UNESCO RILA: The Sounds of Integration

Episode : Elastic Borders: Rethinking the Borders of the 21st Century

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Speaker 1: Esa Aldegheri

وسَهْلاً أهْلاً benvenuti, fàilte, titambire, welcome to the podcast series of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts at the University of Glasgow. We bring you sounds about integration, languages, culture, society, and Identity.

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Speaker 2: Catherine McGrath

This episode on Elastic Borders: Rethinking the Borders of the 21st Century is presented by Dr Bilgin Ayata at the annual UNESCO RILA Spring School. Dr Ayata is the project leader of the Elastic Borders research project, and is a professor for the Centre of Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz. She specialises in topics such as displacement, affective politics, memory and violence. The Elastic Borders project, funded by the NOMIS Foundation, aims to create a conceptual framework for understanding the ever-changing nature of borders in the 21st century. Enjoy.

Speaker 3: Dr Bilgin Ayata

Good morning, everyone. What I will be talking about in the maybe next half an hour or so is to engage with the very violent border transformations that we've been witnessing over the decades. A lot of the attention, as I could see in the program, and the emphasis on peace, is so important, focusing on genocide and mass violence, but one of the overlooked sides of these kinds of violent transformations are the borders themselves. A lot of the attention is of course currently in the US, and we all are following the intensification that we are seeing there that are being carried out by the current presidency in the US. However, Europeans have been experiencing transformations that should require all of our attention.

In this project that I would like to share with you now, we are trying, really, not only to document — or I should say that the emphasis is indeed not to document violations,

there are other projects and NGOs and other research projects who will do that, our emphasis is really to try to understand, also conceptually, what to make out of these developments at the border. The research project Elastic Borders: Rethinking the Borders of the 21st Century, is generously funded by a Swiss research foundation, the NOMIS Foundation's and together with a large and wonderful team of, by now, even 30 people (this is the core group but we're growing and growing) of researchers from many different disciplines to study at a broader, comprehensive and interdisciplinary level what we mean or researching as elastic borders.

So, I would like to begin first with the question, what does elasticity mean here, and why taking a name that maybe appears in such a violent context even a little too neutral, maybe. The term elastic, we reaches this terminology by looking at the broader array of how we so far have been conventionally understanding borders, especially in international relations and political science. Borders are not only there to demarcate a particular territory, but it is also very key for the questions of accountability, of what happens at the border and beyond the border. So, this static and physical border has been for the longest time, for the past three centuries, very much shaping our understanding of what we think of borders, as very static, fixed lines. Now, historically, this was never true, and we all know there have been always changes and transformations and pushings of the border, but in the 21st century we want to argue that actually the idea or the practices, together with the digital technologies and the acceleration and facilitations that we have, have been fundamentally challenging this idea of the static border.

For one, we have the so-called "smart borders" for those who have the privilege of owning a passport that enables them to walk more or less frictionless through an airport, while at the same time, of course, technologies which enable the smooth transitioning are also being implemented to make these borders less passible than ever. I want to refer maybe here to [?], a very important statement he had made in 2019, that currently, the biggest or the largest global injustice is no longer just one between let's say the north or the south, or the materially poor and the rich, but the question of mobility or immobility. Who is able to travel or move, and who is not, poses one of the fundamental global inequalities of our time. An example or feature of the 21st-century border is how digital technologies or advanced technologies are being used to implement border controls far beyond a particular physical border. I'm sure by now you all have seen or heard of examples where the crossing of border control and authorities have been shaping interceptions and controls of a particular border.

