

**Surveil, Datafy, Publicize:
Digital Authoritarianism and Migration Governance**

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Abstract:

The growing scholarly interest in digital authoritarianism has mainly focused on consolidated authoritarian states such as China and Russia. These states use digital tools and data for widespread monitoring, repression, propaganda, and manipulation of citizens. This study takes a critical perspective, examining digital authoritarianism in the context of migration governance. It advances two arguments. First, digital authoritarianism is not confined to consolidated autocracies. It can also appear in subtler forms in other political systems, such as autocratizing and even liberal democratic regimes. In the sphere of migration governance, digital authoritarianism has evolved into a transnational practice, employed through high-tech border surveillance technologies, biometric data gathering, and information and communication technologies (ICTs) and AI technologies to monitor, categorize, and discriminate against undocumented migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers, often circumventing democratic oversight. Furthermore, several liberal democracies actively support and finance digital authoritarianism in non-democratic contexts. Second, digital authoritarianism is implemented through three mechanisms: surveillance, datafication, and the selective publicization of data about migration. While surveillance and datafication predominantly target non-citizens, the government's calculated release of migration data aims to manipulate, mitigate, or coopt citizen dissatisfaction. The study contributes to the theorization of digital authoritarianism by highlighting its nuances and broad implications.

Keywords: digital authoritarianism, migration, surveillance, datafication, European Union, Turkey.

Introduction

Despite the proliferation of mobile applications, blockchain technology, artificial intelligence, and privately controlled algorithms, states continue to exercise substantial control over data collection, storage, processing, and dissemination. Authoritarian regimes are particularly notorious for exploiting data as a tool for repression and manipulation. Research has predominantly concentrated on how consolidated autocracies—such as China,¹ Russia,² and in the Middle East³—engage in indiscriminate data collection to monitor and oppress the online and offline lives of their citizens. These practices are called digital authoritarianism, which encompasses a range of technology- and algorithm-driven practices employed “to surveil, repress, and manipulate both domestic and foreign populations.”⁴ While digital authoritarianism has gained wide scholarly attention in recent years⁵, its manifestations beyond a few consolidated autocracies remain underexplored and undertheorized⁶.

This study has two objectives. First, it seeks to demonstrate that digital authoritarianism is a practice that transcends strict regime categorizations. Within the realm of migration governance, digital authoritarianism has evolved into a globally normalized transnational practice that different states implement in strikingly similar ways when targeting non-citizens, mainly undocumented migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees. The study brings to attention how liberal democracies lead the advances in digital authoritarianism through high-tech and militarized border surveillance and their reliance on biometric data in algorithm-driven decision-making for the detention and deportation of migrants. These high-tech digital systems become punitive tools, often bypassing legal or civic democratic oversight. The study also argues that democratic countries, particularly the European Union (EU) member states, actively finance and promote digital authoritarianism in non-democratic (authoritarian and semi-authoritarian⁷) regimes, entrenching the repressive capacities of their security forces and governments.

Second, by examining Turkey as a representative case, the study aims to outline three mechanisms through which semi-authoritarian regimes implement digital authoritarianism with the backing of democratic states of the EU: *surveillance, datafication, and selective publicization of data*. Surveillance is “the focused, systematic, and routine attention to personal details for the purposes of influence, management, protection, or direction,”⁸ which necessitates intensive collection of personal data. Data refers to “the material produced by abstracting the world into categories, measures, and other representational forms.”⁹ While data can exist in analog or digital formats, it is increasingly produced and stored in digital, quantified forms. The movements, transactions, social relations, online activities, and biometric data of migrants and refugees are meticulously recorded, categorized, and stored as digital data. This is facilitated through militarized border security measures with high-tech infrastructure, interoperable biometric data collection systems, and population registries.

Intensive digital surveillance paves the way for datafication, defined as “the process through which the extraction, collection, and processing of data become influential in practices of governance within a certain area.”¹⁰ Datafication relies fundamentally on various surveillance methods that trace and record the movements and activities of migrants and refugees within and at the borders. However, the collection of digital data does not necessarily result in datafication. Datafication is inherently a political practice wherein digital data—extracted from human lives, experiences, and

bodies—are utilized to generate profits, inform decisions, and shape policies. This study underscores how datafication through the deployment of high-tech surveillance enabled the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey to expand its repressive capacities to non-citizens through the systematic detention and deportation of refugees and migrants with little to no accountability.

The final pillar of digital authoritarianism pertains to the selective and arbitrary publicization of migration data. The AKP selectively discloses migration data to the public, carefully curating which details are shared while concealing those deemed undesirable. The government may highlight the number of detained irregular migrants at one moment and emphasize the percentage increase in deportations at another. At one time, it may choose to release data on the capacities of detention and deportation facilities and, at another time, the number of arrested human traffickers. By harnessing and strategically disseminating centralized migration data, the AKP seeks to control, quell, or coopt societal discontent concerning migration governance. The study argues that the rapid and inconsistent shifts in the methods, timing, and venues of data-sharing aim to create an environment where citizens struggle to fully process or compare information. In this state of confusion, the government seeks to assert itself as competent and effective in managing migration.

