

The EU levers out refugee rights

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Ever since I began writing this blog, I planned to feature contributions from colleagues who inspire and motivate me. Today's blog was written by Eva Bitran. She works in the International Crimes and Accountability Program at the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR). Part of her work focuses on migration. In the last weeks Eva Bitran has been twice in the refugee camp Idomeni on the greek-macedonian border.

Desperation and uncertainty: these were and remain the chief characteristics of life in Idomeni, the small Greek village near the border with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The town has gone from a way station on the route to Western Europe to a semi-permanent encampment of more than ten thousand refugees, stuck mid-flight. This week, Idomeni saw another transition, as the Greek police [evicted the camp](#).

Beginning late last summer, one after another the countries at Europe's edges closed their borders to migrants and refugees. In November of 2015, the governments of Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, and Macedonia denied passage to anyone without Syrian, Iraqi, or Afghan papers. Macedonia built a fence at the Greek border near Idomeni. On March 8, 2016—on the heels of a European Council [summit in Brussels](#) and the subsequent closure of borders from Serbia to Austria—the Greece–Macedonia border was [declared shut](#). Thousands of asylum-seekers were stuck, with no effective possibility to apply for asylum and no opportunity to seek redress for violations. The European Union and its neighboring states effectively suspended fundamental human rights and refugee rights.

The result is a [humanitarian catastrophe](#) on European soil. When you come to Idomeni what strikes you first is the number of children: thousands, running around in the mud and nearly getting blown over by the wind. Shelter primarily takes the form of makeshift camping tents, ill-suited to the rainy, windy spring weather. Long lines form for food distribution, showers, and routine medical attention. Fires fueled by anything on hand fight the pervading dampness. Everybody coughs.

) in Berlin and I - first visited the camp in March, two weeks after the border formally closed and one week after the so-called "[March of Hope](#)" on March 14, 2016. Over two thousand refugees walked around the fence and crossed into Macedonia, fording a river and arriving in the small village of Moin. There, they were stopped by the Macedonian police in riot gear and with armored vehicles. Journalists and activists were separated from the group and arrested, while the migrants (after several hours in the cold) were put in trucks, driven to the Greek border, and made to cross it—some through a hole in the fence cut expressly for that purpose. Although this collective expulsion was the largest in recent European history, it hardly stands alone: violent, unlawful push-backs are a [near-nightly event](#) in Idomeni and a common occurrence [at other points](#) along Europe's outer border. Migrants who are summarily deported—[in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights](#)—have virtually no opportunity to vindicate their claims before a European court. This is a clear deprivation of rights, which only very few migrants challenge. Two men from Mali and Ivory Coast did so in 2015: With the support of ECCHR they submitted to the European Court of Human Rights

(ECtHR) a [complaint against Spain](#) related to the push-back they had suffered at the Spanish-Moroccan border.

Six weeks later, in mid-May, we were back in the camps. The mood had shifted but uncertainty remained. Migrants—families, children and grandparents, architects and engineers and lawyers—reevaluate their options and try to find the least deadly way forward. We spoke with a family of four that had tried five times to cross into Macedonia, each time paying a smuggler, each time getting pushed back. Many return beaten, one even burned, by the Macedonian police. Another couple lost two sons to Assad's forces and fled with their daughter; they, too, have been summarily returned from Macedonia. "We cannot go forward, we cannot go back, and we cannot stay here," the father said.

The numbers bear out their frustration. In the wake of the deal between the EU and Turkey, asylum-seekers who arrived in Greece before March 20 [may apply](#) for asylum, relocation within Europe, or family reunification. To do so, they must call a Skype account during a given window of time, available once or twice a week depending in the applicant's language and location. For this, of course, they must have internet and a Skype account—and, most importantly, they must be able to get through. Not one asylum-seeker we met knew anyone who had managed to connect. They are systematically denied their basic right to have rights. Even if they are able to make contact, their prospects are not much better: According to [Welcome to Europe](#), "Out of 66,400 refugees that the EU had planned to relocate from Greece to other European countries within the next two years, only 584 refugees were relocated from November 2015 until March 2016, another 208 after the EU-Turkey-deal came into practice"

Since the border closed, authorities have sought to relocate Idomeni's ten-to-fourteen-thousand inhabitants to [government-run camps](#)—some in former prisons or psychiatric hospitals. On the day we visited, buses chartered from a company advertising "Crazy Holidays" moved a batch of refugees who went voluntarily to the official camps run by the Hellenic Army.

Today, the [eviction begins in earnest](#). The border remains closed. Those who breach the fence are typically pushed back. Relocation and reunification are elusive, and the cloud of deportation hangs overhead.