

Interview Series: “Global Deportation and Detention Regimes”

Organized by Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin

Interview with Detention Landscapes

As the violence migrants face is often legitimized through various mechanisms—detention being one of the most acute forms—and rendered invisible, particularly when the state is the perpetrator and actively obscures it, the Detention Landscapes team intervenes by documenting the multiple forms of violence produced within migration detention facilities through a database and a knowledge hub they create. In this part of the interview series, we spoke with the team about these overlapping regimes of violence, the challenges of making them visible, the role of migrant testimonies as a critical method of knowledge production, the new EU Migration Pact, and the current state of social movements.

[Detention Landscapes](#) is an ongoing collaborative project between [Border Criminologies](#), [Mobile Info Team](#) and the [Border Violence Monitoring Network](#). The purpose of the project is to develop and maintain an open access database and knowledge hub collating evidence of violations inside immigration detention facilities across countries.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: We’re really grateful and happy to come together from three different continents, despite all the challenges of time and schedule differences. So, thank you for joining us and for all the effort you’ve put in. To start, could you tell us a bit about the Detention Landscapes project? How did the idea of creating such a map and database come about?

Andriani Fili: The Detention Landscapes project is an evidence-based open access platform that documents human rights violations inside immigration detention facilities. The project has an initial focus on Greece. It brings together an interactive map and a

searchable database that aggregates testimonies from people who have been detained, incident reports, open-source material and visual evidence so that patterns of violence and ill-treatment inside closed detention facilities can be analysed and made visible. The idea for it emerged from a decade of research, but also from civil society documentation showing that violence in detention is both routine but at the same time often invisible in official records. This came from a frustration that what we were seeing in our research and in our work was not visible otherwise. So this grew into a collaboration between the Border Criminologies network at the University of Oxford, myself, civil society organisations, Mobile Info Team and the Border Violence Monitoring Network, and technical partners, Huridocs, who developed the database infrastructure. The platform was created to address the absence of systematic and accessible evidence and to support accountability, research and advocacy. The public launch of the platform took place in 2024.

Alice T: We recognise that immigration detention in Greece is quite a longstanding practice. And whilst there has been limited monitoring of detention centres, for instance by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT), in general the existing information on detention centres and the conditions inside is limited and scattered. For anybody who wanted to find out about this issue, it would require a lot of work to find what's already been published on this. We wanted to make the process of finding information on immigration detention practices much easier, but also to organise the platform so that it brings together different kinds of knowledge. There are monitoring reports, NGO reports, direct testimony from people inside, and also from people that are directly supporting others in detention. Often direct testimonies and activist knowledge is disregarded in certain fora when we talk about conditions of detention. The platform was intended to make these forms of knowledge legible in certain official fora where efforts to challenge the detention system are happening, for instance courts of law.

Lena Karamanidou: I would add another dimension, that of time. I think Alice touched on it in her answer. Immigration detention in Greece has been a very longstanding practice. One of the difficulties I find as a researcher is to find historical information for the very early stages of detention as a practice. I think Detention Landscapes as a platform is also quite well placed to do this, to preserve information of practices of detention over time and how they change, how they are repeated, and how they continue to be violent and degrading to people who are detained.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: On the one hand your work traces the changing patterns of detention, and on the other it seeks to legitimize activist forms of knowledge production and bring different forms of knowledge into dialogue. Migrant testimonies seem to be central to this process. Could you talk a little bit about migrant testimonies as a key method in your knowledge production practices?

