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Struggling for Time on Lesbos: The Impact of EU and National Legislation and Procedures on Refugee Temporalities

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Since the summer of 2015, the Greek island of Lesbos has been centre stage of the so-called refugee crisis and one of the sites where new EU policies for migration control have been tested and implemented. This combined study of jurisprudence with ethnographic fieldwork aims to understand the impact of the asylum regime on the experience of time for refugee applicants on Lesbos. Indeed, different national and EU laws and regulations affect people on the move and their ability to continue their journeys through Europe, forcing them to remain on Lesbos for variable amounts of time waiting for their asylum procedure while experiencing a legal limbo. Long, indefinite waits and abrupt accelerations of the procedure are both part of the temporality of control imposed on refugee subjectivities. Through testimonies collected during ethnographic fieldwork, time is here analysed both in its productivity in terms of humanitarian and labour economies, and in its effects on subjectivities. Different forms of temporal and economic oppression are highlighted, as well as the resulting resistance against these conditions enacted by the refugee population.

Keywords: asylum; time; waiting; border regime; temporalities.

[W]hat happens if we invert the crisis, asking who is really at risk and who is really experiencing a process of crisis?

The picture then looks very different and the contingent suffering, variegated vulnerability and political subjectivity of people on the move takes centre-stage.

— Pallister-Wilkins 2016, 314

Introduction

In 2015, the EU received over 1.2 million first-time asylum claims, more than double the number registered in the previous year. The increase was largely due to higher

numbers of asylum claims from Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis fleeing wars and political crises (IOM 2016). The arrival in Europe of people on the move in 2015 has been widely represented in the framework of “border spectacle” (Cuttitta 2012; Casas-Cortés et al. 2015) through images of crowded landings on the shores of Greece’s Aegean islands. The most iconic and dramatic picture is that of the dead body of the three-year-old Kurdish child, Alan Kurdi, who drowned on a Turkish beach after a failed border-crossing attempt (Smith 2015). European media and politicians have broadly called what started in 2015 a “refugee crisis”, but different migration scholars have criticized this definition (Casas-

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Cortes et al. 2015; New Keywords Collective 2016), preferring to describe it as a "reception crisis" (Lendaro et al. 2019), or analysing it as a failure of the Common European Asylum System (Gilbert 2015). Furthermore, others criticize the use of the term "crisis" itself for its weaponization in enforcing stricter migration policies at a European level (Pallister-Wilkins 2016). We suggest here the concept of "self-perpetuating crisis": the lack of humanitarian visas and safe passage to Europe forces people to reach its shores through dangerous routes and makeshift means (New Keywords Collective 2016). The consequent narrative of this phenomenon being a crisis produces a further securitization of migration policies and the militarization of the external borders of the EU (Bigo 2002; Jovanović 2021). Nonetheless, these stricter policies do not stop people on the move who are searching for protection, but force them to find new hazardous routes to reach Europe, producing new "crises".

Within this context, although the so-called Dublin Agreement (Regulation EU No 604/2013) assigns the primary duty to examine an asylum claim,¹ and to provide materially for asylum seekers, to the EU member state where the asylum seekers entered, some of the southern countries of the Union were criticized for not complying with the regulation. In fact, authorities of these states were not registering all migrants arriving on their territory in Eurodac, the EU's fingerprint database, thus allowing people to move on further, to northern EU member states. For this reason, in late 2015, the European Commission initiated infringement procedures against Croatia, Greece, Malta, Hungary, and Italy (European Commission 2015a). Moreover, presented as a solidarity measure for EU countries facing disproportionate migration pressure, in 2015, the Commission launched the "hotspot approach" (Loschi & Slominski 2022). This measure consists of the attempt to prevent "secondary movements" of asylum seekers towards North-Western Europe, confining people on the move in the countries on the frontline of migration, such as Greece and Italy, with the help of different EU agencies:

The European Asylum Support Office (EASO), Frontex and Europol will work on the ground [...] to swiftly identify, register and fingerprint incoming migrants. [...] Those claiming asylum will be immediately channelled into an asylum procedure where EASO support teams will help to process asylum cases as quickly as possible. For those not in need of protection, Frontex will help Member States by coordinating the return of irregular migrants. Europol and Eurojust will assist the host Member State with investigations to dismantle the smuggling and trafficking networks. (European Commission 2015b)

As a result, places located at the external borders of the EU, like the Aegean islands, came to play a central role in the implementation and experimentation of the European asylum system, creating challenges at a local level (Bousiou 2020). In September 2015, the

Moria camp—which had already been functioning on the island of Lesbos since 2013 as a screening centre for people landing on the island (Trubeta 2015)—was declared a hotspot: a site of management, control, sorting, and labelling of people on the move, that progressively turned into a place of prolonged forced residence for people claiming asylum in Europe.

Prompted by and thanks to EU funding, the hotspot approach was implemented outside of a defined legal framework (*ex multis* Casolari 2016; Thym 2016). The hotspot represents a model for policy experimentation used by the EU, and even though has not produced any tangible results, the border control practices under this approach found an adaptation and generalisation into the Common European Asylum System reform proposals put forward in 2016 and revised in 2020 with the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (Campesi 2020).

This case study explores the impact of supranational and national laws on a first arrival site in the EU, such as Lesbos, between 2015 and 2022.² In particular, it focuses on how the different rules and regulations have affected the temporalities of asylum seekers on this Greek island where 500,018 people landed in 2015 alone (UNHCR 2015). We positioned ourselves on the "battlefield" of the borderland (Mezzadra & Stierl 2019) by conducting research in Lesbos' capital, Mitilini, between March and August 2022. Being involved in humanitarian organisations has been a choice about how to live in the territory and use our privilege as white western researchers. Following the idea of situated knowledge developed by feminist critics (Haraway 1988; bell hooks 1990; Borghi 2020), we did not pretend to assume a neutral perspective, but by making explicit our positionality in the field, we produced a situated knowledge and a form of partial and imperfect objectivity.

