

Mapping Migration Infrastructures; *Epistemological reflection on digital methods*

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In recent years, migration and border researchers started to investigate how infrastructures influence, control and facilitate people's migration projects. In this vast growing body of literature, scholars have conceptualized migration deals, camps, border control technologies, social networks, financial flows, prisons as migration infrastructures. In this paper, drawing inspiration from an Open-Source Intelligence approach (OSINT), a methodology for collecting and analysing data that are accessible in publicly available sources (e.g., video and live-streams on social media), I will discuss and reflect on how we can map the Evros/Maritsa/Meriç River as migration infrastructures. In so doing, this paper invites the reader to reflect on the epistemological questions that arise from such an approach.

Key words: *migration infrastructures; Evros/Meriç River; digital mapping; OSINT; video analysis; Google Earth Pro*

Introduction

Since the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) and its 1926 Athens Annex to the Lausanne Treaty, the Maritsa/Meriç River¹ came to demarcate the majority of the border between the territories of Greece and Turkey.² After Greece's integration into the EU (1981) the Greek-Turkish border gradually became part of the EU's southeastern border that turned the river into one of the main obstacles for 'irregularized' migrant travellers to cross into the EU. In 2020, I talked to Claudia, a woman in her early thirties from Congo who tried to traverse the Evros /Meriç River in order

¹ The river runs through and connects Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey where they have different names for the river. Evros (Greece), Maritsa (Bulgaria), Meriç (Turkey). In this paper I write about the river as the border between Turkey and Greece. Therefore, in this paper I use the Greek/Turkish name of the river, Evros/Meriç in alphabetical order.

² However, at the village of Karaağaç/Καραγάτς, a small Turkish enclave on the western side of the river next to the city of Edrine the border between Greece and Turkey is divided by a 12.5-km-long stretch of land.

to reach the EU and apply for asylum. Together with a group of fellow travelers, she managed to cross the river, however, on the Greek side of the border, she was beaten by a group of men dressed entirely in black, and forced to cross the river again to return to Turkey. Fearful of the swift river current, a large part of the group refused to continue onward to Turkey and instead stayed on a small islet in the river for days. In recent years, NGOs and activists alike have documented and published hundreds³ of similar cases reporting how people on the move have been contained in these small patches of land, surrounded by the water of the river. In various yet distinct ways, the geophysical characteristics of the river i.e., the ruggedness, the muddy river banks, the islets, the strong current, and the temperature of the water have been mobilized to contain and prevent people from crossing (see also Duncan 2020; Forensic Architecture 2020).

In this regard, we can understand the river in relation to border technologies, border authorities, discourses, laws, and policy as comprising a *migration infrastructure* (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Infrastructures, as argued by anthropologist Brian Larkin are “networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space” (2013 *ibid.* 328). In the context of migration and borders, migration infrastructures are understood as the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and set conditions on mobility (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). In a recently published article, Kimberly Anh Thomas brought together critical border studies and infrastructure studies to demonstrate how the Ganges River, which demarcates the Indo-Bangladeshi border, functions as one type of border infrastructure. Thomas demonstrates how three characteristics of infrastructures; circulation, failure, and maintenance manifest in this river as a border. In bringing together these different fields of study, Thomas thereby opens the possibility to complexify the relationship between hydrological processes and practices of b/ordering. Such an approach, as I will try to demonstrate, allows us to incorporate natural barriers into an analysis of migration infrastructures (see theoretical chapter) (see also Duncan 2020; Cuéllar 2021).

In this paper, drawing inspiration from the aforementioned studies, I will explore how the Evros//Meriç River functions similarly as a migration infrastructure in Europe’s border regime (e.g., Starr 1996; Larkin 2021; Xiang and Lindquist 2014; Nemser 2017; Duncan 2020; Cuéllar 2021; Thomas 2021). However, like many other border zones, the borderlands and infrastructures surrounding this river are simultaneously clandestine military zones hidden

³ Border authorities have also published and leaked videos of such cases to discredit the authorities of other countries.

