



RESISTING ANTI-REFUGEE REGIMES

Everyday Violence and Resistance in Europe's
'Migration Management' During the Covid-19 Pandemic

An anthology of essays written by: Gaffar Saeneen, Dalal Rajab, Victoria Tecca, Lukas Kestens, Soline Ballet, Susanne Jaspars, Tianne Haggar, Francesca Pusterla, Robin Vandevordt and Jacob Warn, Marta Welander

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Trigger warning

Please note that the content of some of the essays in this collection may trigger an emotional response for individuals who may have experienced or witnessed self-harm, violence and/or other traumatic events.

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Introduction.

Introductory essay written by Dr Marta Welanders and Dr Susanne Jaspars. Marta is a critical border and migration scholar and activist, and Susanne is an independent researcher and research associate at SOAS, University of London, focussing on the politics of food security, humanitarian crisis and forced migration. She also volunteers with Waging Peace and Care4Calais to support asylum seekers in the UK. In this essay, the authors introduce this anthology of short essays, a compilation of ten contributions from a mix of researchers, activists and practitioners working on everyday violence and resistance at Europe's borders.



Photo by Sarah Story, Refugee Info Bus

Calais Jungle

Welcome to this anthology on the everyday violence and resistance in Europe's 'migration management' during the Covid-19 pandemic. People on the move across Europe are continuously met by a heavy-handed state response. EU-wide and national-level policies and practices are causing widespread human suffering and countless human rights infringements across the continent. The situation for people on the move deteriorated during the Covid-19 pandemic, when states adopted increasingly strict border control policies and when the public health situation in border zones reached critical levels. These practices are worsening the protection and humanitarian crisis at the heart of Europe.

The European Union was founded on the values of human rights and human dignity, with the conviction that adherence to these values is crucial to avoiding the atrocities that scarred Europe during the first half of the 20th century. In the context of people on the move, these very values are now being eroded, as Europe's asylum and migration system is increasingly centred on securitisation, criminalisation and exclusion. We are witnessing ever-increased funding for restrictive border management and the externalisation of asylum responsibilities through 'cooperation' with third countries, as well as illegal pushbacks at internal and external European borders.

Indeed, the past few years have seen an ever increasing number of new policies and actions developed by European states as part of their border management. In only a few months' time following the IHSA conference in November

2021, where these essays were initially presented as academic papers, we've seen drastic changes. These included the passing of the new UK Nationality and Borders Bill, turning it into an Act, which curtails the rights of asylum seekers who arrive irregularly (but does not provide safe legal routes). Also, the widely decried and legally challenged UK-Rwanda partnership through which the UK will seek to deport individuals to have their asylum claims assessed in Rwanda. As UNHCR¹ and others have stated, this practice would not only be unbelievable cruel but also violates international law.² Such practices elsewhere have not proved to be a deterrence (the aim of the UK government) but instead increase the danger for refugees trying to reach safety. With the war in Ukraine and the large number of refugees fleeing the country, the inherently racist nature of Europe's borders has become even more starkly visible. Non-Europeans – oftentimes people of colour – living in Ukraine are facing restrictions and discrimination³ when fleeing, and refugees on the Poland-Belarus border (from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan for example) continue to be pushed back.⁴ In early March 2022, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive to grant Ukrainians fleeing the conflict access to temporary protection in the EU. This enables them to stay in the EU for at least one year on a residence permit, with access to education and to the labour market.⁵ The UK has set up visa schemes just for Ukrainians.⁶ The double-standards are hence undeniable.

Identifying not only as academics but also as practitioners and activists, with years of immersion into the current situation for people on the move in Europe, we have come to develop the concepts of 'everyday cruelties'⁷ (Susanne) and the 'politics of exhaustion'⁸ (Marta) – as a way to seek a conceptualisation of some of the most insidious and invisibilised forms of structural and state violence perpetrated against humans seeking sanctuary in Europe. It was due to the synergies between our work – both theoretically and practically – that we decided to come together to host the conference panel and now this anthology which looks further into the everyday violence faced by people on the move. We bring together a group of scholars, practitioners, advocates and activists, some of whom had lived experience of seeking asylum in Europe and many of whom combine the role of researcher and activist.



Two children during an eviction in Northern France

¹ UNHCR (2022). UN Refugee Agency opposes UK plan to export asylum. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/press/2022/4/62585e814/un-refugee-agency-opposes-uk-plan-export-asylum.html> (accessed 22 May 2022).

² Mayblin, L. (2022). 'With The Rwanda Deportation Plan British Asylum Policy Moves Firmly On To The Terrain Of The Far Right.' Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2022/04/rwanda> (accessed 22 May 2022)

³ UN News (2022). UNHCR chief condemns 'discrimination, violence and racism' against some fleeing Ukraine. Available at: news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1114282 (accessed 22 May 2022).

⁴ InfoMigrants (2022). Polish pushbacks to Belarus continue as Ukrainians are welcomed. Available at: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/39601/polish-pushbacks-to-belarus-continue-as-ukrainians-are-welcomed> (accessed 25 May 2022).

⁵ European Commission (2022). EU Assistance to Ukraine. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/eu-solidarity-ukraine/eu-assistance-ukraine_en (accessed 25 May 2022).

⁶ UK Government (2022). Homes for Ukraine: record your interest. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/register-interest-homes-ukraine> (accessed 22 May 2022).

⁷ Jaspars, S. (2021). The Everyday Cruelties of the UK Asylum System. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2021/06/everyday> (accessed 20 May 2022)

⁸ Ansems de Vries, L. and Welander, M. (2021). Politics of Exhaustion: Reflecting on an Emerging Concept in the Study of Human Mobility and Control. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2021/01/politics> (accessed 20 May 2022).

The anthology includes 10 essays, each of which reveals violence and resistance in a range of contexts, but in particular looking at the experiences of people on the move in France, Belgium, the UK and Greece. They proceed as follows:

- 1 **Gaffar Saeneen** writes from a personal perspective about the experience of Sudanese asylum seekers and refugees in France about how problems of alienation, isolation, and uncertainty lead to suicidal tendencies
- 2 **Dalal Rajab** examines similar problems faced by Sudanese in Belgium, but also how a Sudanese-led project brought them together with volunteers to cook for homeless people. This gave a sense of purpose, helped with language training, legal information and friendship.
- 3 **Victoria Tecca** examines the functions of the queue in the distribution aid to refugees in Dunkirk in France. She argues it is a form of violence that reproduces existing forms of power; a form of controlling or domesticating refugees.
- 4 **Lukas Kestens** analyses the adapted asylum procedures used in Belgium during the Covid-19 pandemic, and concludes that the hurdle of new online registration requirement, left many vulnerable groups without shelter or protection thus increasing the everyday violence.
- 5 **Soline Ballet** discusses how grassroots initiatives in Brussels during the pandemic created new openings for providing accommodation but at the same time risked being co-opted by the violent 'migration crisis' regime.
- 6 **Tianne Haggart** analyses exhaustion as part of the UK asylum process, and argues that it is a result of living in poverty, hostility, endless uncertainty and delay, that are part of the migration management processes. She argues that the poor mental health this leads to is yet another human rights violation.
- 7 **Susanne Jaspars** continues the analysis of the everyday cruelties of the UK asylum system. She argues that the cruelties increased during the pandemic and while they do not deter as intended they lead to retraumatisation and death, highlighting the need for political resistance and humanitarian action.
- 8 **Francesca Pusterla** examines the different levels of violence perpetrated against migrants and refugees in Europe. At the individual level through narratives of crisis and the threats, the adoption of emergency measures at state level, EU border regimes and humanitarian policies in countries of origin.
- 9 **Robin Vandevoordt and Jacob Warn** write about the increased hostility and violence towards migrants arriving in Greece, with political change as well as the pandemic. They discuss how this has also led to more advocacy, mobilisation and calls for political action by civil society and argue that this is needed now more than ever.
- 10 **Marta Welander** closes off the anthology by summing up the status quo through a discussion of how insidious, temporal, and corporeal technologies of bordering, which she refers to as the 'politics of exhaustion,' have been exacerbated during Covid-19 in Europe.

The concepts of 'politics of exhaustion' and 'everyday cruelties' form the organising theme of these essays, just as they did for the conference panel and blog series we hosted. These two concepts help to both make sense of, and ultimately call out, seemingly small and subtle instances of everyday violence and cruelties which converge into a deeply harmful state approach. Indeed, their combined effect builds up over time and grinds down people's resolve to claim asylum, or continue their journey, and to make volunteers and refugee support professionals burn out and give up. As such, although the everyday forms of violence and practices which we highlight in this anthology are oftentimes more insidious or subtle than the heavy-handed state response of physical violence, detention and removals, they are ultimately deeply harmful and violent nonetheless.

Despite the overall bleak picture of the state of affairs presented through several of the essays in this collection, others allow us to conversely shift our attention to the many ways in which migrants, activists and other allies respond to the apparatuses of power, to the everyday violence and the technologies of the politics of exhaustion. As such, we also find the possibilities of articulating new political subjectivities and forms of resistance within border zones. This is, therefore, a necessary but hopeful discussion about where we need to go from here to collectively denounce and resist the violence and injustice and humanitarian crisis unfolding before us.

On that note, we invite you to dive into this anthology, and we hope that it will be helpful in advocacy efforts to bring about change.

Essay 1.

Psychological Disorder, Stress and Suicidal Tendency Among Sudanese Refugees in France

Essay by Gaffar Mohammud Saeneen. Gaffar currently works as a social education assistant with the solidarity association Emmaüs, since 2017 and on permanent basis. In this role, he receives newly arrived asylum seekers, registers initial data, provides basic necessities such food, clothes, and shelter, whilst also taking care of orientation, referrals and interpretation. Prior to joining Emmaüs, Gaffar worked as a volunteer with several French associations working within the field of migration. He has moreover contributed to co-founding two associations: United Migrants and Espoir d'ici et d'ailleurs.



Photo by Gaffar Mohammud Saeneen

This essay tells my personal perspective of the situation facing Sudanese asylum seekers and refugees (I will use the term refugees for both from now on) in France. It stems from a long experience on the ground, first as an asylum seeker, then refugee, and now as a French refugee support worker. I will try to shed light on issues of mental illness and suicidal tendencies amongst Sudanese refugees.

Those who follow the activities of Sudanese refugees via social media will notice the frequent news of psychological and social problems that they suffer in Europe, especially in France. Soon after arrival, these are some of the biggest problems faced by young Sudanese who buried the innocence of their adolescence between the hot Sahara and scary Mediterranean for a future afar away. Many Sudanese refugees in France today suffer from severe depression caused by a sense of alienation, self-isolation, feelings of regret, and many negative feelings, which may lead to addiction to alcohol, drugs and contemplating in suicide. You could say this is because of their lack of defence mechanisms, although if they had received reasonable sanctuary and sufficient psychological support this could be avoided. One Sudanese youth in Paris said: 'there are more crazy Sudanese in Paris than the madmen in the popular market in Omdurman'. Here, the young man was expressing concern about the mental health of refugees in Paris, comparing it to a place back home.

Although there are many statistics⁹ on asylum and migration in France, few of them tell the human stories from an inside perspective, with the human being as an essential and pivotal element. The view must shift from concern with the objective dimension (social, political, economic) to the subjective dimension (human) and the dialectical relationship between them. Many researchers lack personal experience and this means that studies risk missing out on key aspects of migration.

The problems of Sudanese refugees are complex and require serious field study. I use this essay to describe and analyse the situation of the Sudanese who arrived in France between 2010 and 2020. It is based on my experience from 2014 onwards, through my volunteering with several French civil society associations and my work with Emmaus solidarity since 2017, which supports new arrivals with shelter and administrative procedures. Through discussions with members of the Sudanese community and observations of the daily life of refugees, I hope to open the way for others to delve deeper into the subject.



Photo by Gaffar Mohammad Saeneen

⁹ Asylum Information Database (2022). "Statistics. France." Available at: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/france/statistics> (accessed 23 May 2022)

The impact of language barriers

Language has an extremely important role in human life, in communicating and expressing feelings and needs, making connections with others and bringing them closer to you. Most Sudanese refugees do not speak French, because it is a difficult language and because of the state's neglect of this important factor for refugee integration. The lack of language proficiency among refugees has greatly contributed to their social isolation from French society, so they end up living in a state of social marginalisation. This situation has greatly contributed to psychological disorders, especially among those who wish to contribute to society with their experience and qualifications from Sudan. Also, the difficulty of learning the language leads the refugees to withdraw and avoid contact with the French or with those who speak French. Such withdrawal is a very common reaction to situations of failure, which is accompanied by an internal feeling of helplessness and desperation, so the refugee tries by all means to turn their back on the world.



