

Migrants in the Old Train Wagons Borderland in Thessaloniki: From Abandonment to Infrastructures of Commoning

Charalampos Tsavdaroglou ¹ , Paschalis Arvanitidis ¹ , and Zacharias Valiantzas ² 

¹ Department of Economics, University of Thessaly, Greece

² Department of Spatial Planning and Development, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

Correspondence: Charalampos Tsavdaroglou (ctsavdaroglou@uth.gr)

Submitted: 31 March 2023 **Accepted:** 8 October 2023 **Published:** 7 March 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Urban Borderlands: Difference, Inequality, and Spatio-Temporal In-Betweenness in Cities” edited by Deljana Iossifova (University of Manchester) and David Kostenwein (ETH Zurich), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.i312>

Abstract

The article examines the living and infrastructuring practices of homeless newcomer migrants who find shelter in abandoned train wagons in the west end of Thessaloniki, an area described as “one of the biggest train cemeteries in Europe.” Hundreds of train wagons have been abandoned there over the years, especially after the 2010 financial crisis, when the state-owned railway company was faced with significant financial difficulties. These abandoned wagons form an urban borderland and have provided temporary shelter to numerous homeless and unregistered migrants who stop in Thessaloniki on their route to Central and Northern Europe. Although there is a significant number of studies which discuss the formal infrastructures provided by the state and the NGOs, little attention has been given to the various ways by which homeless and unregistered migrants create and self-manage their own infrastructures to meet their needs. The article aims to shed light on this shortage while examining the (re)production of arrival infrastructures by the migrants themselves. In doing so, the article builds upon the concept of abandonment and attempts to enrich it by drawing on the theories of arrival infrastructures and urban commons. It combines spatial analysis and urban ethnography in order to explore how an urban borderland with abandoned infrastructures, like the train wagons, are re-used and transformed into commoning infrastructures, where newcomers and settled migrants join their forces in their attempt to support each other, meet their needs and of “becoming otherwise.”

Keywords

abandonment; arrival infrastructures; borderland; commoning; homeless people; infrastructures; migrants; shelter; Thessaloniki

1. Introduction

The article concerns the less visible migrant populations that reside in Thessaloniki for short periods of time. The city of Thessaloniki is an important hub in the movement of migrants from Turkey to the Balkans and then to Central and Northern Europe, as it is located at the crossroads between South–North and East–West of Greek territory. Migrants arriving in Thessaloniki come mainly from North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. To this day, on one hand, the Greek state has set up a series of refugee camps in the perimeter of Thessaloniki, and on the other, several thousand migrants live either in rented apartments or in occupied spaces in the urban fabric of the city. However, it should be noted that the living conditions of homeless migrants have so far received little attention.

Amir's story is illustrative. He is a migrant from Algeria, who arrived in Thessaloniki through Turkey in 2017. At first, he lived for two years as an asylum seeker in the state-run refugee camp of Diavata on the outskirts of Western Thessaloniki. However, his asylum application was rejected and therefore he no longer had the right to stay in the refugee camp. Since then, he has been homeless and without papers. In order to survive he sought refuge, like many other migrants without papers or unregistered newcomers, to the abandoned train wagon areas in the western part of the city. He has been living there for the last three years and according to his own words:

There are abandoned train wagons right next to the railway station. Several dozen migrants have stayed there for one–two years. Then, there is a cluster of abandoned train wagons next to Chinatown, before the port area. However, next door is the office of the neo-nazi organization Golden Dawn and there have been occasions when nazis attacked the migrants in these wagons. Then, there are abandoned wagons near the red lights district, which is somewhat safer. Then, there are abandoned train wagons in the wider area, which are used as a place to stay but also, and most importantly, they are used by migrants to hide and jump on freight trains leaving for Balkan countries.

There is important literature examining the living conditions in the state-run refugee camps (Gemenetzi & Papageorgiou, 2017; Papatzani et al., 2022; Pechlidou et al., 2020; Tsavdaroglou & Lalenis, 2020) and the political squats—occupations and mobilizations of solidarity with migrants (Kapsali & Karaliotas, 2021; Tsavdaroglou, 2019)—in Thessaloniki. However, the living conditions and processes of subjectification that concern the homeless and unregistered people on the move remain until now an unexplored field. This article aims to cover this research lack by unravelling and examining the commoning practices among people on the move in the borderland area of abandoned train wagons on the west side of Thessaloniki. Thus, this article contributes to the discussion of how borders are shifting and rescaling to urban space (de Genova, 2015) and addresses the question of how newcomers' urban socio-spatial practices, especially in urban borderlands, are related to border security and cross-border mobility. The discussion on international and state migration policies, especially on the borders' perimeter of states, has been extensively examined and in recent years there has been a conceptual and research shift towards the study of the city as the place where newcomers arrive, become visible and claim presence (Darling, 2017; Meeus et al., 2020; Tsavdaroglou et al., 2019). The contribution of this article is to demonstrate that urban borderlands constitute yet another crucial, however until now relatively neglected, field of research in which newcomers' practices of inhabiting, meeting, organizing, and planning subsequent border-crossing movements take place. Admittedly, newcomers' presence in urban borderlands is related to the broader migration policies. Thus, as we will show

in our case, people on the move prefer to stay invisible (Khosravi, 2010; Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2007) in urban borderlands in order not to be detected by the authorities and then continue their journey applying for asylum in a Central or Northern European country. In this sense, the case of the abandoned train wagons in Western Thessaloniki will hopefully contribute to shedding light on people on the move practices in the urban borderland and to relate them to the Greek state borders' securitization and European asylum restriction policies.