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from the view of the media, human rights monitors, and the public at large (e.g., Mountz 2011, p. 118). Spaces such as these serve as a “major preoccupation in maintaining domestic order” and in doing so “reveal the boundaries of the nation” (Paperson 2010, p. 23), making a proper investigation into these spaces a timely and somewhat urgent matter. But, given the secrecy surrounding these places, how can we as researchers challenge, navigate and engage with the largely inaccessible fields of these borderlands? In the context of the global Covid pandemic, when field visits were cancelled, I sought out alternative methodologies for researching the border which could be undertaken digitally from my house in Istanbul, or university locations in Germany and Portugal. Drawing inspiration from the innovative work of Forensic Architecture, the BellingCat, and DisInfo Collective I will explore how researchers can use Google Earth Pro and publicly available data, such as Twitter videos, to map these borderlands. I understand mapping as an analytical research method for uncovering, analyzing, and representing the relationality between infrastructures, and the ways people on the move navigate these structures (Hänsel and Teunissen 2021). In this paper, the mapping process will be undertaken by bringing together a range of sources on the border such as policy documents, press releases and videos that show how the river-border functions.

This paper is first and foremost a methodological exploration on tools for mapping and monitoring an area from a distance, which often applies a fixed and static mapping of power and infrastructures. One of the consequences of this, as argued by black feminist scholars such as McKittrick 2011, “is the erasure of certain modalities of living as some lives are only ever considered in death” (McKittrick 2011 cited in Awan 2020). In this regard, maps serve to reinforce societal hierarchies and binaries between citizen/ non-citizen. Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere (Hänsel and Teunissen 2021), within the research on migration infrastructures, studies rarely discuss how people on the move navigate these infrastructures of exclusion. These static maps may highlight particular routes but they lack a truly human element. It is therefore important to note that this paper presents a rough sketch of the border, but does not claim to display the full story. In what follows, I will first present a short description of how the border has changed over time. Secondly, I will make a case for operationalizing rivers, as well as the technologies surrounding them, as their own form of migration infrastructure. Lastly, by going further into a specific case study, I will show how the river border assemblage operates as a migration infrastructure.

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Theoretical and Methodological Reflections

Following the combined negotiations of the Lausanne Treaty and the Athens Annex, the land border between Greece and Turkey is currently 206 km long and mostly runs along the Evros/Meriç River. Close to the city of Edirne, the village of Karaağaç/Καραγάτς a small Turkish enclave on the western side of the river the border is a 12.5-kilometre-long stretch of land. Karaağaç/Καραγάτς was amended to Turkey because it abandoned its claim for war reparations to Greece during the Lausanne negotiations. From the Second World War onwards, the Greek authorities buried thousands of anti-personnel and anti-tank mines (in fear of an invasion) that continue to influence mobility and border regimes in the region until these days.⁴ From the 1990s onwards, with Greece's accession to the EU, the country became both a migration destination and a transit country for people migrating to Europe.

The Evros/Meriç River has been one of many obstacles that migrant travellers seek to cross to reach Europe. Because of the heavily militarized land border, the region saw relatively few migrant travellers passing through these borderlands between 1990 and 2010. Since 2008, after a mutual abolition agreement in regard to landmines between Greece and Turkey, the region witnessed a sharp increase in the number of people trying to cross the region irregularly.⁵ Due to this demilitarization, as well as the increased control over the Spanish borders (the former crossing hub), the main migration routes to Europe shifted to the eastern part of the Mediterranean, and especially towards the Turkey-Greece borders. With the movement of people shifting more towards the eastern external borders of Europe, the Frontex presence in the area was also intensified. Most notable was 2010-2011 when Frontex mobilized the first Rapid Border Intervention Team (RABIT) in the region of Orestiada in 2010-2011 (FIDH et al, 2014). Around the same time, the Greek government constructed and financed a 12-kilometre fence between Kastanies and Nea Vyssa. After February 2020, when the Turkish authorities announced that they would no longer control the border or disrupt the thousands of

⁴ In a study on the mortality and morbidity of landmines in Thrace, Polychronidis et al. (2006) investigated 169 landmine injuries during the period of 1991 to 2003. According to the authors, a majority of the victims were migrating people that had been trying to reach the EU. In another study by Pavlos Pavilos 2019 the coroner for the Evros region, during the period 2000–2008, a total of 49 people were killed by landmine explosions in the region (2019).