This study advances the theorization of digital authoritarianism by emphasizing its complexities and nuances. Moving beyond the analysis of the “usual suspects” in the existing literature and examining its application in migration governance, the study reveals that when employed in migration governance, it has distinct implications for citizens and non-citizens. Under high-tech surveillance and datafication—practices democratic regimes finance and promote in the hands of non-democratic regimes—migrants and refugees face the constant threat of being re-labeled as “illegal” or “unwanted.” The implications for them are severe, ranging from the risk of death to incarceration and deportation to places where they face violence. Regarding citizens, on the other hand, digital authoritarianism assumes a restrained form in semi-authoritarian contexts. As Gerschewski argues, these regimes prioritize maintaining dissent at a manageable level and preserving a degree of legitimacy instead of total and indiscriminate repression, which is both costly and unsustainable¹¹. The findings show that digital authoritarianism serves this purpose well by seeking to manipulate and shape public opinion in favor of the government’s policies, providing a more sophisticated means of control.

The study bridges the fields of political science and migration studies. While migration scholars have extensively examined the use of digital technologies and algorithms in managing migration and border control¹², their research has predominantly focused on how these practices construct a stigmatized migrant or refugee “other.”¹³ In other words, the emphasis has primarily been on the experiences of migrant subjects. The limited engagement between migration studies and political science has, to date, impeded the development of a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of how migration governance can also have significant repercussions for citizens and for democracy and autocratization at the global level. This study seeks to address this gap by incorporating migration studies’ critical, reflexive lens into political science, demonstrating how even democratic regimes can endorse and implement digital authoritarianism domestically and transnationally within migration governance.

The following section reviews the literature on digital authoritarianism and migration studies to contextualize the study's contribution. It outlines the theoretical argument that digital authoritarianism is a transnational practice in migration governance, adopted and promoted by democratic regimes. Section 2 details the methodology and discusses Turkey as the case study, while Section 3 empirically illustrates the three pillars of digital authoritarianism.

Digital Authoritarianism: A (Transnational) Practice Beyond Regime Types

The literature on digital authoritarianism largely centers on authoritarian states' online activities, mainly using digital surveillance to suppress dissent, censor content, and block information¹⁴. Tactics include China's Great Firewall and social credit system, as well as monitoring IP addresses and restricting VPN access in countries like Russia, Iran, and Gulf states. These technologies enable authoritarian regimes to control and punish citizens¹⁵. Digital authoritarianism also extends into offline life through constant surveillance through CCTV, facial recognition, and geolocation systems to trace citizens' movements. Authoritarian regimes also actively create digital content to spread disinformation and propaganda to turn citizens into supporters¹⁶. Kalathil¹⁷ calls these actions "digital influence operations," capturing how authoritarian regimes manipulate the information space for political purposes.

While consolidated authoritarian regimes are often analyzed as the primary practitioners of digital authoritarianism, Glasius and Michaelsen¹⁸ caution against viewing digital technology for population control as exclusive to these political systems. Migration governance has become a key area where democratic regimes increasingly employ digital authoritarianism, leveraging high-tech surveillance and extensive data collection. In the U.S., Lee¹⁹, Kalhan²⁰, and Boyce et al.²¹ identify various surveillance methods, including facial recognition, biometric scanning, DNA collection, and data mining from utility companies, social media, banks, and courts. Additionally, irregular migrants are now subjected to GPS-regulated ankle shackles, geolocators, and mandatory voice or facial recognition apps on their smartphones. While these measures are framed as humane alternatives to detention by the state, they create "digital cages" of relentless surveillance, perpetuating the oppressive nature of the immigration system²². The U.S. southern border has also been fortified with high-tech militarized infrastructure, including drones and motion sensors²³. The surveillance apparatus of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has ballooned into a multibillion-dollar enterprise, drawing criticism from migrant rights activists and legal advocates for its illegal and unethical consequences, such as the separation of undocumented minors from their families and the death and torture of migrants²⁴.

In the EU, digital authoritarianism is deeply embedded in the monitoring and sorting of migrants, supported by the expanding defense-industrial complex. An increasingly intricate network of surveillance systems and databases visualize, register, map, monitor, and profile migrants²⁵. This surveillance infrastructure relies on three main components. First, the walls at the EU borders have expanded significantly, growing from 315 km in 2014 to 2,048 km in 2022²⁶. These physical borders are fortified with digitized surveillance systems, including satellites, drones, heat and motion detectors, and night vision cameras²⁷. These "intrusive surveillance technologies" have resulted in numerous deaths, injuries, illegal pushbacks, and detentions under inhumane conditions²⁸.

Second, the EU has developed a complex, interoperable system for collecting and storing biometric data. As noted by Ruiz-Benedicto and Brunet, this practice functions as “a virtual wall” to control and monitor EU borders. Since 2013, digital systems have regulated people's movements, such as VIS, SIS II, RTP, ETIAS, SLTD, and I-Checkit²⁹. Especially in migration hotspots like Greece, Spain, and Italy, logistical infrastructures collect and store biometric data for EU-level decisions. This data, stored in the EURODAC database, is used to categorize individuals as “wanted” or “unwanted” based on country or religion, leading to the detention and deportation of the latter without evaluating asylum claims.

