



Working Paper Series

**Number 37, Autumn 2018**

# Refugee Protests in Hotspots:

A first comparison between Lampedusa  
and Lesbos

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## ***Abstract***

In contrast with the narrative of voiceless refugees, this working paper shows the political agency of refugees in hotspots. The hotspot approach was introduced by the EU in 2015 to formerly alleviate pressure from Greece and Italy, however, it has rapidly led to the systematic violation of human rights. Hence, refugees are engaging in protests, often deploying extreme methods. The present working paper aims at analysing how refugees try to overcome the situation of limbo and isolation in hotspots. In addition, the paper aims at investigating the strategies deployed by the protestors and on how they use emotions to challenge the stereotyped idea of victims or threats. In particular, the article focuses on the comparison between the hotspots in Lampedusa, Italy and Moria, Greece, where the two factors of spatial isolation and protracted stays are striking the most.

## ***Keywords***

Hotspots, refugees, political agency, Lesbos, Lampedusa

## ***Author's biographical note***

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## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Implemented at the end of 2015 first in Italy and subsequently in Greece, the hotspot approach has been presented by the European Commission as a way to “alleviate pressure” from frontline states (Papadopoulou, 2017). However, the hidden scope of hotspots was to oblige Greece and Italy –notorious for their refusal of identifying migrants – to comply with the Dublin III regulations that require the first Member State in which refugees enter to take charge of the asylum application (Orsini and Roos, 2017).

The main aim of hotspots is thus to identify, register and fingerprint migrants swiftly and to support the relocation and return procedure. Upon disembarkation, migrants are quickly divided into two categories: those identified as economic migrants and those identified as deserving of international protection. The former category receives a declaration of expulsion and should be subsequently returned (Dimitriadi, 2017) – even if in practice local authorities are still allowing migrants to remain undocumented within the Schengen area (Orsini and Roos, 2017) – while for the latter, the procedure differs from one country to the other. Nevertheless, the final result is that refugees are kept strained in hotspots for a prolonged time that can vary from weeks or months in the Italian case (Tazzioli, 2017) to a year or more in the Greek case (Papadopoulou, 2017). It is important here to stress that hotspots are not conceived to host people for such an extended amount of time.

Since their implementation, NGOs and human rights associations have repeatedly reported breaches of human rights, widespread violence and substandard reception conditions in hotspots (Amnesty International, 2016; 2017). In addition, as we will see better later on, different practices – such as access to the asylum procedure based on nationality rather than on individual assessment – have produced chaos concerning who can practically access the asylum procedure and who cannot. For this reason, in the present working paper, I will use the term “refugee” according to the following definition provided by the Geneva Convention (the basic pillar of refugee protection and which states rely on to assess the asylum claims): a refugee is a person who ‘owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality,

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<sup>1</sup> The working paper is an adaptation of a research proposal. I would like to thank my supervisors, Lorenzo Gabrielli and Thomas Swerts, for their invaluable guidance and insights. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer for their very thorough and constructive comments.

membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...' (Geneva Convention, 1951). Therefore, the term "refugee" will be used by disregarding the official recognition from national authorities and will include all people who consider themselves as refugees and have expressed their intention to claim for asylum, even though no formalisation was carried out by the responsible institution. This would also help incorporate people whose right to claim for asylum has been hindered based on their nationality and have thus been classified as economic migrants. As we will see better in the next sections, this is a worrisome common practice in hotspots (Papadopoulou, 2016).

If we take in consideration the three factors – violations of human rights, geographical isolation and prolonged stays – it should be of no surprise that refugees have been increasingly involved in practices of political disobedience such as manifestations or hunger strikes. In fact, as Lewis has argued:

'[C]ontrary to the popular image of the refugee - barely clothed, wide-eyed, and begging - so often seen in mainstream donation solicitations, a new vision of the refugee is emerging: human beings, demanding to be recognized as such, demanding the rights afforded them under international law, and demanding their voices to be heard' (Lewis, 2006: 4).

The present study has to be considered as a first and non-exhaustive step of research that aims to contribute to the debate on refugee protests in Europe focusing on the very subject of the protests: those refugees that are actively engaging in them. The working paper will present two innovative case-studies. It will focus on the protests that are taking place in Moria, in the island of Lesbos, and in Lampedusa, in the homonymous island in Italy. It is in fact in these two hotspots where the three above mentioned factors are the most evident and create fertile ground for the insurgence of cyclic protests.

The key research question therefore is: how do refugees try to overcome the situation of limbo and isolation in the hotspots? In addition, the research aims to respond to the following sub-questions: which strategies do they deploy? How do they use emotions to challenge the stereotypical idea of victims or threats?

Finally, the comparison between the two cases is what allows to have a broader view of the phenomenon of refugee protests in hotspots. In fact, Italy and Greece present substantial differences in terms of nationalities and thus, to access the protection process (Papadopoulou, 2016). While Lesbos has become the symbol of the so-called refugee crisis since 2015 (Amin, 2016), Lampedusa is mostly identified by mixed migratory flows, with the subsequently negative perception associated with economic migrants or “bogus” refugees (Dempster, Hargrav, 2017). Hence, if in Lesbos there is an abundance of NGOs and activists coming from all over the world (Nianias, 2016), this happens to be less the case for Lampedusa, which, apart from the presence of IOM, UNHCR, Save the Children and the Italian Red Cross<sup>2</sup>, relies more on local and smaller groups of support.

