

# Muzzling the press

*By Antonis Repanas, Journalist*

*«I have always said that Idomeni is the shame of Greece and the shame of all of Europe. Today, another page is written in this book of shame for Idomeni: the page of muzzling the media, a page reminiscent of times past, a times when newspapers in Greece had to secure the nod of the censorship committee before going to press.»*

This was the opening paragraph of an article I wrote on December 9, 2015 when I was detained at Idomeni along with three other journalists and photojournalists. The reason for our detainment? To be prevented from covering the evacuation operation at the Idomeni makeshift camp where thousands of refugees had temporarily settled in hopes that the border would reopen and they could continue their arduous journey towards central and northern Europe.

Idomeni, a village of about 150 inhabitants, found itself in the heart of the refugee crisis for approximately one year, summer 2015 to summer 2016, when over one million refugees and migrants crossed through this small speck of land in the Greek frontier, Europe's largest population shift following World War II. Thousands of men, women and children camped in the fields around a small gate at the Greece-FYROM border, in hopes that it would be unlatched at some point. Yet, as the days passed the gate opened all the more infrequently, up until it was sealed shut permanently on March 18, 2016, the date when the EU-Turkey statement was agreed upon.

## **Securing the Camps perimeter**

I contemplated the opening paragraph while standing at the Evzones police station's waiting room where we were held for well over an hour on the pretext of having our IDs checked; in the meantime, the police was securing the camp's perimeter and kept all the media representatives several kilometers away from the scene of the ongoing operations.

Throughout my experience in covering the refugee crisis, this was the first time I sensed that the Greek government was actually trying to restrict the press. Up until then, we had enjoyed unhindered access to the Idomeni camp: we took photos, shot videos, conducted interviews, all without any bans or restrictions, and all this in a region that is considered to be a military zone since it is located on the border with FYROM.

In retrospect, I pondered if this was due to Greece being late in finding its place on the chessboard of the refugee crisis, or if the unrestrained access we had been granted at the refugee camp merely served the Greek government's strategy. In other words, if the images and stories depicting thousands of refugees living in squalid conditions on the decrepit human soul depository called *Idomeni* served the purpose of securing additional funding or led to open borders for the refugees, then that was reason enough to allow journalists to roam freely at the camp and provide unlimited news coverage.

## **Politicians are like chess players**

This wasn't far from the truth, indeed. When it comes to the global refugee crisis, politicians are much like chess players engaging in a series of gambits where human lives are used as pawns. Our arrest on December 9, 2015 was the first of the Greek government's moves to muzzle the press; this move was followed by numerous others so as to form a pattern, a pattern which at times gave forth instances of suppression and censorship and at other times allowed unhindered media reporting in order to either influence public opinion or sway the chessboard opponents and enable the Greek government to achieve specific advantages, at least communication wise.

The reason given for our arrest on December 9, 2016 was, of course, ludicrous. Speaking on camera, Migration Policy Minister Yannis Mouzalas said that the removal of journalists from the camp was a perfectly normal tactic because, based on his experience, there are never any journalists present during such police operations throughout the world.

Deputy Citizen Protection Minister Nikos Toskas stated that our removal had taken place for the sake of our own safety, as there were reports of some refugees being armed with knives and machetes and there was a risk of journalists being attacked. The explanation given by Mouzalas was a cynical and indirect, albeit clear admission of an intention to muzzle the press, while Toskas' justification, was both awkward and absurd, given that we had never encountered a single problem during our stays in the camp.

## **Hidden journalists removed**

During the second evacuation of Idomeni on May 24, 2016, the Greek government once again restricted media access to the area. International and national media were provided with image and video footage taken from the police helicopter and from the state broadcaster, the only media that was periodically allowed in the camp.

The night before the evacuation, police officers conducted searches throughout Idomeni and removed journalists who had hidden in the camp in order to cover the operation. Several journalists were discovered inside refugee tents and in buildings surrounding the Idomeni railway station.

