



To See and be Seen: Multilayered Field Ethnography in the Evros Region

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Abstract

The Evros/Meriç region constitutes a critical site in the articulation of hegemonic narratives of "extra-legal normality", deeply embedded in the nation-building processes of Greece and Turkey. Historically a zone of fluid cross-border interaction, this borderland—once unified under Ottoman rule—has been reconfigured since the 2000s by increasingly securitized migration governance, shaped in part by EU externalization policies. The Evros border has since become the most violent land frontier in the European Union, marked by systematic pushbacks, the weaponization of the natural landscape, and high migrant mortality rates. Official statistics and independent reports document thousands of informal forced returns and the prevention of hundreds of thousands from crossing, revealing the extent of human rights violations under this regime. In this context, our fieldwork traces a route along the Evros River—from Edirne to Enez—offering a grounded account of contemporary border governance. Through local knowledge and linguistic access, we engage with the materiality of the border and its contradictory framing as both a natural obstacle and a symbolic 'shield of Europe', exposing the interplay between mobility, violence, and the spatial politics of exclusion.

The Invisible Border

The Evros/Meriç region is a space where hegemonic narratives of 'extra-legal normality' prevail (Demetriou 2019; Karamanidou and Kasperek 2022). Since the early twentieth century, the Greek-Turkish border has played a significant discursive, symbolic, and material role in the nation-building processes of both countries. This border runs through the Thrace

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region along the Evros/Meriç/Maritsa River,¹ which was once unified under Ottoman rule but is now divided into Eastern Thrace (Turkey) and Western Thrace (Greece). Historically, this area was characterized by cross-border movement, and new migratory patterns have redefined the Evros borderland since the 2000s. During this period, a 'new security regime' was implemented by both Greece and Turkey in response to the EU's influence on migration and border policies (İşleyen and Karadağ 2023). Indeed, it remains the most violent land border in the EU. According to IOM (2024), in 2023, migrants' arrivals by land in the Evros region were 6.164, about 13% of total arrivals; and it is estimated that at least 398 people lost their lives there between 2000 and 2019 (Karamanidou and Kasperek 2022). Furthermore, data collected directly or obtained from Government sources show that in the period 2020–2022 at least 50 incidents of informal forced return have involved at least 2.157 people, including vulnerable subjects, mostly from non-safe countries of origin. (PRAB 2024). In addition, in the words of the Greek Minister of Migration and Asylum, only in 2022, at least 260.000 people were "prevented from entering Evros".²

Thus, within a framework of progressive weaponization of the landscape (De Leon 2015), in which exposure to the elements becomes a crucial part of the border assemblage (Schindel 2022), the insidious use of the Evros as a natural border infrastructure was also confirmed and legitimized by Ursula Von der Leyen, who has defined it as 'the shield of Europe'.

Based on these premises, we are going to recount our short field trip through this region, trying to get close to what one Iranian mediator once described as "the busiest and safest route to Europe." Based on our knowledge of movements along the river and thanks to one of us being a native Turkish speaker, we decided to follow the river's flow from north to south, starting from the city of Edirne and ending in Enez, where the river meets the sea.

Every year, hundreds of people—primarily, but not exclusively, from the so-called Middle East and other parts of Asia—try to cross the Evros river, relying on makeshift boats and crossing under the cloak of darkness. As we discovered while we were exploring those areas, for many of the smuggling networks operating in the region, this is the only way to leave Turkey and reach the European Union (Fig. 1).

Duncan and Levidis (2020) argue that the border defense strategies implemented both on the Eastern and Western shore of the Evros river testify to the fact that it is an arcifinious space. According to John W. Donaldson, the term 'arcifinious' derives from the legal terminology of international border law and is a territorial concept which describes the way states are bounded by geophysical borders with defensive capabilities or 'natural' boundaries which are 'fit to keep the enemy out,' such as seas, rivers, deserts, and mountains. Eighteenth-century jurist Hugo Grotius argued that rivers are part of 'arcifinious' or 'natural' military frontiers which are 'indeterminate' and flexible based on the use of force. While the course of a river may shift naturally, it can also be manipulated, for instance, when a river is straightened. What may be more telling is that the very flexibility of a river—its interstitial composition, between water and sediment—helps to produce an 'indeterminate' space which is materially porous, ever-shifting, and thus difficult for potential intruders to cross. From the perspective of international jurisprudence, this material ambiguity also makes river borders unstable. The hostile characteristics of arcifinious

¹ The river is called Evros in Greek, Meriç in Turkish, and Maritsa in Bulgarian. For the sake of brevity, in this paper we will only use the term Evros.

