

# Contesting Migration

Efi Savvides

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The event is part of the parallel programme of the exhibition *Fluid Persistence* (12.12.2025-31.05.2026)

like the one that took place on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the shipwreck in 2023 and on which the film focuses, exemplify how the people of Lampedusa honour the memory of the dead who drowned at 3 in the morning in 2013. The documentary's main narrative point is the open sea around Lampedusa, the only place where tourist boats meet with those of migrants. The absence of migrants who eventually arrive on the island by rescue boats from the island's public space, since the introduction of new policies to transfer migrants quickly to the reception centre and from there to Sicily, contrasts with the infrastructures of memory of the shipwreck that dominate the space, as well as with the liveliness of tourist entertainment on summer evenings. This is the normality of life in Lampedusa that the film interrogates.

## **Melilla, 2026**

The fourth documentary in the series mainly focuses on the towering fence along the border line between the Spanish enclave of Melilla in north Africa and Morocco. The 10-meter-high, 11-kilometer-long fence consists of three rows of wire equipped with surveillance technology on both sides and is an example of the European Union's policy to securitize migration. The contrast here is between the infrastructure of the fence and the multicultural character of the city, which, despite being a military zone where national symbols dominate the landscape, also proudly celebrates the coexistence of the "4 religions": Catholicism, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism – and the cultural groups that make it up.



Melilla, 2026  
(video still)  
one channel video,  
colour, sound, 27:02

## **Frontline States**

The juxtapositions in the films draw attention to the tensions that mire reception locations in the Mediterranean in the current moment. Each of them evidences polarised narratives that the political everyday of these locations today has somewhat reconciled. The humanitarian moment of 2015 was a critical one for some of these places – for others earlier, and still others later. These moments brought strain and hardship on both local and migrant communities. And it has been scarring on many fronts: re-organising solidarity communities, straining the sense of security, rendering intolerance a justified approach, and ultimately allowing hostile environment policies to take hold.

These policies, of pushbacks, megastructures and criminalisation have been forged through contention, critique, and outright clashes and in the legal sphere. As the wider research has found, they have at times been fought by pro- and anti- migrant activists alike. But they have ultimately prevailed, in building up what are today considered by the EU to be successful frontline states. The bitter narratives that persist on both sides belie this success.

Olga Demetriou  
Durham, April 2026

Lampedusa, 2025  
(video still)  
one channel video,  
colour, sound, 12:28

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arts centre  
associated with the  
pierides foundation  
[old powerhouse]



Contesting Migration  
<https://contestingmigration.dur.ac.uk>

## Contesting Migration

The films comprising the *Contesting Migration* series have been produced in the context of a research project exploring the contentious political dynamics of refugee reception locations. The films represent part of a long-term collaboration between visual artist Efi Savvides and myself, as lead anthropologist in the academic research of the project.

Bringing together anthropologists and political scientists, *Contesting Migration* explores the impact on local communities of grand global policy shifts in the governance of migration over the last decade. Shifts from refugee protection provided by the UN Refugee Convention towards the management of migration and asylum under the EU Migration Pact or the Global Compacts, have reconfigured the politics of protection redefining the roles of states and communities on the way. The project focuses on the experience of this shift in multiple refugee reception sites in the Mediterranean: Ceuta and Melilla in Spain, Lampedusa and Trieste in Italy, Evros, Lesvos, Samos, and Chios in Greece, and Kokkinotrimithia in Cyprus. These sites distil but also magnify the broader socio-political dynamics that refugee flows set in motion, primarily between pro- and anti-migration actors. They also, sometimes put such assumed dynamics in question, pointing to nuanced and complex ways of articulating and understanding contention.

Reception sites not only condense and amplify the processes of contestation, they are also valuable sites of political mobilization because they become targets for intervention and potentially lightning rods for actions and activism, both pro- and anti-migrant. They thus represent battlegrounds for contestation of migration, from which cues emerge that potentially influence wider debates at other scales and levels. In contextualising these actions, *Contesting Migration* explores activists' relations to refugees and to institutional actors, and shifts the emphasis on the little understood relation between pro- and anti-migrant mobilization – how groups develop their identities through mutual interactions that take multiple forms. This view refocuses on on-the-ground activism of party members, refugee hosts, campaigners, people taking to the streets, and local residents whose lives have otherwise intersected with such activism.