Third, the EU utilizes ICTs to track and control the movements of migrants. “A booming mobile forensics industry” specializes in extracting data from smartphones, including messages and location history³⁰. To enforce the Dublin Agreement, which returns asylum seekers to their first EU entry point, authorities use this data to trace migrants’ journeys. Countries like Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, and Germany have introduced or proposed legislation granting border security and immigration authorities access to the smartphones and social media accounts of asylum seekers³¹. Metadata, such as language settings and call locations, are used to verify the mobilities and identities of asylum seekers³², while Denmark and the UK additionally require access to Facebook accounts. In Germany, blockchain technology enables centralized tracking of asylum seekers’ movements³³. Rights organizations warn that the recent Migration Pact could entrench and even mandate harmful surveillance technologies and practices, including prison-like detention facilities, automated AI decision-making, and transnational repression of migrants and their defenders³⁴.

Democratic regimes like EU member states and the USA seek to justify surveillance and datafication through claims of protecting national security by separating ‘legal entries’ from the entries of ‘bogus asylum-seekers’ and terrorists. They also claim to create safe and humanitarian migration routes through ‘smart’ border surveillance and control of the digital fingerprints of migrants. However, the practice on the ground creates the opposite, making legal migration almost impossible. Biometrics and metadata extracted from people and ICTs determine when and where persons or groups become “threats, risks, victims, or assets.”³⁵ Data becomes an end in itself to order, sort, and categorize ‘wanted,’ ‘unwanted,’ ‘deserving,’ and ‘(non-) European’ migrants based on political preferences rather than human rights-based or humanitarian considerations. Decisions based on digital categorizations often breach international law and humanitarian norms. Numerous reports by rights organizations document that irregular migrants and refugees from Africa and the Middle East are systematically denied fundamental rights in Europe. These include access to food, water, shelter, employment, and family reunification.³⁶ They are also deprived of the right to apply for asylum and safeguards for minors.³⁷ Additionally, they face prolonged and unlawful detention, inhumane or degrading treatment, illegal pushbacks, and deportation without the right to appeal.³⁸ Moreover, these policies usually evade international or national judicial oversight.³⁹

Therefore, the intention behind data collection and how the surveillance and data are used without accountability and democratic checks to deny fundamental rights and protection to vulnerable groups make these practices authoritarian. Furthermore, all these data are extracted by surveilling people’s bodies and daily lives. In none of these practices do authorities ask for consent to access and store private data or duly inform migrants about the potential consequences of these practices.

Scholars label this practice “data colonialism.”⁴⁰ Those whose actions and bodies become subject to surveillance are forced to accept, internalize, and normalize these top-down practices that reduce them to data objects with assigned case numbers.⁴¹

The EU also encourages non-democratic countries in the MENA, Western Balkans, Turkey, Caucasus, the Sahel, and sub-Saharan Africa to adopt the same digital tools and practices as part through its border externalization policy. This policy is based on agreements for the readmission of deported people, often without asylum screening in Europe, and the provision of funding and training to these countries’ security forces to intercept migrants before they reach Europe.⁴² According to a report by Transnational Institute, 48% of the 35 countries the EU collaborates with are authoritarian, 40% are semi-authoritarian, and the rest are considered democracies with flaws.⁴³ Nevertheless, these countries receive funding to improve their repressive capacities, such as detention centers and walls equipped with militarized digital surveillance (radars, satellites, thermal and night vision cameras, drones). The EU also conditions many of these countries to register their citizens and migrants through biometrics and share these databases for fast deportation if they enter Europe irregularly.⁴⁴ Therefore, they are also provided financing to purchase information exchange technology, software, and biometric forensics devices.⁴⁵

Software and infrastructure required to make these undemocratic countries digitally-equipped guardians of the EU borders are purchased from military security companies and “financed with public money” with “the general lack of transparency and accountability.”⁴⁶ The EU relies on the private arms industry to deliver high-tech surveillance equipment and software to these regimes⁴⁷. Deals are concluded without democratic oversight, often bypassing discussion at the European Parliament⁴⁸. These EU agreements cost billions of euros. To finance them, the Commission has repurposed development aid⁴⁹. Member states, especially Italy, Germany, the UK, France, and Spain, offer additional bilateral funds and capacity-building training for the security forces of ‘partner’ autocracies⁵⁰.

In some cases, like Libya, Niger, and Sudan, civil society reports uncovered that the trained security forces responsible for migration and border patrol on behalf of the EU were composed of paramilitary groups.⁵¹ Later, some of these EU-trained agents were found involved in human trafficking and shooting at migrant boats⁵². Rights organizations and journalists also reported that refugee detention centers equipped with computers, cameras, and servers, thanks to EU funds, also gained notorious fame for inhumane treatment from Mauritania to Belarus,⁵³ including executions to open up space for new arrivals and human trade in Libya.⁵⁴ Moreover, the EU and member states have not put in place control measures to prevent these regimes from using this equipment to fuel the repression of their own citizens.⁵⁵

In short, the EU has been propping up digital authoritarianism at home and in several (semi-) authoritarian countries via a transnational network of the European Commission, corporate military industry, states, and paramilitary groups. Paradoxically, the EU has strengthened security forces and governments that people flee from as refugees.⁵⁶ Recently, Turkey has emerged as a key partner in the European Union’s intensified cooperation on migration governance, despite the increasingly authoritarian grip of the ruling AKP, which has monopolized power and suppressed dissent to such an extent that the country has become increasingly inhospitable for both its citizens and migrants alike.

