

A Conversation with Phevos Simeonidis (Disinfo Collective), 21 July 2021

Maria Nerina Boursinou and Pierre Monforte, with Phevos Simeonidis

■ **ABSTRACT:** In this interview with Nerina Boursinou and Pierre Monforte, Phevos Simeonidis—cofounder of the Disinfo Collective—reflects on the role of civil society organizations in the field of refugee support in Greece, in particular through the focus on their relations with public authorities. The interview provides an account of the changing environment in the field of migration and the diversity of the organizations working to support refugees in Greece, while it highlights such organizations' ambivalent relations with public authorities. Moreover, the interview discusses the impact of the measures taken by the Greek government(s) to control or repress the activities of civil society organizations in recent years, including their criminalization. Finally, it makes reference to the complex ethics that accompany migration research and support practices, especially in relation to the collective's operation and decision-making processes.

■ **KEYWORDS:** civil society organizations, Frontex, Greece, investigative journalism, pushback operations, refugee crisis.

Can you briefly present yourself and the Disinfo Collective?

My name is Phevos Simeonidis and I am the acting director of the Disinfo Collective, which is a not-for-profit research co-op in Greece. I am using the word co-op because this is the closest that comes to the UK equivalent of our legal entity status. My background starts with me completing an internship and a postgraduate degree at the Centre for Research Architecture, in Goldsmith's in London, which also happens to be the housing facility for Forensic Architecture. While there, I had the chance to engage with their work, to see the methodologies that were being employed, to get engaged with certain projects, and then, upon finishing my studies there, I returned to Athens. Following many projects, and many discussions with people in the field, we decided to move forward and see how we could employ some of the methodologies that Forensic Architecture and other open-source investigators are using and apply them to the Greek context, not necessarily with a big focus on the academic production of knowledge, but more on the very tangible, practical fast-track side. I am saying that because we try to keep track of what is going on, to collect the material as it comes out and not engage on a project later on. We try to do fast response, let's say, if this is needed, when it is needed, depending on the capacity that we have as a research co-op.



Where do you usually disseminate your findings?

There are three main pillars of our work. The first one is court cases, which is a priority for us. Assuming there is a case of police misconduct, and assuming we happen to have footage from somebody who sends us footage, or we happen to record it ourselves, we are first going to get in touch with the victims. And we are going to prioritize supporting their court case. This is, for us, the most important thing before any research output, before any journalist outcome. The second is what we would call journalist outputs, which are usually disseminated to partners that we work with, namely, in Greece, that would be Efimerida Twn Syntaktwn, The Press Project, [and] Omnia TV. We opened up one project with Kontra Channel and by “open up the project,” what I mean is that we would publish footage there first. The third pillar, which is something we are still developing, is the more academic and the more conceptual sets of interdisciplinary investigations.

What are the main topics that Disinfo is interested in?

The two main pillars are, first the far-right and alt-right. This is something that is really important, because the alt-right has been in the spotlight in the US even before the election of President Trump, but in Greece it is shaping itself as we speak, and it reaches broad audiences. The other big pillar is human rights violations. And as you can easily tell, this is as broad as possible for a reason. I would not want to narrow it down but I can give some examples of what we are looking at. Police misconduct and brutality. Displacement and the “management” of displacement. Digital rights and anti-surveillance or surveillance techniques, especially when it comes to the public domain and the surveillance of citizens, but also people on the move that are detained, in detention facilities in the islands or near the border. Border regimes [are] also quite a developing sector right now in Greece, and have been for quite some years. We are also interested in money trails, but money trails more in relation to something that we are looking into.

Could you tell us a bit more about the current situation in Greece in relation to refugee policies and migration management? And how Disinfo comes in—some of your projects on this question?

First of all, one huge disclaimer that I think needs to be put in every discussion about the current migration management policies in Greece: the Greek state does not really understand people as refugees unless it really has to, unless it is really pressed to. It is a continuation of a policy which started during the previous government. The policy in the beginning of Syriza, in 2015, in the so-called infamous “refugee crisis,” was passive intervention. This goes back in time as well, since the governments previous to Syriza were also implementing similar policies. The state was saying that they are going to do as little as possible, to allow people to continue their journey, not to die, even if that meant allowing organizations, NGOs, anarchist collectives, solidarity collectives, squatters, anyone to chip in with their bit, just to allow people to not die and survive. And then, the people would go on to the infamous Balkan route. So that was the passive intervention prior to the deal between the EU and Turkey and the borders closing.