Now, in light of these developments, I want to argue that it is much more accurate to understand borders as elastic, and when I refer here to is the concept from physics where elasticity refers to — you all know the rubber band, you can stretch it and it may come back and find its form again. The movements that we've been observing at the borders very much also resemble exactly this elasticity that you know of a rubber band. At some certain point, a particular border may stretch out far, far beyond a particular physical border, and then it could also at the same time it could retract and change where the border actually really begins. Let me give you an example of the stretching. You may be familiar with the concept of externalisation of the EU's border, a concept that has since the past three decades or so. You see different deployments of EU agencies and EU-funded projects that all serve to externalise the border control for the exterior frontiers of the European Union by way of corporations or third countries. Of

course, a discussion of the UK-Rwanda deal had been quite prominent, but then put aside recently. Italy not only proposed but followed a very similar policy by establishing seven camps, offshore processing centres, in Albania. And you have these kind of outsourcing of not only border procedures but even asylum procedures to third countries. In the literature, this was so far referred to as externalisation but the problem is that this is a one-way look and also often has this European-centred look by looking at Europe, looking at how the border stretches out, but it is also very important to look at how the border actually is being pushed in.

The focus, how we reached this conclusion and this idea, was by examining the EU's so-called "hotspot" approach since 2015 in the wake of the increased arrivals in Greece and Italy. The European Commission presented in May 2015, it's been now a decade, its new migration management approach, which was called the hotspot approach. I find it still interesting that even today, it's not so broadly, so commonly known, even though it has massively changed how border control on the external frontiers of Europe is actually happening. So, what does the hotspot approach actually entail, what does it mean? It was so far only implemented in Greece and Italy, and it offers, quote-unquote, "technical and financial assistance" to those countries that use external frontiers who are experiencing a high increase of arrivals of migrants. In return, those countries would take those financial and technological assistances, and the EU would deploy four of its agencies on the ground in Greece and Italy, which is Frontex, Europol, Eurojust and the EUAA. All key agencies who then, together with the national authorities, start to manage the external frontiers. So, we see a very fundamental shift of how border governance happens, which until 2015 was a purely national affair. It's the task of every particular national government to control its border, but since 2015, both the Greek and the Italian borders have been governed and controlled in a multilevel and multilateral way, where not only are the European agencies involved, but also international organisations such as the UNHCR and IOM.

In order to illustrate what I mean with elasticity, stretching and retraction, I want to show two examples of our previous research that illustrates this. What does the stretching of a border mean and what does retraction of a border mean? I would like you to look first at the example of Greece. In Greece since 2016, both with the EU-Turkey agreement that had been reached between the European Union and Turkey to take back, so to say — to put it in simple words — asylum seekers who crossed the border to Greece, to five islands very close to the Turkish border, by boat. Turkey agreed to take these back if they had taken this particular route. In the aftermath of this agreement, on these five islands, large camps have been set up, which at some point became the largest camps of Europe, very famously. The Mória camp, for instance, or in Samos, the large camp that was amongst humanitarian workers described as like the jungle because it was such a massive, informal expansion, because the camps that were set up never had the infrastructure to provide and adequately and dignifiedly host and give any form of possibility for a dignified reception in these places. What really happened is that this five islands became places of abandonment where roughly over the years, more than 40,000 people were trapped for months and years under conditions that are really hard to believe unless you see for yourself really physically.

What I want to point out now is what that actually, if you look at it together, did to the border. So, one of our arguments is that this creation of these grey zones between these islands and Turkey led to the building, the formation of a buffer zone where these

islands pushed the actual Greek or EU border to the Greek mainland, because you could arrive on these islands, but you had to undergo and you were still in a limbo process, even though you had nominally reached Greece, which is EU territory. It was only when you made it to the mainland that you actually arrived, also politically and legally, at the EU. We were observing this in 2017, 18 and 19, and in our publications we talked about this grey zones of blurred sovereignties. Ironically, or very problematically, this has now been legalised. This violation is now being legalised in the migration pact of the EU Commission that was passed in 2024, and will become implemented from 2026. In this migration pact, what I just described was happening here, is now legalised, so to say, by a term that has been introduced in the migration pact that is called "the fiction of non-entry," which means that you can actually be on this island physically but not legally. So, this is a very important development and it would be, for us, an example of the retraction of the border. In Italy, what we have observed is that, with the implementation of the hotspot approach, the borders stretched out to the maritime space between the land and sea where some of the hotspot procedures, the border control procedures, were implemented on the sea.

