

## New Borders

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# New Borders

## Hotspots and the European Migration Regime

Antonis Vradis, Evie Papada,  
Joe Painter and Anna Papoutsis

**PLUTO**  **PRESS**

First published 2019 by Pluto Press  
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3846 0	Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 3845 3	Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0369 6	PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0371 9	Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0370 2	EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America

# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Series Preface</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Glossary</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1 The Where and When of Migration	12
2 Refuge, Rules and Rights	25
3 Governing Mobility	44
4 The Camps	62
5 The Sea Is On Fire	89
<i>Notes</i>	109
<i>Index</i>	116

# Introduction

For thousands of years people have criss-crossed the Mediterranean Sea. Merchants, explorers, adventurers, invading armies, pilgrims, empire-builders, exiles, fugitives, missionaries, stowaways and fortune-seekers have all trekked to its shores and launched themselves from them in vessels of every imaginable form. Far from dividing Europe from Africa and Asia, the Mediterranean has above all connected them. For the great French historian Fernand Braudel, the Mediterranean and its surrounding plains, mountains and deserts, though often the arena and object of political rivalries, formed an economic, cultural and environmental ensemble – an integrated, if diverse, geographical space.

While Braudel's greater Mediterranean stretched from the Atlantic to the Sahara, it can also be an intimate space. From the northern shore of the island of Lesbos in the Aegean Sea, the Turkish coast appears on a sunny summer's day to be no more than a short swim away – or a leisurely day trip on a pleasure boat for holiday makers Athenians. Yet in the space of a few months this narrow stretch of water became one of the most hotly contested political spaces in recent European history and the focus of unprecedented shifts in law, governance and international relations.

With the partition of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, an international boundary was formed between Anatolia and the Aegean Islands, including Lesbos, Chios and Samos. When we were out in Lesbos, many of the people we spoke to would tell us they were refugees 'themselves': the drawing of the boundary after the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922) still remains painful for many of the Greeks who were forced to leave the Anatolian shore, and vice-versa. Today the boundary itself remains where it has been since, so in what sense can we speak of the emergence of 'new borders'? The answer lies in the distinction between a boundary – the line on the map and its corresponding coordinates on the land or in the sea – and a border, a political and administrative technology used to manage, regulate and police entry to and exit from the territory enclosed by the boundary. What is 'new' about 'new borders' is not the number or location of boundaries, but their political signifi-

