

“That is the worst: the political normality to lock people up”

Interview with borderline-lesvos

1. What are the main aims of Borderline Lesvos?

Our main aims are to support refugees and migrants on the Greek island Lesvos in a way which creates sustainable long-term structures and involves the local community. The core of our commitment is based on the conviction that people cannot be divided according to their status, between those with a residency permit and those who are seeking asylum. Instead, we see humans, we see people, and we fight against the exclusion of those arriving on the island to seek a safe life.

2. What kind of projects are you pursuing on Lesvos?

Our main office is located in Mytilene, the capital of Lesvos, and our second base is located in a former cheese factory in the north east of the island, in the village Kleio. We are engaged in various areas, such as informing people abroad about the unbearable situation on the island, or giving access to informal education for refugee children, as they face a lack of access to schools. We are also taking part in emergency responses to arriving boats, and we conduct social consultations.

In our Welcome Office, we support refugees by giving information about procedures or services on the island, such as finding a job or an apartment or applying for Greek lessons. We also refer people who are seeking advice to legal support groups, and we help other organizations with their registration or with translations. We reach out to all visitors that come into our office daily and also to refugees arriving in the north. In some cases, we transport refugees to the next transit facility and support them by supplying them with clothes, blankets, water and sometimes food. We also organize a big warehouse, open for all helping hands in the area. This project is called ‘Proti Stassi’ and has been started and maintained by us since 2015.

Our “Welcome Lessons” in Mytilene provide basic education for refugee children aged 10 to 18 in Greek, English, maths, geography and art. It is successful, and the waiting list is very long (currently 100 students visit our lessons regularly and another 150 are on the waiting list).

It is very difficult to organize projects that have a real impact to change the situation. We can provide some kind of relief, but we still feel useless sometimes. There is so much more which needs to be done to improve the situation on Lesvos, especially regarding the living conditions. However, it is also the Greek government and the European Union (EU) who are responsible for changing the situation, providing humane admission conditions, and enabling the right to stay or move on. Given our capabilities, we are satisfied with what we already manage, but what we really need is a political change. The disastrous camps such as Moria need to close.

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3. With the change of government in Greece, and particularly in Lesvos last year: What have been the impacts of the new right-wing policies on the living condition of asylum seekers?

We are experiencing massive restrictions for refugees and migrants living on the island. The biggest challenge at our work is the removal of basic rights, e.g. the right to get a social insurance number for health care, to get a tax number to find a job, or to be able to rent a house. Our office was supporting asylum seekers with applications for a tax number and a social insurance number. Since the new government is in power, both numbers are not given out to asylum seekers anymore.

While asylum seekers who arrived in 2018 or 2019 are still waiting for a decision, the applications of some recently arrived people are processed faster and further attempts for deportation are made. More people than before are arrested after their first or second rejection. Our efforts to integrate people and to support them are always being stopped: by a rejection of an asylum case, by illness, by putting people we support into prison, by students feeling so sick and ill they cannot attend classes.

The services that used to provide medical exams and the verification of vulnerability are not really working anymore neither, as the new government is not pursuing them. The new government publicly discredits most people coming into Greece as “illegal migrants”, and they have openly accused NGOs for supporting them. They call for more control of both refugees and NGOs. We are fighting against a powerful enemy, and it’s difficult.

Especially since the 1st of March, things have gotten harder. Newly arrived persons are even refused the fundamental right to apply for asylum and most of them have been transferred directly to deportation centres in the north of Greece. While those who have been on the island for a long time are still stuck in the camps.

4. In the past few weeks we have witnessed enormous tensions and conflicts in Greece, and a deadly escalation of the situation along the Greek external borders. How does the local population deal with this situation?

After the elections, the public opinion became more aggressive, as one of the government’s promises was to “handle and fix the situation”. When the government announced the building of new closed sites, including one on Lesvos, people got very offended: they did not want another “camp”, while Moria already “hosts” 20 000 people.

On the 25th of February, the government wanted to confiscate land and start to build the new site without any previous talk to the local community. As a response, inhabitants started protesting on the ground, and the central government sent hundreds of policemen. They fired tear gas. Police violence, of course, had happened many times towards refugees protesting before, but locals were shocked that they were treated in the same way. From here things got completely out of hands. Violence won over patience and solidarity.

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This is the result of a longer process. For instance, the government's changes of public speech, using expressions like “illegal migrants” instead of refugees. Additionally, they did not transfer many people from the islands to the mainland, which means that, for the first time, much more than 5 000 people were on Lesbos. From September to November 2019 arrivals increased a lot. The whole situation led to the escalation during the last 3 weeks: the attacks against refugees, NGO workers or even visitors that looked different, the burning down of a transit camp on the 1st of March in the north, and of the One Happy Family Community centre on the 7th of March. You might say the attacks, or the roadblocks were mainly made by 50 or 100 people, but in fact, many other locals supported those actions. Without excusing those horrible incidents, I would like to state that many locals have the feeling that they lost control. They have lost their hope and are trying to act with no plan or clear mind.

