14. McKinsey Consultants and Technocratic Fantasies: Crafting the Illusion of Orderly Migration Management in Greece

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Abstract
In the aftermath of the 2016 EU-Turkey deal, EU institutions turned to McKinsey, the US consultancy firm, to eliminate the backlog of asylum cases of thousands of illegalized migrants in refugee camps on Greek islands. From identifying “bottlenecks” in the asylum process to “performance targets” for caseworkers, McKinsey was tasked with transforming the entire reception regime. Based on internal documents obtained through freedom of information requests, this chapter asks: What technocratic imaginaries of control are encoded in McKinsey’s vision of more efficient and orderly migration management? Through a granular account of McKinsey’s intervention, it interrogates the data practices that transformed the refugee population into depersonalized objects of bureaucratic knowledge and sustain the violence of the EU hotspot regime.

Keywords: data practices; migration management; outsourcing; freedom of information.

14.1 Introduction

In October 2021, EU and Greek officials gathered to inaugurate the first Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC) on the island of Samos—the first of five new refugee camps that were set to replace the notorious “hotspots” where tens of thousands of people had been warehoused since 2016. The camps are the product of a European Commission (EC) Taskforce set up

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in the immediate aftermath of the massive fires that reduced the Moria hotspot on Lesbos to ashes a year before. With €276 million in EU funding, the CCACs are conceived as spaces where humanitarian care and biopolitical control blend seamlessly: basketball courts and playgrounds meet electronic access turnstiles, X-ray machines and military-grade barbed wire fencing; spaces for leisure activities meet CCTV cameras equipped with behavioural analytics software that live-stream footage onto wall-mounted screens in a dedicated control room on the Greek mainland (Emmanouilidou & Fallon, 2021). Humanitarian NGOs and solidarity activists, as well as the camp’s new inmates, denounced the Samos facility as a “prison camp” (Papaioannou et al., 2021). Its architects, on the other hand, heralded the camps as a means to finally “end overcrowding,” guarantee “adequate living conditions,” and “ensure efficient migration management” through fast-tracked asylum procedures and prompt deportation of individuals whose claims to international protection are rejected (EC, 2021).

The centres embody a technocratic vision of migration management that lies at the heart of the EU “hotspot regime” installed on the Greek islands (Vradis et al., 2019). In the aftermath of the March 2016 EU-Turkey deal, which dramatically reduced the number of people arriving on Greek shores, the hotspots were meant to instil order at Europe’s borders amidst the chaos and unruly human mobility of the preceding months. Yet, as Kalir and Rozakou (2016) wrote in their ethnographic dispatch from Lesbos a few months later: “What was planned as a new efficient form of registration and pre-removal camp has turned out to be an overpopulated and impaired formation.” With thousands of illegalized and immobilized migrants in the hotspots, the EC turned to the management consultancy firm McKinsey & Company to help eliminate the “backlog” of asylum cases that had amassed since the EU-Turkey deal had transformed the Greek islands from places of passage to sites of containment. Presented by EU institutions as a purely technical intervention to improve the efficiency of the asylum procedure in Greece, McKinsey’s overarching objective was, of course, deeply imbricated in the politics of EU migration control. Its task was nothing less than to devise a plan for the operationalization of the EU-Turkey deal—a critical juncture in the EU’s externalized border control—by restructuring the everyday functioning of the entire reception regime on the islands.