Alice T: I think it's always important to hear directly from people that experience detention because they have a direct, embodied knowledge of this form of state violence. And due to the extremely limited access for journalists, NGOs and even lawyers, speaking to people who have been detained is one of the only avenues we have to understand what's happening inside. Even lawyers have told us that they face barriers to entering detention centres and will only be given access to one particular part of the facility, so they don't see what's happening elsewhere. Access for NGOs is practically non-existent currently in Greece. And then of course, when you have monitoring visits from official bodies like the CPT, they're more often than not announced in advance, which means that the state has an opportunity to orchestrate a particular picture of what the conditions are like. For that reason, I think testimony is incredibly important. I also think as a practice it goes hand in hand with this idea of breaking the isolation that people face. When you are in contact with people, when you're talking to them, when you're asking them about the conditions, you're not only taking this data, but if you do it well, you're also trying to support them, trying in some way to connect them to the outside

world and convey to them that there are attempts from the outside to witness and document what is happening to them inside the prison walls.

Andriani Fili: Maybe I can add something about testimonies being sort of an ethical choice because it recognizes people with lived experience as knowledge producers rather than merely as objects of study. And also, as Alice mentioned, the fact that they provide so much knowledge and information that we wouldn't get otherwise. The testimonies can also be linked to other evidence or photos and like maybe other special descriptions. In this way, we can situate these individual accounts within patterns of violence, but also what happens in detention, so that this can inform analysis rather than them being dismissed as isolated or subjective, as it often happens with testimonies from people with lived experience of migration, but also detention.

Alice T: The way we conduct testimony interviews is through a semi-structured format where we try to cover certain points about the conditions, so that their testimonies can be utilised in monitoring and legal work, but we also leave space for people to highlight what they think is most important. And this means that it often goes beyond talking about the conditions. People ask: Why am I here? Why does this whole system exist? I've had feedback from people who, when asked about the conditions inside, get impatient and say: it's not about the food, it's not about the conditions; the point is why are we being criminalized? And they're right, of course. Sometimes people talk about forms of resistance that they're engaged in. It's very common to have hunger strikes happening or other kinds of organised protest in detention.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Working on detention is very challenging. Migrant testimonies are one way to overcome some of the difficulties involved in mapping what is happening in and around detention centers. Much of violence is often undocumented or deliberately concealed in these spaces. Because of this, there must be additional methodological challenges when you try to collect data. Even reaching migrant

testimonies can sometimes be difficult in itself. Could you talk a little bit about these challenges and how you try to overcome them?

Alice T: This is connected to the overall logic of the detention system. It is designed to isolate people and that happens in many different ways, including through the geographical locations of detention centers (all but one of the pre-removal centers in Greece are located outside of cities). There are some which are located in northern Greece in the middle of the mountains. The language used to refer to different types of facility which all, to varying degrees, control the mobility of people, also obscures the extent of the practice of detention. For instance, the so-called “open” camp of Sintiki close to the Bulgarian border appears to have functioned since summer 2025 as a *de facto* detention centre, either because people are physically prevented from exiting the camp by the security infrastructures in place and/or because of the extremely remote location of the facility—even if they made it out, where would they go? Even those detention facilities located close to Athens require a significant amount of effort to access. It’s very hard to get access as a researcher, as a journalist. I would say right now it’s impossible. In some facilities, if you know someone inside, you can visit them. There’s very little privacy when you’re on the inside. There isn’t really an opportunity to have a meaningful exchange which is not being witnessed by the police. I would say there’s a lot of logistical and practical challenges just in establishing contact. And that’s also accentuated for people that come directly from the borders to detention because they basically haven’t lived in Greece. They haven’t had an opportunity to make connections.

Andriani Fili: Testimonies from people who have been detained are often discredited by the authorities. This is not necessarily just by the authorities, but also by other NGOs who are questioning this methodology and how we verify our data. So justifying the choices we made has been difficult. The broader environment tends to prioritise official accounts, those of governments or police, over the perspectives of individuals with lived experience of detention. This is compounded by how hostile the political environment has been in

the past few years and how this also threatens data collection. I mean, access to detention centers is severely restricted. So this, again, forces us to adapt our methods and see how else we can gather evidence from detention but with us being outside of it. We are trying now to request FOIs and try to find other sources of evidence about what happens inside attention because, as Alice noted, gaining direct access is extremely difficult and often carries risks, both for us, but also for the people that we speak to.

