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Refugee “camps” in Thessaloniki

People – Socio-spatial Formation, Housing – Built Environment, Planning – Infrastructures – Development, Thessaloniki in the world

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Thessaloniki is located in an important transit hub for people moving from African countries as well as from countries of Central and West Asia to Europe. People on the move are usually displaced populations from war zones, but they can also move for various political, financial or religious reasons, as well as for reasons related to gender-based violence, discrimination and climate change, aiming to seek asylum in a European country and therefore be recognised as refugees. Specifically since 2015 onwards, there has been a particular increase in the number of people moving in the so-called Balkan route, namely from Turkey to Central Europe through the Balkan countries. Due to its geographical position, Thessaloniki is an important stop and transit point in this route. However, after the EU-Turkey Common Statement-Agreement of 20th March 2016 aiming to “end the irregular migration from Turkey to the EU” (European Council, The Council of the European Union 2016), Balkan countries’ borders closed for third country nationals. As a consequence, a significant number of people on the move were trapped in Greece. That is the time when the makeshift camp of Idomeni was created at the border between Greece and North Macedonia, hosting around 20,000 people who were prohibited to cross the border. After a waiting period of about eight months, in May 2016, the makeshift camp of Idomeni was evacuated and the Greek state decided to organise hosting areas – camps around Thessaloniki and in the wider area of the Region of Central Macedonia. It should be mentioned here that the transliterated term “καμπς” (camps) is a language transfer from English. Although Greek authorities use the term “Domes” (Δομές – Accommodation Facilities), in this text I have selected to keep the English term, as it is more predominant both among asylum seekers and in oral speech.

It is also noteworthy that one year before the so-called “refugee crisis”, or better said the “reception crisis” (Christopoulos & Souvlis, 2016), UNHCR set a vision in its 2014-2018 Global Shelter and Settlement Strategy report, according to which “all refugees […] are able to safely and in dignity satisfy their shelter and settlement needs in a sustainable manner […] wherever they live in urban or rural setting” (UNHCR, 2014, p. 2) and highlighted that we should rather avoid establishing camps around urban settings and strive instead to house refugees within the urban fabric (UNHCR, 2014, p. 8).

However, as far as the creation of camps is concerned, the UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies states that “decisions on the location of the camp should involve the host government as well as local authorities and communities” (UNHCR, 2007, p. 206). Furthermore, it points out that it is also important to “involve refugees in all phases of settlement layout and shelter design and construction” (UNHCR, 2007, p. 206), as well as to “use a bottom-up planning approach” (UNHCR, 2007, p. 206). In any case, the general guidelines regarding the “right to adequate housing”, as specified by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, should apply and mention the following criteria: “security, availability of services, facilities and infrastructure, affordability, habitability, accessibility and cultural adequacy” (UN, 1991, p. 4). Similar guidelines and standards regarding the right of displaced populations and asylum seekers to housing and fundamental services in state-run camps are included in handbooks of other international organisations as well (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2007; International Organisation for Migration et al., 2015).

In the case of camps around Thessaloniki though, there is a significant deviation from the above mentioned standards, from the beginning of their operation (2016) until the moment this text is written (2024). In fact, camps are established in isolated former factory areas or in abandoned military barracks outside the urban fabric. Usually, both the outdoor spaces and the inside of the abandoned buildings are used. It is worth noting here that these areas are ruins (Ziindrilis & Dalakoglou, 2019) of the post-war industrialisation and militarisation of the country. In particular, they embody the expression of the massive post-war industrial development of Thessaloniki and the Cold War militarisation policies, since the country is located in NATO’s southeast end and Thessaloniki is near the former Eastern Bloc. Nevertheless, the fall of the Berlin wall, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the rise of post-fordism and the country’s as well as Thessaloniki’s deindustrialisation that followed resulted, among others, in the abandonment of wide factory facilities and military bases in the city’s perimeter (Tsavdaroglou & Lalenis, 2020).