⁵ Despite the abolition of landmines, fatalities associated to landmine detonations account for the second most frequent cause of death among border-related deaths and stood for one third of the migrants' fatal cases (Pavlidis 2019, p. 4). As argued by the author, the reason for this is that landmines that have been moved by the river but also anti-vehicle explosives buried metres away from the lorries queuing up to enter Turkey on the Egnatia A2 motorway.

people attempting to cross the border 'irregularly', the Greek authorities with the support of the EU enforced certain areas of the border (see Teunissen and Koutrolidou forthcoming). In August 2021, 40 kilometers of the new construction was finished and the Greek authorities have since announced that they will enforce other sections of the border as well.

In understanding the changing role of the river-as-border, it is also important to contextualize the technologization of border enforcement. The new border wall is enforced with a range of ultramodern technologies, such as an electronic surveillance network that creates 'situational awareness' by using aerial surveillance and infrared cameras. For example, 11-towers with infrared sensors and cameras have been installed, with the ability to detect migrant movement from Turkey towards the Greek/EU border to the range of 15-kilometres from the actual border. Furthermore, Frontex, in close collaboration with the Greek authorities, has started to use a zeppelin balloon to control the land border between Greece and Turkey. The zeppelin is equipped with thermal cameras and other observation devices that will offer a live stream to the Greek Police Headquarters and six operational centres of the Hellenic Police to ensure a so-called 'timely frontier location'.⁶ The airship is visible from the Greek town of Alexandroupoli, offering an ever-present reminder of the close proximity of the border, as well as a warning to any considering to cross it.

In this regard, we can understand the river in relation to border technologies, border authorities, discourses, laws, and policy as *migration infrastructure* (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Infrastructures, as argued by anthropologist Brian Larkin are "networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space" (ibid. 328). In the context of migration and borders, migration infrastructure is understood as the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Scholars have looked at how (social) networks facilitate or support migration journeys (e.g., humanitarian actors, visa brokers, and work-recruitment agents) (Xiang/Lindquist 2014). Another domain here is how infrastructures are mobilized to control the movement of people (Hänsel and Teunissen 2020) through for example camps (Antonakaki et al. 2016), databases (Pelliza 2019), and vehicles of transportation (Walters 2015; Teunissen 2020).

There are some important studies that investigate how states and border authorities mobilize geophysical and topographical features to enforce control over clandestine travelers.

⁶<https://www.statewatch.org/statewatch-database/electronic-surveillance-network-to-safeguard-greece-s-borders-at-evros/>

For example, some of these studies have shown how authorities mobilize rivers, seas, and mountain passes to enforce control over clandestine travelers from entering a certain territory (Saucier and Woods 2014; Duncan 2020; Tazioli 2020; Cuéllar 2021; Thomas 2021).⁷ Another example is the use of islands to contain people and ‘process’ asylum claims (Mountz 2011; 2020), as we have seen in the Greek islands close to the Turkish border (see also Hänsel and Teunissen 2021). Yet, although there are some notable exceptions (e.g., Thomas 2021; sources) most of these studies do not investigate these geophysical elements as infrastructures. However, an analytical focus on infrastructures and the relationality and interaction within and between different infrastructures allows for a more holistic analysis of (dis)functioning of border regimes (Starr 1996; Harvey and Knox). In a study on the Ganges River, Thomas (2021) conceptualizes and analyzes the river as *border infrastructure* that offers important insights, however, in having an analytical focus on the border the perspective of people on the move is missing. In my understanding, migration infrastructures encompass a more dynamic analytic perspective that allows to include both mechanisms of control but also those elements that support people’s migration project.