This chapter draws on a unique archive of previously confidential documents obtained through freedom of information (FOI) requests, a legal mechanism to gain access to internal documents held by public bodies (Walby & Larsen, 2012). It explores what happens when corporate logics of “maximizing productivity” and managerial control are transposed into
the world of asylum management. What measures did McKinsey consultants propose for the “optimization” of asylum procedures on the Greek islands? What bureaucratic “imaginaries” (Seuferling & Leurs, 2021) of mobility control are encoded in McKinsey’s vision of a more efficient and orderly asylum process? In approaching these questions, the chapter offers a granular account of McKinsey’s blueprint for a “streamlined end-to-end asylum process.” Through a close reading of internal reports that McKinsey circulated to senior EU and Greek officials, it decodes the technocratic fantasies that sustain the hotspot regime and normalize the violence it inflicts upon people on the move.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, I situate the role of management consultancies in relation to literature on the political economy of outsourced migration control (Lemberg-Pedersen et al., 2020), before reviewing recent work on “data practices” (Scheel et al., 2019) —that is, the ways everyday migration management is enacted through processes of data extraction and circulation. I then interrogate the practices McKinsey consultants deployed to transform the refugee population on the islands into depersonalized objects of bureaucratic knowledge. The analysis reveals how the extraction of data from the hotspots was not only abstracted from the everyday violence of the camps but served to normalize the imposition of a range of punitive practices upon their populations. Finally, I reflect on how FOI requests offer digital migration researchers a critical tool for probing important sites of migration management that often remain hidden from public view and the bureaucratic irregularities at play in the outsourcing of migration control.

14.2 The Rise of Privatized Expertise

From visa processing, biometrics, data management, air carrier sanctions and deportation, to the deployment of surveillance technologies, management of detention centres and the provision of humanitarian care, vast areas of migration and border control have been delegated to private companies in recent decades. Through complex processes of privatization, marketization and outsourcing, a “privatised migration control infrastructure” has emerged at both national and transnational levels (Bloom, 2015). In the EU, neoliberal restructuring of the state along with prolific lobbying efforts by the border security industry (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2020; Akkerman, 2021) have generated a growing “market for services directed at controlling cross-border mobility” (Lopez-Sala & Godenau, 2020, p. 7). The increasingly lucrative market is not confined to the outsourcing of infrastructures of control—the provision of
transportation and detention services by security companies like G4S, for example—but extends to a “heavier reliance upon private sector expertise and advice” by public bodies involved in managing migration and borders (Bloom, 2015, p. 154).

Yet, the influence of international management consultancies (MC), whose role is precisely to furnish state bureaucracies with expertise and advice, is currently somewhat overlooked. For instance, amongst the diverse areas of the outsourced “migration control market” identified by Lopez-Sala and Godenau (2020)—from registration to detention to expulsion of illegalized migrants—insight into the role played by MCs in the production of knowledge is missing. This is especially surprising given the growing intrusion of MCs such as PricewaterhouseCoopers, Deloitte or Accenture into the realm of migration management in countries such as Australia, the United States, Sweden or Germany, and transnational levels of governance through contracts with the EC or Frontex, the EU’s border and coastguard agency (Akkerman, 2021; Vianelli, 2022). Furthermore, there are clear cases of MC’s impact on migration control policies. For example, Baird (2018, p. 127) traces the origin of the term “hotspot”—the infrastructural centrepiece of the EU’s approach to managing illegalized migrants at its borders—to a study conducted for the EC by the consultancy firm UniSys.

The US-based firm McKinsey & Company—one of the world’s “Big Three” consultancies in terms of revenue and prestige—offers a particularly illustrative case. At the peak of the long summer of migration in 2015, McKinsey deftly positioned itself as a company that could assist European governments in the bureaucratic challenge of processing large volumes of asylum applications. It was able to draw on its work for the Swedish Migration Agency, where it helped introduce corporate “lean management” techniques geared towards accelerating asylum procedures (Vianelli, 2022). In September 2015, the German Federal Office for Migrants and Refugees hired McKinsey consultants to assist with the implementation of fast-tracked asylum procedures in order to clear a backlog of 270,000 pending asylum cases and, subsequently, to develop plans for increasing the rate of deportations of rejected asylum-seekers (Becker & Wiedmann-Schmidt, 2016). A year later, as detailed below, the firm embarked on a similar project in Greece (Stavinoha & Fotiadis, 2020). Across the Atlantic, McKinsey consultants have devised “detention savings opportunities” for the US Immigration and Enforcement Control agency that had enforced the family separation policy at the border with Mexico (MacDougall, 2019). With proposed measures that included accelerated deportation processes, cuts in spending on food as well as on medical care for detained migrants, the company was lambasted
for becoming complicit in the Trump administration's punitive migration control agenda.

