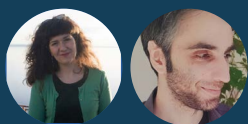


Homelessness on Greek Refugee Camps: A Form of Institutional Racism and Discrimination?



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This article explores how Greece's refugee reception system has evolved into a form of institutionalised exclusion. Since 2021, massive EU-funded camps known as "Closed Controlled Access Centers" have physically and symbolically isolated non-European asylum seekers under the guise of improved conditions. Agapi Chouzouraki and Spyros-Vlad Oikonomou outline how these securitised spaces resemble prisons more than humanitarian shelters, reflecting a racialised logic of containment.

The last decade's refugee influx to Europe has placed significant strain on border countries, with Greece becoming a central node in the reception of asylum seekers. While ongoing reports on the **substandard reception conditions, even for children**, highlight persistent systemic challenges, the model of reception employed by Greece, particularly since the start of 2023,¹ constitutes a one-way housing prospect with no available alternative.

Massive reception structures, based on the principle of **out of sight and out of mind**, seem to promote a simple message for refugees arriving in Greece: you are welcome to stay while your asylum case is examined, as long as you stay "somewhere else". This not-in-my-backyard syndrome heavily underpins the current racialised refugee management system.

Could this be considered a form of institutional racism and systemic discrimination towards non-European refugees and migrants? An examination of the UN Committee's on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 'Guidelines on deinstitutionalization' certainly seems to highlight that the Greek reception system employs quite a few of the "defining elements" of institutionalisation,² which in itself is a form of discrimination. According to the **European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS)**, which has been termed by the European Commission as "[t]he best European classification of homelessness"³, people in accommodation for immigrants such (e.g. reception centres) are also considered to experience homelessness; additionally, there is a close connection between homelessness and racialised people.⁴

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Nevertheless, the answer cannot be a simple yes or no. Institutional racism refers to systemic policies and practices within institutions or states that, intentionally or unintentionally, produce unequal outcomes for racialised groups.⁵ It operates not through overt individual prejudice, but through

laws, procedures, and norms that disproportionately affect racialised groups. Applying this framework to refugee management, camps can be analysed not just as spaces of asylum seekers' temporary reception facilities, but as institutional structures that embody and reproduce racial hierarchies.

A bit of context

Greece's geography situates it as a primary entry point for migrants crossing the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Seas. Following the 2015 great refugee influx towards Europe, the European Union (EU) implemented the **EU-Turkey Statement**, effectively outsourcing migration control to Turkey, in exchange for financial incentives and political support.⁶ This deal (in reality, a press release with no binding legal value) resulted in thousands of asylum seekers being trapped on Greek islands in squalid, overcrowded camps for prolonged periods of time. The reluctance of most other EU member states to share some of the responsibility through a meaningful number of relocations, as one would expect in a Union of solidarity, certainly has not helped either.

Yet, excluding this reluctance which remains embedded in the EU's to-be-implemented Migration and Asylum Pact, things have since changed, even if not really for the better.

In the aftermath of the 2020 fire that burned down the notorious Moria camp in Lesbos, the EU had to invest in improving reception conditions in Greece. And invest, it did. Some five(ish) years and **hundreds of millions of Euros** later, the new (from 2021 onwards) EU-funded facilities on the Aegean Islands, aptly named "Closed Controlled Access Centers" (CCACs), are a stark reminder of the political rules of the game: better to sweep the issue under the carpet, by "penning" asylum seekers "somewhere else", out of sight, rather than addressing the fundamental causes that to this day expose them to undignified and unsanitary living conditions.

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Part of the issue? A preconception seemingly shared by high level policy makers that improving conditions might serve as a dreaded "pull factor" for more to arrive, even though a track record of **beating people** at the

borders and **stripping them of their belongings** (an approach shared by more member states than just Greece), imposing **arbitrary obstacles to accessing asylum** or **arbitrarily detaining them**, seem to have failed to convince those forced to flee their homes from just staying put.⁷

Of course, these institutional choices and failures disproportionately impact on non-white, non-European asylum seekers, revealing an undercurrent of racialised exclusion.