The working paper is structured in three parts apart from introduction and conclusion. The first one provides a theoretical framework and focuses on three factors: firstly, a critical literature review of refugee protest will be examined. Then the concept of islands as spaces of isolation will be analysed. Finally, in order to understand the context in which the protests are taking place, the last sub-section provides an introduction to the organisation of the hotspot approach. The second, aside from justifying the case-selection, will suggest a methodological approach grounded on qualitative methods to further implement the present research. Finally, the last chapter will present the preliminary findings based on the analysis of social and mass media.

## **1. The Theoretical Framework**

### ***1.1. State of The Art on Refugee Protests***

Refugees are often perceived either as victims in need of humanitarian protection and are thus expected to be grateful to host countries (Moulin, 2017), or as a security threat to national sovereignty and host societies (Ataç and Steinhilper 2016). However, a new narrative is emerging: subjects that through acts of resistance are revindicating their capacity to be political actors (Isin and Rygiel 2007) and are hence exercising their political agency.

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<sup>2</sup> For further information, please consult the following website: <https://www.iom.int/countries/italy>

Acts of political mobilisation by refugees, and more broadly by migrants, are not a new phenomenon (Nyers and Rygiel, 2017). However, the vast majority of the current literature on the topic (which has been defined by Ataç, Rygiel and Stierl (2016) as illustrative of the “new era of protest” (2016: 528)) has focused on cases outside Europe (see Lewis 2016, Nyers and Rygiel, 2017, Moulin, 2017).

Research on protests based in Europe has focused mainly on undocumented migrants who are seeking to regularise their situation and to get out of their situation of constant deportability and forced invisibility (Swerts, 2017). On the contrary, protests led by refugees have caught the interest of the academia only since 2012, when protests erupted in different European countries (Ataç and Steinhilper, 2016).

In the literature reviewed here, three themes appear to be important in the analysis of the protests: the refugee’s spatial resistance, the use of the body as a form of protest and finally, the importance of solidarity movements. The various themes are often interconnected and in their analysis there is a common point that emerges: the intention of challenging the stereotypical idea that refugees are voiceless and helpless victims. Indeed, the authors have been actively involved in the protests they were analysing, not only by doing participatory observation and conducting interviews, but by also becoming activists and supporters of the different refugee protests. In this way, the authors have contributed to give a focus from the point of view of the very subject of the protests: refugees.

The first factor to take into consideration is the use of public spaces in refugee activism. Through the occupation of highly symbolic places – such as churches in the case of refused refugees in Belgium (Swerts, 2017) – or of inner-city areas, refugees can achieve two goals at the same time: they can obtain a stage where their requests can be heard and they can break the system of social isolation and exclusion (Ataç and Steinhilper, 2016; Bhimiji, 2016). Furthermore, Bhimiji (2016) has shown in his research how a public space can become a place of aggregation for different groups of refugee activists and supporters. In fact, the occupation of the Oranienplatz square in Kreuzberg, Berlin, was initially led by the “Refugee Strike Berlin” group to demonstrate against Germany’s asylum policy. However, during the 18 months of its occupation, the square also became the stage for the contestation of the Dublin system, pursued by the group “Lampedusa in Berlin”.

When highly symbolic public spaces are not available or the demands continue to be unmet, the strategies used by protestors tend to radicalise, deploying extreme

methods, which mainly involves the use of their bodies (Conlon, 2013). Thus, recurring to hunger strikes or the practice of sewing lips have been tools to express the frustration of migrants and as a last recourse to achieve their human rights (Lewis, 2016; Nyers and Rygiel, 2017). As McGregor (2011) has shown in her research on protests led by Zimbabwean detainees in British removal centres in 2005, with the hunger strike they have achieved extensive mass-media coverage and, more importantly, halted deportations. Moreover, resorting to hunger strike is now becoming a widespread practice among refugees and immigrants in spaces of detention (Conlon, 2013). Bailey (2009) argues that in this way migrants can affirm their capacity of being political actors with a voice. In addition, resorting to hunger strike is a powerful strategy to mobilise individuals (Conlon, 2013).

We can now explore the third element in the analysis of protests led by migrants: the role played by solidarity movements. In this kind of movement, citizens – despite not being directly benefitting from the protests – decide to get involved to defend the rights of others. Through material and legal support, they are mobilising to achieve the respect of immigrants' rights (Passy, 2001). As rightly pointed out by Enriquez (2014), especially in the case of migrant protests, the coalition between solidarity groups and the protestors relies on a shared ideology (a common set of values and beliefs) rather than on a collective identity. In fact, identities are made up of different factors such as legal status, nationality and so forth. Because of the multiple differences between supporters and migrants (and within migrants themselves), it will thus require an extended period of time to negotiate a collective identity. On the contrary, ideologies are pre-existing and determine whether and how citizens will join the protestors. Thus, a shared ideology can allow a quicker unification and can be used to partially reduce the conflicts between supporters and protestors. Moreover, through a shared ideology it is possible to achieve the concept of solidarity defined here as: 'Solidarity implies here not one legitimate voice speaking for another illegitimate/vulnerable/less outspoken voice, but a multitude of voices speaking together in the same message, demand or refusal' (Johnson, 2017: 122).

