

In Me(mória)m – About the largest Refugee Camp in Europe

Elisabeth Ruth Maria Pointner

In the history of Europe, migration has always played an important role. Since the beginning of the 1960s, there was a higher number of immigration than emigration into the territory of the European Union. Many Member States have become destinations of refugees and migrants. While Italy and Greece had been transit countries in the past, through new (inter)national regulations they were transformed into ‘persevere-countries’, where refugees do not fully arrive in their new host-country on the one hand and are not deported back to their home country on the other hand. From the end of 2014 until 2016, there was the largest increase of refugees into the EU since World War II, which resulted in changes to Europe’s asylum procedure on international and national level (Fassmann & Dahlvik 2012: 7f).

Due to the latest events of 2020, such as the collapse of the EU-Turkey migration deal¹, clashes between right-wing groups and protesters², as well as the worldwide coronavirus pandemic³, Greece and the refugees living within Greek camps thereby have to face new challenges, the like of which no other state has ever experienced before. As the rest of the world’s nations are primarily concerned with saving their own national economies from the effects of COVID-19, aid is barely provided. Amongst other things, this led to the suspension of the asylum law for one month by the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, as well as assaults and violence directed toward asylum seekers by Greek security officers. Only recently, serious allegations have been made against the European Border and Coast Guard Agency called Frontex. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), non-profit organizations (NPOs) and the biggest international organizations in this regard, like the International Organization for Migration

¹ Agreed in March 2016, the EU-Turkey deal was a statement of cooperation between the European Union and the Turkish government, in order to provide financial support for Turkey in exchange for Turkish authorities curbing the flow of migrants into Europe (Aljazeera, 2020; France24, 2020; Help Refugees Limited, 2018).

² After the Turkish border was opened, members of right-wing groups from several European countries travelled to the Greek island Lesbos, which was hosting in its biggest camp Moria more than 20,000 refugees (Info Migrants, 2020).

³ Greece’ toll from the coronavirus was low in comparison with Italy, Spain, France and Britain. The bigger concern was about its migrant population, as two facilities have already entered quarantine after residents were tested positive. An outbreak of the virus in the camps, where sanitation and hygiene is poor, as well as accommodation is overcrowded, makes the virus easy to be spread (The New York Times, 2020).

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(IOM) the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), as well as the specialists for human rights at the UN, oversee the latest events and are seriously worried. Felipe González Morales, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, stated that he was “very concerned about the reported pushbacks of asylum seekers and migrants, which constitutes a violation of the prohibition of collective expulsions and the principle of non-refoulement” (OHCHR 2020).

In this presentation, Greece will be put into the spotlight, in order to give an example of how a state is dealing with the increased influx of refugees since 2016, with a special focus on the year 2020. I will mention my experiences in Europe’s biggest refugee camp called Mória, where I have been doing research for my master’s thesis from July until August of 2020. Next to that I was working in PIKPA (a smaller, independent camp) as a volunteer. One week after I had left the island, the whole camp Mória burned down on 8th of September, which made over 12.000 people ‘tent-less’. I was given daily updates by some of the volunteers who were still on the island and by the refugees, who I had gotten to know during my stay. The former residents of Mória told me that they were forced to live in the streets between the camp and the city called Mytilene for about a week. Streets were blocked by the police and fascists, food and water was delivered, if at all, irregularly and unequally. Next to this chaos, on 30th of October, PIKPA was evacuated by the police, who had threatened for years to shut down the camp, without giving specific justifications. Despite international attempts at saving PIKPA (mostly by former volunteers such as me), the residents of PIKPA were forced to leave this camp and were put into Mória 2.0., called Kara Tepe, which was built up within two weeks on a former military site, with hardly any facilities until now. More details about Mória and PIKPA will follow in the end of this paper. First, there will be a short overview on important declarations concerning refugees within the United Nations (UN), within the European Union (EU) and those only concerning Greece.

Legal Framework: Receiving Refugees and Displaced Persons

Within the UN a rather recent declaration is the New York Declaration of 2016, which represents together with the global compact on refugees⁴ a remarkable commitment to international cooperation for sharing responsibilities more equitably in the face of large

⁴ The global compact 2018 proposed by the High Commissioner for Refugees in the annual report. It comprises two parts: the discussion of the New York Declaration and a program of action that sets out future actions (UNHCR May 2017: 1).

