Introduction [New Borders Migration, Hotspots and the European Superstate]

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Citation: VRADIS, A. ... et al., 2018. Introduction. IN: Vradis, A. ... et al. New Borders Migration, Hotspots and the European Superstate. London: Pluto Press., pp. 1 - 11

Additional Information:

- This is a sample of a book chapter.

Metadata Record: [https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/36720](https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/36720)

Version: Published

Publisher: © The Authors. Published by Pluto Press (UK)

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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