Image 1: Diavata Camp. Makeshift individual tents exist along with group tents of the UNHCR and containerized housing units. December 2019. Source: Author

Camp studies

The debate about camps has its roots in the colonial past of European countries. The first concentration camps were created in the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century in Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia. A rapid increase of camps is observed after the second World War. Bauman (2000) has characterised the 20th century as the "century of camps" and UNHCR (UNHCR, 2021) estimates that more than six million people lived in camps in the beginning of the 21st century.

Today there are two main approaches in the so-called camp studies. The older approach examined camps as spaces of exception and biopolitics (Ek, 2006, Isin & Rygiel, 2007, Minca, 2015, Pasquetti, 2015). Following the analysis of the Italian philosopher Agamben (1998) on the state of exception and the suspension of law, the refugee camp can be conceptualised as an emblematic space of biopolitics, where "bare life" is produced by the sovereign power. This approach emphasises the characteristics of confinement, obedience, isolation, as well as the policing and control technologies implemented in the camp. A more recent approach tries to move away from the above "disciplinary" and "punitive" perspective and shifts the focus to the examination of cultural practices and everyday relations among camp residents. This approach focuses in particular on the ability of the subjects to act, seeking to highlight the practices of contestation, protest, as well as the possible self-organisation forms of the camp residents (Jordan & Minca, 2023; Martin, 2015; Ramadan, 2013; Sanyal, 2011; Martin et al., 2020).

Between these two, more recent complementary approaches aim to emphasise the complexities between confinement and mobility (Turner & Whyte, 2022), exclusion and inclusion (Oesch, 2017) as well as analyse the interconnections and interactions of different socio-spatial configurations between formal and informal camps (Katz, 2017).

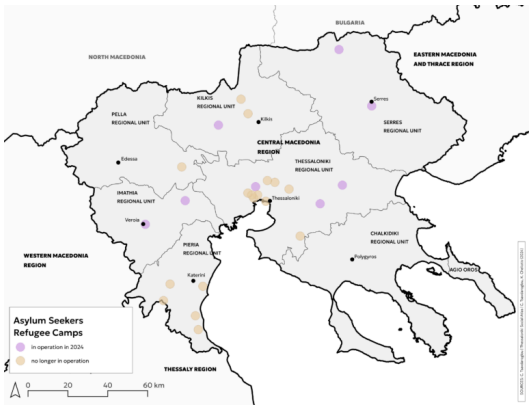
Camps in Thessaloniki

The first camp in Thessaloniki was created to shelter refugees who had been trapped in Idomeni. It opened in April 2016 in the former Anagnostopoulos military camp, in the north area surrounding Diavata, on the Symmachiki Street of Oraiokastro (Images 1, 2, 10). In the next months, the Ministry of Migration tasked the Army Services (Image 3) to configure in total 17 "accommodation facilities" (Central Coordinating Body for the Management of the Refugee Crisis, 2016) for refugees in the wider area of Thessaloniki and Central Macedonia (see Map 1, Table 1). In summer 2016, more than 21,000 people were living in these facilities (Ibid. 2016). During the same period, 42 "accommodation facilities" in total were created in the mainland (Central Coordinating Body for the Management of the Refugee Crisis, 2016). Although they were called "Temporary Reception and Accommodation Facilities",[1] they "acquired characteristics of permanence under the infeasibility of long-term planning" (Arapoglou et al., 2023).

Image 2: Diavata Camp. Children playing improvised games next to containerized housing units, January 2020. Source: Author

Image 3: Army machines configuring a refugee camp in the former paper industry factory of Softex, near the petroleum refinery - industrial complex of Ionia, June 2016. Source: Author