Photo by Gaffar Mohammad Saeneen

The complexities of bureaucratic procedures and tedious slowness

The wall of bureaucracy and administrative procedures for asylum applications, because of Dublin III regulations (whereby someone can be deported if they were fingerprinted elsewhere in the EU), or appeal following asylum refusal, creates a state of despair. A situation in which there is a possibility of salvation and a decent life somewhere down the line – but where you keep encountering obstructions from reaching these horizons because of the difficulty of obtaining legal status – greatly amplifies the pain. When these pressures accumulate, refugees feel that they lost their human value twice, once when being forced to flee their homeland because they felt they were not treated like human beings, and once when the oppression and torture that happened to them is not acknowledged. This situation makes the individual a stranger in this world and will make them even feel that the whole world is against them in order to destroy and humiliate them, and this leads many refugees to suicidal tendencies. Among the Sudanese I met, those not recognised as refugees confirmed their sense of inferiority resulting from an attack on their humanity and their existential value, in addition to the moral pain and suffering that results from this situation. When there appears to be no solution, and facing the world and its difficult existential questions alone, they ask why me specifically? Did I not deserve to live like the others? Thus, the refugees drown in their weakness and helplessness, and surrender in the face of the alliance of the universe against them. They feel they were exiles and persecuted in the homeland, now exiles in exile – and forgotten, which ends in self-destruction by falling into depression or madness, as a natural result of the pain of the past and the present and its non-existence.

The feelings of loneliness and voluntary social confinement

Newly arriving in Europe or France imposes a state of social siege itself for refugees. This social siege starts with isolation in housing, which is often in social residences prepared for foreigners or refugees. Refugees find themselves in a small room isolated from the world by a concrete wall on four sides. They are not accustomed to this situation of

loneliness, given that their previous life was based on social interaction, and many find it difficult to adapt to this new life that leaves you alone with difficult existential questions. This causes depression, regret, and the search for destiny. A few years ago, an informal study on the psychological impact of loneliness in housing confirmed that for at least half the participants living in isolation led to negative thoughts and thinking about returning to Sudan. When alone, they also consume more drugs, tobacco, and alcohol than when they are with other people, which confirms that loneliness in housing has a great impact on the psyche of the refugees. It begins with depression and ends with a state of insanity. The situation of social siege and the lack of hope to get out of it creates extreme anxiety among the refugees, as it triggers painful memories of the past. It was exactly this feeling of siege and hopelessness that was the reason for escape from Sudan in search of a safe place.

The feelings of disappointment

Many refugees fleeing the inferno of wars and poverty hold idealistic perceptions of a European paradise; a safe haven that gives them a virtuous life and all they need once they reach it. But when they reach it, they are surprised by a different reality, leading to a state of remorse and disappointment. This regret may increase as the situation becomes complicated or the greater the failure and the gap in achieving the desired goals. Many of the psychologically affected were the ones who had these idealistic perceptions.



Photo by Gaïfar Muhammad Saaneen

Flashbacks of the past events (Libya) and post-traumatic stress

Flashbacks and post-traumatic stress disorder are other factors that we cannot ignore, as it contributes to worsening depression. For Sudanese refugees, flashbacks are often caused by torture. During my field work, I found that new arrivals between 2015 and 2018, who slept in small makeshift tents in Paris, often complained of flashbacks and severe depression. Among those I talked to, some told of horrors of severe torture for several months at the hands of armed militias in Libya, including physical and psychological torture and sexual violations. It is worth mentioning the case of Mohamed Ali Nourain, who committed suicide on 31/01/2020 at the station of Gare de Lyon by jumping in front of a train. He arrived in France in 2017, coming through Libya, across the Mediterranean, then Italy, and finally he settled down in France after several failed attempts to cross to the United Kingdom. Before his death, I knew little about Mohamed, although I met him on a few occasions during demonstrations in support of democratic transformation in Sudan. He was quite active and responded to the calls for demonstrations regularly. When I heard the shocking news of his death, it prompted me to find out more about his last moments. I discovered that Mohamed had been suffering from severe depression since his arrival in France, caused by the severe torture he was subjected to in Libya, including being violently thrown out of a car on the highway, after which he spent several days in a coma and six months in hospital.

To conclude, my observations indicate that the difficulties of the asylum process, long periods of waiting, social isolation and loneliness, and post-traumatic stress all contribute to suicidal tendencies. The failure of the French state to provide the safety and dignity that Sudanese so desperately need, and the difficulties faced by support organisations, adds to their suffering.

Essay 2.

Sudanese Migrants Countering 'Everyday Violence' in Brussels: Together We Are Even More Resilient

Essay by Dalal Rajab. Dalal is a co-founder and coordinator of the Sudan Action Group, a Brussels-based diaspora organisation, and moreover holds a Master's degree in Governance and Development from the University of Antwerp. In this essay, Dalal reflects on the various ways in which the Sudanese-led project 'Together we are even more resilient', supported by the VGC¹⁰ (Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie: the Dutch-speaking government in Brussels), has countered the effects of 'everyday violence' through self-empowerment and by building bridges across society.

The current situation for many Sudanese migrants (asylum seekers and undocumented people, including migrants in transit) in Belgium is extreme. The 'everyday violence', in Brussels in particular, is generated through the denial of basic needs, uncertainty over one's residence status, hampered mobility of those seeking to reach the UK, police violence, discrimination, exploitation in the unregulated job market, and so on. In response to this, Sudanese migrants have come together to help increase the resilience of fellow migrants in Brussels during the Covid-19 period. As such, the everyday violence and associated challenges have been met by building on Sudanese values, which draw upon a cultural and religious background and are based on collective thinking and actions rather than individual ones. For instance, this entails confronting difficulties with resilience, acting on solidarity, generosity, and respect for elders, as well as helping disadvantaged people. This has greatly contributed to re-build the trust between Sudanese migrants and strengthen the sense of identity and their self-esteem.



Photo by Dalal Rajab

¹⁰. VGC (n.d.) VGC. Available at: <https://www.vgc.be/subsidies-en-dienstverlening/samenleven/connecting-brussels-projectoproep>, accessed February 2022.

Responding to the effects of 'everyday violence'

The extremely bleak situation experienced by many migrants in Brussels has a detrimental effect on their mental health, causing depression, psychological disorders and self-isolation which in some cases have led to drug and alcohol addiction. Covid-19-related factors such as social and self-isolation have complicated their daily lives enormously.

To work against the consequences of social, self-isolation and the loneliness of Sudanese migrants during the Covid-19 period, the Sudanese-led project 'Together we are even more resilient' has enabled people to be more resilient and prepared to confront daily hardships. On the one hand, the project aimed to bring together and stimulate the human connection between Sudanese migrants themselves as they live in different settings: asylum-seekers centres, squats, citizens-municipalities shelter initiatives, hotels, hosted by families and friends. On the other hand, a major focus was to link people with their surroundings in Brussels, namely, the voluntary workers of the Belgium Kitchen¹¹ and other Brussels-based social organisations.

Generosity, hospitality and solidarity

The project activities have been implemented by and for Sudanese migrants, supported by Sudan Action Group¹² volunteers in close collaboration with Belgium Kitchen volunteers. For instance, Sudanese migrants came together for six months with volunteers from Belgium Kitchen to cook Sudanese and international food specialities to be distributed by Red-Cross Belgium to homeless people in Brussels. Building on Sudanese values such as generosity, hospitality and solidarity has proven to be a rewarding approach to bring Sudanese migrants together, fostering their sense of identity. The success of this approach was confirmed by a project member who said: 'by making food for homeless people, even if I have no income, I feel myself useful and proud as Sudanese.'

Also taking the responsibility to make food for 450 homeless people every Saturday morning, gave a sense of purpose and solidarity with other vulnerable people. According to many participants, it also fostered a sense of self-worth which is a big part of resilience. As the project developed, an environment based on friendliness and trust was created. This in turn helped to lay a foundation for solidarity and other actions between the participants which also deepened the discussions on different topics and opened fresh perspectives for future initiatives.

A good example of this solidarity in action was making charity in the form of a hot meal to be offered to people in need in case of the death of a relative. This is a religious concept deeply rooted in Sudanese culture. By doing so, a number of Sudanese migrants managed to get over their personal grief at losing family members in Sudan during Covid-19 period. Additionally, some people began to discover their talents and skills in cooking, which encouraged them to take concrete steps towards professional training in the catering sector.



Photos by Dalal Rajab

¹¹ Bruxelles Social (2021). Belgium Kitchen, available at: <https://social.brussels/organisation/18470>, accessed February 2022.

¹² Picum News (2017). Sudan action group calls on Belgium Government to end collaboration with Sudanese Authorities. Available at: <https://picum.org/sudan-action-group-calls-belgian-government-end-collaboration-sudanese-authorities> [February 2022].

Breaking isolation and countering psychological harm

Sharing lunch together with volunteers from many different backgrounds who form the Belgium Kitchen was a great way to break isolation and led to interesting dialogue and engagement with non-Sudanese. Having the courage and the will to speak out over specific difficulties in their daily lives (e.g. police violence, complicated asylum procedures, Covid-19 related aspects, cultural differences, etc.) was a step forward in surmounting the psychological barriers to expressing themselves openly and freely with others. Spontaneously, this process played an active role in raising awareness amongst the Brussels volunteers over many aspects of daily hardship of migrants in Belgium.

The challenge of communication had been marked by almost all Sudanese migrants as the main factor behind their isolation. More specifically, the ability to express themselves in other languages was a key issue. In the Brussels-multilingualism context, where Dutch, French, English are widely spoken, many Sudanese migrants said they felt confused and frustrated when attempting to communicate. While the majority of Sudanese migrants speak Sudanese Arabic dialect (plus their own local languages), Belgium Kitchen volunteers have quite different levels either in Moroccan Arabic dialect, French, Dutch, or English languages. Therefore, communication between them and other volunteers was a challenge. To ensure a functioning level of fluidity in discussions, a flexible multilingual atmosphere of four spoken languages was created. This innovative system was key in turning the frustration of Sudanese migrants over the language barrier into a positive attitude of engaging gradually in discussions with other volunteers. This choice consciously prioritized the ultimate goal of the project, the breaking of isolation by encouraging the need to express oneself over speaking the languages correctly.



Photo by Dalal Rajab

Enabling communication to address integration and mental health

The highlighted language barrier had been structurally addressed by organising Dutch classes and educational trips led by a volunteer professional language teacher. Remarkably, as the project evolved, the Sudanese involved felt an increasing sense of self-trust, were able to speak with confidence and engaged in deep discussion that manifested in an improved communication level between them and other volunteers. Furthermore, learning these language skills enhanced the integration path for some migrants by opening up chances for jobs and professional training.

Despite the difficulties and trauma experienced by most Sudanese migrants and the suffering endured from leaving home throughout the route to Libya, crossing the Mediterranean, and Europe, they have a common attitude of not discussing it. Organising roundtable group discussions exclusively for Sudanese migrants was useful as to explore reasons for this and other issues. Language obstacles, growing up in a patriarchal community, psychological aspects (e.g. trauma due to violence linked to displacement, conflict, hard migration routes, hostile environment against migrants in Europe, etc.) were all highlighted in roundtable discussions. Keeping silent was seen as a shared coping mechanism.

At the forefront of these discussions were the personal experiences of Sudanese transit migrants with police physical and verbal violence. Describing police violence as 'shocking and humiliating', Sudanese believed language obstacles,

fears of deportation, lack of awareness about their rights as well as ignorance on the limits of police power make them more vulnerable. Throughout the project activities, Sudan Action Group (SAG) has been tackling this issue by raising awareness in small groups with a further plan to translate law-related documents into Arabic.

In the same way, SAG now runs a series of successful roundtable group discussions over other themes, for example of discrimination in Sudan and Europe where many of them managed to some extent to speak about their emotions frankly. Eventually, a secure and open atmosphere was gradually established, paving the way to make past and current suffering open for discussion. Sympathising with each other has facilitated strong and mutual feelings of resilience as well as an ability to cope with stress and functioning in society more productive. One individual expressed this point directly, saying: 'What doesn't kill us may make us stronger and bring us together as Sudanese migrants'.

Providing opportunities for individual consultation in Sudanese Arabic, aiming to orient awareness towards relevant social organisations in Brussels contributed considerably in linking migrants with services and professionals. Over time this significantly helped to break feelings of isolation. As a result, migrants are increasingly building trust in these organisations as important sources of information rather than depending exclusively on their own networks. Equally important, developing access to reliable information on questions of crucial aspects related to asylum law and procedures enhanced their decision-making ability and broadened future perspectives.



Photo by Dalal Rajab

Conclusions

How resilient communities are better equipped to counter everyday violence

The efforts of Sudanese migrants to help break the isolation of fellow Sudanese migrants trapped in cycles of everyday violence, has contributed in different ways, by considering the situation and context that migrants live in; addressing the root causes of isolation, and developing ways to address these issues concretely and structurally. There is still much more that can be done, including a pressing need to have an approach that can support some migrants psychologically and to convince those with deep trauma to be referred to a medical specialist.

Empowering Sudanese migrants based on their homeland values and building trust between Sudanese migrants themselves and others are major elements to strengthen their resilience, sense of identity and their self-esteem. These initiatives have already shown great value and can continue further, building on successes and surmounting the challenges and the potentially detrimental effects of the everyday violence experienced by migrants in Brussels.

