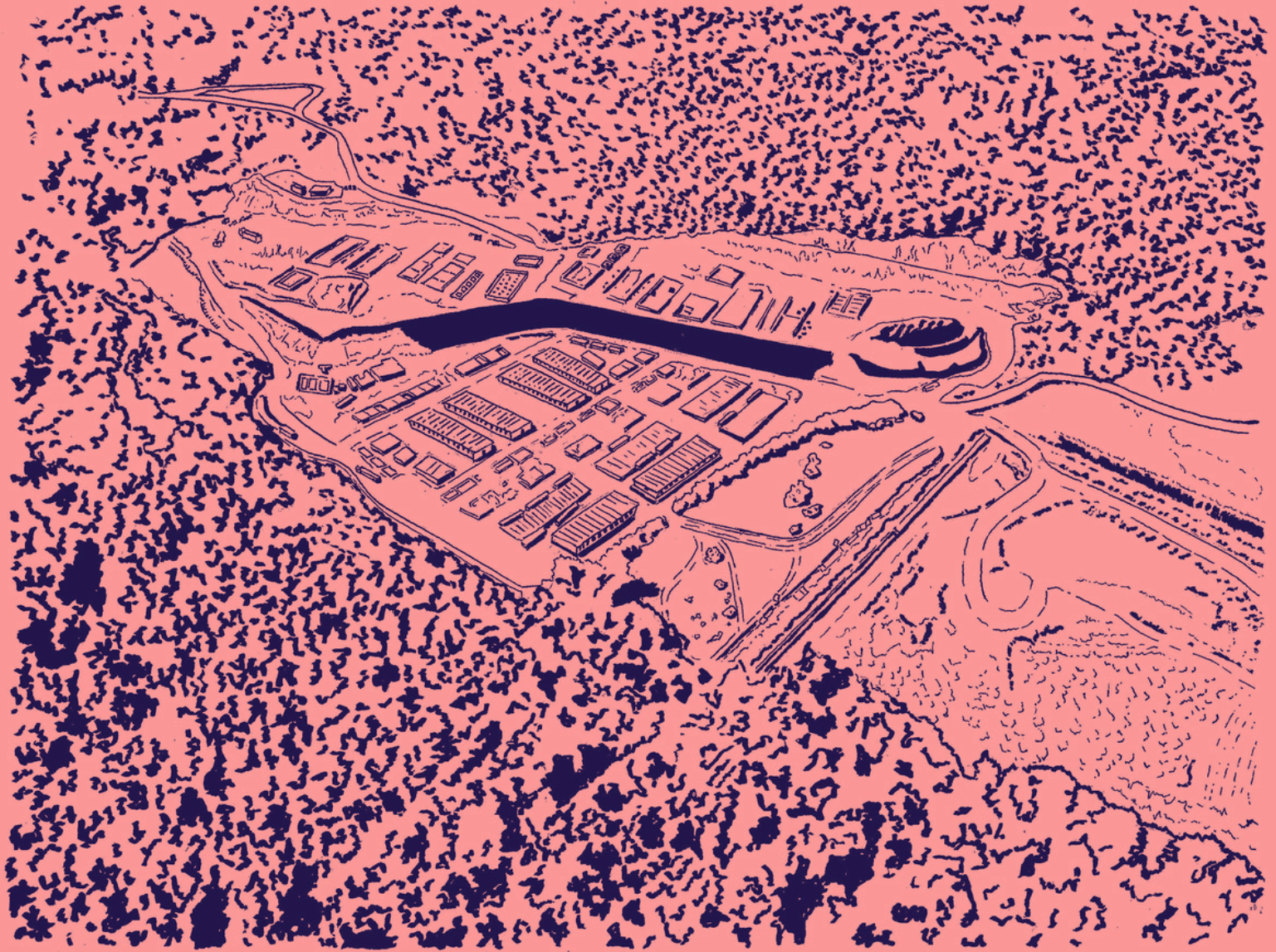


AGAINST VASTRIA



CAMPS, RACISM, FASCISM



Against Vastria: Camps, Racism, Fascism

“I am so sorry refugees. This is not Europe”. These words were sprayed on the walls of Moria camp in its last days. That this message was most likely written by those who had come from abroad to “help” shows how deeply it was misunderstood. There is nothing more European than the Camp.

