

HOW TO BUILD A DETENTION CENTRE

THE CASE OF VASTRIA IN LESVOS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Vastria Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC) on Lesbos marks a strategic shift in Greek and European migration policy. Unlike the overcrowded and chaotic detention centres of the past, such as the one in Moria, authorities now favour isolated, enclosed facilities with strict surveillance. Vastria, located deep in a pine forest 30km from Mytilene, is a prime example of this new model, combining biometric monitoring, geographical restrictions, and severely limited access.

Despite widespread local opposition—especially following protests at Karava in 2020—the construction advanced through a patchwork of legislative amendments and repeated revisions of environmental permits.

The Vastria structure spans approximately 240,000 square meters, with a total built area exceeding 41,000 square meters. It includes a reception and identification facility, a pre-removal detention centre, designated zones for vulnerable groups, administrative offices, sports facilities, and quarantine areas. Its location—far from the city, next to the island's landfill site, and within a highly flammable forest—is seen as intentional: to isolate migrants from the public sphere and limit civil society or local community involvement and civic oversight.

The project faced repeated legal challenges due to procedural violations and environmental concerns. The most significant decision came from the Plenary of the Council of State, which annulled the issued permits due to the lack of an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)—a legal requirement for facilities of this scale. In response, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum submitted a retroactive EIA and temporarily reduced the facility's capacity to 2,952 people before raising it again to 5,001—likely in order to secure continued European funding. Despite these manoeuvres, the courts ruled that even a smaller facility violated environmental standards and declared illegal the planned deforestation of 35,000 pine trees for the access road. Regional authorities—such as the North Aegean Region and the Municipalities of Mytilene and Western Lesbos—filed appeals and objections, citing both substantive risks and the lack of democratic consultation.

Nevertheless, the Ministry proceeded with a tactic of administrative attrition. With every legal challenge, new Joint Ministerial Decisions were issued, altering technical descriptions just enough to bypass annulments or suspensions. This pattern reveals a broader political strategy: maintaining the project by undermining institutional oversight through bureaucratic sleight of hand. This reflects a political will to legitimize a regime of legal exception in the name of migration control.

Local reactions to the Vastria CCAC have been marked by shifting alliances, pressure, and strategic silence. The North Aegean Region, under Governor Kostas Moutzouris, initially led the main opposition—particularly after the violent clashes at Karava in February 2020, which temporarily halted the project. His stance, framed in terms of national sovereignty and limiting state arbitrariness, was electorally rewarded. However, over time, the Region adopted a softer stance, limiting its actions to legal appeals without sustained public confrontation.

The Municipality of Mytilene showed a more dramatic reversal. Under its previous Mayor, Stratis Kytelis, who was aligned with the central government, the municipality actively supported the construction of the new structure, arguing that its remote location would protect the city from further strain. This narrative was reinforced by the closure of all alternative facilities, such as the municipal centre at Kara Tepe. Only after the 2023 municipal elections, under new mayor Panagiotis Christofas, did the Municipality of Mytilene formally withdraw its support and initiate new legal actions.

In contrast, the Municipality of Western Lesvos consistently opposed the project. However, its limited jurisdiction—mainly over the access road—reduced its ability to intervene effectively. Civil society and the solidarity movement have been gradually eroded. The once-vibrant solidarity movement that emerged during the operation of the Moria camp was weakened by state pressure, criminal prosecutions, administrative hurdles, and attacks from local reactionary groups. Simultaneously, the mandatory registration of NGOs in a state registry—along with opaque approval processes for accessing the facilities—restricted their presence and reduced civic oversight to a handful of state-sanctioned actors.

The COVID-19 pandemic was used as a pretext for further disruption, while threats of prosecution against protesters—many of whom still face charges—fostered a climate of fear. Many international organizations fully withdrew. This vacuum has resulted in a condition of passive acceptance of the proposed structure. The population, exhausted by years of instability, is now portrayed as “in agreement” with the project. In reality, a form of controlled consent has prevailed: opposition is rendered impossible through legal, geographical, and economic constraints. European funding, local construction contracts, and targeted tax incentives have created a web of dependence that isolates dissent and fragments collective resistance. The Vastria site lies within one of the most fire-prone ecosystems in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Vastria forest, composed mainly of pine trees, has lacked a management plan for years. According to the European Forest Fire Information System and expert reports, the risk of a mega-fire is already high and is expected to peak once the facility becomes operational. The approved fire protection plan includes internal fire protection measures, a fire station, firebreak zones, water tanks, and AI-powered detection systems with cameras. However, critics highlight the absence of a second escape route from the structure, the ineffectiveness of fire

zones during strong winds, and the fact that critical infrastructure (such as the fire detection system) remains unfinished. The emergency escape road, mandated as a 2024 environmental condition, hasn't even been mapped—escalating the danger once the site opens.

These shortcomings violate both EU and national environmental law and the fundamental precautionary principle. In the event of a mega-fire, the consequences could be catastrophic—not only for the environment but also for human lives. Legal experts argue that if authorities proceed with knowledge of these risks, criminal liability may arise in the case of casualties. If completed and put into operation, the Vastria CCAC would institutionalize a de facto detention regime under the guise of “controlled reception.” Although not officially classified as a prison, the facility is designed to impose strict limitations on freedom of movement—via perimeter fencing, curfews, mandatory nightly presence, and internal surveillance systems. These constraints, combined with geographical restriction policies prohibiting residents from leaving the island, create a legal grey zone, denying freedom without formal legal process. While the law allows administrative detention for up to 25 days, in practice, restrictions often last much longer—especially for rejected asylum seekers, who may be held in pre-removal centres for up to 18 months.

Surveillance infrastructure further reinforces this architecture of control. The Vastria CCAC is expected to incorporate two AI-enhanced systems—Centaur and Hyperion—which combine biometric recognition, CCTV systems, drone surveillance, and behaviour analysis. In 2024, the Hellenic Data Protection Authority imposed a significant fine on the Ministry of Migration for serious GDPR violations, citing inadequate risk assessments and insufficient safeguards in the use of these systems. Meanwhile, in other island facilities—particularly in Samos and Lesbos—there are reports of systematic confiscation of residents' phones, limiting access to legal aid, and external oversight through restricted communications. In this context, isolation is not a side effect—it is the goal. Vastria is not merely a place of detention; it is designed to exclude its residents from the public sphere and from the protection of their rights.

Basic infrastructure remains incomplete. There is still no water supply, and the facility will need daily deliveries via tankers. At the same time, sewage disposal could impact protected local streams, while projected estimates of solid waste appear suspiciously low.

The economic footprint of Vastria's CCAC is enormous for the island—representing the second-largest public or private expenditure in decades. With over €80 million (mainly from EU funds), the project has created construction contracts, land leases, and long-term service agreements. This financial injection, along with tax incentives and administrative favours, has fostered relationships of dependency in the local community, partly explaining the reduction in opposition.

Vastria is not merely a detention center—it is the material embodiment of a European policy shift toward invisibilization, technological control, and bureaucratic exclusion. It replaces the chaotic refugee landscape with totalitarian control—at a tremendous human, environmental, and democratic cost. As of mid-2025, the project is nearly complete, but its operation is still pending due to the absence of basic infrastructure: electricity, fencing, and—most crucially—an emergency escape road. Under the current design, the centre remains a potential death trap—and a monument to a failed migration policy based on confinement rather than protection.