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GREECE. A NEW RELATION?
EMERGING COMMON SPACES IN MYTILENE AND
IDOMENI**

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URBAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND REFUGEES IN GREECE. A NEW RELATION?

Emerging common spaces in Mytilene and Idomeni.

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing refugee streams that derive from the recent conflict in the Middle East are a central issue to the growing socio-political debate about the different facets of contemporary crisis. While borders, in the era of globalization, constitute porous passages for capital goods and labor market, at the same time they function as new enclosures for migrant and refugee populations. Nevertheless, these human flows contest border regimes and exclusionary policies and create a nexus of emerging common spaces.

Our basic argument is that despite the vivid and increasingly popular discussion on commons and urban social movements, there have been few attempts to think it together with the ongoing migrants and refugees' crisis. During the current migrants' crisis, the newcomers do not just claim the urban space but they occupy and tend to transform it to common space. Moreover, the moving populations try to challenge cityscapes and border regimes, as well as they seek to negotiate and go beyond cultural, class, gender, religious and political identities. At the same time the newcomers produce hybrid spaces and collectively reinvent a culture of coexistence, sharing and commoning. Consequently, the newcomers produce unique and porous common spaces, spaces in movement and threshold spaces. In parallel, neoliberal exclusionary policies tend to appropriate the migrants' common spaces, with several methods like closing borders, forced evictions, detention centers-camps and hot spots.

Based on the above context, this paper attempts to elaborate a critical methodological framework that examines the emerging migrants' common space focusing on the case of Greece, a country that is in the epicentre of the current refugee crisis. We pinpoint in the cases of Greek borderscapes in Mytilene and Idomeni; the former is the main entrance point in the East and the later is the exit point in the North. Based on this context, we explore how the newcomers challenge the existing socio-spatial power relations and produce unique, unpredictable and misfitting common spaces.

KEYWORDS: commons, immigration, social movements, Greece.

1. INTRODUCTION: URBAN COMMONS AND URBAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The moving populations challenge the role of the nation-state and its borderlines and bring into question the notion of free movement and citizenship. While borders, in the era of globalization, constitute porous passages for capital goods and labor market, at the same time they function as new enclosures and racialised spaces of exclusion for migrant and refugee populations. Nevertheless, these human flows contest border regimes and exclusionary policies and create a nexus of emerging common spaces of resistance and co-existence.

Following the recent spatial approaches on commons (Blomley, 2008; Harvey, 2012; Stavrides, 2014) and urban social movements (Petropoulou, et al. 2016) this paper focuses on the production of the migrants' common space as a contested transnational threshold. Specifically we examine the case of Greece, a country that is situated in between Global North and Global South, West and East; hence it is in the epicentre of the current refugee crisis. In particular, we pinpoint in Greek borderscapes in Mytilene and Idomeni i.e. the main entrance and exit points.

Firstly, we build on autonomous Marxists analysis (De Angelis, 2007; Caffentzis, 2010; Federici, 2011; Hardt and Negri, 2009), which proposes that conceptualizing the commons involves three things at the same time: common pool resource, community and commoning. The people who, through commoning, constitute emancipatory communities that self-organize in non-commercial ways of sharing the common pool resources are called "commoners". De Angelis (2010: 955) felicitously makes the point "there are no commons without incessant activities of commoning, of (re)producing in common. (...) It is through (re)production in common that communities (...) decide for themselves the norms, values and measures of things." Based on this three-part definition of commons, it can be argued that commons do not exist per se and they are not a nostalgic reference to the medieval past of the communities of commoners. As outlined by Harvey (2012: 105) "the common is not something extant once upon a time that has since been lost, but something that, like the urban commons, is continuously being produced". Moreover, several scholars (Caffentzis, 2010; Hardt and Negri, 2009; Kapsali and Tsavdaroglou, 2014) make the point that the urban commons have to be separated from the dipole of private or state management. Finally, in this brief review on the urban commons a definite point worth mentioning is Blomley's (2008: 320) proposal that the commons "is not so much found as produced, (...) the commons is a form of place-making."