As the analysis of the "Refugee Protest Camp Vienna" movement conducted by Ataç (2016) shows, solidarity movements can have an emotional positive impact on refugees. In fact, even if the primary goal of the protest was to fight for change in the Austrian asylum procedure, the real outcome was the creation of strong relational links among refugees and between refugees and supporters. This last point helps introduce

the understudied role of emotions in refugee protests. As a matter of fact, even if emotions have seen a renewed interest in the broader field of social movements (Jasper, 2011), they have received scarce attention from the literature on refugee protests. Emotions such as frustration or anger can be the reasons lying behind the protests (Jasper, 1998) or they can be a powerful strategy in the mobilisation of resources and supporters (Jasper, 2011). However, very little is known about how migrants use emotions to escape from the traditional narrative of victims or security threats.

The other aspect which the present working paper aims to shed light on concerns how refugees break the condition of limbo and isolation in which they are stuck in hotspots. We have previously seen, for example, that the occupation of highly visible spaces can help migrants get a stage for expressing their concerns, but what can they do when they are literally confined in a place of double isolation – such as hotspots in islands – that is used by states with the exact purpose of rendering migrants invisible? The next section discusses the concept of islands as spaces of isolation.

## ***1.2. Islands as Spaces of Isolation***

In their research on the envision of the Archipelago, Stratford et al (2011) have resorted to different historic examples and contemporary illustrations to show that islands are dynamic places of interconnection. The same concept has been later emphasized by Pugh (2013) who has stressed the need of destabilizing the idea of the existence of static territorial form. However, islands have been extensively used to hinder migrants' right to claim for asylum (Mountz and Hiemstra, 2012) and they have thus become spaces of isolation for refugees. In what Mountz (2011) calls the “enforcement archipelago” (2011: 118), islands are the privileged places for the control of migration, because states – through the invocation of the protection of national security – can isolate and render migrants invisible. Indeed, due to their geographical position, islands are used by states to attempt to hide refugees from civil society, mass-media and human rights associations (Dimitriadi, 2017; Hyndman and Mountz; 2007).

Australia, for example, has created different off-shore detention centres on small islands subcontracted by the Australian government. It is the case of detention centres in Nauru and Manus in Papua New Guinea. Hence, refugees arriving by sea are intercepted and sent to off-shore detention facilities where their application will be

examined. In these premises, they do not have access to translators, legal counselling or information (Hyndman and Mountz; 2007).

Another famous case of islands as tools of migration management is represented by the island of Lampedusa, in the south of Italy and close to Tunisia. Lampedusa has been associated with migration well before the implementation of the hotspot approach (Andrijasevic, 2010). Cuttitta (2014) argues that in this case the island has been transformed to an EU external border not only for its geographical position, but also due to a political discourse and specific policies. In fact, in line with the securitisation of migration approach led by the EU, Lampedusa has been transformed in the place for excellence where migrant “legality” and “illegality” is rendered spectacularly visible (Cuttitta, 2014; De Genova, 2013).

Moreover, one could argue that islands used to control migration represent what Isin and Rygiel (2007) call “abject spaces”. Moving from the work inspired by Giorgio Agamben (1997), who argues that camps constitute states of exception where the law is temporarily suspended, the two authors go further and claim that in “abject spaces” refugees are rendered “inaudible and invisible” (2007:187). In fact, these spaces are considered by Isin and Rygiel (2007) as: ‘states of inexistence that function as reserves in which subjects and their rights are suspended temporarily, in transition from one subject hood to another’ (2007:196). For Agamben (1998) the temporary suspension of the law which takes place in refugee camps becomes in reality permanent. Here refugees are excluded from political power and thus, are reduced to passive subjects and forced to live a “bare life”, one in which the biological life, common to all living beings, takes priority over the way a life is lived. In contrast with the idea of “bare life”, in “abject spaces” refugees are perceived as actors capable of political mobilisation. In fact, through acts of resistance, refugees in “abject spaces” are fighting for their right to have rights and, which in turn reaffirms their capacity to be political subjects (Isin and Rygiel, 2007). In this light, islands, and even more hotspots, are to be understood as “abject spaces”. In fact, as it will be illustrated in the next section, they constitute institutionalised spaces of transit regulated by flexible and ad-hoc policies that are at odds with the respect of fundamental human rights (De Vries, Carrera and Guild, 2016). Moreover, as noted by Dimitriadi (2017), they are at the same time ‘an external border, a hotspot (since 2016), an island, and part of the externalization of EU policies’ (2017: 83). At first sight, it could then appear that due to the configuration of isolation that characterises hotspots, refugees have fewer opportunities to exercise their political

agency and are thus living in conditions of “bare life”. However, as we will explore later on, refugees are actively contesting these spaces.

### ***1.3. The Hotspot Approach***

With over 60 million people forcibly displaced worldwide due to war (UN News, 2015), 2015 has been the starting point of the so-called “refugee crisis”. However, as argued by De Vries, Carrera and Guild (2016), the term “crisis” implies the creation of a threat that thus requires the implementation of extraordinary and exceptional measures to manage the “crisis”.

Hence, the response to a “crisis” can involve policy instruments and legislative proposals that are undemocratic and constitute a breach of fundamental human rights. In addition, a “crisis” requires the proliferation of borders within and outside Europe (De Vries, Carrera and Guild, 2016). It is in this framework that the European Agenda on Migration presented in May 2015 by the European Commission introduced the hotspot approach. Although it lacks a clear definition, hotspots have been officially presented ‘as part of the immediate action to assist frontline Member States which are facing disproportionate migratory pressures at the EU’s external border’ (European Commission, 2015).