In sum, MCs like McKinsey play an important role in scripting policies, disseminating ideas within policy-making circles, and transposing distinctly corporate managerial techniques and datafied logics into public bureaucracies tasked with managing cross-border mobility. In turn, the resonance of McKinsey’s approach in several EU member states reflects “the increasing centrality of organisational, efficiency and economic imperatives in the management of asylum processes” (Vianelli, 2022, p. 52). However, much of what is known about MCs in the field of migration management derives from journalistic accounts. At least in part this has to do with the fact that their work for the public sector is generally shrouded in secrecy. Consequently, there is “a paucity of empirical studies into their work … and little evidence, beyond MC’s own rhetoric, of their impact” (Ford & Harding, 2021, p. 223)—a gap this chapter seeks to fill through the case study of McKinsey’s intervention in Greece.

14.3 Managing Migration Through Data Practices

It does so by adopting an analytical lens that is less concerned with the political economy of outsourced migration control as such than with the production and circulation of knowledge that undergirds and legitimates particular state bordering practices and regimes. In other words, the attention here is on the data practices that are “mobilized to constitute migrations as intelligible, actionable objects of policy-making” (Scheel et al., 2019, p. 579). Through the case of Frontex, for example, Cobarrubias (2019) shows how these knowledge practices entail the production of statistics, maps, visualizations and projections about cross-border movements which actively construct notions of migrant illegality. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to detail the growing body of scholarship dissecting varied modes of data production and circulation that suffuse the overlapping domains of migration management, border control and humanitarian care (see, for example, Leese et al., 2022; Madianou, 2019; Tazzioli, 2019; Witteborn, 2022), or to give due regard to the “structurally violent workings” of tech-driven interventions targeting refugee bodies (Leurs, 2020, p. 96). Rather, the key point here is, following Scheel and colleagues, that:

what is known, negotiated and targeted as migration is mediated by a plethora of data practices, including registering, enumerating, counting
and estimating to storing, cleaning, imputing, extrapolating and anticipating. These data practices, while often framed as matters of technocratic expertise, are of course political, sustaining the knowledge regimes that inform and shape migration policies, border regimes and migration management (Scheel et al., 2019, p. 579).

As I document below, this is precisely what McKinsey consultants were tasked with in Greece: to “bring order to chaos,” to borrow Kalir and Rozakou’s (2016) phrase, by rendering the presence of thousands of asylum-seekers in the hotspots an “actionable reality” (Scheel et al., 2019, p. 582). In McKinsey’s words, its consultants would provide EU and Greek policymakers with a blueprint, packaged in a Microsoft PowerPoint format, for a “streamlined end-to-end asylum process” that would see “all new arrivals processed within 15 days,” from the moment of disembarkation on the shores to their eventual deportation.¹ McKinsey’s work in Greece, though never publicly acknowledged, is emblematic of a broader vision of migration management put forward by the firm in response to the “unprecedented influx of asylum seekers” into Europe since 2015 (McKinsey Global Institute, 2018). “Collecting reliable, comprehensive data is critical for managing immigration more effectively,” reads a McKinsey report, which boldly affirms that “taking a more data-driven approach is a no-regrets move” (McKinsey Global Institute, 2018). It thus comes as little surprise that McKinsey’s approach found a receptive ear inside the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG Home), given its predisposition to conceptualize illegalized human mobility through a technocratic lens (Boswell, 2009).