As far as their location is concerned, in the case of Thessaloniki and the Region of Central Macedonia, most camps were established in the west side of the urban agglomeration of Thessaloniki, mainly in the Municipalities of Delta and Oraiokastro (see Map 2). Seven camps were created in the bordering regional units of Kilkis, Imathia, Pella and Pieria. Another two camps were later erected in the regional unit of Serres. However, no camp was sited in the regional unit of Chalkidiki and only one was established in Vasilika, in the Municipality of Thermi, in the east side of Thessaloniki (see Map 2). The spatial distribution is, therefore, here obviously unequal and pertains to the availability of spaces (abandoned factory areas and former military barracks), although it can be also assumed that it relates to the financial stratification of the reception areas, as well as to the potential political pressure of local authorities. It is worth noting that several xenophobic-NIMBY (not in my backyard) protests took place in the first years of the operation of camps (Makridou, 2021; Pechlidou et al., 2020), mainly against the camps of Diavata, Vasilika and Oraiokastro, by residents of neighbouring settlements, often supported by local authorities.



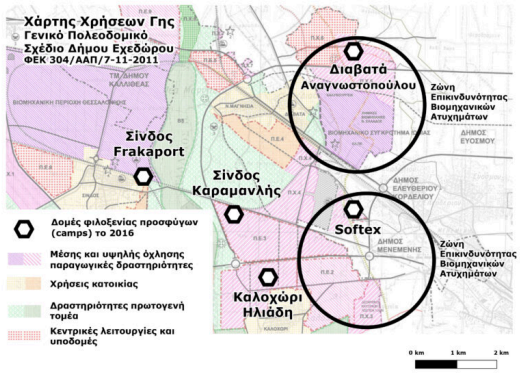
Map 1: Locations of "Controlled Access Facilities for Temporary Accommodation of Asylum Seekers" (camps) in the wider area of Thessaloniki and the Region of Central Macedonia. Source: Author

Table 1. State refugee accommodation structures in the Greater Area of Thessaloniki & in the Region of Central Macedonia

Location	People 12.07.2016	People 05.03.2024
Greater area of Thessaloniki & Region of Central Macedonia	**21.558**	**7.109**
Alexandria	755	721
Vagiohori	158	786
Veria	357	420
Vasilika	1.223	Not operating
Giannitsa	761	Not operating
Derveni-Alexil	810	Not operating
Diavata – camp Anagnostopoulou	1.526	768
Kavalari – Sinatex	321	Not operating
Kalohori – Iliadi	495	Not operating
Kordelio – Softex	1.812	Not operating
Lagadikia – Vogiatzoglou	861	581
Port	383	Not operating
Pieria – estate of Herakles	364	Not operating
Pieria – Petra Olympou	1.335	Not operating
Polikastro	4.107	1.660
Serres	Not operating	1.578
Sindos – Karamanli building	580	Not operating
Sindos – Frakapor	560	Not operating
Sintiki	Not operating	595
Cherso – camp Masaraki	3.735	Not operating
Oraiokastro	1.415	Not operating

Source: Coordination Centre for the Management of Refugee Crisis, 2016, Refugee Support Aegean, 2024 | Thessaloniki Social Atlas

Table 1: State-run accommodation facilities of refugees in the wider area of Thessaloniki and the Region of Central Macedonia. Source: Central Coordinating Body for the Management of the Refugee Crisis, 2016, and Refugee Support Aegean 2024.



Map 2: Locations of refugee camps and map of the land use of the Municipality of Echedoros (currently Municipal Unit of Echedoros, Municipality of Delta). Source: Author

As already mentioned, most camps around the urban agglomeration of Thessaloniki were sited in the west side of the city (see image 3, map 2), within or near industrial zones, such as the Industrial Area of Thessaloniki and Ionia Industrial Complex. Namely they were erected in unsuitable areas, where residential use or the creation of infrastructures to concentrate population are prohibited according to local urban plans (Gemenetzi & Papageorgiou, 2017; Pechlidou et al., 2020; Tsavdaroglou & Lalenis, 2023). Thus camps become a space of exception from the legislation on spatial planning, while, according to the Special Plan for Dealing with Large-Scale Technological Accidents (Ministry of the Interior et al., 4498/25-06-2009), some camps are even located within industrial accident danger zones (see Map 2). Furthermore, most camps are near motorways that function as physical and mental borders cutting off camps from possible neighbouring residential areas. At the same time, the connection of camps with the city centre through public transport is deficient or even non-existent.