Currently, a total of ten hotspots are operative, five in Italy (Lampedusa, Messina, Pozzallo, Taranto and Trani) and five in Greece (in the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Kos, Leros and Samos) (FRA, 2018). The main aim of hotspots is to swiftly carry on the process of fingerprinting, identification, registration and assist with relocation and return procedures.

In particular, the hotspot approach has been conceived to help Member States tackle those identified as economic migrants from those identified as deserving of international protection. As we will see better later on, being entitled to international protection seems to play a role in the discourse framed by protestors who ask to have their demands met in light of their status of refugees and subsequently in light of the respect of international laws established by the EU. However, the process of this primary identification has been widely contested by NGOs, supporters and by migrants themselves. Through the implementation of different practices, such as an unclear asylum-seeking process, the swift procedure has practically turned into an assessment of the right to seek asylum based on the nationality of migrants rather than on individual

assessment (Papadopoulou, 2016). In Italy, for example, people from West-Africa (with the only exception of Eritrea) have been denied of their right to apply for asylum (Garelli, Tazzioli, 2016a). The same situation of exclusion of certain nationalities from their right to international protection is present in Greece. In fact, some nationalities – such as Syrians – are being prioritised over others – such as Afghans – with the result of creating tension among migrants (Papadopoulou, 2016).

Those identified as economic migrants will receive a declaration of expulsion and should be subsequently returned (Dimitriadi, 2017), even if in practice migrants are still allowed to remain undocumented within the Schengen territory (Orsini and Roos, 2017). On the contrary, the procedure for refugees differs from one country to another. In Greece, the EU-Turkey deal has marked a significant shift in the procedure for refugees. In fact, the deal – that is part of the externalisation process carried out by the EU – seeks to reduce arrivals in Europe and to regulate the situation in Greece (Collett, 2016). However, the EU-Turkey deal has resulted in the creation of a situation of further chaos and violation of people's rights (Amnesty International, 2017). Refugees who had arrived in Greece after the 21st of March (when the deal was implemented) have remained stranded in the Greek islands (Papadopoulou, 2016). Furthermore, refugees are allowed to leave the islands only in case of a positive response; in practical terms, this implies that refugees have to wait in hotspots for one year or more while their applications are being processed (Dimitriadi, 2017). In Italy, refugees should be transferred to hosting centres located in the territory within 72 hours – the maximum time required by the Italian law to complete the identification procedure. However, as research has shown, refugees usually spend an average of two or three weeks in the Lampedusa hotspot (Tazzioli, 2017). Part of the problem lies in the fact that, in order to achieve the goal of almost 100% fingerprinting rate for arriving refugees and migrants in hotspots (Orsini and Roos, 2017), the European Commission has allowed Italian police to implement 'provisions on longer-term retention for those migrants that resist fingerprinting' (Amnesty International, 2016:14).

In sum, hotspots have rapidly converted into temporary EU borders where the violation of fundamental human rights, arbitrary detention and prolonged stay in substandard reception conditions are the norm (Amnesty International 2017; Amnesty International, 2016). Through their remote offshore locations, hotspots located in islands have been conceived as places of isolation where states can adopt an 'out of sight out of mind approach' (Dimitriadi, 2017:82). Moreover, hotspots rely on a

particular (and often unclear) set of laws that are at odds with the respect of human rights (De Vries, Carrera and Guild, 2016). In this way, states have attempted to render refugees invisible and hence to limit their political agency (Isin and Rygiel 2007). However, as mentioned before, contrary to the public discourse that sees refugees as voiceless victims (Lewis, 2006), they are actively engaging in different forms of political mobilisation such as hunger strikes and riots (Dimitriadi, 2017). The agency of refugees in hotspots is the core of the present working paper and will be examined in the next sections.

## **2. Methodology**

### ***2.1. Justification of the Case Selection***

Hotspots are unique places in the landscape of refugee protests in Europe. In fact, since their implementation in 2015, there have been multiple protests led by different groups of people (Tazzioli, 2017; Papadopoulou, 2016). What distinguishes the hotspots of Moria and Lampedusa from the other eight implemented so far is the combination of time and space factors that contribute to refugees' social and physical isolation. What was conceived as a space to carry out the procedure swiftly has been converted into a place of limbo and protracted stay. In the case of Lampedusa, the average stay is of weeks or even months (Tazzioli, 2017), while in the case of Moria the average stay is of one year or more (Dimitriadi, 2017). This condition of limbo is exasperated by the geographical position of isolation.

Lampedusa was the first hotspot implemented and served as a model. Hence, it is where the role of isolation can be better understood. In addition, as already noted by Garelli and Tazzioli (2016b), it has the most peculiar geographical position in the Italian landscape (a small island with a distinct offshore position, halfway between Italy and Tunisia). The implementation of hotspot in a distinct offshore position and proximity with another country (in this case, Turkey) is a common practice in the Greek case. For this reason, the hotspot with the largest number of arrivals has been selected (IOM, 2017) for the comparison. Moreover, the worsening of living conditions of hotspots, that are not adequate to host people for a prolonged period of time, have exasperated an already tense situation and have thus created a fertile ground for the protests (Papadopoulou, 2016).