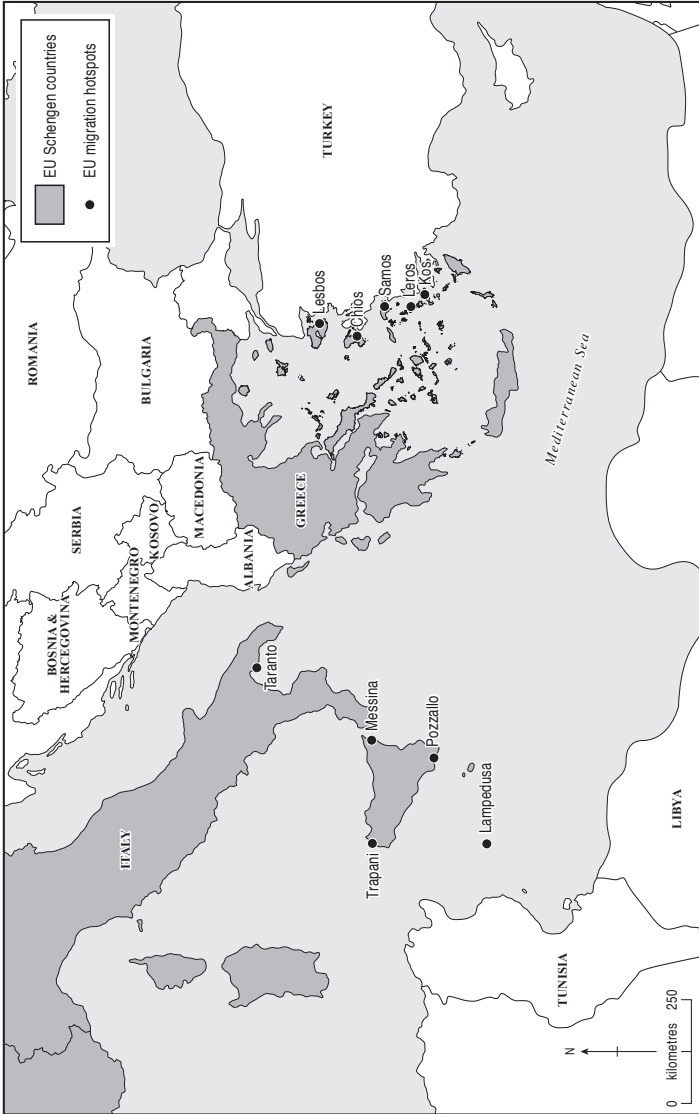


Figure 0.1 The Mediterranean.

cance, cultural meaning and economic and social impact. Far from the borderless world imagined by the enthusiastic proselytisers of globalisation in the 1990s, the world of the twenty-first century appears marked by bordering practices of ever-growing intensity, iniquity and violence.

In the European Union (EU), foremost among these new bordering practices is the 'hotspot'. The hotspot approach appeared as an emergency response to the rapid rise in irregular boundary-crossing in the Mediterranean in 2015. The hotspot approach is partly an idea, partly a combination of novel administrative and legal practices and partly a set of physical infrastructures located close to, but not on, the EU's external Mediterranean boundaries.

As an idea, the hotspot approach signals an intention on the part of EU policymakers to intervene directly and decisively in Mediterranean migration flows in order to gain 'control', accelerate decision-making, alleviate pressure on receiving areas and deter further irregular migration. As a novel combination of administrative and legal practices, the hotspot approach seeks to coordinate the work of several EU agencies with international bodies and national authorities to provide for a more streamlined (and Europeanised) system for processing and sorting arriving migrants and dealing with their claims for refugee status. As a set of physical infrastructures, hotspots provide accommodation and services for (some) migrants in designated camps, where they are concentrated for processing, alongside offices of the various agencies involved in processing arrivals.

While hotspots as both idea and infrastructure are not the only form of 'new border', they crystallise many of the key trends in the reordering of European border politics. This book aims to examine how and why the hotspot approach arose, how it operates, how it differs from earlier forms of borders, and what impacts it has had on the lives of those who pass through or around it.

This is not a book about migration. It is a book about what the pretext of a migration threat does to our freedom and sense of belonging. From Brexit to Trump and the rise of the European far-right we are living through a moment, it feels, when isolationism, nationalism and the ensuing 'end of globalisation' are firmly in sight. This is a book about the ways in which this xenophobic and seemingly introverted turn fuels another form of globalisation that is now swiftly embedding itself in our everyday spaces. It is also a book showing how this force can be lethal in its discretion, showing how this apparent crisis is both the culmination



and an all-new chapter in a long history of the violent forced movement of people by the powers that be. From wall-erecting to terrorist scare-mongering, migration has become Europe's political focus of blame par excellence.

The 'hotspot approach' is the European Commission's response to this crisis: a tool that allows the authorities to declare whole regions, or even entire nation-states, under emergency. For the first time, all relevant EU agencies have been brought together in crisis territories and handed unprecedented powers. We examine Lesbos, an island in the north-east Aegean, that came under the global media and political spotlight as over 1 million people – more than ten times the island's population – landed and crossed its territory, changing its everyday life in unimaginable ways. We trace the dismantling of local communities and their reformulation into entrenched opponents as supra-national law and enforcement kicks in and takes over. We watch in horror as reception becomes detention, as rescue becomes registration, as refuge becomes duress.

This book uses migration as a vocabulary to talk about the human condition in Europe today. In doing so we have opted not to focus on the plight of the thousands of people trying to cross borders into the continent – this is by far the most tragic, but also the most extensively covered part of the story. Instead, we trace the unprecedented and unreported, meticulous and eerily discreet stifling of EU borders in response. As with the financial crisis, these developments have been treated as akin to a natural disaster – all responses seem to start off with the discursive equivalent of an awkward shrug: It happened, such is life, so let's get on with it and let's see what can be done right now, at a historical moment oblivious to collective consciousness or any sense of the past, a moment incapable of forward-thinking imagination. In this suspended moment, the urgent becomes the means by which to conduct politics – not an exception in the face of urgency, but a definite and definitive way of acting upon the world. And from within this urgency rabble, the EU's new migration and border management agenda comes to silently but solidly set a new, firm ground.