So, with that taken as a starting point, we were interested in this project on Elastic Borders to understand two questions: which technologies, which laws and which policies actually enable the elasticity of the border; and what are the social and political effects of these elastic border zones where these policies are being implemented? Today I, just very briefly with my remaining time, want to show you and share with you from our three ethnographies that we are carrying out since 2022. One is in Tenerife and the Canary Islands, which in the past two years has recorded the highest number of boat arrivals, mostly from the West African coast. Another case study is at the land border between Tunisia and Libya. And, as well as an example for how these policies have an impact outside of the EU, we dove deep into the case study in Greece of Samos as an elastic border inside of the EU where the hotspot approach is being implemented. So, this comparative research dredges and attempts to provide a very comprehensive picture, because most of the studies that we have when it comes to these border transformations focus on one simple example, and comparing the different developments helps us to understand, or leads us to insights that enable us to actually also take these insights far beyond the European case.

I would like to walk with you a little bit through these case studies in order to give a bit more empirical understanding of what these border transformations do. I wanted to make sure that the comparative angle is there right away, so you see the abstraction. I will go step by step through the single cases. So, when we compare these three places, three ethnographies, we can see different articulations of this elasticity. In the Canary Islands, over the past three years, we saw a very highly elastic border where a dynamic transformation has been shaping the border policies, from containment, from trapping people in Tenerife in the year 2020, 2021, 22, and then shifting — the Spanish government then shifted strongly to a very different policy that, at this moment, nowhere in the European Union is being implemented, even though these Canary Islands would be a very conducive place to treat them as prison islands, as in Greece those five islands have been functioning now. Islands of containment and entrapment. In Spain, people who are arriving, migrants who are arriving in Tenerife or also on the other islands, are very fast channelled through the mainland. This is absolutely in opposition to how border policies are implemented not only in Greece but also in Italy, for instance.

This is a very radical shift from a containment policy to a controlled transfer of arriving persons after one month max, sometimes already within a few days, from the islands to the mainland. This is very interesting development, and the most interesting thing, the question here is, how come Spain as a member of the EU is not getting reprimanded by the EU of doing this policy? And I will present you this case at the end because I do have a theory or an assumption why the EU is allowing Spain to do something that it massively prevented and obstructed in Greece and Italy, because if you remember, before the hotspot approach, in 2015 when we saw the large arrivals, the EU and several member states were highly critical for what they called the "laissez passer," opening the borders so that everyone could move on further to, let's say, Germany, Sweden or other places. And in Spain we see this happening at the moment, but there is no intervention by the EU to that. So, I want to say at the end why I think this is the case.

In Tunisia, which we began the study in 2022, but in 2023 the EU — maybe some of you remember this — entered a memorandum on migration, and Tunisia ever since then has become an ever-important nodal point in the North African and European border zone. For those of you that are following what's happening in Tunisia, we see a tremendous authoritarian regress where, at this moment in 2025, my researchers can no longer go to Tunisia and do research, because the authoritarian contrast has been increased so far that even some of our interview partners who we had interviewed back in 2022 and 2023, have been arrested, and very important NGOs working on behalf of migration and migrants have been closed down at the moment, so all of this is of course an impediment for the EU to continue this migration agreement with Tunisia.

In Samos, what we have is a case that we would almost now describe as plasticy. This is when the rubber band no longer goes back. It's stretched in such a form that the change that has happened at the border becomes permanent. And what we are referring to — and I'm going to start with this case— is that, even though in Samos and in Greece at these Aegean Islands close to the Turkish border, once they were the places where the highest arrivals were recorded of migrants, this is no longer the case. Yet, the infrastructure that has been implemented and the militarisation of these infrastructures and the borders, it has become also from a political economy such an important element of the islands.

I just briefly want to speak about [?], our case study Samos, to my researcher, Dr Artemis Fyssa who was the principal investigator for this case. So, my comments and my explanations are based on her insights and her research So, just briefly, for the context in Greece, very often forgotten, it is 2008 as this very pivotal moment for the Greek economy with the big financial crisis that has deeply affected this country, and especially in very excessive financial hardship in 2015, Greece became the border zone, especially at the Aegean Shores, with the record number of arrivals from Turkey. At some point, more than one million passed through these islands. And especially when we talk about these five islands which then were declared as "hotspot islands" — Chios, Samos, Lesvos, Leros, Kos — these are islands, as most of the time with islands, where infrastructure is also in any way limited. The amount of hospitals that you have.