It should be highlighted that no formal invitation or institutional procedure took place for the siting and the residential organisation of camps, while their design and construction was based on informal decisions of contractors and Army officers (Tsavdaroglou & Lalenis, 2023). Urban

planners, architects, the civil society and refugees-residents were excluded from the design process. The camps were indeed created in a condition of emergency. However, around ten years later, there is no excuse for the absence of an overall institutionalised urban design and public consultation procedures. More specifically, the most common characteristics of a typical camp include a barbed wire fence, white containers and the Hippodamian orthogonal arrangement of space. The layout of the grid is usually structured in a hierarchical way, in which the administration buildings are located in the centre and the housing units are erected in an orthonormal array. This form serves functional reasons, but makes it also easier to surveillance and control.

Image 4: Softex camp, group military tents within the shell of the former paper industry factory of Softex, June 2016. Source: Author

Moreover, living in camps is characterised by a serious lack of healthcare services and the inability to access healthcare and educational infrastructures, as well as local markets and public services. In general, camp residents are cut off from the city's social life and from employment opportunities. In parallel, the camp is a space, where a series of vested democratic rights, which are otherwise in force throughout the country, get suspended. Camp residents are not allowed to participate in decision making processes regarding the organisation of the camp and they do not enjoy the right to vote, assemble and protest (Tsavdaroglou & Lalenis, 2023). On the contrary, life in camp is subject to a series of rules and repeated rituals pertaining to the control, the waiting and the constant negotiation with interpreters, various NGO employees, as well as the police or military authorities that are in charge of the operation at the facility (Gousiari, 2024). At the same time, there is a diffuse feeling of fear and insecurity, as abduction incidents of residents by unmarked police officers as well as illegal pushbacks to Turkey have been recorded in several camps. It should be also noted that the life of more vulnerable camp residents, such as women, homosexual and transgender people (Liapi et al., 2019) as well as children, is considered particularly precarious. For example, the life of children in camps is particularly precarious, as the specialised facilities are not sufficient, while there is a lack of supervision and the fact that children are gathered together with adult populations is potentially dangerous (Digidiki & Bhabha, 2017).

The housing units were initially group tents of military type (see Image 4). Later, containers, the so-called isoboxes, were installed (see Image 2). It is worth noting here that the basic use of containers, as standardised box, is to carry commodities of any kind from any location towards any destination at the least possible cost (Levinson, 2016). However, in the case of refugee camps their function is reversed and this box, which was designed "for travel", becomes the shell that shelters the immobility of newcomers. Moreover, the containerisation of refugees in the same repetitive and standardised housing shell refers to the logic of homogeneity,

objectification and depersonalisation, as the various cultures and housing perceptions of the newcomers are not taken into account and are hushed up (Dalal, 2017).

Practices of solidarity and contestation

The camp is not only a space of control, record and isolation of newcomers. Self-organisation and solidarity practices, as well as a great number of practices of contestation and protests that took place especially in the first years of the operation of camps can also be identified in it.

Image 5: Vasilika camp, improvised fruits and vegetables market, June 2016. Source: Author

Image 6: Softex camp, makeshift cookhouse, September 2016. Source: Author

More specifically, in the first years of their operation, camp residents configured makeshift spaces to prepare food, restaurants, barber shops, prayer rooms, open markets and mini markets (see Images 5, 6, 7, 8). The need for more makeshift infrastructures and activities did not only originate from the lack of sufficient services and supplies provided by official authorities, but responded also to the fact that camp residents prefer to form their own relations to infrastructures (Meeus et al., 2019), which are closer to their own cultural practices. However, the aforementioned activities were gradually restricted and in 2021 they were totally prohibited due to the measures taken in response to the covid-19 pandemic.

