of the post-Statement era. Albeit this time around, most of the newly arrived asylum seekers were left with no alternatives other than their forced accommodation in facilities that were, and still are, unsuitable to guarantee even the most basic standards of reception, for what have since been ever-prolonged periods of time. Periods of time where fluctuating numbers of arrivals and the policy of island-based confinement have put further pressure on a system well beyond its limits.

The years following the Statement’s implementation have been marked by the intensification of the “same old problems” – a lack of proper long-term planning and dwindling European solidarity/responsibility-sharing. Living conditions at the borders have, for the most part, ranged from inadequate to inhumane. Refugees are faced with chronic deficiencies caused by overcrowding, a lack of access to health care services, and safety risks created by tensions arising from the prolonged confinement. The cumulative result has been the ‘vulnerabilisation’ of the population of stranded asylum seekers, whom, forced to patiently endure a process that has actively contributed to the exacerbation of their anguish and distress, have been

² More commonly referred to as “hotspots”, when it comes to the islands.

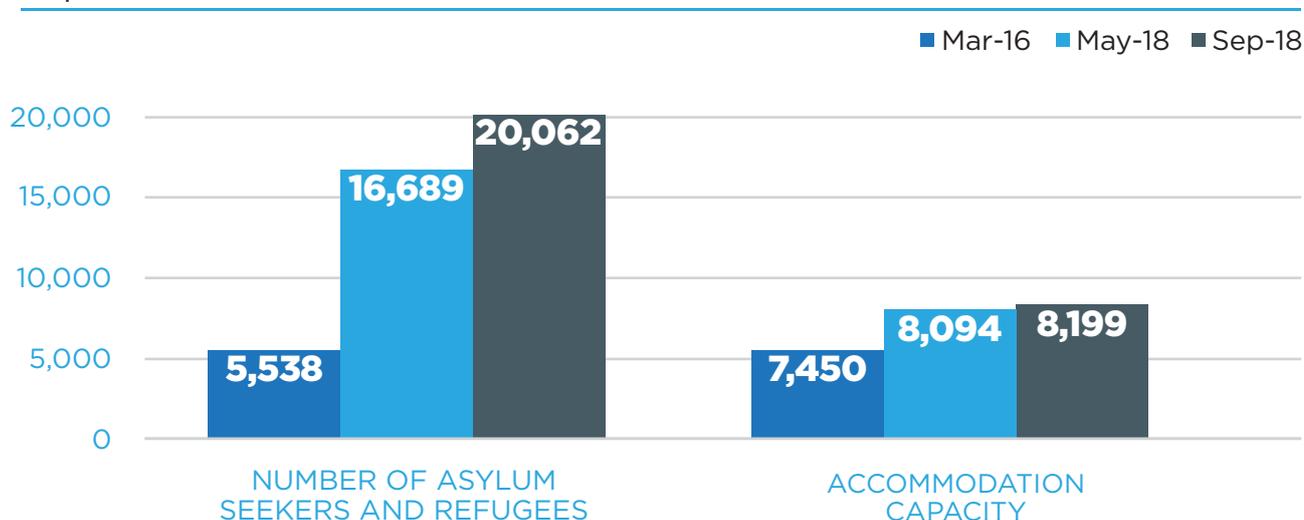
simultaneously exposed to a series of escalating tensions (e.g. protests, racist motivated crimes) and safety risks (e.g. SGBV and suicidal tendencies and attempts).

Lastly, with the number of land-based arrivals increasing exponentially throughout 2017 and especially during the first months of 2018, the chronic gap in Greek-wide reception and accommodation spaces for newcomers reached new heights. Most notably, to date, there is an unaccounted number of asylum seekers becoming homeless in the very place (Greece/EU) they have come seeking protection. It is hardly surprising that the smuggling “enterprise” (within and across Greece, amongst others) has seen such a boom as an increasing number of forcefully displaced persons seek to escape yet another prison/“hell on earth” by any means necessary.

Towards the Greek government and the EU:

- i. *Drastically improve conditions at the RICs, by primarily expanding mainland accommodation capacity and transferring registered (especially, vulnerable) asylum seekers there.*
- ii. *Work towards creating and implementing a model reception-accommodation scheme that will be structured around rapidly filtering registered asylum seekers from border RICs to suitable accommodation in mainland Greece, and from there to either more integration-friendly accommodation places (apartments) or to other Member States.*
- iii. *As a minimum, ensure the presence of at least one working doctor on a 24hr basis in each RIC and large-scale accommodation facility for refugees and asylum seekers.*
- iv. *Tend to the safety of asylum seekers by ensuring that all RICs and accommodation sites have, at a minimum, gate-supervision throughout all days and hours.*
- v. *Similarly take all necessary steps to minimize the risk of SGBV (e.g. gender-based showers in all RICs, adequate lighting throughout the night).*

Graph 1: Accommodation crisis on Greek islands



³ Sexual and Gender Based Violence.

Concluding Remarks

The EU-Turkey Statement has been widely hailed as a success, due to its impact on diminishing the number of (irregular) arrivals in Greece. The facts show, however, that the situation has been steamrolling on a self-perpetuating downward spiral. Instances of critical deterioration are followed by sporadic, last-minute attempts to bring the situation to “manageable”, yet never humane levels.

It is past time that the EU and EU member states accept their responsibilities and work jointly towards strengthening, rather than trampling, the very values upon which the EU has been founded. It is past time for the realization that the only humane way to move forward is by building more bridges instead of cages. Ultimately, and especially in the context of a (Migration) policy that has been justified on the necessity of safeguarding Europe’s borders against the very threats that many asylum seekers, themselves, strive to flee (see terror and terrorism), it is becoming something of an increasingly banal paradox to accept – let alone actively contribute to – the constitution of a placeless population; belonging neither “here” (host country/-continent) nor “there” (home country).

“Apparently nobody wants to know that contemporary history has created a new kind of human being –the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends.”

- Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees”

Recommendations towards the EU and EU member states:

- i. The primary effect of the EU-Turkey Statement has been the dehumanizing treatment of persons fleeing persecution and/or destitution. Therefore, the Statement should be reconsidered and ultimately abolished in favor of a policy that would reposition human rights at the forefront of its agenda.*
- ii. The imperative to respect the (human) rights of all people on the move should form the core principle guiding the management of migration.*
- iii. EU member states alongside Greece should provide asylum seekers with appropriate and effective, safe legal channels for reaching the EU, while facilitating, instead of obstructing, the reunification of families.*

³ H. Arendt, ‘We Refugees’, Menorah Journal 31, no. 1 (1943): 69-77, <http://www-leland.stanford.edu/dept/DLCL/files/pdf/hannah_arendt_we_refugees.pdf>, last accessed 25 June 2018, p.71.