Moreover we are equally concerned the concept of urban social movement which has become particularly popular by an earlier work of Castells (1983). According to him, urban social movements differ from simple urban movements in the following: they can change the signification itself of urban space. The urban social movements are carriers of urban-spatial transformation; hence it's about social movements, which, opposed to the meaning of a given spatial structure, they try new urban functions and new forms. These movements are different from the citizens movements organised around various issues. In the case that the movements are consciously experiencing the redefinition of the signification of urban space, then we can talk about urban social movements. The most important thing is that the new urban and regional movements are autonomous, massive and creative. They put themselves beyond a mere denial and confrontation to get in a collective creation and in radical changes of the space and everyday life. So, in these movements they come together all ages and people from different political spheres that do not know each other or have important differences between them (Zibechi, 2007). Moreover we have to noticed that this process is done in a highly creative poetic way and it quite refers to a poetic social movement which now has characteristics that embrace the entire city and region, not just their popular districts (Petropoulou, 2009). The effect of all these movements in a symbolic social level will be increasingly important as long as they are engraved in the collective consciousness.

Based on the above theoretical framework in this paper we examine the migrants' social movements that can both challenge and produce urban spaces and we focus in the cases of Mytilene and Idomeni.

2. MIGRATION CRISIS IN GREECE: SPATIAL THRESHOLDS VIS A VIS GATED ENCLAVES

The so-called migration crisis in Greece has been a major issue during 2015-2016. In one year 851.319 people have entered and crossed the country according to the United Nations (UNHCR, 2016a). Most of the newcomers were from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq and the main entrance corresponds to the islands of the border with Turkey. The islands where more people have crossed are Lesbos, Chios and Samos, located in the North Aegean. In 2015-2016 only in Mytilene were arrived about 1.500 refugees per day and then they continue their trip to Athens, Thessaloniki and Idomeni (borders).



(Figure 1. Refugees and migrants flows in Greece 2015, source: UNHCR, 2016a)

Simultaneously, migrants and refugees along with solidarity people, transform the space and its configuration. A multicultural community associates switching constantly the bounds between triptych sea – coastline – seafronts in the case of Lesbos and between the triptych no land – fence – European “promised land” in the case of Idomeni. The symbiotic composition of these elements in space, the controversy of the construction of meaning and the organization of common space defines anew the reading and the interpretation of social commoning relations.

Focusing on the emerging common space as capacitor of activities and field of expression and coexistence, we see that diverse groups of people cohabit and create physical and social thresholds in contradiction of gated enclaves of hotspots and concentrations centers. Refugees and solidarity people can be recognized as the commoners who create their own space where commoning procedures happening. Divergent life forms encountered in public realm, re-invent and re-give meaning in space, and the global history is concentrated spatially in a coastal front and around a fence. Subsequently the coastline and the fence constitute the bounds of transition of refugees, the threshold of their heterotopia. Along the coastal front space has changed and the “non place” (Augé, 1995) in Idomeni has turned into common space.

For the purposes of this paper the social data was carried out from both qualitative and quantitative a methodological tool, which was applied for the determination of these dynamic characteristics approved by participatory research, interviews, collection of articles of local press and web pages and informal discussions among residents and solidarity people.

3. MYTILENE: THE EMERGING SOLIDARITY COMMON SPACE

After the sealing of the Balkan Route and the attemptation of crossing the Turkey-Greece sea borders, in earliest stages of refugees flows, the newcomers were directed from the north-eastern part of the island to the town of Mytilene. The infrastructure was weak. Thus, the public spaces were full of caravans of people. They were trying to become visible and to gain a ticket to Athens or Kavala.

The spatial dimensions of the flow were mostly linear. Along the seafront temporary configurations seek to express what still unformed, struggling to be born in conflict with what is already there. The open spaces turned into “outdoor dormitories”, “outdoor kitchens”, “outdoor mobile courts of discrimination”, “outdoor spaces of faith and praying”. Crowds of people, like wandering troops, were seeking for hygiene, food and shelter. The city had a diffused character of detention center, where supply, solidarity, repression, surveillance, criminalization coexisted on remarkable way.

On a second level, a network of coverage and support of the north-eastern part of the island was created. Since October 2015, the scenery was more explicit, the amounts of NGOs employees were compared to the amounts of migrants, the ad hoc NGO's solidarity is commercialized, and infrastructure of transportation, accommodation, catering, legal coverage, health care are erected. Moria enclosed center constitutes a recording and detention center point as well as Kara Tepes. In Sykamia, Mantamados and Eftalou were created transit camps. Meanwhile, in the old camp of PIKPA, the Village of Altogether movement regenerates an open camp for vulnerable cases. Open, self-organized structures of solidarity support “equal humans” (Lesvos Solidarity, 2015).

