

ELASTIC BORDERS

Newsletter #6
January 2026

*Field Research Updates from Greece,
Canary Islands & Tunisia
Analysis of the EU Pact on Migration & Asylum
Contributions from Affiliated Fellows
Upcoming Events and Activities*

RESEARCH PROJECT



Photograph of the monument at La Restinga port, El Hierro Island, August 2025,
© Mirco Buoso

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EDITORIAL

by Bilgin Ayata

In September 2025, Mirco Buoso and I stood at the port of La Restinga on the island of El Hierro, facing the monument featured on the cover of this issue. Marked as the "southernmost point of Europe," the site condenses multiple temporalities of bordering. Standing there after a series of interviews with local actors, the contradictions of past and present seemed to converge with particular force.

Long before Jean de Béthencourt's forces subjugated El Hierro in 1405, the island was home to the Bimbaches, an Indigenous people of North African descent whose communities were destroyed through colonial conquest and enslavement, as across much of the Canary archipelago. Although El Hierro is closer to the African coast, it was firmly inscribed into Europe's cartographic imagination: for centuries, the Ferro (El Hierro) meridian served as the prime meridian marking what imperial geography constructed as the westernmost edge of the "known world."

What occasionally served as one of the provisional stopping points along colonial routes to the "New World" is today a little-known island with a small resident population. This changed abruptly in August

2023, when wooden boats departing from West Africa began arriving—at times carrying close to 1,000 survivors of the lethal Atlantic route in a single day. As Mirco Buoso details in his contribution to this issue, what struck us most was the sense of overwhelm and abandonment expressed by virtually all interlocutors, echoing the years 2014/15 on Greek and Italian islands, only this time without sustained media attention. It was as if, right here at the "southernmost point of Europe," the summer of 2015 had never happened.

What we encountered in September 2025 was a local community that was trying to manage a humanitarian emergency as best as they could, largely on their own for the past two years. It was striking to see in 2025, after a long decade of EU policy reforms, large-scale investments in technologies and infrastructures and incessant debates on migration and border governance at the EU level, the experiences on the ground keep reoccurring across time and space. This shows once more that despite the humanitarian language accompanying successive policy reforms from the Hotspot Approach in 2015 to the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum passed in 2024, the modus operandi in border zones remains deterrence, dehumanization and neglect. El Hierro exemplifies a recurring strategic amnesia within the EU border regime, in which each episode is governed and narrated as a first-time crisis: rendered without memory, always surprising, always overwhelming, with no institutional learning that would serve migrants and border communities.

This strategic amnesia keeps the baseline assumption of "migration pressure" in place: From the Hotspot Approach to the Migration Pact, official EU policies present migrants as external shocks exerting pressure on borders, to which states are then forced to respond. However, our comparative research at three critical nodes in Spain, Greece and Tunisia suggests

the opposite: It is state (in)action that produces stress and strain at the border. Across these cases, we identify structural neglect that underpins the absence of adequate and dignified reception infrastructures. When the arrival of unwanted migration still results in "emergencies" after this decade in El Hierro and elsewhere, then crisis *is* the policy. Its costs are borne first and foremost by migrants themselves through dehumanization, violence and death, while also transforming peripheral communities tasked with confronting the immediate realities of bordering.

As we enter our third year of research, the analytical density of this newsletter reflects a transition in our work from intensive data collection toward analytical synthesis. Our focus now has moved toward consolidating conceptual and empirical insights in several co-authored publications currently in preparation. A central finding emerging from our research is that contemporary borders do not follow a linear trajectory of fortification or erosion. Instead, we observe multi-scalar processes of stretching and reshaping across territorial, institutional, and corporeal dimensions. The contributions in this issue show how this border elasticity operates through uneven distribution of pressure, delegation of responsibility, and institutionalized abandonment. Mirco Buoso demonstrates how relative calm in Tenerife is enabled through intensified strain in El Hierro, revealing how borders function by concentrating disorder in some sites while maintaining procedural order in others. Artemis Fyssa shows how borders extend far beyond territorial lines, operating through prolonged waiting and restricted mobility that transform Greece into what interlocutors describe as an "island of Schengen." Chiara Pagano traces how declining sea departures from Tunisia—celebrated as policy success—have been achieved through violent interceptions, mass arrests, and forced deportations, producing hydraulic effects across routes. Our new team mem-



Prof. Dr. Bilgin Ayata is the director of the research project „Elastic Borders“

ber, legal scholar Angelika Adensamer, analyzes the constitutional tensions likely to arise from the implementation of the EU Migration Pact, while our visiting fellow Charlie Yves Ngoudji Tameko examines health as a site where borders are produced through delay, exposure, and deferred care. In a different register, our Marie Curie Fellow Carolyn Defrin reflects on how artistic practice can carry research on elastic borders beyond academic formats, opening speculative spaces that unsettle the apparent permanence of bordering arrangements.

