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Deaths at the Borders: The cases of Evros and the Aegean Sea.
Research Notes from Greece

1. Introduction

Hundreds of people have died – and still do – in Evros river and the Aegean Sea, between Greece and Turkey, in their struggle to cross the south-eastern EU border. The tragic history of these passages goes back more than 20 years, but it stayed in the margins of global news and scientific research until recently.

Who these people were and what processes followed their death were the questions at the core of a study that took place in Greece, Italy, Malta, Gibraltar and Spain, collecting data about migrants who have died attempting to cross the southern external borders of the EU, as part of the *Human Costs of Border Control* project of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. One of the aims of the project was the creation of the *Deaths at the Borders Database* which is “the first collection of official, state-produced evidence on people who died while attempting to reach southern EU countries from the Balkans, the Middle East, and North and West Africa, and whose bodies were found in or brought to Europe”.¹

Data collection for this study provided the main stimuli for this research note, which gives an insight to border deaths and their management in Greece from 1990 to 2013. More specifically, we attempt to shed light on: firstly, the data of border deaths, as it is distributed in the different land and sea routes of Greece; secondly, the Greek law and the formal procedures that should be followed when a dead body is found and; lastly, the management of migrants’ death in Greek practice, focusing on its various divergences from the rule. Throughout, we describe many aspects of the fieldwork as it was prepared and conducted in Greek reality and, especially, how it was allowed or denied by the various stakeholders involved in border deaths procedures. Finally, some remarks and rethinking of *borders* will be attempted in the last section of the paper, as they are related to *deaths* and their *management*.

The research note is based on the fieldwork and data collection in the following Greek border regions: (i) the land borders with Turkey (Evros region); (ii) the North Aegean islands; (iii) the Central Aegean islands of Cyclades and Evia.² In the first of these regions, the Evros river serves as a natural border between Greece and Turkey, while at the others, the border is at sea, a fact that is more apparent on a map than in physical reality. The North Aegean islands distance just a few miles from the Turkish coasts, while the Central Aegean islands distance more than 100 miles. Although the three regions have different spatial and historical relations with the border, they have all witnessed and experienced border deaths.

2. Border deaths in the Eastern Mediterranean: the cases of Evros & the Aegean Sea (North & Central)

The *Deaths at the Borders Database* records 847 people who lost their lives during the passage to the EU via the Eastern Mediterranean/Greek borders between 1990 and 2013. This number is estimated to be much lower than the actual total, as the Database refers only to migrants’ bodies found and registered by Greek authorities, excluding people whose bodies are missing and those found and registered in Turkey.

The majority of border deaths in Greece, during this period, occurred in the Evros region and North Aegean islands, both of which presented similar fatalities from 1990 until 2005. In 2007 there was a peak in deaths along the North Aegean sea route, but from 2009 to 2012 most migrants entered Greece by crossing the Evros river at the land border and fatalities followed suit. The highest number of fatalities in Evros region was in 2011, the year that deaths in the Aegean Sea dropped remarkably. After 2011 the data suggests a shift in border deaths from the land to the sea borders again.

These preliminary findings of the *Human Costs of Border Control* project can be related to EU border policies over the same time period. Most notably, the shift in 2011 coincides with the construction of a

1 <http://www.borderdeaths.org>

2 While data for the research was also collected from the Southern Aegean islands (Dodecanese), Crete and the land borders with Albania.

fence along the Greek-Turkish land border, and the launch of Frontex³ operation *Poseidon*.⁴ The fieldwork revealed some insights into the context behind these landmarks in the recent history of EU-Greek border control.