Case and Methodology

Turkey serves as a compelling case study for examining digital authoritarianism in migration governance, highlighting the transnational influence of democratic regimes in shaping and perpetuating these practices. Over the last two decades, under the rule of the AKP, Turkey has transitioned from a democratizing country to an electoral autocracy, a shift well-documented in the literature⁵⁷. Amid this regime change, Turkey faced a significant ‘migration crisis’ following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The AKP’s “open door” policy played a pivotal role in this crisis⁵⁸, as the country became host to 3.4 million refugees, according to the UNHCR, alongside half a million irregular migrants⁵⁹. As a major transit route for undocumented migrants heading towards Europe, Turkey has become a crucial partner in the EU’s border externalization policy, solidified by the 2016 EU-Turkey refugee deal, which linked financial aid to joint border management and the repatriation of Syrian refugees. The agreement catalyzed the EU funds for digital authoritarianism in Turkey to prevent irregular migrants from claiming asylum in Europe. This cooperation has also bolstered the AKP’s desire to develop a ‘national’ digital surveillance capacity, as discussed in the next section.

With the rapid rise of refugees and declining welfare under the economic crisis, the Turkish public’s sentiment towards migrants and refugees has soured, especially after 2018, with surveys indicating a shift from viewing refugees as a vulnerable group to seeing them as cultural and economic threats⁶⁰. Despite growing resentment towards the government’s migration policy (or lack thereof), the AKP’s electoral support remained stable until the 2019 local and 2023 general elections. In these elections, opposition parties, despite pledging to restore democracy, promoted anti-democratic and anti-human rights policies toward refugees to exploit public fears for electoral gain. Rising intercommunal tensions and attacks on refugees, alongside public opinion surveys, already signaled to the opposition that an anti-refugee stance would resonate strongly with citizens.⁶¹ Opposition leaders intentionally inflated the number of refugees to gain a political edge, with the newly formed anti-immigration Victory Party leading in the front with claims that Turkey hosted approximately 13 million migrants and spreading false information about the number of Syrians granted citizenship. The Republican People’s Party (CHP), Turkey’s main opposition party, and its electoral allies pledged to repatriate Syrians upon electoral victory. The term “fugitive migrant” (*kaçak göçmen*) became popular in pro-opposition media and opposition leaders’ speeches, heightening public perceptions of migrants as a threat. As the next section illustrates, this evolving socio-political landscape has driven the AKP to adopt digital authoritarianism in migration governance to reinforce its authority and demonstrate competence in response to the opposition's growing challenges.

The study’s findings are based on a combination of primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources include official migration statistics, eight migration reports from the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), and statements published on the DGMM’s website from 2013 to 2024. News reports, press briefings, reports by rights organizations, and official social media posts from MoI and DGMM were analyzed for additional context and insights. Primary data was obtained through nine in-depth interviews with lawyers, activists, and representatives of organizations involved in migrant and refugee rights. These

interviews were conducted face-to-face in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, and Gaziantep in 2022-2023 and lasted one to two hours. They are used to validate the information provided by official sources and to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of digital authoritarianism on the lives of citizens and migrants. To protect the safety and privacy of the interviewees and their organizations, all identifiers have been redacted.

Three Mechanisms of Digital Authoritarianism

Digital authoritarianism in Turkey's migration governance rises on three mechanisms: surveillance, datafication, and publicization. While the first and second mechanisms target non-citizens (i.e., irregular migrants and refugees), the third focuses on shaping citizen's attitudes toward the government.

Surveillance

Despite being a latecomer as a host country for millions of migrants and refugees in the 2010s, Turkey was quick to adopt digital surveillance to control border movements and the lives of non-citizens in the country. One of the earliest attempts was to erect physical borders with Syria, Iran, and Iraq. The longest of these walls was built alongside the 911 km border with Syria. Its construction started in 2016 and was completed in 2021 at a cost of 2 billion liras (54 million euros).⁶² However, these walls are not just physical barriers. They are entrenched by multiple layers of invisible digital structures. They constitute a part of the Ministry of National Defense's "Smart Border Security System," centered around using advanced technology. The wall with Syria is equipped with "sixteen thermal cameras, 19 solar systems, and LED lighting fixtures in 15 points" besides "a solar energy-powered lighting system ... along with a camera tracking system."⁶³ According to MoI, the major parts of the security walls were planned as "modular concrete walls" fortified with satellites and sensor systems. These walls would, in addition to combating irregular migration, "prevent the crossing of terrorists" and smuggling.⁶⁴ The sophisticated technologies of these walls allow surveillance and data sharing through an integrated system.

The EU funded digital surveillance border systems in Turkey. The financing started before the 2016 deal via Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA I-II) funds. Between 2007 and 2020, Turkey received 469 million euros for migration-related purchases like border surveillance equipment and the building of reception and deportation centers.⁶⁵ Defense companies are often the primary beneficiaries of EU funds for digital surveillance systems. For instance, in 2014, the EU awarded contracts to several Turkish communication and informatics companies for delivering digital equipment to deportation centers.⁶⁶ The EU also granted two tenders to Aselsan, a state-owned defense company, for 'smart military towers' and 'surveillance and reconnaissance balloons' at Syrian and Iraqi borders.⁶⁷ Additionally, the EU contracted 47 million euros to another Turkish company, Otokar, to supply border patrol vehicles equipped with digital detection technology.⁶⁸ Turkey also deployed high-tech surveillance equipment along the Greek border with the support of Frontex.⁶⁹

Surveillance of borders through high-tech infrastructure is complemented by measures to accumulate biometrical data. Following the EU's biometric data collection and identification requirements in visa processing, Turkey paid Gemalto—a company owned by French aerospace and defense giant Thales—to issue biometric passports to Turkish citizens.⁷⁰ To also fulfill the

EU requirement to collect biometric data of non-citizens, the government purchased fingerprint scanners from Taiwanese biometrics company Aratek in 2018. According to Aratek's report, the Turkish government struggled with the identity management of migrants due to a "lack of IDs, proliferation of fake IDs and fake documents, or missing passports."⁷¹ Aratek stated that the equipment helped the Turkish government to build "a robust database that helps in the day-to-day administration of the refugee program."

