

The paradox of refugee hotspots: De/Rehumanisation within logics of permanent temporariness

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Entrance of Mória Refugee Camp in Lesvos. Image source: Rita Lambert

As the EU welcomes tens of thousands Ukrainians fleeing war described by the UN as the largest humanitarian crisis Europe has seen since World War II¹, those escaping conflicts and hardships from places in the middle East or Africa, are denied similar humanitarian consideration and receive a more hostile treatment². Although the double standards and racialised approach³ of the EU and US has been criticised by many, limited attention is placed on the experience of these 'other' asylum seekers entering into the EU reception system. Almost a decade since the start of the 2014-15 crisis, that saw the world's refugee population increase by about 9 million according to United Nations Refugee Agency data⁴, important lessons can be learnt from examining how the EU's policy has evolved and how it materialises in particular places.

Greece has been a major gateway into the rest of Europe. In particular, the five Greek islands closer to Turkey- Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos- are the first port of entry and thus major sites for

¹ https://www.iom.int/news/iom-appeals-usd-350-million-support-response-ukraine-crisis?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosam&stream=top

² <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-refugees-diversity-230b0cc790820b9bf8883f918fc8e313>

³ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/african-immigrant-advocates-point-double-standard-ukrainians-receive-u-rcna23092>

⁴ (<https://news.stanford.edu/2022/03/24/ukrainian-refugees-face-accommodating-europe-says-stanford-scholar/>)

refugees reception. The EU's designation of these five islands as 'hotspots' in the Aegean Sea⁵ since 2015, means that refugees and asylum seekers that arrive on these islands cannot continue their journey into Europe and are instead taken to camps to wait for the outcome of their applications. After the signature of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016, the hotspots essentially became centres for returns to Turkey and provided for the automatic detention of new arrivals for up to 25 days in Reception and Identification Centres (RICs), even if an asylum application has been initiated⁶. In many cases, the time spent in the RICs can extend by many months or even years before a definitive decision is made on the asylum application.

Dehumanising spaces and practices of the hotspot approach

Examining the trajectory of the hotspot approach, it is difficult to ignore the adoption of increasingly dehumanising spaces and practices and how these become institutionalised over time. Having visited the sites of the previous and current camps (in Lesvos- Mória Refugee Camp (figure 1) and its successor Kara Tepe; in Samos- Vathi Camp, the 'jungle' (Figure 2) and reports from the new Zervou camp; in Chios- Vial Refugee camp), as well as the proposed sites for new RICs, we see increased restrictions on camp dwellers' movements, their isolation from the social and economic life of the islands, and restrictions that impact their agency and autonomy. The newest camps are even more disconnected, out of sight, and disempowering for migrants, who are spatially and symbolically bundled with all that is 'unwanted'. In Lesvos for example, the proposed RIC is located by the largest dump site, while in Chios it will be built in a rocky, barren and water scarce area in the Northeast of the island. The new phase of the hotspot approach, based on establishing remote and inaccessible camps away from city centres, is condemning thousands of displaced people (of all ages and backgrounds) to challenges that impact their ability to act in the present and also plan their future.



Figure 1: Boundary wall of Mória Refugee Camp in Lesvos

Image source: Rita Lambert

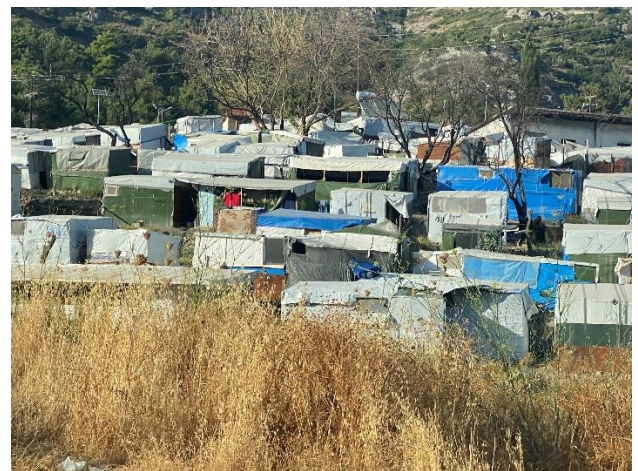


Figure 2: The jungle outside Vathi camp in Samos

Image source: Edurne Bartolome

⁵ <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/asylum-procedure/access-procedure-and-registration/reception-and-identification-procedure/>

⁶ <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2021/04/european-approach>

In Samos, the Zervou RIC has already been built. Despite numerous reports highlighting the dehumanising architecture and practices⁷, it is hailed as the cutting edge of refugee reception⁸ and a prototype for others to emulate. The land is cleared of all trees and grass, tons of concrete has been poured to support the structures, and a gridded street layout facilitates surveillance and control. The environment is hostile and stark, devoid of social spaces or children's play areas.