In the coming months, we will focus on further interdisciplinary synthesis of findings and on the preparations of our publications, while collaborating with partners at the University of Graz in an event series on the EU Migration Pact and in the biannual Camps Conference in June 2026. We look forward to exchange with upcoming visiting fellows Sebastian Cobarrubias and Maribel Casas-Cortez and keynote speaker Rinaldo Walcott in the Spring term. Stay tuned for more updates in our next issue of the newsletter in Summer 2026.

When I returned to Tenerife in August 2025 to conduct another round of fieldwork, my goal was to understand the entanglements between the transfer-based migration management system and the absence of a generalized sense of crisis from my earlier fieldwork in 2023 and 2024. In those years—amid record sea arrivals—the islands projected a public-facing order, reinforced by local authorities’ rhetoric that “there is no problem with migration now.”

I soon realized that I could not grasp the nuances of this puzzle by considering the island of Tenerife alone. In the last three years the majority of migrants who passed through Tenerife’s reception and transfer system had arrived in El Hierro, the smallest island of the archipelago. As elastic borders stretch and retract across scales and spaces, understanding their function—and the impacts they produce—required following the border to where most arrivals took place in 2023 and 2024. Therefore, in my last visit to Tenerife, I conducted two visits to El Hierro, one of them with our project director, Bilgin Ayata. With a registered

population of just over 10,000 (and, according to our research partners, a de facto population closer to 5,000), the island received more than 14,000 sea arrivals in 2023 and nearly 24,000 in 2024 (APHDA 2024; APHDA 2025). Although between 2006 and 2010 some 4,500 people reached the island—as we learned in interviews—when arrivals increased sharply from 2023 onwards, El Hierro had neither a migration infrastructure nor designated authority in place: the national police was, in fact, not even deployed on the island.

What emerged since 2023 was a markedly different governance setting: smaller in scale, delegated, improvised, and directly lived by the island’s society—whose direct involvement has been central in every account. Interlocutors repeatedly reported a sense of “abandonment” by the state. Others framed this more specifically as neglect, pointing in particular to the Director Insular post—the central government’s main coordination role on the island—which has effectively remained vacant for two years now and been covered only on an interim basis by senior administrative staff. Thus, at a time when almost 40,000 migrants arrived on this small island, the most critical governance position was—and remains—vacant. This meant that arrivals management became crucially dependent on local responses and informal coordination, overwhelming the local community and border actors, as well as the two first-response centres that had been esta-

blished: one for identification and initial processing (CATE: Centro de Atención Temporal de Extranjeros) in San Andrés, and one for emergency reception and referral (CAED: Centro de Atención de Emergencias y Derivación) in La Frontera.

In both interview accounts and on-the-ground observation, Civil Protection and its volunteers stood out as the central infrastructure of this delegated and impromptu governance. Their unusual centrality appears across most aspects of the arrival system: from support during disembarkations in the small port of La Restinga to their extended presence inside the CATE, assisting with logistics. Their role is another dimension of border elasticity: capacity is stretched not primarily through formal institutional expansion, but through delegation and the mobilisation of local civic infrastructure. This is not simply an ‘add-on’ to state capacity as we argue in a forthcoming team-publication. The reliance on voluntarization of service provisions becomes the infrastructure through which the system remains operational, with responsibility redistributed downward and accountability rendered harder to locate.

This fragile arrangement is easily perceptible to the public eye. When coordination depends on volunteer labour and ad hoc arrangements, bordering becomes entangled with community resources, rhythms, and limits. We could observe this especially in La Restinga, the 500-inhabitant maritime village where migrants arriving in wooden fishing boats from the West African coast are directed to the island. The port’s activation reorders everyday space and services; stress rapidly spills beyond the reception site—through using school buses for transfers, temporary redeployment of scarce medical staff away from residents, and restrictions on port access for fishers and tourists, who mostly come for diving.

Yet the most consistently reported impact was psychological, rooted in the Atlantic crossing’s lethality. As noted in Newsletter No. 4, in the year 2024 alone at least 10,000 lives were lost, with some of the deceased reaching the islands. A shipwreck in May 2025 close to the port resulted in 7 deaths alone. The emotional stress of witnessing these border deaths was frequently addressed in our interviews. Interlocutors described how the routine recovery of dead migrants has placed such strain on maritime rescue crews that one vessel and its team were reportedly reassigned outside the archipelago. Meanwhile, island residents confront the arrival of the deceased as a municipal responsibility

that, in practice, is borne by neighbours—who support identification, contact relatives, and attempt to secure dignified burials. In El Hierro, the stress of the elastic border thus extends beyond everyday life, into the aftermath the island is left to carry.

The contrast of the situation at the border between El Hierro, the small and overlooked island and Tenerife, could not be starker. El Hierro foregrounds a form of impromptu bordering under exceptional circumstances, in many ways comparable to the situation on Greek islands in 2014/15, while two ferry hours further in Tenerife, bordering is organised to appear routine, administratively contained, and politically manageable. It was on the short return flight from El Hierro descending into Tenerife, that this archipelago division of labour became visible to me as a single configuration. From the window, I could see the expansion of Las Raíces—huge areas of new terrain incorporated into what is already the archipelago’s largest camp. This made tangible what I had also observed at the other camp in Tenerife, Las Canteras, and through administrative reclassifications within the reception apparatus which includes the shift of the Red Cross—run centre from a comprehensive reception center (CAI: Centro de Acogida Integral) to first assistance and referral center (CAED). Ironically, the expansion and consolidation of the border infrastructure in Tenerife occurred exactly at a time when the numbers of arrivals overall declined in the Canary Islands.