² <https://migration.gov.gr/en/mitarakis-o-frachtis-tha-oloklirothei-syzitame-idi-gia-tin-epomeni-epektasi-toy-ston-evros/>.



Fig. 1 The Evros region and the areas where our research was carried out

boundaries are exploited in the naturalization processes which provide the basis for claims to sovereignty over territories, allowing states to conceal their agency concerning border deaths. Indeed, rather than being a ‘natural’ border, the Evros river is an exemplary case of bordered nature, characterized by environmental elements which are not deadly in and of themselves, but rather become deadly because people are forced to cross them in treacherous conditions (Duncan and Levidis 2020).

And yet, the most striking element when one visits the area around the Evros river for the first time is that the river is not visible anywhere. There are no signs which indicate the way to panoramic sites or the presence of river tourism. If you get close, the river’s ‘invisibility’ in relation to tourism is compensated for by a series of telltale military check-points rising above endless fields and blocking access to the river. As one travels across this landscape, the Evros river exists in a paradoxical state of simultaneous presence and absence. In our collective awareness, it appears deeply ingrained in the fabric of the border regime, yet it remains elusive, like a phantom divide. The flat terrain and the trees growing along its banks hide its trajectory from view. In this enigmatic setting, the river becomes

a metaphor for the inherent contradictions and the overlap between the power of visibility and spatiality within the border regime. The road runs a few hundred meters from the river, which still cannot be seen. On the plain, there are ploughed fields, tractors kicking up dust on sandy land, and small water canals everywhere. Europe—or, to put it more appropriately, EUrope (Queorolo Palmas and Rahola, 63)—is on the other side, looking like a barrier of high hills.

The shore that we were able to cross near the village of Karaağaç, for instance, is a space of deterrence, a weapon which was undermined until less than twenty years ago, and an imaginary line which for Greece draws a demarcation between their Christian identity and the threat of an ‘Islamic enemy’. We wandered around the fences amidst green fields and blossoming flowers like lost tourists on a disorienting journey. Amidst the tufts of grass, a crimson warning sign depicted the silhouette of a soldier pointing his rifle toward us. Was that a hint of what might happen or was it just a relic from a time when Turkey and Greece were at war? We took pictures of this and that, but no border patrols appeared. Cameras scattered everywhere are probably a far more discreet and effective means of control in the age of postmodern surveillance.

When it comes to how border regimes are implemented, spatiality and visibility play a crucial role. In this vein, our fieldwork questions the idea of visibility as the simple act of making objects and subjects exposable and apprehensible while leaving other objects and subjects unseen and unperceivable, working on the idea of a layered production of (in)visibility and of its reversibility (Tazzioli and Walters 2016). Distances between places, people’s ability to move across space, visibility regimes, and asymmetries in the distribution of the power to observe (and/or to not be observed) are the key factors that shape or shake up the ground on which borders happen to deploy their devices. That is why the ‘visible’ lies at the intersection between the domain of aesthetics (relations of perception) and that of politics (relations of power) (Rancière 2013). Visibility is a metaphor for knowledge, but it is not just an image; it is a real social process. In an ideal natural environment, the rule is that if I can see you, you can see me. However, things are not always so simple, as visibility relations are often asymmetrical, and the concept of intervisibility, of the reciprocity of seeing and being seen, is always imperfect and limited (Brighenti 2007).

The small villages along the river we visited offered desolate landscapes with old men sitting outside drinking tea and tractors passing by. There were no young people in sight. We tried to talk to a waiter: he suggested we go and see the wall, the two flags, the soldiers on one side and the other. The kind of advice he gave us seemed aimed at tourists, while laughing at our naivety. This is the only point along the Greek-Turkish border where it is possible to cross the Evros River. In Rahmanca, we asked how to access the river, and the elderly people who were listening to us laughed, pulled out their documents, and mimicked the military. It was as though they were trying to tell us that we could not set foot anywhere near it. “I have a passport”, one of them said solemnly, “and yet I cannot go close to it”. As another man told us later, special permission is required to work in the fields just beside the river, and it is one of the few ways to get closer to the border.