European state building was financed by the colonial project. The means by which its wealth was acquired, ripped from the rest of the world, contradicted the new values of new states. Racism developed in order to justify the dissonance between the word and the act. The colonised world felt the dissonance sharply and anti-colonial rebellion was widespread. A development of the reservations, expulsions and prison islands that accompanied settler colonialism, the first formal concentration camps emerged to put down anti-colonial insurgencies that threatened the entire colonial project. First in Cuba, then in Namibia, Eritrea, and Kenya, the camp became a tool of colonial governance. It told people who was in charge, reminding them that their existence depended on their compliance, while contributing to the overall project through the labour of those interned.

Declarations, partitions and treaties made new promised lands and damned peoples. Many migrants' journeys today started with Sykes, Picot and Balfour. As the colonial world fell in the 1950s and '60s, the reverberations of national liberation struggles were felt in the “mother countries”. The militant anti-racist struggles of migrant communities settled in Europe demanded concessions from northern European states: in terms

of policing, housing, education, employment, and so on. These states adopted a watered-down multiculturalism, whose politics went no further than embracing a spirit of “tolerance”. This was co-opted, now forming one of the “European values” used to distinguish “us” from our new enemies, a generation of migrating people from less “enlightened” cultures. Europe’s skewed perspective of its own history makes a truncheon of the political gains of previous generations of migrants, which European states now use to batter the next.

Europe is defined today as a negative: we are simply not like them. Five years ago the European Commission rebranded its Migration wing as the Commission for “Protecting our European Way of Life”. An idea – that our tolerance for others has been abused – was born at the far-right fringes of society and found affinity in the mainstream. Fascism is rising again in Europe. Five years ago Giorgia Meloni screamed that we should “sink” the Mediterranean’s Search-and-Rescue boats. Now as Prime Minister of Italy she meets with the UK’s Labour government to share strategies on stopping the boats where they start, which is only achievable by financing Libyan and Tunisian militias. Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland, having taken Thuringia in the state elections, proposes a ban on migrants attending public events while the SPD attempts to undercut it by closing its borders and deporting to Afghanistan.

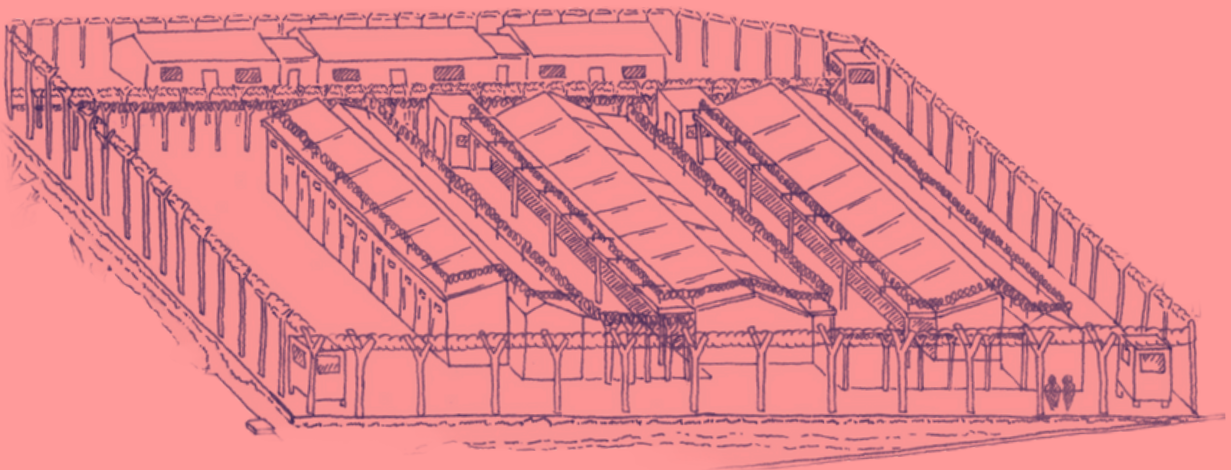
“Traditional” Parties are now steered ideologically by members furthest on the Right, whose intellectual heritage is fixated on issues of race. They share with the extreme Right a manic paranoia about the effects of migration and Islam on culture and

territory. On the basis of their shared speech and values, it is no longer possible to distinguish between them. Europe's anti-migrant Right has rehabilitated disgraced positions on race and culture, making them first seem radical solutions, and then a new common sense. As these ideas win votes, the traditional centre tries to keep pace by outdoing the fringes. Fascism, however, can say what it likes, while the centre must at least pretend to follow legal and democratic means.

