

ARTICLE

The 'Crises' of Lesbos

Dina Siegel*

Since 2015 hundreds of thousands of migrants have arrived on the Greek island of Lesbos, many fleeing war and poverty, others hoping to find work in Europe and give their children a better future. The arrival of migrants on Lesbos was accompanied by an influx of 'humanitarian pilgrims': hordes of journalists, celebrities, academic researchers and volunteers for diverse NGOs. Because the migrants arrived in such large numbers in 2015, they became part of the daily reality of both the local residents and officials at different levels of authority, from local municipalities to EU representatives. The migrants' arrival on the island was presented in the media both as a historic event and an urgent public problem. The term 'refugee crisis' was born. Although its importance and urgency was widely recognized by policymakers, the inability of European and local institutions to manage the influx of migrants in this time of crisis soon became obvious. This 'unmanageable' situation, which demanded quick and creative solutions, involved responding to the suffering of the migrants who needed 'to be managed', and appealing to the local people's solidarity and hospitality. The announcement that hundreds of thousands of refugees were arriving on the shores of Greece came at a time when the country was facing severe political and economic problems. The question is when is something 'announced' as a crisis and by whom, and which parties define and create a specific public problem and also suggest solutions and remedies. Based on an empirical case study in Greece, this contribution reflects on the concept of 'Crisis' from an interdisciplinary perspective, including a historical, philosophical and sociological understanding of its use in the refugee context.

Keywords: crisis; Lesbos; migration; history; ethnography

1. Introduction

Since 2015 hundreds of thousands of migrants have arrived on the Greek island of Lesbos, many fleeing war and poverty, others hoping to find work in Europe and give their children a better future. The arrival of migrants on Lesbos was accompanied by an influx of 'humanitarian pilgrims': hordes of journalists, celebrities, academic researchers and volunteers for diverse NGOs. Because the migrants arrived in such large numbers in 2015, they became part of the daily reality of both the local residents and officials at different levels of authority, from local municipalities to EU representatives. The migrants' arrival on the island was presented in the media both as a historic event and an urgent public problem. The term 'refugee crisis' was born. Although its importance and urgency was widely recognized by policymakers, the inability of European and local institutions to manage the influx of migrants in this time of crisis soon became obvious. This 'unmanageable' situation, which demanded quick and creative solutions, involved responding to the suffering of the migrants who needed 'to be managed', and appealing to the local people's solidarity and hospitality. The announcement that hundreds of thousands of refugees were arriving on the shores of Greece came at a time when the country was facing severe political and economic problems.

The question is when is something 'announced' as a crisis and by whom, and which parties define and create a specific public problem and also suggest solutions and remedies. What does this term mean in regard to migration? We have tried to answer this question elsewhere by asking scholars from different disciplines to explore the terminology focusing on the period between 2015 and 2017, the time of the 'migration crisis' in Europe.¹ We were wondering what kind of crisis this was: a crisis of legitimacy, of migration policy, of solidarity,

* Professor of Criminology at the Willem Pompe Institute for Criminal Justice, Utrecht University, NL; email: dina.s@uu.nl

¹ Dina Siegel and Veronika Nagy, *Was there a refugee crisis in 2015? – Critical voices on the recent migration discourse* (Eleven, 2018).

humanity, economy or democracy? Was it a 'refugee crisis' or a 'migration crisis', accompanied by an 'economic crisis', 'financial crisis', or a 'crisis of globalization'? In 2020, another crisis was added: the 'pandemic crisis'.

These days statements like 'we are living in the process of an on-going crisis' or 'the world is full of crises' seem to be taken for granted in the media, public debate and even academic studies. The concept of 'crisis' is interchangeably used with 'unrest', 'conflict', 'instability' or 'disaster'. Any hostile or unfavourable event is blamed on a 'crisis'. Although the concept seems to have found a permanent place in our lexicon, there is no precision as to its meaning nor clarity with regard to its use. When dealing with a term that is difficult to define, it seems as if we recognize a 'crisis' when we see it (especially in the media), but are unable to say what it actually is.

But then, at the end of the summer of 2017, reports began to appear in the media about the 'end of the refugee crisis'. After the EU cut funding, the NGOs began to leave the island one by one, even though new migrants were still arriving regularly and the Moria and Kara Tepe camps were becoming ever more overcrowded.² The 'end of the refugee crisis' on Lesbos was announced unexpectedly, in much the same way as it had been proclaimed at the beginning in 2015. But was the migrant crisis really over in 2017? Had it really been 'successfully managed'?

