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“Welcome to Europe!”: The Violence Continuum and the Refugee Crisis in Lesvos

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Since 2015, Lesvos, a Greek island in the Aegean Sea, has been associated with a humanitarian crisis. The island has become a gate to Europe for more than tens of thousands of migrants who are fleeing wars, conflicts, and violence to seek refuge in Europe, but often get stuck in one of the asylum hotspots in the south of Europe (Iliadou, 2019). During their time in such a hotspot, migrants often experience a continuum of violence, ranging from direct physical violence to invisible structural violence enacted through EU border politics (Topak, 2020). In this paper, I argue that the everyday violence experienced by migrants is intertwined within a broader structural violence, which is at the core of the biopolitics of Europe, through which the lives of migrants are being regulated. The aim of this paper is twofold: to improve awareness of the often-unknown violence encountered by migrants, and to contribute to the academic literature by exploring the violence continuum and how different forms of violence are intertwined (Bourgois, 2004; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). First, I introduce a brief overview of migrants *en route* to Lesvos. Second, I discuss the violence enacted on those people in relation to the concept of *everyday violence* (Bourgois, 2004). Third, I discuss the broader EU border politics in relation to the concept of *structural violence* (Farmer, 2004; Galtung, 1969). These discussions allow us to identify and place the different forms of violence occuring on Lesvos onto a violence continuum.

INTRODUCTION

Camp Mavrovouni, August 2022. It is 2:58 p.m. I am watching the time on my phone, as it slowly passes by. I feel a warm breeze from the seaside, and I look up to the sky. The sun shines brightly and warms the earth. I am turning around to look at the half-closed gate and the elevated fences with barbed wire on top. We are waiting for a bus with around thirty *New Arrivals*[1] to come into camp. About one hour earlier, we got a phone call; a group of migrants[2] is on its way to camp. I hear the familiar sound of a bus coming closer, and so does the police. The bus stops right in front of the gate and people get out under the watchful eye of at least ten policemen. They follow us into camp as we are assigning their new *homes* and give them a sleeping bag, a bundle of clothes, and a hygiene kit. People start coming out of their tents and gather at the metal gates. “Welcome to Europe!” They cheer and applaud for the newcomers. People start crying, laughing, and embracing. People are reunited with their loved ones, but also find out their losses and missing persons.

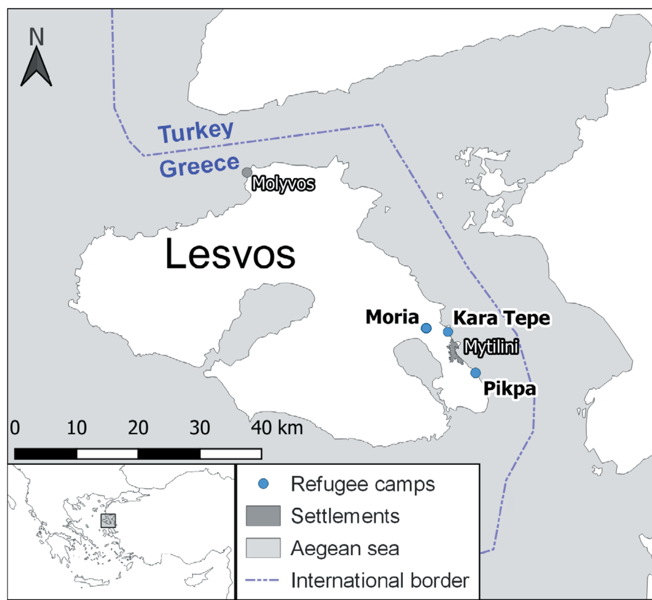
This was a usual day during my time working in the refugee camp on Lesvos[3] in the summer of 2022. I was a volunteer in the quarantine zone, checking in *New Arrivals*. According to the Aegean Boat Report (2022, p. 3), 65 boats with a total of 1,344 people arrived on the island between January and August 2022, far exceeding the other Aegean islands with Samos and Kos in second and third place, respectively—41 boats with 896 people and 41 boats with 1,040 people. These migrants, fleeing their countries for multiple reasons, risk their lives in the hope of a better future in Europe, but far too often get stuck in one of the refugee hotspots in the south of Europe, where they encounter a continuum of violence in violation with International Humanitarian Law (Iliadou, 2019; Topak, 2020).