One of us is a jurist and did an internship with HIAS Greece, an NGO providing legal and psychological support to refugees during the asylum procedure, deepening her knowledge of Greek migration and asylum regulations and procedures. In the context of this European borderland, even law can be considered as a battleground, and NGOs providing legal support are essential to assert the rights of migrant people who have limited access to information regarding their rights. The other author is an anthropologist and volunteered for three months in the community centre Paréa, where different NGOs provide services for refugees. This positioning allowed him to spend several hours per day with people who were residents in the camp for asylum seekers, creating trust relationships and enabling the collection of 11 life stories through semi-structured interviews. In this context, the dual role of volunteer and researcher was explicit to all those involved, in an attempt to achieve a co-production of knowledge with the research subjects—the true holders of knowing about the context. The relationships with

some of the interviewees then continued in the months following the fieldwork using different social media and messaging apps; indeed, one of the interviews was conducted in Athens, after the person had left Lesvos undocumented. Additionally, five NGOs’ workers and activists were interviewed, and many conversations and informal chats with humanitarian actors and refugees were transcribed in the fieldnotes.

Combining the study of Greek and EU legislation with ethnographic material is useful to understanding “how political decisions embodied in immigration law constrain and enable human action” (Menjívar 2006, 1001). We depict the evolution of juridical norms, regulations, and practices developed at European and national levels since 2015, and, through a broad use of direct testimonies, show their impact on the experience of time for the people waiting on Lesvos. Indeed, the EU hotspot approach maintains control over the migrant population not only through spatial confinement, but also through temporal borders. Protracted and indefinite waits, as well as abrupt accelerations of the procedure, are both examples of how time is weaponized against those who claim asylum. As Tazzioli explains:

Within the framework of the temporality of control, I introduce the theme of *temporal borders*: these consist in the establishment of deadlines and time limits which impact migrants’ lives and geographies. Temporal borders, I contend, play a crucial role in regaining control over unruly migration movements. The lens of the temporality of control enables seeing that time is not only an object of mechanisms of control—control *over* time—but also a means and a technology for managing migrant[s]—control *through* time. (Tazzioli 2018, 3)

In this article, different words are used to refer to the people who reside on Lesvos, seeking protection. “Asylum seeker” is the formal definition for those waiting for the result of an asylum claim. “Migrant” refers to the fact that most of them, despite being on the island for a long time, perceive themselves as on the move towards a desired destination elsewhere in Europe. “Refugee” is how the interviewees self-defined, regardless of their legal status. We choose the latter term to encourage the possibility of self-representation of the subjects. For the same purpose, the article leaves ample room for excerpts of interviews, to avoid “the practices that fix migrants as objects of research [...] and researchers as subjects who are authors working in a knowledge market, scientists who maintain an impartial distance, advocates who speak for, or activist scholars and scholar activists who act on behalf” (Casas-Cortés et al. 2015).

This article first offers an analysis of how the hotspot approach implemented by the EU in 2015, and later the EU–Turkey statement of March 2016 (European Council 2016), transformed the Greek asylum system into what we term here a “waiting device”. This is followed by a description of the “legal limbo” produced by the

indeterminacy of the asylum process. Subsequently, the article focuses on the consequences of the accelerated procedure implemented as of 2021. The final question addressed is what these temporal regimes produce in terms of economies and subjectivities. Mezzadra and Neilson (2014) argue that borders are devices that function to produce spaces, labour forces, markets, and jurisprudence, which in turn produce subjectivities. We highlight here the forms of temporal and economic oppression, and the resulting resistance against these conditions, enacted on and by the refugee population, making the conflicting aspects of multiple temporal borders explicit.

2015 to 2020: Never-Ending Asylum Procedures on the “Prison Island” of Lesvos

As mentioned in the introduction, the Moria camp was set up on Lesvos in 2013, while local activists from the Village of All Together had already established an independent camp called Pikpa in 2012, and then, in 2015 the municipality of Mitilini opened the Kara Tepe reception centre for those defined as “vulnerable asylum seekers” (art. 14, par. 8, Law 4375/2016). As Apostolos Veizis, Executive Director of the humanitarian aid organization INTERSOS, explained in the interview:

I started to work in Lesvos in 2008. At that time, the camp [...] was called Pagani, it was an old warehouse. Migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, people on the move were kept there. [...] This continued until 2010 when the government [...] closed this facility. [...] Until 2010 the movement of people to Greece was mainly through the islands, but in 2010 there were changes related to the removal of the mines at the border with Turkey in Evros. [...] For this reason, from 2010 until 2012 there were no arrivals on the islands. In 2012 the situation changed again because the Greek authorities started this operation at the land border between Turkey and Greece called “Shield operation”, sending there about 1,800 police. This [...] shifted the movement again through Lesvos. So, in 2012 the need for a reception place started again. First, in Moria, it was a mobile facility but gradually turned into the first permanent facility for the identification and reception of asylum seekers. (Apostolos Veizis, interview, July 7, 2022)

Although the hotspot approach was presented by the European Commission as part of the Agenda on Migration in April 2015, and the Moria camp was declared a hotspot in September (Trubeta 2015), until the end of that year, the latter mainly remained a place of temporary residence for people who had landed there and were waiting to be transferred to the Greek mainland. J., an American activist, recalling his experience on the island, said:

I arrived in Lesvos in October 2015[. P]eople were issued very rudimentary documentation, and [...] after 24 hours, then 48 hours, eventually in a week, then 10 days, then two

weeks, as more and more people came, they were moved to Athens and then, within 24 hours, they were already in the middle of the Balkans, and a few days after that they were in Germany. [...] The situation was a wildly understaffed camp. [...] There were probably no more than six or seven Frontex officers and when I arrived there were about 15,000 people in the camp, and that number went up about one month later as the staff and officers started working slower, started not coming in, to protest [about] the fact [that] they were completely overwhelmed. [In] 2016 we began to witness the establishment of what Moria would become: a place of semi-permanent residence. (J., activist, interview, July 9, 2022)