Centrist parties around Europe routinely attempt undoable migration policies until some safeguard stands in their way. The safeguard itself, a High Court, for example, is declared an enemy of the state and therefore the people (hence human rights lawyers are targeted for prosecution, while their offices are put on firebomb hit-lists during riots). When the state fails, it looks incompetent, leaving voters looking at promises made further Right. The Left, too, shares nationalist perspectives on citizenship and looks for "progressive patriotisms" that cloak the same proposals in less brutal language. In fact we see signs of a revolving door between fascism and Europe's institutional centre. How seamlessly was Fabrice Leggeri able to move from Director of FRONTEX to Le Pen's National Rally? And what does that say about the border security apparatus itself, accepted universally by European states?

It is often said that the modern migrant camp is intended as a deterrent. This is half the picture. It is also a signal to Europe's voters: we know they don't belong here and this is the society that we will build, life segregated. The medium and the message. Those who have crossed the border have rejected its attempt to reduce their life's function to the needs of

capital. The camp restores that balance, warehousing a surplus population, sentencing them to social death until, ideally, they can be sent back. Through the camp we serve the market, outsourcing, subcontracting, tendering to mafia economies. The camp expends energy in order to waste the energies of the people it contains. It shares that tautology with the market. Its logic turns state duties into services to be contracted, sub-contracted and gutted out in the process. The right to asylum has become a deliverable, allowing states to delegate duties: the EU to Turkey, the UK to Rwanda, Italy to Albania, even internally, Athens to Lesbos.



The Common European Asylum System, now ratified by European Parliament, mandates that asylum screenings should happen at Europe's external borders. Vastria is one of a proposed five Closed Controlled Access Centres in the Aegean islands, and will be Europe's biggest. The EU, through its Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, has already put 276 million Euros into building them. They will be filled with technological equipment to the tune of another 819 million Euros until 2027. One such centre already operating in Samos shows that these new camps act as tightly-surveilled prisons: razor wire, fingerprint scanners, facial recognition software, drones fitted

with AI capabilities that can predict a riot before it happens. All this money feeds a network of arms, surveillance, and private security companies who profit first from wars and then from detaining the displaced. Vastria's rent is an EU-financed 70,000 Euros per month, a gulag tenancy that the private landlords will have to make their private peace with. The choice of site – next to a trash heap like human waste – shows the disregard for life that characterises the whole industry, while the surrounding pine forest condemns the population almost certainly to death with the next fire. This is what it looks like when the interests of the far Right align with the centre.

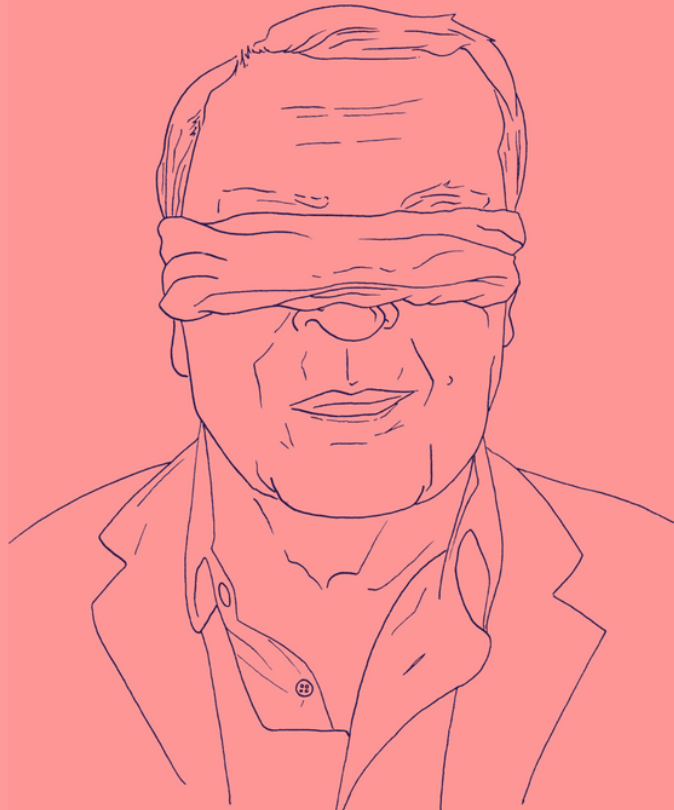
This geography of isolation is imprinted on the people who live there. A society comes to see them as people who should live there, and those who live in such a place deserve such a standard of treatment. This perception leads some among the local population to degrade themselves and others in ways that undermine the commitments fundamental to their professional calling. A “rescuer” tossing a man into the sea like the day's unwanted catch; a paramedic screaming at a frantic mother that her dying child would bleed no slower in Afghanistan; a dispatcher who refuses to send ambulances to the camp. What motivates people working in vocations of care to debase the values to which they dedicate their lives? Does it feel like hatred to them? Or does it feel like the restoration of order? And if the balance sheet calls for the loss of this or that life, whose fault is it? People are paid salaries to tell lies about those arriving, salaries that would pay for a family's crossing, or buy a Golden Visa. Judges believe those lies more than the evidence in front of them. Those lies are the uphill