Then, we see the Greek state forming the first steps of its current policy, which is detention, or as they would call it, reception and identification, and then hosting centers. This is basically a detention regime. Not only it is a rigid detention regime, but it also wishes to add additional time and space for each individual that is applying for asylum, regardless of whether the person is going to get rejected or approved. How do you add time? By making this a very laborious

process for the system itself, and by rejecting people a priori, and then allowing them to do an appeal, to go to an administrative court. So instead of actually looking at the asylum applications as they are and admitting that you have to accept at least some of the people because they have a very valid claim, they prefer to reject people and then allow them if they have the means, like a lawyer [or] the support of an organization, to actually get back into the system, and do a second application.

When it comes to space, we see everything being moved away from the cities. The first camp that was actually built in Greece after the so-called “refugee crisis” was Elaionas in Athens, in the autumn of 2015, and this was actually quite close to the city, compared to everything else that has been built after that. Now we see that the new government tries to create these five new centers five plus one centers that are multipurpose, closed centers in the islands as well as one in the Evros area, stepping up surveillance and detention apparatuses. The interesting thing is that the government itself gets into a paradox when it speaks about its own policies. On the one hand, they promised that they will decongest the islands fully, and that there will be no new people applying for asylum because we are not going to let anyone come in the country. But at the same time, it is constructing five centers in the islands and one in Evros.

And this is in accordance with the European policies. But then there is a different narrative that the New Democracy party gives to their voters and the people that support them.

I am not a specialist in EU law by any means, but it all comes down to how these camps are defined. To put it in very simple terms, the EU does not fund prisons. And the Greek government reassures the EU that these will not be prisons. At the same time, it promises to the local communities that these are going to be closed and very well-monitored centers. So, it gets a bit murky as to what we can actually call them. I have seen visuals, and again, people can find visuals from the new camps—footage and pictures—that deem these places to be prisons. I don’t find any other reason to have, in remote locations, sets of boxes in a row with barbed wire and a very sophisticated surveillance system on them, unless it is a prison. It does not look like a hosting facility. And we can play with words as much as we want on the local and EU level, but they are detention centers.

Something we have been hearing about recently is the pushback operations, and I guess a challenge is how to document them, because this is not something that is easy to observe.

The pushback cases are usually divided between the Aegean and Evros. We had the chance to collaborate with actors investigating and researching these incidents and we were also trying to verify as many of the cases as we can, to put forward more solid evidence. It is actually quite interesting that the government denies all allegations, [and] allegedly investigates or promises to investigate some of them, but to no avail. Also, the government will use any argument against the pushback narrative, as long as it fits its purpose. To give you a recent example, a report by the Frontex Scrutiny Group did not find damning evidence against Frontex (in relation to pushbacks), and the Greek government has used this to suggest that Greece had not been involved in pushback operations either. However, this is not true: the report shows very clearly that Greece has been involved in such operations.

It is also very interesting to understand the relationality between Frontex and Greece and how they operate, and the way that they try to shift responsibility, according to international, European, or national laws. For example, there is the very famous case of a Frontex Danish crew member being ordered to push back people and refusing, obviously, to follow the order. Then,

the Greek Coast Guard was like, “we didn’t do anything,” and then Frontex said, “but this is not our responsibility, that is the responsibility of the country that is hosting the operation”—Poseidon in this case—which is Greece. There is this ping-pong of who is to blame. Also the Greek Prime Minister has explicitly said quite recently that the word pushback is not even in his dictionary, and he does not understand what that would entail.

Do you think that Greek society hears about this? Are the migration developments right now a discussion topic in the mainstream media? Or is it something that people just happen to hear on social media or somewhere else?