The EU's push for the collection of biometric data of citizens and non-citizens inspired the AKP to develop national biometric surveillance capacity. In 2019, the government established Biyoteksan for biometric data collection in connection with the national defense industry. Highlighting the importance of "native and national biometric data collection technology" for security, Biyoteksan committed to developing fingerprint, palm print, vein pattern, face, iris, retina, and voice recognition systems⁷². The company's services were already adopted by DGMM in 2021, and within a year, fingerprints of registered migrants were transferred to the national system. The database is shared among different law enforcement agencies.⁷³ In 2022, MoI announced that the government also collects biometric details of all applicants when issuing visas to 78 country nationals through the national system.

The government has now extended biometric surveillance within national borders, aiming to "hunt" undocumented migrants through a national biometric database to reduce the migrant population in major cities. Activists and migrant rights lawyers report that racial profiling during routine police patrols has intensified since the 2019 local elections. Following the AKP's loss of support in key metropolitan areas like Istanbul, where a significant number of refugees live and work, police have increasingly stopped individuals on the street who "appear to be migrants or refugees" to verify their biometric documentation. Those unable to provide the required documentation are detained on the spot.⁷⁴

After the 2023 elections, the government launched a new mobile checkpoint project in Istanbul to facilitate surveillance within borders, later expanding the practice to Bursa, Adana, Izmir, and Ankara by October 2023. The Interior Minister announced that mobile checkpoints would be deployed simultaneously in 30 metropolitan cities by November and across the entire country by December 2023. According to MoI, mobile checkpoints are a unique practice in the world and work without problems in identifying and facilitating deportation:

Our security forces conduct identity checks on foreigners when deemed necessary. Those who cannot present identification are invited to the Mobile Migration Points vehicles. These vehicles are staffed by a migration expert and a translator. The foreigner undergoes fingerprint verification in the vehicle, and necessary checks are conducted through the GöçNet database. If the individual is an irregular migrant, they are directly transferred to Return Centers for deportation procedures.⁷⁵

Turkey's implementation of digital high-tech surveillance at and within its borders mirrors practices commonly used in Europe. The EU has played a crucial role in facilitating Turkey's digital surveillance capabilities in migration governance, providing financial support, and imposing specific travel and visa procedures standards. This surveillance contributes to a more entrenched form of discriminatory practice: datafication, which the following section will explore in greater detail.

Datafication

Digital surveillance facilitates the collection of vast amounts of data, but these data do not speak or act on their own. Instead, they serve as tools for political authorities, security forces, and bureaucrats to implement new policies in search of controlling populations. Datafication transforms identities, movements, and activities into data points—such as biometric information, travel patterns, and residency status. By continuously quantifying the numbers and movements of non-citizens, authorities can categorize individuals as “illegals” or “security threats.” Data become intelligence to be acted upon by authorities. This process enables governments to exert control over populations, often with significant implications for privacy, autonomy, and rights.

In Turkey, datafication has led to punitive actions targeting non-citizens, including detentions, deportations, and border pushbacks, under the pretext of national security and law enforcement—sometimes with lethal consequences. After Turkey enhanced its border surveillance, illegal actions against non-citizens increased, including shootings at those attempting to cross the border, detentions under inhumane conditions⁷⁶, and coastguard attacks intended to intercept and capsize migrant boats⁷⁷. Biometric data are also increasingly used to facilitate expedited deportations without the right to claim asylum. According to MoI, “When an irregular immigrant enters the country, even if they hide their nationality or claim to be of another nationality, we can easily identify their true nationality by matching biometric data.”⁷⁸ The Ministry highlighted this as ‘the best practice’, particularly for ‘unwanted migrants,’ emphasizing that Afghans and Pakistanis frequently attempt unauthorized crossings, but automated systems now reliably determine their true identity. By comparing biometric data with databases from Pakistan, Algeria, and Morocco, authorities can confirm an individual’s nationality, inform the relevant consulate, and deport the person swiftly with a travel document.

This statement from MoI clearly testifies that datafication “functions to systematically stigmatize, exclude and oppress ‘unwanted’ migrant population through mechanisms of criminalization, identification, and social sorting.”⁷⁹ The government exploits the biometric details of migrants and refugees to “tether them to data judgments.”⁸⁰ Interviewed lawyers mentioned numerous cases where individuals were deported before their asylum applications were processed or families were separated due to the deportation of one member. One lawyer who has worked on several deportation cases noted that law enforcement authorities often “act in an automated manner,” basing their decisions solely on the data displayed on a screen, without considering whether the individual might face violence, life-threatening situations, or permanent separation from their family.