Therefore, the aim of this paper is twofold: (1) to improve awareness of the obscured violence experienced by refugees on Lesvos as, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2015; UNHCR hereafter), this island hosts the highest number of refugees in Europe’s most famous refugee camp; and (2) this paper contributes to the academic literature in that it explores the continuum of violence and how different forms of violence are intertwined. As most academic literature focuses on different forms of violence and their intertwinement in times of war and in places of war (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004; Imbusch et al., 2011), the case of Lesvos adds a unique perspective on the continuum of violence by focusing on a place of peace where the side effects of war and its refugee flows are reflected.

The central question of this paper is: how can the violence experienced by migrants on Lesvos be viewed in the continuum of violence in relation to everyday and structural violence? First, I introduce a brief general overview of migrants *en route* to Lesvos and the practices associated. Second, I explore the violence encountered by migrants on the island in relation to the concept of *everyday violence* (Bourgois, 2004). Third, I discuss the broader EU border politics in relation to *structural violence* (Farmer, 2004; Galtung, 1969) and the concept of *necropolitics* (De León, 2015; originally coined by Mbembe, 2003) as part of *biopolitics* (Foucault, 1997), to conclude that the everyday violence faced by migrants is intertwined with the structural violence in a continuum, which is at the heart of the biopolitics of Europe. This continuum of violence ranges “from direct physical assault to symbolic violence and routinized everyday violence, including the chronic, historically

Figure 1

Lesvos and its Main Reception Centres



Note. From *Asylum seekers and migrants in Lesvos, Greece, 2019 –2020*, by J. S. Jauhiainen, and E. Vorobeva, 2020, p. 6. Copyright 2020 by Jussi S. Jauhiainen and Ekaterina Vorobeva.

embedded structural violence whose visibility is obscured by globalized hegemonies" (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004, p. 21). A focus on this continuum allows scholars and practitioners alike to understand different forms of violence across social and geographical time (Bourgois, 2004); violence does not remain fixed in one moment or one act. Rather, different forms of violence acquire different meanings, actions, effects, and intertwinings (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004).

CONTEXT: *EN ROUTE* TO LESVOS

Since 2015, Lesvos has been associated with the arrival of tens of thousands of migrants into Europe. The route to the island is known as the Eastern Mediterranean migrant route (UNHCR, 2015, p. 11). The island is in the Northern Aegean Sea, situated across from the Turkish coast, and is one of four Aegean islands (among Chios, Samos, and Limnos) hosting EU-funded asylum hotspots (see **Figure 1**). Migrants who venture this route seek to escape across the sea with the help of smugglers. Jussi Juahiainen and Ekaterina Vorobeva (2020) describe how migrants in Turkey are dependent on smugglers to reach the island. Before crossing, the migrants are placed in a holding place to wait until the sea conditions are favourable and the maximum number of border crossers is reached to fill a vessel—usually between 35 and 45 people. Upon crossing, smugglers launch after daylight on boats that are often rigid inflatable boats or wooden fishing boats, without food and water and with life jackets only available to those who can afford them. In these conditions, migrants set off for the shores of Lesvos.

During these crossings, migrants often experience direct physical violence in so-called normalised "pushbacks", orchestrated by the Greek coastguard, a paramilitary organisation— known as the *Harbour Corps-Hellenic Coast Guard*. According to Dimitris Koros, such "pushbacks" entail "the arbitrary removal of third-country nationals without assessing the legality of their entry" (2021, p. 239) with meticulous checking of personal items and on many occasions verbal and physical abuse, after which the boat is pushed back in open waters towards Turkey. Other violent encounters with the Greek coastguard on sea include actively trying to capsize refugee boats and shooting around their boats to make them turn around to Turkey (Koros, 2021). A statement by the UNHCR (2022) claims that since January 2022, more than sixty migrants died on the Aegean Sea when trying to reach Lesvos as a consequence of these violent encounters.[4] In September 2022 at the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly, President Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey accused Greece of turning the Aegean Sea into a "refugee graveyard", as the Turkish coastguard regularly pick up desperate migrants on boats that have been floating for days on open waters, or encounter dead migrant bodies off the coast of Turkey (Bathke, 2022). However, until this day, Greece denies any allegation that indicates the practice of "pushbacks" into Turkish waters. In terms of the violence continuum, these "pushbacks" are a form of direct violence, as the Greek coastguard uses physical violence to prevent refugees from reaching the shores of Lesvos.