Image 7: Makeshift prayer room in Oraiokastro camp, December 2016. Source: Author

Image 8: Makeshift prayer room in an outdoor tent in Softex camp, October 2016. Source: Author

Several protests were also made by camp residents both against the living conditions and the bureaucratic delays in the examination of asylum requests, as well as to claim the right to relocate in the city and in general to demand freedom of movement and the opening of the borders. For example, several demonstrations were made by the residents of Softex camp

towards the city centre in summer 2016. In the same period, many camp residents participated also in the international action No Border camp (see Image 9) that was organised by local and international solidarity groups in Thessaloniki city centre and in campus spaces of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Tsavdaroglou, 2019). Furthermore, in autumn 2016, after a traffic accident outside Oraiokastro camp that cost the life of two refugees, camp residents blocked the street, clashed with police forces, occupied the camp, went on hunger strike and held a rally in the city centre.

It is also worth noting that the camp is a community of people wishing to imagine their life outside this space and sharing hence information, creating social networks, planning their next steps and at the same time constantly developing small everyday practices to take care of and support each other.

Image 9: Demonstration of camp residents together with solidarity groups during the No Border Camp action in Thessaloniki city centre, 21st July 2016. Source: Author

After 2018, several camps closed. Today, eight camps are in operation in the Region of Central Macedonia (see Map 1). In parallel, control mechanisms were strengthened, following the so-called militarisation of migration control (De Genova, 2015; Garelli & Tazzioli, 2018; Loyd & Mounz, 2018). Access to camps has been restricted to a few accredited NGOs, while the entrance is prohibited for visitors of refugees, volunteer groups and civil society solidarity groups. Diavata camp (see Image 10), which is the only one remaining near Thessaloniki, has also been converted into a Closed Controlled Access Centre since 2022. A perimeter five-metres wall made of concrete has been raised around the camp and the Centaur digital system has been put in operation with regard to the electronic control of the camp using cameras and motion analysis algorithms (Artificial Intelligence Behavioural Analytics).

Image 10: Diavata Camp was turned into a Closed Controlled Access Centre with surveillance cameras and a five-metres concrete wall, which does not allow visual contact with the inner space. October 2023
Source: Author

Conclusions

Following European policies, the Greek state addresses also migration as a human intervention and security issue (Kourachanis, 2019). Actually, migration policies are getting more and more the form of the so-called “military humanitarianism” (Garelli & Tazzioli, 2018). Newcomers are seen as passive and helpless beings in need of humanitarian aid. At the same time, they are treated as illegal, smuggled, namely as unwanted foreigners who are only entitled to accommodation under military terms, that is through control and obedience technologies and mechanisms. Consequently, they are placed in enclosed camps, which often deviate from the official urban planning laws. Based on the above, the almost ten years’ experience of camps around Thessaloniki allows us to draw some critical conclusions.

First of all, the camp is an emblematic space, where exclusion, control and marginalisation of the newly arrived “others” are territorialised. It can, therefore, be said that the camp is a clear urban border between the city of legal citizens and the city of others, namely the unwanted populations. At the same time, the camp is a space of exception, a space where urban planning laws, visibility and rights in force in the rest of the country are suspended. Concurrently, the moments of waiting and despair, the feelings of hopelessness and entrapment, the uncertainty about the future, the fear of deportation and post-traumatic stress can be daily identified in all residents.

However, subversive solidarity modes, practices of supporting each other, the creation of relations of reciprocity, emerging friendships and forms of mutual care can also be detected in the camp space. Camp residents are able of coming up with survival practices, while possibilities of coexistence, spatial disobedience and protest are constantly emerging. Consequently, camp residents are not just passive recipients of state migration policies. They are also active subjects themselves who may develop small everyday moments of agency, which sometimes get a voice, pass through the fence and demonstrate in the city centre.

As insightfully highlighted by Agier et al. (2019, p. 71), the camp is hence “prophetic and destructive […] wonderful and miserable, utopian and dystopic” at the same time. The camp is a space, where Cartesian geometries of power are enlarged, but tested at the same time by the unpredictable desire of people who continue to move in all geographical scales.