In this article I have focused on 'crisis' in order to make sense of the migrant situation on Lesbos since 2015, using a case study based on ethnographic and online research. In 2017, I spent several months on the island to conduct fieldwork and study the social relationships between the different actors in this 'crisis'.³ I tried to study this complex crisis situation empirically, capturing and explaining specific relationships at a given moment, and focusing on events that demonstrate the intensity and culmination of particular developments. Following Max Gluckman, Emanuel Marx and other cultural anthropologists, I focused on the micro, including individual agency, which allowed me to make sense of the macro, explaining the general context of the situation. Ethnographic research allowed me to observe from up close how my respondents (migrants, Greek government officials, police officers and the Hellenic Coast Guard, Frontex officers, NGO volunteers, local businessmen, doctors and lawyers) experienced and interpreted what the media represented as the 'refugee crisis' on Lesbos in their everyday lives.

Since then, I continued to maintain regular contact with several of my respondents on Lesbos, mainly online or by telephone. This has enabled me to gather first-hand information on developments on the island, even after Covid-19 pandemic restrictions made me dependent on online, visual and virtual ethnography.

2. The Concept of 'Crisis' and Its Many Meanings

The ancient Greek word κρίσις has a range of meanings. The Greek historian Thucydides interpreted it as 'judgement', 'decision', or 'result of a trial', while according to Plato it meant 'contention' or 'quarrel'.⁴ Aristotle used it in the sense of a legal decision, which defined the ordering of the community, whereby political decisions were made based on the legal meaning.⁵ For the Greeks, 'crisis' was the main legal concept for the justification of the political order.

Parallel to its legal-political meaning, the concept of crisis was mainly used in medicine in ancient times. It originated in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, in reference to the patient's condition at a turning point in the course of an illness.⁶ The metaphorical meaning of a physical (organic) crisis was later adopted by the social sciences, the humanities and other disciplines. Rousseau linked the term to 'revolution'.⁷ He was followed by Denis Diderot, Thomas Paine, Edmond Burke, August Comte and many other European thinkers. The work of Jacob Burckhardt was largely dedicated to the study of world crises in history. It provided a typology distinguishing between religious, political and economic crises, including 'failed crises' and 'illusory crises'.⁸ Burckhardt also explicitly referred to migration in European history as a crisis, which led to a mixture of folks and finally to the emergence of the Christian Church. He praised 'crisis' as an accelerator of history for its ability to bring about change and 'regenerate life', when the old order is abolished and a new one created.⁹ 'Developments which otherwise take centuries seem to flit by like phantoms in months or weeks, and are

² Dina Siegel, *Dynamics of Solidarity. Consequences of the 'refugee crisis' on Lesbos* (Eleven, 2019).

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman and Carlo Bordini, *State of crisis* (John Wiley & Sons 2014).

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics* (H. Rackham tr, Harvard University Press 1932).

⁶ Tangjia Wang, 'A Philosophical Analysis of the Concept of Crisis' (2014) 9(2) *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 254.

⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvre Complete* (Gallimard 1964).

⁸ Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History* (2nd edn, Liberty Fund 1979).

⁹ James Martin, 'The Theory of Storms: Jacob Burckhardt and the Concept of "Historical Crisis"' (2010) 40(2). *Journal of European Studies* 307.

fulfilled'.¹⁰ In the field of history, 'crisis' became a permanent concept. It was mainly used to indicate a critical situation or a transitional stage in history.¹¹ The concept also occupied a central place in the non-Western world. In Chinese literature the word *weiji* (crisis) means 'the turning point of danger',¹² a link between the past and the present, which includes both 'danger' and 'opportunity'.

Perhaps even more extendedly the concept was – and still is – used in economics with terms such as 'trade crisis', 'production crisis', 'commercial crisis', 'monetary crisis', 'financial crisis' or, more generally, 'global economic crisis'. Karl Marx used the term to show the limitations of capitalism and emphasized the necessity of crisis as the inevitable transition from capitalism to socialism.¹³

