

Press Release

The “Hotspot” approach is NOT the solution!

The EC-funded international research project “RESPOND: Multilevel Governance of Mass Migration in Europe and Beyond” calls for human-rights responses to the explosive situation at the refugee camp “Moria” and in the Aegean region.

After another fire in which a woman was burnt to death, on Sunday 29 September 2019, the inhuman and volatile situation of the “hot-spot” Moria on the Greek island, Lesbos attracted further worldwide publicity. The woman’s death on Sunday was the third in the last two months. An Afghan teenager was killed in a fight in August and a five-year-old boy was run over by a truck while playing in a cardboard box outside the camp in September. The camp, which is supposed to host just 3,000 asylum seekers, is notoriously over-populated, and now houses 13,000 people. The appalling condition of Moria camp is known and has been made public by a number of academic studies and NGOs including Doctors without Borders, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as the Greek health service.

In the context of our own year-long academic commitment and research on the governance of the recent mass migration movements to central Europe (as part of the EC-funded Horizon 2020 – RESPOND project), we have personally observed how this place has changed. It has turned into an area where aggression, violence, despair, depression, human trafficking (especially of young women) and a high suicide rate are dominating the everyday life of the arriving migrants. The “hot spot” Moria was established by the EU and the Greek government to bring order to the refugee migration movements in 2015 and 2016. However, instead of providing good governance, the hotspot approach has by-and-large failed. In fact, it has led to a highly chaotic legal and social situation where the dignity of the asylum-seeking migrants - as enshrined in international human rights and humanitarian laws such as the Anti-Torture Convention, the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Asylum System - is being trampled into the dust of the camp.

Our partner at the University of Aegean, Dr Electra Petracou and her collaborators provide more details about the situation in the camp:

Asylum Seekers in Moria Hot Spot are forced to live in inadequate and insecure living conditions and insufficient hygiene facilities. They suffer from both a lack of security and health care provision, which raises serious protection concerns. Due to overcrowded and suffocating conditions, an informal camp has been gradually created in the surrounding olive grove fields known as the “Jungle”. Right now in the “Jungle” approximately 7,000 people stay, sharing flimsy tents packed next to one another.

Furthermore, she underlines the situation of vulnerable refugees and post-traumatic experiences that they face at the European territory:

Additionally, people that have already been recognized as vulnerable, still remain in Moria for months or a year despite the lifting of the geographical restriction due to the significant delays in the identification of empty spaces in the mainland’s camp site. At the same time there is a lack of coherence regarding the profile of vulnerable cases eligible to be transferred to an accommodation scheme (such as apartments, hotels, etc.) or open Temporary Accommodation Facilities in the mainland. The most vulnerable populations, women and children, are not given the protection they need, no access to health treatment, and no safe space from a violent environment. The prolonged stay in refugee camps such as Moria, together with the re-traumatization through events as the one on Sunday, increases the health deterioration of individuals as well as decreasing their resilience and their hope for a better future.

The hot-spot approach is described in the European Agenda on migration as one of the cornerstones of the new EU migration and asylum policy. It has failed due to the way it has been implemented within the EU-Turkey-Deal of 2016, which was mainly designed by the German government to stop the mass movements of asylum-seeking refugees through the Balkan route to the northern European countries such as Austria, Germany or Sweden. The number of people returning to Turkey has been relatively small - the deal has never worked in the way that its originators had intended. Instead, the deal, in connection with the hot spot system, has turned the Greek islands into a zone of deterrence and immobilization similar to the situation in Australia with Nauro, referred to as “the island solution”. The deal, which was primarily designed by the German government to bring relief to its own national situation in 2016, is being especially defended again now by the German Minister of Interior who is visiting Turkey and Greece again to call for its strict implementation.

Our partner at Göttingen University, Professor Sabine Hess draws our attention to the German government’s insistent approach on the implementation of the hot-spot system and the Turkey-EU Deal:

It is shameful to observe that the German government has managed to find some peace in the management of the refugee crisis by exporting the migration challenge to the fringes of Europe. The sharp decrease in the number of asylum seekers arriving since its peak in 2016 – between January and April this year only 59,889 person applied for asylum, a 6% drop compared to the respective period last year – has been achieved with the help of such inhuman conditions like at the camp of Moria. The woman who died in the fire is also a victim of our short-sighted asylum policy.