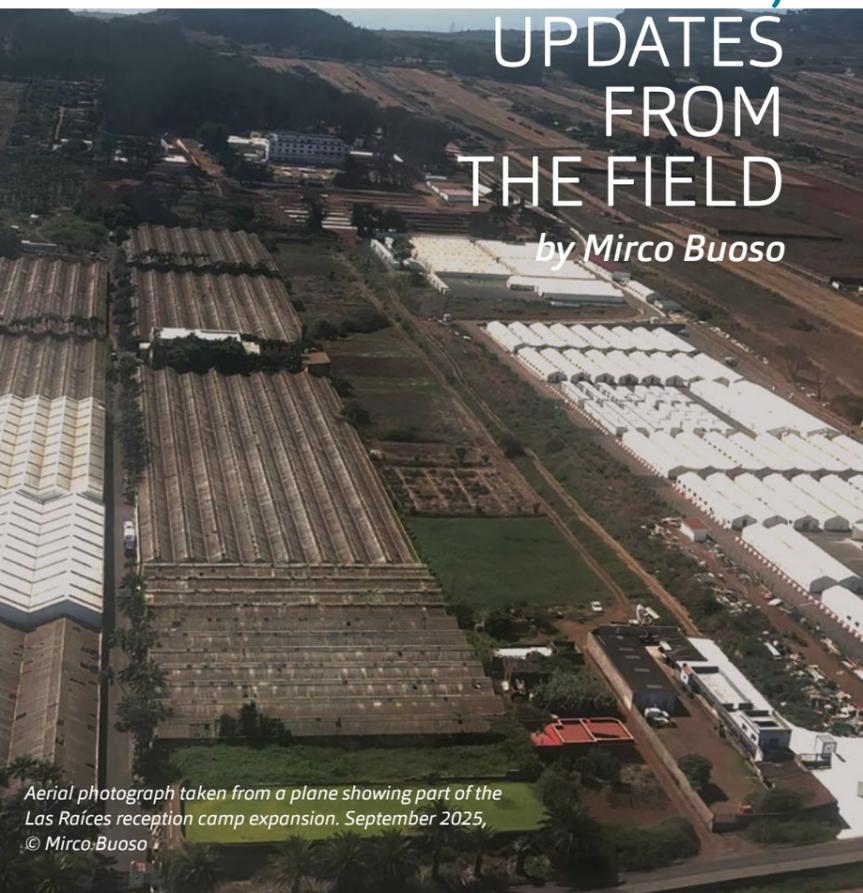
My visit to El Hierro critically extended my Tenerife analysis. While previous fieldwork showed how rapid mainland transfers create administrative efficiency (Buoso, 2025), El Hierro revealed what enables this: a less visible site absorbing the material and affective pressures of bordering. The two islands function as interconnected nodes in a single elastic border regime—maintaining Tenerife’s order by concentrating disorder in El Hierro. This uneven spatial distribution, I argue in a forthcoming co-authored article with Bilgin Ayata, is not incidental but constitutive of how border governance functions in this critical EU border zone.



Mirco Buoso is exploring the elastic border zone in Tenerife.

FOLLOWING THE BORDER, UPDATES FROM THE FIELD

by Mirco Buoso



Aerial photograph taken from a plane showing part of the Las Raíces reception camp expansion. September 2025, © Mirco Buoso



A "Refugees Welcome" banner at the entrance of the Refugee/Migrant Housing Squat Notoia 26, Athens.
© EB Team

LOOKING AT THE BORDER FROM THE MAINLAND

by Artemis Fyssa

How does our understanding of the border change when we look at it from the mainland — and more specifically, from the capital city of a nation state? And conversely, how does the elastic border regime of (im)mobility extend from the islands towards Athens and the wider mainland, a space often imagined as one step closer to the rest of Europe? These questions framed our trip to Athens, which combined the presentation of our research project at the conference “Sociology of Migration after the 2015 ‘Migrant Crisis’,” organized by the European Sociological Association, the Hellenic Sociological Association, and the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, with a small-scale field trip comprising targeted interviews. Together with Bilgin Ayata, we were in Athens in November, meeting with NGO actors, refugees, and the by-now former Secretary General for Migration Policy, Manos Logothetis.

Without turning our gaze away from the border, but by taking a certain distance from it, Athens emerged as a space where many dynamics familiar from the islands persist — albeit in reconfigured forms. Prolonged waiting, policy improvisation, and semi-provided services that neither fully include nor entirely exclude make the mainland appear as an extension rather than marking a rupture with the island experience.

