

Hotspot stories from Europe's border

VICKI SQUIRE 7 June 2016

A response to testimony from an unaccompanied minor whose long journey culminated in a perilous boat journey, the author discusses Europe's failure to address the rights of those it renders precarious.

This article is a response to Gabriel's story, '[Lampedusa: Red Letter Days](#)'.



Lampedusa hotspot.

Photo: author. I met the author of [this story](#) in September 2015, just a few days after he had arrived to the notorious European island 'entry point', [Lampedusa](#). It was also a few days after I arrived for first time to the island.

I was visiting the island to begin research for my project [Human Dignity and Biophysical Violence: Migrant Deaths across the Mediterranean Sea](#). We initially met on opposite sides of a wire fence that contains the people within the centre in which he was staying. We clumsily attempted to shake hands through wire that is designed precisely to prevent any movement beyond its confines. Since that time, we have worked closely together to write his [story](#).

I was not granted authorisation to go inside the first aid and reception centre ([CPSA](#)) in Lampedusa, despite my request for access in order to undertake interviews with people recently [crossing the Mediterranean Sea by boat](#). During fieldwork, our team has found that the denial of access to such centres is an increasing challenge for many researchers, as well as for activists and others that are not integrated within the official reception process.

Nevertheless, I wanted to get a sense of the situation for those inside the centre regardless of these challenges. Although I was not aware of it at the time, on 17 September the Lampedusa CPSA began informally operating as the first centre branded with the label [European 'hotspot'](#). My decision on 28 September to observe the conditions at the centre 'from a distance' could not have been more timely, with it being formally designated as a hotspot just a few days later.

The hotspot approach

The 'hotspot approach' was initiated in 2015 as part of a developing European agenda on migration. It is integral to the relocation mechanism also initiated in 2015, and is described as involving an intensification of activities along sections of the external EU border marked by increased arrivals. The stated aim of the approach is to coordinate intelligence and monitoring as well as to facilitate the effective management of 'mixed migratory flows'.

The hotspot approach is implemented by Member States, but involves a range of European Agencies, including [Frontex](#) (European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union), [EASO](#) (European Asylum Support Office), and [EUROPOL](#) (The European Police Office).

While centres such as those in Lampedusa are officially branded as hotspots, the hotspot approach is better understood as an emergent architecture through which [coercive European policies](#) are now being developed. Thus, [Glenda Garelli](#) and [Martina Tazzioli](#) have [recently argued](#), hotspots work "as a preemptive frontier, with the double goal of blocking migrants at Europe's southern borders, and simultaneously impeding the highest number possible of refugees from claiming asylum".

Indeed, [as scholars increasingly argue](#) the hotspot approach is much more than a series of detention centres: it can also be seen as representing a significant development in a European architecture of coercion. The hotspot approach follows on from a European agenda that was already failing, and which continues to fail many people, in many ways, and on many levels. The author of this story is one of those people.

The treatment of unaccompanied minors

Having turned seventeen soon after his arrival, the author of [this story](#) is an unaccompanied minor. In some respects, he would appear to be relatively fortunate in the sense that he has been accepted as such. During fieldwork in Sicily, our project came across several cases whereby interviewees claimed that their ages had been misrecorded on deportation documents. Recent [evidence suggests](#) that the use of seven-day expulsion orders dramatically increased in Italy when the hotspot approach was initiated, and any misrecording of people's age is a considerable worry in this context.

In addition to this, the detention of an unaccompanied minor for nearly two weeks is clearly a cause for concern. This raises questions about how effectively Europe is implementing legal rights, including Article 4 of the [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#) and Article 3 of the [European Convention on Human Rights](#), which state that nobody shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. It also raises questions about how far the rights to liberty and security, embedded in the [European Convention](#), are being honored for people such as the author of this story.

Moreover, the treatment of the author also raises concerns about implementation of the [2003 Council Directive on reception](#), particularly given that he has been fingerprinted and separated from people with whom he travelled. That the author is an unaccompanied minor is an issue for EU states as signatories of the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), the latter of which prohibits the detention of migrant children. For somebody who paradoxically appears to have been treated relatively 'well' in

comparison to some of his contemporaries, the [story](#) presented here thus emphasises how coercive tendencies dominate Europe's emergent hotspot approach.

'At the bottom of the food chain'

Currently, Gabriel is in Sicily, staying in a reception centre for unaccompanied minors. He often messages me to say he is tired of waiting there, that many of his friends have moved on, and that he wants to leave too. His [story](#) is thus [similar to others](#) who feel compelled to move under similar circumstances.

Such stories reflect an additional dimension of a European architecture of coercion, which not only seeks to deter people from entering and applying for asylum, but that also makes life increasingly difficult over time for those who are forced to wait. Indeed, the longer-term prospects for unaccompanied minors who arrive in Europe are a significant concern. For those who have undertaken a long and difficult journey and who have been separated from friends and family along the way, waiting to go nowhere further perpetuates their precarious situation.

This author's [story](#) therefore highlights how current [policies perpetuate the precarities of unaccompanied minors](#). While the plight of unaccompanied minors who have 'disappeared' has recently been raised as an issue of political concern, as [discussed](#) previously on People on the Move, [Elaine Chase](#) and [Nando Sigona](#) suggest that the lack of accountability of European states such as the UK who [detain and deport](#) those who reach the age of eighteen serve as the institutional conditions under which such disappearances occur.

Indeed, this reflects a further on-going dimension of Europe's architecture of coercion, namely the building into a focus on preemption or deterrence an emphasis on fostering "[return and readmission](#)". West African states such as the Gambia, from which the author of this story comes, are precisely the sort of states targeted by Europe in this regard. As [Alexandra Embiricos](#) has [argued](#), this is because people migrating from West Africa are "at the bottom of the food chain, most likely to be dismissed as 'economically' driven migrants searching for a better life".

Policy failure

It is [policy failure](#) in a much broader sense that renders the situation of people such as the author of [this story](#) so precarious. This story is one about a boy who decided to leave home to care for his family under conditions that he experienced as demanding flight. It is a story about a journey involving disturbing levels of violence and precarity, as well as periodic experiences of protection and care. It is, moreover, a story about his arrival to conditions that drain hope and invite 'disappearance', despite everything that the author has endured.

Hotspot stories such as this highlight the failure of Europe to address the rights of those it renders most precarious. It also points to the concerning treatment of unaccompanied minors and of all those who left at the 'bottom of the food chain' in a '[brutal and unjust world](#)'. No doubt there will be a proliferation of [hotspot stories](#) in the months and years to come, and no doubt these will continue to point to the need for a [radical rethink](#) of the European agenda on migration. Europe's effective response is long overdue.

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