After the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal in 20 March 2016 the facts are changing. No clear picture. The borders are officially closed. The transit camps are evacuated. Moria camp becomes a closed type detention center, where everyone is forced to be imprisoned until their “screening” (relocation, reunification, asylum in Greece, refoulements, deportation to the 'safe country' of Turkey). Most of NGOs are withdrawn. At Moria, in total, the doctrine of surveillance and punishment applies to all aspects during their remaining at the center, during the common meal, during their presence to the “limbo” and the space where they sleep. In 26 of March 2016 conflicts between migrants and police forces took place, and minors got isolated in Mantamados' camp. At the same time the solidarity is criminalized, the self-organised, open structures and independent people of solidarity who denounce the anti-migrant politics and post-bureaucratic humanitarianism, are under attack (Trubeta, 2015; w2eu, 2016).

Simultaneously migrants, NGO's employees and people of solidarity, moving and helping to the transformations of space and its configuration. A heterogeneous community associates switching constantly the bounds between triptych sea – coastline – seafront. The symbiotic composition of these elements in space, the contestation of the meaning's construction and the articulation of public space defines anew the reading and the interpretation of commoning.

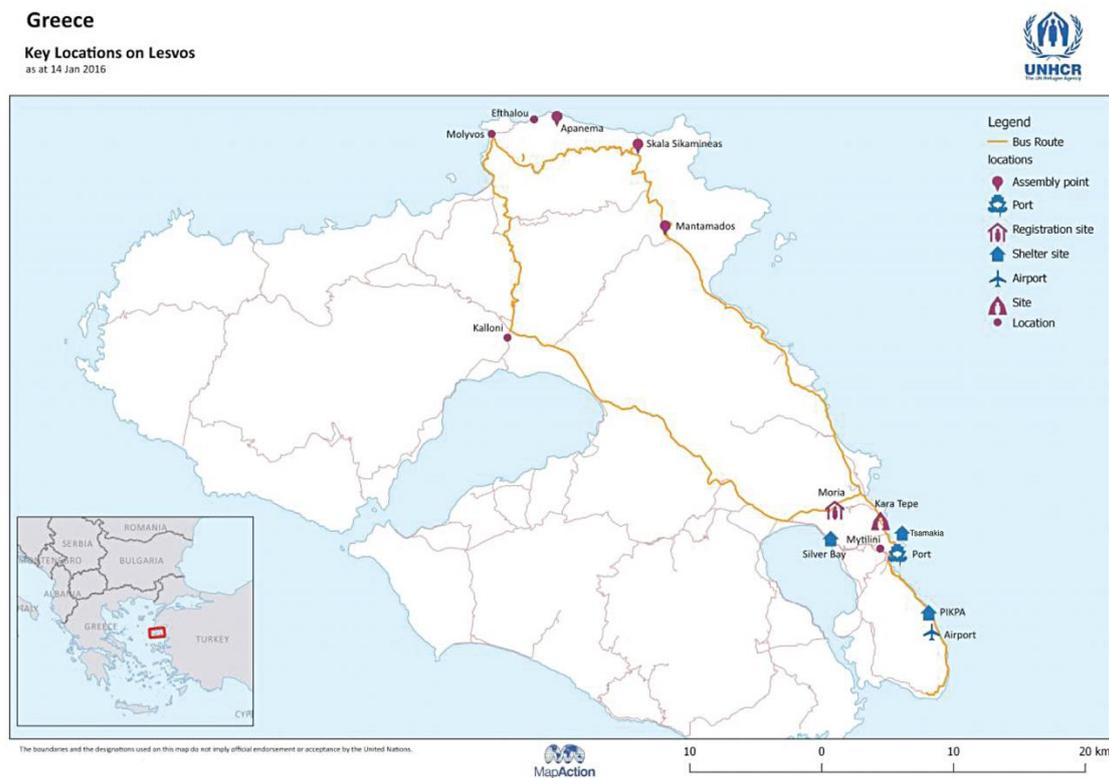
What can be born at the meeting point of resistance and sovereign power with its discourses and performances?