Taking these insights into account, thereby following critical borders scholars, I understand the Turkish/Greek land border as a relation between technologies, discourse, politics, and actors in different configurations that does not follow a given scale or topography (Teunissen 2020). In the following section, I will look at the river through the lens of migration infrastructures. Specifically, this means that there are three domains that I will look at more closely; first, how the river assemblage functions as a deadly line of deterrence; second, how the river has been mobilized to contain people; thirdly, the infrastructures people on the move use to cross this river.

The river as a site of containment

With a rope tied to both sides of the river, Claudia, together with her fellow travellers crossed the Evros/Meriç River. The river looks calm, but this calmness conceals a deadly treacherousness. Between 2006 and 2019, 389 bodies have been found on the Greek side of the border (Pavlidis and Karakasi 2019). Claudia described how the current was strong and the water was cold but they eventually managed to struggle across. On the Greek side of the border they were eventually stopped by a group of men dressed in black. The men started beating them

⁷ For centuries, nation-states and empires mobilized topographical characteristics to demarcate populations but also to control and enforce mobility regimes. My PhD research looks at these historical contingencies to look at the present.

and forced them to cross the river to Turkey. Afraid of the river's strong current and the risk of re-entering its frigid waters, a big part of the group didn't continue to Turkey but stayed on a small islet in the river. Here is where they stayed several days.

On 8 of August, 2021, an activist network called The Alarm Phone published a video of a group of people who, according to their statement, were also contained on a small patch of land in the Evros/Meriç River.⁸ In the 16 second video, we see seven people lying on the ground and one additional person standing nearby, with enough visible scenery to offer us an insight into the surroundings of the small islets. Before entering the analysis, however, I would like to contextualize some ongoing debates regarding the usage of such material for academic research and the epistemological questions which are raised in this pursuit. First, releasing videos of pushbacks at border crossings has been used in hybrid warfare between Greece, the EU and Turkey, where both sides are mobilizing migration and human rights for their geopolitical games. For example, several videos have been published showing illegal pushbacks on both the Aegean Sea and the Evros/Meriç River. These videos have been released either by activist groups, NGOs, migrants themselves, but also by the Turkish authorities. Although there has been sufficient evidence that proves how Greek authorities are involved or complicit in these pushbacks, the Greek authorities discredit this material as a form of anti-Greek propaganda. In this hybrid warfare, mixing together digital data and phenomenon with lived consequences, Turkish and Greek authorities mobilize human rights and instrumentalize migration to put pressure on one another. This, together with so-called fake news, means that as researchers we should be critical in using such material for academic work. We need to ask ourselves; Who published this video? What are the reasons why this video has been published and who benefits from this video being published?

The Bellingcat, an investigative journalism organization that uses open source and social media to probe into a variety of subjects, published guidelines on how to verify such material to confirm the location of the video. Their approach has been influenced by a so-called Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) approach that has been utilized by state authorities, civil society, activists, and journalists to collect and analyze publicly available sources. Social media, blogs, videos, news reports, and publicly available satellite images are some of the sources used for an OSINT investigation. To confirm the location where the video was filmed,

⁸ https://twitter.com/alarm_phone/status/1424110649496543235?s=20

OSINT allows us to geolocate the video. In the following section, I will proceed with a geolocation process that will allow me to authenticate the video.