This continuity was articulated with particular clarity through the lens of institutional governance. Greece as a whole was repeatedly described as an “island of Schengen” — a space that, until recently, was encircled by external borders with Non-Schengen countries, effectively limiting onward movement. This condition did not simply trap people on the islands; it reorganized — more dangerous — mobility routes and extended the border deep into the mainland. Thus, seen from Athens, our core analytical concept of border elasticity emerges as the spatial extension of control, risk, and waiting — a process through which the border does not soften, but stretches, settles, and reorganizes life far beyond the islands.



Dr. Artemis Fyssa is exploring the local impact of the elastic border in Samos.

Crucially, this optic was also tied to perceptions of temporariness — which are then challenged through the permanent infrastructures of detention and containment. In the eyes of central authorities, migrants appear to be widely understood as being “in transit,” a condition that profoundly shapes interactions with space and infrastructure. While the Closed Controlled Access Centers on the islands were allegedly built with expectations of order and care, these assumptions repeatedly collapsed in practice. Hence, for our institutional interlocutor, most infrastructural shortcomings can be explained by temporariness as a “state of mind” that characterizes people on the move. And yet, the ongoing campization of migration governance — with similar facilities operating on the outskirts of Athens — points to a permanent spatial transformation that reshapes both island border-zones and their mainland counterparts, and the possibilities of social relations.

Encounters with NGO actors complicated this institutional reading of the border. Initiatives such as ECHO Hub sought to move away from humanitarian narratives centered exclusively on vulnerability and trauma, emphasizing instead empowerment, skills,

and everyday social participation. The provision of Greek and English language classes signaled an attempt to interrupt relations of dependency and reframe integration as a lived, present process. This contrast sharpened a central tension of the mainland perspective: while the border travels and reproduces itself through policy and infrastructure, it is also actively contested and reworked through alternative practices.

Perhaps the most incisive perspective on the border came from A., a Palestinian former resident of Samos’ older camp. He described it as a deeply harsh place — one that tests the limits of what a person can endure. “We are the stories,” he insisted, emphasizing the need to speak, remember, and preserve lived experiences of these spaces. As newer, industrialized CCACs replace earlier Reception and Identification Centers, older camp infrastructures — and the memories attached to them — risk being erased. What was discussed in our previous Newsletter issue by Greek interlocutors in Samos as a “problem of memory” here reappears from a different angle: not as memory loss, but as the failure to preserve and carry forward the stories that make these spaces politically and socially legible.



Originally operating in Leros, ECHO Hub has moved away from the maritime border to operate in Kypseli, Athens.
© EB Team.



SUBMERGED
CITIES,
ELASTIC
BORDERS:

Streets flooded after Storm Harry hit Tunisia on 20–21 January 2026. P © Nessma TV.

THE PLACE OF TUNISIA IN THE MAKING OF NEW MEDITERRANEAN ECOLOGIES

by Chiara Pagano

While Tunisia is still assessing the damage caused by Storm Harry—which claimed four lives and flooded entire neighbourhoods of the capital and major coastal cities—, another force has continued to advance without interruption: the political transformations set in motion by President Kais Saied’s so-called self-coup of July 2021.

Spilling from the final months of 2025 into the first weeks of 2026 and continuing to reconfigure the country’s political and social landscape with comparable force, government attacks on the political, civil, and social rights of Tunisian citizens have increasingly converged with assaults on the fundamental rights of racialised and irregularised migrants present in the country. This convergence has taken shape in dialectical tension with pressures exerted by the EU and its member states on Tunisian authorities to “secure” their borders, alongside a broader reconfiguration of policy priorities around mobility and migration at regional and continental levels.

Tunisian authorities repeatedly sought to continentally reposition the country as a proactive actor in what was framed as the revival of a “new African and global order,” in which states of the Global South would reclaim the power to define their own priorities while discarding the “remnants of colonialism” and “external interference.” President Kais Saied’s address at the Intra-African Trade Fair in Algiers in September 2025 emphasised Tunisia’s claimed African identity and its commitment to strengthening the African Union through a “new approach,” presented as simultaneously deepening economic partnerships within the framework of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and reinforcing international security through tighter border control. Framed as an affirmation of sovereignty and self-determination, this narrative places security—explicitly including border security—at the core of Tunisia’s vision for African cooperation, revealing how decolonial claims intertwine with authoritarian notions of control.

On 27 November, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning Tunisia’s violations of fundamental rights and explicitly calling for an end to the repression of political opponents and civil society figures, including lawyer Sonia Dahmani. Her televised

arrest had inaugurated the government’s crackdown on prominent civil society actors mobilised in solidarity with irregularised migrants and against mounting racist discourses promoted by state authorities, as we highlighted in our newsletter no. 4. Saied responded by denouncing the resolution as “blatant interference” and summoning the EU ambassador.

Only hours later, Dahmani was conditionally released, shortly before being awarded the 2025 Human Rights Prize of the Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE). While this move could be read as a response to EU pressure, Dahmani remains subject to ongoing judicial proceedings, and the following day Tunisian courts handed down heavy prison sentences to numerous political, media, and business figures linked to the opposition. Selective concessions thus coexist with an overall intensification of repression.

legal safeguards and remain confined in unofficial detention sites. Meanwhile, humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR and IOM have seen their operational autonomy curtailed, only to adjust to a praxis where the assistance they continue to provide is folded into a broader system of deterrence: refugees are temporarily hosted in emergency shelter near the Libyan border, to be then pressured into so-called “voluntary return” programmes. For racialised migrants—especially pregnant women and women with children, many of whom are survivors of sexual violence—the consequences are particularly severe. Lacking access to healthcare and protection, they are increasingly targeted by hostile public discourse portraying them as instruments of alleged demographic “plots”, and conjuring their sterilization. In this context, “voluntary return” appears less as a choice than as the endpoint of a process of policing, exclusion, and abandonment.

