Transcript

00:00:00 Speaker 1

Hello and welcome to the Migration Oxford podcast.

00:00:03 Speaker 1

I'm Delphine Bogie.

00:00:04 Speaker 2

And I'm Rob McNeill.

00:00:05 Speaker 1

Hi Rob, what are we talking about today?

00:00:07 Speaker 2

So today we're having a conversation about detention, primarily.

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I mean, this is, we're looking at the Detention Landscapes Project, which is a programme of work looking at detention primarily in Greece.

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But also we're speaking to people who've experienced migration detention in the UK as well.

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We're speaking to a person rather who's experienced migration detention in the UK.

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And we are thinking about what migration detention means for the individuals who go through it, but also kind of what it means at a political level as well.

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Why do we see migration detention happening and what are the kind of the underlying political sort of rationales for that, I suppose?

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And you've outlined a little bit to us about what detention actually is, but why is it important to understand the complexities of these systems in 2025?

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Well, the key thing that we get from the conversation with our guests this time is...

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this explanation that this is not just about a kind of bureaucratic process.

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There's a line that's used by G, I think it is, who experienced migration tension in the UK, where he said this is a system that's designed to break people, right?

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It's not, you know, this is not just a process of having someone somewhere and then doing something, right?

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You know, it's like a person is placed in the UK, we talk about immigration removal centres.

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In theory, you're supposed

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go into detention ahead of removal.

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They're not supposed to be used in a kind of prison-like way.

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But Gee describes his experience and describes it as that, like he's part of a system that is holding people essentially in a kind of criminal-like way.

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And that, I mean, he also describes this as something which is dressed up with clever language, like processing an order, right?

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It's important, when we think about migration debates, we hear people talking about things like processing

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migrants in detention.

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Processing is a very kind of like a bureaucratic word and it just sounds like somebody in a system but of course this actually means holding people in prison-like conditions.

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And a lot of the conversation is about people experiencing violence as well.

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It's not just about people being held, it's actually about there being violence.

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And that violence, not just being violence being experienced from other people within these facilities, other migrants being held within these facilities, but is often actually either tacitly accepted or actively participated in by state authorities.

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That is the description that we're getting and I think that it's quite a

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quite a shocking one.

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Absolutely.

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I thought that listening to our guest today, speaking about the hostile political climate faced by migrants and asylum seekers in many countries felt bleak and challenging.

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And I wonder what can be done to kind of rectify and remedy the flaws of this system and how it operates and the processes you describe.

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Community and solidarity feel really important.

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What can our listeners take away from this podcast to bring about action and change?

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I think that the sort of point that people make here, I think, which is really important, is that there's, we need to recognise that there shouldn't really necessarily be a kind of relative value given to different human lives.

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You know, I mean, at the end of the day, these are human beings and people need to be thought of in the context of human beings.

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There's been this kind of ongoing process that people are talking about throughout this of the kind of militarization of borders and processes of containment.

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And I think that the underlying focus of the Detention Landscapes project seems to be, I mean, from the conversation that we've had about trying to kind of reveal the hidden realities of the human experience in migration detention.

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And that, quite aside from the situation in places like Greece, I mean, there are similarities between the UK and other places, and that by shining a light on the human experience, we create a space for people to actually think about and respond to what is actually going on, rather than just this kind of like, I suppose, massaged version of reality that's dressed up in language like processing and order, rather than something which is actually about the messy and often frightening reality.

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reality of what it's actually like to be in these situations.

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I'm joined by Dr.

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Lena Karamanadu, who's the Research and Investigations Coordinator for the Border Violence Monitoring Network, by Dr.

00:04:41 Speaker 2

Adriana Philly, who's the Wellcome Trust Post-Doctoral Research Fellow and the Co-Director of Border Criminologies, which is part of the Centre for Criminology at the University of Oxford, and also by G.

00:04:52 Speaker 2

Menohoran, who's the Co-Director of AVID, the Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees.

00:04:58 Speaker 2

Adriana, if I could start with you.

00:05:00 Speaker 2

Detention of migrants in Greece is now deeply rooted in political efforts to manage the EU and other European borders.

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Can you start by just outlining for us what's actually happening and how we got here?

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Yeah, so I've been working on immigration detention issues since 2011, both as a researcher and as an NGO practitioner for some years.

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So I offered social

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services inside immigration detention in Greece, in various facilities in the region of Athens.

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And I've been researching this field for many years.

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So the detention of migrants in Greece is, I would say, the result of decades of evolving policies at both the national and European levels.

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And this is rooted in efforts to manage migration as a security issue rather than a human one.