Finally, the differences between the two cases are what allow us to have a broader view of the phenomenon of refugee protests in hotspots. In fact, as we have seen in the theoretical framework, Italy and Greece present substantial differences regarding the legal framework, practices, refugees' length of stay and nationalities. Different nationalities can have implications not only on how states deal with refugees (by granting them access to asylum protection or not) but also on how civil society and NGOs might engage with them. Furthermore, differences in status might also correspond with differences on how the protestors themselves frame their discourse and their requests. Hence, the comparison between the two case-studies provides a broader perspective on the research questions. It will thus allow us to have a broader perspective on how refugees try to overcome the situation of limbo and isolation in hotspots, on how they engage with emotions and, finally, on the strategies deployed.

## ***2.2. The Pilot Study***

The working paper relies on a pilot study grounded on the qualitative analysis of social and mass media conducted for a period of nine months, from July 2017 to March 2018. Only the events that have been covered by both mass media and social media have been taken into consideration for the sample. In order to understand how actors that are not directly involved represent the protests, news that have been published by international and highly recognised mass media -such as Aljazeera, Reuters and so on- have been analysed. In addition, the pilot study relies on news that has been reported by organisations and support groups that have demonstrated an active engagement with the protests. The Lesbos Legal Centre is just an example to be mentioned. It is a solidarity movement composed of legally trained international volunteers who provide legal assistance to refugees and migrants based in Lesbos.<sup>3</sup> As we will explore later, among its various activities, the movement engages in supporting and reporting the protests on the Greek island. Social media of active organisations and support groups have also been analysed. In fact, social media often works as a stage for the request and call for support. It is more likely to read the entire communicate of the protests in social media, especially Facebook, than in mainstream mass media. Thus, the analysis of social media has helped to collect information about the protests (goals, strategies used, the evolution

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<sup>3</sup> For further information, please consult the website of Legal Centre Lesbos at the following URL: <http://www.legalcentreslesbos.org/partners/>

of the protests). The data has been used as evidence to support theoretical insights and thus, description of crucial events and the most important quotes for the purpose of the paper have been reported.

### ***2.3. Future methodological steps***

The empirical study presented here should be considered as a preliminary and non-exhaustive step in the analysis of refugee protests in hotspots. To fully answer the research questions, the adoption of a multi-methodical approach grounded on qualitative methods is required. Specifically, following steps in the analysis of refugee protests in hotspots should take into consideration the adoption of multi-sited ethnography. As elaborated by Marcus (1998) and further explained by Falzon (2009) multi-sited ethnography sheds light on global phenomena by following relationships and connections across space. Additionally, an extended period of time in the field is required to build a relationship of mutual trust between the researcher and refugees. Trust is a fundamental element when it comes to establishing contact with people in situations of vulnerability<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, mistrust can cause several problems – lack of researcher’s access to information is just one of the most evident consequences of it.

Moreover, the research plan should rely on qualitative interviews, with a sample that combines the snowball effect with multiple entries with a selected sample deriving from participatory observation. The interviews should focus mainly on the protestors, but in order to have a broader picture on refugee protests, the sample should include supporters and NGOs’ members.

The adoption of open interviews over other types – such as structured interviews – should be preferred because, as suggested by Yin (2011), they tend to follow a conversational mode that allows a two-way interaction and thus the creation of an equal relationship of power. Moreover, it allows participants to express themselves ‘on their own terms and how they make meaning of their own lives, experiences, and cognitive processes’ (2011:156). There is also another reason to adopt open interviews, especially when conducted with refugees: structured interviews could remind refugees of the interviewing procedure they have been or are currently going through for the assessment of their protection’s request. This phase is often described as unpleasant (Papadopoulou,

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<sup>4</sup> Restricted access to legal information and support networks, language barriers, breach of human rights perpetrated by national authorities and sense of isolation are just some of the factors that expose refugees and more broadly migrants to a situation of vulnerability. However, being in a situation of vulnerability is not in contrast with nor does it limit the capacity of refugees to be subjects with political agency.

2016) and hence, the adoption of a conversational approach could avoid unnecessary distress.

Finally, it is worthwhile to make some ethical considerations. In fact, if social research aims to contribute to society, it is thus crucial to establish equal and respectful relations with all its members. Researchers should thus ensure respect for human dignity and avoid the sense of exploitation often felt by migrants (Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway, 2007). Here the issues of power relations and trust will be briefly discussed. Forcibly displaced people live in vulnerable situations in which unequal power relations are the norm (ibidem), and hotspots are no exception to this. Moreover, as already stressed above, particular attention has to be reserved in creating a relationship of mutual trust between the researcher and migrants. Hence, participants should receive a full explanation on how the information provided will be used, then they should receive a report of the research and should have to approve (or not) the contents.

### **3. The Protests**

Since their implementation, the hotspots in Lampedusa and Moria have been sites of multiple protests. As it will be shown, isolation and limbo have been highly contested by migrants who have been demanding, through protests, access to the mainland, freedom of movement, faster asylum process and better living conditions. However, in line with the concept of the hotspot approach as a space of exception, states have tried to discourage protests and make migrants invisible through arbitrary detention and prolonged stay. A focus firstly on Lesbos and then on Lampedusa will illustrate these dynamics of contestation and repression.