Migration governance offers a magnifying lens through which this pattern becomes even more visible. In 2025, irregularised sea crossings to Europe fell by around 80 percent compared to two years earlier—a figure celebrated by European governments as a political success and claimed by Tunisian authorities as proof of their sovereign capacity to get rid of unwanted migrants. Yet this outcome is inseparable from the 2023 EU–Tunisia Memorandum, which allocated nearly 30 percent of European funds to surveillance equipment, fuel, and armoured vehicles, reinforcing a security-first approach that Tunisia now publicly frames as pursued in spite of European pressure, even though it had arguably emerged in response to it.

Taken together, these developments reveal how, rather than simply hardening or dissolving, borders are continuously stretched and reshaped—across territory, institutions, and bodies—in response to pressures from state, supra-state, and non-state actors. Tracing these elastic reconfigurations lies at the heart of this research project, shedding light on how borders are remade under the combined pressures of authoritarianism, climate crisis, and globalised migration control.

The decline in departures has been achieved through the expansion of violent interceptions at sea—up by approximately 45 percent—combined with mass arrests, arbitrary detention, and forced deportations toward the Libyan and Algerian borders. People returned to Tunisia have been denied access to



Dr. Chiara Pagano is researching the effects of the EU’s elastic border in Tunisia.



Tunisian lawyer and journalist Sonia Dahmani is released, Tunis, 27.11.2025. © YASSINE MAHJOUR/SIPA



WHEN BORDER PRACTICES BECOME LAW:

THE EU MIGRATION PACT AND CONSTITUTIONAL CONFLICT

by Angelika Adensamer

From screening and filtering arrivals to intensifying detention and expanding surveillance, the EU Migration Pact has turned border practices that evolved over many years at the external borders of the EU into codified law. After many years of planning and negotiation the Pact was adopted by the European Parliament in a final vote in April 2024. The ten legislative acts of the Pact will come fully into force in mid-2026. Member States were required to submit a National Implementation Plan (NIP) to the Commission by December 2024, outlining how they intend to achieve full implementation by the time the legal acts become applicable.

The package requires substantial adjustments across all Member States, with a disproportionate burden put by the EU lawmakers on the countries with the most arrivals, notably Greece, Italy and Spain, though its effects are not confined to those countries. All Member States are required to update the technical infrastructure of the EURODAC system, which is ex-

panded to include not only fingerprints but also biometric facial images, and to establish new interfaces with police databases. The new Border Procedures, which include health and security screenings and a filtering process, will have to be implemented on all external borders of the EU, which includes international airports. Depending on pre-existing national arrangements, this could require the construction of new screening facilities, including for health checks as well as additional detention infrastructure or alternatives to detention, thereby bringing enhanced border zones further inland. These implementation requirements exemplify how border elasticity operates legally: EU-level norms stretch across Member States with different constitutional traditions, expanding border zones spatially to inland airports and new screening facilities as well as temporally, extending detention periods and differentiated procedures, while generating zones of legal ambiguity that shift enforcement capacity across scales.

While several states failed to meet the deadline for the submission of an NIP, all but Poland and Hungary – both of which have explicitly refused to submit a plan – eventually delivered it. Together with Laura Montanari, we have tried to systematically analyse these NIPs, when not available, sought to otherwise determine the state of implementation in the different member states in order to understand



Angelika Adensamer is researching the EU legal framework that enables border elasticity.

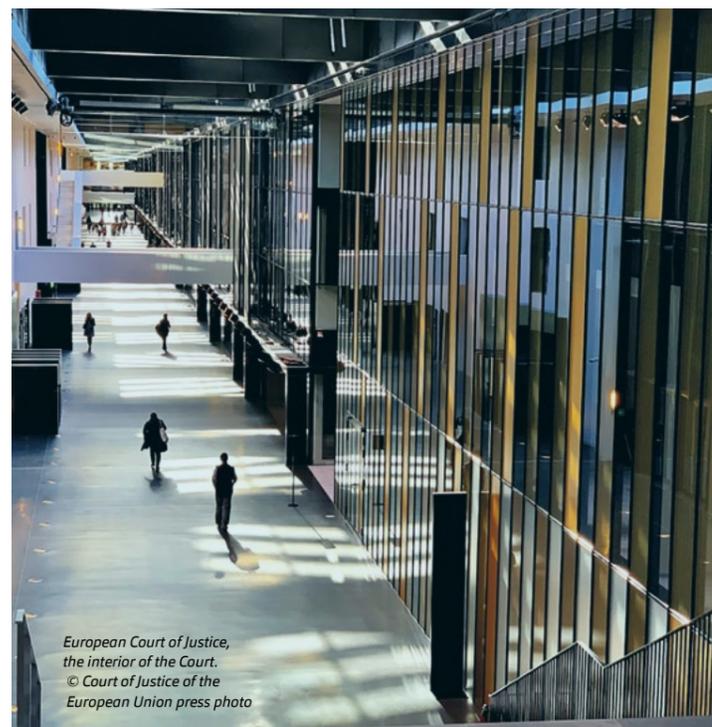
the real effects of this unprecedented reform of the EU asylum system, as well as the differences in implementation between capitalise Member States and the many problems that may arise: from Human Rights violations, to unclarity of procedures and incompatibilities with national administrative systems. There is, however, no official list of the plans received by the Commission, and many of the submitted plans have not been made public. The lack of transparency has prompted significant criticism from civil society organisations and academic scholars. I share this criticism, as insufficient transparency obstructs the discussions necessary in a democracy and the accountability of the legislators, limits academic monitoring and analysis, and puts immense pressure on the preparation by the many actors and institutions involved in supporting people on the move during their arrival and procedural processes.