Alice T: It's really important to document what's happening as an absolute basis for any kind of advocacy or political action. We need information. But at the same time, what we see in Greece is that even when things are documented, people don't really care if there's violence—or worse, they see it as legitimate. Such is the extent of criminalisation and dehumanisation of people coming to Greece, often expressed as latent or explicit racism/Islamophobia. A man died in a detention centre earlier this year, and it was barely covered in the press. There was also a case of two police officers working in a detention centre who were charged with torture of a man who was detained a couple of years ago. And it didn't blow up into a big scandal. This is not to say that we shouldn't continue documenting what's happening. But we are working in a context of normalised violence and racism against people on the move, and a far-right Minister of Migration in Greece who has explicitly said that the intended effect of detention is to make life unbearable to the point that people “choose” to return to the country where they hold nationality. In a sense, you could say that we are living in a moment when violence is somewhat explicit—or at least, the discourse allows for violence to happen without being challenged, whilst specific acts are concealed to protect individual perpetrators. The discourse is that people have done something wrong if they're in detention centres, which implicitly legitimates the violent conditions they are subjected to. It is not surprising that the people we speak to inside detention centres sometimes refer to these spaces as prisons and the other people detained there as criminals (this is an interesting point: even amongst detainees, there is a perception that some groups are illegitimately detained there while others are “criminal”; I think the architecture of some detention centres supports

such divisions; firstly because the design is prison-like, but also due to the spatial segregation of different communities in distinct zones within the centre—usually based on language and nationality—which seems to stoke division).

Andriani Fili: Unfortunately, it's true.

Lena Karamanidou: It's precisely because of the overall hostile environment in Greece and the repression of any kind of testimony or documenting violence in detention. This for me makes the testimonies even more important. But it is not necessarily with the caveat that we must verify everything and have other evidence to support every individual testimony. I think this is quite a dangerous trend that we've seen in Greece and elsewhere. However much evidence there is to support testimonies, they are going to be discredited for political reasons, because of dehumanisation. In the last decade or so verification, for example, through OSINT methods, has become quite a big trend in journalism and academia. We sometimes adopt this assumption that we need to verify everything. However, sometimes it's better to let a person talk, say what they have experienced and not try to position ourselves as experts that need to substantiate lived experiences. For me this very often implies that a testimony cannot be accepted unless other, often privileged "experts" located in the Global North validate it through their knowledge and authority.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Everything you said—especially the discussion on dehumanization—reminds us of how detention itself can legitimize violence, including epistemic violence. And this is not something that seems easily resolved through improvements in detention conditions alone; it brings us to the question of an abolitionist perspective on detention. What you are doing seems quite different from the approach many NGOs take, which often focuses on monitoring detention centers and advocating for improved conditions within them. But still, how do you perceive and overcome all the dilemmas of just monitoring and at the same time advocating the

abolition of the detention industrial complex itself? So do you think these two can be possible together or are there any tensions you are also feeling while doing this mapping project?

Andriani Fili: I think there's definitely a tension between the two. On the one hand, improving conditions and strengthening monitoring, as you say, on the part of NGOs and other monitoring mechanisms seems necessary and very pragmatic because this reduces immediate harm, supports legal claims and sometimes enables civil society access to these centers that would otherwise be impossible. But, as the case of Greece illustrates, even these measures do not always succeed. These reforms often operate within the logics that produce detention. And this can entrench systems that are fundamentally unjust. From an abolitionist perspective, these reforms cannot fix a system whose purpose is exclusion and control. So the only horizon is the dismantling of the detention system, and to replace this with alternatives grounded in rights, justice, mobility, and care, even if imagining such a transformation remains difficult in the current moment. From a research perspective, this has implications. The documentation and analysis we produce, should situate these abuses within the broader political economy of detention, so that this evidence can hopefully feed into abolitionist arguments and long-term transformation of how we see and approach mobility, migration and justice in general.