#### **3.1 Lesbos**

In Lesbos, on July 18<sup>th</sup> 2017, as reported by Legal Centre Lesbos, refugees peacefully protested for freedom of movement and better living conditions in the Moria hotspot (Thomas-Davis, 2017). As confirmed by a report written by Amnesty International, the protest was violently interrupted by Greek police (Amnesty International Public Statement, 2017). In addition, 35 individuals of African origins or descent were arbitrarily arrested. In fact, as reported both by Amnesty International and by Legal Centre Lesbos (which is legally representing them), many of those who were

arrested were not even present at the protest (Amnesty International Public Statement, 2017; Thomas-Davis, 2017). Moreover, although their asylum claims have been rejected, they are still prohibited from leaving the island due to the ongoing criminal case against them (Thomas-Davis, 2017).

Despite the attempts made by states, refugees have continued to exercise their political agency. In line with the theory presented before, when peaceful protests are perceived to be unsuccessful, and there are no available spaces to be used as stages, protestors engage in more disruptive practices that mainly involve the use of their bodies. It was the case in Lesbos, when in October 2017 Aljazeera reported that following clashes between different ethnic groups in the Moria hotspot, around 200 people, mostly from Afghanistan, decided to leave the hotspot and marched to the city centre in Lesbos (Strickland, 2017). Without prior organisation, they then occupied the Sappho square in the centre of Mytilini and started a sit-in demanding freedom of movement throughout Greece and were soon joined by Kurdish and Iranian families (Leete, 2017). Because their requests remained unheard and the police made an attempt to render the protests invisible, by discouraging support groups to help and threatening refugees, protestors went on hunger strike (Strickland, 2017).

Frustration and the fact that they were being unheard led to an intensification of protests. For example, hunger strikes are often used as a strategy to evoke emotions from and mobilise the general public (Conlon, 2013; Jasper, 2011). This is clearly the case in the Sappho square protest. Consider the open letter spread on social media:

‘[A] number of us have decided to start a hunger strike. The others amongst us are going to give the Greek government and the UNHCR four more days to grant us our freedom before they join those on hunger strike. Within this cradle of so-called democracy, you are forcing us to sew our lips together and to start a hunger strike, although we are only doing this to defend our dignity and our freedom (...) People of Europe, we are talking to you. (...) To repeat again, a number of refugees are going to start a hunger strike tomorrow, after another four days a larger number of men and women are going to join if you do not accept our demands. WE leave you alone with your conscience.’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For further information and to consult the full open letter, please consult the Facebook post at the following link <https://www.facebook.com/sol2refugeesen/posts/1782292855396383>

The decision of starting the hunger strike was revealed in an open letter published in English. This suggests the intention of obtaining a stage as broad as possible. Moreover, the letter uses emotions to portray a new narrative of refugees: human beings who are lawfully entitled to a set of rights. Dignity, right and freedom are the key-words of the letter. As it is stated in the press release:

‘[W]e, the refugees without refuge, have fled from Moria and will not return there or to any other camp on Lesbos, for we want Freedom. We want respect for our own human dignity and we want you to follow your own laws. We want you to follow the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and The Refugee Convention of 1951, which you Europeans wrote yourselves’ (ibidem).

As we have seen in the theoretical framework, shared ideology is a powerful tool to build an equal relationship of solidarity (Enriquez, 2014). We can then see how, in this case, refugees are trying to build precisely this through the press release. The shared ideology, in this case, relies on the respect of international human rights such as freedom of movement, dignified living conditions and respect of the Geneva Convention. In addition, the open letter clearly appealed to collective solidarity.

The last point to analyse in the protests in hotspots is represented by differences in support and, subsequently, access to networks, symbolic capital and other resources between the two cases. From the analysis of mass media and social media we notice that solidarity movements have been active especially in the case of Moria. This might be partially explained by the fact that since 2015, the year of the so-called “refugee crisis”, the island of Lesbos has been associated with people in need of international protection (Amin, 2016). Additionally, Lesbos has seen, in the last years, a proliferation of volunteers and activists coming from all over the world and who are based in Lesbos (Nianias, 2016). This has repercussions on the coverage of the protests. For example, the Sappho square protest and the protest of July 2017 in Greece have been covered and supported by multiple actors.

The Sappho square protest has been rendered highly visible through social media. Greek support groups such as Lesbos Legal Centre, No Border Kitchen and Refugee Accommodation and Solidarity Space City Plaza (from now on, called City Plaza)

documented the protests and provided a stage to express the requests of the protestors. For example, City Plaza is gaining international attention for being a valid solution to refugees' housing problem in Greece. Based in Athens, City Plaza is a hotel that has been abandoned for several years and was occupied in 2015 by refugees and volunteers; it is now home to 400 people (Patrikarakos, 2018) and it was visited by the activist Angela Davis and the singer Manu Chao, among others. Its Facebook page counts around 13.700 followers from all over the world, and beside the documentation of its own struggle, it reports refugee resistance all over Europe, with a special focus on Greece. The ex-hotel can thus help protestors escape from the situation of isolation, publishing their demands that can now virtually reach people from all over the world. City Plaza extensively covered the protests through information, photos and through the release of the full open-letter of the protestors.