As so many meanings are attached to the concept, 'crisis' remains a vague 'catchword', which brings more confusion than clarity and is even misleading when the meaning of a transitional phase clashes with the meaning of a permanent condition of the world. The literature usually distinguishes different stages of crisis: 'pre-crisis', '(in) the middle of crisis' and 'post-crisis'. When these stages of crisis rapidly replace each other over a relatively long period of time, the question is whether such a distinction makes sense. It can be claimed that there is an 'official end of a crisis', as happened in 2017 within the context of migration, when the number of arrivals on the coast of Greece started to drop and the media abandoned the Aegean islands. However, the actual 'crisis' did not end or disappear. Just because a problem is now receiving less attention does not mean that it has gone away. Bauman and Bordoni emphasized a particular feature of the situation of crisis,¹⁴ namely its duration. We often associate a crisis with a moment or a relatively short period of transition, when therapy or some other solution is required to 'end the crisis'. However, when one crisis seems to end (at least as announced in public), it is replaced by another, even before it is resolved. There is an illusion that a crisis is a temporary situation. In fact, we are living in a constant state of multi-dimensional crises.

The year 2020 has shown us that when there are ongoing waves of crises, one after another, crisis is no longer extraordinary: instead it becomes the normal state, liquid and changing continuously, a kaleidoscope, a *perpetuum mobile*. One crisis leads to another, they overlap each other, and small, individual crises become part of larger ones. As the anthropologist Max Gluckman explained: 'This conception of the situation as crisis demands an understanding that micro dynamics are always integral within macro forces'.¹⁵ It is in such a situation that forces that have long been engaged in social action become revealed. The crisis on the Turkish-Greek border,¹⁶ the economic crisis following the earthquake in June 2017, which hit several villages and blocked the main roads, the regular fires in and around the Moria camp on Lesbos, the medical deficiencies during the Covid-19 pandemic – all these 'micro crises' constitute part of a larger and longer situation of macro crises: economic, migration, public health. Nothing comes 'out of the blue'. 'There is no unchanging primordial condition or static beginning or prior point of fixity in relation to which change can be measured'.¹⁷

3. Multiple 'Crises' on Lesbos

3.1. Living in the Camps – an Existential Crisis

There had been extensive global reporting on the horrifying living conditions in the camps on Lesbos, in particular the infamous camp at Moria, long before the devastating fire in September 2020. People had been crowded into camps, their plight ignored, their needs, health and in some cases their very lives a matter of indifference, all in an attempt to convince anyone considering crossing the Mediterranean that they were not welcome in Europe. But none of this was enough to prevent other migrants from embarking on the perilous journey to Lesbos. Some migrants were aware that they would probably end up in a terrible situation; some could not believe that something like that could happen in a 'civilized European country', while others did not even know where exactly they were going to land.

¹⁰ Burckhardt (n 7) 224.

¹¹ Reinhart Koselleck and Michaela Richter, 'Crisis' (2006) 67(2) *Journal of the History of Ideas* 357.

¹² Wang (n 5) 258.

¹³ Karl Marx, *Letters to Capital*, (New Park, 1983).

¹⁴ Bauman and Bordoni (n 3).

¹⁵ Emanuel Marx, 'The Social World of Refugees: A Conceptual Framework' (1990) 3(3) *Journal of Refugee Studies* 189, Max Gluckman as cited in Bruce Kapferer, 'Situations, Crisis, and the Anthropology of the Concrete: The Contribution of Max Gluckman' (2005) 49(3) *Social Analysis* 85, 122.

¹⁶ On February 27, 2020, 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in an airstrike in Syria. In response, the Turkish government changed its policy of preventing migrants from leaving Turkey for Europe, with the aim of putting political pressure on the EU to support a ceasefire in Syria (Oztig, 2020: 79). The Greek government reacted by suspending asylum applications for a month and deploying its forces at the border, see Lacin Idil Oztig, 'The Turkish–Greek Border Crisis and COVID-19' (2020) 2(1) *Borders in Globalization Review* 78, 79.

¹⁷ Kapferer (n 13) 125.

In 2017, several of my respondents had become convinced that migrants who were treated badly in Europe would eventually become violent, not only towards the officials they spoke to on a daily basis, but also towards the local people, who were seen as representatives of a 'Europe that didn't want them.' Michalis, a local politician, told me:

If you come next year you will see that not 5,000 but 10,000 people will live in Moria, and they will fight not only for a shower, like today, but for a piece of bread, because nobody cares how they live there. Nothing will change. The NGOs are leaving, because they don't care, their money is finished: too much beer. But if these refugees, especially young people, continue like this, they will either commit suicide or kill each other.¹⁸