battle against which a person must fight an army of Asylum Officers, armed with “country profiles” based on centuries of ill will.

Those lies are why they are in the camp; the camp in turn reinforces the lies. The camp’s dehumanising logic traps people in place. During the Moria years it found another expression in the relentless humanitarian use of images of suffering. The images produced a class of people to be pitied. They showed the cost of the camp’s failings, but could only provoke the thought that it should be managed better. Cut and paste photographers took cut and paste images, sticking to the predetermined brief of editors in agencies which supported the policy of putting people into camps in the first place. It provoked the viewer to see something universal and therefore permanent, people with one past and one future, images of those whose *fate* is to live in a camp.

We saw one response to such imagery in the thousands of people who came to offer their service, to say “I am so sorry refugees”. But the moment that industry and funds replace simple acts of solidarity, when it becomes institutionalised, the relation between the “server” and the “served” becomes infantilising. Racialised people are euphamised as “beneficiaries”, a term which removes our ability to imagine things differently ordered, since a beneficiary belongs in a relationship of mercy. A different response is to prop up the whole structure, but to make it more efficient. Here we see the tinkers and the technocrats who play the game on its terms: how to solve the puzzle of where to put the people. They reduce a political impulse to a logistical problem, limiting what it is possible to do according

to Best Practice Guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures. They will be Vastria's Hiring Managers.



We have called this meeting because it is crucial that we come together now to discuss how we deal with Vastria, either to prevent it opening or to deal with it when it does. But we must draw a red line. Four years ago, Athens wanted to construct another new camp, and sent its riot police to secure land outside Mantamados. Nobody wanted it, but the police tried to push it through, behaving like an occupier. We stood in the port waiting for the riot police to dock, those who didn't want a new camp because we didn't want yet another ghetto in our society, alongside our political enemies, those who didn't want a new camp because they didn't want the people in it. The same forces also oppose Vastria.

For days this uneasy alliance fought side by side against the new camp. Some opposition took the form of marches and demonstrations. Some,

however, were in the midst of a revolt. Priests turned bulldozers into pulpits, directing their congregation to skirmish against the police in the forests of Karavas. They lent to the struggle the tone of a crusade. Mayor Kytelis of Mytilene, Mayor Verros of West Lesvos, and Kostas Moutzouris, Regional Governor of the North Aegean, implemented the road-blocking techniques which were used elsewhere in collaboration with far-right vigilantes – in the face patrols at Moria village looking for migrant sympathisers, at the DEI plant in Mytilene looking for passing NGO workers, at the Panagiouda junction to block transfers of newly-arrived people to the camp, and finally on 9 September at Larsos, to prevent reconstruction after the previous day's half-job of burning Moria camp itself. For a few days, Lesvos became a symbol of the battle for Europe: the European Commission declared Greece Europe's shield while the continent's neo-Nazis made pilgrimage here. Pushbacks became a shadow policy and Moutzouris came out at the forefront of a reactionary movement.

Officially he kept enough distance from the most violent excesses of that movement. At the same time those violent elements could boast of how lucky they were to have someone like him. Moutzouris believes in the far-right fantasy of a “population replacement plan”, whose architects want to “impose another way of life, another religion” on Greece. That's why he opposes Vastria, because he sees migrants, especially those from Muslim countries, as a fifth column in Europe. In this respect he appeals to a wide local constituency in Municipal politics and in commercial sectors who have for years been involved in racist campaigns, including attacks on

initiatives that tried to find alternative ways of hosting the new populations.