In contradiction with Agamben's (1998) “bare life” and the “zone of indistinction” at the militarized “abject spaces”, arising the question if proliferation of contestations surrounding the exclusionary politics could happen. Could we exceed the Agamben's totalizing reading of sovereign biopower as producing abjection within the space of the

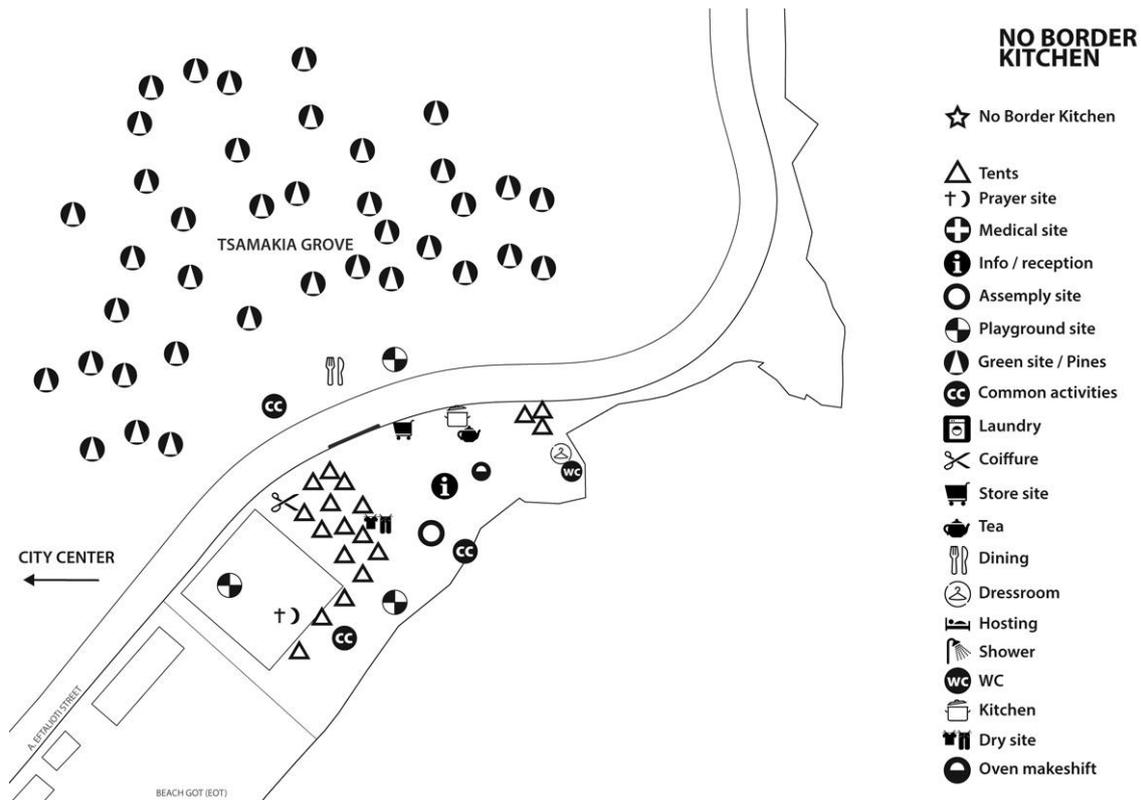
camp? (Vicki Squire, 2009) We are not going to approach migrants as passive victims of exclusionary politics, but as equal humans capable of claiming, co-configuring and commoning.

These contestations are conceptualised here as mobilisations that entail acts of solidarity, that invokes a conception of politics that “turns on equality as its principle” (Vicki Squire, 2009:159). In Rancierian terms, we are going to contest the in between wolds, worlds that are invisible and inaudible according to the territorial frame of sovereign power (Vicki Squire, 2009: 160), the territorial framing of politics.

We focus specifically on the enactment of solidarity by the No Border Kitchen of Lesbos and the Village of Altogether (PIKPA) movements wich are both based in Mytilene.



