

Schengendangle
Undocumented Refugees in the City of Igoumenitsa



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SCHENGENDANGLE: UNDOCUMENTED REFUGEES IN THE CITY
OF IGOUMENITSA



We arrive in Igoumenitsa after a seven hours tour with the bus from Athens. It is cold. In the darkness of the night the mountainous environment gives us a strong feeling of isolation. A small port city in northwestern Greece close to the border to Albania. 15.000 people live here and next to them unseen the parallel existence of 150 undocumented refugees. The Economy of the city relies more and more on the sector of transportation. Life for both the documented and the undocumented is largely influenced by the daily ferry traffic to Italy, the connection to the Ionian Axes towards Albania and the new Egnatia Highway, the famous road of traders and travelers connecting Igoumenitsa to Thessaloniki, the Balkans and Turkey.

We take a cab to drive to a nearby hotel. On our way, we express our feelings of having arrived at the end of the world to the driver and he laughs: «Some people say this is the gate to Europe, but I say it is the ass of Europe!» «Why», we ask. «Because from here all the shit of the world leaves!», is his spontaneous answer - obviously his usual description of the situation in town. He continues: «Afghans, Kurds, Arabs, Somalis...» Welcome to Igoumenitsa!

Igoumenitsa has a long experience with the

SCHENGENDANGLE: UNDOCUMENTED REFUGEES IN THE CITY OF IGOUMENITSA

undocumented migration of Albanians, but for more than 10 years it is after Patras also the second largest exit point for refugees who want to leave Greece towards northern European countries. A smaller number leave also from Korinthos and Kerkira island. «Only one or two asylum applications have been lodged in Igoumenitsa within the last five years», says the head of the police department Vasilis Miaris.

In the words of the refugees Igoumenitsa is a place of «schengendangle», the place where you hide under a truck, between the tires in order to reach a mystic Europe of asylum.



At its peaks the number of undocumented refugees in Igoumenitsa have outnumbered 1.000, but the size of the refugee population in town depends largely on the tensity of police measures to combat undocumented migration. During periods of police led raids a huge number of refugees is repeatedly being arrested while others are leaving terrified for more secure places. Most of the refugees in town live in one of the two self-made shanty camps either in the mountains of Graikochori on the southern city rims or in Ladochori, a city quarter full

of olive tree fields. Some others are more mobile and organized in small groups of 2 -5. They move each night constantly changing sleeping places - from a construction site to a forest to the street. We ask the head of police where the refugees camps are. «They live everywhere. What camps? The piece of nylon is not a camp.» He is right at this point. There is no informal settlement such as it existed in Patras until 2009. Some few tents made of nylon planes and covered by woods create the hidden world of the refugees in Igoumenitsa. The two largest refugee groups are comprised of Maghrebian Arabs and Kurds (mainly from Iraq), while also some Afghans and Africans from Somalia and Sudan find their way to Igoumenitsa. Most of them try every day to hide inside or under the trucks in order to reach the shores of Italy with one of the ferries. Some families also try to pass the border with forged passports traveling as tourists. The two prisons in the port and in the police station are constantly overcrowded. People live there under miserable, inhuman and degrading conditions. Vasilis Miaris says: «We have not enough space in our prisons. Thus, we transfer the detainees to detention centers all over Greece. In 2009 we had 2.210 arrests where a deportation order was issued. They are detained for up to one or two months, then they have to be released because there is not enough space.» From his point of view detention is a kind of social support to the refugees offering them a warm place to sleep. If you ask the refugees it is everything but that. Every day 10 to 40 refugees are returned from Italy back to Greece. Controls are harshening every day.

«The situation is tragic», says Vasilis Miaris.