IN LIMBO: BEING A REFUGEE IN LESVOS

The physical direct violence experienced *en route* to Lesvos continues for migrants in everyday life on Lesvos. Upon arrival on the island, migrants are taken into *reception centres*: these are detention camps aimed at enclosing undocumented people after their arrival, to register, fingerprint, and select migrants who will be relocated to other countries (Guiraudon, 2018). One such reception centre was Moria (see **Figure 1**), recently replaced by camp Mavrovouni—nicknamed by locals as Moria 2.0—as Moria was destroyed by a fire in September 2020. In these detention camps, often overseen by the UNHCR, conditions are considerably below basic living, health, and safety standards, including (1) extremely poor hygiene conditions; (2) insufficient quality of food; (3) serious overcrowding; (4) a lack or limited access to education, healthcare, and employment; and (5) acts of violence and abuse perpetrated by other migrants as well as the police (Iliadou, 2019; Topak, 2020). These conditions can be placed in the structural realm on the violence continuum, as these conditions are structural factors resulting in direct physical violence, which I discuss below.

Acts of violence and abuse are well-documented by Özgün Topak (2020), who conducted field research in camp Moria. One of his interviewees described the camp as a struggle for survival, causing thefts, fights, and other forms of violence, such as domestic and sexual violence. He stated: "[There are] a lot of fights [in the Moria camp]. People killing each other, burning the camp, stealing. On the first week that I came, they stole my phone" (Topak, 2020, p. 1869). Another interviewee stated: "All night there was fighting; in the food line there was fighting. Every night I could not sleep. Maybe someone will kill me, they will kill my son, they will burn my tent" (ibid., p. 1858). In addition to the violence perpetrated by other migrants, Evgenia Iliadou (2019) shows through her fieldwork on the island, among both refugees and non-profit organisations (NGOs),[5] that police brutality is a common phenomenon among migrants. An NGO, operating in former Moria, stated:

> Police violence is omnipresent on Lesbos. It happens in the day, in the night, in the street, in the police station, in Moria prison, and to the people with and without papers. Every day on the island, people are controlled, harassed, humiliated, insulted, and beaten. (No Border Kitchen Lesvos 2017, cited in Iliadou, 2019, p. 79)

As a result of these daily violent encounters, migrants live in a constant situation of fear. According to a 2018 Refugee Rights Europe survey, of the 311 Moria camp resident respondents, 65.7% "*never [felt] safe*, while only 8% felt "*quite safe*" or "*perfectly safe*" (Gallagher et al., 2018, p. 9). Furthermore, 47.1% reported experiencing violence perpetrated by other migrants, while 47.4% reported experiencing violence perpetrated by the Greek police (ibid., pp. 12–13), showing that at least nearly half of the sample has encountered violence on the island. These statistics show that the experienced violence is not unidirectional, with refugees being depersonalised victims; it is a more pervasive issue affecting the entire system of refugee camps, in which a spiral of different forms of violence influence each other.

What is apparent in the discussion above, is that refugees live in a constant situation of direct interpersonal violence, ranging from verbal and physical violence during "pushbacks" to fights, killings, and abuse by other migrants and the police on the island. Moreover, these violent encounters are embedded in the everyday lives of refugees: "[e]very day

