A letter sent by the Greek ambassador in Finland to a group of academics studying the “hotspots” appears to herald governmental persecution of civil society actors beyond what is already the case and intimidation of researchers, by suggesting they should primarily rely on information from Greek authorities and be careful about voicing criticism.

Preface: The European Agenda on Migration: migration as a pretext to violate laws and promote authoritarianism (2015-ongoing)

Since the Commission unveiled its Agenda on Migration in May 2015, an institutional drive at the national, EU and intergovernmental levels has sought to exclude people who arrive in the EU without prior authorisation from human rights and the ordinary functioning of the rule of law. In practice, this has amounted to paying third-country governments and regimes to abuse people (migrants and asylum seekers) systematically to discourage them from attempting to reach Europe, with chilling consequences, particularly in Libya.

Further, in the central Mediterranean, the unofficial policy has been to create a search and rescue gap after the Mare Nostrum operation (which saved lives but was portrayed as a “pull factor” by Frontex) was curtailed. This was followed by a retreat, and then a wholesale withdrawal, of EU naval assets from a particularly deadly stretch of the sea. This policy amounted to leaving people to die at sea to undermine the traffickers’ business model, although traffickers themselves were involved in EU-funded activities to hold migrants in detention centres (another dissuasive tactic), while the EU and member states portrayed NGOs as colluding with traffickers.¹

However, the Agenda’s main goal was to normalise the dehumanisation of migrants and asylum seekers within the EU. Member state governments were given free rein to do so, in a context marked by the Commission and Frontex doggedly instructing Italy and Greece to

undermine normative frameworks and human rights for these people. The very strict criteria introduced for relocations (75% percent asylum recognition rate for a nationality according to Eurostat data) managed to disqualify practically everyone who was arriving in Italy, except for Eritreans. This did not work in Greece due to substantial numbers of Syrians and Iraqis who were arriving. Yet, the fact that large numbers of these people could not reasonably be denied recognition as asylum-seekers or refugees did not sway the Commission/Frontex duo from a determination to put on a show of force: even in a humanitarian crisis (war in Syria), the EU could develop procedures to exclude almost everyone.

This was the backdrop for the March 2016 EU-Turkey deal (a press statement) that turned tens of thousands of refugees into illegal entrants awaiting transfers to Turkey, thus wrecking the Directive on reception conditions for asylum seekers (originally adopted in 2003, it was reformed in 2013) in wholesale fashion in Greek island hotspots. The Directive did not apply in these camps because, despite a large presence of asylum seekers including children and vulnerable persons, the EU-Turkey deal allowed them to be classified as illegal entrants, with the consequences this entails, including long-term stays in overcrowded camps. The rule of law and human rights standards were also undermined in Italy, first under a centre-left government coalition that followed the Commission’s instructions, and then under a right-populist government that took this outlook to its ultimate consequences, supposedly in conflict with the Commission.

People were kept at sea in degrading conditions in plain daylight by an EU state’s government, including European citizens guilty of rescuing people the Commission, Frontex and the Italian government had decided should either drown or be returned to detention and mistreatment centres by the Libyan coast guard. Brazenly illegal acts were followed by attacks by media and politicians against judges who upheld the law by certifying the illegality of government actions led by the then interior minister, Matteo Salvini of the Lega.

Far-right parties, organisations and racist groups also participated, by vilifying and intimidating people who assisted migrants and public officials who respected their functions by highlighting that various acts undertaken in the context of migration policy enforcement were plainly unlawful. Former interior minister Salvini has been formally accused of criminal offences including kidnapping.

A study on the Lesvos island hotspot in a Finnish university

Jussi S. Jauhiainen and Ekaterina Vorobeva recently published a paper entitled “Asylum Seekers and Migrants in Lesvos, Greece, 2019–2020” for the Department of Geography and Geology of Turku University. In the study’s conclusions, what was happening in Lesvos is described as a “biogeopolitics” governance intervention whose purpose was to develop

“the preferred geo-political order at the EU borderlands by biopolitical (mis)management of this migrant population. The asylum process has been

The study collected information about the dreadful, unsanitary and overcrowded living conditions in and around the Lesvos hotspot in Moria, the Kara Tepe reception centre for asylum seekers and other camps, sometimes run by NGOs, noting a worsening in the situation in spring 2020 linked to EU-Turkey and Greek-Turkish political engagement and tensions. Greece is deemed to have "violated human rights and neglected international and EU asylum principles", with indirect support from the Commission. Interviews recorded the concerns felt by migrants in the island hotspot that included “hostility by police and local government forces”, complaints of racism between different ethnic groups and within asylum procedures, and complaints about health care. The residents complained about national and EU policies that leave them helpless and unable to work or study. The study also makes sense of the situation by analysing migration flows from Turkey to Lesvos and structural conditions dictated by border and asylum procedures and practices, concluding that border functions and management techniques turn residents into subjects who are denied rights and banned from society.

An interesting finding concerning the EU-Turkey deal confirms that it was more about securing Turkish cooperation to stop arrivals and providing a pretext for the large-scale exclusion of illegal entrants supposedly awaiting transfer to Turkey from asylum procedures, than about its numerical effects:

“The interception and the fast return of irregular migrants from Greece to Turkey were mentioned as key instruments in the EU-Turkey Statement. The return mechanism has not had a quantitative impact on migration, and at most, a few hundred migrants have been officially returned annually.”