In the analysis below I am concerned with understanding how McKinsey’s “data craving” (Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioty, 2020) practices are structured by the “desire for order over what many consider disorderly flows” that lies at the core of the technocratic paradigm of “migration management” (Ashutosh & Mountz, 2011, p. 28; original emphasis; see also Watkins, 2020). More specifically, I build on the work of Seuferling and Leurs (2021) in approaching the tranche of confidential McKinsey documents as a window into the bureaucratic imaginaries that underpin the EU hotspot regime. In their analysis of the intertwining of media and migration infrastructures, Seuferling & Leurs (2021, p. 674) reveal how particular imaginaries—of mobility control, of camps, of illegalized migrants—are encoded within the “forms of mediation, including tools, discourses, images, and protocols”

¹ All quotes, unless indicated otherwise, are from the tranche of McKinsey documents that were disclosed to the author under EU access to documents rules.
which facilitate the everyday management of refugee populations. Through a close reading of archival material, Seuferling and Leurs (2021, p. 670) reveal the historical lineages between Germany’s post-war refugee camps and the “fantasies of efficient ordering, administrating and limiting of refugee bodies in space and time” that drive the contemporary deployment of border technologies and infrastructural experiments such as the hotspots in the Aegean.

For what else are EU hotspots but sites for registering, sorting, containing, channelling and (potentially) expelling illegalized migrants (Vradis et al., 2019)? Subjecting border-crossers to a complex set of bureaucratic procedures, material infrastructures and logistical operations, the facilities were, in the technocratic imaginary of their architects, meant to “ensure the streamlining, absolute knowledge and control of populations on-the-move” (Kalir & Rozakou, 2016; Vianelli, 2022). Of course, from the perspective of street-level bureaucrats tasked with managing the “crisis,” the reception regime was anything but orderly, characterized instead by informality, improvisation and bureaucratic irregularity (Rozakou, 2017). For those warehoused inside the camps on Lesbos, Samos, Chios, Leros and Kos, they were sites of violent abandonment. And it is into these spaces that McKinsey consultants were dispatched to resuscitate the faltering EU-Turkey deal.

14.4 Methods

The empirical material for this chapter was obtained through several FOI requests filed with the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and DG Home, the EC department responsible for overseeing the implementation of the EU-Turkey Agreement and the hotspot approach. I requested access to all communication exchanged between these EU bodies and McKinsey in order to shed light on its involvement in Greece between September 2016 and April 2017. The requests were submitted under Regulation (EC) 1049/2001 which governs the rights of citizens to request documents held by EU institutions.² The regulation stipulates institutions’ obligations to facilitate transparency, the procedural rules that they must follow in handling requests, as well as a series of exceptions, such as the protection of public security or commercial interests of third parties, that can be invoked to withhold access to specific (parts of) documents. Following initial rejections,
subsequent appeals and two complaints filed to the European Ombudsman (2018; 2020), the entire process spanned a period of more than three years. It ultimately yielded partial access to two sets of hitherto classified documents: (i) contractual arrangements between McKinsey and EU bodies; (2) the Report of the Study on Operationalizing the EU-Turkey Statement—a document of more than 1,500 pages of which several sections were disclosed. The analysis below consists mainly of a close reading of the latter.

Marked “strictly internal” and “confidential,” at its core are a series of weekly “progress reports” that McKinsey consultants authored as the project unfolded and that were shared with the project’s Steering Committee composed of senior officials from all relevant migration actors in Greece: EASO, Frontex, DG Home, the Greek Asylum Service (GAS), the Reception and Identification Service (RIS) and the Hellenic Police. The compilation of progress reports contains the firm’s comprehensive analysis of the reception regime on the islands and the measures it proposed to eliminate the backlog. As such, the documents offer a rare insight into the data practices of a management consultancy “famed for its secrecy” (O’Mahoney & Sturdy, 2016, p. 250). More importantly, as I argue below, they reveal the “desires of control and order” (Seuferling & Leurs, 2021, p.8) that animate the discursive worlds and “idealized imaginaries” (Watkins, 2020, p. 1120) of the hotspot regime’s architects and guardians.