(Figure 2. Key locations on Lesbos, source: UNHCR, 2016c)



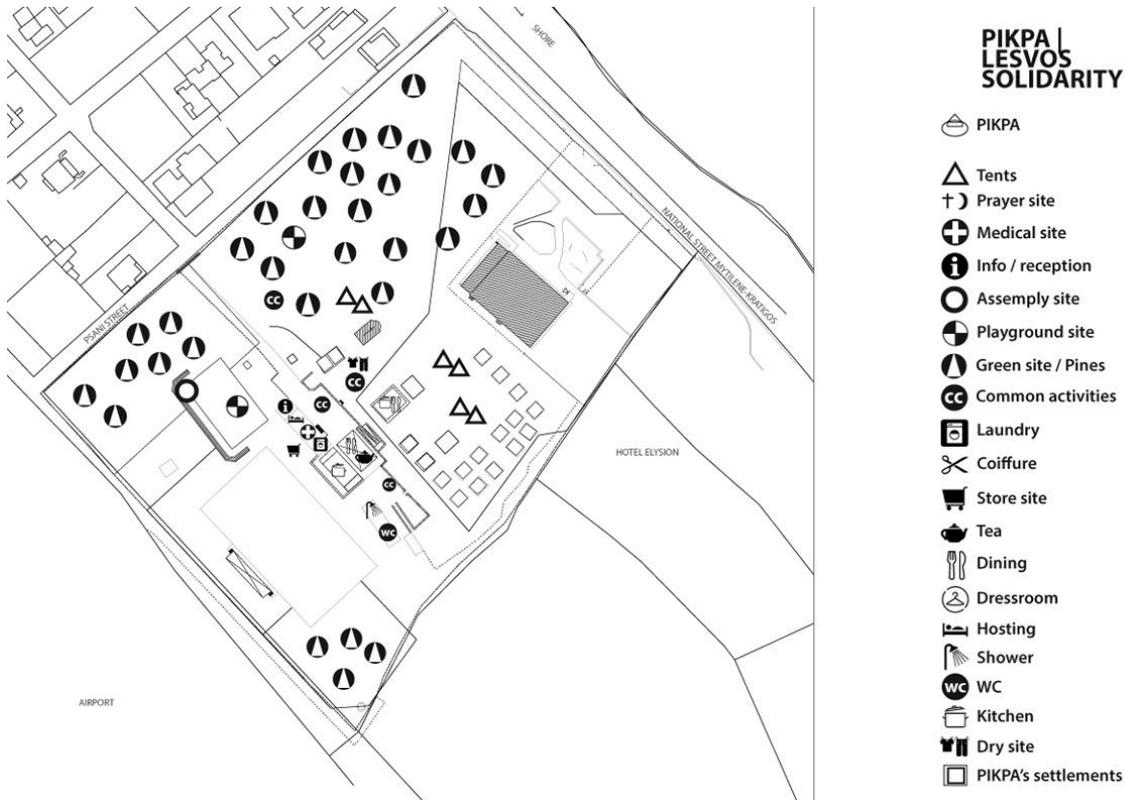
(Figure 3. No Border Kitchen Tsamakia, Lesvos, source: by the authors)

The No Border Kitchen (NBK) of Lesvos is a non-hierarchical and horizontal self-organized group of cooking activists from all over the world that share the aim of supporting people on their journey to Europe. NBK started in September 2015 on the Balkan route with few activists. Since 14th November NBK has started cooking at Tsamakia beach, which is close to the port of Mytilene. It was squatted by the people seeking refuge as a place to shelter for a few nights and supported by the NBK in terms of food and infrastructure. This is how NBK evolved into a self-organized camp where it supports people seeking refuge, irrespective of their backgrounds and adapting to the current situations.

The NBK crew is an open structure, with antiauthoritarian positions and reference to broad terms of antifascism, antiracist and antisexism. According to its manifesto (NBK of Lesvos manifesto, 2015) it is vegan kitchen, acknowledging the connection of exploitation and oppression of all living beings in the logic of capitalistic system. NBK is a political project that rejects the border regime enforced by the governments of the European Union. Furthermore, these people of solidarity don't assist the governments of Europe in management of the so-called "refugee flow" or work officially together with non-governmental and humanitarian organizations, they are not officially registered.

Against surveillance, racist, discrimination, sovereign discourses and performances NBK's people created the space together and everybody was able to join and co-organize the space. They held regular general assemblies, translated into different languages, in which they explained the general idea of NBK and how the space worked, and also spreaded independent travel and border information to help people on their journeys. Except from the cooking and the camping near the coast, they managed to create bonds with each other, reciprocal relations, to play and sing together, to support each other, to claim their space, to transfer ideas, to give bearth to a current community.