Indeed, in the first months of 2016, other decisions at European and national levels influenced the situation on the island. On March 18, the EU-Turkey statement was drawn up (European Council 2016); in exchange for the provision of three billion euros, Turkey agreed to accept the rapid return of all migrants crossing into Greece who were deemed not in need of international protection, and to take back all irregular migrants intercepted in Turkish waters. Moreover, the statement said: "[f]or every Syrian being returned to Turkey from Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled from Turkey to the EU taking into account the UN Vulnerability Criteria" (European Council 2016). The EU-Turkey statement's declaration to allow readmission only from the islands led to the provision of Article 41 of Law 4375/2016, which imposed the so-called "geographical restriction" for people landing on the Aegean islands. Since then, asylum seekers—with a few exceptions related to specific vulnerabilities—have been denied the possibility of moving to the mainland for the whole duration of their asylum procedure. St., a 22-year-old from Afghanistan, remembered what this regulation meant for him:

Before coming I knew that there was not a good situation here, I had heard about it and when I arrived, I said: "Yes, it's true" [laughs]. It was clear to me that we cannot leave this island until the end of the asylum procedure, until we get a positive decision. In Moria there was nothing, there was no chance to study for example or to join NGOs. We had to go to the food line, and we stand two or three hours in line for food every day, then we went back to the tent, like this every day. Only lines, not just for food, for toilets, doctor. All of it was big lines. (St., refugee, interview, May 6, 2022)

After the EU-Turkey statement was implemented, the number of people able to reach Greece decreased from 151,452 between January and March 2016 to around 22,000 for the remaining nine months of the year (Jauhiainen 2017). Lesbos, along with four other hotspot islands (Chios, Kos, Leros, and Samos), was transformed from a transit point into a "prison island" (Bousiou 2020). Furthermore, the same law (Law 4375/2016) that established the geographical restriction also introduced the fast-track border

procedure and an admissibility procedure for asylum applications submitted by Syrians. This means that during the admissibility interview, relevant elements for the assessment of the application of the "safe third country" concept (Ovacik 2020; EUAA 2022) must be explored—reasons for leaving Turkey and fear of returning there (EASO 2019)—while reasons for leaving the home country are not taken in account. If Turkey is considered a safe country, the asylum request is rejected as inadmissible, and the applicant can face detention and deportation.

The border procedure, initially designated as the fast-track procedure, was understood as a temporary and exceptional measure to respond to the increase in the number of arrivals and to the implementation of the EU-Turkey statement in 2016. However, with its continuation under Law 4636/2019, as reported by the Greek NGO Fenix, this accelerated procedure can no longer be considered an exception, having become de facto permanent. Thus, all asylum seekers arriving on the five Eastern Aegean islands are subject to it, with few exceptions (Fenix 2022).

It is important to highlight that the introduction of the accelerated border procedure has not ensured that people receive an answer to their asylum claim within fair and reasonable times, but rather that it has produced shorter times for appealing against negative decisions and has undermined the quality of first-instance asylum processing and outcomes. As the European Council on Refugees and Exiles has remarked:

These very short time limits seem to be exclusively at the expense of applicants. [...] In fact, whereas timelines are, by general principle, not compulsory for the authorities and case processing at the borders takes several months on average, applicants still have to comply with [...] very short time limits. (ECRE 2022b)

As a result, since 2016, the experiences and living conditions of asylum seekers in Lesbos have changed radically, with the length of asylum procedures increasing dramatically, turning them into what can be termed a "waiting device" characterized by different waiting periods. The procedure begins with the wait for an interview, followed by the one for its outcome, and, in the event of a rejection, the waits for the appeal and its result. In the case of a final negative decision, asylum seekers have the possibility of starting a subsequent application to add new elements considered useful for the reassessment of their claim (Figure 1), and the same procedure with its waiting periods starts again. In addition, with the 2021 amendment to Law 4636/2019, Greek authorities introduced a fee of 100 euros for the submission of a second subsequent application (Law 4825/2021 added par. 10 to art. 89 of Law 4636/2019; JMD 472687/2021). Forty-four-year-old A., who arrived on Lesbos in August 2017 and had his first two applications rejected, explained:

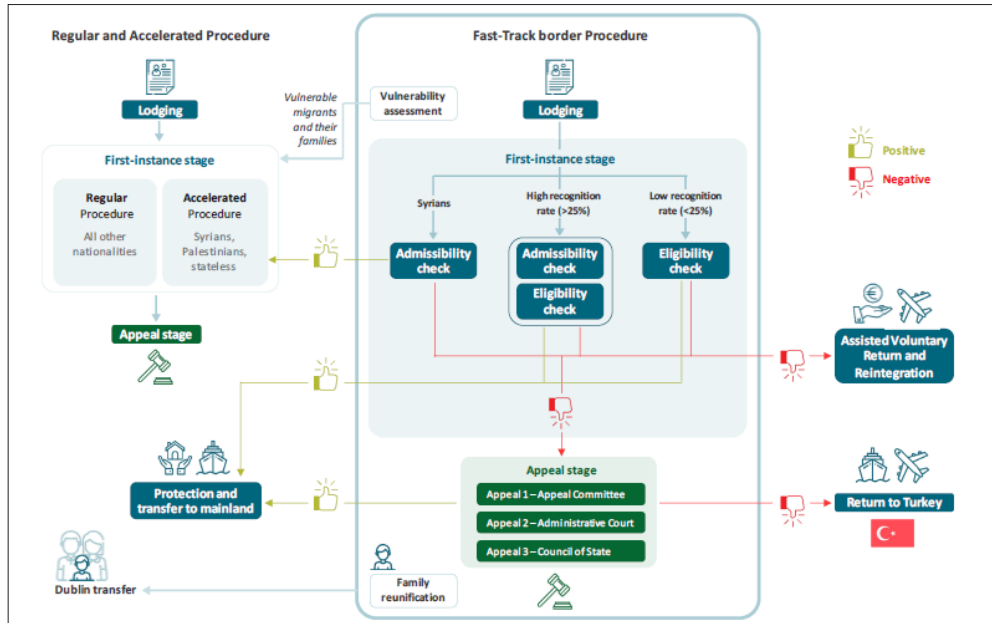


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the asylum system in Greece. Source: European Court of Auditors 2019.