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movements of refugees (UNHCR May 2017: 7). In order to address large movements of refugees and migrants, the UN General Assembly hosted an all day summit on the 19th of September 2016 at the UNHQ in New York. The aim was to bring countries together to strengthen governance of international migration by moving them toward a more humane and coordinated approach. This was the first time that the General Assembly had called for such a summit at the Heads of State on a governmental level. It was a historic opportunity for a better international response to large movements of refugees and migrants. The result was The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, which expresses the political will of world leaders to save lives, protect rights and share responsibility on a global scale. In adopting the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, the 193 UN Member States recognized the need for a comprehensive approach to human mobility and enhanced cooperation at the global level. This sent a powerful political message that migration and refugee matters had become major issues squarely in the international agenda (United Nations 2020).

Related to the matter of the organization of the asylum procedure within the EU, several conventions have been held and laws have been enforced. The most cited and well-known one is the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, which is an international legal norm for distributing responsibility and organizing the asylum procedure within the 28 Member States. Because of the events of 2014 until 2016, the huge increase of refugees coming into the EU made new deals necessary, in order to avoid even more chaotic scenarios arising within member states. Therefore, Europe’s asylum procedure adopted some new strategies on the international and national levels in response to the massively increasing numbers of refugees arriving in the EU. In 2016, the EU agreed to a deal with Ankara to seal the sea route and to improve conditions for Syrians staying in Turkey. According to this, all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands after March 20th, 2016 were returned to Turkey. The second anniversary of the Common Statement between the EU and Turkey came in March 2018, despite the fact that it was initially described as a temporary and extraordinary measure (Hellenic Republic (1) 2018).

This deal was a statement of cooperation between the European Union and the Turkish government, in order to provide financial support for Turkey in exchange for Turkish authorities curbing the flow of migrants into Europe. Turkey has repeatedly stated that this is not a balanced burden sharing, since around four million mostly Syrian refugees live in Turkey. As the EU did not provide enough money until 2020, Turkey’s president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan opened the

gates at the border to Greece in March 2020. This led to the reaction of the Greek National Security Council declining to suspend the registration of asylum applications for one month, stating it as an emergency⁵ (Aljazeera 2020; France24 2020; Help Refugees Limited 2018).

The asylum matters in Greece used to pertain exclusively to the Ministry for Public Order and Citizen Protection. It was the last European Member State in which the asylum procedure was handled for and only by police authorities, without intervention by an independent body. Nonetheless, in 2011 at the Ministry of Citizen Protection one independent service called “Asylum Service” was established, which has a local jurisdiction extending across the entire Greek territory. This Service has since been responsible for implementing the legislation on asylum and any other forms of international protection of foreign nationals and stateless persons, as well as for contributing to the planning and formulation of the national asylum policy (Hellenic Republic 2011).

Greece had been a late entrant into the field of asylum, as it used to be a transit country. Although the Geneva Convention was ratified in 1959, the establishment for a procedure for refugee recognition started only in the late 1970s. The first specific asylum legislation was enacted in 1977 and since then asylum became part of the Ministry for Public Order. Greece revised its asylum legislation and adopted specific refugee recognition procedures in the early 1990s and also later during that decade. An attempt was made through this to meet the obligations of the Geneva Convention and other EU relevant legislations. For instance, doing a personal interview for all applicants, giving them a right to work, no more deadlines for lodging asylum applications and so on. In the late 1990s on to the 2000s, the number of official registrations of asylum applications grew gradually in Greece. The Greek authorities discovered that they were unable to accelerate their processing and about at the same period, the first European efforts to coordinate asylum were undertaken. This way, the treatment of certain aspects of asylum between Member States of the European Community started and intensified with the Maastricht Treaty. Asylum then became part of the third pillar – Justice and Home Affairs – of the Union’s competencies. The Dublin Convention signed on 15 June in 1990 and entering into force on 1st September 1997 had laid emphasis on deterring abuses in asylum procedures. For example, asylum applications should no longer be lodged in more than one EU Member State. This way, one of the states had to take the responsibility for taking care of the

