



Safe Havens and Prison Islands: The Politics of Protection and Deterrence of Border Crossers on Lesvos Island.

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I argue that the refugee crisis, in terms of discourse and sequence of events, has been deliberately misused by the EU policymakers in order to govern unwanted human mobility and to impose and legitimize brutal, obscene and violent politics, such as the EU-Turkey Statement, the Hotspot Approach and the geographical restriction rule. Based on ethnographic research I conducted on border crossers on Lesvos, I argue here that these obscene policies produce a Kafkaesque and suffocating context with enormous and devastating consequences upon border crossers' lives. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on 1) the refugee crisis discourse; 2) the immobilisation of border crossers on Lesvos, the Prison Island; and 3) the racial profiling and segregation of people into penal and bureaucratic "categories": "vulnerable/ non-vulnerable" and "delinquents".

KEYWORDS: refugee crisis; externalisation; internalisation; Lesvos

Introduction¹

In 2015, images of displaced people following desperate journeys via the Aegean and Mediterranean Sea dominated the news and the social media. The mass and social media bombarded audiences with images of overcrowded dinghies floating, capsizing or sinking, and of rescues carried out by humanitarian organi-



sations. The massive border-crossings, the misery, suffering, screams, and even deaths at Lesvos, the North-Eastern edge of the European border, became a spectacle. The Aegean – similar to the Mediterranean Sea – became a deadly border (Albahari, 2016). Lesvos became the epicentre of the so-called “refugee crisis”. Over the course of 2015, approximately one million border crossers² reached Europe by sea, via Greece and Italy (Clayton & Holland, 2015). Approximately 500,000 border crossers reached Europe via Lesvos (Gillespie et al., 2016), an island with a general population of 86,436 people (Hernandez, 2016). Currently, there are 6,000 border crossers indefinitely trapped on Lesvos in limbo (UNHCR, 2018).

This paper is based on ethnographic research I conducted for my PhD thesis between October 2016 and June 2017 on Lesvos. In my thesis, I explore the multiple, and intersectional forms of harm and violence border crossers experience on Lesvos. In this paper, I am deploying interviews, observations and personal accounts, and critical reflections collected during my fieldwork. I argue that the refugee crisis, in terms of discourse and sequence of events, has been deliberately over-used by EU policymakers in order to govern unwanted human mobility and impose and legitimise brutal, obscene and violent politics, including the EU-Turkey Statement, the Hotspot Approach and the geographical restriction rule. I argue here that these obscene policies produce a Kafkaesque and suffocating context with enormously devastating consequences upon border crossers’ everyday lives. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on 1) the refugee crisis discourse; 2) the immobilisation of border crossers on Lesvos, the Prison Island; and 3) the racial profiling and segregation of people into penal and bureaucratic “categories” (“vulnerable/ non-vulnerable” and “delinquents”).

An “Unforeseen” Crisis?

Border crossings, violence, and the pain, suffering and deaths of people seeking international protection on Lesvos remain intense, enduring and traumatic lived experiences for me which still haunt me as nightmares. I lived and worked for various Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) on Lesvos Island by supporting border crossers, survivors of torture, violence and trafficking including unaccompanied minors for more than a decade. This support, in the language of my profession, is commonly framed as “aid work”. Parallel to my work, I have been po-

litionally involved in local activist movements supporting border crossers. In 2008 I traversed the threshold of Pagani “reception” centre for border crossers on Lesbos in order to provide social support to people who were reaching Lesbos (Iliadou, 2012). Naively, during that period, I thought that Pagani, termed a “reception centre”, but in practice, a detention centre was the worst space in Greece. Through the passage of time and accompanying otherwise unaccompanied minors from detention centres to reception facilities, I had access to various “reception” centres within the Greek mainland. I thus observed, lived and served as an “eyewitness” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) of what is framed as the continuum of politics of detention as well as the insult and violation of human dignity.

“Reception” centres within the Greek mainland and Lesbos before the “refugee crisis” era have systematically been condemned for the appalling, inhuman and degrading living conditions and for human rights’ abuses (Amnesty International, 2010, 2012a, Carr, 2012, 2015). Pagani was condemned as the worst detention centre in Europe during 2009, “worst than Dante’s inferno” (sic) (Carr, 2015, p. 94; Sarantidis, 2018). The living conditions there were so appalling that the European Court of Human Rights (2011) ruled that they “violated the very meaning of human dignity”. In 2010, Frontex’s Deputy Executive Director described Greece as the “hottest area of illegal immigration in Europe” (Carr, 2015, p. 88). Evros River, the natural border between Turkey and Northern Greece, became an enormous graveyard for hundreds of border crossers. This period was also framed as a “humanitarian crisis” (Pro Asyl, 2014).

