

The Greek part of the Balkan route: Pressure & Resistance

...how the creation of the Balkan route is connected to the Greek financial crisis

...what happened when people on the move came across the part of the greek population that (faced with the end of consumerism as we knew it) chose not fascism but humanity and solidarity and what was the reaction of the social movement in Greece

...how a radical/progressive government followed all EU recommendations and directives while at the same time continued standard Greek State politics on migration and kept posing as radical and progressive

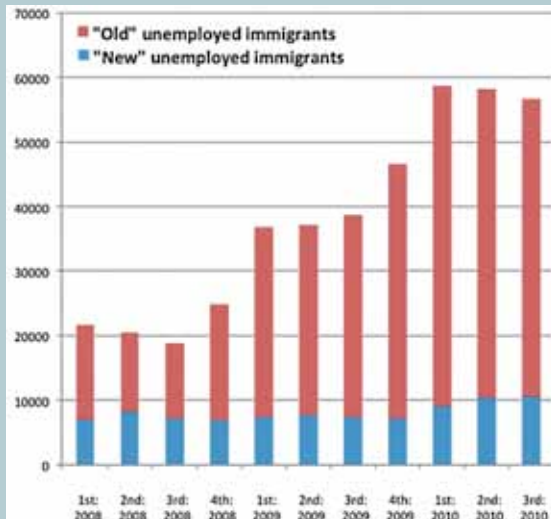
...what is the situation today ... what are the paths of resistance

**a presentation
by clandestina
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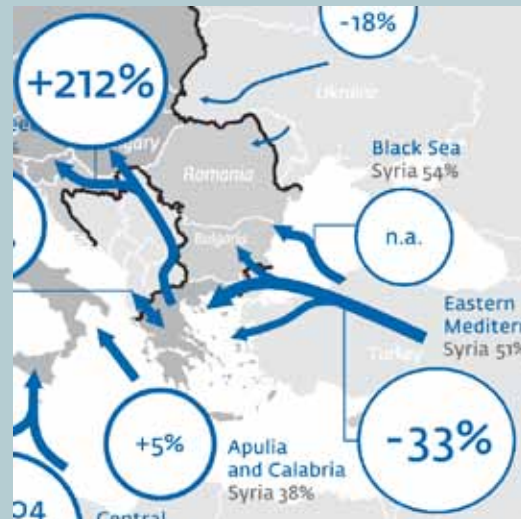
A. The Balkan route and the summer of migration

1. Crisis in Greece and creation of the Balkan route

- The majority of migrants coming to Greece were transit.
- Financial crisis: no jobs anymore - no pay for smugglers.
- People start using the Balkan route. Scapegoating.



2010: migrant unemployment rises



Balkan route in 2013

The myth of the “foreigner-friendly Greek State” (dominant during 2015 and the beginning of 2016) was actually built upon the fact that most new migrants *did not want to stay in Greece* anyway, since, with the setting in of the financial crisis by 2010, there were no jobs and no security for them here. The creation of the Balkan Route is directly connected to the financial crisis in Greece. The absence of work and perspective is why the majority of migrants who had arrived in the 1990s started leaving Greece. The number of Albanian nationals that left the country in the period from 2011-2012 reached 133,787.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the majority of migrants coming to Greece were transit. For them, the country was a stopover, a place where they could work to cover their onward journey. After the crisis this was no longer possible: There were no jobs anymore. As a consequence, the smuggling circuit changed. People who had no money to pay for smugglers any-

more started walking up to Serbia on the centuries old foot track along the Vardar river. From 2011 to 2014, around 200,000 *sans-papiers* left Greece, mainly using the route that became known as the Balkan Route.

In the first years of the crisis in Greece, migrants were used as a scapegoat. At the same time, the neo-nazi party, started being advertised by the liberal media in order to create a counter-balance to the growing social movement against austerity. The fact that migrants *were fleeing Greece anyway* was used to postulate that migrants were leaving in large numbers *allegedly because* of the effective police operations, arrests, pogroms and nazi attacks. August 2012: 6,000 immigrants were detained over the weekend in the biggest police operation in Athens. Scapegoating made the State appear strong, helped nazis rise and comforted the average Greek citizen: although their living standards were rapidly falling, at least had an advantage over those on the margins of society.