«When the number of migrants increases, also racism in the local society becomes more tense. We had some incidents of theft and harassment of women in the last period, so people started to complain about the immigrants. We receive a lot of pressure from the local society. We can be happy that the locals haven't revolted yet. Racism will rise due too the refugees if we don't control the population and keep the numbers of people low.» He represents the xenophobia of the public in the best manner. «Our role is to prevent the illegal migrants from coming to the city and to the port. We are trying to let them down, to disappoint them.» The local police and coast guard co-operates with FRONTEX "only" on a level of expertise exchange. Additionally they get some material and financial support. But this doesn't seem to satisfy the head of the police. Exchange of expertise also happens between the authorities of Italy and Greece. «We have a double wound here», says Vasilis Miaris. «On the one hand we have the border to Albania with a long history in illegal migration and on the other hand we have all the illegal migrants trying to leave to Italy. The problem cannot be solved! LAOS would say: put them all in a boat and throw a bomb on it. Solution? I don't know. A huge detention center and let them kill each other? I say, the situation has to be solved in the countries of origin. This is the only way, that they won't come here anymore. (...) Practically we need more detention centers, because there is not enough space. But they should be far away from Igoumenitsa in order that they do not return here immediately after release.»

The first night in Igoumenitsa. We walk around the port to get a first impression of the situation. No

SCHENGENDANGLE: UNDOCUMENTED REFUGEES IN THE CITY
OF IGOUMENITSA

refugees to see. While walking around the Egnatia Highway, we see small groups of people disappearing on a small hill close to the port. They get lost in the darkness of the mountain. We move around in the empty streets. A look back towards the mountain. It is too dark to see anything. But in the silence of the night, the wind carries the echo of some voices to us. It gives us a strange feeling of melancholy and loneliness to know that back there in the mountains invisible to society with all its blindness a couple of refugees are fighting for their destiny. A parallel existence of the undocumented at the margins of society. Nobody sees them, nobody listens to them. Nobody knows how many have been imprisoned, deported, beaten and how many lost their lives on their way.



Nobody recognizes their existence unless they disturb “us”. When they disrupt “our” common citizens daily routines questioning with their problems the legitimacy of “our” lives, “our” wealth and “our” happiness. We stare at the mountains and listen for a while to their voices

During January 2010 the refugee population of Igoumenitsa decreased drastically from 500 to 150 when the police with a special force on «illegal migration» (30 officers) invaded daily the makeshift settlements burning down the shelters and all their belongings, arresting each day up to 40 persons, transferring them to prisons and detention centers in all over Greece and even deporting them back to Turkey. But we also hear strange stories about a detention center close to the border to Albania. We hear stories about transfers of refugees 110 km far from the city, where they are being released in the middle of nowhere. They return on their own walking all the way back. Supposedly, this time the raids were planned in advanced for the visit of the general secretary of the Ministry of the Protection of the Citizen, but probably they were also “just” the consequence of the increasing protests by the population of Ladochori, where a number of refugees live in between the olive fields of the local population. «They steal our wood and destroy our fields!», the Greeks accuse them. First they collected signatures in order to get rid of the refugees, then they proceeded to direct confrontations threatening the refugees with guns. The last step was to call the police, which answered their request with a series of arrests and by destroying the shanties. The contact between the local population and the refugees is not much more than that although we have to say, that there are also a few people

helping and showing their solidarity manifested in a newly born solidarity group for the migrants and refugees. Sometimes you can see a refugee searching the garbage bins for something to eat, sometimes you see them waiting in the dark of a side-street beneath the huge advertisement for *superfast ferries* waiting for the one and only chance to leave for a better future. You cannot see how they sit in the cold darkness of the mountains without any shelter, huddled around the fire and sleepless all through the night. You cannot see the hunger and the cold if you don't look into their eyes.

In the morning we try to find some refugees to talk to. With some local activists we drive around the city and to all places where usually a lot of refugees hang around. «You might think we don't know, but really, normally you always meet refugees in all these places. I don't know why we don't see anybody now!» The raids had obviously an outcome. People are leaving, people are hiding. Close to the mountains and the port we finally meet Mohamad, a Somali refugee. He is just returning back to the mountains with a bread and a juice in a plastic bag. «I just bought that for 3 Euro. We don't have any money. This is for twelve persons.» He pulls us aside the street to talk. «It is dangerous here for me», he says. «Police always hunts us when we try to go and buy something. Even the supermarkets they did not

SCHENGENDANGLE: UNDOCUMENTED REFUGEES IN
THE CITY OF IGOUMENITSA

let us buy anything for a while. They didn't allow us to enter even when we told them that we had money! Now, some of them allow us to buy something. But you can only go if you have money. If you don't have money, you don't have any rights. This is why a lot of us have to search in the garbage bins for food.»