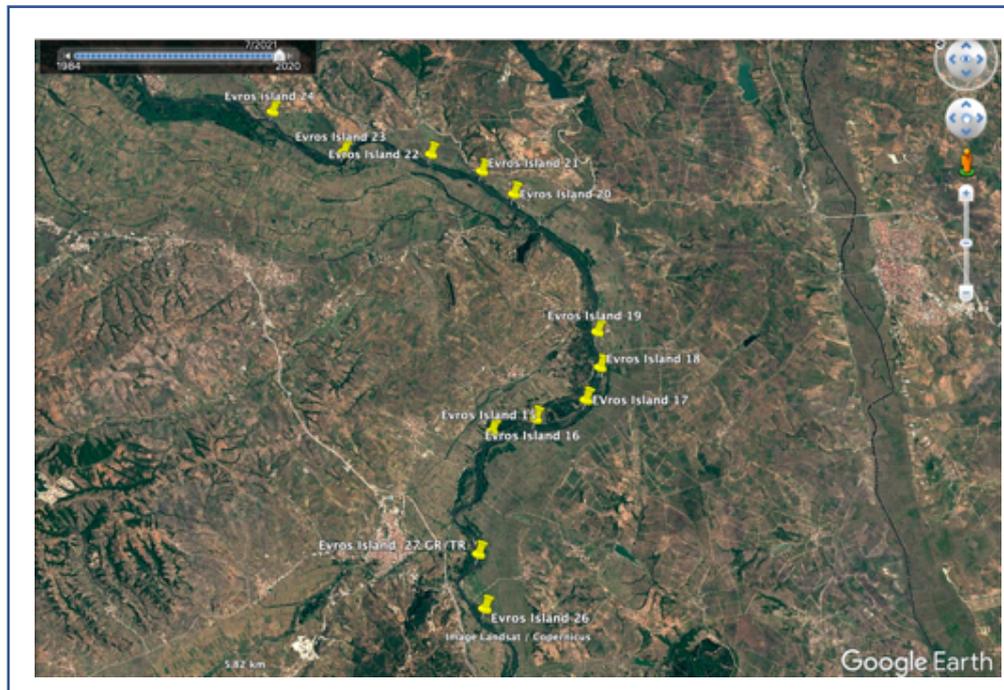
Case Study

The opening clip of the video shows a group of people spread across the small islet, lying down in groups, with one standing. In the video, the current of the river runs from the left to the right, visible by the water's rippling and direction of the flow. Given that the Evros river runs from Bulgaria to the Aegean Sea, this suggests that the video records the Turkish side of the border.



By spicing the video into individual moments as it moves across the scene, we can make the following collage. The collage I use here represents a collection of stills of the video that can be placed next to each other that presents a panorama view of the video.

The next step for the investigation was to identify the small islet in the river. In total, through a specific analysis of satellite imagery, I identified approximately 28 of these small patches of land, however, it must be noted that the number of islets changes per season and month depending on the flooding of the river.