The erection of a fence along the short stretch of solid land along the Greek-Turkish border was one of the latest manifestations of securitization in a long history of border control in the area. After the Cyprian crisis of 1974, Western Thrace developed into a military zone across which were planted thousands of landmines. Long after the threat of Turkish military invasion had subsided, the mines became one of the leading causes of death for migrants attempting to cross the EU external border without authorization. The mines were only finally removed in 2008,⁵ and it was soon after this that the fence was commissioned. The transformation of the Greek national border to an EU external one has reinvigorated the area's militarization, with negative implications for the many people who struggle to cross it. Thus, the Evros region remains a central concern in national and EU discussions about border control and management, just now in relation to irregular migration.

Meanwhile, the EU border agency, Frontex, which had been providing operational assistance to Greece since 2006, launched *Joint Operation Poseidon* to enforce control over the Greek-Turkish land border and to prevent irregular migration in the Aegean Sea. The North Aegean region, consisting of nine islands,⁶ is situated on one of the main migration routes since 1990. Many migrants have crossed the sea to the north of Lesbos, one of the narrowest passes between Greece and Turkey in the Aegean Sea (approx. 7 miles), reaching Greek shores somewhere between Molivos and Sikamia. This stretch of coastline is scattered with remains of plastic boats, clothes and personal items, together with washed-up dead bodies. The winds and currents off the Korakas peninsula, which lies nearby this route, create a very dangerous passage that has caused many shipwrecks during the period 1990-2013, such as that of October 27th, 2009, from which nine bodies were found.

After 2012, the number of fatalities in both North Aegean islands and the Evros region dropped, as migration flows – and therefore border deaths – rose in Italy,⁷ highlighting “an already common hypothesis that border control diverts irregular migrants and border deaths, rather than preventing them”.⁸

The third geographical region explored in this research note is also related to the same EU border policies, which produce spaces of death that extend across EU border regions (and arguably throughout the whole of Greece). Border deaths can occur in locations not usually designated as being on the physical border, such as in the Cyclades⁹ and Evia islands. These islands, more than 100 nautical miles from the Turkish shores, were on an irregular migration route from Turkey, which emerged between 2000 and 2007. Coast guard officers and other local stakeholders offered varying explanations for why border deaths occurred in this region¹⁰: Some connected the deaths to passing boats on a direct route to Athens, established in response to the problem many migrants had faced – and still do today – of becoming trapped on the islands closest to Turkey, unable to continue their journey. Others claimed that these Central Aegean islands were themselves the destination of the boats. The islands offered proximity to the mainland for the migrants, and, simultaneously, distance for the smugglers to avoid the risks of getting too close to Athens itself, where sea patrols and surveillance systems were more effective. A coast guard officer base in Rafina, near Athens, claimed that regardless of these temporary migration routes, bodies from shipwrecks on the usual Aegean Sea routes could be found along the islands' shores, brought there by the currents.

3 Frontex (from French *Frontières extérieures*, meaning *external borders*) is an EU agency launched in 2004 to manage (control and securitise) the external borders of the EU.

4 T. P. SPIJKERBOER, *Policy Conclusions*, 2015, http://www.borderdeaths.org/?page_id=295.

5 Greece has signed the Ottawa Treaty (1997) for the banning of the minefields against personnel which demanded the disarmament of the minefields in Greece until 2008.

6 Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Lemnos, Ikaria, Inousses, Psara, Agios Efstratios and the complex of Fourni islands.

7 However, from 2015, the Aegean Sea shifted again to the main passage of people struggling to enter Europe.

8 T. LAST, *Preliminary Findings*, 2015, http://www.borderdeaths.org/?page_id=293.

9 Cyclades are a group of 33 islands in the Aegean Sea, lying in central Greece.

¹⁰ Data deriving from: (i) interviews with stakeholders and; (ii) phone interviews with the Coast Guard officer of Rafina, Athens, on file with the authors.

3. The research: preparation

The fieldwork in Greece took place between April 2014 and January 2015, in which researchers visited civil registry offices and other places related to death management (e.g. cemeteries, coroners, etc.), in search of migrants' death certificates and other relevant information about border deaths. In addition to the three regions discussed in this paper, fieldwork was also conducted on the Dodecanese islands (southeast Aegean), on Crete, and in northwest Greece along the Albanian border. Each region was allocated to specific field researchers.