It is early in the afternoon when we decide to go and meet the refugees on the mountain. We walk up the hill on the track next to the highway that we saw the other day. When we arrive on top of the hill we find a group of refugees hiding behind the bushes and watching out the port for a truck. We meet Kurds from Iraq, Afghan minors, Somalis ... One of them carries a plastic bag full of apples. «You know, it is unbelievable. People throw food in the garbage. Like these apples.» He divides the apples between his friends. Ali (17) is from Afghanistan.

«I only came today. Just arrived from prison where I was detained. Then they brought me to a reception center for unaccompanied minors.



I took one month vacation time in order to try and leave Greece within that period.»

Almost everybody here has been detained in Greece more than once and every second person we talk to is a Dublin case. There are Kurds from Iraq that have been deported back to Greece once or twice from other European countries like Germany and France. «What can I do? I cannot stay here. They don't give anything here, no support for refugees. I cannot return. Where should I go now?» A group of young Afghans sits at the side of the track on some little rocks. «It has become very difficult for us to enter the port. There are a lot of controls. The truck drivers sometimes become very angry when they find us. Some of them beat us. They are stressed out because they are in danger too. If the police catch them, they might imprison them for smuggling - just like us.» When we ask the refugees where they live they point with their fingers to the back of the mountains. «We live back there behind the last house. But the police came yesterday night and they burned our shelters, they took our clothes. We don't have where to sleep now and no clothes left. They come and arrest people every day, so we always have to hide. Could YOU live there even if it was only for one night?»

Salah (39) comes from Palestine. He is already six months in Igoumenitsa, which among refugees is better known as Komunisia. We meet him in a side-street close to the port where he is watching out for a possibility to enter the port.

SCHENGENDANGLE: UNDOCUMENTED REFUGEES IN
THE CITY OF IGOUMENITSA



«I forgot to be hungry, I forgot to be thirsty, I forgot to be tired!» Salah wears a dirty worn out coat, at least five numbers bigger than his real body size. He is of small height. His eyes have a look of desperation but also determination.

Salah speaks a little German and French. He has lived several years in Europe as a student. Then the Palestinian government ordered him to return and work for them. Now the situation has become very difficult for him. He had to flee his country in order to escape imprisonment. He just wants to go back to France. His memories keep him alive: «I had a car, I had a flat!» It is a cold night. Salah wears three trousers, three pullovers and three jackets. «If I stay for another month here,» he says ironically, «I will maybe also wear three pairs of shoes!» A small smile appears on his lips for a second and disappears again into the cruel reality. «Everybody here is sick. We search garbage bins for food. There is no hot water, no place to charge our mobile phones to contact our families.» He looks very tired. Sometimes he laughs about the tragedy he is going through. «When I reach France I will bring myself to a

hospital and stay there for a week to check all my body!» I ask him if he is sick. The question seems funny to him. «Yes, of course I am sick. I also have severe problems with my stomach, because I was hit by a bomb in Palestine!» He shows me a big scar on his belly. I ask him if he needs medicine. Again he laughs: «Medicine ...» It is the same laughter I see when he hears words like «money». Normal things to us that are very far from his reality. Then he tells me with an indescribable calmness in German «Greece is shit!»

While we talk with Salah some Africans from Somalia join us. They tell us that recently more than 200 refugees have been deported back to Turkey after being arrested in Igoumenitsa. Many refugees left to Athens and Patras because they feared the militarization of the authorities controls. «What can we do? We have to leave Greece.» Waiting. They wait day by day sitting on old car tires.



The two Somalis wear black clothes in order not to be seen when they hide under a truck. Next to them on the floor lies an old pair of dirty sport shoes. Ali Mohamad says: «I tried them, but they don't fit.»

After chatting a while he tells us that he has diabetes and that he run out of medicine. He didn't know where to find help. Ali from Sudan has just arrived back from Turkey: «They

arrested me here. I stayed about fifteen days in the prison of Komunisia. After that I was transferred to another prison in Evros where I was for three months. One day they took 64 of us, put us into a small boat and pushed us to the other side of the river – the Turkish side. They waited for another fifteen minutes to be sure that we arrived then they started shooting in the air in order that the Turkish police comes and gets us.» Every five minutes a police car patrols the street. Once to the one direction once to the other. «They have petrol for free!» says Salah and again a small smile glides over his face. Every now and then the patrols stop and hunt the refugees who then disappear in the dark between the reed.