Most often with touristic islands, you have much more infrastructures during summer, so the sudden outbreak of a true humanitarian crisis — it was not a refugee crisis but there was a crisis of people arriving and having no infrastructure for an adequate and dignified reception; and for that, of course, these islands were very inadequate already

as they were — but with the introduction of the hotspots, unfortunately what we had to see and notice is that this infrastructure was one for deterrence and at no point actually for protection or accommodation.

In 2021, after the COVID pandemic, when in these horrible camps where at some point in Mória, 20,000 persons were living in a space that was designed to accommodate 3,000 people. So, at the moment of COVID, there was a very, very severe or an increased danger for a mass outbreak, an epidemic that already doctors had warned before because of the deficient infrastructure and unsanitary context there. So the camps were evacuated and step by step, migrants were then transferred to the mainland. And after that, immediately in 2021, the building of new hi-tech camps were established.

So this is often the case that those coastal towns are these very pretty, touristic places which now carry a dual reality of being carceral zones. Now, the new camp, the close-controlled access centre of Samos, you see only very clean pictures from the ministry. I have been there and I visited the camp in 2023, but no longer we were allowed to take pictures. Also, journalists are not allowed. So when as a research team, you get permission to enter, you can only visit the facility with someone from the camp who shows you around, but you're not allowed to take pictures. This close-controlled access centre, which is not a fully closed centre, meaning that migrants can leave the centre from 7am to 7pm, but you have to walk through these turnstiles and fingerprint each time you leave and you come in. It is a prison facility, so to say. One interesting point is why it was earlier... in the middle of the town, now this is the site of the new camp. And you can leave, but there are three, four buses per day and it costs €1.90 to get there, if you would go to the city centre.

Even though more than €45 million have been invested in this camp, there is still deficient infrastructure, deficient food distribution. We were shown, when we visited, all these centres with washing machines, which are now not working anymore, so migrants walk with their laundry. There is an NGO here which provides laundry services for free. These are just examples of this hi-tech prison which still is not able to give basic infrastructure to the persons who are there.

I want to talk briefly also about Tunisia and end just with the Canary Islands, as I said, and about why the EU is not intervening. So in Tunisia, since 2011 after the uprisings and the revolution, it has been a very important transit for migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, walking through the Saharan Desert and then arriving in Libya, either departing from Libya or crossing by foot to Tunisia to depart there on boats. I want to talk here about what EU involvement also means for persons living at these border zones. In Tunisia, in the towns of Zarzis and Medenine engage now with a situation that they have pretty much nothing— it's not Tunisia that closes the EU's frontiers. It now is actively participating and complicit in maintaining this, but the Schengen system was not invented by Tunisia. Yet, through the ever-closing paths, by taking more and more dangerous routes, with boats crossing from very dangerous routes both from Tunisia or Libya, coastal towns at the south of Tunisia no longer for instance use the seashores as they used to, because for them, these are now sites where bodies are washed ashore from shipwrecks, from migrants who die on the sea.

A couple of years ago, a French reporter team made a report where they spoke about this site here, the Cemetery for the Unknown in the town of Zarzis. And two French reporters came upon this, which is, in this site, a former waste site, where a fisherman tried to create some sort of a burial site for the migrants. In France, and then later in other European news outlets, this became a moment of where many were saying, 'How can you do these undignified burials? What kind of a mass grave is this?' And it was a critique of the local town there that they do not provide a cemetery. It was not a critique about how to change the European border policies, which is the problem at the first site. When we were there visiting in 2019, indeed the town then built European cemetery, because the cemeteries were very different in Tunisia there. Very different organisations of cemeteries. Already by the time we were there for a couple of weeks, this site filled by the continuous number of shipwrecks and persons who we no longer talk about at the European plane because the discursive shift has been so much about criminalising migrants that these deaths are not at the centre of policy. This very same site now has been reworked by an Algerian artist and this cemetery called the Jardin d'Afrique, showing this as the perversion which we see.