Essay 3.

Everyday Violence in Informal Camps: Distributing Materials Using the Queue

Essay by Victoria Tecca. Victoria holds a PhD in Anthropology from University College London (UCL). Her research examines the intersections of violence and affect in a makeshift tent settlement built by undocumented Kurdish migrants on the northern French coast. She is particularly interested in questions surrounding border deaths, processes of illegalisation, and everyday expressions of power. Her research will be made available in autumn 2022, upon the online publication of her doctoral thesis in UCL's repository.



Photo by Victoria Tecca

It is well-documented that increasing border securitisation and restrictive immigration policy have resulted in the proliferation of makeshift migrant tent settlements across Europe's borderzones.¹³ Many of them are frequented by (largely) European aid workers and volunteers who distribute material goods such as tents, sleeping bags, clothing, hygiene items, and food. This essay examines one of the most common means by which these items are distributed – the queue – and identifies it as a key mechanism for the reproduction of asymmetries of power within the camp.

Queueing in Dankix

One such tent settlement, along the France–UK border, is referred to by the majority of its Kurdish residents as 'Dankix' (a phonetic adaptation of the French pronunciation of 'Dunkirk'). It is continuously destroyed by police evictions ordered by the state and, in turn, rebuilt in makeshift form. As such, Dankix has existed in countless iterations since its original inception in 2006 but is usually a collection of hundreds of tents in and around a nature reserve called Le Puythouck. The data that informs this essay was derived from eighteen months of fieldwork in Dankix in 2018 and 2019.

Much of everyday life in Dankix is shaped by queueing. Residents must wait in queues at least twice per day for food, and many more times if they need other items. There are queues for medicine, to see the doctor, for soap, and for a single disposable razor. Aid workers and volunteers do not begin distributions until residents have formed an 'orderly' (single-file) queue behind their vans. They then open the van doors and distribute items one-by-one. Queueers are ejected from the queue if they are perceived to be aggressive, if they leave and return, or if they attempt to touch the

¹³ Dhesi, S., Davies, T., and Isakjee, A. (2020) 'Informal Migrant Camps', in: Mitchell, K., Jones, R., and Fluri, J. L. (eds.) *Handbook on Critical Geographies of Migration*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

van's rear doors. Often, stock runs out while hundreds are still waiting in line. Sometimes, those distributing arrive late, come at an unexpected time, day, or location, or do not show up at all.

Subjection to waiting has long been conceptualised as a mechanism of control. Welfare service users wait, sometimes for hours per day, for the funds that ensure their survival.¹⁴ Asylum-seekers wait for months or years for a decision on their claim.¹⁵ Immigrants in detention wait for indefinite periods to be released or deported.¹⁶ Building from these studies, the queue can be seen as both an expression of, and a way of experiencing, power.



Dankix residents charge their phones using a generator brought by aid workers, while others behind them queue for food

Power

Drawing from his experience of detention in Manus Prison, Behrouz Boochani considers the queue to be a “domesticating process” whereby hungry or otherwise deprived people are controlled by an imposed logic.¹⁷ In other words, queuers’ time and behaviour are regulated through a system of reward (receiving an item they need) and punishment (expulsion from the queue, or the complete withdrawal of aid).

Aryos, a research participant in Dankix, laughed whenever the aid organisation distributing food arrived in their white van. As he watched people run after the van and form the beginning of the queue, he joked with his friends, “*The animal feed has arrived!*” referring to both the quality of the food and the behaviour of those running. And yet, those who made it to the front of the queue always ate before the food ran out. Aryos, who refused to join the queue, put his decision this way: “*I’d rather go hungry than eat like chickens on a farm.*” Aryos’ words echo those of several other participants. Another participant, Keywan, stated: “*The queue might look calm, but it doesn’t make me feel calm. It’s undignified for me, but I have to pretend that I’m calm.*” Keywan’s words reflect the notion that material goods are traded for compliance, patience, and passivity.

Additionally, despite the best efforts and planning of those distributing, the queue often fails. Organisations run out of stock and those at the back of the queue receive nothing, or organisations distribute at a new time and place, of which residents have been made aware only through messages written in English.

Blame deflection

When the queue fails, aid workers often deflect blame upwards to faceless stock managers and donors (“*We haven’t received a donation in weeks, I don’t know why*” or “*I know as much as you, I got here last week*”) or downwards towards those to whom they distribute (“*There are hundreds of you, we don’t have enough stock*” or “*We communicated the location change to you, you should’ve found someone who reads English*”). Many research participants also deflected blame, but did so laterally, towards themselves and other residents: “*It’s our fault, some people take more than they need*” or “*Some people are greedy and cut in the queue.*”

¹⁴ Auyero, J. (2011) ‘Patients of the State: An Ethnographic Account of Poor People’s Waiting’, *Latin American Research Review*, 46 (1): 5–29.

¹⁵ Kohli, R. K. S. and Kauko, M. (2017) ‘The Management of Time and Waiting by Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Girls in Finland’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 31 (4): 488–506.

¹⁶ Bosworth, M. (2014) *Inside Immigration Detention*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ Boochani, B. (2018) *No Friend but the Mountains*, Tofighian, O. (trans.), Sydney: Picador.

Failures are, then, most often attributed to residents themselves. They are constructed, through blame deflection, as a problem that aid workers are struggling to solve. As one aid worker told me, *"This is the best we can do in these circumstances. There are what, 1200 guys in Dunkirk now?"* For many aid workers, therefore, the queue is perceived as an inevitable mechanism of distributing to several hundreds of men.

Aid workers who employ the queue are often critical of those who do not. As one aid worker and I watched a group of volunteers haphazardly throw pairs of shoes out to a crowd of at least 100 men he murmured to me, *"This is disgusting. This turns people into animals."* And yet, as Aryos jokes above, as does the orderly queue for dinner distribution.

The responses included above are indicative of what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as 'symbolic violence' or that which normalises asymmetries of power.¹⁸ As Boochani argues, the queue 'domesticates' those upon whom a wait has been imposed; it demands compliance. It both evidences and is reproductive of the relations of power already framing the encounter between one in need of a resource and another with access to that resource.



Photo by Victoria Tecca

Residents belongings are confiscated and destroyed during an eviction

Conclusion

The everyday violence of the queue – whereby the hierarchies of power positioning aid workers and camp residents in relation to one another are concretised – has been examined extensively in other settings (see, for instance, work by Lasse Hansen and Barry Schwartz).^{19,20} Despite the ubiquity of queues in migrant settlements in Europe, however, comparisons of these contexts have seldom been made. Yet, the scarcity of material goods, itself manufactured by repeated police evictions and the destruction of migrants' belongings, means that such queues are a central part of everyday life in informal camps.

Distributions are, of course, not designed with the intent to harm. Most aid workers with whom I lived and worked were self-reflexive and aware of the issues outlined here. Many worked tirelessly to design distribution systems that limited the forms of violence inherent to the queue through, for example, tailored support or the use of 'free shops.' Indeed, aid workers and volunteers sometimes decide to ban the queue as a distribution system altogether (see, for instance, work by Marta Welander).²¹ Yet, structural forms of violence are identifiable as such because no one person or institution seems to be the perpetrator. The violence outlined here is instead enabled by the very structures of power situating migrants and aid workers in relation to one another. The queue is often posited as the easiest form of mass distribution. This ease, however, exists in part because the queue does not challenge these structures of power. Instead, it reproduces them.

¹⁸ Bourdieu, P. (2002) *Masculine Domination*, Nice, R. (trans.), Redwood City: Stanford University Press.

¹⁹ Hansen, L. S. (2020) 'It's not even the leaders out here who have any say at all in how long they're gonna have to wait': A study of waiting time, power, and acceptance', *Time & Society*, 29 (4): 1128–1149.

²⁰ Schwartz, B. (1974) 'Waiting, Exchange, and Power: The Distribution of Time in Social Systems', *American Journal of Sociology*, 79 (4): 841–870.

²¹ Welander, M. (2021) *The Politics of Exhaustion and Migrant Subjectivities: Researching border struggles in northern France in 2016–2019*. Doctor of Philosophy. University of Westminster: London.

Essay 4.

'Hypervulnerability' Through Adapted Asylum Procedures During Covid-19 In Belgium

Essay written by Lukas Kestens. Lukas graduated from the Ghent University (Belgium) in Conflict and Development Studies with a research focus on migration issues. With a PhD-candidacy in mind, he is currently active with Caritas International (Brussels) as project associate for Community Sponsorship. In this essay, Lukas discusses the procedural flaws of the asylum registration model in Belgium, with a focus on the extraordinary measures implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond.

Adapted asylum registration in Belgium during the Covid-19 pandemic

When Covid-19 spread across the European continent mid-March 2020, it brought with it new complications for people on the move, who in addition to acute health risks also faced additional legal hurdles. Registration and reception of asylum seekers ceased to be a priority to many EU member states. With national lockdowns announced across the continent and member states closing their borders, they either resorted to online or digital alternatives to ensure (partial) continuation of asylum registrations (e.g., Germany, the Netherlands) or suspended them altogether (e.g., France, Greece). Meanwhile, in Belgium, the doors of the arrival centre 'Little Castle' in Brussels were closed and an 'interim', online pre-registration procedure was introduced in early April 2020. This new procedure was initially justified by the need for federal asylum authorities to process asylum registration in a 'safe and structured manner'. Yet, the contrary happened and, as a result, hundreds of asylum seekers were left on the streets without registration nor shelter. Media coverage and worrying reports from the few civil and 'frontline' actors still operational despite the pandemic, sparked interest in investigating and analysing the issue more in-depth.

By chronologically reconstructing the events during this period, we have discovered the impact of the introduction of this interim 'solution' in Belgium on people on the move, as well as state and civil actors involved. We also established how digitalisation gave rise to new dynamics, problems and (improvised) solutions. Over a year and a half later, the online pre-registration procedure is now history, yet the question is: for how long?



Messages on the doors of Little Castle announcing its (temporary) closure and a weblink to the online pre-registration procedure mid-March 2020

Introducing an online *pre*-registration procedure

The best way to describe this 'interim' asylum registration process is to call it an "online pre-registration procedure". This name fully grasps its meaning as a 'mere' online, remote steppingstone towards one's actual asylum registration. For newly arriving asylum seekers, it was obligatory to complete their pre-registration online, in order to initiate their asylum procedure. Specifically, this meant that they had to (1) complete an online form with personal data, photos and scanned documents, as well as (2) attend a physical registration appointment as specified by a confirmation email. Although intended as a temporary solution, the practical, digital specificities of the interim procedure proved in reality a temporary hurdle for (many) asylum seekers. Compared to the 'normal' asylum procedure, this 'interim' approach thus added an additional online aspect to the process; something that affected the positions of both asylum seekers as civil society organisations at the 'frontline'.

Vulnerabilising the excluded even more

The interim procedure's requirements, in terms of linguistic, social and (digital) material aspects, proved too demanding for some asylum seekers, as the online form was only available in Dutch and French, and its completion required access to the internet, a laptop, mobile phone, scanner and/or printer. For those without the necessary resources to access the pre-registration and, for example, include photos and scanned documents, no support or information was provided by the government. As such, those unable to complete their pre-registration ended up in a grey area of being unregistered and without a shelter, yet in need of protection. Even for those who managed to pre-register, their confirmation email could be delayed for weeks and, in some cases, even months, while day and night shelters in Brussels quickly reached their maximal (and decreased due to Covid-19) capacity. Simultaneously, very little information was available to explain the system and the reason for the increased waiting times. This proved especially problematic for asylum seekers without a support network in Brussels or Belgium. Left to their fate, many relied on a small number of civil society organisations to complete their pre-registration. Most civil actors, however, also lacked information on the interim procedure's practicalities and therefore saw no other option than engaging in improvised, trial-and-error support. This included managing people's pre-registrations themselves, exchanging asylum seekers' personal data to follow-up on their procedures and creating email accounts and passwords for those without one. In hindsight, such humanitarian support inadvertently turned out to be rather ambivalent, unwillingly legitimising and prolonging the existence of the 'interim' procedure while also stripping asylum seekers from the control over their own (digital) personal data and procedure.

Inspired by the work of Walters²² and Pallister-Wilkins²³, this environment for asylum seekers could be defined as a humanitarian borderland, where people seeking asylum are dependent on, and entangled in both the life-saving operations by civil society actors and the repressive measures by state authorities. Of course, the online pre-registration procedure didn't affect all asylum seekers evenly. While it proved trouble-free for some, yet troublesome for others, the 'interim' procedure worked as a kind of differentiator between different asylum-seeking profiles. Typically for asylum procedures, women, children and other vulnerable individuals were prioritised, while single men remained last in line. As a result, the non-prioritisation of these men rendered them exposed to increased vulnerability and precarity, subjected to a type of state violence that Welander and Ansems de Vries²⁴ have called 'politics of exhaustion', marked by a long-lasting period of uncertainty, violence and hardship. As such, a part of 'vulnerabilised' asylum seekers was not taken care of, were it not by civil society, and thus confronted with a kind of 'hypervulnerability'.