Greece has been a major entry point for border crossers since the 1990s, when hundreds of thousands of Albanian border crossers arrived in the Greek mainland, in the aftermath of the collapse of the pyramid banking system in Albania (Baldwin-Edwards, Kyriakou, Kakalika, & Katsios, 2004; Dalakoglou, 2016). Moreover, from the early 2000s onwards, Greece and particularly Lesbos was an important gateway for border crossers coming from Asian and African countries, as documented by academics (Georgoulas & Sarantidis, 2013; Iliadou, 2012; Lauth Bacas, 2010) and multiple reports from Human Rights Organisations. Between 2000 and 2014, Lesbos Island and the “refugee issue” did not attract as much attention as the “refugee crisis” of 2015. It was only after the death of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian refugee child, whose dead body was washed ashore upon the coasts of Turkey, that the public opinion and the cold EU technocrats were sensitised to the

phenomenon which had gradually unfolded since the 1990s in Lesvos and Greece. Thus, the beginning of the refugee crisis is chronologically located in Aylan Kurdi's death, who also became "an allegory of refugeeness" (Khosravi, 2010, p. 73). As Miriam Ticktin denotes, "The photo [of Aylan Kurdi] gave the "migrant crisis" a new face: innocence. It shamed Europe into action" (Ticktin, 2016, p. 258).

The "crisis" as a discourse and sequence of events which unfolded and was reproduced by policymakers, the media and humanitarian organisations from 2015 onwards was so overwhelming that Lesvos Island became suddenly famous. When I moved to the UK in September 2015 to conduct my PhD research on the multiple and intersectional forms of violence and harm border crossers experience on Lesvos, the vast majority of people I spoke to had never heard of Lesvos. I remember someone asking me "Lesvos? Where is that? Is it in Malta?" However, in the aftermath of the refugee crisis, Lesvos became so famous that even Skala Sykamias – a small fishing village on Lesvos – was announced as the most popular holiday destination from AFAR travel magazine, due to the spectacle of border crossing and solidarity of the local people (Cosgrove, 2016; economy65, 2017). Lesvos became a popular destination, by attracting celebrities, volunteers and 'voluntourists' (Gillespie, 2018; Rozakou, 2016), journalists and academics, NGOs and even profiteers (lesvosnews, 2015). The scale of this intervention of various actors, particularly of NGOs, was so enormous that throughout the research process even I was repeatedly asked by local people, "Are you working for an NGO?" By having first-hand lived experiences and "bearing witness" to multiple border crossings, humanitarian "crises", sufferings, pain and deaths in time and space, this "crisis" panic (in terms of discourse, intervention and humanitarianism) seemed to me incomprehensible from the beginning, whilst mixed feelings of anger and sadness overwhelmed me. How can people, the media and particularly EU and Greek policymakers be sensitised only now by the death of a single child? What about the thousands of deaths of children, women and men within the Aegean and Mediterranean Sea crossroads from 2000 onwards (see Albahari, 2015, 2016; themigrantsfiles & UNITED, n.d.)? How can these border crossings and deaths have been ignored? What "crisis" are they talking about, since the odysseys and tragedies that border crossers experience had been unfolding during the previous two decades? How can the EU and Greek policymakers speak about crisis by pretending that crisis is a sudden, unforeseen event, an "accident" and not an outcome of political decisions?

Refugee “crisis” as a term has been challenged and problematised by scholars (Albahari, 2016; Collyer & King, 2016; De Genova & Tazzioli, 2016) on the grounds that it has been misused in order for EU policymakers to justify and legitimise emergent and exceptional measures – a state of exception (Agamben, 2005) – in the name of humanitarianism but at the expense of border crossers’ lives. The “refugee crisis” language and events which have proliferated resulted in particular governmental responses (De Genova & Tazzioli, 2016, p. 5) and practices. These were manifested via the overwhelming securitisation and militarisation of the external EU borders (De Genova & Tazzioli, 2016, p. 10; Fassin, 2011), internalisation and externalisation of the borders as well as a huge humanitarian intervention particularly in Lesbos (Howden & Fotiadis, 2017) enabling what Maurizio Albahari frames as, “a moral economy of salvation; a sovereign humanitarianism (...). A way of doing nothing while pretending to fight trafficking and the lethality of the border (Albahari, 2016, p. 278).

Safe Havens and Prison Islands

I want to be a bird to fly everywhere. To build a nest and every day I fly wherever I want. It would be a cheerful life. Birds don’t have nation they don’t have borders.” (Anonymous, 2009)

Mytilene, January 2017. It is 1 o’clock in the afternoon, and I am hastily walking down the road. A child, barely twelve years old, stands in my way. In broken English, she says, “Madam, I am from Syria. Please give me money, I am hungry.” A few steps away her mother is talking to a man, who is carrying bags full of goods. The man pulls out his wallet and gives her money. Inside a small blue car, which is parked just a few steps away, I see three men “stalking” us. They are cynically smiling. Are they secret police? Members of the Nazi Golden Dawn? Traffickers? An unspecified fear overwhelmed me. Due to my political involvement with activist networks on Lesbos, supporting border crossers, I have lived experiences of intimidation and harassment by the police, and the scene of the three men “stalking” evoked these memories. I left and started walking fast, faster than usual. Supporters of the Nazi Golden Dawn political party on Lesbos have increased significantly in comparison to the beginning of 2015 and especially in the cities of Mytilene,

Moria and the surrounding areas, where detention centres and sites “hosting” refugees either already exist or are to be established (Papanicolaou & Papageorgiou, 2016; Pazianou, 2016). As I drifted apart from the child, a woman who was passing by asked me with apathy, “Did they beg you for money?” The unknown woman was walking quickly, and at the same time, she was talking on her cell phone. “Yes,” I replied. “They beg for money all the time,” she said in a harsh and disdainful manner, and she disappeared without listening to my last few words: “do they have any other choice?”