The reference to the space becomes in past tense due to the fact that a month after the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal, NBK structure in Tsamakia was evicted. But the project still exists. “To resist is to exist” was written to a banner outside the space. We could compare this slogan to Bauman's opinion which says “outside of that place, refugees are an obstacle and a problem, inside that place, they are forgotten” (Trubeta, 2015). In the light of this, how could this community disturb the sovereign power?



(Figure 4. PIKPA, Lesvos, source: by the authors)

Another self-organized solidarity structure is the PIKPA's camp or “Village of Altogether” which is an open refugee camp in Mytilene. It is a former summer camp for children, which was unused and run-down and from 2012 is transformed to a self-organised, autonomous space run by volunteers and is built on the principle of solidarity. The main principals are that of no human is illegal and that borders should be open. PIKPA is the only remaining open camp in Lesvos (May 2016). It's main objective is to stand in active solidarity with the refugees and “fight against the barbaric European immigration policies” (Lesvos Solidarity, 2015). In parallel, it raises awareness and do advocacy work around human rights violations and any acts of humiliation, violence and attacks against refugees. The crew works with local people to involve them in their work in order to promote community and sustainable action. The Village of Altogether is a group of people that come from all different social and cultural backgrounds.

PIKPA opened in 2012 and is now a growing and evolving camp in response to the dynamic nature of the refugee crisis on the island. The group of “Village of Altogether” was created in 2012 in order to coordinate the organisations and associations of the island, working in the context of the economic crisis in Greece. Soon afterwards, in response to the growing number of refugees arriving on the island and their housing needs, the abandoned site of PIKPA was occupied. The Municipality ceded PIKPA and volunteers transformed the space into hostels for vulnerable groups of people.

Since May of 2015, as the number of refugees increased, PIKPA provides refugees with shelter and hospitality but not registration. The refugees who stay at PIKPA are some of the most vulnerable: disabled, sick, pregnant and the families of victims of shipwrecks. It undertakes cases from UNHCR, IRC, other NGOs and hospital. The crew of PIKPA offers food, clothes, hygiene kits, medical assistance, psychosocial support. It also organizes activities for children, language classes and social support.

In collaboration with the Social Kitchen, PIKPA provided up to 2.000 meals per day and distribute them to the port or Moria; they distribute clothes and blankets to new arrivals; they monitor police violence and facilitated access to medical help at Moria camp. They also welcome boat arrivals on the Mytilene coast, ensure that refugees safely disembark and transport the most vulnerable or disabled to the hospital or camps. PIKPA collaborated with open structures of solidarity (Platanos Refugee Solidarity, NBK) and supported them. In addition, it supported structures at Idomeni and Chios.

After the EU-Turkey Deal, PIKPA has no access to Moria's detention center, so it stopped the distribution of food as there are no new arrivals. The mayor demands, once more, the evacuation of the camp. The crew resists, tries to keep the place open, published the issue to the press trying to gain the common opinion.

They insist on the importance of freedom and dignity. It is the sense of community, of participation and interaction that keeps alive the space. PIKPA seeks the participation of all in daily life, and the integration of all in society. It makes an attempt, as well, on forms of solidarity economy. Could this type of open camp, this community, resist against closed borders, deportations, fight for open structures of hospitality and social integration?

4. IDOMENI: FROM A NON PLACE TO A COMMON SPACE

On March 8, 2016, following a gradual restriction since February 2016 of access to the Balkan route based on ethnic origin criteria, the border between Greece and Macedonia was closed for all third-country migrants. In the aftermath of this closure, over 55.000 refugees have suddenly become trapped in Greece, the one third of them in the borderscape of Idomeni. Consequently it was established an informal makeshift settlement where almost 20.000 people were seeking to survive in appalling and precarious conditions, against the cold, the illnesses, the psychosocial distress, the lack of food, energy and water supplies.

According to Bahin, a Syrian refugee:

‘The difference between the situation in Syria and the situation here in Idomeni is that in Syria we die faster from bullets and bombs, while here we die slowly from germs, diseases, snakes, scorpions, cold and from the absence of any hope. If you put a dog in this situation it will die for sure in a few days. We escaped Syria searching for a better future and now we are in this situation. I am pregnant and together with my husband we left Syria to protect ourselves and our kid. We came here because we are searching for a better life. But humanity has ended here, at the borders with Macedonia. (interview to the authors).

