

The detention camps on the Greek islands of Kos and Leros

Episode 4/7. The role of the associations with the exiles

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- **Speaker 1** (in french) : All I can say about this whole system is : the fault lies with Europe. Because all European countries are well aware of what is going on here. Because where do you think the money is coming from ? The European Union is.

- **Voice-over 1** (in french) : “Detention camps on the islands of Kos and Leros in Greece” a podcast from the Migreurop network and Gisti, edited by the radio studio la Parole errante.

You can listen the episodes with subtitles on the migreurop.org and gisti.org websites. After two visits to the hotspots of Lesbos and Chios in 2016, then to Samos in 2019, the Migreurop network and Gisti went to the islands of Kos and Leros in 2021.

This podcast gives voice to exiles stranded in these islands, and to those who work or stand alongside them, in order to highlight and denounce the hotspot system.

In this 4th episode, we will talk about the role of organisations and groups on the island. The people we met describe the ways in which they try to offer daily support and fight for the rights of exiles who live in and around the camps.

- **Speaker 2** : I wasn't thinking, « oh poor people ». It's something that I had to do because all of us have to do the same. If I were in this position, maybe later, I would like for someone to help me. It's not like charity.

I remember once talking with a syrian guy, he said « thank you » and I said « it's ok, maybe one day I will be in your position » He said « I wish you not to be in my position, ever ».

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : In spite of all their good will, organisations are limited in what they can do. Controlled by the Greek authorities and banned from entering into some camps, making it very difficult to offer assistance to exiled people.

We met Kos Solidarity, an activist collective created in October 2015. It is a citizen movement that was born during the crisis in refugee reception. They refuse to work within the camps because they do not want to support them.

They chose the form of a “non-profit syndicate”, so as not to be identified as an NGO because NGOs have a bad reputation in Greece.

They want their actions and positioning to be free from constraints. Distribution of food, housing, clothing, Greek lessons and cultural activities... They tell us how they get by in a local climate where the population has gone from helpful to hostile.

- **Speaker 3** : This is official. We don't accept hotspots. We don't accept it. Not open, not close. Not at all. We want people to be outside. It's our statement. We have a lot of empty hotels, in Greece

we have a lot of empty villages, In Europe I think it's the same. I'm sure for Italy, for France. I know because I have been Empty villages, in Europe, there is a lot of space.

- **Interviewer** : As you say you refuse to go inside. This is your position as an association. But the camp, at some point, came back to you.

- **Speaker 4** : Yes Kos solidarity did a lot of things unofficial, nobody knows about that. Even when we had a lot of supplies, we gave some to the prison, the real one. We sent to the orphans, in many places. So even the locals, nobody knows what we do.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : In 2015, Kos Solidarity opened a building to house some of the refugees that were then arriving by thousands on the Kos Island. A few streets away, Médecin Sans Frontières and the United Nations intervene in the jungle, an improvised camp in the city center. The unofficial camp lasted as long as the official camp, in the middle of the island, was being built dozens of kilometers away. Today, this place became a parc again, with its antique vestiges. Even if they are heavily critical of NGOs, the activists of Kos Solidarity recognize that some of them have contributed to improving the situation of exiles.

- **Speaker 4** : When we went to « captain Ilias » (the occupied hotel), MSF was there already. I respect MSF, they were the only ones that were here at the very beginning, And the United Nations were there to help with the papers and tickets and other stuff. But MSF did a lot.

- **Speaker 3** : MSF is for physical problems, but they cleaned a very big place, we called it the Jungle, in the center (Vodafone). So they cleaned it, they made it « straight », they put they put huge tents for 50 people each, they put bins for the garbage. How could we have done this ?

- **Speaker 4** : They also have technicians, architects and others. In the abandoned hotel, they built up toilets and showers for people. They had people who were cleaning the place. I think they put solar panels, they tried to have some electricity to charge the phones.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : The association Glocalroots also intervenes on the island of Kos. The room is small, but very welcoming. It is filled with hygiene products and cans, with labels written in Arabic. It is located in a neighborhood where many Turkish immigrants have settled. Relations with the neighborhood are good, and the refugees can come and pick up packages during the opening hours of the store.

Irine, from Glocalroots, testifies about the conditions in which NGOs intervene with exiles and how they adapt to the urgency of the needs.

- **Irine** : I would say in Kos, it's very different. First of all there's not so many people but I find there is a huge lack of support, in terms of organisations. I feel it's really nothing. Honestly I have no idea, I feel like there used to be some organisations here and they left, and I don't know why. Maybe because it's not in the media or maybe people don't understand the need... Yeah I'm not sure it's not clear for me why.