A few hours later I followed the road which leads to the port of Mytilene, a place where I would walk in the past. However, entering the port area was impossible. The port was not the same as it used to be. It now had the appearance of a big cage, due to the high fences surrounding it and the police guarding it. In January 2017, due to the overwhelming flows on Lesvos and the lack of reception facilities in the main camp of Moria, the port was turned into an unofficial camp for approximately 300 border crossers. A former navy ship was anchored within the port serving as a peculiar “reception centre”. What an oxymoron, I thought. Although border crossers live inside a ship within the port, they are not allowed to travel, due to the geographical restriction rule implemented in the aftermath of the EU-Turkey Statement.

On 18 March 2016 in a common Statement, the EU and Greece recognised Turkey as a “safe third country” and “a first country of asylum”, even though Turkey has been criticised for the systematic violations of human rights and violence (Amnesty International, 2016). In practice, this meant that, “[a]ll new irregular migrants entering from Turkey into the Greek islands as from 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey”, as well as “Migrants not applying for asylum or whose application has been found unfounded or inadmissible in accordance with the said directive will be returned to Turkey” (European Council, 2016). After the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement and the Hot Spot Approach (Council of the European Union, 2015), the Greek islands, and particularly Lesvos, were turned into a securitised and militarised space of governance, where multiple national and EU bodies coexist and operate: the Greek police and Coastguard, the Greek army, the European Union’s Law Enforcement Agency, the European Union Borders and Coast Guard Agency, the European Union’s Judicial Cooperation Unit, the European Asylum Support Office, the Greek Asylum service, the office of the United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees, the International Organisation of Migration and various International and Non-Governmental Organisations; the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation has also been deployed in order to patrol into the Aegean Sea and “assist” in tackling the “criminal trafficking networks”, which were blamed for the deaths of hundreds of border crossers (NATO, 2016). NATO’s operations at the Aegean Sea inaugurated and established a whole new geopolitical epoch as far as the militarisation of the Aegean Sea is concerned (Garelli & Tazzioli, 2016).

Additionally, the “geographical restriction” rule was reinforced by the Greek authorities in order to “comply”, as they put it, with the EU-Turkey Statement’s terms and conditions. Under the rule of “geographical restriction”, all new border crossers arriving at the Greek Islands after 20th March 2016 are coerced by the Greek authorities to remain there until their bureaucratic and asylum procedures have been completed (Greek Council for Refugees, 2016a). As if shutting down the Balkan route and the potential of deportation or “re-admission” to Turkey was not enough, border-crossers additionally found themselves in a state of captivity by the Greek state. The geographical restriction rule indefinitely immobilised border crossers on Lesbos by creating a prison context for them, where the prison is not located only within Moria camp but everywhere on the Island. According to Katja Franko Aas, “one does not need prisons to be, or feel, incarcerated in the locality” (2007, p.293). As *Sariad*³, a Syrian border crosser, puts it, echoing most of my interviewees, “The Island is like a prison; the only difference now is that there are no fences; there is instead the sea.”

As I was standing outside the ‘cage-port’, I saw the ferry to Athens getting ready to sail, as the last passengers were running to board. A small group of border-crossing men were showing their “papers” to the coastguard who, with a dismissive wave of his hand, indicated to them that they were not allowed to enter the port and ferry. Those border crossers were not lucky today, I thought. Maybe they will be lucky tomorrow. Who knows? And if not them, some others perhaps – some who will possess “genuine papers” or more professionally made passports purchased for a high price from traffickers – will be luckier. The more expensive the documents and passports are, the greater the chances of a successful exit from the island. You pay for what you get, after all. On the back side of the port, in the shadow of the statue which, ironically, is called the Statue of Liberty, another small group of border crossers is left outside of the ‘cage-port’ gazing at the ferry travel-

ling to Athens. They, too, had no luck today – like so many other border crossers who have been stranded within an enormous geographical, physical and psychological limbo for many months by moving here and there, back and forward on a daily basis; from Moria, Kara Tepe and PIKPA camps to Mytilene, sometimes on foot, sometimes by bus or taxi. This is what the internalisation of the borders looks like, I was thinking.