During the three months of Idomeni informal settlement the Greek State was almost absent, except of the police forces, and the resources and facilities of the several national and international NGOs could provide sanitation and basic assistant and services only to 3.500 refugees (UNHCR, 2016b). Consequently the vast majority of the refugees along with solidarity groups create their own forms of life, organization and struggle.

In the words of the Syrian refugee Izibin:

'People survived through difficult weather conditions as we all came from a war zone. You can see, for example, the kids playing here happy and free. People let their kids play here because in Syria there was war, so the situation here, no matter how difficult it is, is a lot better than the situation in Syria. Last thing the parents think of is that someone is going to steal their child. Maybe it sounds weird, but there is a common sense of protection among the people here, no matter their country of origin. Even if a child is not mine, I will take care of it' (interview to the authors).

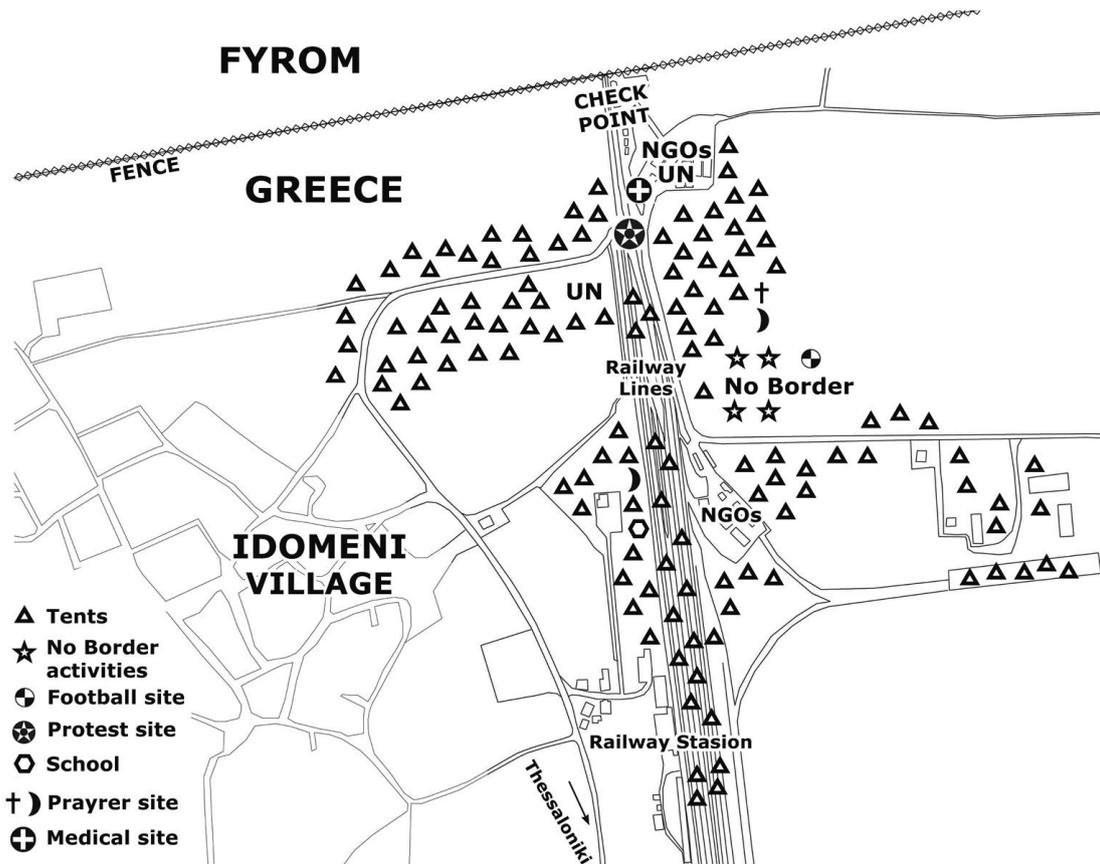
Moreover as Mustafa, a Moroccan refugee, states:

'We started to discuss that we should organize dynamic actions, demonstrations, protests, to block the railway line and to march against the fence. Here I should notice that, in contrast what the mainstream media are saying about to manipulation of the actions by European anarchists, we the refugees ourselves have taken the decisions for actions. We organize meetings and plans of action and went and announced them to all the other refugees. We did almost every day several protests, we closed the railway line and we put a kiosk in the railway line, as a permanent meeting and protest point' (interview to the authors).