Indeed, mobile checkpoints discussed earlier have become a decisive means for deportation, where biometric data is treated as a piece of forensic evidence within the process of datafication. According to Turkey’s 2014 temporary protection law governing Syrian refugees, they are required to reside in designated cities and cannot relocate without authorization, even for essential services like healthcare, education, or employment. Although this law was largely unenforced for years, with authorities ignoring Syrians moving in search of better opportunities, the situation changed significantly after the government’s losses in the 2019 local elections. The government began using biometric data and digital population registries to displace, detain, and deport migrants. When Syrians travel without authorization and are detected at mobile checkpoints, they

are forcibly returned to their registered city, even if they do not have employment opportunities there. They must report to checkpoints to verify their legal presence; failing to do so three times results in deportation.

For unregistered migrants, the consequences of datafication are even more severe, with human rights organizations raising alarms about the increasing number of arbitrary detentions and rushed deportations. By mid-December 2023, a few months after the introduction of mobile checkpoints, journalists reported that 47,000 people were deported due to the checks carried out at 97 mobile checkpoints. Migrant rights activists report that fear of being profiled at these checkpoints has led many registered and unregistered migrants to confine themselves to their homes, severely impacting their ability to work, access healthcare, or pursue education.

Collecting and storing biometric data in transnationally interoperable systems serve as a preemptive measure against asylum-seekers and against attempts at regularization, not as a supportive piece to detect criminals, terrorists, or other security threats on the move. This decontextualized and impersonal treatment of biometric data during the datafication process is rooted in what Couldry and Mejias⁸¹ describe as colonial extractive rationality; data is treated as a resource to be appropriated—like “a natural resource that is just there”—for use in policies and decisions, often without contextual evaluation or the informed consent of the individuals to whom the data belongs.

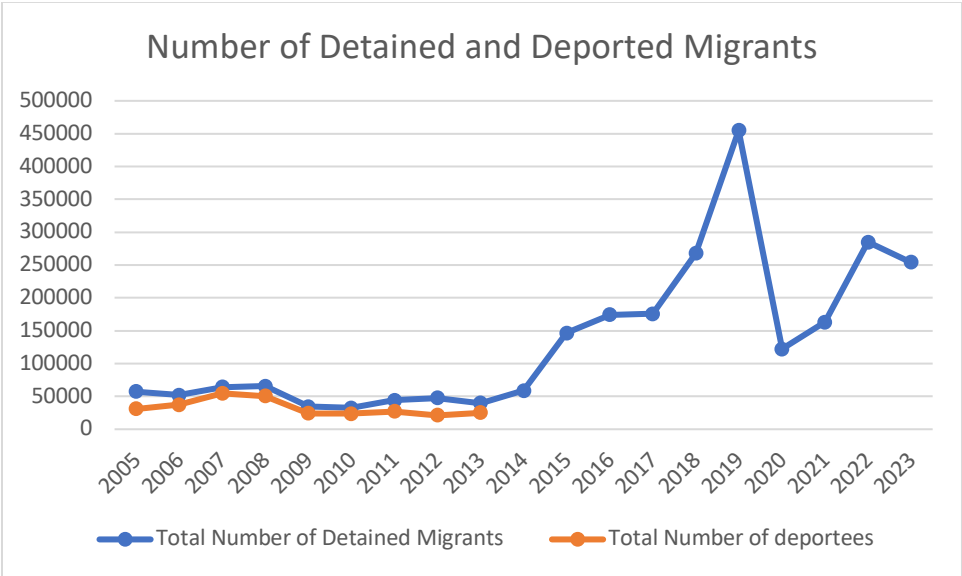
It is also important to highlight that decisions regarding detention and deportation are made without adequate vertical or horizontal oversight. An activist affiliated with a pro-refugee network in Istanbul argued that the situation has worsened since 2019. Deportation decisions are frequently taken without due process, often coercing migrants into signing voluntary return declarations at deportation centers. Furthermore, the criteria employed for the data-driven sorting of individuals—distinguishing “legal” from “bogus asylum-seekers” or “terrorists”—remain opaque to both human rights organizations and the general public. A human rights lawyer active in refugee advocacy in Izmir noted that the government exercises exclusive control over this data: “We do not know how they decide that a person should be deported by cross-checking biometric details.” This monopolization severely limits the capacity of human and migrant rights organizations to provide timely legal aid, as they are often only able to respond on a case-by-case basis. The lawyer emphasized, “We frequently encounter violations of the right to asylum and cases of expedited deportation, but often only become aware of these situations too late to intervene effectively.” This lack of transparency and accountability in the decision-making process not only undermines the rights of migrants but also poses significant challenges to upholding the principles of justice and due process in Turkey.

Publicization of Data

The third pillar, selective publicization of migration data, seeks to manipulate and contain citizens’ opinions about the AKP’s migration governance. This pillar of digital authoritarianism helps the government build an image as a competent authority in control of Turkey’s national and border security. By controlling the public narrative, the government seeks to undermine the opposition’s potential gains and build public trust in managing migration.

MoI and DGMM, responsible for surveilling and datafying migrants, also control the public release of related data, which has become increasingly arbitrary over the years. Between 2013 and 2017, the DGMM published annual migration reports. However, these reports often lacked crucial details, such as where irregular migrants were detained (e.g., at borders or within the country) or whether they were subsequently deported. While data on the total number of detained migrants is available from 2005 to 2023 from these reports, specific figures on deportations are only provided in the 2013 report for 2005-2013⁸². Although deportations have surged after 2013 (Graph 1), reports from 2014 to 2016 offer only vague references to deportations. For example, the 2016 report merely states, “The travel expenses of foreigners to be deported are covered by themselves. If this is not possible, the remaining part or the entirety of the expenses is covered by the budget of the Directorate General”⁸³.