The field researchers were tasked with three objectives: (1) to identify the relevant civil registry offices in their allocated region; (2) to gain access to the archives of these offices; and (3) to research alternative sources of information to confirm and/or supplement the data contained in the death certificates. In the Evros region and the North Aegean islands, civil servants working in the civil registries were key informants about the death registries as well as other potential sources of information about border deaths. In contrast, in the Cyclades and Evia, achieving the three objectives was made more complicated by a general lack of awareness among civil servants about border deaths. This lack of awareness may be due to the region's distance from the physical border, or the fact that the region was only affected by border deaths for a relatively short period of time (between 2000 and 2007). Instead, the field researcher responsible for this region received advice mainly from coast guards.

In all three regions it was necessary to supplement death certificates with other sources of data on border deaths. In Evros region, additional information was obtained from the Coroner of Alexandroupoli, funeral undertakers and religious leaders. In the North and Central Aegean regions, additional information was obtained from coast guards and cemeteries. Using multiple sources of data in this way, caused field researchers considerable confusion as many of the pieces of information conflicted. However, in the end, this method ensured the highest quality of data collection and the best guarantee that every migrant body found along the EU's external borders in Greece was recorded in the Deaths at the Borders Database.

4. Border deaths management in Greece: law & practice

The legal and official procedures that have to be followed after a dead body is found are described in this section, as reported by various respondents during the fieldwork. These procedures are almost identical in all regions, with exceptions due mainly to local infrastructural and financial (in)capacity.

If a migrant's body is found on land, the police has to be immediately notified. It is their duty to gather evidence, photograph the scene and call the undertaker to transport the corpse(s) to the mortuary. Meanwhile, if a body is found in the sea, it is the coast guard that is responsible for conducting the preliminary examination of the scene. In both cases, after the body is transferred to the mortuary, the coroner records post mortem data about the deceased, including fingerprints, facial features, any identifying features such as tattoos or scars, and a description of the person's clothes and personal belongings. If the person has not been immediately identified at the scene where he/she was found, the coroner should also take a DNA sample to be sent to the Criminology Laboratory of the General Police Directorate of Attica (Athens). Migrants who travelled with the deceased may be asked to help identify the body. If the body is identified, the police contact the relatives, who have the right to choose the cemetery in which the deceased is to be buried.

But many border deaths are not identified. In the Cyclades, unidentified corpses are permitted to remain in the mortuary for a period of three to six months to await identification. In Evros region, unidentified corpses are normally permitted to remain only up to three months inside the mortuary at Alexandroupoli Public Hospital.¹¹ Moreover, there is not always space available in the mortuary,¹² in which case, as soon as the police transfer the bodies to the mortuary, the coroner submits a request to the Regional Public Prosecutor to order immediate burial. If the Prosecutor issues such an order, the bodies are placed in body bags marked with the protocol number and returned to the undertaker. This protocol number links the physical remains to a DNA sample and the post mortem data collected during the autopsy conducted by the coroner.

11 According to the coroner of Alexandroupoli, field notes on file with the authors.

12 There are only four freezers that can hold a maximum capacity of eight corpses.

Once the autopsy is done and, usually, after a burial order has been issued, the municipal registry office makes a death certificate. Death certificates in Greece are official testimonies of death that should contain the following information: name, age, sex of the deceased, time and place that the person died or the body was found, name of the person who requested the registration, protocol number of police and prosecutor's document if occurred and, lastly, cause of death. For unidentified bodies, there should be a detailed description of the personal items of the deceased and other post mortem details, which could contribute to identification.