Notes

[1] website of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum with the Temporary Reception and Accommodation Facilities https://migration.gov.gr/ris/perifereiakes-monades/domes/

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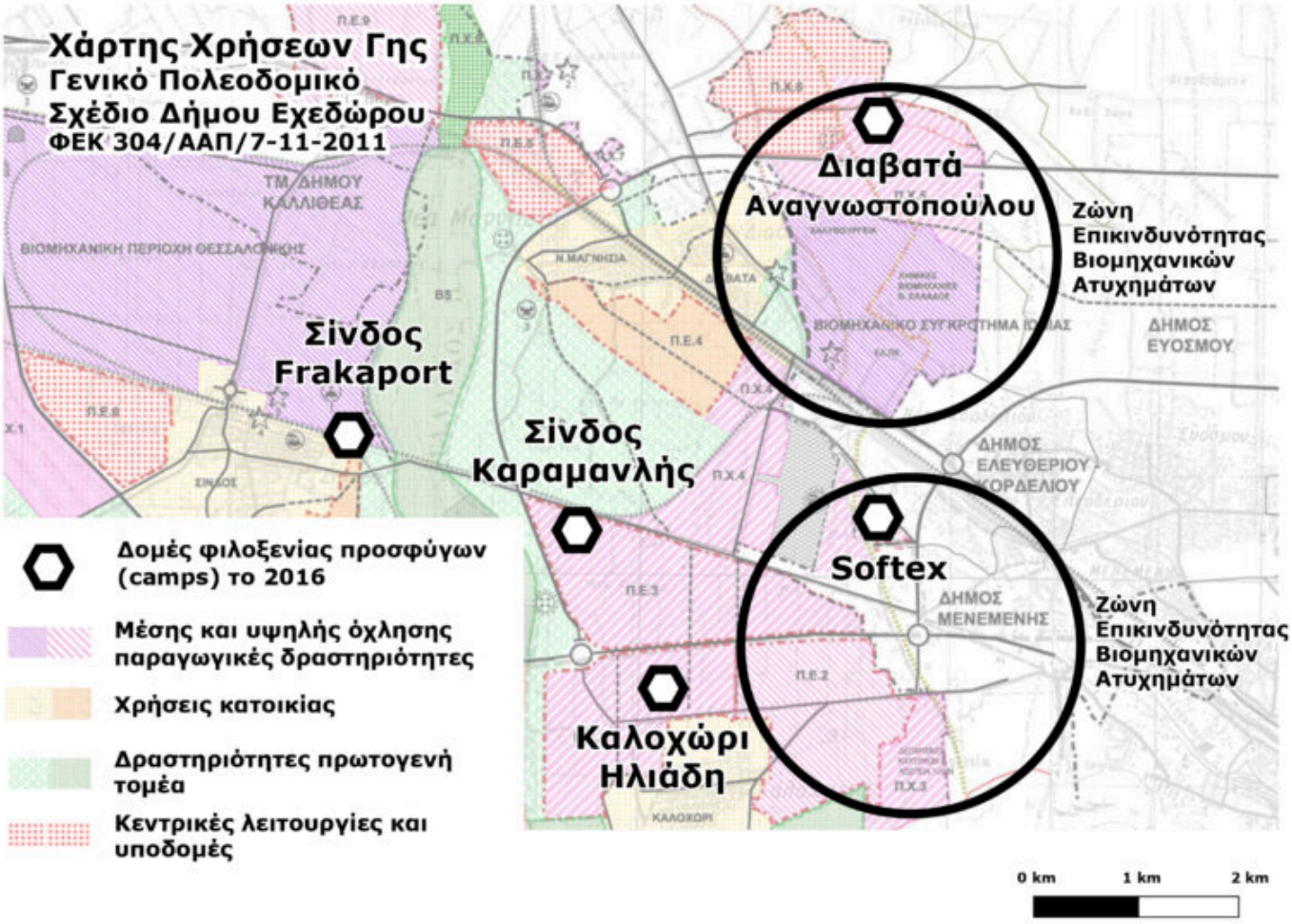
BULGARIA
NORTH MACEDONIA
EASTERN MACEDONIA
AND THRACE REGION
KILKIS
REGIONAL UNIT
Kilkis
Serres
PELLA
REGIONAL UNIT
SERRES
REGIONAL UNIT
CENTRAL MACEDONIA
REGION
Edessa
THESSALONIKI
REGIONAL UNIT
IMATHIA
REGIONAL UNIT
Thessaloniki
Veroia
CHALKIDIKI
REGIONAL UNIT
PIERIA
REGIONAL UNIT
WESTERN MACEDONIA
REGION
Polygyros
AGIO OROS
Katerini
Asylum Seekers
Refugee Camps
in operation in 2024
no longer in operation
THESSALY REGION
0
20
40
60 km