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And we can identify many European policies that have influenced how the immigration detention system in Greece has been constructed.

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But I would like to also add and not forget the influence of broader socio-political factors that have allowed for a deeply racist

00:06:20 Speaker 3

system to thrive.

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So I would start with how Greece became a key entry point as migration surged after the Eastern Bloc's dissolution in the early 1990s, and of course the Schengen Agreement and doubling regulation in 2003, which externalized EU border controls and placed disproportionate responsibilities on countries like Greece.

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And then obviously the securitization of migration

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which increasingly framed migration as a security threat.

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And during the early 2000s, Greece intensified attention to align with EU policies, emphasizing surveillance and control over humanitarian solutions.

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And then as we're moving forward, we have EU investments in border security such as Frontex.

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expanding Greece's enforcement role and obviously after the 2015 humanitarian crisis and the EU-Turkish statement in 2016 we have a formalization of containment of asylum seekers on Greek islands turning all these island facilities into de facto detention centers and

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slowly moving into the present day, all these EU policies that have increasingly focused on militarisation and containment, funding walls, surveillance and detention centres, and Greece remaining a frontline state in enforcing these measures.

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G, if I could come to you next.

00:08:02 Speaker 2

You've been detained in the UK.

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Can you tell us a bit about how that came to happen?

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Your experiences with the people that you were detained with?

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and what their experiences of detention and your experiences of detention mean for both yourselves and for the wider situation of immigration detention within Europe.

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Thank you, Robert.

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I think there are some similarities, but there's also lots of stark differences as well.

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But the underlying principle is that it's, I was listening to and it's almost like the physical manifestation of a dehumanisation system.

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So where people are reduced to number, and I was reduced to numbers,

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and stripped of my name and my dignity and dream.

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So there is a similarity that obviously being detained in the UK is quite different to someone being detained in a Greece detention camp.

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I was seeking asylum in the UK in 2012 and saying 10 years ago, but I was detained 10 years ago.

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So, at the time, even now, if you are currently seeking asylum, essentially, that you are, as by the home of you've been told to do reporting weekly, sometimes people have to do monthly, and so out of after that sort of reporting monthly time is when I was...

00:09:28 Speaker 4

I was detained.

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But the reason I was seeking asylum is like, at the time in Sri Lanka, it was straight after Sri Lankan Civil War, and I came to seek safety in the UK due to my previous activism in Sri Lanka.

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And that was the basis of my own case.

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The reason for me being detained is that in 2012, the government at the time, the UK government at the time, set up the charter flights.

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So it's charter flights usually meant that group of specific nationality will be put into one flight and been taken into their country or where they came to the UK from.

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So there are charter flights frequently going at the moment to Albania.

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There are charter flights going to, you know, there are discussion on charter flights going to Iraq.

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There are charter flights going to Nigeria and Bulgaria.

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So that sort of is the idea of the charter flight.

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We were, a group of Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese rounded up in different places of the country and put together, and that's like the basis of me being detained.

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I was firstly detained in Larne House in Northern Ireland.

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It's close to Belfast.

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It's south of Belfast, a place called Larne, and that's why there's short-term holding facilities.

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It's a short-term holding facility mainly because you're only allowed to be detained 5 days maximum, you know, it's 8 to 9 days.

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From there, I was moved by the Home Office to Colombrook, which is next to Heathrow Airport.

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And yeah, so the idea of the space and the detention as a setting is as someone who doesn't know what's happening, although they will tell you that you're going to go back to Sri Lanka, where I was feared of my life and I was terrified.

00:11:11 Speaker 4

And you're also equally met with people who are equally terrified and thinking of how to get out of there.

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And that's what, going on everyone's mind at the time, and we would speak about how to resist the flight, how to, people will share, I've did this before, and they brought me back in here, or...

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And there are also people come directly from prison environment who have, they've finished their sentences and their conviction, but they've been brought back into remote centers who are a lot more familiar with the system, familiar with the bureaucracy around detention, where for me, like I've never been imprisoned and I wasn't sure why I was locked up.

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So simplifying it, is a terrifying place, but the add-on power that comes with the people who manage the centre as well makes it much more dehumanising and inhumane, mainly because all of the centres in the UK are currently run by private contractors who bid the cheapest way to run a centre.

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And quite a lot of the time, the scrutiny around them is not always up to standards.

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What I see in the UK is comparing to Greece is like, quite often, UK immigration and decision systems tend to sort of mask around those bureaucracy and hide behind it.

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And it's an intricate sort of inhumanity and cruelty as well.

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There are places where...

