

Idomeni, the dystopia of our refugee crisis

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The year 2015 was marked by the unceasing movement of thousands of persecuted people through Greece, in search of save haven and a more certain future. Initially, the people moved unhindered, but their march became progressively subjected to ever increasing restrictions, a process that culminated with the full closure of the Balkan corridor in March 2016. Idomeni, the most emblematic migrant point of departure from Greece, acquired a double connotation: from a symbol of hope and potential freedom, it was eventually transformed into a place of miserable entrapment.

For those left behind, Idomeni would become a symbol of uncertainty and insecurity. The hurried and heavy-handed response of Europe's policy makers was to cynically dictate the fate of people, causing divisions among European governments and public opinion. During the initial period when unwelcome refugees could still move onwards, the Greek government, in an unprecedentedly magnanimous move, "permitted" refugees to cross Greece's Northern border unhindered. Later, Greek authorities kept their distance from the camp. Under the unofficial system of cooperation with the police of Greece's Northern neighbour (FYROM), the authorities of the two countries undertook no obligation to provide humane living conditions to the refugees. Finally, after the Balkan route was essentially closed, the Greek police forcefully evacuated the camp. The volunteers and NGOs were the actors who provided the essentials to those people under chaotic conditions. It was they who gave hope to people who had fled from their homelands with great aspirations. They were the ones who, essentially, kept the refugees trapped in Idomeni alive. This expression of tangible and vital solidarity emerged as a political paradigm, which was undermined when the government

set up “official” camps across Greece under standardised rules of management. That solidarity was the most humane kind of interaction between the visible and invisible people of Idomeni.

The composition of the thousands of the nameless “residents” of Idomeni was ever-changing. Recognising their refugee status would necessitate the establishment of some kind of official relationship between them and the state. Instead, all these people –prosecuted, struggling to survive, with no guarantee of safety– found themselves bereft of any legal protection, by virtue of their extraordinary, tenuous and temporary status. Under these conditions, the refugees in Idomeni essentially lost their capacity of being holders of human rights. As Hannah Arendt wrote in 1951:

“the conception of human rights, based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships –except that they were still human”*.

The trapped refugees in Idomeni experienced exactly this predicament, stranded on the razor’s edge between hope and desperation. Having lost every official legal status, they were essentially deprived of their status as rights-holders. They were “naked people” excluded from the protections of the rule of law, the genuine representatives of the concepts of otherness, of “alienness,” falling outside the scope of all well-established categories of protection. The refugee status, their last safe haven, without automatic political or legal guarantees, has been (and remains) the only safeguard that can allow for these people to be recognised as humans entitled to rights. For those unable to get access to asylum, the road has been (and remains) darker, ominous, riskier. The closure of the Balkan route and the almost parallel signing of the March 2016 EU-Turkey Agreement and evacuation of Idomeni made the issue of refugee rights even murkier. Henceforth, rights would be contingent to the time and place of arrival of each refugee. The barrier was moved from Idomeni to the islands: the March 2016 EU-Turkey deal effectively created two different zones in Greece. Refugees were now subject to two totally different statuses, depending on



*Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, chapter 9: “The decline of the nation state and the end of the rights of man”, in P. Baehner (ed.-introduction), *The Portable Hanna Arendt*, Penguin, London 2000, p. 41.

where exactly they first arrived: those arriving in one zone would be returned to Turkey, while the others could still hope to reach Europe. The two zones communicate with and feed each other through legal and illegal channels. Refugees who crossed to Greece after March 20, 2016 face different prospects compared to those who were already in Greece before the EU-Turkey agreement took effect. Clearly, in the case of Greece, there were double standards both before and after Idomeni, further complicating the status of refugees and hindering effective policy making and crisis management.

At a European level, the specific aspects of providing safety to migrants –such as “safe passage-safe settlement-safe relocation / return”– is shifting continuously in the ever-changing space between the various borders: the external borders of Schengen and the national borders of states. Specifically for the *Balkan Route*, there are also intervening national borders that belong to non-EU member-states. Hence the border is transformed from a *line* to a *zone*, inside which the path leading from “entry” to “settlement” is not subject to a unitary legal system, but to a variety of individual and sometimes contradictory laws. This is a diversified border, rendered flexible by arbitrary “date markers” and territorial zones, subverting the uniform and ecumenical implementation of the law. This regime of multiple zones, to which Greece also belongs, comprises an uncertain European *border*. In this context, the makeshift camp of Idomeni, where thousands of people were trapped as they waited to cross the border, is a focal point of the Greek sub-system of the wider Border-Europe. In this shifting border-zone, Idomeni is a landmark and it should never be forgotten. Not just on account of what happened there, but also because Idomeni transformed into dozens of subsequent dystopias: the zones of the Aegean Islands, the fenced refugee camps, the watery wall of the Aegean, the fence on River Evros or the multiple bottlenecks along the Balkan corridor, at the borders of Hungary, Austria or Slovenia.