Finally Hussein, an Afghan refugee, makes the point that:

'There is no discrimination between refugees. You can see people from many different countries, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, all cook and eat together, also teach each other their language. We are all in the same situation, looking for a better life, a better future, therefore there is no room for cultural or religious conflicts' (interview to the authors).

The refugees along with several solidarity groups especially with antiauthoritarian, left and anarchist background, from several countries created an unpredictable and misfitting common space in the former "no place" of Idomeni's borderscape. The transformation of the "no place" to a "common space" took place as the area started to acquire the characteristics of the "threshold". According to Stavrides (2012: 589): 'common spaces emerge as threshold spaces, spaces not demarcated by a defining perimeter. Whereas public space bears the mark of a prevailing authority that defines it, common space is opened space, space in a process of opening toward newcomers.' Thus common spaces are 'porous, spaces in movement, space passages' (Ibid: 589). The mode of communication and the social relations of the migrants gave into the informal settlement of Idomeni its porous and hybrid character. This character was formed by the following features: modification of the boundaries between the private and the political space; praxes of "relocation" and "reinscription" (Bhabha, 1994), which allowed the presence, identification and sharing expectation among the refugees. Refugees along with the solidarity people "relocated" and "reinscribed" in the common space of Idomeni their personal space, they transformed the borderscape into their "new home" and their collective space as they set up various self-organized collective projects. All these gave birth to the troubling of identities and the emergence of the Idomeni community, a community open to newcomers and constantly in motion.



(Figure 5. Idomeni migrants' informal settlement, source: by the authors)

Exemplary, inter alia, were the practices of improvisations and experimental modes of communication as expressed by several self organized groups like the kitchen groups, the cleaning groups, the technical support group, the tv-radio group, the legal group, the medical group, the guard group, the translation groups. Moreover in collaboration with the no border solidarity people it was established a cultural center, a cinema, a school, a kinder garden, a tea place, several coiffures, makeshift prayer sites (churches) for Muslims and Christians and a football site. In addition, there were organized several fests, music, dance and theater events. Furthermore the paintings, the makeshift placards, the anti-border slogans and the soundscape of the Idomeni with the voices of the people, especially from children, the percussion instruments, the metallic sound of pans and the clapping formed an unpredictable and subversive architectural common space. Finally there were doctors without borders, journalists without borders, teachers without borders and clowns without borders.

Accordingly, it can be argued that the above social, cultural and political praxes transform the borderscape of Idomeni from a typical demarcated non-place which separates nation-states to a threshold common space where people with different national, religious, class, gender and cultural identities reinvent the cultural of co-existence.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper we argued that the refugees and migrants along with the solidarity movements have the ability to change the meaning itself of the urban or border space as they destabilize the dominant policies and collectively produce hybrid, unpredictable and

misfitted communities. In fact, both the cases of Mytelini and Idomeni sought that it was formed a fluid and open community with no boundaries, as concerns its members, but with specific forms of commoning and communication practices between them; hence there emerged a variety of micro selforganized communities in Mytilene and micro-communities inside the informal settlement of Idomeni. At the same time in the emerging common space the mode of communication, the characteristics and identities of the participants confronted with their limits, modified, troubled and, even ephemeral, they were pursued to be transformed. The process of setting up the common space was based on the multitude of solidarity gestures, the emotional, communicative and aesthetic interactions, which sought to overcome the catoptric bipolar contrasts of native-immigrant, young-old, worker-unemployed, male-female, gay-straight, farsi speakers-arab speakers, Syrian-Afghan, Iraqi-Moroccan, Alevi-Sunni, Sunni-Shiite etc. In doing so, it constituted intermediate and hybrid paths of emancipation, social relations and modes of communication, through which the communities of the common space were formed. Consequently, we urge that the study of the selforganized structures in Mytilene and Idomeni push the boundaries over the symbolic, material and social meanings of the common space.

In closing, it is undeniable that there are many further issues to be explored, however we maintain that writing with this kind of ambition may be open politico-intellectual imaginations in ways that have generated new questions and possibilities for future theoretical intervention. Moreover, we hope that our approach will be useful for critical scholars in discussing the future developments on the production of the migrants' common space.

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