A. The Balkan route and the summer of migration

2. Refugees from Syria start using the Balkan route

- People start sleeping in the fields around Idomeni.
- Silent agreement: they must remain invisible.
- Only volunteers and solidarity people help.



September 2014: Some media reported that around 100 migrants per day, mostly from Syria, were gathered in an open field close to Idomeni Police Station. Nobody paid much attention. Only volunteers and solidarity people from Kilis tried to somehow help the migrants, who slept in the open fields close to the border of the Republic of Macedonia, waiting for the smugglers. During the winter the situation got really harsh, but almost nobody was interested: the attention was focused on the January 25 (2015) general elections. The SYRIZA party won the majority vote. Part of the Syriza victory was also due to the fear that neo-nazis had gained too much power in parliament, and one of the main certainties was that Syriza was not a racist party. However, we can not say that the refugee issue was very high on the pre-election agenda of Syriza, since refugees were still quite invisible, or rather *had sunken back to invisibility* after the peak of anti-migrant hysteria, in the summer of 2012.

During the first 6 months of 2015, the number of people crossing Greece rose because of: (a) the deterioration of the situation in Syria, (b) the big number of deadly shipwrecks in the central Mediterranean route (1,208 deaths just in April 2015) and (c) the fact that the Balkan Route became more known to people eager to reach wealthy EU countries. As the summer approached, the number of migrants in the fields around Idomeni rose to hundreds. Invisible to the media, they waited for the signal from the smuggler.

The weekend of July 4-5, 2015 was the weekend of the referendum called by the Syriza government. On that same weekend, around 1,000 migrants in Idomeni organized a protest, as more and more people were stuck in the fields. The migrants blocked the tracks of the international Thessaloniki-Belgrade train route for almost two days, but the protest was kept invisible: *The general idea was that these invisible people should exit the country just as they entered it: as invisibles.*

A. The Balkan route and the summer of migration

3. The summer of migration begins ... cash starts flowing in

- The number of people crossing the border rises geometrically.
- A whole new business opportunity arises.
- First clashes in Idomeni.



The situation, though, could hardly remain secret for too long. In the following weeks, 50,000 migrants arrived on Lesbos (75% Syrians). On July 13, 2015, the Hungarian government announced the construction of a fence at the border with Croatia.

In Greece, everyday life and public discourse was dominated by the SYRIZA capitulation to the bankers' "Troica" and by the capital controls imposed on bank transactions (the 60 euros withdrawal limit). At some point fascist rhetoric appeared against migrants arriving on Greek islands, but eventually the situation was dealt with as a much needed influx of cash: A taxi ride from Moria camp to Lesbos port now cost 10 euros, the boat ticket from Lesbos to Piraeus cost 60 euros per person, then another taxi driver charged another sum, then a bus ticket from Athens to Idomeni (65 euros per person) was needed, while taxi drivers asked for 700 euros for a taxi ride from Athens to Idomeni. Stores on Greek islands that sold sleeping bags and tents ran out

of stock. A simple mobile phone charging could cost up to 5 euros, a small bottle of water (30 cents the most) was sold for 1 euro and more, sandwiches and rented rooms were highly overpriced etc. In other words: In the midst of financial suffocation, "hospitality to refugees" meant hot cash tax-free.

The rate of migrants arriving on Greek islands was higher than the rate of migrants traveling to Athens and then to Idomeni. On August 19, the Greek government announced that a ferry boat would be hired to carry migrants directly from the islands to the Thessaloniki port (migrants would still have to pay for their tickets). This meant that the Greek government was unofficially accepting that a large-scale transport of migrants through the Republic of Macedonia was underway. On August 20, the government of the Rep. of Macedonia responded by shutting down the border and declared a state of emergency. Riot police clashed with migrants, lots of tear gas was used, the border opened again.

A. The Balkan route and the summer of migration

4. State control of the Balkan route

- The “humanitarian corridor”.
- Borders close for non-SIA people.
- First eviction of Idomeni.



At the end of August 2015, 3,000 migrants were crossing the border in Idomeni every day. The situation was half-regulated by border police and smugglers on the two sides of the border, while volunteers and solidarity people tried their best to provide food and medical care. On September 2, 2015, Alan Kurdi died. The image of the drowned child drew attention to the “refugee crisis”. On the 5th of September, Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that there were “no limits to the number of asylum seekers” Germany would take in.