In 2003 a policy paper under the name “A New Vision for Refugees”, which included Tony Blair’s vision concerning the management of the irregular migration flows within Europe, emerged (Travis, 2003). This was Blair’s proposal at the EU-Thessaloniki Summit about the establishment of a regime of “Regional Protection Areas” or “Protection Zones” or “Safe Havens”, as well as Transit Processing Centres (TPCs) for border crossers on transit routes on Europe (Amnesty International, 2003; Hess & Kasparek, 2017; Noll, 2015; Travis, 2003). Blair’s ambivalent scheme would involve denial of entry to “asylum seekers” and “economic migrants” by returning them to the “Safe Havens”, meaning to countries outside the EU and close to migrants’ homelands (Johnston, 2003; Noll, 2015; Travis, 2003). “Safe Haven” countries would serve as a containment for border crossers arriving for the first time there, for deportee border crossers from other EU countries, as well as containment for returning border crossers, for possible resettlement in the EU (Antonakaki, Kasparek, & Maniatis, 2016; Hess & Kasparek, 2017, p. 63; Kuster & Tsianos, 2016). According to Jennifer Hyndman, the notion of “safe spaces” is not something new. It is a post-Cold War phenomenon which was applied in 1991 in Northern Iraq and also Haiti and Rwanda (Hyndman, 2003; Long, 2013). “Safe Havens” reflect the deliberate political intention of a “preventive protection” (Hyndman, 2003, p. 168), meaning the provision of humanitarian relief as far away as possible, within or closer to displaced population’ countries (Long, 2013). This demonstrates the determination of policymakers “to bring safety to people rather than people to safety, by force if necessary” (Newland in Hyndman, 2003, p. 169).

What took place in practice in the aftermath of the refugee crisis was, in Miriam Ticktin’s words, an “armed love” process (Ticktin, 2016) within the borders, an overwhelming spectacle of “protective” militarised and humanitarian response. The “armed love” process involved, instead of international protection, enormous securitisation, the militarisation of the borders and governance of irregularised border crossing. It also involved a process of externalisation and, at the same

time, internalisation; namely a process which pushes the borders of Europe outwards and inwards (De Genova & Tazzioli, 2016; Frelick, Kysel, & Podkul, 2016; Hess & Kasperek, 2017; Ruhrmann & FitzGerald, 2016). The internalisation of borders within European countries like Greece vividly echoes Blair's "Safe Havens" vision. It includes the "safe country" concept (European Commission, 2015; Ruhrmann & FitzGerald, 2016, p. 7), according to which countries like Turkey and Afghanistan are recognised as "safe" (European Council, 2016; European Union, 2016). The "safe country" concept has a direct effect on the asylum procedures which take place within the safe countries. It also includes bilateral and readmission agreements. With an exchange of development, capacity building and financial aid, countries which were only "transit" are now becoming "buffer zones", keeping border crossers stranded there. "Buffer states" thus become the watchdogs or, in Liz Fekete's words, the "immigration police" (Fekete, 2001) of the external frontiers of fortress Europe. After all, as the American poet Robert Frost phrases it, "Good fences make good neighbors" (Frost, 1914). Additionally, it includes the deployment of maritime patrol operations within the Mediterranean and Aegean Sea (Frontex, NATO, EU Naval Force Med) (Garelli & Tazzioli, 2016), as well as the establishment of a European Border and Coast Guard which "would consist of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, an enhanced FRONTEX, and the national border authorities, which are to share responsibility for European integrated border management" (Ruhrmann & FitzGerald, 2016, p. 25).

From the abovementioned policies, those which crucially affected Greece and particularly Lesvos were the EU-Turkey Statement, the 'geographical restriction' rule, and the Hotspot approach. According to *Sophia*, one of my interviewees and a lawyer supporting border crossers on Lesvos, the Greek Government is determined to implement the EU-Turkey Statement and the 'geographical restriction' rule "no matter what". This is evident in the fact that activists and NGOs, as well as Law Bar Associations, have repeatedly been noting that the 'geographical restriction' is arbitrary, against the Greek Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights, an outcome of arbitrary interpretation and thus a political decision (Chios Law Bar Association, 2016). As *Sophia* stated during her interview,

Turkey does not accept refugees back if it is proved that returnees are sent from another part of Greece and not from the islands. The EU-Turkey Statement says;

‘From the Greek Islands only!’ Do not return refugees [to Turkey] from Korinthos [Greek mainland], keep them!’ [She says cynically].

In October 2016, a few months after the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement, I started my fieldwork in Lesbos. Although I have lived and worked there for more than a decade, I was confronted with dreadful changes, all brought about by the “sensitive” and “deeply concerned” EU and Greek policymakers. The coasts surrounding the island and even the city centre were full of “border crossing monuments” (Iliadou, 2018) – namely disposed lifejackets, plastic dinghies, clothes and litters – indicating hundreds of border crossings. Border crossers were wandering here and there within the city centre, aimlessly, like “living dead”. Moria and Kara Tepe, the two official camps coordinated by the Greek authorities, were overcrowded. Moria camp did not resemble in any way an organised, official site. It was located within a former military base surrounded by tall fences and walls, with the police, the riot police, and G4S private security being present there. The overcrowded facilities within, around and outside Moria camp, the general disorder (the litters, plastic bottles, clothes, sleeping bags and tents) confounded any sense of the camp as an official site. I observed many dirty clothes hanging on the fences and waving like small dirty flags. I thought that these peculiar dirty “flags” are something that I have encountered in almost all “camps” I have been to in the past. A strong and intolerable smell came from a deep ditch on my right. The ditch was full of dirty clothes and sleeping bags, evidence of people who had been sleeping rough. A smell of urine emanated from the ditch, while stools were all over a small road between the canteens and the camp’s gate. “Welcome to Europe,” I thought, ashamed.