When I attended an event hosted by the Vienna Centre for Migration and Law on the implementation of the pact in Austria this January, I could observe these tensions. The Austrian draft law for the implementation of the pact has been published on 15th of January 2026 and the submission of opinions on the draft through parliament is still open to the public. At the event the draft law was controversially discussed between representatives of NGOs as well as the ministry, judges, and academics. Some aspects

of the implementation give rise to great concerns: it is of yet unclear, if a remedy is available against a placement in the accelerated procedure and also, if all remedies have a suspensive effect. This means that the applicant might not have a right to stay during the processing of it and that an applicant could be deported before the process is concluded. There is also still uncertainty - even among the judges - on the transitional provisions, so that it is not yet clear if the new laws will only apply to new applications or also to those already pending. It is clear that such a situation puts great pressure on the NGOs and organisations that make a great effort to provide legal counsel to applicants continuously. I will continue to follow the implementation closely as an example of the impact the legalisation of the practices in Greece and Italy now have on the member states that do not lie on the outer borders.

The EU Migration pact is attempting to normalise practices that could be incompatible with the constitutional and Human Rights framework of the capitalise Member States as well as international law, most notably the Geneva Convention which guarantees the right to seek asylum. Spain, for instance, limits administrative detention to a maximum of 72 hours, well below the 12 weeks of the Border Procedure. The Spanish government has therefore indicated that alternative measures to detention will be employed in implementing the new rules. These problems of constitutionality and conflicts of the Pact with human rights, international protection, as well as freedom of movement have been discussed within the Elastic Border project for some time and the development we are witnessing as the implementation comes closer reinforces these concerns.

Against this background, the application of the Pact is also expected to trigger a wave of cases before national constitutional courts as well as the European Court of Justice. The true contours of the Migration Pact will be shaped not only by legislative text but also by constitutional limits, litigation, and implementation on the ground over the coming years. In the next months until summer, the Elastic Borders team will host events examining how different Member States navigate the tensions between EU-level harmonisation and national legal frameworks. My focus will be tracking this legal transformation revealing how contemporary borders are remade through legal mechanisms that often escape public scrutiny.



European Court of Justice, the interior of the Court. © Court of Justice of the European Union press photo

As I complete my visiting fellowship at the University of Graz this winter semester, my engagement with the Elastic Borders project (EBP) continues the methodological journey I described in Newsletter No. 5—moving from quantitative analysis toward critical border studies that centers lived experience. My work in Tenerife, where I have long been involved with NGOs supporting arriving migrants, combined with the EBP’s interdisciplinary framework, has led me to examine health not as an individual attribute to be measured, but as something actively produced by border regimes themselves. This analytical reorientation shapes the contribution I offer here: understanding how the elasticity of European borders operates through and upon migrants’ bodies.

On the migration routes between Africa and Europe, survival is increasingly a matter of chance rather than planning. In recent years, thousands of migrants have endured journeys lasting several days or weeks at sea, without food, water or adequate protection from the harsh weather. Survivors often find themselves in a

state of severe physical and psychological deterioration. This reality calls for a change in perspective: rather than viewing migrants’ health as something that is simply assessed at the border, it must be understood as something that is actively produced by the border itself.

The concept of elastic borders offers a powerful perspective from which to examine this process. European borders no longer function solely as fixed territorial lines. They stretch and retract across space and time through surveillance, deterrence, delays in rescues and outsourced control. Within this elasticity, health becomes a key dimension where the border operates. The border is not only crossed, but also experienced through the bodies of migrants, with the Atlantic and Mediterranean routes providing empirical evidence of this dynamic.

SURVIVING MIGRATION ROUTES, ARRIVING UNWELL:

REVISITING HEALTH AND MIGRATION IN ELASTIC BORDER ZONES

by Charlie Yves
Ngoudji Tameko, PhD.



Mobile Red Cross units activated at the port of Las Cristianas on a day of arrivals – October 2023
© Mirco Buoso.