However, there have been numerous attempts at silencing the press when it comes to the refugee crisis, which go far and beyond Idomeni. So long as the chess game played between European countries carries on, governments will keep attempting to influence the press either by suppressing the flow of information, or by promoting news images and human stories to their advantage. From the outset of the refugee crisis, European leaders have been engaged in a barrage of mutual recriminations as to who is responsible for the humanitarian emergency, or which country should and which shouldn't accept refugees and migrants in its territory.

## **Whitewashing the situation**

The enforcement of an entry ban to journalists in all of Greece's refugee

encampments is merely one of the measures drawn by the Greek government in its effort to whitewash the situation and explain on its own terms where the EU funds earmarked for refugee housing have gone.

In November of 2016, a number of photos were released from the Petra camp located on the hills of Mt. Olympus, the only one in Greece set up exclusively for Yazidis, a religious minority in Iraq who are being hunted by the ISIS and were forced to flee their country. The photos were taken by the refugees themselves, as well as by members of NGOs and several volunteers, in an effort to show the world the freezing conditions the refugees were living in.

In January of 2017, yet another series of photographs surfaced, again taken by the refugees, NGO members and volunteers, depicting the snow-covered summer tents in the Moria hotspot of Lesbos. These shameful pictures sent the Greek government into a scramble to find eleventh hour solutions for refugee housing during the harsh winter months.

### **Deploring living conditions kept under wraps**

Needless to say, the media entry ban was quite convenient for the state: on the one hand, it kept these shocking pictures from being shown around the world and, on the other, it led the refugees into believing that the media had no longer an interest in them.

Many times during my talks with refugees living in camps, where I would either sneak in or enter with a valid permit that was hard to come by and was secured by working as a field producer or as a fixer for international news outlets, I sensed the refugees' bitterness who felt they had been abandoned by the media. Only after I explained to them that there was an entry ban enforced upon journalists did they understand the reason why the deplorable living conditions experienced by thousands of families were being kept under wraps.

In July of 2017, accompanied by an Al Jazeera English TV crew, we were denied access to the Souda camp in Chios on the claim that it was the refugees themselves who did not want cameras on the premises, although I was told by refugees outside the camp that they didn't have any problem with TV crews entering the camp and filming their daily routine.

We encountered a similarly hostile stance from the police at the island's Vial refugee camp when we underwent an unwarranted scrutiny of our ID cards, even though we had a scheduled meeting with NGO representatives.

The pots of money already spent - and still being spent - by Europe for the refugee crisis are seemingly endless. And, as we all know, the more money involved, the more interests follow, which is when the press becomes a hindrance. The sordid living conditions experienced by refugees and migrants who are detained on the islands of Greece cannot adequately justify the allocation of EU funds for refugee housing.

The blame game carried out between the state and local governments over the conditions of the refugee camps on the islands is not only failing to produce any plausible answers, but also reinforces the attempts to conceal the problem by imposing a media entry ban on the island-based camps.

Nonetheless, this is in sharp contrast to the country's mainland, where the media are occasionally given permission to enter the refugee camps. Why? Because refugee camps located in the mainland are in far better conditions than those in the islands and this provides the Greek government the opportunity to show a better image to the outside world.

### **Then pen is mightier than the sword**

No one is completely in the clear when it comes to Europe's refugee crisis. It's a peculiar chess game played amongst countries, organizations and special interest groups, with the refugees carrying out the sacrificial role of pawns.

Journalists are called upon to conduct their duties under unfavorable and difficult conditions. We have forgotten in recent years that "the pen is mightier than the sword". The stance adopted by the Greek government ought to awaken us, lest we forget that informing the public is our foremost calling.

Even if in recent years we have lost a considerable degree of credibility, we must seize this opportunity and regain the public's trust. It's in our common interest, both ours and the political institutions', to restore the public's trust. In this sense, freedom of the press can only be mutually beneficial.