

Stranded on the Border of the Promised Land

Ostend's Transit Migration Problem

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[TOM CHRISTIAENS]

Since the 19th century, artists have allowed themselves to be seduced by the charms of the Belgian seaside resort of Ostend. But in recent years, the seaport has also been a magnet for refugees trying to cross the Channel to England illegally, in search of a better life. However, the gate to the promised land is heavily barred and bolted for these transit migrants.

'This evening, I'll risk it again,' Cucus says determinedly. For the third time already he will try to board a lorry that is going to cross the Channel by ferry to Ramsgate, in Great Britain. Will he, as is so often the case, cut open the canvas of a semi-trailer, or cling onto an undercarriage? And how is he hoping to outwit the CO₂ scanners, the heartbeat detectors and the police dogs? Too many questions and not a single answer. Cucus holds his cards close to his chest. 'The police can read my mind.' The 45-year-old Tunisian had worked for the previous five years as a taxi-driver in London, but when his work permit was not renewed, he was deported from the country. 'I want to be with my wife and daughter. Is that so abnormal?'

Cucus is one of the dozens of paperless refugees who try every day to reach England via the port of Ostend. They are called transit migrants, since they are birds of passage. They mainly come from Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Palestine and Iraq and have fled from their homeland for political or social reasons. One of these is homosexuality, but talking about this with them is taboo. In recent years it has been striking that one out of ten fortune-hunters is a minor. Twelve-year-old children are no longer an exception.

Just how many of these undocumented travellers live in the seaside resort nobody knows for sure. Just under fifty, the town administration asserts – 250 according to the CAW, the only organisation on the Belgian coast that takes care of illegal aliens. The police and welfare organisations are well aware that the number of transit migrants in Ostend has greatly increased in recent years. The Belgian and French coastlines function in this respect as communicating vessels. 'Because of the tough dissuasive policy in Calais, and certainly since the closing of the refugee camp in Sangatte, they more often come to Ostend,' the head of CAW, Tine Syns, states. 'It's like seagulls. If they are chased away from the centre of the town, they move to the suburbs. Transit migrants also move away from places where things get too hot.'



Drop-in centre

Ten o'clock. Now and then people walk into the CAW drop-in centre, in the heart of the town. While five minutes further on the latest fashion is being bought, here an old man is handing out sandwiches, yoghurt and apple juice to some refugees. The expiry dates of some of the products have already passed. Even so, the food is gratefully accepted. The Ostend man comes along every day with food packages. He was nearly nicknamed *Papa Noël* because of it. 'If he wasn't here, we'd all go hungry', says Ramzi in amazingly good English. 'For, forgive me for saying this, the Belgians are a cold lot, they don't care about people worse off than themselves. People spit and glower at us as if we were criminals.'

Ramzi fled from Tunisia and ended up in Ostend via France. You find him every morning at the drop-in centre. To eat, for a cup of coffee, to take a shower, to relax in front of the computer or TV, or simply to wile away his loneliness. Every Tuesday, a legal adviser visits the drop-in centre, and on Thursdays a nurse to provide minor medical assistance. Those seriously ill are referred to local doctors, who often treat them for free. 'The centre is the only place where we feel safe and are not constantly harassed,' says Ramzi, who has his leg in plaster. 'Broke it when I had to run from the police.'



Every morning, the CAW is paid a visit by about 60 undocumented migrants. In the afternoon, the centre is open for deprived Ostenders. This calls for streamlined assistance. Sometimes the demand for help is greater than the welfare workers can cope with. Particularly in spring, when there are the most transit migrants in Ostend – between 300 and 500, according to the CAW – it is all hands on deck at the drop-in centre. Then harsh words may be uttered, and small fires need to be put out. For anyone staying in a foreign country and suffering from hunger can get desperate from time to time and prepared to violate regulations. Even so, no criminal behaviour is tolerated at the centre apparently. Refugees who go too far – stealing a roll can sometimes lead to a brawl – will be dealt with by the group itself.

‘We, too, as a welfare organisation, have had to learn how to treat this new group of paperless people,’ Tine Wyns says. When the CAW came into contact with transit migrants for the first time, in 2008, there was considerable tension between the migrants, the staff and the local homeless. In 2010 the pressure was off for a while, when, with the aid of subsidies from the Flemish authorities, it was possible to open a separate day centre for the undocumented migrants. But these subsidies were a one-off measure, and the centre had to close again after a year.

