



Mapping Migrant Deportation and Expulsion from Malta

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While deportations in Malta may feature in prominent court cases which enter the public eye, most deportations do not involve criminals and operate in an opaque way, with little data available. Nonetheless, the brutal impact of deportation is not only felt by the deportee but also by the wider community in a very tangible way. **Prof. Daniela DeBono**, who has previously led a research group on deportation from Sweden at the Malmö Institute for Migration Studies (Malmö University), from which a book was published, and postgraduate researcher from the University of Bergen, **Camilla Cardini**, are mapping how deportation operates in practice, and what its increased visibility reveals about the direction of state power.

In September 2025, a Parliamentary Question yielded Malta's first consolidated set of deportation statistics. Until then, little public picture existed of how often people were being removed from the country, who they were, or how the process worked in practice. Prof. Daniela DeBono, Head of UM's Department of Anthropological Sciences, argues that since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a shift from 'compassionate repression' to a system she characterises as one of 'repression without compassion'. The state has become more heavy-handed and visible in its efforts to exercise control over migrant communities.

Yet, the data from the Parliamentary Question proved counterintuitive. The figures suggested that the number of deportations had remained relatively stable in recent years, in spite of the increasingly visible enforcement measures such as public arrests, political messaging and new institutional structures. Therefore, as part of joint research with postgraduate researcher Camilla Cardini, DeBono set out to understand the implications of this contradiction,



the real situation around deportations, and what it all says about the evolution of the Maltese state and the direction it is taking, through the lens of critical migration studies.

'We have tried to analyse deportations from a human rights perspective and theoretical framework, to highlight how deportations are a threat to human rights,' Cardini explains.

'There is very little knowledge about deportation in Malta. We lacked clear data, even basic statistics, until the Parliamentary question last year. We wanted to undertake something ambitious and long-term, connecting human experiences with the power dynamics of the state, to ask how individuals and communities navigate the precarity brought about by deportation, including resistance with the help of allies. Much deportation research focuses either on economic consequences for the state or on migrants' well-being in isolation. We aim to interconnect these experiences, to examine how state power is exercised, resisted, and how it is developing, and how the state is being shaped. We also needed to map the system itself: whether removals are

accompanied, whether they are outsourced, as in the United States. In Malta, they are not outsourced; they are carried out by the Ministry for Home Affairs and the Immigration Police, with significant support from Frontex,' DeBono adds.

Over the past decade, Malta has experienced rapid demographic change, with a growing population of third-country nationals living, studying, and working on the islands. At the same time, European return policies have expanded, a national Return Unit has been established, and cooperation with EU agencies has deepened. Within this shifting context, deportation has become an increasingly visible part of migration governance. Deportations not only target new arrivals but also people who have lived in Malta for years.

IS DEPORTATION A COMMON PRACTICE IN MALTA?

DeBono explains that, on average, there have been between 400 and 500 deportations each year over the past five years. She adds that, while it is not uncommon, ➤



there has been a rapid increase in population over the last decade, and so the percentage of people who are deported would have been expected to increase. However, that is not what the data shows. In total, 2,298 irregular persons were deported back to their country since 2021, and 3,183 other persons were transferred to EU Member States. Even these figures remain difficult to interpret, as the category of 'return' includes deportations, voluntary returns, and relocations to other European countries.

Deportation in Malta involves a network of institutions and international actors. Operations are led by the Ministry for Home Affairs and the Immigration Police, with significant operational support from European agencies, particularly Frontex. In recent years, the government has also established a dedicated Return Unit, signalling a more structured approach to removal procedures.

European policy distinguishes between three forms of return. Voluntary return refers to migrants leaving of their own accord. Assisted voluntary return offers financial incentives and logistical support to encourage departure. Forced return follows a removal order and may involve detention and escorted flights. In practice, the boundaries between these categories can blur. Many 'voluntary' returns occur after prolonged detention, where the alternative may be months or years of uncertainty. Financial incentives are modest, yet they often represent a more attractive option than forced removal, which is expensive for the state due to the cost of flights and accompanying officials, and humiliating for migrants.