When we came initially, the idea was to set up a safe space for women and their babies. However after a couple of months everything changed. The situation is quite volatile. People were actually kicked out of the camp, having to find their way in town, so we realized that we had to adapt our program. And so we decided to close our space and come here to support « self-accomodated » people who are in transition after leaving the camp but who are not leaving the island. So we're providing hygiene items, dry food packs, and some logistical and administrative support.

- **Interviewer** : For how many people ?

- **Irine** : It varies, because the population is changing but it's about 250 people.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : The question then arises of exiles' access to organisations: How do they find and access the premises ? How do they know that an organisation can help them?

- **Irine** : At first actually it was very challenging to find people. So we started doing outreach, and anyone that we know we just started asking : « where are you living ? What's going on ? » We tried to find people and we just went out and so eventually we started to find out where people were staying. Actually at first we were doing all delivery because we didn't have this place, so we would bring items directly to people, so then slowly slowly it started to grow, it went word of mouth. Now we have people contacting us and saying « I know this person, they're living in the camp, they need help with this, etc. ». So we do have an info line, a phone number that's available for people to call, on whatsapp.

- **Interviewer** : So people can call you ?

- **Irine** : And a lot of people know where we are, and of course they can come by. We also take referrals, for example from the UN, or Equal Rights, for specific needs. We're helping also, as I was saying before, for logistics. For example, we help to book covid vaccine appointments, or a hospital appointment, or take them somewhere they need, or help to find a translator. All these small things that are not necessarily easy to fill, we try to support in this.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : Between poor information and the silence from the authorities, access to organisations is difficult or even impossible. This is what Mohamed, a palestinian refugee volunteering for the organisation Flyinghelp, tells us. This organisation gathers, and then distributes clothes to the exiles. We meet Mohammed in the association's premises, a shed filled with clothes, extremely well organised. Before he was granted refugee status, Mohammed was in detention and tried in vain to get in touch with lawyers or organisations.

- **Interviewer** : And what about the information you have received, during the months you spent in detention? UN ? Police, lawyers etc. ?

- **Mohamed** : I tried to contact them when I was inside, to help the people inside. But they were lying to me. I had their number, I tried to contact them and they would tell me « we are coming tomorrow or the day after tomorrow ». I told them we need to talk with someone about the food, about many things. But they didn't come. They promised me many times, but they didn't come. And they write their numbers when you go inside, I think it was from the UN, and I tried to contact them many times. Sometimes they answered, sometimes they didn't. When they answered, they promised they would come and then they didn't..

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : When Mohammed talks about the UN, Mohamed is talking about the UNHCR, the High Commission for Refugees. His words are confirmed by a Kurdish asylum seeker living in Leros.

- **Interviewer** : Normally to inform people, it's the UN. UN must inform people about their rights !

- **Speaker 5** : The UN they don't come to our camp. They don't have any power to do anything. We asked about the UN and people told us the UN is nothing here. They can't do anything.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : People who work in the camps speak about their difficult relationships with the local authorities, which control the work of organisations. Wayne, who has worked in several camps, confirms this.

- **Interviewer** : Have you seen journalists come by here recently, or other activists ?

- **Wayne** (in french) : Here in Kos nothing is possible. It's not the same as Lesbos. Here, they have complete control over individuals. In Lesbos, volunteers have access to the refugees. But now you are here, who are you going to see? Since you have been here, have you seen anyone go past ? Nobody. You don't even feel like there are refugees here. When you go to 'Pili', you will see. How can you get to them ? How do you get back into the camps ? The police question you at the gate. If you don't work there, you don't have access to the interior.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : Interactions with local authorities vary. Kos solidarity explains to us how, today, helping refugees who arrive is forbidden and subject to repression. Whereas several years ago, if the police found refugees on the island they would call Kos solidarity.

- **Speaker 4** : For a long time, the government was absent. So Kos solidarity and other NGOs were filling the gaps. And the government said ok. We were in a non-official collaboration sometimes.

- **Interviewer** : It was Syriza at that time ?

- **Speaker 4** : Yes. It was something new. Maybe at the beginning we were not organised, but with time we became experts. I remember once, at the abandoned hotel, we had to feed there 1000 people. And we were 5 to feed them all. But we had a system, with cards of different colors, so we gave the cards, and people had to get in a queue by the color of their card. And from time to time we called « now the green card », « now the yellow card » ... And I remember once we had an argument with the Government, who asked us to stop giving food there.