The project's academic research<sup>1</sup> is complemented by a series of four films and four legal reports,<sup>2</sup> which provide further perspectives on this activism, illuminating the contexts that give rise to it. In the case of the films, the attempt is to document the perspectives of people living in these locations, while in the case of the reports, they seek to chart the legal terrain within which national migration policy is formed and contested.

## Visualising Contention

The films explore the textures of Europe's carceral migration regime. In development since 2015, EU policies against irregular migration have aimed to unify practices of border control, asylum procedures, reception and detention conditions, and deportation. Central to this effort is the increasing

securitisation of movement and invisibilization of migrants in locations of first reception, many of which are small communities in the Mediterranean, each embroiled in its own set of political dynamics vis-à-vis regional and state authorities. In some places, like Greece and Cyprus, this means the construction of large-capacity, multi-purpose infrastructures or the extension of existing facilities. In others, like Italy and Spain, it means faster procedures that see migrants moved to further locations and their interaction with residents minimised. The films approach this process from the perspective of these small places, offering glimpses of the political contestations that unfold there.

Methodologically, the films are oriented towards the ethnographic framing of the project as a whole. They are informed by earlier collaborations between myself and Savvides over the meaning and practice of art and anthropology, function of vignettes as tools of presentation and analysis, and the ways in which political

<sup>1</sup> Ongoing and in:

Kenti Kranidioti, Maria. 2026. Beyond the far-right: an ethnographic approach to cultural and institutional grievances in migration-centred mobilisations in Cyprus and Greece. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, pp.1-26;  
Kourou, Theodoros. 2026. Contextualizing Anti-Migrant Sentiment: A Comparative Ethnography of Lesvos and Samos, Greece. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 41(1), pp.235-253;  
Pescinski, Janina. 2026. The politicization of migrants' onward movements from Italy to France. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, pp.1-13.

<sup>2</sup> Bouchetel, Marion. 2026. "Contesting Migration in Law: Legal Perspectives in Pro- and Anti- Migration Mobilisation in Greece", *Contesting Migration Legal Report Series 1/2026*, Durham, May 2026.

Albanese, Antonina. 2026. "Contesting Migration in Law: Legal Perspectives in Pro- and Anti- Migration Mobilisation in Italy", *Contesting Migration Legal Report Series 2/2026*, Durham, May 2026.

Vaughan-Liñero, Daisy. 2026. "Contesting Migration in Law: Legal Perspectives in Pro- and Anti- Migration Mobilisation in Spain". *Contesting Migration Legal Report Series 3/2026*, Durham, May 2026.

Demetriou, Olga, Antonina Albanese, Marion Bouchetel, and Daisy Vaughan-Liñero. 2026. "Contesting Migration in Law: Legal Perspectives in Pro- and Anti- Migration Mobilisation in the Mediterranean". *Contesting Migration Legal Report Series 4/2026*, Durham, May 2026.

engagement is manifested in art and in ethnography.<sup>3</sup> Together, they exemplify four different ways of approaching ethnographically-informed work,<sup>4</sup> here in the practice of filming: foregrounding contextual political dynamics (*Camp Pournara*), conducting in-depth interviews (*Camps Vathy-Zervou*), observing commemorative events (*Lampedusa*), and collecting oral history narratives (*Melilla*). In this sense, the films are also an experimentation quartet in the terrain of film and ethnography.