This is not a book about borders. It is a book about what a border, under the convenient invocation of an emergency, does to the territory that it encloses. It is a book that warns what the unprecedented grounding of EU legislation and executive force means not only for those trying to cross a border but also for those living within its confines. EU executive power is grounding itself with a thump, disrupting our common-place

sense of freedom and belonging, and demanding a collective response from all of us who are now under its sway.

At a time when Europe's media and politicians obsess over the migration crisis as an ostensibly outside threat, this book shows it is Europe itself that is dramatically changing. Under the pretext of the crisis, whole swaths of EU territory (islands and regions for now, but potentially anything up to entire member states and the EU itself) have openly come under the direct control of supra-national EU military, policy and judicial agencies, while welfare functions have been taken on by international NGOs – dramatically changing the way in which local and arriving populations are governed. Our research team was on the ground in Mytilene on the island of Lesbos, and in the Greek capital, Athens, between September 2015 and August 2016. We ask: What does the management of the migrant crisis tell us about the future of Europe?

*New Borders* is the result of a collective ethnographic project undertaken over the course of two years.

#### A TIMELINE OF EVENTS, 2015/16

One of the striking things about the hotspot approach is how rapidly it appeared, both as a policy and on the ground, reflecting a 'crisis response' mode of policymaking in the face of rapidly moving events.

The series of events that came to be known as the 'Mediterranean migration crisis' commenced in 2015 and marked the arrival in Europe of over 1 million people from the Middle East and other parts of Asia and Africa. These new populations came primarily from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq but also from African countries including Eritrea, Sudan, and countries of the Maghreb. We divide this series of events into three phases: phase one (January to April 2015) played out at the heart of the Mediterranean, along the sea route from the Libyan coast to the island of Lampedusa, south-west of Sicily, and along the south of Italy – in short, the central Mediterranean route. Phase two (April 2015 to March 2016) saw the mass arrival of migrants from the shores of Turkey to the north-eastern Aegean islands (primarily Lesbos) and lasted until March 2016, with the signing of the EU–Turkey Statement. Finally, phase three followed this agreement and the ensuing implementation of the European Commission's hotspot approach. This third phase was still ongoing at the time of writing (winter 2017/18). It has come to be marked by the endless waiting and desperation of the thousands

trapped in transit, whether on the shores of Turkey, in Greece or along the western Balkan corridor – in short, anywhere along the route to the European North.

*Phase One: January to April 2015*

The first phase of the migration crisis was marked by mass deaths at sea, culminating with the death of more than 800 migrants in a single shipwreck over the weekend of 18/19 April 2015 when the trawler that carried them capsized off the coast of Libya.<sup>1</sup> The testimonies of the 27 survivors and their rescuers brought the full scale and horror of this tragedy to light. Less than a week earlier, on 13 April, another boat had capsized 60 nautical miles off the Libyan coast, with the loss of 400 people, making the total death toll over 1,200 in less than a week. In response, the European Commission (EC) published a blueprint for what it claimed to be a wholly new approach to migration management, the European Agenda for Migration.<sup>2</sup> The Agenda featured additional funding for search-and-rescue (SAR) operations conducted by Frontex (the EU Border and Coast Guard Agency, EBCG) and the strengthening of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Most crucially, the Agenda introduced the so-called hotspot approach to migration management. This approach envisaged a new model of operational support for EU member states considered to be under 'extreme' migratory pressure. It provided a platform for interagency collaboration and intervention that was a prototype for a more integrated EU administration. In the years that followed, the Commission's entire set of legislation concerning asylum and borders stemmed from this Agenda. Further initiatives to tackle migratory pressures included: (i) the introduction of the EC's Emergency Relocation Scheme, an intra-EU resettlement system aimed at alleviating border states; (ii) enhanced cooperation with non-EU countries; and (iii) the extended use of the 'safe country' concept, most notably the declaration of Turkey as a safe third country for returns. Notably, this new Agenda for Migration also saw an expanded role for Frontex in implementing returns, as well as the introduction of the EBCG. We understand the hotspot approach to be the materialisation of this agenda. Together with the newly established EBCG, the hotspot approach represents one of the EC's efforts to Europeanise the EU's borders: a strategic, long-term overhauling of the asylum and migration system that both precedes and surpasses the peak of the migration crisis itself.