These predictions were not far off the mark. By September 2020, 13,000 migrants were packed together in a space designed to accommodate no more than 3,000 people.¹⁹ To cope with this overpopulation, the camp was enlarged to include nearby olive groves, some of which had been rented from local landowners by NGOs. Some areas in the camp remained without electricity or water facilities. Not only were conditions bad at Moria; other camps, such as Kara Tape and Pikpa, were also overpopulated. By December 2020, 21,480 migrants were living on Lesbos.²⁰

The harsh living conditions led to ongoing tensions between different groups of migrants, especially between migrants from Afghanistan and Africa, including verbal violence and physical altercations. During my fieldwork I noticed that Afghan, Iraqi, Nigerian, Congolese and other ethnic groups avoided each other and stuck to their own areas in the camps, thereby creating 'ethnic zones'. Moria was the scene of continuous quarrels and fights, mainly about everyday irritations, such as complaints about noise and the use of facilities, but also regarding religious and political issues. Although the refugees may have been presented as a homogenous group by the media, the camps' multicultural population, hostilities between Muslim and Christian groups, misunderstandings between the young and the old and tensions between the sexes were not conducive to the construction of a common identity as a 'refugee' or 'migrant'.²¹ The lack of communication, support and solidarity between different ethnic groups formed a major obstacle that made it difficult for them to organize, resist and fight together for their common needs and rights. It seems as if these tensions may have been one of the factors leading to the arson in September 2020.²²

These inhumane conditions and local tensions were regularly reported in the media. In February 2020, doctors warned: 'The suffering is palpable, the hopelessness is insidious, the feeling of abandonment is all-consuming... the situation in Moria is about to implode'²³ The local islanders feared that the situation would spiral out of control and that physical confrontations between different groups of migrants would spread beyond the camp. As one respondent, a local islander, predicted:

Now they are fighting each other in Moria, Arabs against Africans, Syrians against Nigerians, but they will soon also attack Greeks, because they are hungry and angry.²⁴

3.2. Crisis of solidarity

Since 2015, various initiatives to 'solve the problem' at the European level, from establishing 'hotspots' to the Turkey-EU Agreement, have all failed. Member states shirked their responsibility to receive their share of asylum seekers (either by means of a flat-out refusal or a grudging consent to accept very small numbers) and by allowing the inhumane conditions in the camps at 'hotspots' to continue in violation of the basic human rights, health and safety of the people forced to live there. It became clear that European solidarity

¹⁸ Personal communication with respondents on Lesbos, October 2020.

¹⁹ The Moria camp was the first reception centre in the EU, set up in 2015 as part of the European Agenda for Migration.

²⁰ General Secretariat for Information and Communication, 'National Situational Picture Regarding the Islands at Eastern Aegean Sea (12/1/2020)' (InfocrisisGr, 13 January 2020) <<https://infocrisis.gov.gr/7484/national-situational-picture-regarding-the-islands-at-eastern-aegean-sea-12-1-2020/?lang=en>> accessed 23 December 2021.

²¹ Dina Siegel, 'Countering 'Crisis': Identifying the Components of the Refugee Crisis in Greece' in Dina Siegel and Veronika Nagy, *Was there a refugee crisis in 2015? – Critical voices on the recent migration discourse* (Eleven, 2018) 265–293.

²² Patrick Kingsley, 'Fire Destroys Most of Europe's Largest Refugee Camp, on Greek Island of Lesbos' *New York Times* (New York, 9 September 2020) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/world/europe/fire-refugee-camp-lesbos-moria.html>> accessed 20 March 2020.

²³ Annie Chapman, 'A Doctor's Story: Inside the 'Living Hell' of Moria Refugee Camp' *The Guardian* (London, 9 February 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/09/moria-refugee-camp-doctors-story-lesbos-greece>> accessed 20 March 2020.

²⁴ Fieldwork data 2017 Lesbos.

is 'flexible' and not every member state considers it has a moral duty to welcome migrants and accept responsibility towards the European Union as a whole.

On 23 September 2020, a new attempt to deal with the crisis was announced, namely the draft of the New Pact on Asylum and Migration (NPAM). It was another urgent solution to the ongoing crisis, as only two weeks earlier, Moria, symbol of the 'refugee crisis' and the failure of the EU's migration policy, had burned to the ground.²⁵

The institutionalization of migration on Lesbos by placing migrants in camps created both physical and an emotional distance between the local islanders and the migrants and volunteers. By 2016, the mass arrival of migrants, which had caused excitement and brought new and unusual experiences to the locals in 2015, had become an 'intrusion and risk'. By late summer 2017, it was a marginal issue. The geographical concentration of migrants in just a few camps reduced residents' contact with and interest in them. Even though the end of the migrant influx was still not in sight and existing policies had proven to be inefficient and ineffective, the migrant crisis was over as far as many local people were concerned. As one respondent, a local resident, explained:

We live here, they live there, they have their cages; we do not need to be confronted with their misery every day. On this island we all live in 'bubbles': migrants, volunteers, tourists, Frontex, locals. At the beginning of the crisis we were all in one boat, now we have many boats.²⁶

This separation between 'us' and 'them' was, however, wishful thinking, divorced from reality, but for the local islanders it was necessary in order to normalize their lives. They were unable to continue being the heroes, rescuers and celebrities they had been in 2015.²⁷ The memories of their acts of solidarity in that period became romanticized and were even reminisced upon with nostalgia. For them, the migrant crisis was history.

The Covid-19 pandemic further contributed to the growing distance between migrants and local residents. Hostile sentiments had already been expressed on the island, but they increased throughout 2019 and 2020. Plans to transform the transit camp on Skala Sykamnias into a quarantine location were met with local resistance and the site was finally closed down following violent confrontations. A series of attacks on NGO workers by extreme right-wing groups caused many of them to discontinue their activities and leave the island.²⁸

3.3. The Covid-19 pandemic – a new crisis

The first Covid-19 case was registered in Greece on 26 February 2020.²⁹ In the weeks that followed, the inadequacies of Greece's public health system and the gaps between public and private institutions,³⁰ which had emerged after a long period of severe economic crisis, became all too obvious. The Greek government took a proactive response and implemented a series of measures, culminating in a general lockdown on 23 March, which was gradually lifted by the end of spring. In March, severe restrictions were imposed on the movement of asylum seekers living in the camps. Residents of Moria (one person per family) were only allowed to leave the camp to buy daily provisions in a nearby town between 7AM and 7PM.

On 2 September, a 40-year old Somali refugee was confirmed as Moria's first case of Covid-19. Consequently, the entire camp was sealed off and no one was allowed to leave or enter. Within a week there were 35 new infections. With the exception of a medical team to provide basic services, no NGOs were allowed into camp.

The Greek healthcare system had been generally eroded over the last twenty years, and its shortcomings soon became apparent during the outbreak of Covid-19.³¹ In this way the handling of the pandemic became a new crisis in itself. My respondents, doctors from Mytilene hospital, all agreed that there was a 'medical crisis' in Greece in general and on Lesbos in particular. The official Greek policy to deal with Covid-19 included

²⁵ Vasileia Digidiki and Jacqueline Bhabha, 'EU Migration Pact Fails to Address Human Rights Concerns in Lesbos, Greece' (2020) 22(2) *Health and Human Rights* 291.

²⁶ Personal communication with respondents on Lesbos, October 2020.

²⁷ Siegel (n 2).

²⁸ Personal communication with different NGO members, summer, 2020.

²⁹ Reuters, 'Greece Reports First Coronavirus Case in Moria Migrant Camp on Lesbos' (Reuters, 2 September 2020) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-greece-migrants-idUSKBN25T1CA>> accessed 20 March 2021.

³⁰ Ioanna Giannopoulou and George Tsobanoglou, 'COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Opportunities for the Greek Health Care System' (2020) 37(3) *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine* 1, 226-230.

³¹ Amnesty International, 'Resuscitation required: The Greek Health System after a decade of austerity' (*Amnesty International*, 28 April 2020) <<http://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur25/2176/2020/en/>> accessed 20 March 2021.

responsibilization and 'crisis control'. The first aspect emphasized the responsibility of everyone in Greece to keep social distance, wash their hands and stay at home. The responsabilization strategy had the effect of obscuring the duty of the government and its National Healthcare System to protect the population. The use of the term 'crisis' justified the harsh policing practices of control and punishment.³²

Greece's official anti-Covid-19 policy included the 'protection of migrants'. In late March 2020, Moria was placed in quarantine for 160 days. But imposing lockdown on Moria only heightened the risk to its residents, as 'self-isolation' was impossible in this overpopulated setting with its lack of clean water and generally poor sanitary conditions. If social isolation means a family or a small group of persons living in the same house, this kind of 'bubble' could not be created in the migrant camps. The entire camp at Moria, with a population of thousands, became a 'bubble'. According to one respondent, a migrant on Lesbos:

The official Greek slogan is 'We stay at home', but what if you don't have a home? What is my home? A tent without water, without electricity, without heating. Is it home, when I need to stand in a queue outside for two hours waiting for a shower? This is not 'home'. For me the slogan is 'You stay in the refugee camp', not at home.³³

At the beginning of April, a new policy was implemented whereby all newcomers were to be quarantined on remote beaches for two weeks before being transferred to a camp. Quarantine zones were set up in a special area in the camps at Kara Tepe and Megala Therma.