Moreover, October was also the launch month for the campaign "open the island". As it is stated in the website of the campaign, it was initially led by over 40 between support movements and organisations (and then signed by 121 of them), demanding the closure of the hotspot, allowing refugees' freedom of movement and respect of human rights. In addition, the EU-Turkey deal and EU asylum policies were explicitly denounced and considered as the primary cause of inhumane conditions in the island. The following excerpt from the statement illustrates this:

'[T]he collective stresses that the current situation (...) is a direct result of the EU-Turkey Statement and EU asylum and migration policies of exclusion. These policies keep people trapped on the islands for prolonged periods of time, prevent people from ever reaching Europe, and prevent people who are eligible for relocation and family reunification from moving on to other countries in a reasonable time.'<sup>6</sup>

As it was publicized on the website of the campaign, the hashtag #opentheisland was spread through different social media platforms, from Facebook to Twitter. In

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<sup>6</sup> For further information, please consult the full statement at the following URL: <https://opentheislands.wordpress.com/statement/>

addition, a twitterstorm was organised to gain international visibility.<sup>7</sup> Since the beginning of the campaign, all protests in the Greek hotspots – such as the one mentioned above – have been accompanied by the #opentheisland.

The second stark example of how protests in Moria are receiving better coverage than the ones in Lampedusa is represented by the protests that took place in July 2017 and in which 35 people were arrested. After several months, the trial was set up for the 20<sup>th</sup> of April of this year (2018). Not only was the news immediately reported by social media platforms, support movements and NGOs such as Amnesty International (Amnesty International Public Statement, 2017; Thomas-Davis, 2017), but many activities were also launched in the following months. Legal Centre Lesbos successfully launched a crowd funding campaign to legally assist the 35 refugees who were arrested<sup>8</sup> and it often releases updates on the situation. In the weeks before the trial, City Plaza organised a call for solidarity collectives in Greece and Europe, posting the call on an almost daily basis on its Facebook groups. Collectives such as No Borders soon answered the call and a group called “Free the Moria 35 refugees” was created and organised solidarity events and provided information translated into Greek, Arabic, French, Spanish, German, Catalan and Italian.<sup>9</sup>

In Greece, the protestors, their demands and thus their political agency, received great visibility through the spreading of their news and frequent updates. As will be explained in the next section, this appears to be less the case in Lampedusa.

### **3.2 Lampedusa**

During the time span that has been considered for the pilot study we can see how refugees have contested the hotspot in Lampedusa recurring to the three strings of the literature presented in the theoretical framework (occupation of public space, the use of the body and solidarity networks).

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2018 a group of around 42 people of Tunisian origins started a protest to reject collective deportations and demanded to be transferred to the

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<sup>7</sup> For further information, please consult the full statement at the following URL: <https://opentheislands.wordpress.com/2017/10/23/join-the-twitterstorm-tomorrow-2-00-pm-greek-time/>

<sup>8</sup>For further information, please consult the following URL: <http://www.legalcentreslesbos.org/2017/12/13/crowdfunding-help-us-defend-35-refugees-denied-of-their-human-rights/>

<sup>9</sup> For further information, please consult the Facebook page at the following URL: <https://www.facebook.com/freemoria35/>

mainland<sup>10</sup>. In order to obtain visibility, they decided to occupy a church in the centre of the city of Lampedusa. However, due to a lack of response from authorities, in the following days the protestors adopted more radical strategies and a group of demonstrators sewed their lips together and started a hunger strike (ANSAMED, 2018).

The protest was made public through a one-minute length video spread on social media showing a young man helping a fellow demonstrator to sew his lips together with white thread.<sup>11</sup> We can then see that protestors are not only transforming their bodies into an act of resistance, but by spreading the video on social media they are trying to overcome the situation of isolation in which they are trapped by virtually taking their resistance in front of the spectators. However, Lampedusa relies more on local and very limited network of supporters, providing few possibilities of getting a broader stage. This is reflected in the choice of the language used to write on social media platforms. In fact, in the case of Lampedusa, the social media pages of the solidarity networks taken in this analysis are entirely written in Italian. As mentioned before in the case of Lesbos, the differences in support and, subsequently, access to networks, symbolic capital and other resources between the two cases might be partially explained by a difference in terms of perception of the migrants present in the Italian island. In the case of Lampedusa, refugees are perceived as economic migrants, therefore, because of a negative perception towards the latter category (Dempster, Hargrav, 2017), protestors in Lampedusa tend to be less visible than their Greek counterparts.

This will appear striking if we take into consideration the mass-media and social-media coverage that have preceded the temporary closure of the Italian hotspot. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, after months of a situation that was infamously notorious for being critical and unsustainable, tension erupted once again and protestors set on fire a compound of the hotspot (Gostoli, 2018). Following this event, an independent report was written by the Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights, the Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration and IndieWatch and forced the Italian Interior Ministry to temporarily close the hotspot for renovation works (Sunderland, 2018). This is an important (even if temporary) result which set a precedent in the history of the hotspot approach. It obviously got extensive media coverage and was seen as an enormous success by many NGOs (ibidem). However, what received wide attention in the case of Lampedusa were

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<sup>10</sup> For further information, please consult the Facebook page at the following URL: <https://www.facebook.com/ForumLampedusaSolidale/posts/2019863478027239>

<sup>11</sup> For further information, please consult the Facebook page at the following URL: <https://www.facebook.com/askavusa/videos/1994954607430227/>

the final outcomes reached after a part of the hotspot was literally destroyed. Moreover, what gained visibility were the efforts made by NGOs rather than the political agency of the protestors that remained almost in the background. Additionally, the social media platforms of the active solidarity networks present on the island have covered only partially the protests of the 8<sup>th</sup> of March. In fact, the Facebook pages of the support groups here analysed have focused more on the events following the protests rather than on the protest itself. This appears even more striking when compared to Greece when, as seen before, on two different occasions, the protestors, their demands and thus their agency, received great visibility through the spreading of the communicates and frequent updates.