*The Age of Innocence: April 2015 to March 2016*

In an attempt to avoid large populations being trapped within their territory, several transit states allowed migrants to cross their borders and territory with relatively little hindrance. Migrants could cross Europe with some speed, and the journey from Turkey to the heart of Europe could be done in a matter of days. Greece did not register arrivals for several months; Macedonia and Serbia allowed arriving migrants 72 hours to cross their territories. Tasia Christodouloupoulou, Greece's minister for migration at the time, called this second phase an 'age of innocence' for migration, even though the Greek government and the EU were already devising strategies to violently control this mobility. Fortress Europe had been breached. For this brief historical moment, EU officials seemed unable to figure out how to handle the migration crisis at all. It was not just the sheer power of the numbers, it was the visibility of these populations and their direct claim to freedom of movement, too. The European public quickly became exposed to images of people arriving in overcrowded dinghies on the shores of Lesbos, activists reaching out to help them disembark and orange life jackets covering beaches where tourists once swam – images that now represent the refugee crisis in our collective memory.

Following several attempts at controlling border crossings along the so-called western Balkan corridor with the erection of walls (in Hungary) and a series of consecutive border closures (in Austria, Serbia and Macedonia), the Greek–Macedonian border was eventually sealed off on 7 March 2016. The move was coordinated extra-institutionally – that is, outside official European forums, such as the EC or a summit. It was pushed for by the leaders of the so-called Visegrad countries (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic) plus Austria. Later that month, on 18 March, the EU announced it had reached an agreement with Turkey for the management of illicit border-crossings into Greece: Turkey was to accept the return of all new arrivals in exchange for €6 billion in support of its 'humanitarian infrastructure'. Two years later not only have these funds not reached the intended beneficiaries, but they have been spent on military equipment to deter refugees from fleeing Syria.<sup>3</sup> The agreement signalled a whole new era in the Mediterranean migration crisis, an era that came to be entirely ruled and marked by the hotspot approach.

*The Hotspot Approach: March 2016 to May 2017*

The EU's hotspot mechanism was touted as a new way of tackling border crises and safeguarding migrant lives at sea. Even though it was already included in the May 2015 Agenda for Migration and inaugurated as a border infrastructure as early as October 2015, its full implementation only became possible after March 2016, when the deal between the EU and Turkey was reached. At that moment, the hotspot became the EU's main approach to migration management. Situated at frontline EU member states, the hotspot is a mechanism that allows the hosting in one place of all the relevant European agencies in order to bolster their cooperation and to centralise control over the common external border. Once an area is declared a hotspot, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), Frontex, Europol and Eurojust come in to assist member states to swiftly identify, register and fingerprint incoming migrants.<sup>4</sup> What is envisioned by the EC is that the four agencies will support member-state authorities in the registration, identification and removal of apprehended migrants (using Frontex), the registration of asylum claims, the preparation of successful relocation claimants (by EASO) and the investigation and subsequent prosecution of crimes (by Europol and Eurojust).

Migration and asylum have been pivotal in the EU's institutionalisation and governance for quite some time now. For example, the EU has spent years building a Common European Asylum System (CEAS), setting out minimum standards and procedures for the treatment of asylum-seekers and those granted protection (known as the EU Asylum Acquis). It has also set up support mechanisms for the implementation and harmonisation of relevant jurisprudence. Despite the promises seeping through its bureaucratic jargon and the intended functions of its mechanisms, the hotspot phase has been marked by endless waiting, uncertainty and the erosion of whatever meagre rights were previously in place. Its introduction marked the degradation of asylum procedures in Greece (prolonged detention, suicides and humanitarian camps established across the country) and the full institutionalisation and control of mobility.

#### OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The book is structured in five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the period that came to be known as migration crisis in the Mediterra-

nean, and starts off in 2015. Here we consider why anyone should study something as seemingly bureaucratic and mundane as the European Commission's approach to crisis management. When we started off *Transcapes* in the fall of 2015, we announced the project to the world with a brief text called 'Them Refugees.'<sup>5</sup> This was a reflection on Hannah Arendt's classic essay, 'We Refugees.'<sup>6</sup> Our text grappled with the contradictions and dilemmas that opened up once we had decided to study the migrant/refugee crisis at this moment in time, and we considered what it meant to do so from a profoundly privileged, 'insider', European position. In a bitterly ironic way, the question why anyone should study the migration issue is no longer relevant; whether we like it or not, the repercussions of the crisis could potentially affect us too – albeit to a different degree than they affect incoming populations, of course. Here, we reflect on the stories we recorded in Lesbos: the shopkeeper-turn-heroin, the lives of local volunteers transformed through their seemingly unwinnable quest against local ignorance, media distortions and lies, global forces of capital. But we also reflect on the stories of those whose lives changed when they saw the arriving populations as potential income generators. And we reflect on the lives of those trapped inside the mechanisms of a labyrinthine system of bureaucracy, subject to the practice of privatisation, global policing and management, a labyrinth of EU-speak where 'protection' means entrapment, 'welfare' provision means meagre survival, and 'hotspot' means a coldly calculated vagueness through which entire territories come under vast European powers.

Chapter 2 situates the events of 2015 and their aftermath in relation to a longer historical narrative. While many aspects of the regime are strikingly novel – the hotspot approach foremost among them – they cannot be adequately understood separately from past ways of thinking about and responding to the movement of people across borders and the needs of those seeking refuge from war, famine and persecution. In this chapter we trace the longer history of the international system governing population mobility and some of the ideas on which it is grounded. We examine the changing meaning of the concept of asylum, the emergence of the political figure of the refugee in Europe and the development of the legal and organisational infrastructure associated with international efforts to both protect and regulate refugees.

Chapter 3 looks at the differentiated mobility regimes produced by the hotspot mechanism and critically rethinks the relationship between (im)mobility, agency and freedom. The hotspot mechanism is not a

prison – it doesn't need to be. Strategically situated on islands, it physically thwarts any unauthorised secondary movement of migrants and, most importantly, it becomes a capture-and-circulation mechanism that governs people's mobility in multiple places and at multiple scales simultaneously. This is what we call the hotspot mechanism. While migrants are relatively free to move around after being processed without being physically detained, the spaces allocated to them are predicated upon arbitrary criteria, most prominently their arrival date. Some are trapped on frontline Greek islands including Lesbos, Chios, Leros, Samos and Kos; others remain indefinitely inside pseudo-protection zones across Greece. In practice, these spaces are shrunk even further: asylum-seekers receive a scarce allowance that keeps them de facto immobile, while they are often allocated accommodation in places with largely hostile local populations, denying them essential family, social and solidarity networks.

Chapter 4 advances the argument that the material, organisational and institutional aspects of the hotspot approach – primarily incarnated in camps for sorting, hosting and detaining migrants – are the culmination of years of attempts to manage migration in a humanitarian way. It does this by tracing the workings of the hotspot of the Moria Reception and Identification Centre (RIC), the first hotspot inaugurated on the island of Lesbos. It also looks at the role of the principle institutions and the effects of changes in asylum procedures on people's mobility. By making reference to previous management of 'refugee crises' in Europe, we argue that Europe is at a crossing point. Here, acts of solidarity and support from ordinary people are contrasted with official expressions of compassion. The camps of the hotspot approach in Lesbos provide a gripping example of the spatial governance of populations and of the transformative potential of the logic of humanitarian emergency upon people's experiences.

Chapter 5 concludes the book by elaborating on the relationship between the hotspot approach, the growth of EU liminal territory and the birth of the EU superstate. First, we unpack the hotspot mechanism and explain why and how so much more is at stake than the mere confinement and filtering practices taking place in registration and identification facilities, the physical infrastructures located on frontline islands (hotspots). The hotspot *approach* is far more than the sum of all the hotspot *parts*: it is a decree, powerful in its vagueness, able to cut through and to supersede national boundaries and pre-existing

powers alike. This approach creates a new border, fit for a new time: an incubator and a testing ground for what is the tentatively future relationship between individuals, territory and social and political rights across Europe. The immaterial border separating entry from exit, work contract from unemployment and movement from stasis does not concern those arriving in the boats alone. It is a paradigm, a way of drawing lines dividing us, breaking us apart, subjecting us to abstract, abrupt and retractable orders. It is a new border that should – and does – concern us all.