The area of West Thessaloniki can be conceptualized as a complex urban borderland site and, in this article, we focus on its western part, which precedes the residential areas of the municipalities of Menemeni, Eleftheriou-Kordeliou, and Thessaloniki (see Figure 1). This area is an extensive intermediate space between the city and the countryside. It is the so-called "Western Entrance" to Thessaloniki through which major road and railway axes pass, as well as other infrastructure networks (gas pipelines, oil pipelines, etc.). In addition, this area has been the main production area of the city from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, mainly for activities in the secondary sector, with extensive industrial and craft zones, some of them organized following official urban plans, and other large areas unorganized and arbitrarily structured (Christodoulou, 2015; Gemenetzi, 2017; Hastaoglou-Martinidis, 1997). In the 1990s, with the fall of the Eastern Bloc, many of the industries relocated to neighboring Eastern European countries where there was cheaper labor power (Kalogeresis & Labrianidis, 2010). Also, in the last decades due to the economic crisis, several others have been closed down. Therefore, a large number of former industrial buildings have remained empty to this day. Some of the abandoned factories were used to create state accommodation centers—camps for refugees in the summer of 2016—with one still active today. Additionally, the area includes medium and high disturbance uses such as oil and gas refineries, illegal dumping and garbage areas, warehouses, and gas stations. Also, there are uses such as the city's biological cleaning, penitentiary store—prison, migrants deportation center, Roma settlement areas, a red light district, as well as the commercial port are located in the area (see Figure 1). The residential uses occupy a very small part of the wider area. Therefore, it is clear that this area could be perceived as "the backyard of the city," where most of the "unwanted" and disturbing uses are placed. Unregistered people on the move and homeless migrants without papers have also found refuge in this urban borderland area.

Borderlands are usually geographic margins and spaces in-between that separate nation-states, territories, and the "us" from the "other," and are demarcated by borders, lines, walls, and surveillance mechanisms. Although many times they are heavily securitized, some borderlands are "relatively open, porous and unregulated" (Plonski & Walton, 2018, p. 6). Borderlands also constitute transit situations and waiting zones (Agier, 2016), socio-cultural and transitional areas where "two or more cultures edge each other" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. vi), and "spaces of disorder, loss, tiredness and tardiness" (van Houtum & van Naerssen, 2002, p. 131). In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the so-called "urban borderlands" as contested spaces (Jaber, 2018), arenas of border control (Lebuhn, 2013) and spaces that newcomers claim as a refuge (Daher & d'Auria, 2018). According to Iossifova (2015, p. 91), urban borderlands are "the claimed, appropriated, inhabited, shared, continuously negotiated, maintained and often even nurtured spaces of co-presence and coexistence." Indeed, in our case study, we seek to examine and highlight the social relations of cohabitation of homeless migrants who reside in the West Thessaloniki borderland of abandoned train wagons and use them as places to stay, recover, sleep, hide, network, get in touch with others, and to think and plan their next steps. Thus, in our case study, the old train wagon borderland is a place of coexistence where sharing and commoning practices of solidarity take place. In order to examine

the aforementioned living situations, the article is based on the literature on mobile commoning, abandonment, and arrival infrastructures. Mobile commoning concerns the mutual help and sharing practices among mobile populations. In our case study, these practices occur in the urban borderland of old train wagons abandoned infrastructures and we will highlight the potentialities of the transformation of the abandoned infrastructures into arrival infrastructures of commoning.

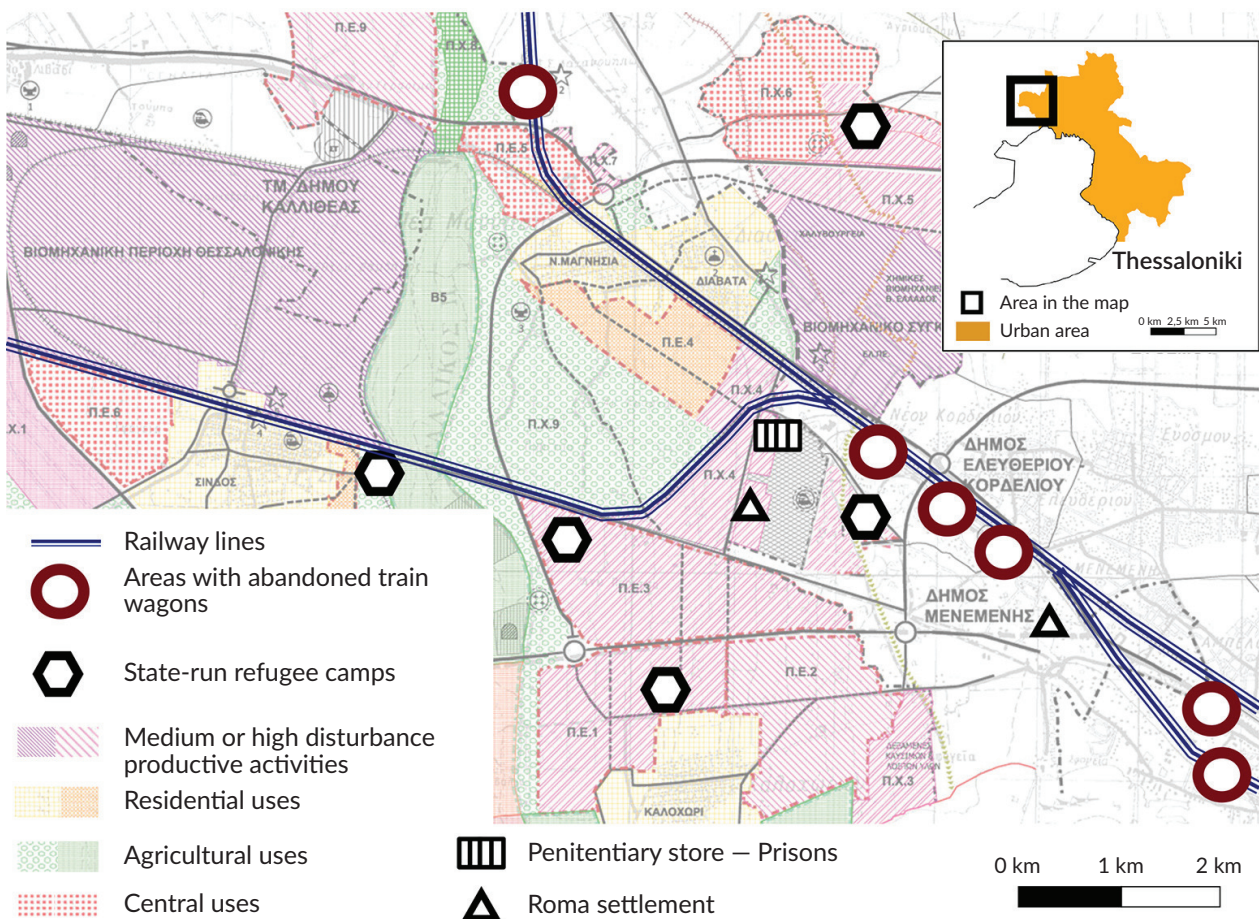


Figure 1. Map of land use in the municipality of Echedoros on the west side of Thessaloniki and positions of abandoned train wagons and state-run refugee camps. Source: Authors' work based on the land uses map of the General Urban Plan of Echedoros Municipality (Greek Government, 2011).