In sum, the preliminary study has confirmed the existence of refugee political agency in hotspots. In line with the theory presented before, refugees have tried to occupy public spaces, and when it was not possible or it revealed to be an unsuccessful strategy, they resorted to more disruptive forms of protests. In addition, solidarity movements and the use of social media platforms played a fundamental role in rendering refugee protests visible. This appears to have been especially the case for the Moria hotspot.

## **Conclusion**

Many points emerge from the preliminary findings based on the analysis of social and mass media. Living conditions of hotspots function as a trigger for protests, however, as the campaign “open the island” in Greece shows, the whole hotspot approach is contested. Hotspots have been conceived for being places of protracted invisibilisation. As it was shown, this appears to be particularly evident in the hotspots in Lampedusa and Moria with their offshore position and prolonged stay.

In contradiction with the concept of “bare life” expressed by Agamben (1998), the working paper shows that hotspots can be considered as what Isin and Rygiel (2007) call “abject spaces”. In fact, through the double geographical position of isolation (hotspots located in islands), states are here trying to render refugees ‘inaudible and invisible’ (*Ibidem*:187). Therefore, states are trying to eliminate the possibility for refugees to get public spaces to express their grievances and are thus seeking to prevent refugees from exercising their political agency. However, in line with the theory on migrant political agency in spaces of detention presented before, refugees have tried to

overcome this situation of isolation through the adoption of more radical forms of protests. As stated in the open letter of the Sappho square protest, the hunger strike started after peaceful and less radical forms of protests did not lead to having their demands met.. Thus, the only option left was to deploy more disruptive strategies of protest. Furthermore, the participation of refugee women and minors in the hunger strike was seen as the very last resort to achieve the mobilisation of the society and as the last recourse to protect the dignity and freedom of the protestors.

The protests usually go hand in hand with the help of support groups and organisations (formed both by migrants and civil society). People who are not directly experiencing the sense of isolation imposed on refugees by the hotspot approach have provided their emotional and material support through advocacy campaigns, legal aid, rendering the protests and their demands visible on social media sites.

In other words, refugees try to overcome the situation of isolation and limbo that they are experiencing in hotspots by engaging in protests (which often requires them to deploy extreme strategies) and relying on support movements.

Additionally, with their potential of virtually reaching everyone in the world, social media has been actively used as a strategy to overcome isolation and to express and convey different ranges of emotions aiming to represent the protestors on their own terms and conditions. In fact, appeal to collective solidarity based on the respect of international rights has been used both as a strategy to mobilize supporters (Jasper, 1998) and to escape from the stereotypical idea of refugees as victims or threats, reaffirming in this way a narrative of subjects with agency (Lewis, 2006).

The different acts of resistance have been made public in forms of open letters - such as in the case of Lesbos- or through the release of videos -such as in the case of Lampedusa. However, as shown by the study, in places that are characterised by “mixed flow” it will be more challenging to get a stage to express the grievance of the protestors and thus to overcome the situation of isolation. As it was demonstrated, protestors in Lampedusa receive less attention from social and mass media than in Lesbos. In fact, if in the latter case protests were followed almost daily, with social media reporting the releases of the protestors, in the former one it appears to be less the case. This could be partially explained by the different composition of the two islands. As already mentioned before, while in the case of Lesbos there is a proliferation of NGOs and activists coming from all over the world that are based on the island, in Lampedusa this does not happen. In addition, there are differences in the access to international

protection and thus a different perception of the protestors that is more favourable in the case of Lesbos, the symbol of the refugee crisis. In fact, we have seen how in the case of the protests in Moria the protestors themselves have appealed to collective solidarity remarking the Geneva Convention and have articulated all their requests (freedom of movement, better treatments, faster procedures and so forth) connecting them directly with their condition of being refugees. However, due to the restricted visibility on social and mass media in the case of Lampedusa, it is highly difficult with the present preliminary study to understand if and how protestors use different strategies or frame their discourse differently than in the case of Lesbos.

We can thus conclude that the preliminary findings based on the analysis of social and mass media can give us valuable insights on the protests but are not sufficient for providing a full understanding of the dynamics in place in the two case-studies and can only partially broaden the view on the protests. Indeed, the analysis of social and mass media cannot replace qualitative methods focused on direct contact and observation. Thus, a qualitative study with an extended period of time in the field could help shed light on different issues such as strategies used by the protestors, the decision-making process and relations between protestors, supporters and journalists. For example, the differences between social and mass media (expressed here in terms of impact on the protests and link with supporters and protestors) should be deeper analysed. The same discourse applies to the unclear relation between support groups and refugees. For instance, in the case of the published open letter, it is impossible to establish who decided to publish it without a previous period of observation in the field. Were the protestors the ones who decided to publish it as a strategy to overcome the sense of isolation or, on the contrary, was it a decision taken by support groups? Moreover, how were the contents of the open letter decided?

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