These RICs require considerable infrastructure investments to connect water, electricity, sewerage, and roads to their remote locations. The way they are planned clearly indicates their physical permanence. At the same time, they operate through a seemingly temporary logic. This logic is deeply problematic, as it manifests in processes that are dehumanising. This is evident in the practices adopted by RICs around food amongst others. Instead of preparing meals in situ, the camps depend on ready-made meals and a bottle of drinking water per person brought from outside. These meals do not always provide for a balanced diet and overlook recipients' cultural or religious preferences. They also produce a lot of waste as one refugee highlights: *"Every meal comes in a disposable container, so if we are getting it three times a day and there are 4000 people within the camp, that is 12,000 plastic containers that go straight to the island's dumpsites every day since there is also no recycling"*.

Despite the allocation of EU funds to meet camp dwellers' needs, the food provided does not reach all who need it, and some might forego it because it is not in line with their religious beliefs. Hence many people still experience food and water poverty. Daily cooking in camps is prohibited. Accessing food is also difficult due to the limited resources asylum seekers might have, the remote locations of camps and the restrictions on movement. Asylum seekers and refugees are thus reduced to passive agents receiving food over months and even years, not being allowed to decide how to fulfil the basic human need of feeding themselves and their families. Moreover, the endless queues, held in cage-like structures, stretching for hours to receive the cooked food, contribute to the experience of dehumanisation, oppression, and control. As a refugee, who experienced life in the camps told us: *"we have time for little else but queuing, it's exhausting, demoralising and frustrating. Food can run out without everyone receiving their share and fights can easily break out in such a tense environment"*. Authorities who work in the camp, as well as informal leaders within the camps, can exacerbate the unequal access to food and other supplies, also contributing to the experience of scarcity.

Rehumanising practices of solidarity care networks

Despite the fact that Greek authorities seeks to take full control of the refugee reception services, various NGOs and civil society organisations have stepped in as solidarity care networks to attend to the unmet needs of camp dwellers. Although discouraged, and sometimes criminalised by the state⁹, the NGOs we met take the role of service gap fillers. They also play an important part to counteract the hostile experience in RICs and rehumanise reception for migrants. There is thus a dehumanisation-

⁷ <https://faithrclarke.wordpress.com/2018/10/05/the-dehumanisation-of-refugees-immigrants-and-asylum-seekers/>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/19/why-greeces-expensive-new-migrant-camps-are-outraging-ngos>; <https://theconversation.com/inside-new-refugee-camp-like-a-prison-greece-and-other-countries-prioritize-surveillance-over-human-rights-168354>

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/17/world/europe/greece-migrants-aid-workers-espionage.html>

rehumanisation dynamic in place. This plays out between the space within the camps and the space just a few meters from the tall fences where NGOs can operate out of full view.

The NGOs and grassroots organisations we visited highlight the importance of food beyond its nutritional value. Food and cooking represent not only activities of one's daily life, but are also implicit carriers of cultural and religious identity, deeply rooted in people's daily practices and cultural codes. Cooking and eating together represents an important social moment where families sit and share their experiences and exchange thoughts. Food practices are acquired and transmitted through habitual socialisation processes, and find themselves at the core of culture. If families are prevented from cooking, and conversely, have to queue for prepared food, this daily cultural practice is interrupted, and a relevant part of identity and collective family life is negated.