The field research took place during the period of summer 2021 to autumn 2022 and includes urban ethnographic methods like participant observation, field notes, designing maps, collection of articles from local press and websites, and semi-structured interviews with migrants, representatives, and volunteers of international humanitarian organizations, and several informal conversations. We have conducted 30 interviews and four focus group discussions. The migrant participants are from the following countries: Afghanistan, Algeria, Iran, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, and Syria. Many interviews were conducted with the assistance of interpreters. Taking into account that people on the move are in a vulnerable position, the names of the research participants have been changed in order to protect their identities. Also, for the purposes of this research, the consent of the interviewees was requested so that parts of the interviews could be used and published. Access to the field was made possible through already-established relationships and new contacts that emerged during our fieldwork via snowballing. In terms of participatory

observation, we made dozens of visits to the areas of the abandoned train wagons and it took quite some time to gain access to the field. The main difficulty we faced was that the people on the move who live in the abandoned wagons do not have legal papers and therefore find it difficult to trust and talk about their living conditions to someone they do not know. This difficulty was overcome as we established relationships with humanitarian organizations that provide food and assistance to the people on the move and several times we participated in the food distribution process. Equally important was the help from migrants who now live permanently in Thessaloniki but have lived in the areas of the abandoned wagons, and know the conditions, and therefore acted as mediators so that we could have access.

2. Theoretical Discussion on Migration Policies of Abandonment, Arrival Infrastructures, and Mobile Commoning Practices

In order to examine the living conditions of people on the move in the abandoned train wagons borderland it is necessary to elaborate the concepts of migration policies of abandonment, arrival infrastructures, and mobile commoning practices.

According to Gross-Wyrtzen (2020, p. 887), abandonment should be theorized “not as absence of government but a technique of governance that targets the racialized poor.” This argument echoes Harvey’s (2006, p. 397) concept of the state’s “organized abandonment” in order to give space for private investments to develop. Meanwhile, according to a number of scholars (Aalbers, 2013; Peck et al., 2010), with the financial crisis of 2010, what becomes crucial is not the unorganized abandonment of state infrastructures and the liberalization of the already free markets, but the need for reliable governance that will ensure the operation of the free market and in this mission each state, with mechanisms of security, law and control has a central role. This process can be conceptualized as a political technology of governance that is accompanied by policies and mechanisms for strategic abandonment of the protective welfare state services and infrastructures that leads to the precariousness of the population, especially the most vulnerable social groups such as the migrants and the poor (Leshem, 2017). In particular, regarding the situation of migrants in the EU, it can be claimed that abandonment “is associated with the hardening of migration law and its implementation, which undermines migrants’ rights” (Aru, 2021, p. 1624). In line with a number of studies (Darling, 2009, 2016; Kalir, 2017), it is clear that a growing number of newcomers are excluded from the European asylum system; they become “irregularized” (Aru, 2021, p. 1624) and therefore they are abandoned without having access to public services and facilities that are crucial for their livelihoods. At this point, it could be argued that, in the case of Greece, the policies of abandonment are also linked to the increasing cuts in NGO funds, the closing of refugee camps, and the reduction of asylum seekers’ accommodation places in housing programs. Another particularly interesting dimension in our case is that the migration policies of abandonment are connected to a previous phase of abandonment that concerns the economic crisis in which Greece found itself during the last decade. As outlined by Leshem (2017, p. 621), “abandonment has become a structural component of the neoliberal state” and in particular “abandonment draws attention to the material economies that surround us, to structures and infrastructures.” Indeed, in the case of Greece, the neoliberal austerity programs resulted in the massive abandonment of public infrastructures which, inter alia, led to the numerous abandoned train wagons in Western Thessaloniki. Here we can observe an interesting coupling. In terms of infrastructures, the condition of abandonment offers the possibility to reuse the abandoned infrastructures for the benefit of the newcomers. Our research case demonstrates exactly this argument. The materialities of abandoned

infrastructures are intertwined with the abandoned lives of newcomers and in a subversive way, one remakes the other. The newcomers, while giving life to the abandoned infrastructures, at the same time, rebuild their own lives. In the case of abandoned train wagons, the newcomers recover, gain strength, meet other migrants, and find ways to resume their journey. Thus, the infrastructures of the abandoned train wagons have the potential to be transformed into arrival infrastructures for newcomers. At this point, it is worth mentioning that the newcomers' capacity to reuse the abandoned wagons, according to their needs, forces us to rethink the analytical category of abandonment. Thus, we want to highlight that beyond the Western-centric approach of abandonment, due to the gradual deregulation of the welfare state in the Western world in recent decades, most of the newcomers leave from countries where people rely less and less on state support. According to the relevant literature in the Middle East, subaltern urban populations invent innovative informal practices of survival, especially in outdoor activities (Bayat, 2012), producing mundane geographies and spatialities (Bou Akar, 2012). Therefore, possibly, people on the move are familiar with the production of space without the support of the state or due to that very absence of the state they develop skills and survival strategies and cultivate capacities "to recognize their limitations, and yet understand and discover opportunities and inventive methods of practice, in order to take advantage of the available spaces to resist and move on" (Bayat, 2012, p. 125). It is likely that these techniques, knowledge, and experiences are valuable vehicles for their survival during their journey to Europe.