The river is a barrier between two social worlds built around the replacement of local populations and minorities after the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. The Greeks were on one side, the Turks were on the other, while the Orthodox and the Muslims were on the other. Now, the EU is on one side, and the rest of the world is on the other. This border has not connected the two countries for so long, rather it has been separating them for at least 100 years, with a succession of mutual, intersecting violence. An elderly farmer looked bemused when we asked him if he used to go to Greece as a child and if there were any

relations with the other side, with those mountains that can be seen beyond the invisible river and which are now in Europe.

The Invisible Migrants

“There are no migrants in Edirne.” This was the first impression we collectively got as we walked through what is often described as the ‘land gateway to Europe’. In the heart of the city, there were no signs of the proximity of the border, nor did we see migrants wandering in the streets. Indeed, the public space seemed homogeneous to our naive eyes. Those who were there were there to get across, hiding in shared apartments rented through local smugglers and waiting in concealed underground passages for their car to be smuggled across the border, as one former facilitator explained to us. They were like ghosts, to borrow a beautiful and painful metaphor used in a GAR report (2021) to describe the conditions of Afghan irregular migrants in Istanbul: you could sense their presence, you knew they were there, but you could not see them. It is not only the physical border between the two countries which is invisible to us; this characteristic is also embodied by the migrants who, in turn, become invisible.

Thus, the invisibility enforced by their living conditions simultaneously intersects with the blindness of the international community and civil society toward them. As Balibar puts it, ‘some borders are no longer at borders’ in the geographical or political sense of the term (2002: 84). Borders have become invisible; they are located everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Thus, the undesirables are not expelled by the border but forced to become the border (*ibid.*).

The sight of the Edirne Removal Centre, a cog in the border machine, jolted us awake to the weight that the issue of migration has in these whereabouts. A fortress wrapped in steel fences crowned with razor wire, overseen by the Turkish Ministry of Internal Affairs via the Provincial Directorate for Migration Management, played host to a motley crew of kids with parents, lone men, and all sorts of ‘undocumented’ humans. Despite its proximity to Edirne city center, which is less than 1.5 km away, the ERC stood solitary, immersed in rural tranquility, surrounded by fields, ancient ruins, an old Mosque, and venues primed for wedding extravaganzas. There, unauthorized migrants found themselves ensnared, banished from the public eye and space, locked in a swirl of legal wranglings and familial pleas. Beyond those fences, through which we could neither go nor cast a glance beyond the well-kept garden at the entrance, lay a world concealed from prying eyes, a world accessible solely to those who were trapped in it.

Like in Edirne, migrants near the Evros river are barely visible, at least to the eyes of the villagers. As one of the elderly locals we interviewed told us, migrants sometimes arrive in the village “robbed, cold and hungry” after being violently pushed back from the border or failing to cross the river. Except for these direct encounters, their presence is known but invisible to the villagers and only the traces of their passage can be seen. Yet, stories about ‘ghosts’ circulate widely. “There is a blind elderly woman who lives alone in the village. One [migrant] entered her home, slept and ate there. Apparently, the lady was unaware of what was happening at the time but, in the morning, she noticed that someone had slept and eaten in her house”. This is not unexpected. Perhaps the first piece of advice for crossing that dangerous border, surveilled by various forms of technology and law enforcement, is to avoid being seen. Yet, what may be invisible to us or the villagers is visible to the apprehension apparatus stationed on both sides of the border.

The law enforcement officers patrolling the border are an almost imperceptible presence, but their footprints and words (orders, if you like) are obvious to us. Upon our arrival in the village of Rahmanca, the residents promptly summoned the *muhtar*³ and the gendarmerie⁴ upon realizing the purpose of our visit. Despite the absence of migration and law enforcement agencies, their influence on the locals was clear. The gendarmerie was only visible to us when we visited their headquarters and on the signs warning people of the presence of armed gendarmes. At their headquarters, the gendarmerie maintained complete silence. The commander of the gendarmerie refused to speak, as a word he uttered without even realizing it might contain information. The villagers took us to the gendarmerie and made us visible to them, providing them with information about us. It is likely that satellites and thermal cameras had detected our presence and local residents had alerted the gendarmerie, but we were unable to see the surveillance devices that ‘saw’ us.