NGOs and the UNHCR started working towards organizing and controlling the camp in Idomeni.

September 14-18, Edirne, Turkey: Around 3,000 migrants gathered to demand that the Turkish-Greek border be opened for them. The protest ended when the police removed them. Although there were many opinions expressed in the Greek media against the fences constructed by Hungary and Bulgaria (and Slovenia, later), rarely was it mentioned that the oldest

such fence was the one constructed by Greece at the Greek/Turkish land border. *A safe passage between Greece and Turkey was never considered part of the so-called humanitarian corridor* that started functioning in October 2015 (a state controlled corridor that was the first step to shut down the borders).

The very day the above mentioned mobilization in Edirne started, at least 34 migrants (15 children), drowned in a shipwreck off the Greek island of Farmakonisi. Despite the Greek government’s rhetoric presenting a refugee-friendly Greek state, from May 2015 to May 2016, 1,151 migrants lost their lives in the Aegean.

At the end of October 2015, the European Commission organised a mini summit of “interested countries” to start restoring the border regime. On November 19, the borders closed for people that were not from Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq. In the following days, a fence was built on the border. On December 9, 2015, the first eviction of the Idomeni camp took place.

B. Public manipulation, sustained chaos, crowd control

1. From Idomeni to the camps



2016 Frontex *Balkans Annual Risk Analysis* reads: “The unprecedented massive flows of people along the Western Balkan route proved to be unmanageable for the border authorities involved. All plans were designed with lower numbers in mind and with a presumption that the arriving people would not refuse to follow the existing procedure”. The civilized EU cannot use force to halt multitudes that refuse to follow procedures. Turkey (and Libya) can. All 2015 plans aimed to an EU-Turkey deal.

Sustained chaos and crowd control: Meanwhile in Greece, State and NGOs, police and the army totally improvised their techniques as they went along. However, they did remain within a tight framework of controlled chaos, constantly issuing new and often unrealized plans, keeping the activities of migrants (protests, demos, hunger strikes, occupations and blockades of roads and stations) as invisible as possible, and the people themselves out of sight, moving them around for no apparent reason and consciously preventing the

living conditions from becoming sufferable. After the EU-Turkey on March 20, 2016, it was time for the final eviction of Idomeni (15,000 people in the broader area). This happened on May 24. Possibilities for resistance were weakened by the combined presence/actions of NGOs, smugglers, drug dealers and prostitution. People were forcedly moved to refugee camps, that spawned all over Northern Greece.

Public manipulation: The transition from the *summer of migration* to migrants’ *invisibility* in the camps required some manoeuvres: by keeping migrants within the camps right-wingers would not see them, while lefties would argue that migrants were in camps, not in prisons. Right-wingers felt satisfied because the camps where run by the army, while lefties could enjoy the deputy defense minister receive flowers that refugee children miraculously picked from the sandy soil, just 3 days after a riot! In the case of the Pope’s and Tsipras visit (Lesvos, April 2016), the riots happened afterwards.

B. Public manipulation, sustained chaos, crowd control



2. Targeting political solidarity

- Charity and NGOs replace human solidarity.
- Political solidarity is declared an enemy. No Border camp targeted.
- Migrants squats are evicted. Public order minister congratulates police.



During the first chaotic months, solidarity from political activists was welcome, but things changed. Police targeted solidarity people during the first eviction of Idomeni, then attacked them on the islands as the deal with Turkey was approaching (this continues until today, with constant attacks against the No Border kitchen in Lesvos), then started to control migrant population through NGOs and mafias, then (after the final eviction of Idomeni) started attacking migrants in the camps (not publicly though).