I think that, since at least 2013, the people who want to know about it can find the information easily accessible to them. I am saying that because even newspapers that are aligning themselves more with the government are actually speaking about that. They speak of misconduct; sometimes they speak of the burden on the people to actually make a solid case, and then try to investigate that or try to apply for asylum. And there is a discussion also when it comes to the European level. I would say that people are against this, I would say that people are protesting the pushbacks. But we also have to keep in mind that one of the arguments used by the Greek government is Turkey’s involvement in this. We are speaking about the propaganda war, which is run by both governments on their respective levels for their respective end goals. It is safe to say that there are pushbacks happening and the specificities of each case are different depending on who you are going to ask. That is why also, very few cases are being submitted.

On the legal side of things, the very practice of a pushback—people are intercepted and taken on board the vessel and then sent back without them being allowed due process or any registration—does not allow people to put a case against Greece and actually request for their asylum to be examined. The reason is that they can never prove the pushback in terms of a paper trail, that they have actually been in the country, that they were actually stopped by the Hellenic Coast Guard, even though some of the testimonies—some of which we have also published—are very eloquent as to what exactly happened, and the vessels have been identified.

Let’s move now from state management over to the field of refugee support in Greece. Can you tell us about this field, in particular since 2015, and place Disinfo’s role in it?

I can start with Disinfo’s role. It limits itself to investigation and research based on what we call Open Source Intelligence: things that are already in the public domain, or sometimes through legal partners, information that gets to us and we try to reconstruct cases and actually speak about the cases in the public domain or provide support and research to substantiate the evidence that the people are bringing forward. We are also very heavily engaged in trying to understand the surveillance and detection apparatus that is being constructed.

In more general terms, and this will be my personal opinion as somebody that has been involved with refugee and migrant solidarity since 2015, the collectives, organizations, NGOs, and even state [and] parastate actors that have been supportive of the right to apply for asylum are still continuing to operate. There have been attempts by the government to actually control the NGOs, civil society actors, and the horizontal bottom-up collectives. But this has not been a complete success from their side. I am thinking of the registry that they tried to create for the nongovernmental organizations, I am thinking of all the squats that have been evicted. People have managed to open up new ones, or manage to maintain some of them. I think it would be unfair to say that the whole of the Greek society is against asylum seekers. But it would also be unfair to say that the whole of society is for asylum seekers. I think that the tensions that were

present in 2015 are still present today. At the same time, but from a different side, the governing party is actually openly against asylum seekers.

Can you tell us whether and how you collaborate with other organizations in the field?

When it comes to organizations, we are part of the Border Violence Monitoring Network, a consortium of multiple organizations and individuals around the Balkan area and Central Europe. Our work with them is mainly to monitor and investigate specific allegations or specific cases, and to also follow certain money trails, and the infrastructure that is being constructed to control people on the move. Border Violence Monitoring Network publishes, on a monthly basis, its own reports about violence in the borders. There is also a set of special reports, one of them being the Black Book of pushbacks, which reached the EU Parliament. Border Violence Monitoring Network has had some great victories on a European advocacy level, scrutinizing cases in Slovenia, and Croatia and Hungary and elsewhere. When it comes to other organizations in Greece, we are trying to collaborate with legal actors. This has been the most fruitful collaboration: one of our main goals has been to assist them to explain what is going on and to actually get further details on an incident to support a case.

What are the kinds of organizations you don't want to collaborate with, if there are any?

I would say that, by default, we oppose notions of extractivism: organizations that would try to take away the work from the people that are doing it, and to actually also take away the agency from the very people that are on the move. We also do not work with organizations that are directly connected to the Greek authorities, and there is a set of organizations in Greece—and we don't have to name them—that are actually very happy to collaborate with authorities and actually push forward the demands and the narrative the Greek government is proposing, which many times becomes very much against human rights. I don't think we would want to collaborate with these organizations. We have not been asked to, to be honest.

Could you describe your relationship with authorities at different levels: local, regional, national, and the European Union?