14.5 Decoding McKinsey’s Imaginaries of Control

McKinsey’s involvement in Greece can be divided into two phases. Under a pro bono arrangement with the Commission signed in September 2016, its first task was to “analyse the situation on the Greek islands and come up with an action plan that would result in an elimination of the backlog” of around 16,000 asylum cases that had built up since the EU-Turkey deal came into force. Over the next 12 weeks, McKinsey consultants were positioned at the heart of the EU migration decision-making apparatus as they briefed senior EU and Greek officials about procedural “bottlenecks” and began to outline a series of measures to reduce the backlog. At the first stakeholder meeting, for example, McKinsey informed participants that the “processing rates” of cases by EASO and GAS would need to significantly increase. By December 2016, McKinsey had produced a list of “targeted strategies and recommendations” for each of the actors involved in reception on the islands. In an unprecedented instance of the outsourcing of policy formulation, McKinsey effectively scripted the operational component of the Joint Action
The second phase of McKinsey’s intervention ran from January until April 2017, when the backlog was to be eliminated (see Figure 14.1). Under a contract with EASO, the consultancy was tasked with implementation of the action plan it had devised. Consequently, it became intimately involved in monitoring the everyday management not only of asylum procedures but of the logistics of the entire “reception chain” (Vianelli, 2022): from shelter allocation in the camps to deliberations about the precise stage when rejected asylum-seekers should be placed in detention prior to their deportation. The scope of the exercise was ambitious: McKinsey dispatched teams of consultants—putatively “experienced in migration management”—to organize workshops and “problem solving sessions” with “island implementation teams,” to schedule daily calls with hotspot coordinators, and to coordinate the “alignment” and “continuous buy-in” of all “stakeholders.” By the end of the project, the firm tallied 40 field visits to the islands and more than 200 meetings and workshops.

The documents reveal how McKinsey’s approach to restructuring the Greek asylum bureaucracy was guided entirely by the lean management doctrine, with its emphasis on breaking down the asylum process into a
collection of smaller parts and improving efficiency through incremental “adjustments” to each step of the process. Through constant optimization of resource allocation, the aim is to reduce interruptions, minimize “waste,” and create a continuous workflow between the different actors involved in the process. As Vianelli (2022, p. 51) explains, an asylum case is, from this perspective, approached much like an automobile assembly line: “a process that needs to flow as smoothly as possible through the different stages from the asylum application to the final decision and the consequent transfer of the applicant” from the hotspot to either the Greek mainland or, as envisaged by the EU-Turkey deal, deportation back across the Aegean Sea.

McKinsey’s intervention in Greece did not entail the extraction of data from migrants directly. Rather, its strategy of “making order out of disorder” (Ashutosh & Mountz, 2011, p. 28) consisted of the continual pooling, sorting and processing of diverse strands of information from the relevant actors operating in the hotspots. For example, amidst conflicting statistics on the number of people present in the camps, a key objective was to establish the refugee population for each island. This would then allow the consultants to establish “transparency on migrant volumes per process step,” categorize the population “across islands and nationality clusters to identify potential bottlenecks,” and visualize the evolving patterns via weekly “dashboards.”
The same approach was applied to establish the “productivity rate” per process step per hotspot—that is, for instance, how many asylum interviews were conducted per GAS or EASO case worker each week. By analysing multiple strands of data almost in real time, McKinsey consultants would be in a position to monitor the “status” of implementation of each actor’s ascribed targets and propose adjustments to eliminate inefficiencies deemed to be causing the backlog.