On paper Moutzouris denies the use of illegal or immoral means, but he does so with a nudge and a wink that lets us peek behind the curtain. A society so clearly stratified by race keeps its order through acts of collusion – between the police officer and the vigilante, between the Minister and the Coast Guard Captain, between the Prosecutor and the Judge – either through “active collaboration” or through “failures to act, through faked ignorance, turning a blind eye to what is morally, legally and officially unacceptable”. When Moutzouris says that we should forget, rather than investigate, far-right violence, he shows us why Justice is so slow for some, so swift for others. When he tells journalists that, because their conversation is recorded, he will “say that there are no pushbacks”, he reveals that the policy rests on deniability.

In order to succeed States have to vandalise the law by breaking or changing it. Vastria is a symptom of this. Along with the other CCAC's, Vastria was schemed up to appease racist and fascist voters who, not so long ago, openly tried to send migrants back to Turkey themselves. Since then, however, pushbacks have demographically changed the island, and Vastria's promises have already been delivered. New Democracy built it hastily, disregarding its legal obligations leading to the stalemate at the courts that we see now. Instead they put facts on the ground – a camp that needs filling, funds to be accounted for, promises to be kept – in the hope that the next Judge will shrink before the weight of vested interests, whether those that bulldozed the land or those that wrapped it in barbed wire. Vastria

stands ready and empty, a dysfunctional statement of intent. The question is, who is this camp for?

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Vastria is the next phase of an ongoing de-humanisation. Over the years in Lesvos we have seen that camps always share some things in common. They are usually sold as emergency, short-term solutions, and under such circumstances their awful conditions seem more acceptable. But the “temporary” soon becomes “permanent. Pagani lasted from 2005-2009, Moria from 2013-2020, to be replaced by the temporary solution of Mavrovouni, still there now. The camps change character to adapt to the needs of their designers. Moria, for instance, went from emergency housing to prison to favela and back again under a never-ending quarantine. No matter how full it was the reality never changed: not enough food, or food you couldn't eat, lack of medical care, lives wasted in lines, and violence on multiple levels.

When incoming people are defined as invasive, is it any surprise that the local population believes they must protect themselves? Europe's narratives have fused together the concepts of crime and migration. This is built on the bedrock of concepts of Greek democracy and Christian civilisation. Extreme violence against people on the move is considered normal, even necessary. Under such a framework, cowardly attacks become acts of honour (take, for instance, the 2018 Sappho Square attack).

The surveillance equipment is clearly not there for protection but for policing. Police turn a blind eye to acts of violence, if they are not perpetrators

themselves. Whether or not they raise a fist or pull a trigger (and from time to time they do) the institutionalised racism embedded in the practices of the police and the Coast Guard justifies doling out specific forms of violence to specific targets. Identity checks on the basis of skin colour, pushbacks, arbitrary arrest, ruthless and deadly chases on land or at sea, torture and even murder, are a daily reality for Greece's racialised population. The 600 murdered by the Coast Guard off the coast of Pylos were in the best case thought of as an acceptable level of collateral damage, in the worst legitimate targets in the war against migration. Hence the Blue Star crew member who in September 2023 pushed Antonis Karyotis to his death in Piraeus port justified his actions by saying "I thought he was black, a Pakistani".

After years of dehumanising migrants it is the next logical step to deny even their right to life. Some seem to feel safe in a society in which migrants are found dead in police stations, their bodies washed up on our shores. The idea of an "invasion" has done its job, as it has done for centuries. Those who celebrate their political leaders for protecting them do not realise that they already pay the price. The millions that go into surveillance and policing are balanced by an inflation that suffocates us, where trains collide, workers are killed, people die in front of underfunded hospitals and roofs collapse on schoolkids' heads. It does not end with negligence: a state ready to commit such crimes against one target is ready to commit crimes against any it chooses. It may be easier to get away with against a population already pushed aside, but once certain red lines are crossed there are no boundaries left.

After the camp burned down, the villagers of Moria, until then united in getting rid of it, found themselves in a vacuum. The glue that had held them together was gone. Will this happen again if, one day, the walls do their ultimate job? Kavafis' poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" describes a society held together only by the threat of arrival of the Barbarians, an undefined group of strangers. What happens to a nationalist society that defines its identity only through its differences with others? To use Kavafis' words: "And now what will happen without the barbarians? Those people were a sort of a solution." Before Vastria opens, before we lock up one group of people now or another tomorrow, we will say that we do not believe in barbarians.



19 October 2024, Lesvos