Looking ahead: different crises, similar problems, new solutions?

As this example from Belgium shows, digitalising asylum procedures has very real consequences and effects. The digital requirements creates an additional, invisible yet real obstacles for people seeking asylum and limit their right to seek protection. The burden of digitalisation accompanied by a lack of information, helpdesks or explanatory tools results in weakening certain asylum seekers' access to the procedure, where those lacking certain skills and capacities are singled out and worse off, as well as in exposing people to increased vulnerability and dependency on civil society support. This would further reduce the level of control and oversight each individual has into their asylum procedure, a potentially life-changing process, as civil society would now organise pre-registrations for hundreds of people by logging in on their email accounts, creating new accounts, and so on.

Therefore, in the event that digitalisation of asylum procedures becomes an inevitable reality, it must under all circumstances go hand in hand with assistance and information frameworks to give people on the move a fair and equal

²² Walters, W. (2010) *Foucault and Frontiers: Notes on the Birth of the Humanitarian Border*, London: Routledge.

²³ Pallister-Wilkins, P. (2017) 'Chapter: Humanitarian Borderwork', in: Günay, C., Witjes, N. (eds) *Border Politics*, Springer.

²⁴ Ansems de Vries, L. and Welander, M. (2021), Politics of Exhaustion: Reflecting on an Emerging Concept in the Study of Human Mobility and Control. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2021/01/politics> [28 February 2022].

chance to seek international protection. This plea for better support towards refugees and/or asylum seekers goes beyond the context of the first months of the pandemic and also applies to what is happening today. From September to December 2021, Belgium reported²⁵ another 'reception crisis'²⁶. Due to an overcrowded reception network, hundreds of asylum seekers have been refused registration and shelter. Even with no online pre-registration procedure in place, the outcome is similar – asylum seekers on the streets, hindered to access the procedure and increasingly depending on civil society's support to survive. This continuation of a failing process will likely contribute towards more structural problems in the way asylum registration and reception is set up.

The absence of pre-reception support and/or assistance and the lack of structural and necessary cooperation between state and civil society actors has become apparent. As long as these dynamics continue, any kind of 'innovative' asylum procedure – for example by digitalisation – is likely to reach its target group only partially, benefitting the already 'capable' and harming the majority of those with lack of resources. This, of course, risks leaving many more people on the move trapped in harmful, often urban environments and legal limbo over the coming months, and needs to be called out along with a strong demand for the fundamental rights of people seeking protection in Europe to be upheld.

Nonetheless, Belgium's actual emergency response to the arrival of thousands of Ukrainian refugees shows that it is possible to produce quick, large-scale answers in response to current-day migratory challenges. That is only possible when the urgency and necessity are both acknowledged. The set up of a central registration center in Brussels, at its peak with a capacity of 3,000 registrations a day, and the mobilization of widespread civil solidarity (through temporary, individual housing solutions) shows that efficiency and solidarity can go hand in hand when it comes to such challenges. The deployment of an online appointment scheduling system thereby demonstrates that the use of digitized tools can be trouble-free when governmental actors and civil society organizations work together, when information-sharing happens transparently and when such information is also provided in the language of the target population.



Police guarding the closed entry of 'Little Castle'. Tens of asylum seekers waiting for a registration opportunity outside around November 2021

²⁵ ECRE. (2021). Belgium: EASO to Support Authorities Struggling with Reception Crisis. Available at: <https://ecre.org/belgium-plan-agreed-for-easo-support-to-authorities-struggling-with-reception-crisis> [28 February 2022].

²⁶ Lyons, H. (2021). 'A crisis foretold': Belgium's system for asylum seekers is overwhelmed. Available at: <https://www.brusselstimes.com/news/belgium-all-news/194255/a-crisis-foretold-belgiums-system-for-asylum-seekers-is-overwhelmed> [28 February 2022].

Essay 5.

From Civic to Autonomous Solidarity: How Grassroots Initiatives in Brussels Reorganised Accommodation for Migrants in Transit During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Essay by Soline Ballet. Soline is a PhD candidate at the Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy at the University of Ghent where they conduct ethnographic research on support practices with/for illegalised migrants in Belgium. In this essay, the author discusses how different grassroots initiatives in Brussels reconfigured their accommodation and actions for illegalised migrants in transit during the Covid-19 pandemic.



Photo by Plateforme Citoyenne

Volunteers at Citizen Platform

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the hostile environment in Brussels for illegalised migrants in transit continued. As a result, various grassroots initiatives diversified and intensified their support. I show that on the one hand an existing citizens' initiative, the [Citizen Platform for the Support of Refugees](#), increased collaboration with local authorities and local actors. On the other hand, a different type of grassroots actor, squatting collectives, emerged and gained importance by occupying buildings all around Brussels. Secondly, I argue how these accommodation practices shifted the types of interpersonal relations established between citizens/volunteers and migrants. I conclude that the Covid-19 pandemic was an ambivalent political momentum which brought about a paradox: grassroots initiatives adjusted and showed their resilience in providing housing, while also becoming implicated in a pandemic governance mechanism. This provides a new perspective on how in times of crisis, grassroots actors' support can be situated between humanitarianism and political action.

The Belgian state looks away: grassroots initiatives take over

"In the beginning of the lockdown I stayed outside; near the canal for a few days, then in and around the Maximilian Park. The police came every day. We could not stay there. A group from the Citizen Platform came and registered our names. They took us by car to the first hotel they opened: we were the first group to arrive." Mohammed, like many other illegalised migrants, found himself on the streets of Brussels in the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Illegalised migrants in transit to the UK have been facing both repression such as police violence, detention and deportation, as well as 'violent inaction' (see the [work of Davies, Isakjee and Dhesi; 2017](#))²⁷. The Belgian state denies them shelter, and medical and material support. During the Covid-19 lockdown, the mobility and livelihood of illegalised migrants was rendered even more difficult. As a response, a well-established citizens' initiative called the Citizen Platform for the Support of Refugees formed new alliances with the Brussels Region and Brussels' municipalities, as well as hotel owners to transform hotels into temporary shelters for illegalised migrants.

Accommodation in hotels: The Citizen Platform and local actors

Following discussions and intense lobbying with the respective municipality and the Brussels region, the first hotel opened in the heart of Brussels in mid-March, 2020. The Citizen Platform coordinated and managed the accommodation in the hotel, together with the hotel owner. The Platform's volunteers together with former hotel staff operated together, performing the daily tasks. Three other hotels opened in the following months, spread out across different municipalities. Due to the subvention of the Brussels Region, the Citizen Platform could rent the rooms at a minimal price, whilst continuing to pay the wages of the former hotel staff. However, in this collaboration with local authorities there were apparent tensions. The shift in accommodation practices enhanced the transformation of civic solidarity (see the [work of Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019](#))²⁸ towards institutionalisation. Within the context of the pandemic, the collaboration between local authorities and the Citizen Platform tended to depoliticise the issue. At the same time, this experience also highlighted the potential for creating welcoming cities.

Consequently, the emergency rhetoric and the pandemic governance also had implications on the type of relations possible between migrants and volunteers within the hotel. Often, grassroots migrant solidarity initiatives forge more personal relations than those solely based on humanitarian care, thereby contending the reproduction of power imbalances. Nevertheless, the pandemic generated accommodation organised in hotels instead of being hosted by families. In the hotels, migrants were often distanced away from volunteers. Support and care were reduced to fulfilling basic needs. While maintaining a discourse of solidarity, the Citizen Platform actually reproduced humanitarian power imbalances within the hotels they managed.

Squatting to accommodate illegalised migrants in transit

The partial reconfiguration of the local political environment during the Covid-19 pandemic gave an impetus for urban movements to occupy buildings in Brussels. Squatting is a criminalised activity, risking immediate eviction and penal sanctions. However, from March 2020 to April 2021, a moratorium was constituted by the Brussels government to temporarily stop evictions. One of the squats which opened was Tilt, a former living complex, occupied and supported by various urban movements. From the lockdown onwards, about twenty illegalized migrants in transit were living there. While the volunteer support group responded with direct action to raise awareness for the precarious situation faced by illegalised migrants, they also tried to strengthen their activism in the wider housing struggle through the occupation of the space.

Whereas literature on these forms of autonomous solidarity and living spaces conceive these as spaces of self-management and radical autonomy in clear opposition to the local government, a squat such as Tilt also held a negotiation position as a stakeholder with the municipality, the private owner and the police. In this sense, the temporary emergency of the pandemic and the respective moratorium on evictions opened up – besides contentious modes of action – also engagement with local authorities. Nevertheless, in reality, such discussions were always conditional upon the municipalities' discretionary power. Squatting remains a criminalised activity, and a temporary occupation depends on the willingness of municipalities and private owners to tolerate it.

The emergency of the Covid-19 pandemic and the pandemic governance challenges the types of relations possible between volunteers/activists and migrants living in squats. The urgency to act in the moment to accommodate illegalised migrants while merging emergency solutions with activist methods can endanger potential solidarities between activists and migrants. In Tilt for example, the volunteer support group were not familiar with the lived

²⁷ Davies, T., Isakjee, A., & Dhesi, S. (2017). 'Violent Inaction: The Necropolitical Experience of Refugees in Europe', *Antipode*, 49(5), 1263-1284.

²⁸ Agustín, Ó.G., Jørgensen, M.B. (2019). 'Civic Solidarity: Venligboerne' in: Agustín, Ó.G., Jørgensen, M.B. (eds.) *Solidarity and the 'Refugee Crisis' in Europe*, Cham: Palgrave Pivot.

experiences of migrants, yet they tried to install particular horizontal and participatory activist methods of organising. Subsequently, the insensitivity of activists towards the struggles and challenges faced by the migrants, risked overshadowing their voices.



Photo by Chloé Thôme

Urban movements occupy a building to house migrants

Grassroots resistance during a pandemic

In conclusion, both grassroots initiatives altered their practices to provide accommodation for illegalised migrants during the Covid-19 pandemic. While the Citizen Platform increased collaboration with local actors, also more contentious actors such as squatting movements could negotiate their own forms of accommodation. This shows how grassroots actors in their everyday resistance to violent migration regimes under a crisis paradigm, whilst being legitimised, also run the risk of reproducing and being co-opted by that same paradigm. In other words, the Covid-19 pandemic generated political openings for negotiations, as there was a sanitary pressure to get people off the streets. In the process of reconfiguring their actions, the type of relations between volunteers and migrants in both grassroots initiatives shifted.

Essay 6.

Mental Health and the Politics of Exhaustion in the UK Asylum Process

Essay by Tianne Haggar. Tianne is a Research Assistant at the Policy Institute, King's College London. With a background in global health and psychology, her work focuses on the intersections of mental health and society. In this essay, she analyses how asylum policy and practice produce harm through exhaustion.



Charities and grassroots organisations providing support for people seeking asylum at the Migrant Connections Festival 2021 in London

In 2021, the controversial 'Nationality and Borders Bill'²⁹ gained significant backing by UK politicians. The bill seeks to further persecute people seeking asylum in the UK. I struggled to comprehend how the UK could justify such a punitive asylum process. Even without this bill, the UK asylum process is extremely hostile³⁰, complicated by bureaucratic barriers and discriminatory practices which severely harm asylum seekers' mental health³¹. Asylum policies and practice also intersect, compounding one another to give rise to a more inconspicuous harm: exhaustion.

Exhaustion refers to the depletion of mental, physical or emotional resources. It is the idea of feeling 'used up' or 'drained of energy'. Marta Welander's 'politics of exhaustion'³² highlights the prevalence of exhaustion in the context of humanitarian migration. The argument is that harmful practices of migration management, such as police violence, raids on camps, and immigration detention all converge in a way that is simply exhausting.

As part of my MSc thesis in Global Health, I set out to explore perspectives on exhaustion within the UK asylum process, as well as its mental health consequences. I interviewed 18 employees and volunteers who provide support services to people seeking asylum in the UK. The people I interviewed support asylum seekers in different ways, through social

²⁹ Morris, S. (2021). MPs back new immigration bill which makes arriving in UK without permission a criminal offence. Available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/mps-back-new-immigration-bill-which-makes-arriving-in-uk-without-permission-a-criminal-offence-12359884> (Accessed 13 May 2022)

³⁰ Lyons, K., & Thone, E. (2017). Britain is one of the worst places in western Europe for asylum seekers. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/01/britain-one-of-worst-places-western-europe-asylum-seekers> (Accessed 13 May 2022)

³¹ Jannesari, S., Hatch, S., Prina, M., & Oram, S. (2020). Post-migration Social-Environmental Factors Associated with Mental Health Problems Among Asylum Seekers: A Systematic Review. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 22: 1055 – 1064.

³² Welander, M. (2021). The Politics of Exhaustion and the Externalization of British Border Control. An Articulation of a Strategy Designed to Deter, Control and Exclude. *International Migration*, 59 (3), 29 – 46.

support, legal support, mental health or medical support. These varied perspectives provide a valuable insight into the bureaucracy of the asylum process, as well as its mental and emotional toll.