We meet a priest called Papa Theodoros. He used to visit the refugees in the informal settlement between the olive trees. When the number of refugees increased he realized his soup kitchen was not providing enough food and he decided to focus on the refugees in prison and bring his food there. «When people arrive here, you know, they have really run out of everything. They don't have even a Cent to feed themselves. The situation is tragic!

In the evening we join some friends for dinner. We receive a phone call of one of the Afghan minors. «We missed you. We just got beaten by the police!» His battery turns off and our conversation gets interrupted. We visit once more the refugees in the side-street close to the port. There are some Arabs from the Maghreb

trying to find a «good truck». Hadi has been deported back to Greece from Italy. He was living in Bologna for three years. «We live in a construction site in the centre of the city. These days the police is everywhere. They never leave with an empty bus. They arrest us from the port, the jungle, the streets and only when the bus is full, they go. Fifteen days ago they brought almost 100 people that were living in the *up-town camp* close to the border to Albania. We also heard that two days ago forty of us have been transferred from Komunisia to Orestiada and from there some of them were deported to Turkey. Some friends also have called us from Istanbul.» Abbas from Morocco adds: «Sometimes police takes us to the mountains near Albania and leaves us in a place in the middle of nowhere. The ones who have money wait for the bus. Actually nobody has money so we walk for 110 km to return back to Komunisia.» Later on we are talking with Jamil from Iraq. He has been deported from Germany on March 2009. He shows us his deportation order: «I have been arrested ten times since then and police always gives me the same paper with the same date, what can I do? Every time they arrest me, they keep me a few days and then they let me go. » A young Somali joins us. «I was caught in Italia and deported back to Komunisia. They found me in the port of Ancona and sent me back with the next ferry. They locked me in a toilet together with other two refugees and gave

us a cardboard to sleep on. When we reached Komunisia I was kept in the detention centre of the port for fifteen days. I had a paper that proved that I am underage. They transferred me in the prison of Kosani where I stayed for one month. Upon release they kept all my money - about 100 Euro - and my mobile phone. Then they sent me to the reception centre for minors where I stayed for one month. There it was ok. In the prison the situation was really bad. Almost everybody was sick. We had scabies. We couldn't go outside and whenever we were complaining they were kicking us.»

The day after we meet the refugees again on their observation hill close to the port. This time we take the road from the back side. We see some of them coming from their shelters.

They stop for a moment next to a cemetery close to a water-tap to wash their hands then they continue up the hill.



We meet Ibrahim, a 62 year old Kurd from Kurkuk in Iraq. He is blind and he is alone. «I became blind when I was already three years in Greece. Now I am six years here. I applied for

asylum, but I didn't receive any answer yet. I have no family in Europe. One sister of mine is in Lebanon and one brother I have in Iraq, but he went crazy. I don't care where I will live, where I will go. I don't even care anymore about receiving asylum. I just want to get my eyes operated and they told me it is impossible here in Greece. This is why I want to leave.» It is one month now that he is in Igoumenitsa. The other refugees don't know what to do with him. «It is impossible for him to leave from here. He cannot see anything», Rashid says. «We feed him and he sits day by day in his hut. Even if nobody of us could be helped, we just ask you to help him! » We also meet again Ali, the young Afghan who arrived the same day with us. I ask him: «How was your first night in Igoumenitsa?» «Very bad», he replies. «You see my trousers? Within one day they became teared apart already. In another group the refugees are discussing about their financial situation and the issue of work. «I was working in Vrahati in the grape harvest. I was getting 15-20 Euro for fourteen hours work per day», says Ibrahim from Morocco. «I was in Filiatra», says Nasser from Algeria. «I was working in the harvest of watermelons for fourteen days. It is hard work with low payment, but we need the money, you know, we need money to move on, to survive.» Seasonal work in the agricultural sector is a common means for the undocumented to find temporary work without knowing the language. Unfortunately, bad

working conditions and exploitation are the rule that governs this sector, but for the refugees it is also one of the few possibilities to generate income. Khalil from Algeria is around forty years old. He was working in a village of Crete: «Ah, it was really difficult in Kasteli, people there, don't like migrants. Most villagers were treating us like animals. They came and put fire to our shelters while we were inside sleeping and the police was just watching and doing nothing. »