During the summer of migration a real social movement had emerged, consisting of many thousands of people driven by true human instincts. This was easily usurped by a paid-charity system and NGOs. But the government had also to deal with political solidarity. Comrades from the city of Kilkis (close to Idomeni) had been active since autumn of 2014, then antifascists in Lesvos managed to stop racist gatherings from the very beginning. The *Self-organized Solidarity Initiative to Ref-*

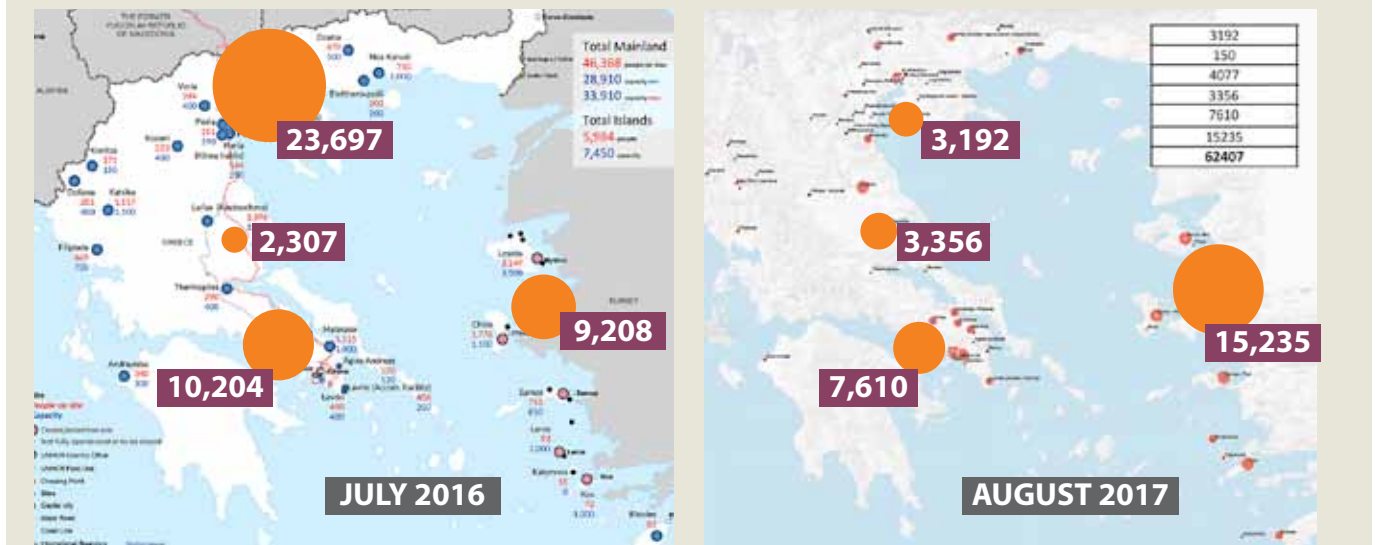
ugees/Migrants started to act in July 2015 in a central square in Athens and later (October 2015) in “Platanos” (a self-organized solidarity structure on the northern coast of Lesvos) and proved that solidarity can be both political and practical. The same goes for the NoBorder kitchens, created at various spots of the route. In September 2015 the Notara squat in Athens was the first in the struggle for the refugees right to the city, while the Orfanotrofeio squat in Thessaloniki, created shortly after non-SIA people were not allowed to cross the border, focused on fighting for the *sans papiers* rights to free transport, legal jobs etc. Also, organised protests at detention centers and visits to the new camps multiplied after the eviction of Idomeni.

The Thessaloniki No Border camp stood against “open camps” and “hot spots”, declared that “we want to live with migrants in our neighborhoods” and was immediately targeted. In July 2016, migrants squats in Thessaloniki were evicted. Orfanotrofeio was demolished.

B. Public manipulation, sustained chaos, crowd control

3. Population in the camps

- During the No Border Camp: 41.5% in Northern Greece
- Now, in the same area: the percentage is less than 6% of the total population
- 15,000 on the Greek islands are now in the worst conditions



During the No Border Camp, 41.5% of the country's total recent migrant population was "living" in some camp in Northern Greece (23,697 migrants out of 57,325 in total). Now, in the same area, the percentage is less than 6% (3,192 out of 62,270). Last July, more than 90% of people that were stranded in Greece were living in state-run "open camps", now this percentage has dropped to 53%, the rest (most of them initially "living" in camps around Thessaloniki) now live in apartments, hotels etc. run by NGOs. We don't know if this was the government's initial plan (to move migrants away from Greece's northern borders) or how decisive the unusually heavy winter was for the evacuation of the camps around Thessaloniki. Whatever the case, we think that migrants' mobilizations in the camps and in the city of Thessaloniki after the No Border Camp definitely encouraged these evacuations.