⁵ More details in the following pages

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asylum procedure. The Dublin Convention was an international law instrument and not part of the Community legal order. In the Amsterdam Treaty and following the Extraordinary Summit held in Finland in 1999, the Member States decided to adopt a number of specific legislative measures on asylum. This way, a common European system for granting refugee status was to be established. What came out of that is known as the Dublin II Regulation, with which mechanisms were set up to determine which of the Member States is responsible for examining an asylum application. Therefore the territory of countries played a significant role, regarding the entry or residence of the applicants. With this, Greece being geographically on the periphery of the EU, it led to the country having to bear a higher number of asylum applications (Papadimitriou & Papageorgiou 2005: 300ff).

In September 2015, a relocation scheme was set up by Council Decisions (EU), for a target of 160,000 asylum seekers. It was designed as an emergency measure to alleviate pressure on Greece and Italy. This scheme constitutes a partial derogation to the Dublin Regulation rules. Out of 66,400 asylum seekers to be relocated from Greece, until 25th March 2018 the Asylum Service registered 21,994 persons being transferred (Asylum Information Database 2017; Hellenic Republic (2) 2018).

While reducing the number of refugees within Greece is one way to help the country dealing with its situation, the EU Commission also supports the country by providing money, which is in total around 1,5 million Euros (Zeit Online 2018). In summary, there have been international measures, like the relocation scheme and the EU-Turkey deal, which show that Member States under certain conditions would need help on international basis. As the UNHCR states:

“The principle of burden- and responsibility-sharing reflects an understanding that refugees are of concern to the international community as a whole and that the countries and communities that host large numbers of refugees should be supported in doing so by the international community.” (UNHCR July 2017: 2)

In 2017, 29,718 persons arrived in Greece by sea, compared to 173,450 in 2016. About 5650 persons were arrested at the Greek-Turkish land borders in 2017, compared to 3,300 in 2016. Of the arrivals, 42% were originated from Syria, 20% from Iraq and 12% from Afghanistan. While there were 22% women and 37% children, less than the half (41%) were adult men. In total, the Asylum Service registered 58,661 asylum applications in 2017, which is 8.5 % of the total number of applications submitted in the EU. This means, Greece has had the highest

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number of registered first-time applicants relative to the population, which was 5 295 first-time applicants per million population (Eurostat 2018; Asylum Information Database 2017).

A high amount of these applications are made on five islands, the so-called “refugee hotspots” of Greece, which are Lesbos, Chios, Samos and Kos. On these islands, the asylum applications comprised 36.2 % of the total applications submitted in all Asylum Offices in the country. In 2017 and 2018 this percentage increased on to 44.8 % and 50.2 %. Until 28th March, 2018 there are 45.5 % on Lesbos, followed by 23.5 % on Chios, 19.4 % on Samos and only about 5-6 % on Leros and Kos. In total there are since then more than 15,000 asylum-seekers, which is the double amount of the islands’ capacities. Due to that fact, the conditions for refugees in the camps are low-standard, which is internationally known and criticized (Hellenic Republic (1) 2018).

Asylum-seekers have been prohibited from leaving the islands since March 2016, which has resulted in severely overcrowded camps, and protests⁶. In April 2018, the Council of State annulled the decision and new refugee and migrant arrivals in Greece are therefore able to move around the country freely, whereas the movement on the hotspot-islands become more restricted (World News 2018).

“In practice, the imposition of a restriction on freedom of movement is particularly applied to persons subject to the EU-Turkey statement and the Fast-Track Border Procedure, whose movement is systematically restricted within the island where they have arrived, under a “geographical restriction”. As mentioned in Reception and Identification Procedure, the geographical restriction on the given island is imposed both by the Police Authorities and the Asylum Service.” (Asylum Information Database, 2021)

The so-called “hotspot approach” was introduced by The European Agenda on Migration, which should serve as a model of operational support to Member States faced with disproportionate migratory pressure. In particular, Frontex and Europol should support frontline Member States such as Greece, to handle incoming migrants. Those who are claiming asylum will be put into the asylum procedure where the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) is sending teams in order to help process asylum cases, while Frontex should help by coordinating the returns. Next to that, Europol and Eurojust should assist the host Member State with

⁶ On 23rd April, 2018 the protest in Lesbos, with desperate migrants asking for better conditions and ultra-nationalists holding counter-protests (Express 2018).