on this island, people are controlled, harassed, humiliated, insulted, and beaten" (No Border Kitchen Lesvos, 2017, cited in Iliadou, 2019, p. 79). Therefore, this violence can be conceptualised as *everyday violence*, described by Philippe Bourgois as "a focus on the individual experience that normalizes petty brutality and terror at the community level and creates a common sense of ethos of violence" (2004, p. 426). Refugees thus adjust to their violent surroundings by adopting survival strategies, such as using backways to become as invisible as possible, suggesting normalised mechanisms to cope with the everyday experienced violence (Iliadou, 2019). Evgenia Iliadou (2019) describes a case in which refugees make use of narrow sideroads along the coast to avoid police encounters on the main roads. In addition, this violent ethos affects different refugees differently; refugee men are more likely to be beaten, scolded, or arrested by the police than women and children (ibid.). Consequently, men more often make use of these backways than women and children, who in turn feel unsafe on the narrow sideroads for fear of being sexually violated and therefore prefer to stay on the main roads (ibid.). As these coping mechanisms show, refugees exert a certain level of agency in coping with the spiral of intertwined forms of violence.

According to Heath Cabot (2012) and Topak (2020), this everyday violence is aggravated by a prolonged state of waiting, as many are not allowed to travel geographically from the island as long as their asylum application is not yet confirmed. Hence, migrants are trapped in a liminality of waiting in-between Turkey and Europe, resulting in psychological violence amongst refugees of all ages (Topak, 2020). A migrant stated: "Everyone is in a bad mood psychologically, and they start fighting for no reason almost" (ibid., p. 1869). Many migrants feel passive, hopeless, anxious, depressed, and even traumatised. Voluntary psychologists and social care workers from diverse NGOs do everything in their power to assist these refugees, but resources often fall short and are only provided to a very limited extent by the Greek government and the European Union (EU), another structural matter on the continuum of violence.

This everyday direct and psychological violence is not an isolated case. As Bourgois (2003) shows how everyday violence, enacted through a violent street culture among crack sellers in East Harlem, New York, is the product of broader invisible structures, so too is the everyday violence experienced by migrants on Lesvos intertwined with broader structural factors. This aligns with Galtung's (1969) argument that visible direct violence is a consequence of invisible structural violence—I turn to such discussion now, particularly to how EU border politics may be embodied in the Dublin Regulation and the EU–Turkey deal.

THE BIGGER PICTURE: EU BORDER POLITICS

The EU has played a crucial role in developing its border politics and procedures applicable to refugees arriving on Lesvos. The EU's Common European Asylum System sets out who qualifies for international protection and covers all aspects of the European asylum process (European Commission, 2020). The groundwork for its procedures is embedded in the Dublin Regulation,[6] a European law first implemented in 2003 (Cabot, 2012; see UNHCR, n.d.). Although some minor changes have been made since, the regulation still determines which EU member state is responsible for examining an asylum application; usually the country in which a migrant first arrives. Consequently, this rule has led to an uneven distribution of migrants among member states, creating so-called "refugee hotspots" across the southern borders of the EU in countries, such as Spain, Italy, and Greece (Cabot, 2012). The southern borders of the EU countries receive most migrants as most migrants migrate from African and Middle-Eastern countries. With the dramatic increase in the number of migrants arriving in these hotspots since 2015,[7] the EU has increased its efforts to externalise migration flows through agreements with countries of origin and transit, such as Turkey and Libya, providing development aid in exchange for return regulations (Iliadou, 2019).

Regarding Lesvos, one such agreement was the EU–Turkey deal, signed in 2016, in which Turkey would use any means necessary to stop people from travelling illegally to Greece in return for €6 billion to improve the humanitarian situation of refugees in Turkey, and visa-free travel for Turkish nationals in Europe (Lehner, 2018). Together with the Dublin Regulation, this deal resulted in Greek liminal open-air prison islands for migrants near the Turkish coast. As previously stated, those arriving from Turkey by boat are placed under geographical restriction: they cannot leave the island until their asylum case has been processed by the Greek government, which can take more than three years of indefinite waiting (Cabot, 2012). Moreover, acting as the gatekeeper of *Fortress Europe*, Greece has hardened its stance on both asylum and border control practices, such as increased detention of migrants, bureaucratic barriers in the asylum process, including the requirement of fingerprints, as well as the earlier discussed normalised "pushbacks" with the help of EU border agency, Frontex (Iliadou, 2019). This hardened stance of Greece on its border politics has resulted in migrants now experiencing even more violence (including its various forms), as they must find illegal and arguably more vulnerable ways of travelling. While in 2015 refugees were received with solidarity from the Greek population, in 2022 refugees were subjected to resentment and hate of the Greek population, as refugees kept coming and tourism had collapsed (Cabot, 2012).