At the end of summer and the beginning of autumn 2016, migrants from camps around Thessaloniki

organized themselves and coordinated various protests: On July 29, there was a protest in Thessaloniki by migrants from the Softex camp, on August 8 there was another protest in Thessaloniki by migrants from the Softex camp, while other migrants were on hunger strike, on September 1st there was a vibrant demonstration in Thessaloniki by migrants from various camps, on September 10 there was protest in Thessaloniki by migrants from the Oreokastro camp. Now all these camps are either completely empty or just "host" some dozens (or 2-3 hundreds at the most) newcomers.

The 15,000 migrants currently stranded on the Greek islands after the EU-Turkey deal are facing the worst conditions, especially the 9,475 of them "living" in practically closed camps. Undeniable proof for this are the recent July 10 and July 18 (2017) migrants' revolts in the "closed camp" in Lesvos (Moria).

C. The situation today

1. The situation on the islands: *dying in the cold, crashed revolts*



Moria, winter



Moria, summer



Souda (open camp), Chios



VIAL (closed camp), Chios

Under the EU-Turkey deal, all migrants who arrived before 20 March 2016 were cleared from the camps on the Greek islands and sent to the mainland to make way for newcomers. All new entrants to the Greek islands that are rejected asylum must be returned to Turkey.

Registration and Identification Center (RIC) or 'hot spot': It is the place where refugees and migrants are registered after having arrived by boat and where they are detained for the first 25 days following their arrival in Greece. Then, they are allowed to leave the camp, but the majority remain living in tents and containers inside the 'hot spots'. They are not allowed to go to mainland Greece and police gives them a hard time if they meet them outside the 'hot spots'. Some of the 'hot spots' (like *Vathy* in Samos) are still formally a detention site. *Moria* in Lesbos is both a detention centre and a Refugee Camp and the same goes for *VIAL* in Chios. Awful conditions prevail inside the detention centers and the 'hot spots' (practically functioning al-

so as detention, as people cannot go elsewhere). There have been reported cases of rape and police violence in different 'hot spots'. People are mainly living inside tents. The winter of 2016-2017 was very heavy and five refugees died in January 2017 because of the bad weather. There are suicide attempts all the time – the first anniversary of the EU-Turkey deal was marked by two "successful" ones: a 29-year-old Syrian set himself on fire inside the *VIAL* detention centre. Another Syrian, 25-year-old, hanged himself at the port of Piraeus. Consequently, riots happen all the time too.

Asylum procedures are very slow. To make room for newcomers, around 2,000 people were moved to detention centers on mainland Greece. Based on the EU-Turkey deal, 1,305 migrants (202 from Syria) were returned to Turkey. The number of returns is not big. ***The main meaning of the Greek role in the deal is to create inhuman conditions inside the 'hot spots', in order to discourage others from coming.***

C. The situation today

2. Money talks...

- reboot economy
- bribe NGOs' staff
- control refugees
- return to detention politics



Over the last two years the EU has contracted over €1.3 billion to Greece to “help manage migration and the external borders”. As long as the money keeps flowing, a number of refugees who arrived before the 20th of March 2016 will be welcome to remain, so that NGOs and the Greek economy can pocket the money.

REBOOT ECONOMY: “Experts at the National Bank of Greece have estimated that EU funds for the refugee crisis have helped increase Greek GDP by 0.3 percent this year. In a year full of challenges, and for an economy struggling to get back on its feet, this is seen as a major help.” (*Euronews*, October 2016)

BRIBE NGOS' STAFF: A fresh employee in a “refugee aid” NGO receives a monthly wage of 800 euros (that can double, depending on the position) while the monthly minimum wage in Greece is 586 euros and the youth unemployment rate is 50%. It's hard to imagine NGO employees turning against their employers.

CONTROL: Part of this money is used for rented accommodation. “Open camps” are a form of segregation, but also a place where people can communicate and organize struggles. That's why groups in the big settlements around Idomeni were cut down and dispersed in smaller “open camps”. Now migrants are scattered across several remote Athens neighborhoods.