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investigations to dismantle the smuggling and trafficking networks. This approach has been endorsed by the European Council in June 2015. Details about the function and modalities of the hotspots were presented in an unofficial “Explanatory Note” (Papadopoulou, 2016: 10).

“According to the Explanatory Note and the Annex, the hotspot approach should be the provision of operational support to Member States for the registration, identification and fingerprinting at points of arrival, in order to avoid irregular secondary movements; it would also aim to support the implementation of the relocation scheme under article 78(3), enhance law enforcement analysis on the ground and more effective implementation of returns policy. The Regulation establishing the European Border and Coast Guard (EBCG) of 13 September 2016 adds the definition of hotspot as ‘an area in which the host Member State, the Commission, relevant union agencies and participating Member State cooperate with the aim of managing an existing or potential disproportionate migratory challenge characterised by a significant increase in the number of migrants arriving at the external border.’” (Papadopoulou, 2016: 10)

Between the EU Agencies there is no hierarchy, as each Agency has a specific role in its implementation, such as Frontex, currently operating under the command of the Greek state in the Aegean Sea near Turkey. They stepped up their operations after Turkey opened their borders in the beginning of 2020, which led to geo-political tensions and Greece being challenged with thousands of new arrivals. They are providing assistance with registration, nationality screening, fingerprinting and the Eurodac registration. The Eurodac is enabling Member States to compare fingerprints of asylum applicants in order to regulate irregular entrances. Through this process, it is easier to determine responsibility for examining an asylum application. Next to these tasks, Frontex conducts interviews in order to gather information about smuggling routes. Besides that it also supports the organisation of returns (Papadopoulou, 2016: 10).

In late 2020, Frontex has been accused of violating against human rights, as they would carry out illegal pushbacks. The executive-director of Frontex, Fabrice Leggeri, had followed procedures over internal reports of possible violations. He sent letters to Greek authorities, with explanations and investigations into the allegations. The Greeks denied any wrongdoing by the Hellenic Coast Guard, claiming that in some cases the migrants on boats turned back to Turkey of their own free will (Nielsen, 2021).

“The results seek to spare the European Union reputational damage, at a time when Frontex's powers continue to expand. But in reality, they end up reinforcing a system of impunity of state institutions, whose political masters are largely supported by the EU. For its part, the European Parliament declined to set up a more powerful inquiry committee into the agency.” (Nielsen, 2021)

It seems like authorities want to look away in order to protect Frontex, as it is serving as a protection against asylum seekers, that are trying to reach the islands, and maybe later on trying

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to get farther into the north of Europe. And for those who are reaching the islands, they are kept in the hotspots. Those hotspots were designed in order to identify, register and process migrants. While in Italy migrants spend a few days in such hotspots before being transferred to reception or detention centres, in Greece the situation is different, as the hotspots serve as reception/detention centres themselves. Refugees arriving on the Greek islands therefore often spend months or years in such camps, living in inhumane conditions and being forced to wait until a decision about their asylum has been made by the Greek authorities (Papadopoulou, 2016: 11).

“Hotspots were conceived as a tool directly related to the emergency relocation mechanism, in order to identify and channel asylum seekers in clear need of international protection. According to the ‘Explanatory Note’ sent by Commissioner Avramopoulos to JHA Ministers, the hotspot approach should contribute to the effective implementation of the relocation schemes established by the EU Decisions of 14 and 22 September 2015.¹⁰ With regards to Greece, however, the EU Turkey deal shifted the hotspots’ objective and functioning towards a filtering between the regular asylum procedure in Greece, or return to Turkey.” (Papadopoulou, 2016: 12)

While executive powers rest with the Member States, and EASO and Frontex increasingly interfere with national procedures through their operations on the ground, which through its involvement in individual decision-making processes generates greater accountability and liability for human rights violations (Papadopoulou, 2016: 12).