El Pinar municipal cemetery, El Hierro. Unidentified migrants are buried alongside island residents, September 2025
© Mirco Buoso



Dr. Charlie Yves Ngoudji Tameko is an economist specializing in health and migration and a visiting fellow with the Elastic Borders Project.

In 2024 alone, a record number of 10,457 people died or disappeared while attempting to reach Spain via the Atlantic routes, with the Canary Islands recording the highest number of victims (9,757 deaths). More than 2,500 deaths were recorded on the central Mediterranean route. This trend changed in 2025, but more than 3,000 people, 14% of whom were children, still lost their lives crossing the Atlantic from West Africa to the Canary Islands, and more than 1,000 on the central Mediterranean route. NGOs such as ‘Caminando Fronteras’ suggest that these figures represent only a fraction of the actual toll, as the majority of deaths at sea leave no recoverable trace, turning entire shipwrecks into invisible tragedies.

These deaths are not random accidents. They are structurally linked to the tightening of legal migration routes, the externalisation of border control and the strategic use of deterrence. As borders expand, rescue efforts are delayed, selective or conditional, and exposure to dehydration, hypothermia, sunburn and untreated injuries is prolonged. In this sense, deteriorating health is not an unfortunate side effect of migration, but a predictable consequence of the way borders are managed. Health, which appears in governance frameworks as something to be controlled, categorised and managed, functions in practice as a slow and elastic border mechanism, with vulnerability being spread across space and time and risk redistributed among migrants’ bodies.

Although the new European Union Pact on Migration and Asylum recognises the importance of migrants’ health, mainly through screening mechanisms at external borders aimed at identifying vulnerabilities

on arrival, it continues to view health as a consequence of initial vulnerabilities rather than a process shaped by the journey itself. It overlooks the fact that elastic border practices that result in long waits at sea, drifting under surveillance, delayed rescues and prolonged transits actively transform bodies. Worse still, health checking tends to lead to further discrimination, transforming health into a temporally extended border that begins well before arrival and continues well after disembarkation.

Migrants who set out in relatively good health (‘healthy migrant effect’) often arrive suffering from acute dehydration, malnutrition, respiratory infections, injuries and severe psychological disorders. Borders follow migrants into reception centres, hospitals and asylum procedures through persistent health effects that shape their future trajectories. Health thus extends the border far beyond a simple checkpoint, transforming it into a continuum of exposure and endurance, with contemporary European border regimes exhausting bodies slowly and often invisibly. I look forward to presenting my ongoing research on health and migration at borders at the upcoming Camps Conference at the University of Graz in June 2026 at a panel organized by the Elastic Borders team.

As I enter the final months of my Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions fellowship, I have been reflecting deeply on questions of impact. What happens when a two-year research project formally ends? How can the relationships, insights, and creative methods developed during an academic fellowship continue to circulate, adapt, and reach new audiences—especially those beyond academia?

'The Hallway' has emerged as my response to these questions. Developed in close dialogue with the Elastic Borders research project, it takes the artistic research carried out in Samos and Tenerife and transforms it into a modular, evolving installation and convening format that can travel, grow, and remain responsive long after the fellowship period concludes. 'The Hallway' engages with elastic borders not only as an analytical concept but as a lived and felt reality: borders stretch across time (from inherited memories to imagined futures), across space (from Samos to Tenerife to the US–Mexico border), and across the social positions of those who encounter them. While elastic border regimes often compress time and space through waiting, uncertainty, and bureaucratic strain—placing intense pressure on social relationships—this project uses artistic practice to stretch them differently. Through sound, storytelling, and collective imagination 'The Hallway' creates alternative temporal and spatial experiences that slow urgency, open reflection, and reconfigure connection. In dialogue with the Elastic Borders research, which examines these dynamics

through social scientific analysis, the project offers an artistic lens through which participants can envision more humane relationships and possibilities beyond the constraints of border governance.

The project unfolds through three interconnected modules: Doors to the Future, Micro-Artworks, and an Art Symposium—each designed to translate research insights into embodied, participatory experiences.

Doors to the Future consists of seven sonic “doors” that invite audiences to step into imagined future worlds addressing some of the most challenging aspects of contemporary migration and border regimes: health, housing, education, social belonging, and dignity. These immersive sound environments combining music, found sound and multi-lingual narration are being co-created with a diverse workshop group in Samos—local educators, lawyers, people seeking asylum, artists, humanitarian workers, and long-term residents.

FROM RESEARCH TO RESONANCE:

EXTENDING ELASTIC BORDERS THROUGH THE HALLWAY
by Carolyn Defrin



Concept design sketch for The Hallway, created in collaboration with generative AI © Carolyn Defrin

„Doors to the future“ sketch designs created by participants during the Spring 2025 workshop in Samos © Carolyn Defrin



As shared in my contribution to the previous issue of the newsletter, the Samos workshops began with speculative drawing exercises. These sketches have since evolved into immersive soundscapes through ongoing online collaborative workshops and will be physically assembled during an intensive two-week residency in February. The installation will culminate in a public event over the weekend of 14 February, where local audiences will be invited to experience the doors and reflect collectively on how future imaginations might reshape present relationships. A core aim is to explore whether imaginative encounter can foster unexpected alliances across roles often positioned in opposition.