At this point, crucial is the recent discussion on arrival infrastructures. According to Meeus et al. (2019, p. 1), the concept of arrival infrastructures concerns "those parts of the urban fabric within which newcomers become entangled on arrival, and where their future local or translocal social mobilities are produced as much as negotiated." Also, Kox and van Liempt (2022, p. 167) make the point that there are "supportive as well as exclusionary infrastructures at the state and civil society levels." Thus, arrival infrastructures constitute a rich variety of multi-actor and multi-site artefacts, services, and technologies through formal and informal, institutional and non-institutional channels (Felder et al., 2020; Meeus et al., 2020). For our purposes, it is significant to emphasize infrastructures not only as a noun but also to bring to the fore the verbal form of "infrastructuring." To put it differently, arrival infrastructures are also practices, "infrastructuring practices'...within, against, and beyond the infrastructures of the state" (Meeus et al., 2019, p. 1). In light of these practices, arrival infrastructures may acquire a transformative dimension (Meeus et al., 2019, p. 17) which in our case is particularly important. The borderland of abandoned train wagons is transformed from a collapsed state-owned train company infrastructure to a squatted and grassroots arrival infrastructure for homeless migrants and people on the move. In fact, as we have already mentioned, newcomers in Thessaloniki depart from countries of Asia and Africa, where they are very likely to have developed their own survival practices, to have taken action and to have produced their own infrastructures beyond the official rules (Alimia, 2022; Sanyal, 2014). According to Simone's (2004, p. 410) research in African cities and his approach to "people as infrastructures," it is very likely for the urban poor to have the "capacity to improvise" (and to produce infrastructures themselves). Thus, in his words, "regularities...ensue from a process of incessant convertibility—turning commodities, found objects, resources, and bodies into uses previously unimaginable or constrained" (Simone, 2004, p. 410). Accordingly, taking into account the above parameters, the crucial questions that come to mind are: In what ways were the abandoned wagons transformed into a shelter for the newcomers? And what socio-material infrastructuring processes occurred there?

The concept of mobile commoning can shed light on the transformative processes of infrastructuring practices in the borderland of abandoned train wagons. To put it succinctly, we are talking about mobile

infrastructuring commoning practices. Mobile commoning can be perceived as “actions that are shared through acts of co-mobilization” (Sheller, 2018, p. 169); hence, they are commonly produced by people on the move and, according to Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013, p. 179), they are based on “shared knowledge, affective cooperation, mutual support and care between migrants.” Indeed, as we will show, it is exactly these kinds of social practices and relationships that occur among the people on the move in the abandoned train wagon. Here it should be also highlighted that the mobile commons are “neither private, nor public, neither state owned, nor part of civil society...rather, the mobile commons exist to the extent that people use the trails, tracks or rights and continue to generate new ones as they are on the move” (Trimikliniotis et al., 2016, p. 1039). Consequently, the arrival infrastructuring practices of people on the move in the abandoned train wagons are generated beyond the official, institutional, and formal infrastructures and are based on the commoning relationships of mutual support among the newcomers and supporting solidarity groups.

3. People on the Move in the Borderland of Abandoned Train Wagons in Thessaloniki

The area of abandoned train wagons is known as one of the “biggest train cemeteries in Europe” (“A breath from Thessaloniki,” 2021). Hundreds of train wagons have been abandoned there in recent decades, especially after the 2010 financial crisis, when significant cuts were made to the state-owned railway company until its privatization in 2017. Thessaloniki is the main railway hub of Greece, as, since the time of the Ottoman Empire (end of the 19th century, beginning of the 20th century), it has been connected by rail with Turkey, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Serbia as well as with Southern Greece. The central railway station of the city is located at the western entrance of the city and an extensive railway network is developed in the wider area of the west side of the city (see Figures 1 and 2). Today, there are hundreds of abandoned wagons in this area that are mainly used by homeless and unregistered migrants. Since March 2016, with the closure of the so-called “Balkan Refugee Corridor” and the EU–Turkey “common statement” that aimed “to end the irregular migration from Turkey to the EU” (European Council, 2016), thousands of migrants have tried to cross Greece without registration. One of the main stops on their route is Thessaloniki, and the borderland area of abandoned wagons has been a relatively safe place for their temporary stay. In fact, there is a multitude of enclaves of abandoned wagons and abandoned buildings in close proximity to wagons in the wider area of Western Thessaloniki in which unregistered migrants find temporary shelter (see Figures 1 and 2). Echoing Anzaldúa (1987, p. 3), in the borderland, “the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.” Indeed, it is the people without papers, the people who are forbidden from entering Europe, who inhabit the borderland of the abandoned train wagons.

In the words of Johanna, a German volunteer in an organization that provides food to the migrants in the train wagons area:

A lot of people who arrive in Thessaloniki, because the living conditions in the official structures like state-run camps are unbearable or they do not want to be registered, remain homeless. They are mostly those who stay for a short time, or just stay for a few days and then continue their journey. The few days they are in Thessaloniki, they usually stay in abandoned buildings or abandoned train wagons. They are in a way invisible people, invisible from the system, invisible from the city and they live in invisible places. There are hundreds of reports of the situation in state-run camps, but nothing is said about homeless migrants. No one knows exactly what is going on here.