By then, many NGOs had left the island and no educational and psychological assistance had been possible for some time. This left the migrants feeling even more abandoned than ever. Some NGOs switched from providing their usual assistance to supplying basic sanitary goods. As one respondent, a lawyer from an NGO, told me:

Today we brought boxes with soap and disinfection gel to the camp. But I am a lawyer, I am here to provide legal assistance to these poor people, I am not here to fulfil the responsibility of the local municipality to bring them sanitary essentials.

Outside the camps, the image of migrants as 'sources of contagion' continued to prevail. Lockdown was not only intended to protect the migrants (an impossible aim), but also the local islanders. The first case of Covid-19 in a local resident, a Greek woman, was confirmed in March, long before the first case was discovered in Moria. As in other countries, however, the pandemic was exploited to blame migrants.³⁴ The ongoing tensions between locals and migrants and violent protests against the building of new migrant detention camps³⁵ intensified in spring 2020.³⁶

When news of the first cases in Moria broke in early September, after the end of lockdown, Covid-19 infected migrants did not want to go into quarantine in a separate area in the camp, which caused new tensions between the residents.

3.5. Moria on fire: a solution to a crisis?

The camp at Moria was overcrowded and for the people detained there the inhumane living conditions were exacerbated by the threat of Covid-19 and the ongoing tensions between different ethnic groups.³⁷ On 8 September 2020, a fire was started that destroyed most of the camp. A second fire was set the following night, reducing the rest of the camp to ashes. There were no casualties, but the camp's residents were left without a place to stay.

Fires occur regularly on Lesbos, either spontaneously or as the result of arson. Many fires in and around refugee camps are deliberate, but often they are due to careless handling of flammable materials, unsafe

³² Vasileois Gerasopoulos, 'The Lockdown and the Crackdown – Controlling the Responsibilized Body During a Pandemic' in Dina Siegel (ed), *Notes from Isolation. Global Criminological Perspectives on Coronavirus Pandemic* (Eleven 2021).

³³ Personal communication with respondents on Lesbos, October 2020.

³⁴ Daniel Trilling, 'Migrants aren't Spreading Coronavirus – but Nationalists are Blaming Them Anyway' *The Guardian* (London, 28 February 2020) <<https://amp.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/28/coronavirus-outbreak-migrants-blamed-italy-matteo-salvini-marine-le-pen>> accessed 20 March 2021.

³⁵ Associated Press in Lesbos, 'Police and Protesters Clash on Greek Islands over New Migrant Camps' *The Guardian* (London, 25 February 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/25/police-and-protesters-clash-on-greek-islands-over-new-migrant-camps>> accessed 20 March 2021.

³⁶ Siegel (n 2).

³⁷ The Greek authorities told the media on 2 January 2020 that the main countries of origin of migrants were Afghanistan (73%), Syria (12%) and Somalia (5%) as reported in the following website <<https://www.ethnos.gr>>

cooking practices, and the use of candles, lamps and faulty electric equipment.³⁸ My respondents used to interpret fires on Lesbos as 'the result of frustration with years-long asylum procedures', 'anger about the inhumane conditions', 'a push to move migrants to the mainland' or 'violent inter-ethnic conflict'. However, in September 2020 the media reported a direct link between the fire and Covid-19, as more than 30 migrants at Moria who had tested positive for Covid-19 were refusing to go into quarantine.³⁹ The fire, meant as a protest against the camp being put into lockdown, was started by a group of six Afghan migrants, all of whom were arrested a few days later. The Juvenile Court of Mytilene found two of them, both minors, guilty and sent them to Avlona prison for minors and young adults on the mainland. The remaining four were charged with arson.⁴⁰

The media spoke of a potential 'humanitarian catastrophe'⁴¹ as it depicted overcrowded roads and migrants sleeping and living on the main road from Moria to the capital Mytilene. For almost a week, the international media were dominated by images of people lying on the ground, and babies and elderly people being carried by other migrants, while police and firemen looked on.