Suspended between these doors is the second module: **Micro-Artworks**. These are small, intimate multimedia works—drawings, poems, photographs, short texts, videos—created through a simple duet prompt I describe as listening back to create forward. Participants are invited to first listen to a piece of music from their grandparents' generation and make a response reflecting inherited wisdom; they then create a second work imagining a future world on the other side of a door they find intriguing in their local area.



Dr. Carolyn Defrin is a Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellow affiliated with the Elastic Borders project.

This participatory format has been part of my plan throughout the fellowship as a way to involve voices beyond the immediate case studies of Samos and Tenerife. It was initially tested with the Elastic Borders research team during February last year, when we were dispersed across different countries. Weekly WhatsApp prompts invited small acts of making, followed by shared reflection. Through this process, the project distilled into its current two-part structure—past wisdom and future imagination.

Since then, the micro-artworks have expanded through WhatsApp participation with colleagues and border actors across Europe, the UK (where I previously worked on migration and art), and the US,

where I recently conducted preliminary research on artistic responses at the US–Mexico border with a Karl Kaser Exploratory research grant from the University of Graz. This module will also form the basis of a final two-week workshop period in Tenerife, hosted by a local pharmacy that supports unaccompanied minors, with additional contributions from Fine Art students at the University of La Laguna. The result is an ever-growing archive of speculative futures shaped through accessible acts of creativity.

The third module, the **Art Symposium**, brings these elements together. Over two days, invited participants with varied relationships to borders—researchers, artists, policymakers, humanitarian workers, and people with lived experience—will experience the installation, create micro-artworks, and engage in facilitated reflection. Rather than seeking consensus, the symposium prioritizes multi-perspective inquiry and what conflict facilitator Prentis Hemphill describes as “unexpected alliances” needed for future visioning (2024). Each gathering culminates in shared commitments, which become part of the project's documentation and online archive.

Elements of this symposium will be tested in Samos and Tenerife, with funding and festival applications currently under review to support its full realization during London's Refugee Week (June 2026) and the Steirischer Herbst Festival in Graz (October 2026). Alongside these live encounters, an online archive will host the sonic doors, micro-artworks, and reflections—ensuring that my work in collaboration with the Elastic Borders research project continues to resonate across borders, disciplines, and communities.

The Hallway seeks not to conclude the fellowship, but to carry it forward—transforming research into a living, adaptable practice of shared imagination. Stay tuned for reflections on the installation as it develops.

UPCOMING EVENTS

January

Angelika Adensamer participated in an event on the Implementation of the EU Migration Pact in Austria at the Vienna Centre for Migration & Law with stakeholders from the Ministry, Administrative Courts, NGOs and academia.

February

2nd – 17th

Carolyn Defrin will work with participants in Samos on the installation build, which will be presented to a local audience.

March

2nd – 3rd:

Chiara Pagano is co-organizer of the Final Conference of the MARE Project (Mediterranean Alliance for Research and Education), entitled: "Beyond Migrations: People and Human Mobilities Across Contemporary Mediterranean History" at the University of Pavia.

6th

Mirco Buoso is selected to compete at the Three Minute Thesis Competition - 3MT at the University of Graz.

16th – 29th:

Carolyn Defrin holds a two-week workshop with young people in Tenerife in through collaboration with La Comunitaria Pharmacia and art students from the University of La Laguna art students. Bilgin Ayata, Chiara Pagano, Artemis Fyssa and Mirco Buoso will join for parts of the workshop.

April

28th

Elastic Borders, in collaboration with the "Migration, Borders and Mobility in, Around and Through Europe" Cluster (Field of Excellence Dimensions of Europe), will co-organize a keynote lecture on the EU Migration Pact.

May:

15th

Angelika Adensamer will participate in the Human Rights Conference (Menschenrechtskonferenz), organized by an alliance of NGOs in Vienna.

18th – 19th

Elastic Borders, together with the "Migration, Borders and Mobility in, Around and Through Europe" Cluster (Field of Excellence Dimensions of Europe), will co-organize a workshop on the EU Migration Pact.

June

4th – 7th

EB team members compose panel on "The Elastic Borders of the EU: Analyzing Contemporary Border Regimes in Europe and Beyond", at the 3rd Graz/ Puerto Rico International Conference on Human Rights from an Inter-American Perspective, "Camps, Belonging, and Abolition Democracy," held at the University of Graz, Austria. In parallel, the EB team, in collaboration with Carolyn Defrin, will present an interactive installation.

16th – 22nd

Carolyn Defrin will participate in London's Refugee Week, bringing together installation elements from Samos and Tenerife into her art/symposium concept 'The Hallway' (location TBD).

18th – 19th

Angelika Adensamer will participate in the first ACMRL Conference on Migration Law, taking place at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

20th-25th

Bilgin Ayata participates at a workshop on Afghan Displacement at the Aga Khan University in Nairobi, Kenya.

Painting in San Ysidro district in San Diego, California,
close to the US-Mexico border, September 2025
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