The Visual Navigation Regime

Let’s take a look at this point, Karaağaç, do you see it? From here we’ll give you the indications to reach the river and cross it into Greece. Do you see these points? You follow them in this direction... Be careful when crossing the river and don’t forget to watch our tutorial on how to read Google Maps!

The architecture and spaces we navigate, in which we carry out our research and operate, are increasingly infused with digital technologies that, on the one hand, are signs of visibility and, on the other, are tools of mobility. This conceptual and spatial configuration constitutes what Verhoeff defines as a ‘visual navigation regime’ (2012). The predominant role of visibility in today’s culture is closely linked to the fundamental role of mobility in modern culture and society, which manifests itself geographically and physically through travel as well as visually and virtually through media and communication technologies (Vernhoef 2012).

Halfway through our journey, we found ourselves in the heart of the Evros river region, navigating invisible routes across a border which remains invisible and unreachable. How can one access an unknown place without the help of a guide? How can one approach a field which is physically invisible and inaccessible? As Hallett and Barber have noted, “it is no longer conceivable to do ethnography without considering online spaces” (2014: 307). These words resonated with us as we decided to scan through some Telegram groups and channels used by unauthorized Iranian and Afghan migrants searching for clues about this region. We knew these networks lead unauthorized migrants to cross the river into Greece. Could we track their routes physically? Should we have followed digital routes and transposed them onto the physical world? It may have been risky, but with few other options left, we decided to try. Otherwise, we would have been wandering around those hills, blindly searching for something undefined.

In one of these groups, we quickly found a video tutorial explaining how to interpret Google Maps instructions sent by a facilitator. Coincidentally, it focused on Rahmanca, a

³ The village administrator elected by the inhabitants of a village or neighborhood to carry out the affairs of that village or neighborhood as determined by law in Turkey.

⁴ It is an armed security and law enforcement force that operates outside the provincial and district municipal borders, or in areas lacking a police presence.

village near the river about a two-hour drive from Edirne. The tutorial showed that from Rahmanca there is a path leading to the Evros River and, once you get across the river, the infamous E85 highway route divides the two countries. With no other leads, we set off in that direction.

One of the most striking features of screen-based interfaces is the possibility for people on the move to co-create a map of the spatial arrangement in which they operate. Vernoeff uses the term ‘performative cartography’ to refer to the coincidence of movement and the creation of spatial representations. In the visual navigation regime, what is represented—such as maps and panoramic views—is created simultaneously by interacting with other users through a screen-based interface.

This is an example of how digital technologies and visualizations of migration on digital media create a new ‘digital border’ (Chouliaraki and Georgiou 2019) which migrants themselves subvert and exploit. We wondered how easy this border crossing appeared in the digital world; soon, we would find out that actually it was far from easy. Taking a risk paid off, as in Rahmanca we had a series of random fortunate encounters. Despite the increasing militarization and securitization of the area, people on the move do cross the river—or at least they attempt to—and the locals confirmed this.

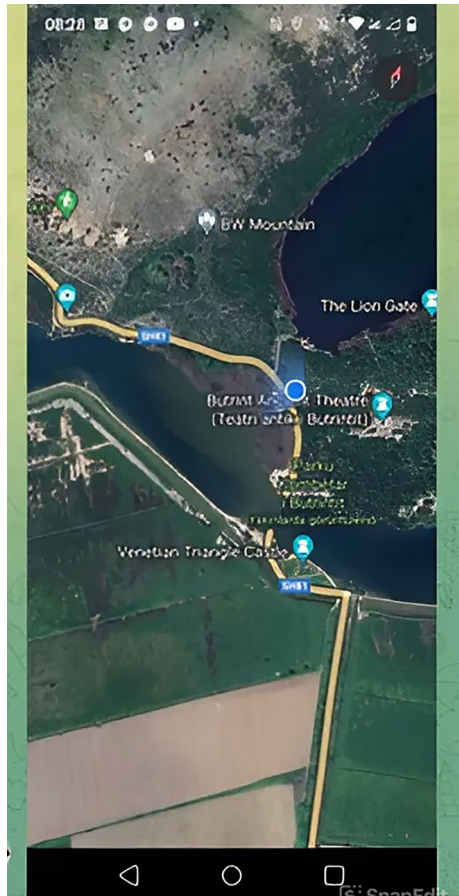
Reflections about the transformations of the concept of field and the overlap of the physical and digital dimensions of fieldwork seemed to echo in our minds and felt particularly pertinent in this context. What exactly constitutes the field in its current state? Since the term ‘field site’ refers to the “stage on which the social processes under study take place” (Burrell 2009: 182), the ongoing evolution of the ‘digital stages’ of contemporary social media makes it difficult to simply transpose offline methods and concepts to the online world (Fig. 2).