These moments are part of the everyday life of border crossers who are stranded on Lesbos in limbo. They are a vivid illustration of the “collateral casualties” of the politics of closed borders, “safe havens”, deterrence and internalisation/ externalisation of the borders. As *Maria*, a support worker for an NGO, said during her interview, “Suddenly a population who traditionally was “on the move” became a population “on hold”.”

The policies implemented in the aftermath of the “crisis” have produced misery and pain on a large scale. Without being able to move either forward or back, stranded on a small piece of earth surrounded by the deep blue sea, border cross-

ers are held as hostages on the Prison Island. Meanwhile, the only option for breaking free or having a better treatment is to be assessed as “vulnerable”.

Racial Profiling and Segregation: The Vulnerable, the Delinquents, the Disposable

On a cold morning in January 2017 I am walking down the main street of the city centre of Mytilene. The shops are open, people are passing by, and the street is noisy and busy. The sea surrounding the city centre’s dock is calm. As I walk in front of the open shops, the big and bold headlines of a local newspaper catch my attention: “Vulnerable and troublemakers will be removed from the island” (sic). The article says that the Mayor and the Prime Minister came to an agreement in order for “vulnerable” and “delinquents” (paravatikoi)⁴ border crossers, and those who create problems for the local community, to be transferred from Lesvos to the mainland. What an oxymoron I thought, the “vulnerable” and “deviant” together; the former are the ones that “deserve” protection and special treatment, while the latter are the “undesirable”.

The representation of border crossers in media and policy discourse through binaries such as “vulnerable” versus “delinquent” produces images of people who are either “problematic” (vulnerable) or “the problem” (deviant) per se (Judge, 2010; Nyers, 2006; Pickering, 2001). These binaries problematise border crossers who are all grouped and criminalised as ‘a problem’ and ‘problematic’ faceless population and not as people seeking international protection. As I am reading the newspaper article, I could not stop thinking of Sharon Pickering’s words: “the inherent deviancy of asylum seeking” (Pickering, 2001, p. 178), and the a priori criminalisation and stigmatisation of people seeking international protection (Bosworth & Turnbull, 2014). The focus on delinquency raises the issue of the “racialised deviant”, which represents migrants as a “problematic” population, but overlooks problematic state policies imposed at the expense of border crossers.

A few hours later I headed to Moria camp in order to meet *Yusuf*, a 50-year-old Syrian border crosser. At the edge of a small road between the canteens and Moria’s main gate, *Yusuf* was waiting for me to come. In one hand he was holding a cigarette, and in the other hand, he was holding a small plastic bag. “You look like

my daughter”, *Yusuf* told me with sadness. *Yusuf* was forcibly separated from his family in order to reach Europe.

I am already one year here, and I am still waiting. I gave my interview, and I am still waiting. *I am a Syrian*. They told me that I will receive an answer in a couple of months but still nothing. I do not know what will happen. I am already one year here.

Yusuf was currently living in another refugee camp on Lesbos, but the day we met, he had an appointment with an NGO employee in Moria camp, in order to be medically examined. As we were speaking, he opened his plastic bag, and he showed me his papers. He unfolded one of them and pointed at a small box at the end of the document, telling me with a strangled voice, “Do you see this? This is not good, not good at all. It says “NO”. This “NO” in this box is not good.” As I looked more carefully at his paper, I realised that he was pointing at a medical assessment. The box on the bottom of his document was referring to the “vulnerability issue”. According to the doctors of the NGO, *Yusuf* was not vulnerable enough, and they assessed him as “non-vulnerable”. “This is not good, not good at all”, *Yusuf* kept on saying, as ‘vulnerability’ would have helped him to be recognised as a refugee. Vulnerability would be his “passport”, which would allow him to travel to the mainland by breaking free from the Prison Island. After *Yusuf* left and our roads split, the echo of his strangled voice saying “This is not good, not good at all” was stuck my head.

Delinquency and vulnerability are two of the bureaucratic classifications implemented under the fast-track border procedures (Greek Council for Refugees, 2016). Especially after the implementation of the “geographical restriction”, where all border crossers were indefinitely immobilised in Lesbos, the two classifications were introduced for the bureaucratic and deportation apparatus to operate “efficiently” by prioritising and “protecting” the vulnerable and expelling all others. Both are very problematic as concepts per se, but also as policies implemented within the bureaucratic and asylum procedures. As Ann Murphy observes, “there is something about the theme of vulnerability that raises troubling issues” (Murphy in Gilson, 2016). Administrative vulnerability is not just a problematic concept but also a tool of segregation and segmentation. It acknowledges that some people

are more vulnerable than others, whose needs must be protected and safeguarded by a paternalistic state (Butler, Gambetti, & Sabsay, 2016). At the same time, the paternalistic state has the power to define who counts as vulnerable or not, to control the ways of protection and at the same time to victimise.

“Vulnerable” people in Lesvos within the bureaucratic asylum procedures must be first identified and assessed according to certain criteria by expertise, via a specific vulnerability assessment which includes medical examinations. In practice, however, due to the overwhelming numbers of people arriving and being restricted in Lesvos, vulnerability does not guarantee the protection of the vulnerable. Vulnerable people can be excluded from the administrative vulnerability scheme during the bureaucratic procedures, since among the vulnerable cases even “more” vulnerable cases are identified to whom the higher priority is given. A state of “vulnerability within vulnerability” is thus being implemented. According to Gilson (2016, p. 74), “(...) [vulnerability] characterises some and does not pertain to others, and this attribution is accompanied by a hierarchical ascription of value in terms of agency and other desirable capacities and traits”.