14.6 Disciplining the Hotspots

McKinsey’s data practices performed two related but distinct roles. Distilled into PowerPoint-style slides, graphs, projections and measurable targets (see Figure 14.2), McKinsey transformed the “problem” of human mobility into an object of technocratic government for policymakers (see also Cobarrubias, 2019). Indeed, the language of “maximizing productivity,” “key performance indicators,” “process optimization” merges almost seamlessly with the European Commission’s self-image “as a technocratic agency, keen to portray its actions as being based on rationalistic decision-making procedures and the use of expertise” (Boswell, 2009, p. 195). At the same time, these data practices were a necessary precondition for formulating appropriate disciplinary measures to increase “productivity,” including meticulously planned “performance targets” for GAS caseworkers and the Appeals Committees. In a February 2017 progress report, for instance, McKinsey warned the steering committee that the “weekly total output of [circa] 50 cases across all committees is significantly below the weekly target of [circa] 300 cases.” In response, McKinsey recommended that “performance dashboards” be installed inside offices to “motivate” individual employees to meet their required “output” of decisions. The imposition of discipline was not confined to street-level bureaucrats, however. It extended to the everyday management of the camps through a range of punitive measures directed at their populations. For example, the documents speak of stricter “consequence-enforcement,” whereby the cases of individuals who failed to show up for their asylum interview would be automatically closed or archived. Elsewhere, McKinsey advised authorities to “detain migrants immediately after they are notified of returnable status” to speed up deportations.

This is not to say, however, that McKinsey’s vision of an orderly asylum regime was solely guided by the logic of securitization. Rather, the imperative of maximizing efficiency carried ambivalent effects. For example, the firm
repeatedly advised Greek authorities *against* the use of limited detention capacity on the islands for individuals signed up to the International Organization for Migration (IOM)’s “Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration” (AVRR) scheme. It also urged Greek authorities to drop the contentious “Maghreb pilot” project on Lesbos and Kos, whereby asylum-seekers from North Africa and other nationalities with “low recognition” rates were being placed in “pre-removal detention centres” immediately upon arrival (Dickson & da Silva, 2017). Opposition to these detention practices was not guided by human rights considerations, however, but by the purely instrumental objective of freeing up “maximum [detention] capacity for forced returns” in order to speed up the rate of deportations to Turkey. Indeed, the imperative of maximizing efficiency was entirely divorced from any humanitarian concerns about migrants’ welfare, for the “quality” of asylum procedures here is “calculated from the perspective of the institution, its decision-making and management processes” (Vianelli, 2021, p. 52). In fact, unlike the IOM, which couches its brand of orderly migration management in humanitarian terms (Ashutosh & Mountz, 2011, p. 28), any pretence of humanitarianism is entirely absent in McKinsey’s discourse.

A final example illustrates this point. In a March 2017 progress report, McKinsey had identified “the lack of will for transfer to mainland camps” of some refugees who were granted permission to leave the hotspots. The reason, McKinsey acknowledged, was because they “do not consent to less ‘attractive’ shelter” and the prospect of being contained, indefinitely, in often remote camps with no social ties or networks of support. From McKinsey’s perspective, however, they were needlessly occupying scarce shelter on the islands. They had, in other words, become a source of inefficiency. In response, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) was tasked to “implement [a] sanction mechanism that makes stays in hotspots less attractive” by making “cash cards work[ing] on mainland only”—effectively compelling refugees to accept camp transfers by depriving them of access to the UNHCR-managed cash assistance scheme (Tazzioli, 2019).

### 14.7 Silences and Erasures

In January 2017, as McKinsey consultants descended upon the islands, three men died within a single week inside their snow-covered tents in Moria camp. Their deaths were attributed to carbon monoxide poisoning from makeshift heating devices (Papadopoulos, 2017). Yet, McKinsey’s intervention was entirely abstracted from the lived realities of the hotspots, where the
provision of shelter itself had become a “politically crafted materiality of neglect” (Pallister-Wilkins, 2020, p. 78). One would search in vain in the McKinsey documents for any reference to the necropolitical brutalities that mark life, or death, inside the hotspots.

In fact, the entire project could only proceed via a wholesale erasure of the refugee as a rights-bearing subject endowed with the capacity for public-political speech (Stavinoha, 2019). The pervasive use of dehumanizing language is instructive. No longer are we dealing with individual men, women, children but numbers of “transferable,” “imminently addressable,” or “returnable” migrants, whose sole recorded identity markers are their nationality and their exact location along the procedural chain. As Ioannidis et al. (2021) explain in their study of the Greek Asylum Service, “asylum seekers are treated as members of particular sub-populations defined by categorical indicators rather than as human subjects.” These categories carry material consequences as they, for example, facilitate the “segmentation” of cases by nationality, a strategy that was at the core of McKinsey’s action plan despite warnings from human rights NGOs that it was contributing to “inter-ethnic tensions and riots” inside the camps, “reflecting the frustration of certain nationalities waiting for months without being given access to the asylum procedure” (Papadopoulou, 2016).