Nonetheless, it featured prominently in Commission and Frontex documents since 2016 to justify other practices (like keeping large numbers of people on Greek islands, and as a way in which the number of arrivals has been made to decrease), without raising concerns about the deal’s human rights implications.

**Greece reacts, unhappy with the report**

On 27 April 2020, Are You Syrious? (AYS)⁵ reported that the Turku University study drew a response from the Greek government that materialised in a letter by the Greek ambassador in Helsinki, Giorgos Ayfantis, demanding that it be posted alongside the academic paper. AYS noted that the letter referred to the extreme sensitivity of Greek-Turkish relations, especially in the Aegean, that were settled by the Lausanne Treaty amid continuing Turkish territorial claims. Criticism of, and conflict with, NGOs operating on Lesvos was also included in this correspondence, which otherwise forcefully defended the Greek government’s management of the situation. AYS highlighted a sentence in the final part of the letter that stated:

“Migrants in Lesvos, merely by their numbers, mentality, and attitude, are unarmed invaders.”

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This intervention was interpreted by AYS as an “example of political interference in academic freedom” and as “a rare step to take”, despite accepting that some comments and criticisms of the study’s methodology and findings may be plausible.

Greek Sunday newspaper Proto Thema (liberal) supported Ambassador Ayfantis’ reply and published the letter on its website, alongside an article entitled “Inconceivably dirty Finnish blow to Greece & the exemplary answer of the Greek ambassador in Helsinki”, calling this a case of EU allies back-stabbing Greece. The letter is worth reading in full for its vitriolic attack on NGOs (the reason for which migrants are unhappy in the camp, supposedly, and any research involving them is invalid), its exaltation of Greek management, heavy criticism of UNHCR for not allowing Greek forces to deal with the problem properly, and strong claims against Turkey.

A few telling extracts (emphasis added):

“… the 25,000-strong compound of Moria is a sort of jungle, a ‘no man’s land’, since the UNHCR prevents Greek Authorities to patrol and efficiently police it”… “a motley crew of NGOs exercise a tremendous influence on them, shaping the migrants’ behaviour, attitude, decisions, availability and public statements”… “under the circumstances, the scientific accuracy of any field research conducted in Lesvos with either the assistance or connivance of asylum-related NGOs is significantly compromised. Not less than any survey in Palermo’s suburbs ‘blessed’ by the Mafia operatives or a survey in the Gaza strip ‘assisted’ by Hamas.” [A3, p. 2]

Despite some valid points made about the Commission’s responsibility for overcrowded conditions on Lesvos in its unilateral interpretation of the EU-Turkey deal [A11, pp. 3-4], Ayfantis accuses NGOs of supporting policies they have criticised and opposed for years, including in calls for Moria to be closed, as profiteers.

“the NGOs chorus was more than happy, since overcrowded Reception Centres on the Greek Islands and the ensuing miserable conditions provided the NGOs with a golden opportunity to obtain, again, more funds, along the established pattern of the tacit EU’s practice on migration [to be resumed as: ‘pay (UNHCR and the NGOs) and ignore’]."

Criticism of Aegean Boat Report is included in the letter, amongst attacks in every direction, particularly regarding Turkey weaponizing migrants and its treatment of refugees in Turkey, which the study (about Lesvos, it should be recalled) does not examine in similar terms to those used for Greece. There would be much to highlight, but the third-to-last point on the final page, whose beginning was quoted above, will suffice:

“Migrants in Lesvos, merely by their numbers, mentality, and attitude, are unarmed invaders. So far they have been dealt with by Greece with mercy, as human being [sic] in need. They seem not to appreciate it. In any case, they are weaponized by Turkey (and perhaps not by Turkey alone) in an effort to change the ethnic

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composition of the island and to undermine its social cohesion. Turkey is mounting a hybrid attack against Lesvos and the rest of the Greek islands. In such a hybrid offensive, migratory flows are equally significant with the Turkish military assets”.

The text does include some legitimate grievances that Greece may have. However, its efforts to criminalise people who help migrants and refugees who are dehumanised by the interaction between EU and member state policies and practices, accuse them of profiteering from a system they struggle against.

The letter’s aggressive, intimidatory and nationalist tone appears to herald governmental persecution of civil society actors beyond what is already the case and intimidation of researchers, by suggesting they should primarily rely on information from Greek authorities and be careful about voicing criticism.

Ambassador Ayfantis’ request that the letter be posted next to the Jauhiainen and Vorobeva study for Turku University could backfire, affecting the Greek government’s reputation, due to the arguments it contains and its intimidatory tone. The link between the arguments presented in the letter and the far-right’s attacks on migrants, refugees and members of NGOs in Lesvos at the time of the Turkish-engineered crisis at the border is evident. Despite the letter correctly pointing out that the police have arrested refugees for a fire that was initially blamed on the far right due to events that were taking place on the island, it is not surprising that far-right activists may have felt their acts were justified by official demonization of people acting in solidarity with refugees.

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