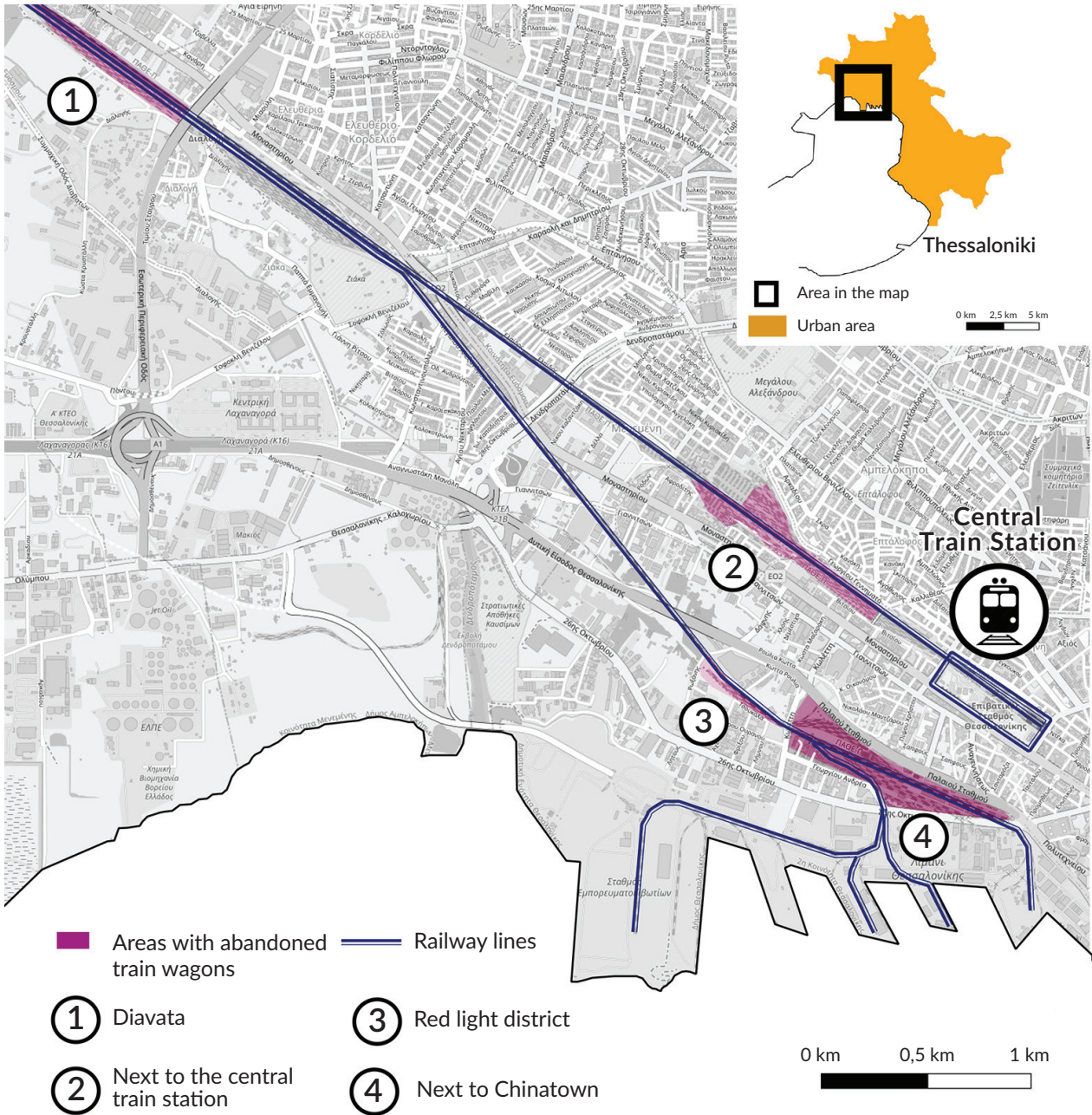


Figure 2. Areas with abandoned train wagons on the west side of Thessaloniki.

In fact, the story of inhabiting abandoned train wagons started in the summer of 2016, when, the Softex refugee camp was created right next to a large cluster of abandoned wagons (see Figures 3 and 4). Many refugees, who were expelled from the camp, started to use the wagons as temporary accommodation. Also, next to the abandoned wagons is the railway line that connects Thessaloniki with Belgrade and Central Europe. So since then, many newcomers have sought to hide on freight trains to continue their journey to central Europe without being documented.

Here we should note that due to the Greek state migration abandonment policies, a large number of newcomers merely pass through Thessaloniki or stay for short periods of time. These people on the move

are mainly unregistered young male migrants, who try to cross Greece and the rest of the Balkan countries, being careful not to be detected by the authorities and not to be registered so that they can then apply for asylum directly in Central or Northern European countries. The reason for this choice is the fact that according to the Dublin Regulation III (Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013, 2013), someone has the right to apply for asylum in the EU only in the first country of arrival—member state of registration, e.g., in our case Greece. Nevertheless, if they register in one state and seek asylum in another member state, then the latter has the right to send them back to the country of registration. An additional reason that a large number of people on the move try to avoid registration in Greece is the fear of increasing police ill-treatment, torture, and especially the fear of illegal deportations and pushbacks to Turkey (Border Violence Monitoring Network, 2020). It appears then that abandonment constitutes an irrefutable governance technique as the Greek state's immigration policies of abandonment intend to transform Greek territory into an inhospitable place for newcomers. Therefore, governmental policies of abandonment have a dual objective; on the one hand to discourage newcomers from entering the country and on the other hand, in case they do enter, for the latter to feel abandoned and unwelcome and therefore to move invisibly to the next Balkan countries.

The locations and number of people who choose to stay in the old train wagons change depending on police patrols, possible attacks by neo-fascist groups, and the circulation of information among migrants. A reference location is the streets Achelouou, Empedokleous, Frixou, Limnou, and Roxanis (see Figure 3; see also Point 3 in Figure 2), next to the red light district, in which a number of self-organized organizations are active such as Wave, Medical Volunteers International, Mobile Info Team, Border Violence Monitoring Network, and Equal Legal Aid. These organizations provide legal support, distribute daily meals to homeless migrants, and, in an adjacent rented building, they have created a community center, where they have facilities to provide clothes, sleeping bags, blankets, shoes, washing machines, showers, and a first aid clinic. Even though this community center is located next to the red light district, none of the participants in the research reported to us having any conflict with the activities of the sex industry or any incident of sexual exploitation. In our questions about possible problems of coexistence both the people working in the humanitarian organizations and the people on the move who live in the train wagons told us that it is like two parallel worlds coexisting on the edge of the city. Also, many of the migrants who live in the train wagons help with food preparation, laundry, interpreting, and giving directions to the newcomers.

As Sophia, a volunteer from France who participates in the food preparation, points out:

We used to distribute food inside the building, but now due to Covid-19 we only do it outside. Food is distributed every day at 17:30. At the moment, 100 people come to the food distribution every day, while a month ago we had about 150–200 a day because the weather was better. Also, many people, most of them I would say, have tried to cross the border into Macedonia or Albania and then Serbia and Bosnia and haven't succeeded, so what they do is they come back here to Thessaloniki for a few days and then try to leave again. So we might see someone come every day, then disappear for a few weeks and then come back. In other words, this place is somehow a point of reference, people on the move know it and feel a relative sense of safeness.



Figure 3. Abandoned train wagons next to the red light district (the sign indicates the direction the red light area is located).

Also, in the words of Said from Morocco, who is living in the abandoned train wagons:

I would say that these people have saved my life, their help is excellent, they do not discriminate and they do not ask where you are from, if you have papers, etc.....They offer food, clothes, sleeping bags, medicine, all the basics, for me that's enough. They helped me a lot with my leg. I had broken my leg when I jumped the fence between Turkey and Greece. Even though I was very dirty, it didn't make any impression on them, they helped me a lot. A few months ago a friend from Morocco arrived through Turkey here in Thessaloniki. He was with a group of five, six other people, but unfortunately, the others were arrested by the police and sent back to Turkey, only he managed to be saved, even though the policemen beat him very badly. He came to the wagon where I live, I hid him for 15 days, the doctors from Medical Volunteers International took care of him, gave him medicines, he had wounds on his legs and they healed them, and now he has arrived in France.