“In particular, when operating in the framework of migration management support teams in the hotspots, the technical and operational assistance that can be provided ranges from screening (including registration, identification and, where requested by Member States, fingerprinting), the provision of information on asylum procedures, the registration of asylum applications, and “where requested by Member States, the examination of such applications” (Article 21 (2)). As ECRE has noted, while the responsibility rests with the national authorities, this is clearly stretching the competences of the Agency’s staff and Member States’ experts from other Member States and raises questions of accountability. It also raises questions of quality and efficiency, in particular where they lack any practical experience in assessing and examining asylum applications.” (Papadopoulou, 2016: 12)

For example in the case of Greece, the Law of April 2016 foresees a supporting role for EASO in the inadmissibility interviews, while not specifying certain responsibilities. This and other facts led some observers to come up with the idea that the EU should issue an additional legislative proposal covering the specifics of hotspots and the ways in which compliance with European asylum law and the EU Charter are to be guaranteed (Papadopoulou, 2016: 13).

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Lesvos: Camp Mória and Camp PIKPA in Comparison

We come now to the part, where we will have a closer look into one of these European Union’s hotspot islands, including my personal experiences on the Greek island Lesvos. Mória Reception and Identification Centre, which was located close to the city Mytilene, is stated by some NGOs as the worst refugee camp worldwide, described as an open prison. It used to be Europe’s biggest refugee camp until it was burned down in September 2020. It was built for about 3000 people, while at its peak around 20.000 refugees lived there, among whom 6000-8000 were children. Most of them coming from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Somalia, and Congo among other places. As the camp got overcrowded fast, it expanded into the surrounding, while estimated 5000 olive trees were cut down and used for the structures or as firewood. The Greeks living in the village Mória were complaining about vandalism and rising criminality, as people were breaking in their gardens or houses. People arriving on the island had to register at EASO, who usually handed a tent out at the beginning. If the people found other people to make a structure they would live together in and if they had enough money – because the wood for your structure you have to pay for yourself – then they would start building their homes out of whatever was available to them. When I walked through the so-called “Moria jungle”, which is the area all of the structures were built around the original container camp of UNHCR (the one originally for 3000 people) I saw all kinds of houses, some built out of plastic bottles or leaves, others with wood. Some had dug a hole in front of their structure which was used as a stove. I have visited one structure, where they had a small bathroom, the hole being their private toilet, which to them was luxury. Because all the other people would have to use the facilities of the camp, which were rare and dirty. People had to stay in lines in Mória not only for going to the toilet but also for taking a shower, getting food or water, picking up money (there used to be one cash-machine installed sometime in 2020 for around 18 000 people back then), going to the health centre, going to the city Mytilene by bus and actually for almost everything. In a state of standstill, there is not much more to do for refugees, than to wait for the interview, then the decision and in general waiting for a better future. Seeing it like that, this camp could also be called “waiting-camp” (Wikipedia, 2021).

In the beginning of the so called refugee crisis, there used to be a lot of volunteers coming to the island working in the camps. There used to be a system, separating new arrivals into vulnerable and non-vulnerable refugees. Throughout a first interview this decision had to be

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made by some authorities, which had a huge impact on their asylum procedure. If you were put into the vulnerable group (mostly women, children, injured people) then it was more likely that the whole process was faster and it was easier to get help for special needs. In the beginning of 2015 the situation was also very different to the situation in 2020, as there were mostly richer people arriving, actually those who could afford to leave. The Greeks were using this opportunity, selling supplies for a higher price than later on. There was, for example, the possibility to charge your phone, which would cost 10 Euros. Over the years, the camp grew in size as more and more people were arriving while not so many were leaving the island. Around the container camp, which was run by the UNHCR, a little village made out of tents and structures started to grow. At its peak, camp Mória had 20 000 occupants at the same time. Facilities were lacking and if existent, in a bad shape. The conditions were tough, as in summer there was nowhere to hide from the heat and in winter there was no heater to warm up the tents, the refugees themselves started to put life into this prison. There was a little market, where some richer refugees could run little shops. There were also tents offering different things like barber shops or structures which had sewing machines. Even schools had been formed inside the camp, some with the help of volunteers and some just run by refugees themselves. In those schools there took place language courses but also art courses or dance classes. Conditions further deteriorated throughout 2020. The threat of having COVID-19 spread in the camp easily and quickly was apparent, as keeping distance was impossible and the hygiene-level very low. Because of COVID-19 the people were also put under lockdown, which meant they could not leave the camp in order to go to Mytilene. Only with a special permission from the police could they move around (for example in case of a doctor's appointment or for the interview). Also, because of the virus most, if not even all of the courses that were run by NGO's had to stop operating during the first lockdown. Help was hard to provide and only the schools run by refugees themselves could find a way to continue. Next to this worldwide pandemic, as I already mentioned earlier, in the beginning of March the Turkish borders were opened and a massive influx of refugees came to the Greek islands. This led to riots by right-wing extremists who flew from Germany and Austria to Lesvos, trying to attack refugees and volunteers. Some people I knew for my work as a volunteer were telling me about being attacked when they were sitting in the car on the way to the camp. Those extremists were throwing stones at cars but they were also attacking people. Next to that, the Greek state suspended the asylum law for one month, which made the new arrivals of refugees illegal. Some of them were not even