Revealingly, no refugees were interviewed as part of the project; their lived experiences and views concerning the asylum regime were considered irrelevant in the knowledge production process. These, then, are data practices where migrants are targeted “without being directly addressed or interpellated as subjects, nor required to speak” (Tazzioli, 2019, p. 74). Within this “imaginary of abstract quantification” (Witteborn, 2022, p. 12), migrants are rendered speechless but they do not appear as victims or villains, figures deeply engrained in the humanitarian imaginary. Instead, they are reduced to dehistoricized and depersonalized categories of bureaucratic “processing.”

There is, finally, no room for political agency or resistance in the sanitized discourse and aesthetics of the McKinsey reports. The everyday acts of contestation through which camp subjects rupture the illusory order of the hotspots (Stavinoha, 2019) appear as but another source of inefficiency that must be eliminated: “Increase security presence on islands to reduce downtime caused by riots and unrest” is the instruction given to the Hellenic Police. And other than references to vexatious “abscondences” that imperil efficient processes of data extraction, any traces of migrant agency are expunged from the record. The managerial imperative is clear: the hotspots shall remain thoroughly depoliticized.
14.8 Conclusion

When McKinsey delivered the final report to the steering committee in May 2017, it touted its success in “reducing total process duration” of the asylum procedure to a mere 11 days from an average of 170 days just three months earlier. Yet thousands of people have continued to be warehoused in the hotspots for months, sometimes years, ever since the consultants departed. That McKinsey’s lean management techniques did not have their desired effect is, perhaps, hardly surprising. There is a paucity of compelling evidence that demonstrates any positive impact when corporate management mantra is transposed into the public sector (Ford & Harding, 2021). But the argument here is not one of instrumentality: determining to what extent McKinsey’s proposals were actually implemented and whether McKinsey succeeded in fundamentally transforming the “managerial modalities of governmentality” of the Greek asylum regime (Ionnadis et al., 2021). That would be to ascribe too much credit to the intellectual creativity of corporate consultants, to deny the “partial, clumsy and non-working” (Tazzioli, 2019, p. 87) character of data-extraction practices at borders, and to obscure the messiness of migration management at the everyday level. Top-down impositions of the kinds of disciplinary measures depicted above inevitably clash with the “counter-conduct” of street-level bureaucrats—camp personnel, police officers, caseworkers—and their capacity to subvert managerial control (Ioannidis et al., 2021; Rozakou, 2017). Above all, and despite their meticulous analysis of every procedural component of the reception regime, McKinsey consultants failed to anticipate how their vision would be continually frustrated by people’s unruly and unyielding desire for mobility.

What purpose did McKinsey’s intervention then serve? To answer this question, it is important to bear in mind that these were not public-facing documents; their circulation was confined to senior policymakers in the EU capital of Brussels and the Greek capital of Athens. Within these corridors of political power, I argue, McKinsey’s knowledge practices sustained the imaginary illusion of the possibility of orderly asylum management envisaged by the architects of the hotspot regime. While the hotspots plunged individuals into a grotesque vortex of indignities, McKinsey’s consultants deployed mundane data practices to transform migrants immobilized on the islands into depersonalized objects of knowledge that could be acted upon, managed and controlled. In doing so, it sought to transform a fundamentally political question of Europe’s response to unruly cross-border mobility into a purely technical one. Yet, the chapter
has shown that beneath McKinsey’s sanitized lean management jargon lies not only the “irreducibly political character of data practices” (Scheel et al., 2019, p. 580) but the everyday brutalities of the hotspot regime and the punitive policies these knowledges set out to legitimate. Of course, none of this is entirely new. The desire for order and control encoded in McKinsey’s blueprint and premised on the segmentation of refugee populations “into neat categories of desirable/undesirable subjects” has a long, and dark, history, as Seuferling and Leurs (2021, p. 671) remind us. McKinsey’s intervention in Greece is thus but one chapter in the growing proliferation of essentially violent logics of abstraction and quantification within the field of mobility control (Witteborn, 2022), while the highly securitized, high-tech detention centres that are set to replace the hotspot facilities on the Aegean islands are, in this regard, but the latest infrastructural manifestation of this deep-seated fantasy.