To counteract this, the NGO Refugee Biryani and Bananas¹⁰ in Chios, delivers dry provisions, carefully selecting the type of food and tastes people want, so families have the ability and autonomy to cook. They can also choose the right moment for them to do so within the course of the day and eat according to their cultural codes. This is only possible where camps authorities turn a blind eye to cooking in camps or for those refugees and asylum seekers who have had the possibility to move to alternative accommodation outside the camps. When independent cooking is not possible and ready-made meals are the only option, the example of the NGO Zaporeak's¹¹ practice, displays a number of respectful considerations. Zaporeak hires people from the refugee community, who are trained and employed as chefs to cook food which is sensitive to people's desirable tastes and customs. These NGOs take considerable care to build and maintain trust with asylum seekers, by providing a sense of predictability and fairness in the delivery process amongst other strategies. A lot of effort is placed on the micro-processes of re-socialising the experience of receiving food by exchanging smiles and greetings in the many different languages and by considerably shortening the length of queues, avoiding preferential treatment, and minimising the potential for conflict.

Although they fill an important gap, these NGOs are forced to adopt a temporary logic too, through practices based on emergency response rather than sustainable solutions that acknowledge that the displacement of people is here to stay. The supplementary cooked meals, for example, can only reach recipients if packed in disposable containers. This produces considerable waste which impacts the islands' fragile ecosystem. As our interlocutors have also highlighted, when the process of supplying food is perpetually based on a crisis mode, opportunities to work closely with food producers and local vendors from the islands to enhance sustainability along the entire food value chain are missed. In the Greek hotspot islands, 'crisis mode' has been the dominant operational temporality for almost a decade now and is ongoing.

¹⁰ <https://www.refugeebiryanibananas.org/>

¹¹ <https://www.zaporeak.eus/es/>



Image source: Rita Lambert

“We had to listen to people and adapt the type of meals we cook. Our flat bread is especially popular and now famous in Lesvos”
(volunteer from Zaporeak)



Image source: Rita Lambert

“People’s lives are spent queuing, for food, for water, for the toilet, for permits... we seek to make the queues as short, as fair as possible, and provide essentials that people want” (volunteer from RBB)

Working through the paradoxes of permanent temporariness

Dominant paradoxes are found within the hotspot approach, that have long term destructive consequences. Although hotspots give all indications of being permanent, their practices are still firmly lodged in the temporary logic of emergency. Consequently, this clash not only negatively affects asylum seekers and refugees’ mental health and self-worth¹², but also the islands’ fragile social, economic and ecological systems. The large amount of waste and intractable problems that this logic creates will accumulate over time on the islands but will also be felt across geographies, as the final destination countries will have to address migrants’ traumas that have been produced in the process.

The very conceptualisation and planning of the hotspots, and the RICs within them, through a permanent temporariness, is deeply problematic. The seemingly permanent, stark and controlling

¹² <https://www.msf.org/greece-mental-health-distress-among-asylum-seekers>

physical environment is socially violent and ultimately, dehumanising. Furthermore, the practices that are embedded in the temporary logic legitimise further dehumanisation to the point of institutionalising it with every iteration of this camp model. This also serves to deter newcomers and asylum seekers from remaining in the EU entry point and amplifies the message for those still coming to seek refuge, no matter their circumstances. It is therefore important to understand how the hotspot approach can become part and parcel of a hostile strategy for dissuading and preventing migrants from arriving into Europe. In this environment, we see that NGOs and grassroots organisations try to compensate through rehumanising practices. Despite their efforts, they are also forced to adopt a temporary logic that in turn can create unintended negative impacts. There is thus an intricate connective link between the top-down and bottom-up approaches. Although the two seem to be disassociated and to work in parallel, the top-down policies are preventing the bottom-up responses from becoming more sustainable.

Given that displacement of people due to conflict and climate change will continue, and is expected to grow across the globe in the following years, it is important to better understand the impacts of the hotspot approach as it guides the way that refugee movements will be dealt with more widely, producing rather than mitigating crisis. Many lessons can be drawn from solidarity care networks as they retain the flexibility, adaptability and creativity to respond to people's shifting needs. The externalities produced by the present approach could be avoided if the role and lessons of solidarity care networks were recognised in EU policy and planning circles dealing with migration. The inclusion of these networks becomes vital to devise strategies for dignified, socially and environmentally sustainable refugee reception. Understanding the top-down and bottom-up approaches, their interaction and possibility for working together is key for enhancing a more just system.

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