Thus, the abandoned train wagons play a vital role as arrival infrastructure for the people on the move. We can say that they are "similar to the transit spaces where migrants rest for a while, reconnect to their communities, call their relatives and friends, earn more money to pay the smugglers, collect powers, prepare their new becomings" (Papadopoulos et al., 2008, p. 217). Indeed, the borderland of abandoned wagons constitutes a place of protection, meeting, rest, healing, and re-planning of future paths. However, what are the internal social relationships and processes that take place between people on the move?



Figure 4. Sign in the area of the abandoned train wagons written in Arabic and English warning migrants trying to pass the railway lines that it is dangerous because of electricity.

4. Newcomers' Infrastructuring and Mobile Commoning Practices

The train wagons have been abandoned for many years, most are rusted, with broken windows, ripped seats, and holes in the floor, many of them are burnt as the newcomers have no other way to keep warm and light small fires. Also, the vegetation around them is extremely dense, like small jungles, an autonomous ecosystem has been created next to the city in which the newcomers find refuge. In and around the trains there are scattered objects, food cans, beer cans, plates, forks, calling cards, shoes, and clothes, which bear witness to the constant passage of people (see Figures 3, 5, and 6). Due to the precarious and extremely difficult conditions, the people who live in the abandoned train wagons are young men and those we met were between 18 and 45 years old. Possibly, the poor sanitary conditions and lack of suitable living conditions prevent children, women, and the elderly from finding shelter in the abandoned train wagons.

Hakim from Algeria lives with other newcomers in an abandoned train wagon and describes the living conditions and their infrastructuring practices as follows:

This is where we sleep. It's hard to sleep inside the wagon, it's very dirty. We have cleaned and are trying to make this place suitable for sleeping. In the winter, or when it rains, some also sleep under the train, between the tracks and the wagon. We put cardboard boxes on the ground or when we find some mattresses and blankets on top of them and then we sleep with sleeping bags and maybe a

blanket on top. You have to be careful, the wagon is rusty, it has holes in some places, and especially at night without light it is dangerous. We have made this here like a room, we sleep close to each other. We sleep seven people here. Some nights some can't sleep, they are usually newcomers and they have nightmares, then the rest of us try to calm them down. We need to support each other, otherwise, it's very difficult.



Figure 5. Shoe left on the rails next to abandoned train wagons.

The living conditions in the abandoned wagons are extremely difficult and the sustainability, operation, and defense of the abandoned infrastructures, which were transformed into arrival infrastructures for the newcomers, take place through commoning practices, mutual care, and support. In fact, we can recognize practices of extending commoning. Extending commoning is based, as Stavrides (2016, p. 44) notes, on “a constant opening of the circles of commoning” or, as Hardt and Negri (2009, p. 254) underline, on “expansive circuits of encounter,” which in our case study occur not only between the newcomers and solidarity groups but also between “oldcomers” and “newcomers,” allowing the migrants to invent spaces of co-habitation, friendship, and solidarity. These solidarity practices played a pivotal role in the material maintenance of the train wagons’ arrival infrastructures but also in the migrants’ claim to the right to stay and to move as they broadened connectivity and solidarity.

The words of Jilali a newcomer from Morocco, who lived for a period of three months in the train wagons area and now is working in a humanitarian organisation, are defining:

The area of abandoned train wagons is mainly attended by people who are not accepted at the Diavata state-run refugee camp and are homeless. The living conditions for homeless migrants are very difficult, especially in the winter. Cold, rain, snow. They have no clothes, no heating and no food. It is a big risk to live in these violent conditions and at the same time to be chased by the police and to have no money. For me these people are brave. I was in their position, I understand them, and I admire how they manage and survive in these very difficult conditions in the winter and then with what courage they plan their trip to the Balkans or Albania and then Italy.

Here it is also worth noting the words of Hussein from Palestine which may be the answer to Jilali's comment:

The very interesting point in the long migrants' journey to Europe is that they come in contact with other people on the move, establish friendships and relationships of solidarity. For example, here in the train wagons during the food distribution, many people have met, have come in contact, even from different countries, with different cultural backgrounds. I have even met people who, even when from the same country, considered themselves enemies, but now here in the wagons, they come together, support each other, and form small groups to move to the next countries.

Consequently, the borderland area of the train wagons is not simply a relatively safe refuge, but it has transformed into a place of networking and connectivity between the newcomers. In this way, pre-existing perceptions and prejudices may change and new friendships are created.

Hussein continues by saying that:

I think that when you are on the move, when you seek to find a safe country and a better life, you are more open to learning and experiencing new worlds, new cultures, new perceptions. It is possibly an unconscious choice, but it happens. The movement opens up new perspectives that you did not imagine. It is the moment of your life when you are possibly more open than at any other time. You can more easily create relationships with other people, relationships that would have seemed unimaginable to you before starting your journey.



Figure 6. Bag, clothes, shoes, and biscuits left in an abandoned train wagon by migrants who have left, and that will probably be used by the next people on the move.

Thus, we can argue that the borderland of abandoned train wagons also constitutes a borderland in the lives of people on the move. It is a life in-between, a temporary station between here and there, a life, which, despite being extremely difficult, includes the possibility of new gatherings, friendships, and transformations. At the same time that people on the move transform the train wagons, they also re-organise border-crossing plans and re-imagine their lives beyond the specific borderland space. In the words of Anzaldúa (1987, p. 195), “To survive the Borderlands you must live *sin fronteras*, be a crossroads.” In fact, the abandoned train wagons could be seen as a crossroad where transformative processes take place through “acts of commoning” (Tsavdaroglou et al., 2019, p. 122), that is practices of mutual care, co-living, and co-imagining future plans. It is especially worth noting that according to several scholars (de Angelis, 2010; Stavrides, 2016; Tsavdaroglou et al., 2019) commoning always has a transformative potentiality as it creates new values of solidarity and sharing. Thus, the practices of co-existence, togetherness, and living in common of people from different countries of origin are essential elements that allow us to recognize the borderland of train wagons as a form of possible “transnational commons” (Tsavdaroglou et al., 2019, p. 125).

5. Conclusions: A Transformed Borderland, From Abandoned Infrastructures to Infrastructures of Commoning

In this article, we aimed to unpack the living conditions of people on the move in the borderland of abandoned train wagons in the west area of Thessaloniki. To conclude, we want to highlight three main arguments for critical awareness.