What I observed during my research on Lesvos, as a result of the administrative vulnerability, was various cases of people seeking international protection who were willing to do anything possible in order to be assessed as vulnerable and thus have “better” treatment – for instance, to live in accommodation outside Moria camp or to have the opportunity to travel to the Greek mainland. *Katja*, a local activist and lawyer, supporting border crossers on the island, told me with emphasis during the interview:

There are even people who are forging the vulnerability assessment by replacing the ‘no’ with a ‘yes’. Now, I do not know. There is a possibility that a case-worker can check directly into the system [via a database] if one is vulnerable. But, many refugees are forging “No” to “Yes”. This “No” and “Yes” has “killed” people.

Katja’s last sentence made more obvious to me that the “love” EU and Greek policymakers were distributing to the thousands of border crossers on Lesvos was actually “killing” them quietly, silently and softly. Policymakers’ “love” in the form of humanitarianism, care, and protection made me think of the irony of the expres-

sion “your love is suffocating me”. As I found, the consequences of the vulnerability criterion, for some of the border crossers on Lesbos, were even worse. As *Petros*, a humanitarian worker for an NGO highlighted during his interview,

A woman who is raped, for example, en route to Europe and is now in a state of unwanted pregnancy, apart from the fact that it is very unlikely to speak to someone it is also very unlikely that she will proceed to abortion, since pregnancy is a ‘bonus’, a ‘ticket’ for vulnerability.

As *Serafeim*, an aid worker supporting border crossers, emphasised during his interview, “vulnerability is the royal road which leads to the refugee status”, but which is paved with massive misery, suffering and pain. What perverse minds would implement obscene policies and bureaucratic criteria like vulnerability by pushing women into unwanted pregnancies, even when these are an outcome of a rape?

During fieldwork in January 2017, I was shocked and upset by the news of three border crossers’ deaths in the space of one week in Moria camp due to the cold. They were all “single men” who were living in tents, and they had not been considered to be vulnerable (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2017c). Cold is unbearable for border crossers who even invent metaphors to illustrate the misery the Greek authorities coerce them to live in. “This is not an Island. It is the land of ice, an iceland. That is why I think it is so cold”, *Salif*, a border crosser from Eritrea, remarked during his interview. Playing with words “Iceland-island”, he commented on the problem of winterisation, which a week before I met him had killed the three men. *Morteza*, another border crosser from Afghanistan, stated,

Each refugee is distributed with two blankets, and I think two blankets with this weather are not enough especially when refugees sleep in the tents. Even inside the house, you cannot sleep with two blankets, how then can you sleep inside the tents? Moria camp is colder than [the city of] Mytilene.

Vulnerability is both inclusive and exclusive, it “risks sustaining the very exclusion and inequality it aims to redress” (Peroni & Timmer, 2013, p. 1057). “Single men” are excluded from the vulnerability criterion, and they do not experience equal treatment within Moria camp. They must endure long queues in order to use the lava-

tories or to receive food. They are obliged to sleep inside summer tents even during winter, just because they do not count as vulnerable. Structural violence, which is manifested in multiple ways, is a common phenomenon within detention, the camp and the Prison Island, turning all border crossers into the vulnerable by also exposing them to death. Vulnerability is a problematic concept in terms of “how it captures and expresses the complexities, tensions, and ambiguities of experiences of gender, sexuality, and power in contemporary life” (Gilson, 2016, p. 73).

As for people who are classified as “delinquents”, they do not have many chances to be granted asylum in case they are asylum seekers. In fact, deportability seems to be the corollary of delinquency. Classification on the grounds of “delinquency” (Greek Council for Refugees, 2016b; Ministry of Interior, 2016) is implemented on Lesbos in order for the “unwanted”, “unworthy” and “disposable” border crossers to be expelled. It is based on a very vague and ambivalent definition linked with border crossers’ country of origin. As *Sophia* emphasised,

They [Greek authorities] indicatively list some of those countries, so as it will be more convenient for them to implement discriminatory and racist policies. The nationalities in the list are the ones they want to treat as delinquents with rejections and deportations.

What was clear to me during my fieldwork was an obscene, inhuman and degrading treatment of all border crossers being penalised as “delinquents”. Delinquents are detained and thus coerced to live only within a prison inside Moria camp called ‘Section B’ for an uncertain period of time. What I found during my research was that the detention on the grounds of “delinquency” is in most of the cases unfounded and arbitrary. According to the NGO Greek Council of Refugees, “findings on-site do not confirm allegations of “law-breaking conduct” in the vast majority of the cases” (2016, p.16). The most well-known cases of arbitrary detention on the grounds of delinquency are that of Arash Hampay – an Iranian border crosser who went on a hunger strike for 41 days in July 2017 by demanding the release of “all arbitrarily detained refugees and migrants from Section B in Moria” (Sea-Watch, 2017) – and the “35 of Moria” case (Legal Centre Lesbos, 2017).