The Racialisation of Refugee Spaces and Homelessness

Greek refugee camps, such as Moria and its successor Mavrovouni camp, in Lesbos, or Vathy camp in Samos and its successor, the "model" Closed Controlled Access Center (CCAC) of Samos, have been widely criticised for inhumane conditions. Overcrowding, lack of sanitation, limited access to healthcare and medication, and exposure to adverse weather conditions are just a few of the more visible common complaints.⁸ Less visible is the impact on the psychosocial well-being of asylum seekers, in what **Médecins Sans Frontières** (MsF) have identified as a "mental health crisis". These conditions are not incidental but symptomatic of a system that normalises the degradation of racialised bodies.

Refugees are routinely subject to containment policies that spatially segregate them from the general population, effectively creating racialised zones of exception⁹, by state decision. The camps, surrounded by barbed wire,¹⁰ are heavily securitised, resembling carceral spaces –something also acknowledged by the **EU Ombudsman** in 2022– more than spaces for the reception of those fleeing persecution, war, and severe material deprivation. This physical marginalisation mirrors the symbolic marginalisation of non-European others in Europe's racial imaginary.

The Greek asylum system's inefficiencies are compounded by EU policies that disproportionately place the burden of refugee management on frontline states. This unequal distribution reflects a racialised logic wherein Southern and Eastern European countries, often depicted as peripheral within the EU, become the main "gate-keepers" for non-white migrants that in lack of alternative, safe and legal pathways, arrive irregularly at Europe's borders.

The Public Discourse on the "other"

Greek and European media often portray refugees through a lens of security and threat, reinforcing racialised narratives and divides. Refugees –i.e. unarmed civilians– are depicted as invaders or burdens (the foe as opposed to the friend), rather than individuals fleeing violence and

persecution.¹¹ The fact that the theoretical underpinning of this foe and friend approach, of securitisation, lie in the work of **Carl Schmitt**, a jurist and political theorist that in 1933 joined the Nazi party, just reinforces the tragic irony of the situation.

This framing, in turn, legitimises harsh policies and fosters conditions for public indifference –at the end of the day, if “they” are a danger, why should “we” care if they are mistreated. It also reinforces a “Fortress Europe” mentality and approach that equates non-white migration with crisis and chaos. The fact that non-white refugees and migrants are frequently, in countries such as Greece, the reason why the rest of “us” can enjoy **strawberries** at our tables, seems to be forgotten in the equation –unless, of course, “they” dare to demand what is owed for their work.

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Public discourse in Greece has, at times, mirrored these narratives, fuelled by far-right rhetoric and anti-immigrant sentiment. While solidarity movements exist, they are often overshadowed by nationalist discourses that portray refugees as incompatible with Greek cultural identity, as Greeks mostly tend to believe that immigrants do not contribute to the country’s development (neither economically nor culturally).¹² This discursive exclusion validates the mechanisms of institutional discrimination, as the “other” is to be placed “somewhere else”, out of sight, as they are not part of “us”.

Framing the issue within advocacy work

Despite these challenges and despite the cutting of US-based funding for human rights NGOs, including those in Greece, there are still voices pinpointing institutional racism. Organisations such as the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR) provide free legal aid and psychosocial support, document abuses, and advocate for policy change, regarding reception conditions, among others. Our work exposes the contradictions between the legal obligations (**have you been to Samos?**) and the lived realities of camp residents.

However, such efforts are often constrained by limited resources and political hostility. In recent years, Greek authorities have introduced laws that restrict NGO activities and criminalise humanitarian aid, framing

these actors as complicit in irregular migration.¹³ These developments reflect a broader trend of shrinking civic space and institutional entrenchment of discriminatory practices.