This increased surveillance through confinement in detention camps and the asylum process can be conceptualised as a biometric act, referring to Foucault's (1997) thoughts on *biopolitics*; that is, the way in which governments govern the biological life of people. The ways in which EU border politics, a political system, regulates the life of migrants within and beyond its borders through bureaucratic means is a form of biopolitics, as it concerns techniques for subjugating migrant bodies. Even more, it contains a form of *necropolitics*; that is, the use of power to decide how certain people may live and how others should die in a state of exception (see Mbembe, 2003). Jason De León (2015), taking this idea, argues that the Sonoran Desert between Mexico and the United States has become a state of exception, where the abnormal is normalised through a form of necropolitics, which decides the ways in which some border crossers can live, and others must die. Similarly, Lesvos is a state of exception where the abnormal is normalised through otherwise prohibited practices, such as "pushbacks" and severe living conditions, thereby determining in what ways migrants can live in detention camps or must die at sea. In short, EU border politics not only determines the life and death of these refugees, but also the ways in which life and death are enacted upon these people.

These structures of the EU border politics are a characteristic of structural violence, a concept coined by medical anthropologist Paul Farmer, who defined the concept as "violence exerted systematically—that is, indirectly, by everyone who belongs to a certain order" (2004, p. 307). Johan Galtung similarly defined the notion as "the violence built into the structure and showing up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances" (1969, p. 171). Migrants arriving on the borders of Europe experience this violence as these structures of EU border politics allow for brutal indignity and dehumanisation of migrants—they are excluded from obtaining human rights, as designated in the Geneva Conventions of 1949[8] and the European Convention of Human Rights 1950 (Guiraudon, 2018). As mentioned, refugees in detention camps on Lesvos are often denied access to basic living, health, and safety standards (Topak, 2020). Furthermore, the participation of multiple actors in those politics, such as EU member state governments, NGOs, and paramilitary organisations, and the secrecy surrounding its practices, obscure the lines of responsibility through which it often becomes impossible to assign individual responsibility—another characteristic of structural violence (Farmer, 2004). This obscuration of responsibility leads to the deterioration of the wellbeing and safeguarding of migrants. A well-known case entails the failures of European states to investigate reports of abuse and violation among refugees (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Human Rights Watch (2022) documented several reports in which different European countries abandoned their duties towards migrants, including Poland and Belarus. Polish officials repel those who try to cross or push back those who initially succeed in crossing the border. Belarusian officials in turn beat and detain those who return and coerce them to try to cross into Poland again (ibid.). Consequently, refugees end up in a state of limbo on the border between Poland and Belarus, with both countries taking no responsibility for any of these migrants in deteriorating conditions without access to basic humanitarian services—including food and

water—resulting in illnesses and deaths (ibid.).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have explored a wide continuum of violence experienced by migrants on Lesvos. Although not every aspect of this continuum could be discussed, migrants on the island encounter violence: ranging from direct physical violence, such as the normalised "pushbacks", fights and abuses of other migrants and the police in everyday life, to psychological violence, because of a state of waiting *in limbo*, to indirect structural violence perpetrated through biopolitical EU border politics. Galtung (1969) argues that these forms of direct violence are an outcome of the structural factors underlying the issue on the violence continuum. As migrants experience radical social exclusion through detention, experience migrant and police brutality, and as they are dehumanised by severe living conditions in conflict with human rights and the psychological harm of indefinite waiting, migrants on Lesvos indeed experience a continuum of violence. In this continuum, violence cannot always be strictly labelled. This intertwinement of different forms of violence, seized in a continuum, allows for a unique perspective on the case of Lesvos through viewing different forms of violence across social and geographical time (Bourgois, 2004). As shown in this paper, different forms of violence and its intertwinements acquire different meanings, actions, and effects, as violence does not remain fixed in one moment or one act.