First, our research demonstrates that abandonment is a primary practice of EU and Greek state migration policies. People who have fled their countries of origin and are looking for a safer life in Europe face policies of “exclusionary governmental infrastructures” (Meeus et al., 2019, p. 2) and multifaceted regimes of hostility, deportations, and pushbacks. According to Gross-Wyrtzen (2020, p. 894), “abandonment manifests materially in both bodies and space.” Indeed, in our case study, there is a clear connection between the migrants’ abandoned lives with the increasingly reduced state-led arrival infrastructures and services, mainly with the termination of institutional housing programs.

Second, our research aims to highlight that the situation of abandonment could become an opportunity for subversive practices, like the commoning practices among the people on the move in the abandoned train wagons. It is possible that people on the move have already experienced abandonment in their countries of origin, and this might be one of the main reasons for their fleeing and emigration. At the same time, equally possible is that they have already developed survival skills and have acquired knowledge of converting abandoned materialities into survival vehicles and infrastructures crucial for their livelihood. In our case study, people and wagons are abandoned and invisible in the borderland of the city. Yet, we can observe that, under the deck and out of the radar of authorities, numerous subversive practices that exercise “the right to move” and “the right to stay” have occurred. Thus, the condition of abandonment can trigger social practices that may transform abandoned state infrastructures into newcomers’ arrival infrastructures.

Third, we argue that not only the city but also urban borderlands are “strategic locations” (Darling, 2017, p. 184) for the rescaling of border control. In addition, these areas possibly also function as spaces of sanctuary, especially for unauthorised people on the move. Actually, the area of abandoned train wagons constitutes a borderland which is at the same time a divided area but also an area of connectivity. According to lossifova

(2015, p. 91), “borders and boundaries...not only divide, but also join them together.” In our case study, we confirm lossifova’s argument as the multiple enclaves of abandoned train wagons in West Thessaloniki are transformed into interconnected arrival infrastructures for the people on the move. At the same time, we can extend lossifova’s argument as on a larger scale, the borderland of abandoned train wagons constitutes a stopover point and a joined node in the long journey of people on the move. Admittedly, the urban borderland of the abandoned train wagons is in constant dialogue with the border security policies and cross-border mobility potentialities. Actually, the borderland of abandoned train wagons is a site of arrival and departure as it connects the routes of people on the move from Turkey to Thessaloniki and then to the next Balkan countries (see Figure 7). The testimonies of our research participants unveil that the borderland of abandoned train wagons is like a “porous membrane” (Stavrides, 2016, p. 69). It is not only a crucial connection to the linear route of people on the move from East to West and from South to North, but it is also a relatively safe refuge for people who are pushed back from Balkan countries and have come back to Thessaloniki. They recover and then they try to continue their journey again and again in the ongoing struggle to cross borders.



Figure 7. Graffiti in the abandoned train wagon on the west side of Thessaloniki. On the backside, an Austrian freight train can be seen. At the time of the photo, a group of people jumped on it to continue their journey to the next countries.

Funding

This scientific publication is an outcome of the RERoot project, which has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No. 101004704.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- A breath from Thessaloniki: Where a gigantic train graveyard is located. (2021, October 9). *Ethnos*. <https://www.ethnos.gr/greece/article/177490/miaanasapoththessalonikhekeipoybrisketaienagigantiaionekrotafeiotrenon>
- Aalbers, M. (2013). Neoliberalism is dead...long live neoliberalism! *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 37(3), 1083–1090.
- Agier, M. (2016). *Borderlands: Towards an anthropology of the cosmopolitan condition*. Polity.
- Alimia, S. (2022). *Refugee cities: How Afghans changed urban Pakistan*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/la frontera: The new mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books.
- Aru, S. (2021). Abandonment, agency, control: Migrants' camps in Ventimiglia. *Antipode*, 53(6), 1619–1638.
- Bayat, A. (2012). Politics in the city-inside-out. *City & Society*, 24(2), 110–128.
- Border Violence Monitoring Network. (2020). *The black book of pushbacks*. <https://left.eu/issues/publications/black-book-of-pushbacks-volumes-i-ii>
- Bou Akar, H. (2012). Contesting Beirut's frontiers. *City & Society*, 24(2), 150–172.
- Christodoulou, H. (2015). *Landscapes of urban sprawl: Urbanisation and urban planning. The periphery of Thessaloniki*. University Studio Press.
- Daher, R., & d'Auria, V. (2018). Enacting citizenship in an urban borderland: The case of Maximilian Park in Brussels. *European Journal of Creative Practices in Cities and Landscapes*, 1(1), 54–72.
- Darling, J. (2009). Becoming bare life: Asylum, hospitality, and the politics of encampment. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 27(4), 649–665.
- Darling, J. (2016). Privatising asylum: Neoliberalisation, depoliticisation, and the governance of forced migration. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41(3), 230–243.
- Darling, J. (2017). Forced migration and the city: Irregularity, informality, and the politics of presence. *Progress in Human Geography*, 41(2), 178–198.
- de Angelis, M. (2010). The production of commons and the “explosion” of the middle class. *Antipode*, 42(4), 954–977.
- de Genova, N. (2015). Border struggles in the migrant metropolis. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 5(1), 3–10.
- European Council. (2016, March 18). *EU–Turkey statement* [Press Release]. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement>
- Felder, M., Stavo-Debaugé, J., Pattaroni, L., Trossat, M., & Drevon, G. (2020). Between hospitality and inhospitality: The Janus-faced “arrival infrastructure.” *Urban Planning*, 5(3), 55–66.
- Gemenetzi, G. (2017). Thessaloniki: The changing geography of the city and the role of spatial planning. *Cities*, 64, 88–97.
- Gemenetzi, G., & Papageorgiou, M. (2017). Spatial and social aspects of the housing policies for refugees and immigrants in Greece: A critical overview. *The Greek Review of Social Research*, 148, 39–74.
- Greek Government. (2011). General urban plan of Echedoros municipality. *Government Gazette*, 304(AΑΠ). https://www.et.gr/api/DownloadFeksApi/?fek_pdf=20111500304
- Gross-Wyrtzen, L. (2020). Contained and abandoned in the “humane” border: Black migrants' immobility and survival in Moroccan urban space. *EPD: Society and Space*, 38(5), 887–904.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2009). *Commonwealth*. Harvard University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2006). *The limits to capital*. Verso.
- Hastaoglou-Martinidis, V. (1997). A Mediterranean city in transition: Thessaloniki between the two world wars. *Architecture and Civil Engineering*, 1(4), 493–507.