Structural Violence in the UK Asylum Process

Perhaps unsurprisingly, my research reinforces that the UK asylum process is characterised by everyday structural violence. The first everyday harm is living in poverty, driven by practices such as denying asylum seekers right to work, providing unsafe or unhygienic housing, and offering inadequate financial support. Living in poverty routinely prevents asylum seekers from rebuilding their lives and thriving. A second harm is a deeply entrenched culture of hostility within the UK Home Office, with officials making decisions based on assumptions or deliberately undermining asylum seekers' credibility. According to one volunteer, Home Office interviews to assess asylum claims often leave people feeling "attacked, disbelieved... gaslighted and betrayed by an institution that was supposed to protect them". A third harm is that people's lives are put on hold indefinitely. Increasing numbers of asylum seekers must endure lengthy delays before being granted protection; some asylum claims remain unresolved for as much as 5 or 10 years. Being left in limbo not only exacerbates other harms but creates uncertainty that leaves people frustrated and unable to move on with their lives.

The Asylum Process Becomes Exhausting

Everyone I interviewed believed that the asylum process is often exhausting because of the intersecting impact of poverty, hostility, and living in limbo. Constantly facing such challenges exhausts through "wearing down", "grinding down", and "tiring out" asylum seekers. Living in poverty is perceived as exhausting, with the constant worry of how to ration money or access nutritious foods hanging over people's heads. Concerning Home Office hostility, one lawyer explained, "if you're constantly saying, 'I don't believe you', 'I don't believe you', no matter what they do to produce evidence, and you constantly say 'no, you're not going to be granted', it tires them out. Eventually they think, 'well what can I produce to get you to believe me?'" Being left in limbo also creates extreme worry and anxiety, feelings which are exhausting. One support worker described how those she works with wait every day, desperately hoping that a letter from the Home Office will finally arrive. When explaining why they believed people seeking asylum were exhausted, interviewees described body language like drooping shoulders, behaviour such as social withdrawal or sleeping problems, and asylum seekers saying things like, "I can't do this anymore", "I'm tired", or even "I'm a zombie".



Photo by Unsplash

From Exhaustion to Poor Mental Health

Poor mental health is perceived as a manifestation of this exhaustion. Sixty-one percent of asylum seekers in the UK experience severe mental distress³³. Those I interviewed described how asylum seekers were “fed up” with the process or had “given up the fight”, often leading to problems of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. Exhaustion is perceived to affect asylum seekers’ ability to concentrate, carry out simple tasks and to remember appointments. Exhaustion is also seen as a barrier to mental health protective factors, like participating in social activities or exercise. One psychologist suggested that exhaustion can even manifest as heightened distress and erratic behaviour because people struggle to self-regulate their emotions. While most of those I interviewed believed that exhaustion exacerbates poor mental health in some way, some also acknowledged that exhaustion can be a symptom of poor mental health. Whilst causality is impossible to determine, the relationship likely works both ways. What I argue in my research, is that there is an important pathway from exhausting practices in the asylum process to poor mental health consequences.

Politics of Exhaustion and the Human Right to Health

It is by illustrating this pathway that we see how a politics of exhaustion is enacted in the UK asylum process. Converging asylum practices, driven by policy, are perceived to exhaust people seeking asylum. What makes the politics of exhaustion particularly insidious is that exhaustion comes from the cumulative impact of multiple practices. No single practice or policy is to blame on its own.

By further tracing the pathway from exhaustion to poor mental health, I argue that the asylum process is designed in a way that makes people mentally unwell. This is a violation of the human right to health³⁴, adding another dimension to the way in which immigration policy can violate human rights. It is more important than ever for research and policy to understand the true impact of policies and practices that touch people’s lives so closely. Exposing covert mechanisms of violence, such as exhaustion, is crucial to bringing human rights and social justice centre-stage amidst a political climate that increasingly favours sovereignty of the nation over individual rights of non-citizens.



Human rights for future poster from Amnesty International

³³ Refugee Council. (n.d.). Mental health and support for refugees and asylum seekers. Available at: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/our-work/mental-health-support-for-refugees-and-asylum-seekers> (Accessed 13 May 2022)

³⁴ Jukes, K. (2016). There Is A Human Right To Health, And This Is How It Works. Available at: <https://eachother.org.uk/is-there-a-right-to-health> (Accessed 13 May 2022).

Essay 7.

Intensifying Everyday Cruelties in the UK Asylum System: An Analysis Based on Sudanese People's Experience

Essay by Dr Susanne Jaspars. Susanne is an independent researcher and Research Associate at SOAS, University of London, focussing on the politics of food security, humanitarian crisis, and forced migration. In this essay, she builds on her volunteer experience with Waging Peace and Care4Calais supporting Sudanese asylum seekers in the UK and her research on Darfuri migration from Sudan to Europe to analyse the UK asylum system.



Charities and grassroots organisations providing support for people seeking asylum at the Migrant Connections Festival 2021 in London

In late 2020, I met a group of newly-arrived Sudanese asylum seekers in London. Sudanese arrivals in the UK increased by 77% in the year ending June 2021,³⁵ forming a substantial proportion of small boat arrivals during the pandemic. As a volunteer I followed, observed, and in part lived, their experience as some spent more than 8 months in a hotel, others were taken from hotels to army barracks, in and out of immigration removal detention, and later isolated in home office accommodation. These were times of fear and depression, but some real friendships developed too.

Supporting Sudanese individuals in the UK is particularly pertinent for me as in 2018 I completed a study on Darfuri migration from Sudan to Europe.³⁶ Sudanese people claiming asylum in the UK have fled violence, conflict and persecution in Sudan. Many have lived years in a camp for displaced people, subject to attacks, surveillance and harassment. And this continues. There are still over 3 million displaced people in Sudan,³⁷ mostly in Darfur. Despite a popular uprising against the abusive regime in 2019, violence in Darfur has increased.³⁸ In the capital, Khartoum, protestors against the October 2021 military coup have been shot³⁹ at by the military-security apparatus now claiming once again to be in charge. When Sudanese flee their country, they usually travel via Libya where many are trafficked and exploited, after which they meet with further violence in Europe,⁴⁰ including in the UK.

³⁵ UK home Office (2021). 'How many people do we grant asylum or protection to?'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-december-2020/how-many-people-do-we-grant-asylum-or-protection-to> (accessed 4 August 2021).

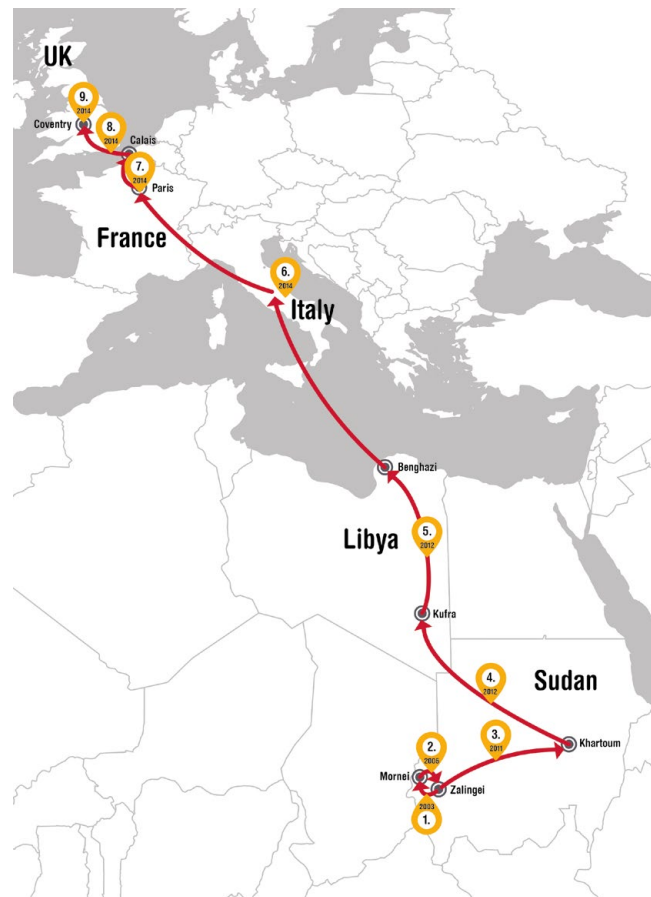
³⁶ Jaspars, S. and M. Buchanan Smith (2018). Darfuri migration from Sudan to Europe. From displacement to despair. Joint study by REF (SOAS) and HPG. London: Overseas Development Studies.

³⁷ UN OCHA (2021) Humanitarian Needs Overview. Sudan. 2022, Khartoum: UN OCHA.

³⁸ Tubiana, J. (2021) Delays and Dilemmas: New Violence in Darfur and Uncertain Justice Efforts within Sudan's Fragile Transition. Fact-finding mission report, Paris: FIDH.

³⁹ Al-Jazeera (2022) 'Several protesters killed in Sudan anti-coup rallies', available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/17/three-protesters-killed-in-sudan-rallies-medics> (accessed 24 May 2022).

⁴⁰ Jaspars, S., Buchanan Smith, M. and Abdul-Jalil, M. (2021) 'Darfuri Journeys to Europe: Causes, Risks and Humanitarian Abandonment', International Migration, 59 (3): 63-78.



Map: a young man's journey from Sudan to Europe⁴¹

Numerous everyday cruelties

Numerous everyday cruelties towards asylum seekers are part of the UK hostile environment.⁴² Seemingly small acts of cruelty (compared to forced return or mass detention) build up over time contributing to a politics of exhaustion.⁴³ ritualised forms of (in)direct violence and abuse, intended to grind down people's resolve to claim asylum or to seek safety in the UK. I wrote about these forms of violence in June last year.⁴⁴ and since then cruelties have multiplied and worsened, particularly with the introduction of the new Nationality and Borders bill.⁴⁵ an increase in drownings in the Channel.⁴⁶ and after waiting for asylum interviews for more than a year, the Home Office (HO) has started rejecting the claims of some Darfuris who arrived in 2020 despite renewed conflict and oppression.

Cruelties start on arrival in the UK. This is well illustrated by the story of one Sudanese teenager (I will call him Mohamed) whom I met when he arrived in late 2020. He was 17 but an immigration officer decided he looked more like 25 (note that those under 18 are entitled to additional protection). On the initial asylum questionnaire, officials skipped the question about his journey, but travel via Libya would have alerted officials to the likelihood of Mohamed being a victim of modern slavery, again making him entitled to additional protection. The UK border force took his phone, then gave him a phone number to call to get his phone back. This practice has now been judged illegal.⁴⁷ He was taken into a hotel with adults, then taken into care when his lawyers challenged the age assessment. At this time, he was so happy that when we could get his phone back he did not want it as it reminded him of bad times. I next heard from him about 6 months later – telling me he was on the street. After several age assessments, he'd been judged to be 21, taken out of care and dropped outside the Home Office building in Croydon. The age assessments themselves are a form of cruelty; with interrogations of several hours a day over several days. Since then, Mohamed has been moved three times, suddenly and without notice – often when he had just established local networks.

The cruelties in this story apply to many: phone confiscation, age disputes, not identifying modern slavery victims, and sudden transfers. And these transfers were not the worst: others were taken in the middle of the night to army barracks or immigration removal centers.

⁴¹ Taken from page 26 in: Jaspars, S. and M. Buchanan Smith (2018). Darfuri migration from Sudan to Europe. From displacement to despair. Joint study by REF (SOAS) and HPG. London: Overseas Development Studies.

⁴² Yeo, C. (2018) 'Briefing: what is the hostile environment, where does it come from, who does it affect?', available at <https://freemovement.org.uk/briefing-what-is-the-hostile-environment-where-does-it-come-from-who-does-it-affect> (accessed 24 May 2022).

⁴³ Welander, M. (2021) 'The Politics of Exhaustion and the Externalization of British Border Control. An Articulation of a Strategy Designed to Deter, Control and Exclude', *International Migration*, 59 (3): 29–46.

⁴⁴ Jaspars, S. (2021) 'The Everyday Cruelties of the UK Asylum System.', available at <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2021/06/everyday> (accessed 24 May 2022).

⁴⁵ UK Government (2022) Nationality and Borders Bill, London: UK Government.

⁴⁶ Grierson, J. (2021) 'Channel drownings: what happened and who is to blame?', available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/25/channel-drownings-what-happened-and-who-is-to-blame> (accessed 24 May 2022).

⁴⁷ Dearden, L. (2022) 'Home Office admits unlawful secret policy to seize all Channel migrants' phones', available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/migrant-phones-channel-home-office> (accessed 3 February 2022).

Pandemic 'emergency' measures create new cruelties

The switch to remote or online services during the pandemic has amplified the difficulties faced by Sudanese people. Without a smart phone, asylum seekers cannot contact a lawyer or GP, make online appointments, or use google translate to communicate by Whatsapp. Many do not speak, read or write English. Even if they have a phone, years of surveillance by Sudanese security service makes many reluctant to communicate by phone with someone they don't know. Communication with lawyers is made even more difficult because they usually provide landline numbers (so Whatsapp is not possible), which give an automated message with different options – in English. To "assist" asylum seekers the Home Office has set up a service called "Migrant Help" – a phone service which usually takes an hour or more to answer. Then, they are usually asked to write an email. These practices limit access to protection, to health care, and adds to the endless delays.