In conclusion

Greek refugee camps are not merely logistical responses to a humanitarian crisis but are also sites where people live and where institutional racism is enacted and becomes normalised. Through poor living conditions in massive reception facilities, inconsistent access to basic services and an unwelcoming public discourse, the camps function as tools of exclusion for non-white migrants. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing just and equitable refugee policies that dismantle, rather than reproduce, systems of racial inequality. This also entails recognising refugees not as passive victims but as rights-bearing individuals **with agency and voice**. Policies must move beyond securitisation and containment towards inclusion, participation, and justice. This does not mean “open borders” as scaremongering politicians frequently profess, but rather treating people in accordance with their rights and the EU’s legal edifice.

Times are pressing for the Greek Council for Refugees and other human rights and humanitarian NGOs. Your support is invaluable for the continuation of our work, which consists of free legal and psychosocial services to asylum seekers and refugees. Please visit our website if you wish to support our work.

1 By decision of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, in **December 2022** Greece terminated the last remaining alternative model of reception: the ESTIA accommodation programme which, through EU funding, had supported in a successful manner the dignified reception of asylum seekers. Since then, excluding (insufficiently) available dedicated shelters and apartments for unaccompanied minors, the only available option for reception are isolated large-scale camps.

2 For instance, asylum seekers residing in Greece's camps are in practice isolated and segregated from independent life in the community, lack control over day-to-day decisions, lack choice over with whom they live and so forth.

3 Reply to Parliamentary question - E-2564/2010(ASW), 2 June 2010, available at: <https://tinyurl.com/595cau8t>.

4 See Fowle, M.Z., *Racialized Homelessness: A Review of Historical and Contemporary Causes of Racial Disparities in Homelessness*, 30 March 2022, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2022.2026995>; Bramley, G. et.al., *Homelessness Amongst Black and Minoritised Ethnic Communities in the UK: a statistical report on the state of the nation*, November 2022, available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4a8h5566>.

5 Among others, see E. Bonilla-Silva, *Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation*, *American Sociological Review*, Jun., 1997, Vol. 62, No.3, pp. 465- 480, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2657316>

6 Papoutsis, A., Painter, J., Papada, E. & Vradis, A. (2018). The EC hotspot approach in Greece: creating liminal EU territory. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 45. 1-13. 10.1080/1369183X.2018.1468351.

7 It is interesting to note that following a 2-year period of decreased arrivals between 2020 and 2021

(which at least in part is attributable to the global 2020 pandemic and the exponential increase, since 2020, of

reported pushback practices from Greece), since 2022 the number of arrivals has started increasing once again. As per **UNHCR's data portal**, arrivals by sea and land to Greece stood at 15,965 for 2020, 9,152 for 2021, 18,780 for 2022, 48,721 for 2023 and 62,119 for 2024.

8 Among others, see GCR & Oxfam International & Save the Children *International Bulletin* – July 2022, available at: <https://gcr.gr/el/gcr-reports/item/2007-gcr-oxfam-bulletin-july-2022/>

9 See more Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press.

10 See also the Greek Ombudsman, *The Challenge of Migratory Flows and Refugee Protection Reception Conditions and Procedures*, April 2024, available in English and Greek at: <https://tinyurl.com/546kmb76>

11 Holmes, S. M., & Castañeda, H. (2016). Representing the “European refugee crisis” in Germany and beyond: Deservingness and difference, life and death. *American Ethnologist*, 43(1), 12-24.

12 Arvanitidis, P., Papagiannitsis, G., Desli, A. Z., Vergou, P., & Gourgoulani, S. (2021). Attitudes Towards Refugees & Immigrants in Greece: A National-Local Comparative Analysis. *European Journal of Geography*, 12(3), 39–55. <https://doi.org/10.48088/ejg.p.arv.12.3.39.55>

13 Amnesty International. (2021). Greece: Crackdown on human rights defenders. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur25/3397/2021/en/>, GCR (2024) *At Europe's borders, Pushbacks continues as impunity persists*, available at https://gcr.gr/wp-content/uploads/EN-GCR_-Pushback-Report.pdf