'Forced returns are very expensive, and they even include the cost of flight tickets of officers escorting the person to their country of origin. Therefore, the Maltese government is trying to promote programmes where they give these people some cash as an incentive to go back home, and it usually works, as even a really low amount is better than being forced out. And it is cheaper for the Maltese government than a forced return. But voluntary return from detention is not really voluntary, as the only alternative they have is to stay in detention for a really long time, up to 18 months, though this is sometimes exceeded. Their prospects are not great,' DeBono explains.

These developments are unfolding within a wider European framework. Recent EU legislation has strengthened return policies by introducing return hubs and expanding



Prof. Daniela DeBono (top) and Camilla Cardini (bottom)
Photos by Kristov Scicluna



cooperation between Member States. Malta's practices reflect these broader changes, with deportation forming part of a continental approach to migration management.

Public imagination often associates deportation with newly arrived migrants. The research suggests a more complex reality. Those removed from Malta generally fall into three broad groups. Some arrive irregularly by boat, are detained, and are deported soon after arrival. Others are visa overstayers who entered Malta for work or study and later lost legal status. A third group has lived in Malta for many years. Many held the long-term 'yellow book' status that allowed them to work and build lives on the islands. Most paid taxes, developed careers, and forged meaningful bonds in local communities. Their sudden detention and deportation after years of residence has been one of the most striking findings of the research. The statistics also reveal that deportations overwhelmingly affect third-country nationals from lower-income countries.

JUDICIAL BOUNDARIES OF BELONGING

Although deportation often unfolds quietly through administrative channels, it comes most clearly into public view when challenged in court. Judicial proceedings expose the reasoning behind removal decisions and reveal how competing principles such as security, migration control, and human rights are balanced in practice. Court cases illustrate the legal complexity surrounding deportation decisions. Appeals based on the right to private and family life under the European Convention on Human Rights have produced different outcomes in Maltese courts.

In one case, an Albanian national who had been fostered in Malta successfully challenged his deportation. In another case, Ethiopian nationals who had lived in Malta for more than a decade were unsuccessful in similar appeals. These contrasting decisions highlight the role of discretion and the difficulty of defining what counts as meaningful social ties.

'The Albanian national's case differed from that of the Ethiopians. He had lived in Austria but had been fostered in Malta since childhood and had clear ties to the Maltese community. In his case, Article 8, calling for respect for private and family life, carried weight. The Ethiopians, despite living in Malta for 13 to 18 years, were found to retain stronger ties to Ethiopia, where they still had family. They had no spouse or children in Malta, and the court did not recognise their links to the Maltese community as sufficiently strong.

That case remains ongoing and may ultimately be taken to the European Court of Human Rights. In the Albanian case, given the strict interpretation of family life, the Court had little room to decide otherwise: he had been fostered here. Yet it raises a wider question. How can someone who arrived at 18 and lived in Malta for decades, holding a tolerated status for years, in long-term employment, or running a barber shop with Maltese suppliers and clients, be seen as lacking meaningful ties to the community?' DeBono states.

THE POLITICS OF APPEARANCES

These legal disputes unfold against a backdrop of shifting enforcement practices. Even where courts intervene, the broader direction of policy continues to shape how deportation is presented and experienced. The available data indicates that deportation numbers have remained relatively stable. Visibility, however, has increased. Public arrests, stronger messaging around return, and a policy framework centred on prevention, return, and relocation have given deportation a new prominence in Malta's migration landscape.

Researchers describe this shift as a form of deterrence. Deportation functions as a warning directed at those considering arrival, while also shaping the daily lives of migrants already living in Malta. Interviews carried out by DeBono and Cardini reveal that fear of detection can influence decisions about seeking healthcare, employment, or social support. Some individuals choose to leave Malta informally, moving elsewhere in Europe before deportation becomes a possibility.

One of the unexpected findings of the study has been the emotional impact of deportation work on professionals involved in the process. Lawyers, activists, and support networks often remain concerned about deportees long after removal has taken place. International research has also documented the psychological toll on detention and enforcement officers, who are negatively impacted by the unpleasant experience of forced detention. Such research suggests that the emotional reach of deportation extends across the entire network of people involved.

The study remains ongoing. As DeBono and Cardini continue to assemble data and testimonies, the emerging picture is of a system that has long existed in the background but is becoming increasingly visible, inviting greater scrutiny. 