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Moria: a catastrophe by design

Years of malign neglect by Greek and EU authorities didn't just create an inhumane present — it also sows the seeds of a toxic future

It has been a testing few weeks for Greece: Covid-19 cases are rising to dangerous levels, few tourists visited the country over the summer, a Mediterranean hurricane (Medicane) caused widespread flooding and damage and the largest refugee camp, in Moria on Lesbos, was burned down.

All these developments were predictable. However, the Moria catastrophe happen almost by design.

The camp, housing an estimated 13,000 asylum seekers within its perimeter and in olive groves around the site, had become a tinderbox.

Years of malign neglect by Greek authorities, who refused to be shamed into action by the inhumane conditions in which many migrants lived, along with the European Union's conscious policy of using the Greek islands as a buffer zone between member states and the armed conflicts taking place towards Europe's east and south created an untenable situation on Lesbos.

This was not a mistake

Some officials thought an effective approach to irregular migration could be based on a long-term containment strategy, whereby asylum seekers are kept at arm's length for months or years as they are snared in the gears of Greek and European bureaucracy, paired with the kind of terrible living conditions that would supposedly act as a deterrent to any migrants thinking of crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece.

'Moria, in all its miserable, dehumanizing squalor, was designed to be that way. It was not a mistake,' wrote Daniel Howden, managing director of the investigative journalism organisation Lighthouse Reports, for Politico in the wake of this month's fire.

'Moria became the emblem of an EU deterrence policy in which the warehousing of asylum seekers in humiliating circumstances was the point. Any other approach was and is seen as creating a "pull factor" that will attract another 2015-style surge of arrivals,' he added.

This approach failed for many reasons. People, however destitute, will not allow themselves to be exploited forever. Moreover, their presence on the Greek islands, which largely live off tourism and have seen revenues decline significantly, has been a source of growing resentment that has provided some Greek and European politicians with easy political targets – and far-right activists with a rallying point to radicalise voters.

The EU's inhumane outsourcing efforts

This is a toxic mix that not only creates a volatile present, but sows the seeds for future confrontation when migration will increasingly be the structural answer to Europe's demographic challenges, while war, climate change and the lack of food and water security will only create more refugees.

'What we've seen on Lesbos is that if you have long-term resentments building up and you can't really resolve any of those, then eventually that anger gets displaced to the most convenient and vulnerable targets,' Howden told The Agora podcast earlier this year.

Turkey's actions in February also contributed to the Greek centre-right government hardening its stance on the migration issue.

Furthermore, the EU's effort to outsource the management of migration, whether it be to the Greek islands, Turkey, Jordan or elsewhere, has created a marketplace for warehousing asylum seekers, either on the edge of Europe or beyond its borders. In doing so, the EU has revealed its vulnerability – a union of some 500 million people from some of the richest countries in the world that is scared of dealing with roughly 150,000 migrants a year that arrive outside of the normal channels along with some 2.5 million legal migrants.

Turkey and the Greek government

Turkey is adept at this bargaining process and understands the EU's weaknesses very well. It has been able to exploit both repeatedly over the last few years. The most blatant example came this February, when Turkish officials waved migrants through to the land border with Greece

in Evros, forcing an ugly stand-off as the Greek government decided to shut the gates.

Turkey's actions in February also contributed to the Greek centre-right government hardening its stance on the migration issue. New Democracy officials increasingly began suggesting that most arrivals in Greece were 'illegal immigrants' rather than genuine asylum seekers, pawns in a broader geopolitical game being played by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

There have also been repeated allegations that Greece has been involved in illegal 'pushback' operations against migrants. These have been denied by Athens, although it has not put forward any evidence to counter the claims.

Over the summer, the government announced that asylum seekers who had been granted refugee status would be asked to leave camps, apartments and hotels for independent accommodation. Soon, hundreds of migrants with nowhere else to go gathered in public squares in Athens. Police moved in to disperse them and the local authorities removed benches to prevent people congregating. This provided the spark for Greece's far-right to make its first prominent appearance since the July 2019 elections, when support for Neo-Nazi Golden Dawn dropped to 2.9 per cent and the party failed to gain any seats in Parliament.

When SYRIZA created Moria

At a press conference over the weekend, the leader of opposition party SYRIZA, Alexis Tsipras, was questioned about the recent events in Moria. He chose to respond with a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche: 'And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.' He accused the EU of indifference and the current Greek government of cultivating xenophobia.

Tsipras accepted, though, that his government should also take part of the blame for creating an unsustainable situation on Lesvos. It is worth remembering that when Moria was first created in 2012, under another government, it was designed to house just a few hundred people. Under SYRIZA, the camp ballooned following the surge in arrivals in 2015, and living conditions became increasingly worse.

Moria should have made it clear to European politicians that they must

Although the Greek Asylum Service has made advances over recent years, it remains understaffed and lacking in resources – no government has been able to address this

normalise this issue.

decisively. Also, SYRIZA failed to speed up the legal process involved in asylum applications. The current government promised last year a Dutch-style, speedy procedure but that has also failed to materialise.

Speaking in Greek Parliament on Monday, Migration and Asylum Minister Notis Mitarachi said: 'Moria is over. We now have the opportunity to build something better from scratch.' But that 'something' cannot be built from the same materials or based on the same line of thought as before. That all went up in flames in Moria.

The EU's new 'Migration Pact'

In this respect, the proposals put forward by the European Commission on Wednesday for a new 'Migration Pact' will be studied closely in Athens as well as other EU capitals.

At first glance, there are some elements to the proposals that could seem appealing to the Greek authorities: For example, financial incentives for taking in refugees and penalties for those who refuse; the speeding up of the returns process for applicants not eligible for asylum; a crisis mechanism to help member states when there are emergency circumstances, and a rethink of the Dublin regulation so asylum applications are not only processed in the country of first arrival, which is often Greece.

Whatever is agreed, it must not create a new ad-hoc situation that allows vulnerable Greek islands to be exposed to fluctuating migratory flows, where a small camp can gradually become a shanty town and in which Greek and European bureaucratic vagaries can trap people for years, leaving goodwill gestures – such as the German government's decision this month to take in about 1,500 migrants from Moria – as their only route to escape this torment.

A fair migration policy is possible

'It's absolutely possible to manage migration in an orderly and fair way,' EU Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson told the EU Scream podcast a few days ago as she called for member states to remove the 'drama' from migration, which is exploited by the far-right, and work towards a 'common and proper' asylum and migration system.

It is encouraging that Johansson has included in the Migration Pact

proposals for an independent monitoring mechanism to ensure that basic rights are protected and to investigate allegations about pushbacks.

It is vital that respect for human life is at the heart of our policies and, from a Greek perspective, it will be a relief to put an end to the claims and counter-claims over whether the mistreatment of migrants is real, or just exaggeration of NGOs or the work of Turkish propaganda, as is often claimed in Greece.

Moria should have made it clear to European politicians that they must normalise this issue. A process whereby asylum seekers are afforded decent shelter and apply to a functioning system that offers due process either in granting asylum or paving the way for their safe return should be the legacy of the inhumanity in Lesbos. Recent events on the island may have made us aware we are staring into the abyss, but they should alert us that thousands of our fellow human beings are already living in it.



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