- **Speaker 3** : August 3rd, 2015

- **Speaker 4** : I don't remember the date. There was an army car full of food, portions, made by the army, the red cross, and some policemen there. And they tried for two days, and they couldn't make it, and they left, and they asked us to continue what we were doing.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : Most organisations and collectives we met have little or no interaction with the Greek authorities or the camp management, and hence no access to people who are locked up. Irene from the organisation GlocalRoots in Kos explains to us.

- **Irene** : We don't have a relationship with the camp manager, or really anyone in the camp. It's very difficult, we to get a meeting several times with the camp manager And we were unsuccessful, unfortunately.

- **Interviewer** : In which way, you didn't receive any answer, or the person answered like « I don't have time », or ... ?

- **Irene** : No we spoke with him directly at one point, and he seemed positive about our project. And he kept saying he would call again, but we didn't hear anything from him. And at this time we were changing our project anyway, so we are operating completely independently now.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : The Kos solidarity activists have seen relations between locals and refugees evolve and change throughout the crisis. From this point of view, the setting up of the camp in the park in downtown Kos was a significant event.

- **Speaker 4** : The Jungle is close to the police station. They asked the mayor to build some toilets, and also to open some public toilets for the refugees, and also if they could have some people to clean up the whole thing. And the mayor refused. So people were going at the park where everyone could go. So there was a mess, and there were smells. It helped the racism. So people started saying that they were making a mess, that they were dirty. After that the Red Cross put some chemical toilets.

- **Interviewer** : And so you would say in 2018 the vibes started to change ?

- **Speaker 3** : Yes I saw the change with local people. For my job, I work with local people, I speak with them. They said « when we go to the bus station, and we see only black people, how can I send my child to take this bus ? With black people, weird people ? I mean foreigners ». Because I remember the island was really crowded, so they made the hotspots to save the people and the local people, but then it became more and more people... They were afraid of problems with the tourists.

- **Speaker 4** : But on the other hand there were people that made money because of the refugees.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : Before coming to the island of Kos, Irine from the association GLOCALROOTS, worked on the island of Lesbos. She shares her experience with us.

- **Irine** : I arrived in Lesbos in the end of June in 2019. I don't remember exactly the population, I would say maybe 8000, and over the course I think it went up to 20 000 people. To see this happen was really crazy. Some people of the local population are very supportive, and some of course not. But I can imagine, it's not easy for anyone. It was an absolute disaster, there were fights, and fires everyday. At some point it's just too many people.

For Samos, I was only there for one month, it was during the winter, and yes it was also challenging because as far as I know everyone is in tents. The landscape, this is something I can compare. In Samos the tents are going up a very very steep hill, so every time it rains there is mud, there is water, people are sliding. In Lesbos also there is flooding. But in Samos I noticed it was much much worse. There are still less organisations in Samos supporting. It was different. And you could feel it also because the camp was located so close to the town, and you can notice a difference this way. But in some ways it was also nice because everything was also more accessible.

For Kos, I was there with another organisation, there were maybe around 4000 people in the camp. The parking lot was full of tents. At some point the population went down and everyone ended up inside. In some way this is better, but again it's private so... Kos, it's different. It's such a touristic island, you do get the feeling that they just want to sweep the problem under the rock. The camp is in Pili, it's in the middle of the island, it's in the middle of nowhere. So the effort kind of goes into hiding the problem because the island depends on tourism.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : On the island of Leros, we met Catharina and Niko from the NGO ECHO 100PLUS. In 2015, when the crisis broke out, ECHO100PLUS embarked on their project. However, they did not want to apply to work in the Leros camp. They explain how the island was divided with regard to the welcome of exiles.

- **Catharina** : I think « supportive » is too much of a word. I would say, in general, people on these islands have understanding. They had an understanding for migration. I mean these islands are full of people whose families came from Minor Asia in the 1920's, so they have a grandmother who was a refugee, I mean, Greeks are migrants. Greeks are migrants. Everybody has an uncle in America, in Australia... They are used to it. And in general they were kind of welcoming. In the beginning of course, everybody helped there. It was many really a small minority that was actively against refugees. We had of course incidents of locals going against refugees, but I would say it was a minority. But now it's been taking a very long time, and people have had enough. They have had enough also of the idea that they have a kind of prison on the island and that people suffer there. It's terrible.

- **Voice-over 2** (in french) : Even before arriving on the islands, exiles are faced with pushbacks to the Turkish coast. This illegal practice orchestrated by the Greek coastguards with the complicity of Frontex, the European border and coastguard agency.

In episode 5, we will hear the testimonies of people who are victims of these repeated pushbacks.

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