During the pandemic, asylum seekers' first accommodation is usually a hotel commissioned by the HO. Here they experience cruelty through food:

- **Food (full-board)** in hotels is of poor quality and quantity,⁴⁸ and insufficient for teenage boys and young men, as most Sudanese are. Some people have received the same hotel food for a year. The people I knew would often not eat. Eventually, some (but not all) were provided with £8 per week.
- In **self-catering HO accommodation**, people get £39.60 on a debit card (the Aspen card). It takes huge effort to survive with this⁴⁹ having to constantly decide between transport, food, clothes, etc. The card is also a means of surveillance.⁵⁰ Expenses are monitored and can be used against asylum seekers to stop support based on invisible or arbitrary rules.

Social distancing and isolation introduce another form of cruelty. Asylum seekers were told to stay in rooms, not to meet, and not to eat together. Sometimes, volunteers were not allowed to enter hotels. When moved out of hotels, the HO imposes new forms of isolation. The people I know were separated in different houses in different cities far apart, without internet access; once again making it difficult to communicate, whether with friends, family, a GP or lawyer.



Photo by asylum seekers staying in hotels

48. Bulman, M. (2021) "Dehumanising": Asylum seekers in hotels left without shoes and given 'inadequate' food, report finds', available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/asylum-seekers-hotels-refugee-council-home-office> (accessed 24 May 2022).

49. Asylum Matters (2021) COVID -19 Briefing: Asylum Seekers and the Right to Food, London: Asylum Matters, Right to Food and Sustain.

The New Nationality and Borders Bill puts cruelties into law

With the new Nationality and Borders bill, the cruelties are expanding, reducing the rights of asylum seekers⁵¹ who arrive on small boats, thus disproportionately affecting Sudanese. Many Sudanese have no choice but to come this way as there are no safe legal routes. The bill aims to make a claim inadmissible if asylum seekers pass through a safe third country. If not deported within 6 months they are to be considered a group 2 refugee, with no automatic right to settle. The bill simplifies age assessments and gives shorter time periods for appeal: many Sudanese asylum seekers are teenagers.⁵² Finally, it proposes a revised, stricter process for referring victims of modern slavery: again affecting most Sudanese because this is oftentimes part of their experience in Libya.

While this new law needs to be analysed carefully, on first sight it appears to be putting the everyday cruelties into law. Whereas previously some forms of deterrence had to be invisible because actively blocking asylum seekers is illegal, it appears that the UK government now thinks it can get away with such acts officially and that public opinion supports them. For Sudanese asylum seekers, it means uncertainties and delays have been formalised.



Photo by Care4Calais

Napier Barracks burning

What does this regime of cruel practices do?

The combination of cruel micro-practices limits access to protection, food, health care and social support. It also:

- **Re-traumatises.** For people with experience of detention and torture in Sudan and Libya, being detained in a hotel room or army barracks brings back traumatic experiences.
- **Limits protest and resistance.** Being constantly pre-occupied with day-to-day survival in isolation reduces the potential for resistance. The protests in Napier⁵³ happened after a Covid outbreak when people felt their actual survival was at stake.
- **Facilitates deportation, returns and disappearance.** No permission to work, limited assistance and extended uncertainty forces some to work illegally thus risking being arrested and deported. Others say they want to

⁵⁰ Privacy International (2019) 'Big Brother says 'No': Surveillance and income management of asylum seekers through the ASPEN Card', available at <https://privacyinternational.org/long-read/3259/big-brother-says-no-surveillance-and-income-management-asylum-seekers-though-aspen> (accessed 9 June 2021).

⁵¹ UNHCR (2021) UNHCR Observations on the Nationality and Borders Bill, Bill 141, 2021-22, London: UNHCR.

⁵² Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium (2021) Age assessment proposals in the New Plan for Immigration, London: RMCC.

⁵³ Taylor, D. (2021) 'Napier barracks staff feared asylum seekers might die from Covid', available at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jul/11/napier-barracks-staff-asylum-seekers-die-covid-health2>, (accessed 24 May 2022).

return to Sudan 'voluntarily', or are made invisible and disappear from the system (no phone, no lawyer, no claim, no assistance).

Much of this is of course intentional and part of deterrence. But the extreme nature of these strategies is illustrated in its humanitarian consequences: deaths in HO accommodation increased⁵⁴ sharply in the 18 months up to July 2021 with initial reports shown to be an underestimate.⁵⁵



Food provided to asylum seekers during Ramadan by the Sudanese community in London.

Everyday resistance

When suffering is so clearly a result of deliberate deterrence practices, it is impossible to stay neutral, whether as a volunteer, practitioner or researcher. It needs advocacy to counter the practices that are creating this crisis, as well as direct life-saving (humanitarian) assistance, even if the latter risks enabling the very policies that are creating the crisis. Showing compassion and solidarity in the face of government hostility is one form of resistance. Within the Sudanese community, food has been a good way of connecting – for example during Ramadan. In terms of research, advocacy and resistance, two things come to mind:

1. The importance of continuing to monitor and assess what policies and the combination of practices are actually doing, and to report and disseminate this information widely.
2. Exposing the political theatre⁵⁶ of the UK's (anti) migration policies: because they are not actually achieving their stated goal of 'stemming migration'.

Indeed, last November, when British journalists reported on proposed push-backs of small boats crossing the Channel, they suggested this wasn't really about stopping migration, but about the UK Home Office 'signalling' action to cabinet colleagues, to electorates, and to migrants. Those who suffer the consequences of such actions are of course people on the move, whose journey is made more dangerous but whose actual need to flee their home country in search of safety remains.

⁵⁴ Taylor, D. (2021) 'More than 50 died in Home Office asylum seeker accommodation in past five years', available at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jul/25/more-than-50-died-in-home-office-asylum-seeker-accommodation-in-last-five-years>, (accessed 8 October 2021).

⁵⁵ Purkiss, J., Gidda, M., Walawalkar, A. and Townsen (2021) 'Asylum accommodation deaths 'twice as high' as Home Office admitted', available at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/oct/24/asylum-hotel-deaths-twice-as-high-as-home-office-admitted>, (accessed 24 May 2022).

⁵⁶ Keen, D. (2020) 'The Functions and Legitimization of Suffering in Calais, France', *International Migration*, 59 (3): 9–29.

Essay 8.

The European Union Humanitarian Aid Policy and Migration to Europe. New Challenges, New Commitments

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Introduction

The EU and its member states are increasing their efforts to prevent people from migrating to Europe. This is mainly focused on the containment and control of the number of incoming migrants and asylum-seekers, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to border controls, the EU humanitarian assistance now plays a role to this end, as also reflected in the European Commission's new Communication 'on the EU's humanitarian action: new challenges,⁵⁷ same principles'. However, the measures intended to control migration risk slip into different types of violence against migrants. This may occur in three forms: individual, national and European. These types raise questions on the perception of migrants' inflow by EU citizens, the national political reaction, and the EU level implications. Moreover, it raises the question: does migration management entail protection for migrants or from migrants?



Photo by Niro / Shutterstock

⁵⁷ European Commission (2021) 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the EU's Humanitarian Action: New Challenges, Same Principles' Official Journal of the European Union COM/2021/110 final.³⁶ Jaspars, S. and M. Buchanan Smith (2018). Darfuri migration from Sudan to Europe. From displacement to despair. Joint study by REF (SOAS) and HPG. London: Overseas Development Studies.



Individual violence: Migration and the narrative of a 'crisis'

In the past few years, the EU and its member states coined the term 'European migration crisis'⁵⁸ to refer to the inflow of migrants and refugees. This expression has been contested because it reinforces a narrative of exceptionality and extreme vulnerability to which the EU and its member states would be exposed. This (mis)representation of the inflow of migrants as a crisis for Europe dramatically influenced the reaction of EU citizens, rapidly turning from empathy towards migrants to suspicion and even hostility. The political and media fury thus impacts the first form of individual violence against migrants. Migrants, therefore, lose their voice, individuality, have no way to tell their stories or frame their culture of belonging and reasons for their departure. Except in rare situations, migrants are often considered a general category without particular distinctions between the specific personal stories of each migrant. They are thus addressed as 'a crisis' potentially threatening European stability. EU citizens feel more exposed and vulnerable since the exceptionality of the 'crisis' has intruded upon the political discourse in the EU member states, as well discussed in the work by Anna Stilz⁵⁹. Incoming migrants are somehow presented as harmful threats for local inhabitants, therefore praising the defence of their territorial sovereignty⁶⁰. Press and media have contributed to this misrepresentation of the crisis by exacerbating negative feelings. Unfortunately, the effects are not limited to political discourse but influence policies and open the door to further institutionalised violence. How does this concretely apply to national political violence?

⁵⁸ Evans, G. (2020) 'Europe's Migrant Crisis: The Year That Changed a Continent' BBC News. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53925209> (accessed 13 February 2021).

⁵⁹ Stilz, A. (2019) *Territorial Sovereignty: A Philosophical Exploration*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

National violence: Vulnerability and protection

Significantly, the feeling of mistrust among European citizens has facilitated the adoption and acceptance of emergency measures and becomes the second form of violence; or the national level. The boasted state of exception⁶¹ due to the alleged risks for national security due to the inflow of migrants influenced national policies⁶², which turned the priority of protection for asylum seekers to an overreaction of protection from migrants. Governments are called on by their citizens to adopt firm management and even refolement measures. Violence occurs through legal and physical barriers to access the EU territories at the EU external (see, e.g. Italy)⁶³ and internal (e.g. between Italy and France)⁶⁴ borders. It also includes dissuasive and obstructing legislation to migrants' welcoming and integration⁶⁵ (e.g. difficult mobility within single states and physical attacks by private citizens and organisations). The first violent political reaction to migrants is border management. The way migrants are rescued and welcomed reflects the later possibility for integration. In this sense, member states have been building a wall, showing a significant tightening of their policies. This entails a shift from search and rescue scope to protection and control. Migrants pass from being subjects of protection to objects of control and refolement. This form of violence – de facto depriving migrants of attention to their personal and particular conditions – permeates national migration policies and, more or less indirectly, the orientation of EU policies. A telling example is the failure of the Mare Nostrum operation⁶⁶ in favour of the Triton operation⁶⁷. The latter, firmly criticised by activists, human rights groups and also by some politicians is primarily an operation to intercept and block migrant vessels and gives up the search and rescue soul of Mare Nostrum. A second relevant aspect of this shift is the centralisation of the operation from national (Italian) management to the European one. Mare Nostrum was an Italian operation, while Triton is coordinated by Frontex, has a military dimension and is centralised within the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)⁶⁸. The result? Violence against migrants shifts to a third level or the European.



⁶¹ Agamben, G. (2003) State of Exception, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁶² Pusterla, F. and Pusterla, E. (2017) 'The 2015 Migrant Crisis and Eu Member States – the Relation between State Fragility and Solidarity' European Political Science Online on 21 March 2017.

⁶³ Pusterla, F. (2021) 'Legal Perspectives on Solidarity Crime in Italy' International Migration, 59 (3): 79–95.

⁶⁴ Tazzioli, M. (2018) 'Crimes of Solidarity – Migration and Containment through Rescue' Radical Philosophy, 2: 4–10.

⁶⁵ Hynie, M. (2018) 'Refugee Integration: Research and Policy' Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 24: 265–76.

⁶⁶ Marina Militare (2014) 'Mare Nostrum Operation' Ministero della Difesa. Available at: <https://www.marina.difesa.it/EN/operations/Pagine/MareNostrum.aspx> (accessed 11 February 2021).

⁶⁷ Frontex (2016) 'Joint Operation Triton (Italy)' Available at: <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/focus/joint-operation-triton-italy--ekKaes> (accessed 12 February 2021).

⁶⁸ Migration and Home Affairs (2016) 'EU Common Security and Defence Policy (Csdp)' Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/common-security-and-defence-policy-csdp_en?s=287 (accessed 12 February 2021).



European violence: scope and principles of EU coordinated actions

Violence at the European level develops around the controversial concept of solidarity⁶⁹. Solidarity should be one of the core values of the EU and a precise engagement for member states to promptly respond to adversities, promote the common good and face adversities together, each becoming stronger through unity and solidarity. Yet, solidarity has recently stumbled from one crisis to another, and the so-called migration crisis is a case in point. The centralisation of migration management at the EU level has been experiencing ups and downs in recent years. Though member states found common ground in Europe to manage migration, internal tensions were common. The adoption of measures to contain migration by EU policies that, until then, were just marginal (e.g. humanitarian aid policy⁷⁰) and the poor results of the 2015 relocation schemes are a clear example of such tensions⁷¹.