In contrast, these reports highlighted legal entries detailing short-term tourist visas, family reunifications, work permits, and student visas. The government's focus on legal entries supported its political agenda of portraying Syrians as "guests" and emphasizing Turkey's humanitarian stance and cultural openness. By withholding details about detentions and deportations, the AKP wanted to convey ‘no problems’ message to the public, obscuring the growing number of undocumented migrants and masking its challenges in managing migration and borders effectively.



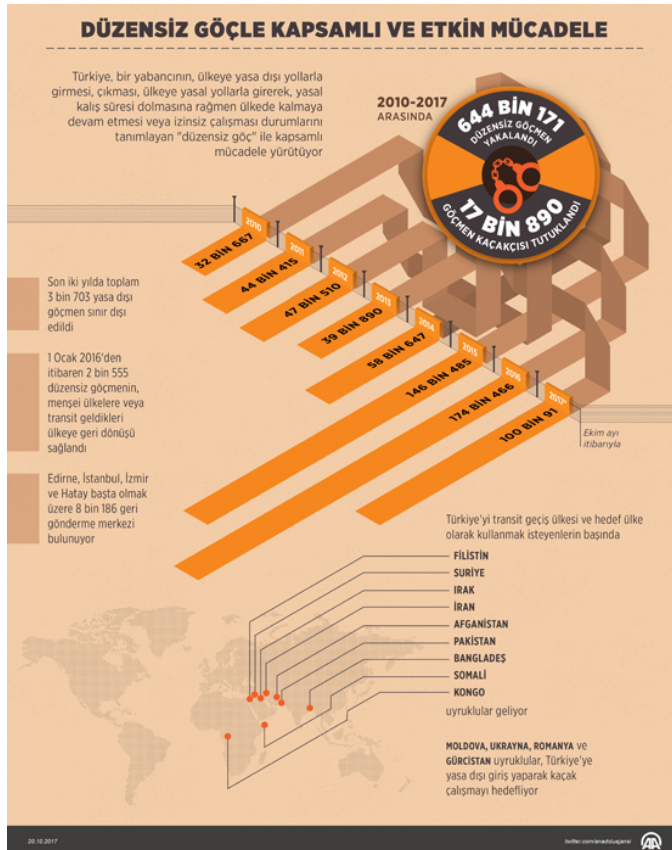
Graph 1: Detained and Deported Migrants, compiled from Migration Reports 2013-2016 and various declarations released by MoI.

After the last migration report was published, the government adopted a new strategy to obscure the growing challenges of registering, settling, and integrating refugees. In this new strategy, DGMM abandoned the practice of releasing official migration reports and shifted its focus by releasing four reports titled “Annual Report on Combating Human Trafficking” between 2017 and 2020. This change reflected the government’s evolving publicity strategy to address rising public discontent with rising unregistered migrants. These reports shifted the focus on human traffickers and highlighted Turkey’s “successful fight”, portraying the government as effectively preventing the country from being a route for irregular migrants and reassuring the public that human

traffickers were not tolerated. They also emphasized the government's moral stance as a protector of trafficked persons and victims of modern slavery.

After the final human trafficking report in 2020, public access to migration-related data has become increasingly subject to the government's discretion. For instance, following the 2019 elections, then Interior Minister Soylu's declaration was a sign of the government's new strategy: To deal with rising public discontent, the government decided to reduce refugees and asylum seekers to deportation targets in the public eye. These targets were to be shared with the public at strategically selected times when the government perceives the need to boost its public image in migration governance. In June, two months after the AKP lost major cities in the March 2019 local elections, Soylu shared with citizens the government's plans that by the end of the month, the government would deport 13 thousand migrants and promised to reach 50 thousand by the end of the year.⁸⁴ While yearly migration reports mentioned the number of detained irregular migrants and even provided data about their nationalities, sharing with citizens deportation targets for the future was unprecedented.

The government also began using the state news agency to publicize data on detentions and deportations, which had previously been buried in yearly migration reports and largely unnoticed by the public. To reach a broader audience, the government started relying on the media to create and distribute infographics showing the number of detained and deported undocumented migrants and refugees, especially when public discontent with the government's handling of migration grew (Image 1).



Source: Anadolu Agency infographic ‘Holistic and Effective Fight Against Irregular Migration.’ It cites the number of irregular migrants detained divided by nationality and detained human traffickers and gives information about deportation centers.

To further publicize data, the government has also started to release ad hoc statements via DGMM’s webpage, Instagram, and Twitter. These statements included detailed information about individuals detained while attempting to cross the border. According to the DGMM, 451,096 irregular immigrants were prevented from entering the country in 2021. In 2022, the DGMM announced that, as of April 14, 127,256 irregular immigrants had been stopped from entering Turkey⁸⁵. This figure was updated in November 2022 to 251,941⁸⁶. Recognizing that plain numbers might not be the best strategy to capture public attention, the director of DGMM’s Combating Irregular Migration and Deportation Affairs division employed a different framing to highlight the government’s effectiveness in controlling borders:

We have taken severe measures at the border. This year, there has been a 36 percent decrease in pressure on our borders. In other words, there has been a 36 percent fall in the number of foreigners we block at our borders compared to last year. There has also been an approximately 20 percent decrease in irregular immigrants caught in Van [a city bordering Iran, a major entry point for irregular migrants].⁸⁷

Publicizing data on "decreased pressure" at the borders allowed the government to counter opposition claims that the AKP had failed to secure the borders. It also served as a way for the government to showcase and boast about the high-tech border surveillance systems it had implemented. However, the government does not disclose to the public the fate of those ‘pushed back’ at the borders, the reasons for their rejection, or the criteria and evaluation process used to determine their ineligibility for asylum. This intentional lack of information obscures the government’s potential breach of international norms.