Some Preliminary Reflections on the Idea of “Layered Visibilities”

As Tazzioli (2016) points out, there is an intricate interplay between knowledge and non-knowledge as well as between visibility and invisibility. In fact, the former is pivotal for understanding the mechanisms through which borders are materially produced. It is not by chance that Brighenti (2007) defines vision as a sense of power or, even better, as a sense that confers a sense of power and as an exercise in activating selective (in)visibilities. Similarly, De Genova (2015) reflects on the spectacle and the related dynamics of (in)visibilization implemented by border regimes, the constellation of images and discursive formations which act as devices of power, discipline (Musrò 2017), and control (Deleuze 1990). Challenging the dichotomous opposition of visibility/invisibility is a necessary step if we want to critically engage with borders as a political apparatus used for categorizing, capturing, and illegalizing individuals, and as a mechanism which reproduces segmented knowledge and different shades of opacity. This assumption allows us to recognize the multilayered nature of the field and the visibilities it generates.

Accordingly, we can understand the field as a ‘slanting space’ in which distance and proximity blend, producing unprecedented and unpredictable patterns and rigid distinctions between the ‘physical’ and the ‘virtual’ as well as between the ‘visible’ and the ‘invisible’ that are becoming increasingly blurred and are taking on new meanings. The case of the river border, which is a very crowded reference point in the digital space but seemingly invisible and empty in the material one, is a case in point. Brighenti (2007) also argues that

Fig. 2 An example of maps shared on Telegram groups



the media constitute a special kind of private space which can nevertheless be more visible than most public spaces.

Thus, complex patterns of (in)visibility emerge wherever the continuous monitoring of bodies intended as a constitutive act of border control policies is overlaid both to the invisibilization of the border (and of migrants themselves) and to the tactical use of counter-visualities (e.g., the perfect transparency of border shape on social media/messaging platforms used by migrants to share information). In the end, this is why the issue of access to visible places is a central political issue.

Epilogue: Another Kind of Invisibility

When we arrived in Enez at the end of our ethnographic exploration, we were finally afforded a glimpse of the Evros River, where it meets the sea and dissolves into it, just opposite the Greek island of Samothrace. There were no migrants around there either. But that was another world where tourism was about to engulf all other activities. Along the

extensive shoreline, cottages and terraced houses formed a picturesque backdrop, a material sign of the encroaching tide of urban development and real estate speculation affecting the area. Despite our efforts to find accommodation for the night, we were met with closed doors and vacant lodgings—a stark reminder that the tourist season had yet to start. No migrants and no foreigners were allowed there at the time. As the dawn of the tourist season was approaching, maybe we were also witnessing the advent of a new local development model. The coastline stretched out like a long ribbon of white sand speckled with terraced houses—some still rising from the dust, others wrapped in scaffolding—placed shoulder to shoulder like soldiers lined up in a trench. This seemed to be the destiny that many small local communities dreamed of, with tourism as the last opportunity to capitalize on their natural heritage. However, another borderland paradox came into view. On the Greek coast, on the islands of the Central Mediterranean (Lampedusa and Malta), in the seaside resorts of the Canary Islands, and in the ski resorts of the Susa Valley, local development is increasingly driven by the stark contrast between two kinds of (specular) mobility regimes (Bauman 1998; Hall and Williams 2002). On the one hand, hyper-visible desirable human mobility (tourists); on the other, the hidden presence of undesirable human mobility (migrants). The latter provides a significant proportion of the workforce needed to sustain the entire tourist industry (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2022a, b), but this is another story.

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