There has not been any request from them to collaborate on something. By collaborating, I mean providing evidence of something. The only thing that comes to mind as a potential collaboration, or a potential invitation, is the invitation of the Ombudsman in Greece to actually provide, as they call it, substantial evidence of misconduct relating to the pushbacks. But it is a strong belief—and it has been a strong belief since 2015 for me personally—that if the EU authorities or the Greek authorities want to find solid evidence of pushbacks, then this is already either in the public domain through the publications that many organizations and media before us have done, or they could also ask their own staff. To give you an example, in many cases of pushbacks, we actually see officers of the Hellenic Coast Guard filming themselves, what is actually happening. And so, it would not make sense for me to try and locate that footage, since it is very evident that X officer from the Hellenic Coast Guard actually has this footage on their phone. The same goes for cases of police misconduct where you can actually see police officers in Athens filming what is going on. So, there is substantial evidence if somebody wishes to find that. The other thing, when it comes to the EU authorities through the work of Border Violence Monitoring Network, we are engaging in the EU and national-level advocacy and there are contributions to, for example, the Frontex Scrutiny Group work, and other pieces and reports.

When we first started, we spoke about criminalization. Have you ever felt that your activities and your actions have been constrained? If so, did you find ways to work around this?

One thing is that there is a lack of information, or access to information in general, and this is also a debate that we see opening up again, in Greece, about freedom of information. The question is whether people in Greece have actually the right to file a Freedom of Information request. Again, it is very murky. When it comes to the information, we solely rely on either what whistleblowers would tell us or what we can find in the public domain through the public registries that the Greek state is willingly offering us, to allow people to access information. Disinfo had no troubles with the authorities. We are not anticipating having any, but there is this possibility, especially because of the nature of our work.

It is interesting to acknowledge the remote sensing: seeing things from afar, working with things from afar, and documenting or analyzing evidence that comes to us also minimizes the risks. The risk lies with the very people that are documenting the violence, that are documenting the pushbacks, for example, that are documenting police violence. Here I am thinking of the two publications we did on the Nea Smyrni incidents: a neighborhood in Athens, which saw a series of cases [of] police misconduct in early March this year [2021]. Our work was, from afar, to analyze the evidence and present the evidence, not to be there and collect it ourselves, which obviously takes away much of the risk that we could expose ourselves to.

The other thing that I wanted to say, when it comes to criminalization: it is really interesting that the Greek government is going against organizations on the ground. Regardless of whether these are organizations we would work with or organizations we would not work with, it is very troubling to see people being prosecuted or people that might one day be prosecuted without substantial evidence. For example, there are groups like Alarm Phone or SeaWatch that are allegedly going to be prosecuted. I say allegedly, because up to this day, as far as I am aware, there is not really a solid case against them. They are to be prosecuted because they publish SOS messages from people on the move. I cannot understand personally—again I am not a lawyer—how this constitutes espionage in any way.

One of the questions in our work is about the relation between organizations and the state. What we hear from different organizations in the refugee support sector is that there is criticism against those that receive funding, or that do work directly with the state. What do you think about this criticism? And, more generally, how do you make choices regarding whether you want to work with the state, receive funding from the state, or not?

As I said before, we have not been approached by any state actor to actually provide research for them. I can only speculate as to what the response would be. When it comes to the criticism, I find it interesting and a bit worrying how you can advocate for something and then receive money from the same actors whose actions you are advocating against. And I understand that this is also a way for some of the organizations to continue to operate. As to whether this is worth it or not, this is entirely up to them to say, I would not want to comment on that. But it is very true that by working with the authorities, you can actually—especially if you are an organization such as a nongovernmental organization in Lesbos within the camp, or anywhere else in Greece—you can actually be allowed to be present if you are actually cooperating with the Greek authorities. As a legal entity, even us, we would be obliged to cooperate if there is something that needs to be done, and that is why we are also submitting things to the court. The point is not to create a para-repository of information that the authorities do not have access to. But again, it is very interesting to understand these relationalities, and I think that each orga-

nization chooses that directly according to their own needs, and also to their *modus operandi*, and whether they think it is more important to stay on the ground, or it is more important to actually oppose current policies that are being implemented.

Is this something that you discuss as a group, within your group? Do you have debates or any tensions within the group, in relation to these questions?