This racial profiling of people seeking international protection based on their country of origin raises important issues of state racism. As many of my interview-

ees, who are activists and support refugees, have noted, people being classified as “migrants with an economic profile” are facing multiple forms of discrimination. From the moment they reach Lesbos they get arrested and detained with inadequate access to legal aid. Their personal needs and circumstances are ignored. They are detained for a prolonged period until they are eventually deported. As if by irony, delinquency is also linked with migrants having an “economic profile”. Thus, delinquency is frequently linked with those nationalities that are “deportable”. Most of the riots, fires and self-harm are caused by these people in a desperate attempt for their voices and problems to be heard. As Palidda observes, “some among those who have been responsible for unlawful conduct may have been victims of excessive zealousness if not abuses, harassment or even arbitrary persecutions” (Palidda, 2006, p. 10).

“Everything which is black and moves is arrested”

In May 2017, *Sams*, one of my interviewees, an Afghan refugee man who has been living on Lesbos since 2011 and for more than a decade in Greece, was arrested by the port police while he was taking a night walk around the port. Although he showed his refugee identification card to the authorities, the port police officers arrested him, detained him in a container for many hours and then released him, without any further explanation:

I was just walking around the Port, and I was arrested! They detained me for several hours in a container within the port, which is at the Customs Office side. They have several containers like this in which they detain people. At some point, a port police officer came to see me and said: “You should be aware that we are looking for them [migrants]”. They are doing street patrols with cars and every time they trace refugees because refugees are visible – they look like refugees – they arrest them, detain them, and after some hours they let them go on foot. They are doing it frequently you know. They just stop refugees in the streets, and they arrest them.

“Since when is it illegal to walk during the night?” *Sams* kept saying, frustrated by the fact that either with or without “papers”, all migrants and their “papers”

are treated by the authorities with disbelief (Fassin & D'Halluin, 2005; Haas, 2017). The “culture of disbelief” is diffused within the asylum system’s procedures (Haas 2017, p. 79) and also within everyday life. This everyday racialised and intimidating treatment on behalf of the police is not a new or unusual phenomenon (Amnesty International, 2012b; Karamanidou, 2016). *Jafar*, a border crosser from Afghanistan whom I interviewed in Lesvos, told me about a similar experience to *Sams* in 2014.

Jafar came to Lesvos in 2006 as an unaccompanied minor in order to seek international protection. With his asylum claim pending for more than six years, *Jafar* left Greece irregularly in order to seek international protection in Germany, where he was granted refugee status. In 2014 he decided to travel back to Lesvos, as a tourist this time, to visit his friends. Disappointingly, when the ship from Athens reached the port of Mytilene, he was arrested by the port police, because he “looked like” a migrant. Although he possessed a passport and the refugee identification card, the authorities did not believe him and detained him for several hours in a container located at the port police station. *Jafar* was interrogated by the port police officers; he was forced to give the names and addresses of the people he was visiting, while the bona fide of his passport was questioned:

Port police did not want to believe that my passport is a genuine one. They were looking at it and checking it over and over again, whilst they were constantly repeating: “How can this be possible? There is no way this document to be genuine.” Greek authorities did not want to believe that there are also migrants who can travel legally. For them, we all are and will always be illegal.

While the port police officers were searching *Jafar*’s bag, they discovered brochures from an activist group supporting refugees. “You arsehole! Are you involved in these things?” one of the officers shouted at him. “Since when is illegal to distribute information leaflets”, *Jafar* asked, only to receive the port police officer’s abusive answer, “Shut up you fucking arsehole!” The everyday disbelief of the genuineness of “papers” during the “transactions” with the authorities intimidate border crossers, and further evoke and inflict traumas, horror, anxiety, psychological harms and precariousness. Moreover, this also turns the official documents – and thus the refugee status – into “make-believe” and “ephemeral” (Navaro-Yashin, 2007).

Within the context of the severe securitisation and migration controls at and within the borders and border zones, massive expulsions, arrests, deportations and violence are taking place on a regular basis. “Sweep” operations by the authorities are just another violent tool of segregation and intimidation. In this context, as *Sophia* emphasises, “everything which is black and moves is arrested” as well as abused, intimidated and/or deported. As the No Border Kitchen Lesbos activist group states:

Police violence is omnipresent on Lesbos. It happens in the day, in the night, in the street, in the police station, in Moria prison and to people with and without papers. Every day on this island, people are controlled, harassed, humiliated insulted and beaten. (No Border Kitchen Lesbos, 2017).

For this reason, the vast majority of my interviewees told me that border crossers are forced to adopt “survival strategies” in order to survive. For example, they are adjusting their everyday routine in order not to be arrested and harassed by the Police. They avoid walking on the main streets of the city centre during nighttime, using shortcuts and back-ways instead in an attempt to be as invisible as possible (Coutin, 2005).

‘Crimmigration’ and illegalisation are dispersed within everyday life and endure within the refugee status itself via disbelief and intimidation. “Illegality” becomes a stigma, a stereotype from which even recognised refugees cannot escape. Within this racial profiling and illegalisation process, where “*everything which is black and moves is arrested*”, fall also activists who support refugees on Lesbos. Activists are likely to be arrested just because they look like migrants. These processes – which are an outcome of the broader EU policies over the governance of unwanted human mobility – are not just racist, but also dehumanising, as well as a vital part of the broader politics of deterrence.