However, as our partners have been observing for some months, the situation on the Greek islands has been deteriorating as yet more asylum-seeking migrants have been trying to reach the shores of the EU, recently the numbers have been 8,000 to 9,000 monthly. This is a direct consequence, as our Turkish project partners can show, of the precarious legal and social situation of asylum seekers. This is especially true for Syrian refugees under the temporary protection status within Turkey where rumours have been circulating about mass deportations of Syrian refugees back to Syria and the eviction of thousands of Syrian refugees from Istanbul. In addition, as a direct consequence of the deteriorating living conditions within Afghanistan, more refugees are on the move again, struggling for better living conditions. The plight of Afghan refugees residing in Iran is also adversely affected due to the economic situation exacerbated by the increased sanctions; this has led to these Afghan refugees also seeking safe haven.

Underlining the change in migration policies and public discourse, our partner at Istanbul Bilgi University, Professor Ayhan Kaya points out how the changes have an impact on Syrian refugees already residing in Turkey:

Recently there is a radical shift in the political discourse adopted by the Turkish government and the state actors. Rather than emphasizing the refugees’ temporary guest status, the emphasis is now on return of the Syrians either to their home cities or to the safe zone, which is in the process of being constructed by the international forces in the Turkish-Syrian border. The discourse of return became more widespread in 2018 and thereafter, as the hostility against the Syrians escalated in Turkey due to the increasing socio-economic and political unrest. This discursive shift also became visible in the speeches of the governing bodies who started to give detailed accounts of Syrian returnees since 2018. The discursive shift of the government became even sharper in the aftermath of the local elections held on 23 June 2019 when the ruling party lost the metropolitan cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, and Antalya. For instance, following the loss of elections in Istanbul, the governor of Istanbul announced that those Syrians under temporary protection who are residing in Istanbul without the proof of

documents showing Istanbul as their city of registration, would be deported to the cities where they were originally registered, or to Syria. These changes in policy practices show that what is happening to the Syrians is not only a discursive shift, but also an actual transformation of policies from guesthood to return. Given the fact that oppositional parties are also pushing for a return of refugees, this changing political and societal climate in Turkey may create further impediments for the refugees in everyday life, leading them to try new deadly voyages on the Aegean shores.

He also shares the same opinion about the failure of Turkey-EU deal:

Having difficulties of structural adaptation, most of the Syrians under temporary protection (around 3.5 million people) have no other shield to protect them but the discourse of cultural and religious similarity with the Turks. It is this cultural and religious similarity, which seems to keep them in Turkey. However, this is not enough of course to give them the legal right to stay in Turkey, and the ESSN program has certain limitations. Anecdotal evidence as well as the growing number of refugees going across the Greek islands demonstrate that the EU-Turkey Statement is no longer functioning. It seems that we have now come to a point where neither the ESSN Program nor the cultural affinity discourse is enough to keep the refugees in Turkey.

RESPOND project, consisting of 14 partner institutions, has conducted research in 11 countries in order to provide in-depth analysis to the responses given to the 2015 so-called “refugee crisis both at policy and practice levels and to analyse the governance structures at both national and local levels within the EU. RESPOND had a specific focus on the narratives of asylum seekers and refugees and endeavored to understand the impact of mass migration on the lives of people. After almost two years of our research we have to summarize that the situation in the Aegean region is deteriorating again; the measures and policies like the EU-Turkey deal and the hot spot approach have failed to bring order to the forced migration flows, and in particular they are lacking essential human rights standards and legal (procedural) norms.

We have to remind all governments, especially the EU Member States, that refugee rights are an intrinsic part of human rights which have been clearly formulated in international conventions. It is not acceptable that people fleeing war and destruction in their countries of origin now face inhuman conditions on European territory.

Our project coordinators at Uppsala University, Dr Onver Cetrez and Soner Barthoma raise their concern about the recent developments, most importantly the long-term impact of the lived experiences on people’s lives and their participation in their new host societies:

As project partners within RESPOND, aiming at highlighting the refugee experience through more than 700 interviews in different countries, among these in Greece and Turkey, we are concerned that the very hard situation of refugees in camps is paid so little attention. Our project results show that refugees are treated very negatively all along their journey to a destination country.

We appeal to the governments and the EU Commission to go back to their own conventions and directives; develop human rights-based migration policies and long-term solutions for the governance of global migration. Hotspot approach is NOT the solution!

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