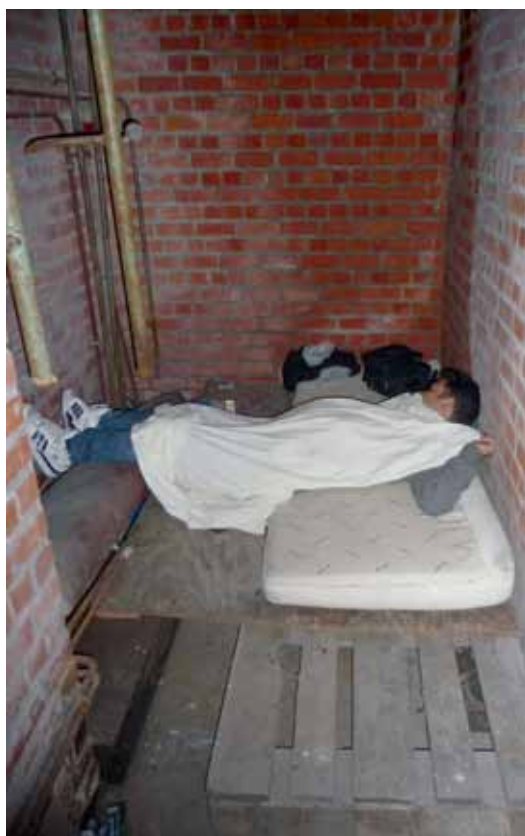
Today, the transit migrants form a fixed group within the operations of the Ostend CAW. But apart from a small provincial subsidy, the organisation received no extra money from the authorities because of this. ‘You may wonder whether transit migrants really belong to our target group. After all, they are travelling through and do not intend to stay here.’ Tine Wyns raises the question purely rhetorically. ‘The CAW has the mission to help those most vulnerable in our society. We make no distinction on the basis of statute or land of origin. Which is why we also take in these undocumented people. No matter how much flak we occasionally get for doing so. It is claimed, for example, that the help we give entices more refugees to Ostend. Rubbish, of course. As long as there is a port here, people will want to try to cross the Channel to England via our town.’

A better life

'A family, a small house, a job and peace of mind – is that too much to ask?' Hos-sion repeats this probably three times while hiding his tear-stained face in his hands. The Algerian is only 23, but all hopes of a better future seem lost. He has tuberculosis, a disease that is found in people living in poverty and bad conditions.

Hamid Hisari knows them all – the dramatic account of people stranded in Ostend. As an intercultural intermediary, he is their most important contact person at the CAW. They knock on his door for help with issues related to food, housing, medicine and legal dossiers – or simply to pour out their troubles. 'On the run and in search of a better life. All refugees tell the same story,' Hisari says. 'The story of their life is often so harrowing that it becomes implausible and they have to tone down the facts if anyone is to believe them.'

It all sounds familiar to Hisari, for he himself is a political refugee from Afghanistan. His brother and eleven other family members have all been murdered, and he has not heard anything from his father since he was abducted in 2001. Four years ago he arrived in Belgium with a diploma in political and social sciences and international relations in his pocket. He speaks no less than nine languages, including Russian, Arabic and Dutch. There are only a few migrants in Ostend that the CAW intermediary cannot talk with. And they also confide a great deal to him.



Most of the refugees are still in contact with their family. But what they tell the home front does not always tally with reality. 'When they ring their parents, they often give a rosier picture of the situation than is the case,' Hisari relates. 'Since their parents have often paid a hefty sum of money for their journey – sometimes to human traffickers – they do not want to disappoint them. They are also too ashamed to admit that they have to survive in Belgium under bad conditions. Some of them dare not return, because they have borrowed money from their family for the journey and are no longer able to pay it back.'

The migrants who are able to speak without fear emphasise that they have no greater wish than to remain in their own country. 'Believe it or not,' Tunisian Ramzi says, 'I fled because it was dangerous. I won't return until my country is once more a democracy. Then I will pick up my former life once again.'

But before that comes about, these transit migrants have set their sights on only one destination: England. And Ostend is the port to freedom, to their



promised land. Some of them talk about it as if it were a paradise – the new Valhalla. And do not dare readjust that picture. 'Often it is all they have to hold on to, their only hope of survival,' Hisari says. Most of the migrants want to go to England because they have family and friends there, because they believe that there are loads of jobs there, and particularly because they say they will not be constantly 'harassed' by the police.

Dissuasive policy

Police: no word evokes more anger and fear in the Ostend refugees. Police are said to let their dogs loose on them to maul them, to beat up illegal aliens, pee on their clothes, tear up the Koran, throw them naked into cells and leave them



there for days without food or drink.

Philip Caestecker, superintendent of the Ostend police, knows the grim stories that circulate about his units – and they irritate him immensely. ‘How many times do we have to defend ourselves against such fabrications? I can understand that the police don’t arouse much sympathy among the illegal migrants and certain welfare organisations, but I’m fed up with us being portrayed as monsters and man-hunters.’

An enquiry conducted by Comité P, the external body that controls Belgian policing, exonerated the police almost entirely of all allegations.

‘You know, I really do understand the difficult humanitarian situation in which many of these refugees find themselves,’ Superintendent Caestecker says. ‘They are sometimes poor souls who have paid suspect characters a fortune to get to Belgium. I can even manage to understand a person stealing because he is hungry, though that doesn’t mean I approve of it. But the law is the law, and facts do not lie. In recent years, more and more illegal transit migrants have come to Ostend and are increasingly causing trouble and committing petty crimes. They also increase the feeling of insecurity in the town. As a police force, we have the task of dealing with criminal offences and tracking down people who are staying in this country without a valid permit.’