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documented and were sent straight back to Turkey instead (while later claiming not to have received any refugees, although Greek people from the village were witnessing it).

On 8th of September when the camp burned down, the refugees lost their homes once again. They were forced to live in the streets, not able to enter the city called Mytilene. They were not even allowed to rent rooms in hotels, as the hotels in Mytilene had decided not to accept any of the refugees, which was a scandal. Some volunteers tried to find a place to stay for a man sitting in a wheel-chair. He used to be in the old camp Mória, not being able to move and therefore always dependent on another friend, also refugee to help him out. In the new camp, which was built on a former military shooting range, for the man in the wheel-chair his mobility was even more limited than before. While the volunteers tried to find a place for him, they had to fight in order for the man staying not more than one night in one of the hotels. Until now, the tents of the new camp are only for a temporary stay, hosting around 7000 refugees, including children under the age of eighteen. Around 5000 refugees have been moved from the island to the mainland.

Along with the overcrowded Mória, there existed a smaller camp called PIKPA, founded by Lesvos Solidarity Network in 2012. This place called then “The Village of Altogether” was a space, built on the principles of solidarity, empowerment and active participation, hosting around 120 of the most vulnerable refugees, living in small huts made out of wood. There were built sixteen wooden houses, three rooms in the main building and six emergency shelters. This camp used to be independent of the Greek government and was fully run by volunteers working in different work-groups, such as the construction team, the kindergarden, the kitchen-team, the social workers and so on. The place where it was situated used to be a summer camp, which was transformed into a refugee camp over the years. From 2012 to 2020, this camp had hosted over 30.000 refugees, all of them living in Mória before. Because of their special needs, they were transferred into this smaller camp, which focuses on humanitarian aid giving access to doctors, psychologists and other aid, providing for the various needs of refugees. That also includes food, medical assistance, clothing and psychological support (Lesvossolidarity, 2021). The refugees are there waiting for the decision concerning their asylum, trying to live a normal life, doing language courses, art courses, theatre and whatever is taking place in PIKPA organized by volunteers. Some of them have to care for their children but they might still find some time for some activities, while the children are going to kindergarden or to some lessons. Only people with special needs were moved from Moria into this small camp, such as injured

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persons, pregnant women, there was one 17-year old girl, she had a four year old daughter, after being raped. UNHCR used to decide about who was allowed to move from the big camp Mória into the smaller camp PIKPA. As I experienced it myself in July and August 2020, this used to be a safe space for people who have disabilities, for those who have a trauma (although I am sure that almost all of the 20 000 people in Moria and those who left it might have that) and for unaccompanied children. The minors and the families/single men and women are separated into two groups. There are volunteers responsible for the minors and others for the families and singles. Some of the unaccompanied children have family in their home country or somewhere else in the world. Only a few do not know about their family or have lost all their family members. The children there were from very small to about fourteen years old, which made organizing a program for all of them quite difficult. During my stay there was a lack of volunteers, which meant that the whole group with these big age gaps had to be taken care of. Even harder was the fact, that those children have actually gone through a lot and some of them were fighting with traumas. For example when the Turkish airforce was flying above the camp, the loud sound made the children usually put their hands on their ears, as those sounds were reminding them of a stressful time in their home-countries. Originally PIKPA was a camp for people who are on the way to other places. Since 2016 some of the residents did not spend two to three months there but up to four years. It is a very mixed camp, all different kinds of cultures and ages. They had a house for music, one for a beauty salon, one just for the children, a playground and so on. This open camp seemed very well structured and was run without the help of the government. I worked there for one and a half months and after seeing both, Mória and PIKPA it was even more obscure that this camp was shut down by the Greek police on 30th of October 2020, especially considering that a fire had destroyed the former camp Mória, resulting in many difficulties (Lesvossolidarity, 2021).