- Iossifova, D. (2015). Borderland urbanism: Seeing between enclaves. *Urban Geography*, 36(1), 90–108.
- Jaber, A. (2018). Creating margins at the centre: Israeli bypass roads in the Palestinian Beit Hanina neighbourhood, East Jerusalem. *Accord Insight*, 4, 12–13.
- Kalir, B. (2017). State desertion and “out-of-procedure” asylum seekers in the Netherlands. *Focaal*, 77, 63–75.
- Kalogerisis, A., & Labrianidis, L. (2010). Delocalization and development: Empirical findings from selected European countries. *Competition and Change: The Journal of Global Business and Political Economy*, 14(2), 100–123.
- Kapsali, M., & Karaliotas, L. (2021). Equals in solidarity: Orfanotrofio’s housing squat as a site for political subjectification across differences amid the “Greek crisis.” *Antipode*, 53(2), 399–421.
- Khosravi, S. (2010). *“Illegal” traveller: An auto-ethnography of borders*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kox, M., & van Liempt, I. (2022). “I have to start all over again.” The role of institutional and personal arrival infrastructures in refugees’ home-making processes in Amsterdam. *Comparative Population Studies*, 47, 165–184.
- Lebuhn, H. (2013). Local border practices and urban citizenship in Europe: Exploring urban borderlands. *City*, 17(1), 37–51.
- Leshem, N. (2017). Spaces of abandonment: Genealogies, lives and critical horizons. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 35(4), 620–636.
- Meeus, B., Beeckmans, L., van Heur, B., & Arnaut, K. (2020). Broadening the urban planning repertoire with an “arrival infrastructures” perspective. *Urban Planning*, 5(3), 11–22.
- Meeus, B., van Heur, B., & Arnaut, K. (2019). Migration and the infrastructural politics of urban arrival. In B. Meeus, K. Arnaut, & B. van Heur (Eds.), *Arrival infrastructures. Migration and urban social mobilities* (pp. 1–32). Palgrave MacMillan.
- Papadopoulos, D., Stephenson, N., & Tsianos, V. (2008). *Escape routes: Control and subversion in the twenty-first century*. Pluto Press.
- Papadopoulos, D., & Tsianos, V. (2007). How to do sovereignty without people? The subjectless condition of postliberal power. *Boundary 2: International Journal of Literature and Culture*, 34(1), 135–172.
- Papadopoulos, D., & Tsianos, V. (2013). After citizenship: Autonomy of migration, organisational ontology, and mobile commons. *Citizenship Studies*, 17(2), 178–96.
- Papatzani, E., Hatziprokopiou, P., Vlastou-Dimopoulou, F., & Siotou, A. (2022). On not staying put where they have put you: Mobilities disrupting the socio-spatial figurations of displacement in Greece. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(18), 4383–4401.
- Pechlidou, E., Frangopoulos, Y., & Hatziprokopiou, P. (2020). The spatial management of the “migration crisis” and local opposition: Public discourse, actors and reactions against refugee accommodation in Thessaloniki. In A. S. Markou & M. Zlatkova (Eds.), *Post-urbanities, cultural reconsiderations and tourism in the Balkans* (pp. 137–160). Éditions Hêrodotos.
- Peck, J., Theodore, N., & Brenner, N. (2010). Postneoliberalism and its malcontents. *Antipode*, 41(1), 94–116.
- Plonski, S., & Walton, O. (2018). Introduction: Conflict and peace in borderlands. *Accord Insight*, 4, 5–11.
- Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast). (2013). *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 180/31. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:180:0031:0059:en:PDF>
- Sanyal, R. (2014). Urbanizing refuge: Interrogating spaces of displacement. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 38(2), 558–572.

- Sheller, M. (2018). *Mobility justice: The politics of movement in an age of extremes*. Verso.
- Simone, A. (2004). People as infrastructure: Intersecting fragments in Johannesburg. *Public Culture*, 16(3), 407–429. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-3-407>
- Stavrides, S. (2016). *Common space: The city as commons*. Zed Books.
- Trimikliniotis, N., Parsanoglou, D., & Tsianos, V. S. (2016). Mobile commons and/in precarious spaces: Mapping migrant struggles and social resistance. *Critical Sociology*, 42(7/8), 1035–1049.
- Tsavdaroglou, C. (2019). Reimagining a transnational tight to the city: No border actions and commoning practices in Thessaloniki. *Social Inclusion*, 7(2), 219–229.
- Tsavdaroglou, C., Giannopoulou, C., Petropoulou, C., & Pistikos, I. (2019). Acts for refugees' right to the city and commoning practices of care-tizenship in Athens, Mytilene and Thessaloniki. *Social Inclusion*, 7(4), 119–130.
- Tsavdaroglou, C., & Lalenis, K. (2020). Housing commons vs. state spatial policies of refugee camps in Athens and Thessaloniki. *Urban Planning*, 5(3), 163–176.
- van Houtum, H., & van Naerssen, T. (2002). Bordering, ordering and othering. *Tijdschrift Voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 93, 125–136.

About the Authors



Charalampos Tsavdaroglou is a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Economics, University of Thessaly. He holds a PhD in Urban and Regional Planning from the School of Architecture, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. His current research interests include critical urban theory, the autonomy of migration, approaches to urban commons and mobile commoning practices, and intersectional, decolonial, and affective geographies.



Paschalis Arvanitidis (MEng, MLE, PgC, PhD) is a professor of institutional economics and a visiting professor on commons. His specialization is on institutional economics, the commons and urban economics, and property markets, whereas current research focuses on issues of urban commons and migrant spatialities. Paschalis is the author of a research monograph published by Routledge and of other articles published in collective volumes and peer-reviewed journals.



Zacharias Valiantzas is a PhD student in critical and human geography at the Department of Spatial Planning and Development of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. His PhD dissertation is titled *Migration, Otherness and the "Right to the City": Practices of Inhabitation and the Lived Ambience of Urban Space*. His recent research explores urban commons through collective practices of inhabitation and the creation of urban ambience. His research interests also focus on migration, otherness, and the right to the city.