The law is clear on the obligations associated with death registration. Death certificates are issued in the corresponding registries which, after the 2010 Kallikratis administrative reform of Greece (No. 3852/2010), lie in the new local-level self-governing municipalities (*Dimoi*) deriving from the merging of the previous smaller municipalities. The Greek Law for the registration of a dead body (No. 344/1976) indicates that the responsibility for registration lies with the registry of the municipality either where the death occurred or where the body of the deceased was found. For unidentified bodies or for unknown places of death the law defines that the death certificate should be issued at the registry of the municipality where the body was recovered. The same law indicates the proper procedure for the burial of the deceased in the municipality where the body was found. Lastly, as concerns the access to death certificates, the legal framework for the protection of personal data as described by the Greek Law (No. 2472/1997) is not applicable to deceased persons.

However, in practice, in spite of the apparent clarity of the law, instances of negligence and misinterpretations of these obligations have been observed in all regions where the research took place. These observations demonstrate a distance between how things should be done, and how things are actually done.

To begin with, there were border deaths which were not registered at the competent registry office, in accordance with the law, and there were other border deaths which were not registered at all. An example of the former was found on the small Cyclades islands¹³ where there was no coast guard for most of the year, so when a body was found the coast guard of Naxos island took responsibility, resulting in transfers of bodies to Naxos island for processing and registration. An example of the latter can be found in Evia where the only documental trace of a shipwreck that cost at least nine lives on December 19, 2002, was to be found in the operation logbook of the coast guard of Kymi. The significant difference between media reported deaths and those recorded in the Deaths at the Borders Database could indicate that this has happened on occasion in other border regions of Greece.

The vast majority of registries in all three regions, apart from only a few exceptions such as Mytilini (Lesvos), issued substandard death certificates for both identified and unidentified migrants as they did not include the information they were supposed to. Even basic information was lacking in many certificates: name, age, sex, time and place of death, personal items or clear cause of death. The deceased was commonly named either as "unidentified corpse", or "unknown man/woman" in case the sex was known, and different ranges were used for the age. However, the area where the body was found as well as the name of the person who found and declared it to the authorities were provided in almost all death certificates. Additional information, such as the circumstances of death, was rare. It should be noted that, as almost none of the deaths had been declared by a relative of the deceased, personal and familial details could only be brought to light if investigated or if their companions survived the journey across the border. Last but not least, negligent mistakes were also observed, for example, the nationality was sometimes pre-filled as "Greek".

Missing information might be attributed to the often advanced decomposition of bodies, the lack of facilities and funds for such procedures, and the heavy workload of the few people with the expertise to complete the procedures (eg. the coroner of Cyclades serving for many regions). Thus, migrants were often perceived as a burden to the death management authorities. However, the fieldwork revealed a general lack of effort by the competent authorities to overcome the challenges and properly investigate migrant deaths. Leaving large sections of death certificates empty seemed to reflect a lack of respect for these particular deceased, and the causes of his/her death. It also raises concerns that information about border deaths is not considered to hold much importance.

Field researchers observed that migrants who died crossing the borders were also mistreated in the

¹³ Donousa, Schoinousa, Irakleia and Koufonisia islands.

course of their burial. This mistreatment took the form of rushed procedures, and carelessness in labelling graves and ensuring traceability of bodies. Insufficient mortuary and cemetery space led to migrants being buried far from the municipality or island where their body was found. For instance, because the forensic services for the Central Aegean Sea is based in Syros, bodies found on other islands – such as Mykonos – were sent to Syros for processing and ultimately buried there.¹⁴ Financial burdens were also highlighted by a number of competent authorities as a reason for not following proper protocols for burial. The registrar officer of Mykonos claimed that the municipality was unable to afford the transportation of corpses back to Mykonos after it had been processed in Syros for proper burial according to the law. As a result, in many cases, other actors took on the financial costs to ensure that procedures were properly followed. For example, on Ikaria island, the municipality did not cover transportation and burial of corpses and so coast guard officers, funeral services and local solidarity groups had to fill the gap.¹⁵

Last, but not least, formal translation options are rarely, if ever, provided by municipality authorities to support communication with relatives of the deceased for the purposes of identification and fulfilling burial requests. As with the other examples above, this is yet another illustration of the consequence of a general lack of facilities, resources and effort on the part of the authorities responsible for the bodies of migrants that die in their border jurisdictions on the borders of Greece and the EU.