INTERMENT: Part of this money is used for detention centers. On March 30 a new detention center was opened on Kos Island. Similar prisons are planned on other Aegean islands. If the 10,000+ people currently being held on the Aegean islands are added to the 3,676 people detained in Pre-removal Centers & Closed “Reception Centers” in mainland Greece, the return to detention politics is obvious.

The good old politics of SUSTAINED CHAOS continues in the queues and the long wait for asylum procedures, residence, relocation and family reunification.

C. The situation today

3. Protests, riots, hunger strikes



In the spring of 2017, Greece and Germany agreed to slow the reunification of refugee families, limiting the flights from Greece to only 70 people per month. On August 22, the German Interior Ministry estimated that there are 4,339 people in Greece waiting for reunification. Most will have to wait for years, even though their requests are approved. Absurdly, asylum seekers must join their families in Germany within 6 months from the date their request is approved – simply impossible under the new monthly limit. If one takes into account that most refugees have been stranded in Greece for over a year and a half, one realizes that the proposed solution is the good old alternative: *smugglers*.

In August 2017 Syrians from different camps held protests in Athens against the new reunifications policy. These were not the only protests in 2017: On January 28, Mohamed A. ended his 47-day hunger strike (Lesvos). His (satisfied) demands were that authorities halt his deportation and re-examine his case.

On May 31, eight migrants were arrested inside a hospital in Athens, where they were carried after being beaten up by policemen at the Petrou Ralli Police Station. Earlier in the day, migrants imprisoned there for over 10 months had demanded some answers for their situation. The eight arrested are facing felony charges.

On July 18th, 35 migrants were arrested in Moria, in raids following clashes with riot police using teargas and violence. Part of the camp was burnt.

On August 8th, B. Aresh and K. Hussein were released after 35 days on hunger strike in Moria. Only then A. Hampay ended his 41-day solidarity hunger strike, although his brother had already been released two weeks before after another (24-day) hunger strike.

On August 28, Afghan refugees, stranded in Moria for one year, held a long protest in the city of Mytilene.

To the above, one should add the riots that often take place inside the 'hot spots' and also the protests against the announced evictions of refugee squats.

Summary - conclusions

The Balkan route was created as a consequence of the 2010 financial crisis in Greece. There were no jobs anymore, so transit migrants who had no money to pay for smugglers started walking up to Serbia.

In 2014 the number of Syrians using the Balkan Route rose by 363%, but attention in Greece was focused on the January 25 (2015) general elections. The FRONTEX *2015 Western Balkans Annual Risk Analysis* still focused on “nationals of Kosovo and Albania”.

During the first 6 months of 2015, the number of people crossing Greece kept rising, but the general idea was that these invisible people should exit the country just as they entered it: *as invisibles*.

By the end of June 2015, the number of people crossing the border was rising geometrically. The summer of migration was a reality. The EU was surprised and unwilling to use raw force. The Greek government, having just capitulated to international bankers, chose to keep its progressive profile by posing as humanitarian. A real social movement “to support refugees” emerged in Greece, while others took advantage and exploited migrants’ needs in any way they could. A safe land passage between Greece and Turkey was never considered an option. Hundreds of people were dying in the Aegean.

Germany was proclaiming an “open borders for refugees” strategy, and at the same time participating in EU plans to close the borders step by step. The solution was an EU-Turkey deal.

The Greek government followed all EU recommendations and directives. The initial improvisation gave way to a strategy of controlled chaos, aiming to discourage migrants and keep them hidden from public eye. The once praised solidarity was attacked, refugee camps were created in distant locations all over Greece and migrants started piling up in the “hot spots” on the islands.

Resistance continues in riots and hunger strikes in the “hot spots”, in protests for family reunification and against the announced evictions of refugee squats, in antifascist mobilizations and in many smaller but deeper projects.

In the ‘90s, the movement in Greece was watching unprepared hundreds of thousands of Albanian migrants being exploited and marginalized. In the decade that followed, some kind of liberal multiculturalism prevailed, while transit migrants who were not needed as cheap labor were treated as human garbage. Huge smuggling circuits were created. After the crisis, new social relations emerged, antifascism became an insparable part of the movement, strong ties with migrants were created during the summer of migration and afterwards. Practical and political solidarity to migrants is present in most struggles.