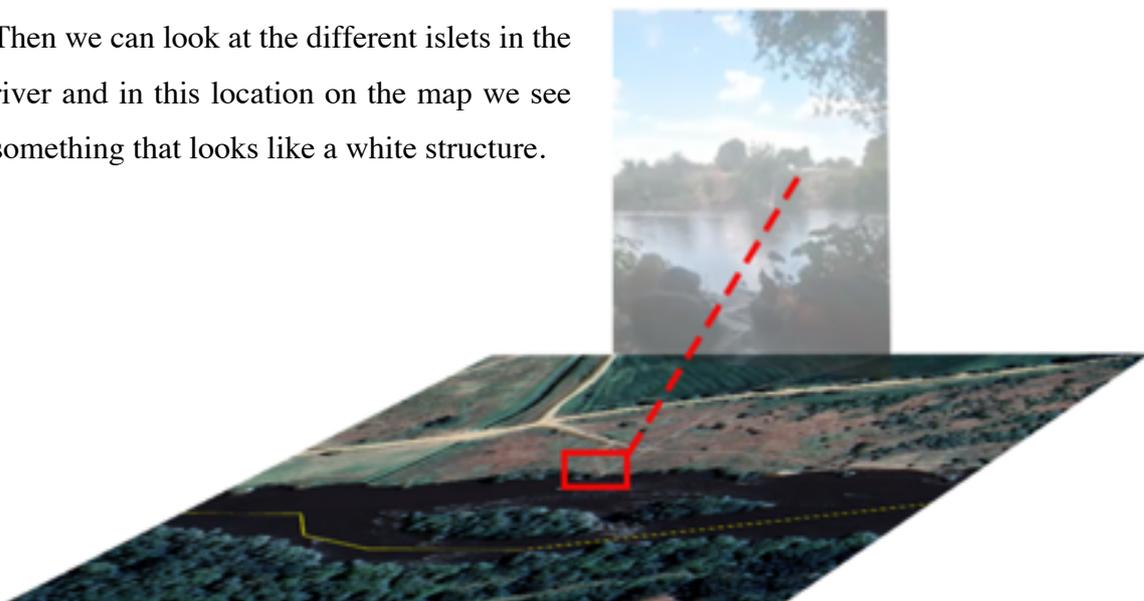


After identifying the different islets, we can have a closer look at the video collage. Here we observe something that looks like a white, unnatural element marked by the red frame (figure 1.2). Furthermore, in having a closer look at this frame of the video we can see several trees and something that looks like a small bay. Based on these recognition points, we can observe the area more closely and see if we can identify a similar structure. The software used for this is Google Earth Pro, which provides a three-dimensional representation that allows us to examine certain areas more closely by zooming in and adjusting the specific perspective. Google Earth combines aerial images and 3D models of topography (e.g., mountains, hills), buildings, and cities. The Historical Imagery plugin provides the option to investigate how a terrain has changed over time. This allows me to identify when for example construction was finalized or when the demolition of a certain building started. This can be important to know in order to determine a time frame to geolocate or even chronolocate a picture or video.





Then we can look at the different islets in the river and in this location on the map we see something that looks like a white structure.



Another recognition point is the shore. If we look at different historical satellite imagery that has an option to calculate high differences, we notice that in this location, from the perspective of the water, the shore also seems to go a little bit up. In the video, you also see a

tree that stands closer to the water. When similarly going back into historical imagery, we can recognize a similar structure in the shoreline.



However, these images are from a year ago, when we look at the most recent image, we can see a similar structure, however, the quality of this image is not that good. But when we look at the shoreline of the latest satellite image, we can recognize the following shape of the shoreline. In this, we can clearly identify a shape that looks like a bay. Furthermore, the green section in the latest video also seems to correspond with the latest material. All these elements together seem to suggest that the video was recorded in this location. But what does this analysis show us? First, the above case study shows how the water of the river is mobilized to contain people on islets to prevent them from entering the national territory. In this regard, the above case study shows how the river is mobilized as an infrastructure of containment. Second, the river also functions as a deadly frontier. Although I didn't discuss this in detail, but as argued by Duncan and Levidis, the Evros/Meriç River and the military zones surrounding it, also blurs state authorities' responsibility in border deaths and human rights violation.

The camera technologies that offer 'situational awareness' play a key role in these human rights violations. The technologies installed allows border authorities to detect people approaching the border 15-kilometer from the actually border line. This means that border authorities can reach this area and prevent people from crossing the border, or as reported by various NGOs and activist, push people back to Turkey (Forensic Architecture 2020; BVMN 2020). Pushbacks "are a set of state measures by which refugees and migrants are forced back over a border – generally immediately after they crossed it – without consideration of their individual circumstances and without any possibility to apply for asylum or to put forward arguments against the measures taken. Push-backs violate – among other laws – the prohibition of collective expulsions stipulated in the European Convention on Human Rights".⁹ Moreover, because the people on the move were contained on the islands, they got in contact with the AlarmPhone and shared the video with them. Here, digital technologies have been used by people on the move to put pressure on border authorities. Within these infrastructures of control there are also infrastructures of support that support people on the move. Moreover, people on the move use digital infrastructures, the mobile phone network, to share information about their situation.

Conclusion

⁹ <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/glossary/push-back/>

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This paper explored the possibility to use Google Earth Pro to monitor a specific region for Academic Research to map migration infrastructures. In the case study, I showed how the river is mobilized to prevent people from crossing; how the river is used to contain people but the river also blurs the responsibility of state authorities in relation to human right and border deaths. As a methodological study, this paper points to the need to activate and make use of digital technologies and potential sources of surveillance for more liberatory purposes. While I do not wish to foreclose or ignore the risks that these data points have in exploitation and co-optation by violent border enforcement practices, I argue for a new vision. Relying on data which individuals have chosen to post, as with the video analyzed at length above, serves to recognize migrant autonomy. In contexts where individuals have sacrificed, suffered, and been exploited to such an extent that their possessions and their bodies alike are not guaranteed any continuity, recognizing and uplifting the validity of their digital selves offers a different route. In this sense, I believe that the digital lives and archival practices of people on the move work against the erasure and misrepresentation of border controls.

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