The EU and the member states are now also trying to prevent migration through humanitarian aid policy by intervening directly on departures and control on countries of origin. But the prevention mechanism through an external, Humanitarian Aid, rather than internal policy, Migration and Asylum, seemed more intended to keep migrants out EU borders than reduce the need for people to move. This transpires once again in the need to safeguard specific national interests, thus exercising implicit violence on people in need and the common European humanitarian and solidarity principles. Concretely, what does the violence against migrants consist of? Not duly considering the real specific and personal needs and situations of single migrants and not correctly framing the social, political, environmental and economic deteriorated conditions that forced their migration. Consequently, the prevention of migration intended simply as a countering and limiting mechanism increased the level of violence against migrants and, contemporarily, the level of threat perceived by EU's citizens.

⁶⁹ European Parliament and the Council (2021) 'Regulation (EU) 2021/888 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 Establishing the European Solidarity Corps Programme and Repealing Regulations (EU) 2018/1475 and (EU) No 375/2014 (Text with Eea Relevance)' Official Journal of the European Union PE/30/2021/INIT.

⁷⁰ DG ECHO (2021) 'Humanitarian Aid' Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/humanitarian-aid_en (accessed 13 February 2021).

⁷¹ European Resettlement Network (2021) 'Relocation in the EU' SHARE. Available at: <http://resettlement.eu/page/relocation-eu> (accessed 13 February 2021).

Essay 9.

Why Europe Must *still* Act

The Aegean islands as a laboratory for European border policies

Essay by Robin Vandevoordt and Jacob Warn. Robin is Assistant Professor in Migration studies at Ghent University, and has been conducting research with Europe Must Act. Jacob is an activist and consultant focusing on impact measurement and migration issues and is the co-founder of the non-profits Action for Education and Europe Must Act.

It's summer 2020. On the unassuming island of Samos, where millennia ago Pythagoras was born, the sun meets the turquoise water. Local shops are reopening after the long siesta. Tourists meander on paved streets painted white and ornamented with sleeping cats.

Then comes a prowling jeep, painted in camouflage. Blue hazards flashing, sirens silent. From its window, a military officer in a casual tank top leans out, surveying the sultry port. Sporadically, he shouts, "go to camp, now".

It's 7 o'clock and the curfew for asylum seekers has begun. Brought in during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, by summertime, though borders are open and tourists flock to the Aegean, for some, civil freedoms remain inequitably curtailed.

2015 to 2020: responding to crisis in the Aegean

2020 marked the beginning of a new era of civil apartheid on the Aegean islands. But to understand its roots within the everyday violence of migration management in the region, we have to step further back in time.

In 2015, a small group of islands in the North Aegean became the centre⁷² of an international crisis. As tens of thousands of refugees sought sanctuary in Europe, the now infamous islands of Lesbos, Chios and Samos became a political melting pot. State actors, international NGOs and grassroots civil society came to the scene, attempting, each in their own way, to bring order to extraordinary events.

In the years that followed, the period between 2017 and 2019 was characterised by a strong presence of both local and international volunteer-driven, grassroots groups, acting in solidarity with marginalised communities. They distributed⁷³ tents, established emergency schools, shows, solar lighting and recreational spaces in overcrowded camps.

Yet despite the great industriousness of a grassroots movement, relatively little was done to actively oppose the migration policies at the root of these inhumane living conditions. The emphasis was, rather, on taking direct social action. Grassroots groups curiously combined a sense of generalised indignation over the lack of adequate action by the Greek state, the EU and traditional INGOs, with a genuine celebration of their own achievements. As a result, the Aegean islands became the site of a relatively depoliticised humanitarian crisis that at the same time demonstrated the alternative of bottom-up solidarity.

Then in early 2020 everything changed.

Crisis upon crisis: Covid-19 and the hostile environment policy

Though the history books may record Covid-19 as the defining feature of early 2020, a series of other events were also unfolding in the Aegean that would change the humanitarian and political landscape irrevocably.

Indeed, just as the pandemic was making its way across Europe, the political landscape in Greece was in outright disarray. A new centre-right government led by Kyriakos Mitsotakis quickly introduced a new asylum bill that was slammed for undermining key refugee rights by major watchdogs⁷⁴, such as reducing protections for vulnerable

⁷² Spindler, W. (2015). '2015: The year of Europe's refugee crisis', UNHCR, 8 December. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2015/12/56ec1ebde/2015-year-europes-refugee-crisis.html> (accessed: January 2022).

⁷³ Kitching, G., Haavik, H., Tanstad, B., Dark, E. and Zaman, M. (2016) 'Exploring the Role of Ad Hoc Grassroots Organizations Providing Humanitarian Aid on Lesbos, Greece' PLoS Currents, 8

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch (2019) 'Greece: Asylum Overhaul Threatens Rights', available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/29/greece-asylum-overhaul-threatens-rights>, accessed January 2022

communities and making the right to appeal against negative asylum decisions significantly harder. Meanwhile, geopolitical tensions between Turkey and Greece resulted in a surge of migrant crossings⁷⁵ in the north west border, along the river Evros, leading to border closures even before the pandemic. On Lesbos, Chios and Samos, the covert arrival of pan-European fascist groups⁷⁶, sparked unabashed violence with local citizens, volunteers and police all participants and victims of beatings, arson and gun violence.

Amid these events, Greece's approach to migration management shifted from passive to more active forms of violence. Inadequate reception conditions and limited legal access were enshrined in emergency yet legitimate policies such as enforced camp lockdowns and heavy (often arbitrary) public finings⁷⁷ for being outdoors or not having taken Covid tests, against which refugees had little recourse to legal defence. In the summer of 2020, lockdown measures were applied more strictly⁷⁸ and for a longer period of time for refugees than for the Greek population and summer tourists, creating a social apartheid that lasts to this day.



NGO activities at the Samos camp

A rising need for pan-European advocacy

Structural violence against refugee populations continues as we write⁷⁹: health conditions continue to worsen due to poor hygiene facilities; access to vaccination is limited for people whose asylum applications have been turned down or who are forced to live stateless in Greece; the shift to primarily digital services excludes those without digital skills, devices or a basic internet connection from finding clear information and accessing much-needed support services.

These affronts on so many levels culminated in the burning down of Moria, the largest camp on Lesbos, in September 2020. Meanwhile, controversial legislation⁸⁰ aimed at restricting the operations of civil society groups hampered the ability of NGOs to fight back and fill critical gaps. On Chios, operational NGOs halved in number resulting in a weaker grassroots movement and a new reality where local, national and European authorities are not held to account.

For civil society in the region, the Covid-19 pandemic presented yet more evidence of the structural violence of Europe's border policies for displaced communities. In response, existing organisations as well as new groups began to tackle

⁷⁵ Smith, H. and Busby, M. (2019). 'Erdogan says border will stay open as Greece tries to repel influx', The Guardian, 29 February. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2015/12/56ec1ebde/2015-year-europes-refugee-crisis.html> (accessed January 2022).

⁷⁶ Fallon, K. (2020). 'How the Greek island Lesbos became a stage for Europe's far right', Al Jazeera, 6 May. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/5/6/how-the-greek-island-lesbos-became-a-stage-for-europes-far-right> (accessed January 2022).

⁷⁷ Keep Talking Greece (2021) 'Greece fines asylum-seekers with €5,000 for arriving without Covid-test UPD', available at <https://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2021/08/24/greece-refugees-fines-5000-covid-test> (accessed January 2022).

⁷⁸ Crossé, E. (2020) 'Lockdown Should Not Discriminate Against Migrants, Refugees', Human Rights Watch, 12 May. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/lockdown-should-not-discriminate-against-migrants-refugees> (accessed January 2022)

⁷⁹ Europe Must Act (2021), 'One year after the Moria fire: Few lessons learned as Greece expands barriers to refugees protection', available at <https://www.europemustact.org/post/one-year-after-the-moria-fire-few-lessons-learned-as-greece-expands-barriers-to-refugee> (accessed January 2022)

⁸⁰ Amnesty International Public Statement (2020), Greece: Regulation of NGOs working on migration and asylum threatens civic space, Index Number: EUR 25/2821/2020, Amnesty International

this desperate state of affairs. These groups harnessed the zeitgeist of public awareness and sympathy, mobilising themselves to raise awareness at the failing approaches to European migration management on a public level.

One such movement was Europe Must Act⁸¹ (EMA), co-founded by members of Action for Education⁸² – a British NGO established by volunteers providing education in Chios. In March 2020, EMA launched an open letter, promptly signed by more than 100,000 people, urging EU leaders to create humane living conditions for asylum seekers on the Aegean islands. In the following months, EMA established more than 50 city and national groups across Europe, and launched several international campaigns to raise awareness of the human costs of Europe's repressive border policies.

This double development, of increasingly repressive policies and the politicisation of grassroots organisation, has strengthened over time. The policies put in place by the Greek government, financed by the European Commission, have become ever more repressive. This is best shown by the construction of the so-called 'Multi-purpose Reception and Information Centres'⁸³ (MPRICs). According to government officials, these MPRICs would replace the open camps that have been subjected to so much criticism for their inhumane living conditions. Yet, these MPRICs can only be described as de facto detention centres: placed several kilometres outside of the main populated areas, behind concrete walls and barbed wire, strongly limiting the movements of asylum seekers and their access to NGOs.



Photo by Europe Must Act

EMA Samos MPRIC

Copy-cats: migration policies around Europe

This turn of events is part of a broader trend across Europe⁸⁴. Throughout 2020, more restrictive border policies have been put in place in other regions, including the Calais region and the Belarus-Polish border⁸⁵. More worrying is that the New European Pact on Migration promises to take the 'hotspot approach' developed in Greece as an example of how the EU and its Member States might manage other border regions. In that sense, the Aegean presents us with a horrific picture for what is to come elsewhere: asylum seekers being locked up in detention centres, out of the public view, and with limited access to their rights.

Movements such as EMA have continued to raise attention to new forms of border violence. As part of its work, EMA has engaged in active monitoring of the less visible border policies taking place in and around the Aegean. This has gone hand in hand with joining advocacy efforts⁸⁶ at the European level to prevent the EU's New Pact from turning into a broadly accepted policy. Together with thousands of supporters and activists, we believe that Europe Must still Act, not only against the injustices that are still taking place on the Aegean islands, but against Europe-wide plans that are taking shape as we write.

⁸¹ Europe Must Act (2022) 'Homepage', available at <https://www.europemustact.org>. (accessed January 2022)

⁸² Action for Education (2022) 'Homepage', available at <https://www.actionforeducation.org>. (accessed January 2022)

⁸³ Europe Must Act and Samos Advocacy Collective (2021), 'All I want is to be free and leave'. Life in the Closed Controlled Access Centre in Samos, Report, Greece: Europe Must Act

⁸⁴ Rooney, R. and Welander, M. (2021). On its 70th Anniversary, the Refugee Convention Faces Unprecedented Threats Across Europe. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2021/07/its-70th>. (accessed January 2022)

⁸⁵ Europe Must Act (2021), 'Commission proposals will weaken EU asylum law on EU-Belarus border', available at <https://www.europemustact.org/post/alarm-as-commission-proposes-weakened-eu-asylum-law-on-eu-belarus-border>. (accessed January 2022)

⁸⁶ Europe Must Act (2021), 'One year after the Moria fire: Few lessons learned as Greece expands barriers to refugees protection', available at <https://www.europemustact.org/post/one-year-after-the-moria-fire-few-lessons-learned-as-greece-expands-barriers-to-refugee>. (accessed January 2022)

Essay 10.

Concluding remarks

Movements, Mobilities and the Politics of Exhaustion in Europe During Covid-19

Concluding remarks by Dr Marta Welander. Marta is a critical border and migration scholar and activist. In this concluding essay, she sums up the status quo through a discussion of how insidious, temporal, and corporeal technologies of bordering, which she refers to as the 'politics of exhaustion,' have been exacerbated during Covid-19 in Europe.

The past years have witnessed a trend⁸⁷ of ever-increasing funding allocations for restrictive border management practices across Europe. This includes the externalisation of asylum responsibilities through 'cooperation' with third countries, as well as illegal pushbacks of people on the move at internal and external European borders. Individuals arriving in Europe from countries plagued by instability and uncertainty – and who have experienced conflict, violence, persecution or extreme poverty – oftentimes find themselves trapped in harmful borderzones. They find themselves criminalised for searching a new and safe life.



Photo by Rob Pinney

Politics of exhaustion in the 2016 Calais 'Jungle' camp

⁸⁷ Pusterla, F. (2022). The European Union Humanitarian Aid Policy and Migration to Europe: New Challenges, New Commitments. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2022/03/european-union> [March 2022].