I paid 100 euros, and I started a new procedure, then I got asylum. If they said it before we would have paid 1,000 euros! [Laughs] In January the government announced that people with four rejections could pay to start a new procedure, but they did not say where we had to pay this money! I went to the camp and asked about the procedure, and they told me, “We don’t know, you must wait”. So, I waited five months, then I paid and after a few months, I got my decision. (A., Afghan refugee, interview, May 11, 2022)

According to Jauhiainen and Vorobeva (2020), since 2016, the average waiting time on the island had been over one year. For the 11 interviewees for this article, the times were much longer: two waited for two and a half years to receive a final decision, two waited for three years, one for four years, and two others for five years—and at the time of writing, another two are still on Lesvos, having been there respectively four and six years since their first application, while two left the island before the end of the procedure. Twenty-five-year-old Afghan Ma. stated:

I understand that this is a procedure that takes a while, but a while! It was like ages for me, not four years! Because it turns into a mental issue [...]. I never complained about living in a tent or about living in a camp. The problem was that people were not thinking respectfully, they use this situation to create this feeling ‘Hey, you are something different and we are gonna treat you differently’. (Ma., refugee, interview, May 2, 2022)

While waiting to receive their decision, asylum seekers resided in the Moria camp. As reported by the NGOs Human Rights Watch and Médecins Sans Frontières, the living conditions in this infamous camp were extremely

poor and deplorable (Médecins Sans Frontières 2017; Human Rights Watch 2018), to the point that the UK newspaper The Guardian referred to Moria as “a hell” (Grant 2020). Ma. described the living conditions in the camp as follows:

Every single day was tough because people were beating each other for food, people were getting sick and there was no medical service, and people that have already suffered a lot in their lives are still struggling to prove how fucked up they are, you know? That’s the only thing they must prove: that they are fucked up, so then people show mercy to them and give them the chance to breathe. (Ma., refugee, interview, May 2, 2022)

Living in the Moria camp meant a daily encounter with overcrowding, extremely poor hygiene conditions, lack of access to healthcare, employment, financial allowances, or education, and insufficient and poor-quality food (Topak 2020). Sm., a 25-year-old from Kabul, gave the following insight:

I arrived in 2019, I am not sure about the month, probably August. [...] Oh malaka! At that time there were 27,000 people in the camp! [...] First, we had to stay two days and one night in the first zone of the camp, which was called “quarantine”. After that, they gave me some papers, they took my fingerprints and they told me, “OK, come next week and we will give you a card”, it is called *Ausweis* [ID card in German]. After the quarantine, we didn’t have any place and we didn’t have any tent to live. [...] When they gave me the *Ausweis*, they told me that the appointment for my interview was in September 2021! After two years, just for the first interview, just to ask me why I came here! (Sm., refugee, interview, April 29, 2022)



Figure 2. Graffiti on the outer walls of the Moria camp.
Photo source: the authors.

Since 2016, therefore, landing on Lesbos seeking protection has meant being subjected to prolonged and indefinite waits, spent in miserable living conditions.

The Legal Limbo

As seen in the previous section, EU and national policies implemented by the Greek authorities have produced a population of asylum seekers living a suspended life (Menjívar 2006): people stuck in island reception centres, unable to leave or travel, without control over the result or the waiting time of their applications. They are in a situation of liminal legality, a temporary legal condition that can be indefinitely prolonged and that is characterized by its ambiguity. They are temporarily documented but live under the constant threat of receiving a rejection that can lead them back to undocumented status and consequently to detainability and deportability (De Genova 2019). When this condition is prolonged indefinitely, it breeds uncertainty and anxiety. Afghan refugee Sm. described his feelings while waiting on the island:

I finally gave the interview in September 2021, and I got the answer after seven months, it was negative. All this time the situation was very bad for me because I didn't know what I could do, every night and day I was thinking that they will push me back. [...] Then I applied for the second interview and after two months I received my second rejection. When I applied for my third interview, I waited just for three months to do it, and that time after one month I got my result, it was accepted because at that time the Taliban took the power in our country. All the time I waited I could just think that I was going to be rejected again. My story was always the same, so why did they reject me before? I waited here for two and a half years, but they seem to me as 20 years. [...] For all this time, we [the refugee population] couldn't know what the next step could be. [...] It is wasted time. There is nothing good in these years, the first good thing was in

2022 when I got my positive decision, but even on that occasion there was something bad because when you got the positive decision, they close your bank account. (Sm., refugee, interview, April 29, 2022)

The uncertainty of the waiting time does not come to an end even when people are granted asylum. At this point, they must wait for the issue of their ID and travel documents. St., who at the time of the interview had already received the positive decision, but was still waiting for his papers, expressed the arbitrariness of these waiting times in this way:

It is not clear [when I'll receive my passport]. I haven't paid yet; I didn't even give my fingerprints. When you get the appointment to do it, then they give you the passport in one month, but it's not clear when they will start. [...] It's a lottery. I got my decision almost two months ago. I tried to go and ask, they said, "No problem, we will send you a ticket, you will get your passport, don't worry". I said "OK, I waited for two years, I will wait more". I have no choice! (St., Afghan refugee, interview, May 6, 2022)

If asylum seekers are forced to live in a situation of legal limbo, the liminal condition is exacerbated for those who must go through the admissibility procedure to prove that Turkey is not a safe third country. As mentioned above, this procedure has applied to Syrian citizens since 2016, and on June 21, 2021, Greece's Joint Ministerial Decision (JMD) 42799/2021 extended its applicability to people from Bangladesh, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. It is worth highlighting that these five nationalities constituted 67 percent of asylum seekers in Greece in 2020, three of whom had very high rates of being granted refugee or subsidiary protection status (Refugee Support Aegean 2022). Consequently, international protection applications presented by citizens of these five countries are not examined on the merits of the reasons for leaving their country of origin, but only on the admissibility grounds. M., a representative of the NGO HIAS Greece, specified:

The lack of legal assistance has been proven particularly problematic, especially regarding the new cases falling under the JMD designating Turkey as a safe third country. Newly arrived persons do not receive information from the authorities regarding the application of the new JMD nor access to legal aid [...]. This is especially problematic [...] because the first interview is an admissibility interview [to prove] if Turkey is considered a safe third country for them, and they ignore it because the authorities don't inform them about the procedure. (M., lawyer, online interview, October 4, 2022)