And the officials responsible for order, the port and town authorities, are doing so by means of an increasingly active dissuasive policy. In autumn 2011, Operation Zephyr began. Local police units and the maritime police search specifically for transit migrants several times a week. Anyone unable to produce their papers is rounded up, locked up for a maximum of 24 hours and on release is ordered by the Immigration Service to leave the country. Almost a year after the launching of Operation Zephyr, the police had carried out over a thousand arrests during almost 100 operations, an average of ten refugees per operation.



The harbour area itself has been more heavily secured in order to keep out undesired visitors. Last year, €400,000 was invested in new high fences and hi-tech cameras, so that today the harbour area is a sealed-off island.

Reports appear in the press that cast doubt on the results of the Ostend dissuasive policy. In the summer of 2012 it was said that during the first half of the year 374 illegal migrants were picked up in the port of Ostend. That was 40% lower than during the same period the previous year. The reason for the decrease was not immediately apparent, but the town expressed satisfaction with the results. The police also announced a marked fall in the number of thefts from cars. Many property crimes in Ostend, car break-ins and shoplifting in particular, are blamed on people without papers. As a result of the tightened controls, the police also noted fewer buildings broken into by squatters in the town centre and a reduced feeling of insecurity.

Even so, refugees continue every day to play a cat-and-mouse game with the police, in the hope of being able to climb unseen aboard a ferry for England. 'Since the police have stepped up controls, the number of migrants in Ostend has not fallen; it is just that they are less visible in the street scene because they hide themselves away better and come out less during the daytime,' says CAW employee Hisari. 'They now walk around in smaller groups so as to be less conspicuous. But they still want to get to England, that hasn't changed. Every month probably another thirty may make the crossing.'

The transit migrants also find better ways of getting round the harbour controls. They avoid the CO₂ scanners by breathing out into plastic bags, and put the apparatus that detects heartbeats on the wrong track by wrapping themselves in aluminium foil.

Police Superintendent Philip Caestecker also knows about these techniques. He admits that the dissuasive policy in Ostend offers no structural solution for the transit migration issue in his town. 'You won't hear me saying that as a result of our campaign to tighten things up there are fewer undocumented people in Ostend,'

Caestecker says. 'I can only state that we have got the negative consequences of their being here – the nuisance and petty crime – under control, and have even been able to reduce them. The problem of transit migration, and probably that of the organised networks of human smugglers and traffickers, is one that the politicians will have to resolve at an international level. As long as nothing happens there, we are simply beating our head against a brick wall.'

The welfare workers often use this expression as well when transit migration is the subject of conversation. Hisari doesn't mince matters: 'Transit migration is an insoluble problem, but not a single politician dares touch it with a bargepole, for it doesn't win any votes,' he states firmly. 'An organisation must be set up as soon as possible that provides these transit migrants with better information about their situation, offers them legal advice, discusses their possibilities on the labour market, and gives them a realistic picture of the European countries of which they have such a utopic view. In that way, you prepare them for a return to their own country.'

Rubbish dump

'Not even a dozen scanners and cameras will stop me getting across to England,' Hossion predicts. The former policeman, who claims he fled Iraq after death threats, was stranded in Ostend after peregrinations via Greece and France. He has already been here a year.

Would I like to know what he does during the daytime to kill the time? In the morning he goes to the drop-in centre to freshen up, in the afternoon he looks for a place to sleep. He is prepared to show me his hiding place. Along with his Algerian friend Moustafa they walk through the harbour area, past large cranes and boats, and hundreds of metres of fences spiked with barbed wire. 'This is my five-star hotel,' says Hossion, pointing at a deserted shed. 'This is where I slept last night, along with three others, until the police chased us out this morning.' A dirty mattress amidst rubble, discarded furniture and rats. A rubbish dump - that is the best way of describing his sleeping place. Moustafa asks me to take a photo: 'Otherwise people won't believe us. Everyone thinks we tell lies and lead a life of ease here – but this is the reality.'

Hossion and Moustafa show me some other sleeping places: a rusty sloop, a collapsed warehouse, an empty house. On the run from the police, they have to sleep at a different location every night, in and around the harbour or in the town centre. In the Maria-Hendrikapark – known in Ostend as 't Bosje – dozens of people without papers used to stay. Since the police have been checking it regularly, it has become a no-go zone for the homeless.

We stop for a while on the bridge by the harbour. 'Every day we come here to look at the ferry,' Moustafa says. 'One day, it will take us with it to England.' What follows is an account of the beauty of London. His GSM interrupts his account. News from the other side: the previous night, four Algerians managed to reach Ramsgate. Moustafa's eyes gleam with hope. 'Have you ever seen Big Ben?' Before I can even answer, the two refugees nervously make off, in different directions. A police car comes into view. ■