We leave the refugees to visit the coast guard prison together with the priest. If he wasn't helping the refugees wouldn't get any food. Just a little sandwich a day. The prison is in the port area. There are two huts, one for the minors, one for the women with children. Small buildings with a little outside area which looks like a cage. Inside the port building there are another two small cells for the men. They are sick, there is no medicine, no proper sanitary infrastructure and it is overcrowded. When they see us with tea and food the kids get all excited. «I love you! I love you! » they shout and ask for sugar for their tea. A young woman stands aside. Her gaze is absent looking into nowhere. She doesn't react nor does she accept tea or food. The other girls tell us that she is not eating at all, just crying. When we come closer she looks intensely at us and asks for a cigarette. Her eyes are filled with tears. She takes the cigarette to smoke it hidden from the police. We convince her to take a cup of tea at least. Then she starts smiling. She tries hard.

«Thank you! » They all ask: «How many days do we have to stay here?» There are twenty persons in the cell of the women with children, nine minors and twenty-six men. The cells of the men are much too small. One of them asks for his wife and his children. The coast guard caught them in the port with false passports. He is waiting for his court-hearing. His wife and children have been released. If there wasn't the priest helping she would be homeless on the streets while waiting for her husband. Later we hear that he was charged a thirty day custody and deportation for illegal smuggling of people – meaning his own family. He will be transferred to another prison. It remains unclear what will happen to the rest of the family.

In the night we visit Salah again. He is starrng towards the trucks that stand close to us. Police is controlling the trucks with flashlights from all sides and underneath. «In the worst case, if they catch me, I will be in prison for a month. At least I will have a roof protecting me from the rain and the cold.» He smiles. «I will have a rest for a while - like small vacations.»

We have a lot of time with the refugees on their hill the next day. We meet Aziz (18) from Afghanistan. He came to Greece with his parents and eight younger siblings and remained in Greece with his younger brother while his parents and the rest of the family arrived in Germany. Now he tries to find and reach them.

Zahir is also from Afghanistan. The young man has a broken arm.

«I was in a truck which wasn't going to Italy but towards Turkey. When I understood what was happening, I tried to jump of the truck and fell on my arm.



The police brought me to the hospital and now I just arrived back!» Twenty-two days later he will be fine the doctors said, but he wants to remove the cast now. «I cannot go to the port with this. I think it is fine now!?» While we talk, more and more refugees come and join us. They show us their deportation orders. All of them have at least once been caught in Igoumenitsa. Their deportation orders have been issued in a variety of detention centers all over Greece. They want to know what the papers say. We translate one after the other looking for specific cases. All of them will be detained again if police catches them. We read the last paper to an adult Kurd. He asks: «Ok. And what can I do now?» There is no answer. Amid, a young man from Algeria is sitting on a small rock while stretching out his

leg with pain in his face. «I was trying to climb up the rope on to a ferry. The police saw me and tried to hinder me. They were throwing different things on me. Finally, they managed to make me fall. As I was falling I hurt my leg on a piece of iron. I stayed in hospital for ten days, then the doctors told me I was ok and I should leave. They didn't give me any hospital paper or any medicine prescription. I feel a lot of pain especially during the night.»

In the afternoon a solidarity group of Greeks visits the refugees for the first time. They are all excited, both the Greeks and the refugees. Everybody exchanges numbers. Mohamed, our friend from Somalia that we met first is happy: «You know, I was always afraid of talking to the Greek people here. I actually never talked with anyone. Now I finally found some friends.» Ali's trousers today look even more destroyed. Every day leaves its signs on his cloths but also on his face. When we prepare ourselves to leave a young Somali while saying goodbye turns to us:



«Don't leave us alone! Don't leave us alone!» It sounds more like a general demand directed towards all of the society, not only to us.