If their asylum application is deemed inadmissible, applicants from these five countries remain in a state of legal "non-existence" (Coutin 2000) on Greek territory, not recognized as asylum seekers and, since 2020, not even eligible for readmission to Turkey. Indeed, from March 16 of that year, Turkish authorities suspended the

return operations that had been agreed upon under the EU–Turkey statement (European Commission 2020). This decision was initially due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but at the time of writing, the readmission process has yet to be resumed (Fenix 2022). Within this context, in at least 16 cases, Greek lawyers have requested the Directorate of the Hellenic Police to provide information on the suspension of readmissions to Turkey and to specify whether a readmission request has been sent. The replies systematically confirm the absence of any prospect of the removal of refugees to Turkey. In addition, they confirm that readmission requests are no longer being sent to the Turkish authorities (Refugee Support Aegean & ProAsyl 2022).³

Following the establishment of the JMD, which expanded the applicability of the safe third country concept, registered inadmissibility decisions increased from 2,839 in 2020 to 6,424 in 2021 (ECRE 2022d). This means that thousands of people are kept on Greek soil without any kind of legal status and without access to any kind of state support. As G., a representative of the NGO Refugee Support Aegean (RSA), specified, “[w]e have this machinery that results in the rejection of asylum applicants, and they remain stranded, stuck in camps around Greece. Thousands of asylum seekers rejected stay in camps without any rights: they are not even entitled to food” (G., RSA). Therefore, refugees whose applications are rejected as inadmissible based on the safe third country concept effectively end up in a state of legal limbo in Greece (HIAS & Equal Rights Beyond Borders 2021) without access to an on-merit examination of their application—even if readmission in Turkey is not possible. In this regard, the new standard operating procedures implemented by the Greek Asylum Service consider the link with Turkey no longer fulfilled if an applicant left there over 12 months ago (information received by the authors following access to European Commission documents). This procedure, however, remains unpublished and largely unknown.

In summary, these measures create a system of increased rates of rejection of asylum applications and work as a mechanism to trap people in camps, forcing applicants to live in degrading conditions for several months, deprived of access to healthcare and without access to the financial benefits granted to asylum seekers, while also at risk of arrest, administrative detention, and deportation (Refugee Support Aegean 2022).

Since 2020: The Violence of Accelerated Times

As described in the previous section, the situation for asylum seekers on Lesbos remained almost unchanged from 2016 until the beginning of 2020, when a breakdown in EU–Turkey relations and the start of the COVID-19 pandemic produced significant changes. Between February and March 2020, Turkish authorities declared

that they would open the borders with the EU without preventing refugees and migrants from crossing, and, in response, Greece introduced an emergency legislative decree on March 2, 2020, suspending the right to seek asylum (Di Pascale 2020; Ergin 2020). Furthermore, to avoid a drastic increase in arrivals, Greek authorities have consistently implemented the use of pushbacks (practices aimed at forcing refugees back to Turkey without access to Greek territory or the right to ask for protection in the EU), producing a decrease in migrant arrivals on the islands. The latter was initially a response to the decision of the Turkish authorities, but then became a customary practice that continues to the present day (AlarmPhone 2020; ECRE 2022c). According to the NGO Aegean Boat Report, which monitors the number of pushbacks from Greek islands into Turkish waters, from the beginning of 2020 until the end of 2022, more than 57,000 people were returned to Turkey, denying them the possibility of claiming asylum in Greece (Aegean Boat Report 2023).



Figure 3. Hellenic Coast Guard vessels in the port of Mitilini. Photo source: the authors.

Subsequently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, very strict rules were set for the people in the camp; no external person was allowed access, producing a tense situation that reached its climax on September 8, 2020, when a fire devastated the Moria camp. In his interview, St. recalled that a system of punishment was implemented specifically for the refugee population:

When we were in Moria we were completely locked, we couldn't come to Mitilini. In this new camp also, we were not allowed to go out for two or three weeks. Then they started this system: I could go out only if I see the number of my ID on the board. I could go out for example two or three days per week, and I had to go back within two hours. [...] They were taking notes of what time you left and what time you came back and if you were late you were punished. Police gave you a fine—150 euros, sometimes even 300 euros. Like this until the beginning of 2022. (St., refugee, interview, May 5, 2022)

Following the Moria fire, thousands of asylum seekers were displaced to the mainland and the new Mavrovouni camp was established in a former military zone in the suburbs of Mitilini. This supposedly temporary camp, composed of tents and containers, soon turned into the only reception facility on the island, because on October 30, 2020, Pikpa was closed, and on April 24, 2021, the Kara Tepe camp was also closed, with more people being transferred to the mainland.



Figure 4. The Mavrovouni camp. Photo source: the authors.

The combination of all these factors (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of pushbacks, and the relocation of many asylum seekers to the mainland following the Moria fire) has resulted in a major acceleration of asylum procedures at the border (Fenix 2022). This “improved efficiency” has produced a drastic reduction in the time between asylum registration and interview. Oftentimes, the interview with the Greek Asylum Service takes place before the applicants receive the necessary information and support, or have even had a vulnerability assessment (Refugee Support Aegean 2022). As one of the lawyers of the NGO HIAS explained:

After the arrival on Lesbos now there is a mandatory quarantine period of about six days [...]. If no positive case is detected, after [...] they are registered by the Reception and Identification Service and receive an appointment for an asylum interview within one to four days, depending on the availability of the Regional Asylum Office of Lesbos. The time is very short, because, within these days, the issuance of asylum cards and a basic [medical] check-up [...] usually must be arranged, without this being always done. This results in people not only being unrepresented during their interviews but also not having time for legal support to be prepared for their interviews. (M., lawyer, online interview, October 4, 2022)

Thus, the accelerated asylum system does not produce an improvement in the protection of asylum seekers’ rights, but rather a lowering of their awareness when undertaking the asylum application interview. In the words of a humanitarian worker for the NGO Medical Volunteers International:

Often when they do the first interview, they are completely oblivious. Questions like: ‘Why did you choose to be gay in a country where gays are persecuted and put in jail?’ can happen. It has actually happened! [...] The problem is that, if people don’t know, because often when they do the interview, they don’t know anything, they find themselves giving answers that can be damaging to their asylum application. (G., psychologist, interview, May 11, 2022)

These last two interview excerpts show how it is not only long waits that can have negative effects on refugees’ rights, but that fast-paced procedures can also be detrimental for them too. In the words of Rozakou (2021, 35), “[a]cceleration does not necessarily equate with emancipation or resistance [but] can also be part of the mechanisms of the migration/border regime”.