Epilogue: The Time of Waiting

What I have realised through the passage of time and my lived experiences as an activist, local, professional and researcher is that for the EU policymakers the only “refugees” who are welcome are the ones who never manage to reach Europe. The

ones who eventually arrive in Europe are exposed to obscene, degrading and humiliating treatment. What is more devastating for me is seeing border crossers being trapped in “the time of control” (Andersson, 2014) which policymakers impose. Amongst all the collateral casualties of the “refugee crisis” measures (militarisation, internalisation/externalisation of the borders, racialisation, delinquency and victimisation/vulnerability), one of the most violent and devastating appears to be the violence of enduring and indefinite waiting. This means enduring suffering, considering that border crossers get stuck multiple times within multiple transits and buffer zones, refugee camps, detentions throughout their journey to Europe. As I have observed, border crossers are in an oxymoronic constant state of breaking free from the one stage of “stuckedness” (Hage, 2009) to another and remaining at the same time still. This awkward and oxymoronic state is often phrased as “in limbo”, wherein border crossers wait, are stuck and move multiple times within multiple limbos (geographical, bureaucratic, legal, social, mental, psychological and existential) as well as from limbo to limbo. In this peculiar scheme of “limbo within limbo” – “limbo-ness” – time plays a pivotal role, since it defines the duration of one’s waiting and precariousness (Hasselberg, 2016; Khosravi, 2014; Turnbull, 2016). Time is not an “ordinary” time since it moves slowly by inflicting enduring suffering and pain to people. Time, “being stuck” and waiting are some of the most obscene forms of violence exercised upon border crossers on Lesbos Island. No wonder my border crosser interviewees give a name to this particular and peculiar time wasted inside the material and symbolic detentions: “Prison Time”. Prison Time is a wasted time which cannot be replaced. This fact is a form of violence, and it has enormous, short- and long-term, harmful mental consequences (Dorling et al., 2008; Pemberton, 2015) upon people, who watch the years and the moments – the time of their life – being wasted without being able to do anything about it. “I have not lived my life as I dreamed and as I wanted to”, *Sams* kept saying to me. While, *Thalis* a border crosser from Ghana said, “I am wasting time of my life without doing anything.”

Border crossers are intimidated, harassed and abused everywhere and at all times inside the Prison Island. Everyday life turns out to be for them everyday torture. Not only must they tolerate an enduring and never-ending bureaucracy during the registration and asylum procedures; they also have to endure dehumanisation, discrimination and segregation into bureaucratic and penal “categories” and

“sub-categories”, into “humans” and “sub-humans”. They have to endure waiting for months and some others, like *Sam* and *Jafar*, for years in order to regulate their legal status or to be deported. As they are waiting, they are forced to experience the humiliation of waiting in degrading conditions, like those in Moria camp, where queuing in order to use the lavatories, to receive food, to see doctors, to speak with the staff, to seek asylum is an everyday and devastating reality. Meanwhile, exploitation, violence, rapes, trafficking and torture within Moria camp and the Prison Island take place regularly (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2017a, 2017b). Between 2016 and 2017 more than six people died in the Moria camp. Self-harm and suicide attempts there have become routine. Rapes and sexual violence are routinised too. Meanwhile, border crossers are forced into survival sex inside and outside the camp, in order to financially survive.

In the aftermath of the refugee crisis, the EU’s “humanitarian” response at the borders – which peaked after the EU-Turkey Statement – turned the everyday life of the thousands of border crossers into a living hell. Border crossers fleeing in order to seek international protection are trapped in a coercive, violent existence. Due to the coerced border controls on land and at sea, and the arbitrary push-backs and deportations, border crossers cannot easily reach Europe. The ones who manage to come are “victims” of intersectional forms of everyday violence. Moria camp and more broadly the Prison Island have become an immense graveyard of the dead, the social dead, and the “living-dead” (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004).

By paraphrasing Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013, p. 171), the dream of an EU humanitarian approach to border security is a dream and an insatiable desire of the EU policymakers. However, their dream or vision is a horrifying and lurid nightmare for the thousands of border crossers.

Endnotes

- ¹ I would like to thank Prof. Steve Tombs for his comments and revisions on previous versions of this paper.
- ² Throughout the article I adopt the term “border crossers”, instead of the legal and bureaucratised terms “refugees”, “asylum seekers”, “irregular migrants”. In doing so I am morally and politically engaging with grassroots movements, which emphasise the fact that the problem is the border. Borders produce border controls, visas and passports, “legal” or “illegal” mobilities, bureaucratic and legal classifications of people as “refugees” or “asylum seekers”.

- ³ All the names being used in the paper are pseudonyms.
- ⁴ The original term used is “paravatikos”, (plural: paravatikoi) a term which in English is more precisely translated as “delinquent” and it means “deviant”. However, in some of the NGOs’ reports the term “paravatikos” is translated as “troublemaker” or “law-breaking conduct”.

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