Yes we discuss it, but no, there is no tension. I think it is a unanimous decision and the way we operate—we operate as a horizontal structure—so, all these things are discussed. We have also decided not to work with [certain] organizations and that is regardless of whether they cooperate with the Greek authorities or not. We are basing our choice to work with someone or not according to the narrative they are proposing. There are certain narratives that are problematic, that we don't agree with, and we try to not associate ourselves with these narratives. Sometimes we have to think beyond the very simple legal aspects or the framework that are being put when it comes to funding and budgets, but it is always important to think of the narrative itself. This goes also to media, right? We might value someone's contribution a lot when it comes to the media outcomes they produce in the specific newspaper, but we would not publish something on that paper if two pages after there is going to be something about how "illegal migrants are raping women in Athens." It is all about how each media and each organization positions themselves and chooses accordingly who they are going to collaborate with.

I have this feeling that these tensions, these debates about whether to work with the state, with authorities (you were saying that this is something that enables some organizations to continue working, basically) are mostly found in organizations that do humanitarian work at the border?

Yes, that is right! Because they are also the ones that have to operate in the very space that is controlled by the authorities.

Based on your current experience and things you already know through your work on pushbacks, detention centers, etc., what would you say are the main issues that are going to pre-occupy groups like Disinfo in the near future?

It is interesting that we talk about the refugee side of things. I would say surveillance, but not for people on the move only. I would say surveillance for citizens. I am using this division between citizens and people on the move not because I find it important for me personally but because it is important for the narrative of the government. We have seen before in the past—and we continue to see on a global level—that detention and surveillance never stick to those that they are usually designed for.

The Greek government is supposed to launch new devices with facial recognition this summer, they are going to use enhanced biometric systems within the new refugee detention facilities. There is a whole bunch of quite creepy, for lack of a better word, and alarming at least, projects rolled out by Frontex and other agencies when it comes to security, digital defense systems, and software. So, surveillance is indeed one of the subjects that we are going to be dealing a lot with.

If I can make a prediction, I guess eventually even the Greek government and the EU Parliament will have to agree on how we speak about pushbacks. I think this is something that will move now more on the legal frameworks versus our work (which hopefully has helped and will

continue to help putting forward this motion). There is an issue when it comes to the local and European authorities as to how we speak about things, what are the words we are using, what is the way we want to move forward with them, and I think that pushbacks are going to be a part of the public debate for at least a couple of years more. Regardless of where this all leads, Greece will try—I mean they are actively trying to—to phrase them in a different way and make them look legal. There is a chance that Greece is going to be scrutinized or brought to court at the European or international level.

What is to come, I can only guess, but I think these are going to be the two main pillars, always keeping in mind that, unfortunately, the Greek police is going to provide us with many more examples of police misconduct in the years to come as they have done in the past. Unfortunately, up to this day there is still no mechanism or political will to actually convict police officers of wrongdoing or at least blatantly and openly admit that there is misconduct and wrongdoing on the side of police officers in a structural way.

You talked about criminalization and you mentioned surveillance. Do you feel that there are other strategies that the Greek government and European institutions will use to limit the activities of organizations on the ground? How do you feel that these organizations can resist?

When it comes to researchers—because this is what we basically are—I think that, in the constitutional and democratic scope of things, there is not truly a way to limit our work, as long as we are also responsible for keeping our work very conscious and very solid. From our point of view, it is our wish to stay entirely in the realm of what we are doing right now and hopefully—for lack of a better word—they will continue to tolerate our presence. When it comes to organizations on the ground, we see a turn toward private actors and the outsourcing of migration management, and we could go into an endless debate about nongovernmental politics and how nongovernmental organizations are operating and the notions of extractivism, or orientalizing, [and] neocolonialism in the policies and actions that are being implemented. But I think that we have to be very aware that the NGOs—all of them, regardless of who they are, where they operate, and what they do actually—take some burden off the Greek government. So, I don't think that they will ban NGOs from working in the field, but it would be an educated guess to say that they will try and limit their actions or to control their actions as much as possible. We have seen that being put forward in the legal context with, for example, legislation around confidentiality, people not being able to film where they work (all these camps being former military bases, so you are not allowed to film them), and all these legalities that in reality [are] trying to control the ways that information eventually reaches organizations, such as Disinfo, or the public domain.

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