“On 30th October 2020, and during a year of unprecedented attack to solidarity from the Greek government, Pikpa was evicted, after 8 years of operation. The residents of the camp were illegally moved by police forces to the municipal camp of Kara Tepe.” (Lesvossolidarity, 2021)

The seventy-four residents, including thirty-two children were moved to the “old” Kara Tepe camp (the new camp, which was built up for the thousands of refugees being homeless after the fire was called Kara Tepe 2.0). At the same time, there was the first case of COVID-19 found in the old Kara Tepe camp, which was actually exposing PIKPA´s residents to unavoidable risk. Lesvos Solidarity stated that:

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“Residents were woken up in their houses by police. No official written order was presented at any point, despite lawyers’ repeated requests for individualised decisions for transfer to a new place, in respect of national, European and international law. The public prosecutor, who was on site during the eviction, repeated she was only present to monitor the situation [...] The few team members of Lesvos Solidarity who were present in the camp were not allowed to move around to observe the situation or support the residents, and were kept under supervision of police. Even when the vulnerabilities of the residents were flagged again, nobody else was allowed in. Police forces surrounded the camp denying access to the residents’ lawyers, psychosocial and medical workers, volunteers, Lesvos Solidarity staff members. Press was also denied access to the premises.” (Lesvosolidarity, 2021)

The EU and its strategy to avoid receiving more refugees

The fact that the EU is installing so-called hotspots at the borders of the European Union, which are in reality more like open-air prisons, where refugees have to wait for months or even years in camps under partly horrible, inhumane conditions, is making one thing clear or everybody. There is no more “welcoming” into the European Union, as since 2015 this whole refugee procedure has become more restricted and complicated for refugees when trying to get asylum in a European country. There seems to be an effort to hold the people into one place, in order to register and process the new incoming refugees, waiting for decisions on a higher level to be made, to either send those refugees into other European countries, back to Turkey or somewhere on the mainland of Greece, where they do not really have better chances to get a job or find a place either. Camps like Mória should serve as a deterrent example, which should make refugees afraid of trying to come to Europe. There is an attempt to scare them off with the knowledge that Europe seems to not care much about Human Rights within those camps, not even if a high percentage of the residents are children. It also seems like international help like the EU-Turkey deal or the redistribution of some refugees within the EU could not help preventing the construction of a camp like that, unless it is wanted like that. Therefore, it does not seem strange that some politicians try to protect Frontex from any charges, wanting them to operate in order to prevent people from arriving Europe at all. Considering the law this is one useful strategy, in order to avoid being in the position of being forced to care for refugees. And even if some could make it into European territory, there are other illegal ways found to get rid of refugees. Current and past political actions (or non-actions) call for and deserve greater explanation. This whole situation is complex to the point that it will take years to be able to find a solution to all the problems that are being attempted to be negated by keeping people in these hotspots. Many thousands of refugees had to live under bad conditions for months or even years,

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it will take them maybe the rest of their lives in order to find a way to live a “normal” life somewhere else again.

About the documentary movie “IN MEMORIAM”

After doing research about this topic for some years and visiting Mória myself last year, I am now working together with the filmmaker Martin Lintner on a documentary movie called “IN MEMORIAM”. It is about a young Afghan boy who arrived on the island in the end of 2019 and is still in Lesvos now. In the documentary movie one can see how Ali Mustafa used to live in Mória, lived in the streets after the fire in September 2020 and finally ending up in the new camp. In this camp the residents have to live in even worse conditions than in the old camp Mória before. At the end of November it was forbidden to film the new camp and show it to the public, even by its residents themselves. It seems like authorities do not want the public to know too much about this new camp. That is why it is even more important to keep in touch with the people who are currently living there and trying to inform the public about it, which is why I also want to thank you again for the opportunity to present this paper.

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