Before leaving, we visit Salah for a last time. He seems to be very lonely. «I will only stay one more week. I am too tired. I will go and look for work to collect some money and then I will try to leave again.» Today he wears only two jackets. The big one he cannot wear when he goes to the trucks, he says. It is white and they will see him. So he has to freeze. «I have to make it», he tries to convince himself. As usual he is waiting. Suddenly, he looks disappointed and desperate. «I will not make it. I am so tired!» We are sad to leave them all behind – especially Salah. He might be of the most tragic figures we met here. «I will never forget you», he says, in his polite and friendly way.

We are on our way to the bus to Athens, when the Afghan boys call us: «We all sit around the fire now. We have cooked, but we cannot eat. We miss you already! It was so good to meet you. Only in few days we got adjusted to seeing you. Now that you go it is very bad for us!»

We leave Igoumenitsa together with Sirwan a young Kurd from Iraq. He had an accident which left him with a severe problem with his leg. «I cannot stay here in the cold with this problem. I was an interpreter for the American soldiers in Iraq. This put me in a very dangerous situation. I was attacked with arms. My home was bombed. There isn't anything left to me.» He joins us in the bus in order not to travel alone. Police controls the buses, trucks and cars on the road to Athens in both directions.

SCHENGENDANGLE: UNDOCUMENTED REFUGEES IN
THE CITY OF IGOUMENITSA

They arrest a lot of people this way. Ali is not afraid. He has already seen the worst. When he was arrested last time they brought him to the prison in Nafplio. He was beaten badly by police officers with globs for three hours. «You know, even if they would give me a Greek passport, I wouldn't stay! They treat us like animals here. There is no support - nothing for us!» He will go to Athens during the cold months and try again later this year with better weather conditions.



The next day we are back to our reality in Athens. I call Ali. He tells me that he left Igoumenitsa and tries now to leave from Patras. «It was too difficult in Igoumenitsa, in the mountains!» After a while another phone call. It is Salah. «I have been arrested. The police came early in the morning to the mountains. I was

brought to a small prison close to border to Albania! I am afraid they might deport us back to Turkey!» We try to locate him, but his phone is off. The battery is almost empty and he has to hide the phone from the police. Two days later he calls again: «They brought us to Arta now. I feel sick. I need medicine and I am on hunger strike since today. They made us sign a paper which they didn't translate or explain. I am afraid that they will deport us to Turkey. Please try to help me!» Salah is not the only one to call. The Afghans call us, telling us that one of their friends who had disappeared for two days finally reached Italy in a truck, but he was deported back immediately. He called telling them he was in Patra, but later he understood he was brought back to Igoumenitsa. When the police took them from the ship in order to bring them to prison, he escaped together with five other refugees. He calls us: «I am hiding in the woods now, because I know they are looking for us and they will beat me if they find me. I have to find money to leave this place and go to Patras. It is too dangerous for me now to be here.» Other refugees report us that the police came to search for the escapees. They came with guns and they arrested others since they couldn't find the ones they were looking for. Daily routines.

Every day we receive phone calls now. Refugees that are arrested afraid of being deported. Families call from the homelands

anxious about the well-being of their children and trying to receive information on their whereabouts. The phone rings: «Hi, how are you? I am still in Komunisia. We cannot go to the port these days. Too much police! Can you give me some information on the asylum procedures in Greece? I don't know what to do. I don't know if I manage to leave from here. I also have no money to go anywhere else. I am stuck here in the mountains. Can I get asylum here? Do I have a chance in Greece?» The asylum recognition rate in Greece is with less than 0,5% the lowest of all EU-member states. FRONTEX estimates that 75% of all refugees entering the European Union are arrested at the Greek borders while arriving from Turkey. At the same time, countries such as Germany report that the highest percentage of Dublin II returns are send back to Greece. The combination of these two tendencies results in an increasing group of people stuck in limbo. Undocumented migrants in Greece are estimated to have reached 400.000 – 400.000 in the quest for a safety haven.



SCHENGENDANGLE: UNDOCUMENTED REFUGEES IN
THE CITY OF IGOUMENTITSA



We want to thank:

- the local solidarity group for their support
- the refugees we met and all the others we did not meet for sharing their experiences

**Freedom of movement!
No one is illegal!**

I don't know which way to choose.
Should I choose the right or wrong?
I would like to follow a star,
but there is no star I could follow!