These images were reminiscent of the first period of the 'refugee crisis' in 2015, when the large numbers of migrants arriving on Lesbos left an indelible impression on people's minds. The fears linked to this mass migration figured prominently in the media and the political debate: migrants arriving from conflict areas could be war criminals, terrorists, or violent, and even if they were not, they would still be an economic and demographic burden on Western societies.⁴² One mediatized fear was that migrants import and spread contagious diseases. These ideas were common not only among the local population but also among the different groups of migrants. Jock Young analysed this type of process as a 'dialectic of exclusion', which progressively increases marginality and creates hostility.⁴³

Defining a situation as a 'crisis' is an efficient strategy for demanding a solution. Goode and Ben Yehuda defined such situations as 'moral panics', which are not so much about specific activities – real or imagined – or social categories, as they are 'about' fear and perceived threat.⁴⁴ Cohen described the reaction of the media, law enforcement and action groups to social disturbances as moral panics.⁴⁵ Similar responses were applied to the migration and pandemic 'crises', whereby migrants were assigned the role of 'folk devils'. It was not their behaviour, but the fear associated with them and their uninvited arrival on the island, especially with regard to the risk of disease, that made it urgent to find a solution to this 'problem'. With the outbreak of Covid-19 among migrants the hostility towards them and the people helping them, became justified by 'medical reasons'. Fear of the spread of Covid-19 fanned by the mass media, played a crucial role. The mass media defined the situation as critical and shaped public opinion on right and wrong ways of dealing with it.⁴⁶

The seriousness of the situation after the fires in Moria and the rapid solution implemented by the local authorities is what distinguishes a 'moral panic' – which asserts the idea that 'something must be done' – from a 'crisis', which is a combination of fears and responses to it, propagating the idea that 'nothing works'.⁴⁷ Whereas a moral panic exaggerates the seriousness of a situation, crisis is an inability to deal with it.⁴⁸ The fire was used to promote the political interests of the various parties who benefited from it and to convince the public that the authorities needed to take decisive action by moving the migrants to another camp.

³⁸ B.S. Atiyeh and S.W.A. Gunn, 'Refugee Camps, Fire Disasters and Burn Injuries' (2017) 30(3) *Annals of burns and fire disasters* 214.

³⁹ Chico Harlan and Elinda Labropoulou 'Fire Destroys Europe's Largest Migrant Camp, Which Had Been under Coronavirus Lockdown' (Washington Post, 9 September 2020) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/fire-destroys-europes-largest-migrant-camp-which-had-been-under-coronavirus-lockdown/2020/09/09/023dc254-f275-11ea-8025-5d3489768ac8_story.html> accessed 20 March 2021; BBC, 'Moria Migrants: Fire Destroys Greek Camp Leaving 13,000 without Shelter' *BBC* (London, 9 September 2020) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54082201>> accessed 20 March 2021.

⁴⁰ Vangelis Papantonis and Derek Gatopoulos, 'Greece: 4 Afghans Charged with Arson for Fire at Lesbos Camp' (*AP News*, 16 September 2020) <<https://apnews.com/article/archive-arson-greece-bb92ce89afaec164a5262f25259ebd9>> accessed 20 March 2021.

⁴¹ Elinda Labropoulou, Chris Liakos, Stephanie Halasz and others, 'Fire Ravages Europe's Largest Migrant Camp on Lesbos' (CNN, 10 September 2020) <<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/09/europe/greece-lesbos-fires-intl/index.html>> accessed 20 March 2021; Harriet Grant, 'Catastrophe' Warning as Thousands Left Homeless by Lesbos Refugee Camp Fire' *The Guardian* (London, 9 September 2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/sep/09/catastrophe-warning-as-thousands-left-homeless-by-lesbos-refugee-camp-fire>> accessed 20 March 2021.

⁴² Daniel Trilling, 'How the Media Contributed to the Migrant Crisis' *The Guardian* (London, 1 August 2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/aug/01/media-framed-migrant-crisis-disaster-reporting>> accessed 20 March 2021.

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⁴⁴ Erich Goode and Ben Yehuda Nachman, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (John Wiley & Sons 2010).

⁴⁵ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Paladin 1973).

⁴⁶ David Altheide, *Creating fear. News and the Construction of Crisis* (Aldine de Gruyter 2002) 13–15.

⁴⁷ Cohen (n 45).

⁴⁸ Siegel (n 2).