Alice T: I think just in reference to the platform, it could in theory support both abolitionist and more reformist approaches. Because the main thing that we're doing is making information freely available. We're not necessarily saying how that information should be used. However, at the same time, we're trying to paint a picture of systemic violence inside detention centers. And I think the logical next step, at least in my mind, is that these systems are inherently violent.

Lena Kermanidou: I agree. I think the question across Europe and beyond Europe is whether immigration detention should exist or should be abolished. If we focus on

whether conditions should be better assuming the state will be more cooperative and improve them, immigration detention is still inherently violent because the border is inherently violent. At a very basic level, it's not about conditions. The question people have asked, as mentioned earlier, is "Why am I here?" Even if a prison is beautiful, it's still a prison. If the walls are nice and prisoners have access to TV and internet, it's still going to be a prison—a place where people don't have freedom. So for me, abolition is the only end goal that makes sense. Even if we want to use the platform or other sources of information to improve immediate conditions in order to prevent harm, the end goal for me is to abolish detention and to abolish prisons.

Alice T: And I think maybe we could say in the interim period, testimony collection is the methodology that makes sense, if that is your end goal. Because it's a way that you, as I said earlier, can break this isolation. Through the methodology, you can somehow enact some kind of resistance to the system. Often when we speak to people in detention, we are the only ones that are speaking to them.

Lena Karamanidou: I would say yes, without necessarily suggesting that testimony collection is the only method. Sometimes testimony collection can be extractive. This has been an ongoing discussion within BVMN regarding our practices of testimony collection from people on the move that have been already subjected to many forms of violence. People sometimes want to tell their story, share their story. But there is a danger for organisations reinforcing a system where they mediate the telling of the story to the wider public, for example through trying to verify the "facts" of a testimony and present them as "reliable", like in a court. There are dynamics that are more complex than saying taking testimonies is a radical method on its own. We need to be sensitive to these dynamics. Testimonies might exist, in the form of videos or images, visual materials detainees produce and share, for example through social media. I'm not trying to diminish the value of taking testimonies, just to note that we need to be sensitive to the

power dynamics implicated in testimony taking. There are alternatives that might better foreground the voices and experiences of the people who have been detained.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Another topic on the agenda nowadays is the new EU Migration Pact. With the Pact expected to come into force in 2026, it seems likely that the “hotspot” model implemented in Greece for years will be expanded across Europe. On the one hand, this will create serious violations in terms of people on the move accessing their right to asylum; on the other hand, it indicates that detention will become even more openly widespread across Europe. How do you assess this situation and the Pact itself? So what is waiting for us?

Andriani Fili: I think this moment requires more effort on our part, particularly as the situation is going to become a lot worse. We need to remain active and creative in the way we approach this work, because like we said before, access to Greek detention centers is very restricted at the moment. And I think with the Pact coming into force, this is likely to become even worse. The Pact risks entrenching detention practices and creating new forms of closed processing, which will be even more difficult to monitor and document. We need to try to find more creative ways to be there and maintain contact with people affected in order to understand the system and what happens and all the linked harms that the pact is so likely to produce. And I guess there is an important link to your other question about resistance; one key priority is to try to build networks of people working on similar fields in order to collectively approach the system, understand it and eventually fight against it. Because I think only through this more collaborative work can we survive this system. Collaborative networks are necessary, particularly in a context where practices that significantly limit access to asylum and expand spaces of detention are so normalized and so widespread, and independent monitoring faces increasing constraints. In such a political environment, finding new ways to remain present, engaged, and responsive is crucial.

Lena Karmanidou: I think the Pact and its implementation will likely be a nightmare in every possible respect. This increases the need for us to collaborate, to be more active, and possibly quicker. Two dimensions that might become more important is the necessity for localized actions and support systems because a lot of the detention centers are going to be located, like in Greece, in isolated border regions with very little access for civil society, activists and possibly lawyers. We should also increase our connections with networks outside Europe because another likelihood is that under border procedures people might be deported a lot faster. To give an example, in the case of Greece, people are likely to be deported to Turkey. Close connections between networks in both countries could help in monitoring the implementation of the Pact as well as in taking action and resisting.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: It seems that we need more transnational networks, and at the same time the local ones. How do you see the struggles and social movements in Greece and across Europe regarding the reactions of the expanding regime of detention and deportations. What's going on in Greece now around the social movements around these issues?