The collection is thus inflected by filmic narrative and visual mediation. In Cyprus, the context of a multiply-policed border and distrust of local, national and UN authorities provides the substrate for polarised positioning. In Samos, the selected interviews speak of contention – between activist groups, but also between political actors, activists, migrants, and the state; the tension in places is palpable, and the narratives stripped down to expose the raw aspects of contention, while images offer a cinematic juxtaposition and ambivalence: the abandoned old camp still haunting the town of Vathy, the megastructure of the new camp dominating the hills of Zervou, the graves at Heraion tucked away, the patrol ships in port blending into a seemingly serene everyday, the migrants' social centre offering a quiet commentary largely unseen. In Lampedusa, the quiet and unobtrusive observation of the commemorative event on the eve of 3 October 2023, 10 years after a fateful shipwreck logs the sights and sounds of memory: a silent march, flower stems on the waves, names recounted and fleeting, images that continue to haunt, resting places that offer respite and remembrance. The solemnity seems jarring against the vigour of nightlife that must go on, sustaining Lampedusa as a tourist destination and in tension with its humanitarian reputation. And in Melilla, the singular narrative that guides the film directs the gaze along the perimeter of the iconic fence of the city turning momentarily to glimpses of the life the multiple fencing encloses, of a society proudly multicultural but also diachronically militarised and now increasingly polarising and distrustful.

Individually and collectively, therefore, the films approach the landscape of frontline states as a mix of perspectives, methods, and textures in living with Europe's new security apparatuses.

## Camp Pournara, 2023

Focusing on the area around Cyprus' main reception centre, *Pournara*, the film navigates the terrain of conflict, hostility, welcome, indignity, fear, and perseverance that local Greek- and Turkish-Cypriots, migrants, and authorities tread on a daily basis as they willingly and unwillingly interact with each other. Border materialities, the sounds of the quotidian, and discourses on politics and belonging past and present, are woven together in the film to interrogate and reconstitute the everyday reality of *Camp Pournara*. The film is a subtle commentary on the intricacies of the politics of bordering, otherness, development, and neglect.

## Camps Vathy – Zervou, 2024

The second film in the series documents some of the narratives of people living in Samos (activists, asylum-seekers, refugees, residents) and their experience of refugee reception over the years. Looking back from March 2023, when filming took place, to the turbulent years that preceded the opening of the new 8,000-capacity mega structure that is now in EU parlance the Multi-Purpose Reception and Identification Centre (MPRIC), but for Greek authorities a Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC), in the area of Zervou, the film records the narratives of state neglect and humanitarian care through which Samos residents navigate their approaches to refugees. Interposing visuals from the previous, abandoned Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) in the town of Vathy with the new structure as well as migrant social spaces and places of burial, the film juxtaposes the provision of higher accommodation standards with the multiple separations, rifts, and estrangements the new approach to migration and its infrastructures are introducing.

## Lampedusa, 2025

The third documentary in the series contrasts the two sides of Lampedusa, a tourist destination in summer time and a docking site for search and rescue vessels trawling the central Mediterranean for migrant boats in distress throughout the year. The documentary contrasts this touristic atmosphere with the journeys of hope for thousands of migrants who often end up drowning in the open sea surrounding the island. The tragic shipwreck in 2013 that claimed the lives of 368 people still marks island life to this day, both in terms of the monuments that mark Lampedusa's spatial environment, and in the commemorations that mark local daily life and remind residents of the lives of those who continue to be lost at sea. Annual commemoration events

<sup>3</sup> Demetriou, Olga. 2023. Reconsidering the vignette as method: Art, ethnography, and refugee studies. *American Ethnologist*, 50(2), pp.208-222;

Demetriou, Olga, Efi Savvides, and Akid Hassan. 2025. "One and Three Knowledges: Displacement, Art, and Anthropology" in Din-kariuki, Natalya, Subha Mukherji and Rowan Williams (eds) *Crossings: migrant knowledges, migrant forms*. Punctum Press.

<sup>4</sup> Demetriou, Olga and Antonis A. Ellinas. 2025. Varieties of Political Ethnography: Caring for the Far Right?. *Perspectives on Politics*, pp.1-19.



*Camps Vathy-Zervou*, 2024  
(video still)  
one channel video,  
colour, sound, 32:37



*Camp Pournara*, 2023  
(video still)  
one channel video,  
colour, sound, 36:51