To conclude, there are general characteristics of death management in Greece, governed by national laws and observed in all border regions by the field researchers, which should mean that border deaths are investigated, registered and buried in a standard and traceable way. However, in practice there is a lot of variation in how deceased migrants are treated. In part this appeared to be a result of misinformed and over-burdened local authorities. But the field researchers also observed that migrants were treated differently from other dead, and often with neglect, massively disadvantaging the relatives and friends who are looking for them. The actions of many civil servants and other officials suggested that they did not consider that recording border deaths was important, raising serious concerns about the visibility (or invisibility) of the context and causes of these deaths in these regions.

5. The research: access & denials

The previous section explored the divergence between what should be and what is in the context of Greek management of border deaths. The same divergence was also seen in regard to the practicalities of the data collection for the Deaths at the Borders Database, in particular in the ambivalence and denial which field researchers met when trying to get access to the official data archived in civil registries.

Officials had multiple reactions towards the researchers' request for access to official data, archives or to even general information about border deaths. Some registrars and locals were interested in our research and eager to help, while others demonstrated ignorance, indifference or even resentment of the study. In most cases, access to registry death books – the main source for the Database – was finally achieved. But this was often a challenging, complicated task, depending on both personal and objective factors.

Ambiguities and gaps in Greek law made space for many civil servants to be uncertain of whether they could formally allow access to the registry's documents. Personal data protection was cited as a reason to initially refuse access by a number of registrars, despite the fact that, by law (No. 2472/1997), deceased persons are excluded from protection of personal data. Registrars commonly asked for additional documents establishing approval of access by superior or other authorities, such as the Mayor or the Hellenic Data Protection Authority (HPDA). A written statement from the HPDA proved to be useful in achieving access in many of these situation. For example, in Mykonos, the registrar refused access despite several calls from the field researcher, but dropped all her objections when she was presented with the letter. On the island of Samos, the main (Karlovasi) registrar's denial of access on the grounds of protection of personal data triggered a series of denials of access in the other registry offices of the island. After being handed the HPDA's letter, and recognizing the field

¹⁴ Interviews with stakeholders of Mykonos, on file with the authors.

¹⁵ Conversation with the coast guard of Evdilos (Ikaria), on file with the authors.

researchers' efforts and persistence, he allowed access to his registry and the field researchers were then able to convince the other registries to do the same. Other supporting documents were also useful when seeking access, such as a letter from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) and another from the *UN Special Rapporteur on Migrant's Rights*, especially in the Central Aegean/Evia region. On some occasions, simply emphasizing that the research was being conducted by a University in the Netherlands and that it was funded by the Netherlands Council for Scientific Research also proved to be helpful in convincing registrar's to allow access, as it appeared to give the study weight.

Once in the registry offices, hesitations and uncooperative reactions were often related to the disruption the data collection would cause to the registrar's work. In these situations, in addition to presenting the supporting documents described above, the field researchers' attitude made a significant difference, including their dedication to the research, their interest in and concern about migration issues, their understanding and sympathy of officers' workloads, etc. In a few cases, the subject of the study itself – border deaths – evoked a strong reaction from the registrars. In one registry on Lesbos island, upon learning of the subject of the research, the registrar started to be unkind, raising his voice at the researchers and emphatically repeating derogatory terms for migrants (equivalent to “illegals”). However, in another registry on the same island, the registrar was brought to tears when recalling how she had to complete death certificates for several children after a shipwreck in 2013.

6. Borders & deaths in Greece: remarks & rethinking

Considering the topic of the research is borders and deaths, and having highlighted the main aspects of the fieldwork in Greece that contributed to the Deaths at the Borders Database, we take the opportunity in this concluding section to make some remarks about rethinking borders in relation to deaths and their management.