Alice T: It's a really good question. I don't know if I'm the best person to answer it, but my perspective of organising around borders and detention in Greece is that it's quite marginal in the broader kind of anarchist, anti-state movement. This means that there aren't many groups visiting the detention centers, or doing this daily work of keeping in contact with people and finding out what's happening in these spaces. I also think that this social movement doesn't seem to be very well connected with migrant-led movements or I guess maybe more everyday forms of resistance that happen within migrant communities, which, of course, are happening all the time. Maybe this can lead to a sense of despondency or lack of hope that resistance isn't happening when of course it is. I think we need to be better connected to understand what's happening and how, particularly in communities impacted by state violence. It seems to me that there was a

lot more happening in the cities and on the streets, particularly in Athens maybe in the middle 2010s when there were also lots of squats and people passing through the city. And there was momentum at this time and now partly because of the success of the state policy of isolation, this broke the connection between people on the move and people in the movement. It was part of a broader attack on resistance movements in Athens or in Greece.

Andriani Fili: Yeah, I agree and I don't have much to add, maybe two brief points: even lawyers who operate in Greece and do advocacy work or litigation, they work in silos. They don't necessarily work together to form resistance practices, or to consolidate their advocacy effort. So again, this is a bit problematic. Also what Alice said about volunteer work and grassroots collectives play a crucial role in this landscape.

Lena Karamanidou: I think there is a question also of the politics of the radical left and anarchist movements that Alice raised earlier. I don't live in Greece, but my impression is that movements or pockets of resistance against detention and border violence, whether migrant-led or Greek activist-led, are isolated. I don't get the impression that they are organically seen as part of the wider struggles of anarchist or radical left movements. Sometimes I get the impression that other kinds of struggles are prioritized by the movements which tend to drown or silence resistance or protests around borders, at least in the last four or five years. I feel there is a residual nationalism that prevents political movements from including migrant struggles or seeing them as an integral part of wider struggles. For example, class is a central element for organising in many movements but I don't think as a concept it is sufficient on its own for understanding borders and border violence.

Andriani Fili: Yeah, and just to add an observation, which is relevant to the discussion before about testimonies... I think in a very similar fashion, resistance is discredited or not recognised as such. This is very problematic. In my research, I've encountered

practitioners who suggest that there's no resistance and nothing is happening because these people have been so weakened by the system. However, this perspective reflects limited access to, or engagement with, what is actually happening inside detention centres. In some cases, it may also indicate a lack of attention to the experiences of those detained. As a result, acts of resistance remain overlooked. I guess it really depends on who you talk to and how they see and understand the system in order to view and understand resistance afterwards. Obviously, resistance happens, but it's how we can make it part of the discussion and part of our work. This, I think, is a key responsibility on our part at present.

Cemile Gizem Dinçer and Eda Sevinin: Around 2015–2016, the social movements in Athens, Thessaloniki, and Lesbos were truly impressive, especially in terms of the solidarity networks, the organic relationships with migrants, and migrant-led organizing. So it's a bit sad to hear about the current situation. Would you like to add anything before we close?

Lena Karamanidou: We talked about the mainland and mainly urban centers in Greece. If the situation is bad there, it's about ten times worse outside urban centers, in small towns or areas like Evros. Being from there, I can say it's a very militarized and securitized border area. There are far fewer solidarity networks or movements because it's even more difficult to operate in an environment where building solidarity with people on the move can be regarded by the state as an action against the security of the country and national interests.

Andriani Fili: It's not easy to be optimistic at the moment, but obviously being part of this group is what gives me strength. I guess that's something hopeful.