Rather than being places of safety, after fleeing war-torn countries, the EU fails to offer protection to refugees arriving at the borders of *Fortress Europe*. Violent practices surrounding the refugee crisis are often shrouded in secrecy, as European states have failed to investigate reports of abuse and violation, despite mounting, credible evidence (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Therefore, future research should focus even more on the violence encountered by migrants, on islands such as Lesvos, which now hosts 40 percent of all arrivals by sea to Greece, far exceeding the other Aegean islands (UNHCR, 2022a). With the deteriorating conditions in Somalia through drought and famine, in Uganda with new outbreaks of violent conflict, in Afghanistan with the Taliban in power, and in Sudan with the unpredictability of new outbreaks of violent conflict, the number of refugees arriving in southern Europe already rocketed a new record in 2022 (ibid.). With this prospect in mind, refugee numbers will most likely rise in the coming years. As Matthieu Aikins (2022) illustrates in his book, *The Naked Don't Fear the Water*, by making the refugee journey himself from Afghanistan to Athens, the Eastern Mediterranean migrant route is by far favoured among refugees, as Turkey and Lesvos are only 1.5 kilometres away from each other. Therefore, it is essential to understand the violence continuum experienced on Lesvos to contribute to the improvement of conditions for migrants on Lesvos both now and in the future. However, to say that migrants are passive puppets in this violence is not accurate; they too exert a certain agency while being *in limbo*, including the briefly mentioned coping mechanisms which could be another point for future research.

In sum, there is indeed a bitter "Welcome to Europe!", for at least the ones who survive the "refugee graveyard" and make it to the shores of Lesvos and continue to encounter the continuum of violence. As one interlocutor, Salma,[9] told me on her self-made wooden bench before her tent, watching the golden sun set into the sea: "Earth shares with us the same sunset you see, but Europe doesn't share the same human rights you have, while I'm human too."[10]

NOTES

1. *New Arrivals* is the official name used by organisations in camp Mavrovouni for people just entering camp.
2. There are many terms for people who try to enter Europe without permission, such as *illegal migrants*, *gelukszoekers* (*luck seekers*), *economic migrants*, *real migrants*, etc. In this paper, I adopt the terms *migrants* and *refugees* to describe people seeking a better future in Europe for reasons of their own.
3. The name *Lesvos* or *Lesbos* means the same. In the Greek language, the B is pronounced as a V. Although *Lesvos* and *Lesbos* are used interchangeably in the English language, I maintain *Lesvos* in this paper as, in my opinion, this represents the Greek language.
4. This estimation of the number of deaths is only based on migrants trying to reach the island Lesvos. As practices on the Aegean Sea are often ambiguous and shrouded in darkness, exact numbers are not possible to record.
5. NGOs operate independently of any government to address a social or political issue. Examples of NGOs in the reception centres on Lesvos are *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), EuroRelief, Boat Refugee Foundation (BRF), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Recently, there has been a debate around the independence of NGOs, as most NGOs rely heavily on donations from governments. For further debate, see Williamson (2011).
6. The Dublin Regulation was officially agreed on in 1990 and became in force in 1997. It operates on the assumption that "as the asylum laws and practices of the EU States are based on the same common standards, they allow asylum seekers to enjoy similar levels of protection in all EU Member States" (UNHCR, n.d.) The irony is in the fact that its regulations seek to *benefit* migrants, while the regulations often have been used as an excuse by EU countries to abstain from receiving migrants, as they enter in the south of Europe.
7. The sharp rise in the number of people arriving in Europe was a leading factor for this agreement. In 2015, almost one million refugees arrived in the EU, while more than 3,500 lost their lives while making the journey (International Rescue Committee, 2022).
8. The Geneva Conventions, established in 1949, are agreed upon by all 196 recognised countries in the world, and form the core of international humanitarian law, regulating the conduct of armed conflict and seeking to limit its effects (ICRC, 2014). They are aimed at protecting people who do not fight, such as civilians, and people who are no longer able to fight, such as wounded soldiers.
9. To maintain anonymity, the name Salma is a pseudonym.
10. Personal communication, August 3, 2022.

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