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I was feeling like, Why am I there?

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And I remember one of my, I could call it a friend, but I know I've seen him again after I was released, who said to me, like, Dave, he was there for a long time, but he was anyway, they locked my body, but they never locked my sort of soul or mind.

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And it's almost like the resilience I saw in people that sort of kept me going to keep me focused and say, it's almost like a quiet defiance.

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I don't want to be here.

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I don't want to go back to where they were trying to deport me to.

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And I want to get out.

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And in terms of going into more details about inhumanizations, like I was detained with someone along the lines of, you know, months of detention.

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I was detained with someone who was actually clearly suicidal, who would

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sit up in the middle of the night, bang his head, and I would wake up and think, terrified, like, what is he going to do to himself, but also what is he going to do to me?

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I remember going to the guards in the morning as soon as they opened the door and said, you know, he did this and can you just look after him?

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And their response is like, you need to keep an eye on him.

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And that's almost like, felt like I was a responsible person to be

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in someone who's clearly suicidal.

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So it's like the vulnerable looking after the vulnerable, which is quite harder to think in a just society like in the UK.

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And it is happening in the UK, you know, it's not somewhere else.

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We're not only talking about somewhere in Greece or Libya, you know, it is happening in the UK as well.

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Lena, the Border Violence Monitoring Network's been collating active violence at European borders.

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How far does this also extend into detention facilities and the government's actively or tacitly facilitating these acts of violence?

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So Border Violence Monitoring Network is a network of...

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of civil society organizations based mainly in southeastern Europe, in Greece, for example, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia, and so on.

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Originally, it has been collecting testimonies, collecting testimonies of pushbacks, that is illegal returns across international borders in the area.

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And violence in detention emerged through those testimonies.

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When referred to violence, I mean different kinds of violence such as physical violence, verbal violence, sexual assaults occasionally, and violent conditions such as absence of medical care or deprivation of food or unhygienic conditions.

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Now, the last few years, the network has been more systematically collecting testimonies of violence in detention facilities, mostly in Greece, but member organizations in other countries are also actively concerned with documenting violence in detention facilities.

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Unlike what Guy said earlier, where private contractors are involved in running facilities in the UK, in the countries that the network is active in, most facilities are run by the state authorities, most often the police.

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And I would say the state authorities, state agencies like the police, are the main perpetrators of violence in those facilities.

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In the sense that, for example, guards normally are police personnel.

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I would also say that the state authorities are facilitating the commitment of absolute violence in those facilities.

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in the sense that, for example, there is very little accountability of police staff that commit acts of violence in detention, and also by the design itself of the detention system.

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So, for example, a lot of facilities are remote.

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Civil society organisations and even legal representatives have little access, and sometimes their access is

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actively obstructed by the authorities.

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So it is easy in those conditions to have violence committed against detainees.

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Gee, your experience in the UK was clearly distressing as we heard from your compelling testimony earlier on, but to what extent do you see parallels between the UK's migration detention and other enforcement practices around the world?

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And what do you think this means for people in detention around the world?

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It's quite hard to compare, but like what I think in the UK context, it's, as I said before, it's a polished cruelty.

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I would describe it as detention centers mimics as it presents.

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But hidden behind like really clever languages, like processing them and order.

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But the core is the same.

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So sort of the philosophy that say some lives are worth less than the others.

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And

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The what struck me, I mean, this is where I've sort of struggled with when trying to compare is the analogy it comes from to my mind.

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I'm Tamil, so I always think in analogy.

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It's like you're comparing a rickety laugh versus a rubber dinghy stuck in a vast ocean.

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The issue is that you are stuck in a big ocean.

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The issue is, as Andreani just explained,

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is the idea of the detention itself and we need to think beyond the world without immigrant detention.

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What struck me most in my time in detention was the overwhelming sense of time slowing down and mainly because you feel that you're on your own and no one really cares.

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Particularly you came to here, you came to the UK for seeking safety and then you've been let down.

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And it's not just entertainment, it's

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it's almost like the enforced stagnation of the specific detention policy that's sort of overwhelmingly put on yourself.

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But it's, yeah, so coming back to the, it's the idea that you do not belong.

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That sort of, it's the idea that across the world I see as a parallels of people detained, being told without, you know, written on their paper.

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explicitly in some countries they do, they do that, but the differences in different countries are is actually the cosmetics and the conditions and how some places have windows and some doesn't sort of sort of those sort of conditions or some have a bit more health care, a little better health care and some doesn't.

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But as you say, they're both, all of these systems sort of seeks to confine and silence and sort of to strip people of the agency and really their voices.