To begin with, borders appear in many literal or discursive ways that go beyond their traditional representations and practices as expressions and instruments of territoriality and state power.¹⁶ This argument can be seen in the transformation of an international (Greek-Turkish) border to a supranational (EU) one, with a corresponding diffusion of responsibilities through privatization and externalization. This shift is related to the “organizing logic of management”¹⁷ of EU border policies that extends throughout border territories, leading to the current situation in which border deaths can occur at various locations not exclusively restricted to the physical external borders of the EU, as proved by the border deaths in the Cyclades and Evia region located in central Greece.

The traditional, linear notions of borders are gradually giving way to understandings of them as human-made, social processes “located” in a number of institutionalized practices, discourses and symbols throughout the state territory and also outside it.¹⁸ From this perspective, borders can be approached discursively as well as spatially. They can be understood as bordering practices, such as the divergence between what should happen according to Greek law and what is happening in practice, in the localities where border deaths are found. Such bordering practices can be expressed as denials of access to information by registrars and other officials, or they can come in the form of migrants' exclusion from death registration. As this paper has described, this accumulation of bordering practices affect identification and traceability of bodies, as well as proper registration and burial procedures. They indicate an unwillingness or inability on the part of the responsible authorities to follow the law and see beyond the borders imposed by the complex Greek administrative framework and lack of facilities and resources. This, in turn, reflects a more diffuse social indifference towards migrants, asylum seekers and

16 E. BALIBAR, *What is a border?*, in *Politics and the Other Scenes*, Verso, London, 2002, p. 75; D. MASSEY, *For Space*, Sage Publications, London, 2005; P. K. RAJARAM and C. GRUNDY-WARR, *Introduction*, in *Borderscapes: hidden geographies and politics at territory's edge*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2007, p. ix.; S. MEZZADRA and B. NEILSON, *Borders as Methods, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, and London, 2013; A. PAASI, *Borders and Border-Crossings*, in *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to cultural geography*, John Wiley & Sons, 2013, p. 478; B. KASPAREK ET AL., *Border Regime*, in: *New Keywords: Migration and Borders*, Cultural Studies, Taylor & Francis, 2014, p. 15-16.

17 T. P. SPIJKERBOER, *Moving Migrants, States and Rights. Human Rights and Border Deaths*, in *Law and Ethics of Human Rights*, 7 (2/2013), p. 213.

18 A. PAASI, *Boundaries as Social Practice and Discourse: The Finnish-Russian Border*, in “Regional studies”, 33(7/1999), p. 669; A. PAASI, *Remarks on Europe's Transforming Meta-geography*, in *Geopolitics*, 10 (3/2007), p. 580.

refugees in Greece and in the EU as a whole, in line with Rozakou's "politics of invisibility".¹⁹ In this respect, the management of death contributes to the management of life, as migrants are seen as bodies whose death or life is of little consequence.²⁰

Rethinking borders as bordering practices that perform and act in a complexity of EU border policies, Greek law and administration, local practices, and community relations and daily life, provides important insights for their role in the management of migrants' deaths. We hope that by encouraging this rethinking in relation to the management of death, we will also encourage rethinking of how we manage life.

¹⁹ K. ROZAKOU, *The biopolitics of hospitality in Greece: Humanitarianism and the management of refugees*, in *American Ethnologist* 39 (3/2012), p. 562. Rozakou points out the Greek status in recording the lowest asylum recognition rates in the EU as well as the nation's poor reception infrastructure, both of which pose obstacles, delays and documented violations at every step of the asylum process.

²⁰ G. AGAMBEN, *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*, Stanford University Press, 1998; O. PATTERSON, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge/Massachusetts/London: 1988; R. L. DOTY, *Bare life: border-crossing deaths and spaces of moral alibi*, in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (4/2011), p. 599.