Rushed times also affect asylum seekers when their procedures come to an end. In cases where they are provided with refugee status, they have only 24 hours to leave the camp upon receiving their documents. If they receive a rejection of their asylum claim and decide not to appeal, they are issued with an expulsion paper and are required to leave the country within 10 days, even though regular travel is not possible for them. In both cases, people are required to make quick decisions about their lives. As R., a 29-year-old from Afghanistan, explains, the combination of the prolonged waiting time and abrupt acceleration makes it difficult to take conscious decisions about the future: “[f]or all the time that you wait, you try not to make plans because you see many people taking negative. Then, after years of waiting, if you get positive suddenly you must decide what to do, everything is accelerated, and you don’t know where to go after years stuck here” (R., refugee, interview, April 24, 2022). In the case of A., a 20-year-old from Somalia, the rapid series of negative replies to his application pushed him to take the decision to leave the island, despite not having valid documents to travel and work:

I got on Lesbos in September 2021, I waited for [...] the answer to my interview, then I got negative. I appealed it twice, and I got two more negatives in one month. So, I decided not to wait for the final decision and leave the island. I took the ferry with an ID with a picture that looks like me. Then I have worked irregularly for three months in Athens to collect money. In the next days I will leave for Albania and then Serbia. I want to go to Belgium. (A., asylum seeker, interview, November 3, 2022)

To summarize, in sections 1 and 2, the testimonies of refugees forced to live for long periods on Lesbos revealed how indefinite waiting produces anxiety and stress, forming what Boochani (2018) has defined “a mechanism of torture”, and De Vries and Guild (2019) dub a “politics of exhaustion”. Conversely, this section has analysed how the opposite mechanism of accelerated times can also bring harm to refugees’

lives. This “temporal politics of speed” (Cwerner 2004; Meier & Donà 2021) controls refugees’ time in the name of bureaucratic efficiency. It produces rush and worry, as in the case of A. who decided to renounce his asylum claim and move on, despite being undocumented. It also promotes reduced awareness and increased damage for people who are rushed through the procedure a few days after their arrival, as explained by the humanitarian actors interviewed.

Productivity of Time

In this fourth section, the time that asylum seekers spend on Lesvos is analysed through the lens of productivity. According to Mezzadra and Neilson (2014), borders produce both labour forces and labour markets. Also, according to Khosravi (2018, 40), in a capitalistic society, time is “a form of capital that, similar to money, can be invested, saved or wasted”. Therefore, our aim is to analyse how the refugees’ time is valued or exploited through different practices, and, consequently, to identify the effects of these practices on their subjectivities.



Figure 5. Graffiti on the walls of Mitilini. Photo source: the authors.

The forced confinement of thousands of people on the island has produced a humanitarian economy, involving both the companies that provide services inside the camp and the NGOs that arrive in support of asylum seekers. To give an example, most of the people inside the camp are not entitled to cook their food, and the Greek government is responsible for hiring catering services. Afghan refugee R. provided the following insight into the eating routine:

We could not cook our food; to get something to eat we had to queue the whole day. In the morning we were in line from six in the morning for three hours, only to get a bottle of water and a croissant. Then for lunch the same, we had to stay in line again. There was no dinner, only sometimes boiled eggs, but oftentimes they were bad, and we could not eat them. In the lines, there were always fights. (R., Afghan refugee, interview, April 24, 2022)

According to official documents of the Greek Ministry of Immigration and Asylum (No. Prot. 107631, May 7, 2021), the catering company in charge since July 2021 receives 6.85 euros per resident every day, and will receive a total of more than 60 million euros over four years. The provision of food highlights how care and control intersect in the policies of migration governance (Pallister-Wilkins 2020). Denying the camp residents the possibility to cook their own meals turns them into subjects in need of institutional care even for basic needs, seriously harming their autonomy and well-being (Canning 2021). In Andersson’s words (2014, 185), “[f]ood is a state-sanctioned charity that reduces residents to passive, reluctant recipients”. This example is also useful in shedding light on the practices of subjugation related to camp life. The food line is a clear image of the disciplinary daily routine: “[q]ueues are productive, they produce obedient behaviour” (Khosravi 2021b, 130). Forty-five-year-old A. explained how different forms of waiting affected him while residing in the camp: “[c]amp life is torture, it is mental torture: you wait for food, you wait for water, you wait for toilet, you wait for laundry, for everything! If you go to any office, if you have any complaints, nobody listens to you” (A., Afghan refugee). This last excerpt highlights how keeping people waiting is a form of power over them. In Bourdieu’s words: “The all-powerful is who [...] makes others wait. [...] Waiting implies submission” (2020, 228).

Continuing to focus on humanitarian economies, since the end of 2015, a steady stream of NGOs and volunteers have arrived on Lesvos to support the refugee population (Tsilimpounidi & Carastathis 2017). On the one hand, many NGOs have a positive impact on refugees’ lives, providing material, legal, medical, and psychological support, and organizing activities, offering the possibility of spending time outside the camp, and sometimes of acquiring useful skills for their future life. As Ma. explained:

I am working with Refocus Media Lab [...]. People come and learn how to work with equipment, they get the chance to create something [...]. I have experience as a video editor, so I get a salary from what I do. [...] People [...] can become filmmakers, directors, cameramen, they can become editors. It is very important. I think that slowly, slowly, people from our community—I mean refugees—will show up and do good things in the future, which can be very helpful for Europe. (Ma., Afghan refugee, interview, May 2, 2022)

On the other hand, the camp regime creates a pool of hundreds of people who have no alternative but to volunteer in some NGO to keep themselves active. Indeed, most of the NGOs carry on their activities by not only employing those they call “international volunteers”—people from the Global North who have the privilege, like the authors, of being able to move to Lesvos for short periods to help refugees—but also

those who are labelled as "community volunteers", i.e., asylum seekers living in the camp. Sm. talked about his experience with NGOs in these terms:

I worked for Movement, for Eurorelief, also for Moria Academy inside the camp, always without receiving money. [...] Donors send money for refugees, but we don't receive any salary to work there. We don't see one euro! [...] Just coupons. One coupon is eight euros; we received four coupons per month, which is 32 euros. But then you can use it just for the supermarket, you don't have any cash. The asylum service gives money every month to refugees, but after the second rejection your case is cancelled, so you don't receive your monthly money because your bank account is closed, your card is closed, everything is closed. You can only wait to restart your application; you can stay in the camp, but you don't receive money. (Sm., Afghan refugee, interview, April 29, 2022)

It should be noted that, during our fieldwork, most of the humanitarian workers and even refugees stated that working with a contract is not possible during the asylum procedure, as shown by this transcription of a conversation with a humanitarian worker:

L. questioned the meaning of volunteering for people in the camp. Shouldn't they receive a proper salary? Isn't it a form of exploitation? People do it voluntarily, but what alternatives do they have and what is their real margin of choice? The 'community volunteers' in Paréa receive a 100 euros shopping voucher every month, because according to the NGO there is no way to give them actual work contracts. (Authors' fieldnotes, March 17, 2022)

On the contrary, according to Greek law, asylum seekers can have regular work contracts after six months from the lodging of an application (ECRE 2022a). It is nevertheless true that there are many bureaucratic obstacles to accessing the regular labour market, such as difficulties in obtaining the required tax number and national insurance number, or the fact that "the four major banks in Greece have repeatedly refused to open bank accounts to asylum seekers, even in cases where a certification of recruitment is submitted by the employer" (ECRE 2022a). During his interview, R. detailed what working, but receiving only shopping vouchers, means in day-to-day life:

I worked only to get coupons: but what can you do with coupons? You cannot use them to go out with friends at night. You cannot do anything with them. [...] In the last week, I met many NGOs to ask them to support me, I need money to travel, but nobody helped me. [...] Smaller NGOs are better; the big ones are here only for business. [...] What I need is just money to be independent, but asylum seekers cannot work in Greece. (R., Afghan refugee, interview, April 24, 2022)

Due to the difficulties of getting a regular contract, and the structural precariousness imposed by the asylum

regime, the refugee population is not only a recruitment pool for volunteering but also for illegal labour. Waiting time is exploited by local economies that can employ people kept in precarious living conditions, making them available for poorly paid and unprotected jobs. Kurdish 26-year-old M. negatively recalls his illegal working experience: "I worked in construction for a while [...] and guess what was the salary? I had to take the cement up two floors and then empty it, it was a very hard job...15 euros per day! [...] They can use people and it is all black work. [...]. We were all refugees working there" (M., Kurdish refugee, interview, May 9, 2022).

Iranian asylum seeker Mj. was also aware of the poor working conditions offered to him but tried to use the opportunity of illegal work as a strategy to escape the camp: "[m]y friend found me a job with sheep in Sigri. I will work every day from 7 to 23. The pay is 650 euros per month. It's not much, but it's better than the camp. In the camp, there is only depression" (Mj., Iranian asylum seeker). These last words epitomize the camp life experience while waiting indefinitely for the asylum procedure. In most of the interviews, a sense of emptiness and "stuckedness" (Iliadou 2019) emerges. Camp life has been described as a form of "torture"; in camp, queuing is all the residents can do. Therefore, escaping the camp and finding productive ways of using their time are practical forms of active resistance for people oppressed by the border regime. Psychologist G. explained how her job consists of assisting asylum seekers to develop a new approach to time, developing the idea that the value of time is reflected in how well it is spent:

The declination of time is precisely part of the work I do with my patients. The concept is: there are things out of our control, but what is under our control? How can you use your time? [...] So moving from 'Oh my god, time never passes, I have to wait for this answer', to bring them to focus on what they can do with this time, on the fact that this time is under their control, because they can decide what to do with it. (G., psychologist, interview, May 11, 2022)

Focusing on the present is the strategy that Ma., a 35-year-old from Southern Iran, has adopted to cope with temporal borders, after having already waited in Greece for six years:

I live in the moment, you know. I don't care about the future, or the past, I don't like thinking about that. If you think about the moment, you can enjoy every second of your life. I like this style of life. [...] I want to be ready for now, not the future, not before, just now, it's better for me; when I am thinking about the future, I am so stressed thinking about what could happen. If I think about before, it's not good either, because I lost them. I can let them go. It's good for me. (Ma., Iranian asylum seeker, interview, May 1, 2022)

Nevertheless, not everybody in the camp has chances to escape it, to access therapy, or the energy to find strategies of resistance. Oppressed by the camp regime, forced to wait in “obscene, vulgar and grotesque” conditions (Mbembe 1992), refugees are kept in a state of enduring uncertainty, risking losing “the aptitude to engage in the game of life, because everything confirms that they are excluded from it” (Augé 2009, 79, translated by the authors). As A. attested in his interview, sometimes people resort to alcohol, medicine, or drugs to alienate themselves from the severe discomfort they experience:

A lot of people spend their time only inside the camp, that’s bad. Many of them use these capsules called Lyrica [a psychotropic medicine]. They take it and they don’t understand anything. [...] In my room inside the camp, there are these two people: one is always smoking and drinking wine; the other one uses everything, different kinds of capsules, day and night and never goes out, he is a zombie. People use these kinds of drugs to relax and maybe to feel that they escape the camp and its painful life. (A., Afghan refugee, interview, May 11, 2022)

Taking drugs or alcohol can be interpreted as a way of individually surviving the suffering of camp life if one is unable to break the boundaries of the camp itself; an act of silent and unconscious resistance, because when the border regime creates hostile conditions that make life intolerable, surviving itself is an indicator of resistance (Canning 2017).