The politics of exhaustion

Importantly, in these borderzones, restrictions reliant on confinement, bordering fences, violent pushbacks and deportation, have now been complemented by the introduction of more insidious, temporal, and corporeal technologies of bordering. These, as I have argued⁸⁸, consist of an array of bordering tactics which are devised to render migrants' lives governable and pliant; their bodies docile. These practices differ from one context to another, and typically involve a combination of the following sets of (micro) practices: (1) recurring and ritualised direct violence (beatings, rubber bullets, tear gas exposure, including its indiscriminate use, regular pepper spraying); (2) Acts of humiliation, dehumanisation, and racialisation (verbal abuse including racial slurs, shouting, heckling, abusive or degrading language, shoe confiscation, shoving, and commanding of nonsensical obedience); (3) Withdrawal or denial of adequate state care (coupled with the hampering of grassroots distributions) which produces preventable vulnerabilities; (4) Acts of dispossession (regular destruction and ruthless slashing of tents, confiscation of tents, sleeping bags, and blankets, basic necessities such as drinking water, mobile phones, and personal paperwork); (5) Shrinking of access to space through erection of fences, razor wire, spikes, specifically targeting people's resting spots and communal spaces ('hostile architecture'); (6) Forced (im)mobility⁸⁹ used to on the one hand confine or detain individuals attempting to move forward, while on the other hand, forcing mobility through dispersals, removals, and deportation (convoluting journeys and delaying recourse to an effective solution); (7) Production of uncertainty, undercurrents of threats, and an omnipresence of death mean that even in the absence of physical violence, individuals are waiting anxiously for violence to recur, leading to constant hiding and caution.

These various practices converge to negate personal autonomy; agency, wellbeing and self-efficacy with the underlying intention of dissuading people and influencing decisions regarding onward movement through physical, mental, and/or emotional exhaustion. Indeed, when sustained over time, these practices are best understood collectively as constituting an entire strategic state approach, rather than being isolated or incidental undertakings by state actors. An Iranian man I once interviewed in Calais succinctly summarised the notion as follows: *"If they don't want us here, why don't they just get rid of us once and for all? I think they're trying to make us tired so that we choose to return home or choose to go somewhere else. Otherwise, it wouldn't make any sense for them to be doing what they are doing."* A long-term volunteer from the Calais area similarly suggested: *"I imagine one thing [the authorities are] trying to achieve was to make us feel confused and tired. Like the point was to make things completely unpredictable, and this really wears you down. [...] Yeah, they drove us into exhaustion."* I refer to such state practices – which neither lead to immediate deportation, detention or death but rather the slow grinding down of resilience as the 'politics of exhaustion'; a concept which I first developed⁹⁰ in collaboration with my colleague Leonie Ansems de Vries, the Chair of the Migration Research Group⁹¹ at King's College London.

An exacerbation of the politics of exhaustion during Covid

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the intensity of the politics of exhaustion has been heightened, with new forms of everyday aggressions, exclusions and intentional neglect targeting migrants across Europe's borderlands and host countries. Indeed, it has been widely demonstrated that the Covid-19 crisis gave rise to disconcerting attempts by governments to utilise the pandemic as a pretext for suspending the human rights of people on the move through border closures, halted or modified asylum procedures, and so on.

In Greece, the government utilised the pretext of Covid to suspend the right to claim asylum for thirty days in March 2020 in direct contravention of the 1951 Refugee Convention and it publicised the use of 'immediate deportation' – removing an individual's right to register an asylum request. Though this ban was not extended past the thirty-day period due to significant international pressure, it demonstrated the Government's intentions of leveraging the Covid situation to curb migration and enact deportations and was followed by many other deplorable examples. Similarly, in Belgium, an extraordinary online pre-registration procedure was introduced in April 2020, to carry out asylum registration in a 'safe and structured manner' during Covid. This – as Lukas Kestens argues⁹² – led to hundreds of asylum seekers being left on the streets without registration nor shelter, despite having been initially justified as a way.

⁸⁸ Welander, M. (2020) 'The Politics of Exhaustion and the Externalization of British Border Control. An Articulation of a Strategy Designed to Deter, Control and Exclude', *International Migration*, 59 (3): 29–46.

⁸⁹ Tazzioli, M. (2019) 'Governing migrant mobility through mobility: Containment and dispersal at the internal frontiers of Europe', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 38 (1): 3–19.

⁹⁰ Ansems De Vries, L. and Welander, M. (2016). Refugees, displacement, and the European 'politics of exhaustion'. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/mediterranean-journeys-in-hope/refugees-displacement-and-europ> [March 2022].

⁹¹ Kings College London (2022) Migration Research Group, available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/migration-research-group> [March 2022].

⁹² Kestens, L. (2022). 'Hypervulnerability' Through Adapted Asylum Procedures During Covid-19 In Belgium. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2022/03> [March 2022].



Medical shelter in a Greek camp

At the French-Italian border⁹³, refugees and displaced people in transit have been facing critical conditions for years. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation further deteriorated services. Covid-related restrictions prevented organisations and solidarity groups from operating in the area and providing essential services and assistance during periods of the pandemic, while a new French-Italian police agreement signed in December 2020 focused on preventing border crossings by increasing controls and containment on the Italian territory. The acute impact of the pandemic has been felt across key areas by people on the move here, their risks increased as access to adequate shelter, medical care, protection, and the treatment and respect for rights at borders decreased. As such, it is evident that while the pandemic presented a crucial opportunity to acknowledge the need for to shelter, healthcare and protection in Ventimiglia and other locations along the French-Italian border, it merely exacerbated a deplorable situation further.

In the UK, as outlined by Susanne Jaspars in her essay⁹⁴ in this collection, the vast range of 'everyday cruelties' experienced by Sudanese (and other) asylum seekers in the UK intensified throughout the Covid-19 pandemic remote legal assistance, and slow Home Office procedures make it difficult to claim asylum, and limits access to health care, worsened by poor food and limited cash assistance and social isolation, essentially putting lives at risk.

In northern France, at the UK-France border, where people on the move have for many years⁹⁵ struggled to survive in the informal settlements of Calais and Grande-Synthe, daily existence became even harder during the Covid period. People's daily lives continued to be characterised by: evictions of informal living spaces (1,287 evictions recorded⁹⁶ in 2021 alone); confiscation of shelters (10,121 confiscations of tents and tarps, 3,751 sleeping bags and 630 bags recorded in 2021), continuous police violence (127 instances witnessed and documented in 2021), arrests (205 documented in 2021) and various additional forms of violence⁹⁷ and violations of fundamental rights, with insufficient and intermittent

⁹³ Mastria, D. and Patierno, J. D. (2021) The Exacerbation Of A Crisis: The impact of Covid-19 on people on the move at the French-Italian Border. Refugee Rights Europe.

⁹⁴ Jaspars, S. (2022). Intensifying Everyday Cruelties in the UK Asylum System: An Analysis Based on Sudanese People's Experience. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2022/03/intensifying> [March 2022].

⁹⁵ Gerlach, F.M., Timberlake, F. and Welander, M. (2021) Five Years On: An analysis of the past and present situation at the UK-France Border, five years after the peak of the Calais 'Jungle' Camp. Refugee Rights Europe.

⁹⁶ Human Rights Observers (n.d) Monthly Observations, available at: <https://humanrightsobservers.org/monthly-observations> [March 2022].

⁹⁷ Tecca, V. (2022). Everyday Violence in Informal Camps: Distributing Materials Using the Queue. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2022/02/everyday-Q> [March 2022].

access to food, shelter, water, information, etc., the Covid-19 pandemic further reinforced people's acute vulnerability and urgent need of protection. Despite the French state announcing some limited measures for the protection of displaced people, little has changed⁹⁸ in the discriminatory practices recorded here throughout the pandemic.

By denying adequate sanitation facilities and safe accommodation, the authorities have ensured that people in the area are faced with a further exacerbated and arguably even more exhausting situation. This also produces a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'; the politics of exhaustion can be understood as co-producing de facto situations of deportability⁹⁹ and terrible humanitarian conditions which warrant the demolition and eviction of settlements based on sanitary arguments, whilst sometimes also co-producing migrant 'deviancy' and violent behaviours, used in turn to justify the already deployed harm-inducing politics of exhaustion – through what David Keen refers to as a 'legitimisation of suffering'.¹⁰⁰



Photo by Abdul Saboor

Living conditions during Covid-19 in Northern France

Politics of exhaustion as experienced by people on the move

When I interviewed individuals in 2016–2019 who had arrived in the UK after many years being trapped in harmful borderzones, many cited¹⁰¹ precisely the notion of being physically and mentally exhausted. One woman from East Africa explained how she felt when arriving in the UK via a lorry after years in the UK–France borderzone: "I just slept and slept and [the detention centre staff] thought I was dead. I slept all day and night. [...] I was sleeping or daydreaming, so the breakfast, lunch, and dinner was just sitting there waiting for me. I was so exhausted." A similar notion is clearly emphasised in Tianne Haggars's essay in this collection, who argues¹⁰² that the UK asylum process is perceived to exhaust sanctuary seekers through practices – including a Home Office culture of hostility, deprivation, and long waiting times. Gaffar Mohammad Saeneen shares similar observations from Paris in his essay, where his analysis¹⁰³ of mental health problems experienced among Sudanese asylum seekers and refugees highlights the detrimental impact of the everyday violence and the politics of exhaustion unfolding there.

⁹⁸ Boittiaux, C. and Paton, E. (2020). Facing Multiple Crisis: On the treatment of refugees and displaced people in northern France during the Covid-19 pandemic. Refugee Rights Europe.

⁹⁹ De Genova, N. (2017). The autonomy of deportation. *Io Squaderno*, 44:9–12.

¹⁰⁰ Keen, D. P. (2021) The Functions and Legitimization of Suffering in Calais, France, *International Migration*, 59 (3): 9–28.

¹⁰¹ Welander, M. (2021) The Politics of Exhaustion and Migrant Subjectivities: Researching border struggles in northern France in 2016–2019. Doctor of Philosophy, University of Westminster: London.

¹⁰² Haggars, T. (2022). Mental Health and the Politics of Exhaustion in the UK Asylum Process. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2022/03/mental-health-and> [March 2022].

¹⁰³ Saeneen, G.M. (2022). Psychological Disorder, Stress and Suicidal Tendency Among Sudanese Refugees in France. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2022/02/psychological> [March 2022].



Shelter under bridge in Paris

Resistance to the politics of exhaustion

The politics of exhaustion has intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic. The brutality and harmful impact that seemingly small and everyday acts of violence have on the bodies and minds of people on the move, ought to be called out for what it is and condemned as state violence. Countering the politics of exhaustion is difficult because everyday violent tactics are characterised by an absence of clearly defined and identifiable ‘human culprits,’ an apparent absence of intent to cause harm by governments. This insidious nature surrounding the politics of exhaustion helps European states to sanitise and invisibilise violence,¹⁰⁴ as well as depoliticise the suffering experienced by thousands of people on their territory.

Despite this, the Covid-19 period has witnessed a multitude of ways in which people on the move have responded to; resisted and partially circumvented the technologies of everyday violence at borders. By the same token, activists, civil society groups and other allies have continued to challenge and counter the politics of exhaustion across Europe. For instance, as we read in Soline Ballet’s essay¹⁰⁵, different grassroots initiatives in Brussels started, adapted and increased their practices in providing accommodation for ‘illegalised’ migrants in transit during the Covid-19 pandemic. Similarly, we learn through Dalal Rajab’s essay¹⁰⁶ how a Sudanese migrant-led initiative has helped to counter certain effects of ‘everyday violence’ through self-empowerment and by building bridges across society during Covid-19 and beyond. In Greece and across Europe, the grassroots movement Europe Must Act¹⁰⁷ worked relentlessly throughout the pandemic to call out everyday violence and harmful border control practices, and continue to do¹⁰⁸ so today. In northern France, grassroots groups and activist movements monitor police violence¹⁰⁹ and provide humanitarian aid¹¹⁰ in the face of the politics of exhaustion. These examples, and others, allow us to envisage new imaginaries and possibilities within borderzones which are otherwise characterised by stringent state control. This, arguably, opens powerful ways to think of spaces for resistance and to re-imagine borders and how we welcome people seeking sanctuary in Europe.

¹⁰⁴ Loughnan, C. (2019). Active Neglect: The New Tool for the ‘Externalisation’ of Refugee Protection. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2019/07/active-neglect> [March 2022].

¹⁰⁵ Ballet, S. (2022). From Civic to Autonomous Solidarity: How Grassroots Initiatives in Brussels Reorganised Accommodation for Migrants in Transit During the Covid-19 Pandemic. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2022/03/civic-autonomous> [March 2022].

¹⁰⁶ Rajab, D. (2022). Sudanese Migrants Countering ‘Everyday Violence’ In Brussels: Together We Are Even More Resilient. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2022/02/sudanese-migrants> [March 2022].

¹⁰⁷ Europe Must Act (n.d.) No More Camps, Choose Alternatives, available at: <https://www.europemustact.org>, accessed March 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Vandevordt, R. and Warn, J. (2022). Why Europe Must Still Act: The Aegean Islands as a Laboratory for European Border Policies. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2022/03/why-europe-must> [March 2022].

¹⁰⁹ Human Rights Observers (n.d.) Welcome to HRO, available at: <https://humanrightsobservers.org>, accessed March 2022.

¹¹⁰ Calais Appeal (n.d.) Calais Appeal, available at: <https://www.calaisappeal.co.uk>, accessed March 2022.