Somehow, it doesn't feel like before. Many volunteers have left. Structures in the Camp are worse than ever. Authorities are not handling the situation well. Moreover, I think it is not about the number of refugees, which is one quarter of the population, but the Hotspot Camp and the bad circumstances there which are provoking the situation: no running water, no garbage being picked up, and people are literally dying because of the lack of services.

5. In this tense atmosphere, do you think the migrants are increasingly getting more sub-jects to discrimination? How do you deal with rising right-wing and racist attacks?

Fascist attacks are taking place every day and start creating a normality, generating more and more supporters. Because of their despair, even people with no racist background are supporting those actions. All the “foreign” people or the ones with background of “solidarity” suddenly become the enemies, including the volunteers. But these attacks are not the main issue: the whole political system is refusing basic rights and needs to migrants, and it has been like that for a long time. Migrants are subjected to systematical attacks day after day, making them feel worthless by the structure they live in, for instance in standing for hours in the food line, or by the denial of medical help. Also, they are treated very badly by the policy of containment, by rejections, by interviews, or by not even being interviewed. For example, after the 1st of March, Greece paused the right to seek asylum. People seem to be directly deported now. The refugees suffer so much from the structure in Moria that several people tried to kill themselves. That is the worst: the political normality to lock people up in camps and treat them like animals. That has been going on for years. Every month another article is published: “the worst camp in the world”, “doctors without borders warn of traumatizing living conditions”, “the pope speaks of concentration camps”, Jean Ziegler's new book “the shame of Europe”. The right-wing attacks might shock other people, but the refugees and migrants have already experienced all the worst.

On the 16th of March, another death of a young child was confirmed by the authorities, the girl died due to a fire that burnt down a part of Moria Camp. I will not even start to talk about the deaths at sea, caused by the lack of options for safe passage to Europe.

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6. How do you estimate the future political development in Greece for the next years to come?

I estimate, from the severe damage and frustration that the government has created during the last months, and the huge problems that they have to face in the close future, that it will be very difficult to keep the lead. Unfortunately, after the last three weeks, I feel that anything can happen, the foulest possibilities: it's a nightmare. It became a reality to shoot people at the border, to return them without a chance to seek asylum, to put people in overcrowded horrible camps and to let people drown during their sea crossing. All of it caused by EU policies. I do not expect the EU or the national governments to make any change, but I hope that the people on the ground still can make a difference.

7. Borderline-Lesvos started its work on the island in July 2015. You have already worked on several projects. Regarding the political development, which future challenges are you facing and what are your objectives for the year 2020?

We have experienced many changes since the founding of borderline-Lesvos. In 2015, when we started as a group or delegation from borderline-europe, it was all about supporting thousands of people arriving as a first response. Then, in March 2016, the borders were closed, the island locked up, so we focused our efforts on allowing people to arrive and on building a community centre for both refugees and locals (Mosaik Support Center). Now things are getting more complex, but we are very flexible, and we have many ideas to support other projects as well. It feels like we are growing up: first we were maybe a bit naive and it was also easier to help. Now, we are in the phase of puberty, rebelling against the circumstances, not willing to step in where the state or the EU should do something.

Currently we are on hold in some of our projects, but we try our best to give as much support as we can:

- A) due to the corona virus, our Welcome Classes had to close for two weeks, upon a government's decision;
- B) the attacks of fascists in the city centre have led to less refugees walking around, and less organizations working to support them, so we have to assess what we can do to get back to a safe city centre where asylum seekers are welcomed;
- C) the north shore response, to support refugees upon arrival is being more important than ever, because we currently step in where infrastructures broke down, due to many volunteers leaving the island and to the current repression of helping hands by the police. At the moment, we are one of the few projects that support arrivals in the north with dry clothes, blankets, water, warm tea, some information, and also by monitoring their situation.

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For us it is very important to reflect on our responsibility every day. We receive donations for supporting refugees, so we are constantly wondering: where are the donations best implemented and where can we support long term structures and local initiatives? Most importantly, what do the refugees need the most? But also, what is doable? We are in contact with many actors and refugees which help us to stay flexible and build a strong network. Our presence on the island in the areas of education, on the first response on arrival, and as an info point in the city centre are crucial. We aim to support and cooperate more with legal support structures and asylum protection work on the island.

I hope for 2020 that we will find our way, to make a difference, fight fascism, and to support refugees in the most sustainable way.

#LeaveNoOneBehind:
Prevent the Corona catastrophe now –
also at the external borders!

Sign the petition:
<https://leavenoonebehind2020.org/>

We are demanding:

- Immediate evacuation of the overcrowded refugee camps and accommodation in safe places. We have space!
- Necessary quarantine and protective measures against corona should be implemented everywhere to prevent exponential spread of the virus. Also in refugee camps.
- Access to medical care for the homeless, refugees and all others as good as possible.
- Humanitarian and financial support for the most affected areas, particularly Greece, through a European effort
- Access to asylum procedures and enforcement of the rule of law - as a minimum standard
- Open the borders, instead of treating refugees as political pawns
- Allow people to move on to their destination:
Freedom of movement for all who do not have the freedom to stay home!

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For more information on our activities read
borderline-Lesvos annual report 2019:
<https://borderlinelesvos.org/annual-report-2019/>