These countries are beautifying these cemeteries, while the EU is engaging and entertaining this memorandum from 16th July 2023, at a moment when the Tunisian president, Kais Saied, in February 2023 had declared Sub-Saharan Africans migrating or transiting through Tunisia as a plague, and used racial slurs and pretty much invited a pogrom against Sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia. At the very moment when this was taking place in the southern parts of Tunisia, buses were just putting, randomly, anyone who they were seeing, reading as black or Sub-Saharan African, into the buses and deporting, in the heat of 45°C, to the desert zone between Libya and Tunisia, and abandoning them there. In a week-long negotiation, who has responsibility for these abandoned migrants — is it the Libyan government or the Tunisian government? — where only the Red Cross had brief humanitarian interventions there, it was then settled after eight weeks that both of them would take the share. Yet, the practice of these deportations, just random deportations, even of Tunisian citizens who are black, putting into those buses and being driven, either to the Algerian border or Libyan border, is an ongoing practise at the moment.

I just want to share one quote from the interviews that Chiara, the principal researcher in this case — Dr Chiara Pagano. One quote from an interview. "The Libyan-Tunisian border turned from being an entry point into Tunisian society, now to becoming a prison." So, here you see again what the enforcement of this elastic border zone, on the ground, entails for the very locality in there. We have publications where you could read further into the Tunisian case.

Now, for the Canarian example, I mentioned to you that Spain is currently adopting a very different policy of very fast transfers. Just for a geographic understanding, the Canary Islands, since it's first colonial conquest in 1402 by the Spanish Crown, is today, I mean, obviously geographically in Africa, yet it is nominally, politically the EU's outermost region as a Spanish territory. Even though the governance of the Canary Islands, their autonomous regional and island governance, it is still of course Spain, right across Morocco and Western Sahara. So, it's just important to remember that what we're talking about when we're talking about the Spanish border, where it actually, geographically is, and you see here the coloniality of borders ongoing.

Since 2006, we have been seeing these departures, which is really very hard to imagine how, with wooden boats in a journey through the Atlantic, which is one of the wildest seas, very lethal, very dangerous — it takes a 1,500 or 1,800 kilometres by boat. In the recent years, in 2006, you had a peak of arrival, and from 2018 onwards, and 2020 onwards, you see the Canary Islands become the largest or the highest points of arrival because the central Mediterranean route, meaning the route between Greece and Turkey, has been closed off and curtailed. More and more people are taking this very, very dangerous route through the Atlantic. There are reports now that in Mauritania, there are 170,000 Pakistani asylum seekers trying to enter these boats, too. So, this is now a new gateway to try to reach Europe. You may have seen in news reports that boats that were started from Senegal, trying to reach the Canary Islands, have been found months later. So, drifting Sparta after four or five months, you have human remains in these boats arriving in the Caribbean. Last year in the Pará State in Brazil, in Belém, a boat was found with human remains, resulting in a complete shock in Brazil. I'm trying to understand how this happens.

So, why is the EU actually allowing or not intervening in the very fast arrivals? Well, in a very bitter assumption, and taking the necropolitical border policies at the EU external frontiers — seriously, if you really not just say these are necropolitical but really think it through as that — really, this extremely dangerous route. We asked, in our interviews, state officials if they can tell us how many boats are departing, because the police monitors the West African coast and has numbers about boats which are departing, and of course we have numbers about how many are arriving, and these numbers are not being shared. So, we don't know how large, how deadly, what kind of a cemetery the Atlantic actually is. Maybe there's a strong correlation between this very, very deadly route and the few then who do arrive this travelling through to these islands themselves.

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Speaker 1: Esa Aldegheri

شكراً, grazie, tapadh leibh, totenda, thank you for listening to this episode. For the full show notes and for more information about our work, please visit bit.ly/UNESCO_RILA.

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