Finally, the data practices that feed these fantasies of control cannot be divorced from the contingent political and economic processes that produce them (Lemberg-Pedersen et al., 2020). The method of accessing the internal archive of documents through FOI requests has revealed an additional feature of the outsourcing of knowledge production to McKinsey. It had the effect of partially taking the contested implementation of the EU-Turkey deal out of the public realm and, thus, beyond public scrutiny, and to obscure the bureaucratic irregularities at play. Bureaucratic irregularity, in this sense, refers not to the often-haphazard management of migration within the hotspots (Rozakou, 2017) but extends to the corridors of power where EU and national migration policies are set (Pianezzi & Grossi, 2020). Indeed, the documents obtained helped to reveal that EASO had awarded the €992,000 contract to McKinsey under “irregular” terms, according to the EU Court of Auditors (Stavinoha & Fotiadis, 2020).

What follows from this is that FOI requests present a methodological tool for shifting the empirical focus away from the ethically problematic practice of extracting knowledge “from the already surveilled bodies of displaced people” (Lemberg-Pedersen & Haioth, 2020, p. 611). Instead, it directs the critical gaze firmly towards the interactions between public and private actors that take place within sites of power where the imagined worlds of orderly migration control are conjured. These interactions are only set to expand and deepen, as datafication and dataveillance technologies continue to proliferate, making state bureaucracies across the EU (and beyond) increasingly reliant on private actors in the outsourced management of complex interoperable migration databases and the deployment of big
data analytics to sift through the vast amounts of data stored within them (Kilpatrick & Jones, 2022). By granting researchers access to a range of otherwise unavailable “backstage texts” (Walby & Larsen, 2012, p. 37), FOI requests offer a productive means for studying the decisions, discourses and everyday practices of the policymakers, bureaucrats and experts in charge of data practices that are generally highly opaque (Fink, 2017).

This does not mean that FOI requests are a magic bullet that can easily penetrate the walls of migration and border bureaucracies. Aside from being a time-intensive, often intensely frustrating, Kafkaesque exercise that requires familiarization with the procedural rules and relevant case law, not every request yields the desired results (Walby & Larsen, 2012). Public bodies can refuse to disclose documents by invoking one of the exceptions contained in FOI laws or, in some cases, on grounds of political expediency. For example, the European Commission refused to disclose details of its arrangement with McKinsey. A subsequent investigation by the European Ombudsman (2020) found that the Commission had unjustifiably withheld these documents “solely for the purpose of protecting the contractor’s commercial interests,” thereby committing an act of “maladministration.” Only in rare instances can FOI requests be a stand-alone data collection method. Yet, particularly when combined with elite interviewing and discourse analysis of publicly available documents, carefully targeted FOI requests can be productively used “to explore work that occupies the space between a given agency’s official protocol and the informal operational code that governs day-to-day activities” (Walby & Larsen, 2012, p. 34). FOI requests thus constitute an important, and so far largely overlooked, tool for digital migration researchers who wish to pry open the black-box of datafied migration management, the technocratic fantasies of control that such data practices expose, and the political and economic interests they serve.

References


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Luděk Stavinoha is Associate Professor in Media and Global Development at the University of East Anglia, UK. His research focuses on the politics of humanitarianism, migrant solidarity and border control in Europe. With expertise in the use freedom of information mechanisms, he has also collaborated with investigate journalists on investigations published in Der Spiegel, The Guardian and Al Jazeera focusing on EU migration management and mass surveillance.