Under the EU and national migration policies implemented by the Greek government, physical confinement and temporal borders reinforce each other in the lives of asylum seekers. Thus, the first step for many camp residents, in order to cope with temporal borders, is to break the boundaries imposed by the camp regime. On a collective level, since 2016, the refugee population has protested against the living conditions imposed on them on multiple occasions, taking to the streets in Mitilini, occupying public spaces, claiming *azadi*, freedom (Greek City Times 2020; Keep Talking Greece 2023). On an individual level, most interviewees expressed that using their time to build relationships and alliances outside the camp made a positive difference to their lives. The words of Mo., a 27-year-old from Afghanistan, clearly expressed this feeling:

My life changed when I could move out of the camp. One of my friends [...] had [...] an empty room [...] She] recognized that I was really in a fucked-up situation [...] that I needed a doctor and of being a bit far away from all this stress, because of my panic attacks and these panic disorders that I had. I mean, it was not only me, probably 90 percent of people in Moria had panic attacks. I had this chance [...]. It was solidarity. [...] We are the people who don’t have any reason to be happy to stay here. We knew that we had to wait a long time here. The good part is that we met nice people here, spent time with them, to learn

from them. To learn more about Europe before going into it. [...] That was the good part. I learned, even from the bad things. [...] If you can learn even from the bad things, you are a hero! [Laughs] [...] I know a lot of refugees that do the same, to take something good, good moments, even from this bad, horrible experience. [...] I remember that once with a friend I say this: ‘I am like a spring, if you press me more and more when you leave your hand, I will jump higher!’. All these problems made me jump higher. I hope that all the refugees, from different countries, could have this feeling: OK, I have more pressure, I don’t have any power to take my rights here, no problem, still I am a human, and I am going to take my rights back. (Mo., Afghan refugee, interview, May 20, 2022)



Figure 6. Graffiti on the outer walls of the Moria camp.
Photo source: the authors.

Conclusions

Both EU legislation and procedures implementing the hotspot approach are aimed at preventing secondary movements from Southern European member states. The practice of keeping people waiting in confined spaces at the border is functional to identifying and controlling them, registering their asylum claims, and more easily readmitting them to the country of origin or transit when asylum claims are rejected. However, in practice, the hotspot approach acts through the containment and deceleration of migrants’ autonomous movements, rather than completely stopping them (Fontanari 2016). The consequence is a disruption of temporalities, including through periods of “spatial confinement and protracted strandedness” (Tazzioli & Garelli 2018), as in the case of Lesvos. The stories collected and presented in this article reveal the imposition of other-directed temporalities, while, at the same time, migrants experience poor living conditions in camps. Such temporalities consist of prolonged waits during which asylum seekers are in a situation of legal limbo, but also of abrupt accelerations that put people in conditions of unawareness and rush, hindering informed decision-making and affecting outcomes.

As seen in the last section, migrant subjectivities are not only the targets of European migration policies but are also cast in the role of opponents to such policies, as active subjects struggling for self-determination within and against the meshes of power (Fontanari 2016). In De Genova’s words (2021, 194), “[s]uch precaritisations of time tend to be productive, if for no other reason than that the human persons subjected to them stubbornly persist in seeking ways to prevail in spite of them”; or for Khosravi (2021, 206), “[b] order waiting is not a static condition but rather a process and a practice. Waiting as wakeful navigation through material struggles in the present and directing one’s mind toward the not-yet is a daily practice”. The resistant practices enacted by the refugees emerge not only through their strategies to cope with the wait on Lesbos, but also through their choices once their asylum procedures come to an end. Indeed, most interviewees have not submitted themselves to the EU legislative framework, deciding instead to continue the journey to their desired destinations.

At the time of writing, only three of the interviewees have decided to settle in Greece and two others are still forced to live in the camp on Lesbos, while two have moved to France, one is in Germany, one in the UK, and one in Austria, all waiting for the outcome of their secondary asylum applications. Another is on the move along the Balkan route, attempting to reach Belgium. It is also interesting to mention that, during the asylum application process, three succeeded in breaking the geographical restriction imposed by the Greek Asylum Service by irregularly boarding ferries to Athens, although two of these were forced to return to Lesbos. Against this backdrop, according to the German Ministry of the Interior, 49,841 refugees had applied for asylum in Germany by the end of 2022, even though the applications they had lodged in Greece had been accepted (Schuler & Spyropoulou 2022). In this regard, in September 2020, the EU Commission proposed a new regulation specifically to limit the possibility of asylum beneficiaries settling in another EU member state (European Commission 2023). Lastly,



Figure 7. The construction of the new camp in Vastria.
Photo credit: Davide Marchesi.

it is important to mention the current construction of a new closed facility in Vastria, a remote site in the north-west of Lesbos. The location of this new camp adds another level of geographical restriction to the island itself, explicitly contributing to transforming asylum application waiting times into a period of detention and isolation.

Endnotes

- 1 It is here important to mention that the New Pact on Migration and Asylum which sets new rules for migration management and the establishment of a common European asylum system, was approved on May 22, 2024. Among these new rules, Regulation (EU) 2024/1351 on Asylum and Migration Management replaces the current Dublin Regulation but will not apply until July 1, 2026. However, while it is true that the Dublin Regulation disappears formally, it remains in substance. Indeed, the criteria for determining which member state is responsible for examining an application for international protection and the discretionary clauses remain in principle unchanged (Maiani 2024, Favilli 2020).
- 2 We are aware that the situation after 2022 has changed again, both in terms of number of arrivals and the living conditions of the refugee population on the island and in terms of the European asylum directives and regulations. As Jacobsen and Karlsen (2021) write, one can sometimes have the perception that academic writing—and the timeframes it requires, both in terms of reflections and in terms of revisions and technical publication times—is ‘out of sync’ with the ever-changing terrain of migration control. At the same time, we think that the production of knowledge cannot also fall into the rhetoric of crisis that the border regime feeds on, producing transformations that follow one another at ever shorter intervals. Unfortunately, our Ph.D. deadlines did not allow us to return to Lesbos for further research, so what we present in this article is a snapshot of the situation on the island in 2022, set in the broader context of the border regime implemented since 2015.
- 3 Subsequent to an application for annulment lodged by two NGOs in February 2023, the Council of State decided to refer a question to the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) for a preliminary ruling (Case C-132/23). The national judge asked to the CJEU whether Article 38 of Directive 2013/32/EU, read in conjunction with Article 18 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, must be interpreted as precluding national legislation classifying a third country as safe for certain categories of applicants for international protection where, although that country has made a legal commitment to permit readmission of those categories of applicants, it is clear that it has refused readmission for a long period of time (i.e. more than 20 months) and the possibility of changing its position in the future does not appear to have been investigated.

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