4. The end of the crisis?

The total destruction of Moria seemed to provide an opportunity for radical change: either the migrants should be moved from the inhumane situation on Lesbos to the mainland and on to other European countries, or a better equipped and more adequate camp should be set up on the island. Although more than 2,000 migrants, including vulnerable people and minors, were transferred to the mainland in the weeks after the fire, a new camp at Mavrovouni, alias Moria II, was constructed on a former military firing range within days. Despite objections to the opening of the new camp from migrants, NGOs and local islanders, who demanded that all migrants be transferred to the mainland, and regardless of the extremely poor living conditions at the new location (lack of drinking water, only 37 toilets and dirt) thousands were moved there in the days that followed.⁴⁹ Soon reports began to appear about health problems experienced by residents in the new camp due to high levels of lead in the soil on which the camp was built.⁵⁰

Although the new camp was supposed to provide suitable conditions in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic, its design failed to prevent the spread of the virus.⁵¹ On Monday, 20 September 2020, a government spokesman confirmed that 243 people had tested positive.⁵² In the weeks that followed yet more cases were confirmed, also among camp staff, Greek police officers and members of international organizations.⁵³

Cold weather and heavy rains in the autumn of 2020 led to floods and more health problems, especially among children in the camp.⁵⁴ The ensuing winter months were even harsher: the camp turned into a sea of mud and as temperatures dropped, the tents were assailed with rain, hail and snow. The migrants complained about food shortages, which forced them to go to nearby local villages for food and clean water, while activists were kept busy trying to provide even the most basic sanitary articles.

The fire in Moria was not presented in the media and public debate as a crisis that required a radical 'macro' solution, namely changing the EU vision on its 'hotspots' policy. The heartbreaking images of the suffering of these people, who had lost everything in the fire, prompted calls for the local authorities to intervene immediately. The quick construction of a new temporary camp was therefore an efficient solution to another 'micro crisis'. The acts of arson at Moria did not achieve their goal. They did not create a new reality or change existing, clearly failed EU policies: instead the fires only served to create new 'enemies', i.e. Afghan migrants. At the European level the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (NPMA) continues to promote large reception centres and even the devastating fires at Moria could not manage to change its course.⁵⁵

The fire also did not deter or change the minds of the hundreds of migrants who continued to arrive on the island, despite global media coverage of the wretched conditions in the camps and the widespread European hostility towards migrants. Neither fires, nor a global pandemic could stop the migration. The root causes of the despair felt by the migrants, convincing them that conditions in Europe could not be any worse than their situation in Turkey, do not seem to figure high on the agendas of the EU and the NPMA.

Both the migration 'crisis' and the Covid-19 pandemic 'crisis' did not shake Europe's political and social foundations, nor did they ruin existing institutions or create a new reality. They are not crises in Burckhardt's sense of a historical transformation bringing down the old legal and political order in order to create a new one. Instead, the case of Lesbos shows that crisis is an immanent and permanent condition of migration. In the words of Bauman and Bordon: 'We will have to get used to living with the crisis. Because the crisis is here to stay'.⁵⁶

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

⁴⁹ Vasileia Digidiki and Jacqueline Bhabha, 'EU Migration Pact Fails to Address Human Rights Concerns in Lesbos, Greece' (2020) 22(2) *Health and Human Rights* 291.

⁵⁰ Ministry of Migration and Asylum of the Hellenic Republic, 'Response to Press Articles: Below the Internationally Accepted Lead Levels the Reception Areas at the Temporary Camp in Mavrovouni – Lesbos' (2021) <<https://migration.gov.gr/en/kato-apo-ta-diethni-oria-ta-epipedo-molyvdoy-sto-mavrovouni/>> accessed 20 March 2021.

⁵¹ Digidiki and Bhabha (n 49) 292.

⁵² BBC, 'Lesbos: Hundreds Test Positive for Covid-19 After Migrant Camp Fire' (BBC, 21 September 2020) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54239446>> accessed 20 March 2021.

⁵³ Digidiki and Bhabha (n 49) 292.

⁵⁴ Personal communication with respondents on Lesbos, October 2020.

⁵⁵ Alberto Barbieri, 'Time to rethink large refugee centres in Europe' (2021) 6 *The Lancet Public Health* accessed via [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS2468-2667\(20\)30255-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS2468-2667(20)30255-3/fulltext).

⁵⁶ Zygmunt Bauman and Carlo Bordon, *State of crisis* (John Wiley & Sons 2014).

How to cite this article: Dina Siegel, 'The 'Crises' of Lesbos' (2021) 17(4) Utrecht Law Review pp. 10–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36633/ulr.745>

Published: 15 February 2022

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