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And this is why, as Ambiani said, or Lena said, is we need to put forward the people with the lived experiences forefront of any policy that comes with it.

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And let's try to sort of, I think the only one thing I would like trying to portray to your listeners is

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It is a system, designed to break people, and it's a system that's designed to be abusive, and it's actually staying on the conscious of our own society.

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So, this is why we want to think about our country and our world without detention, and this is why I've been speaking in this, and I started working on this, and to

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stop more people being detained and envision a better future and an alternative to what they currently have.

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Lena, 2024 was a year of elections and in many countries around the world this has resulted in a more hostile political climate for migrants and asylum seekers.

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I mean, you work to tackle violence and abuses of human rights.

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What does this political shift mean for your work and more importantly, the people facing violence in immigration detention?

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I would slightly disagree with the question and say that the political climate has been hostile for years, if not decades.

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So while we have seen a spike in hostile discourses and that used towards migrants in last year, and I think it was partly linked to

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elections, but also the genocide in Gaza, which is linked to increase the dehumanization of racialized populations, in my opinion.

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So I'd say as a network, we've been facing those conditions since BVMN was founded, essentially.

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And in particular, since 20

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21-22, we have seen a lot of hostility in certain countries, especially Greece, towards activities of monitoring and reporting on border violence in general and in detention.

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So I'd say I cannot say this situation, this political climate changing in

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changing any time soon, which makes it difficult, like again and Adriani said, to imagine a world without detention.

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A world where detention and violence in detention does not exist.

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Given that the hostile climate has made publics across Europe and across the world believe that detention is necessary,

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and normalise.

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And these kind of discourses went into further dehumanisation, but also making very difficult on the one hand for people, civil society organisations and activists to document violence and for people in detention

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to have a voice, to speak about their experiences, to have their experiences being heard not only by civil society organisations or people who might have sensitivity, but wider

publics who have been very used to government or media discourses that dehumanise people on the move.

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So essentially I'm trying to say that the hostile climate you referred to has been pushing further people in detention into silence and not being able to share their experiences and has also facilitated the exercise of violence because of

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civil society organisations like BVMN not being able to have access to detention facilities, to be able to talk to people detained there easily, to be able to collect experiences of violence in those facilities, and further down the road to be able to report and do advocacy.

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So yes, we have also seen, and I would like to stress this, it's not only a political climate, but there are specific legal developments in the European Union, such as the new pact on migration and the facilitation, the proposed facilitation,

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directive that will make documenting and reporting violence in detention more difficult.

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Partly because, for example, the new pact on migration will make the use of detention in border areas more extensive.

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And the facilitation directive

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will further criminalisation of people on the move, but also the criminalisation of civil society organisations?

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Finally, Adriana, can you tell us a little bit about the Detention Landscapes project that you guys have been putting together and what this means and what it's going to try to achieve?

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Thank you for the question.

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I know it's really difficult to imagine a better world in the current state of the world.

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at the moment.

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But we should be able to imagine a world without detention and without violence targeting migrants.

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And this should not just be realistic.

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It is necessary and it requires a shift in mindset and systemic change.

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And to do so, we must collectively, I think, critically interrogate the root causes of detention and the structural violence

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it perpetuates like Lena and G mentioned both in the Greek and UK context.

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And what we've been trying to do in Greece with the detention landscapes platform is to create the conditions.

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We have designed an open source database

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designed to document and expose human rights violations within the Greek immigration detention system.

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It is a collaboration between different organisations and it is designed as a tool for advocacy research and legal accountability, which is currently what's missing from the field of immigration detention.

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So in order to imagine a better situation, we

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We need to look at initiatives like this.

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We need to look at immigration detention as an ineffective system, something that doesn't work, something that harms people.

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We need to center the voices of the affected and we need to create a vision which extends beyond detention systems to the sort of global inequalities that

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drive forced migration.

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And this could include addressing conflicts, climate change, all these explosive economic practices that displace people.

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And we need to imagine community-based alternatives, something that doesn't involve confinement.

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And in order to do so, we need systematic documentation and advocacy.

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and what Lena and G mentioned, to engage with the silences and the normalisation processes to challenge this systemic abuse.

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Thank you so much.

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This has been a fascinating conversation and I'm sure everybody listening to this will be enormously enriched by hearing all of you speaking today.

00:28:55 Speaker 2

So thank you so much.

00:28:57 Speaker 1

You've been listening to the Migration Oxford podcast.

00:29:00 Speaker 1

I'm Delphine Bogie.

And I'm Rob McNeill.