Table 1. State refugee accommodation structures in the Greater Area of Thessaloniki & in the Region of Central Macedonia

Location	People 12.07.2016	People 05.03.2024
Greater area of Thessaloniki & Region of Central Macedonia	**21.558**	**7.109**
Alexandria	755	721
Vagiohori	158	786
Veria	357	420
Vasilika	1.223	Not operating
Giannitsa	761	Not operating
Derveni-Alexil	810	Not operating
Diavata – camp Anagnostopoulou	1.526	768
Kavalari – Sinatex	321	Not operating
Kalohori – Iliadi	495	Not operating
Kordelio – Softex	1.812	Not operating
Lagadikia – Vogiatzoglou	861	581
Port	383	Not operating
Pieria – estate of Herakles	364	Not operating
Pieria – Petra Olympou	1.335	Not operating
Polikastro	4.107	1.660
Serres	Not operating	1.578
Sindos – Karamanli building	580	Not operating
Sindos – Frakapor	560	Not operating
Sintiki	Not operating	595
Cherso – camp Masaraki	3.735	Not operating
Oraiokastro	1.415	Not operating

Source: Coordination Centre for the Management of Refugee Crisis, 2016, Refugee Support Aegean, 2024 | Thessaloniki Social Atlas


Χάρτης Χρήσεων Γης
Γενικό Πολεοδομικό
Σχέδιο Δήμου Εχεδώρου
ΦΕΚ 304/ΑΑΠ/7-11-2011
ΤΜ ΔΗΜΟΥ ΚΑΛΛΙΘΕΑΣ
ΒΙΟΜΗΧΑΝΙΚΗ ΠΕΡΙΟΧΗ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗΣ
Σίνδος
Frakaport
Διαβατά
Αναγνωστοπούλου
Ζώνη Επικινδυνότητας Βιομηχανικών Ατυχημάτων
ΔΗΜΟΣ ΕΥΟΣΜΟΥ
Σίνδος
Καραμανλής
ΔΗΜΟΣ ΕΛΕΥΘΕΡΙΟΥ ΚΟΡΔΕΛΙΟΥ
Softex
ΔΗΜΟΣ ΜΕΝΕΜΕΝΗΣ
Ζώνη Επικινδυνότητας Βιομηχανικών Ατυχημάτων
Καλοχώρι
Ηλιάδη
Δομές φιλοξενίας προσφύγων (camps) το 2016
Μέσης και υψηλής όχλησης παραγωγικές δραστηριότητες
Χρήσεις κατοικίας
Δραστηριότητες πρωτογενή τομέα
Κεντρικές λειτουργίες και υποδομές
0 km
1 km
2 km

ΜΕΤΑΝ
ΝΤΟΠΙΟΙ ΠΑΛΕΥΟΥΜΕ ΜΑΖΙ
MIGRANTS and LOCALS STRUGGLE TOG
ενάντια(ε
AGAINST
ΣΥΝΟΡΑ • BORDERS
ΑΠΕΛΑΣΕΙΣ • DEPORTATIONS
ΚΕΝΤΡΑ ΚΡΑΤΗΣΗΣ • DETENTION CENTERS
NO BORDER camp - thessaloniki 2016
NO BORDE