As the 2023 elections approached, the DGMM intensified its press releases, frequently updating the public on detentions and deportations not only at but also within the borders. In April 2022, the DGMM reported that 320,172 foreigners had been deported since 2016 as part of the fight against irregular migration.⁸⁸ They also announced that 21,087 individuals were deported in the first four months of 2022, a number that had risen to 59,040 by July.⁸⁹ The DGMM selectively highlighted the nationalities of those deported, noting that most were from Afghanistan and Pakistan, as the public is more skeptical of refugees and migrants from these countries.⁹⁰ In July, the directorate also emphasized that the government conducted ‘peace’ or ‘serenity’ operations (*‘huzur operasyonlari’*) monthly to combat irregular migration, detaining 6,733 irregular immigrants, mainly from Afghanistan, Syria, Palestine, and Pakistan in four such operations in 2022.⁹¹

In October, the DGMM issued another statement, altering how the data was presented to appear more substantial than plain numbers by emphasizing percentages: “The number of irregular immigrants deported since the beginning of the year increased by 149 percent compared to the same period last year, reaching 97,448”. To embellish the data with further details, DGMM added that “Compared to the same period last year, there was a 206 percent increase in deported foreigners of Afghan nationality, a 28 percent increase in foreigners of Pakistani nationality, and a 180 percent increase in foreigners of other nationalities.”⁹² In November 2022, the government

was racing against itself and decided to release weekly data. One of the statements declared that 2,597 irregular immigrants were deported across the country within a week, 1,390 of whom were Afghan nationals and 426 were Pakistani nationals. The Ministry also updated the yearly figure of deported migrants, which reached 104,272 in 2022.⁹³ Just one month after, in December, the public was informed that 109,816 irregular migrants were deported in 2022, proudly stating, "This was the year with the highest number of deportations in a year. We broke a record in this sense."⁹⁴ Until the elections in May 2023, the release of updated and new data poured in, inundating the skeptical public with information about detentions and deportations framed through innovative ways. In January 2023, for example, MoI even included the modality of deportation to impress the public: "1364 [were deported] with eight charter flights and 1446 with scheduled flights."⁹⁵

Since 2022, the government has also shared data on the capacities of deportation centers. In 2015, these centers had a capacity of 1,740 people, but by 2022, this capacity had expanded to 20,540. The government even compared Turkey's deportation capacity to that of the EU, which funded several of these centers. DGMM noted in its release that before Brexit, EU deportation centers had a combined capacity of 21,000, which later dropped to 16,000, below Turkey's figure of 20,540. DGMM also emphasized Turkey's increasing deportation rates. The director of the division combating irregular migration described the government's deportation system as "effective and healthy," stating, "Our deportation success rate, which was 9 percent in 2016, has reached 65 percent this year, excluding Syrians. Considering the 18,000 foreigners currently in deportation centers, our success rate reaches 70 percent."⁹⁶ In an earlier statement, the director compared the deportation rate of Turkey to "the 18 percent in the European Union" as a success story.⁹⁷

The publicization of data in discretionary and cherry-picked ways continued after the 2023 elections. Under the newly appointed Minister Yerlikaya, MoI continued to use social media (Image 2). Three months into office, the Minister declared that they had already deported 42,875 irregular immigrants: "As a result of our pressure on the field, 105,488 foreigners whose visas and residence permits expired boarded the plane and left the country."⁹⁸ The Minister's statement with two different numbers is beyond verification and intentionally confusing. He admits that Turkish authorities deported around 42 thousand irregular migrants, and 105 thousand foreigners overstayed their visas and residence permits—which also makes them irregular.



Image 2: Source Official Twitter account of MoI and DGMM. The visual presents data on the number of irregular migrants intercepted at the borders, highlighting deportation figures, particularly emphasizing the number of Afghan and Pakistani nationals among those deported. It also shows the percentage increase in deportations compared to the same period from the previous year. <https://twitter.com/Gocidaresi/status/1606962364322312192/photo/1>

We can identify three key trends by tracing the government's evolving strategy of publicizing migration data. First, the timing of data releases has become more irregular compared to regular reports. When the government detects a rise in anti-migration sentiments or faces political risks like elections, it increases the frequency of data releases about detained or deported migrants, sometimes issuing press statements on a monthly or even weekly basis. Second, rather than relying on yearly official reports, the government has shifted to releasing data through public news agencies, press statements, and social media like Twitter and Instagram. This approach turns data sharing into part of a broader PR campaign in migration governance.

Third, the government strategically frames the language of these data releases, making it difficult for the public to compare and contrast the information directly. The tone and words are deliberately chosen to manage growing public discontent. The selective sharing of data often includes comparative perspectives, such as highlighting percentage increases in deported migrants compared to the same month of the previous year or comparing numbers of detained migrants over several consecutive years. Frequently, these declarations emphasize qualitative aspects, such as announcing record numbers of deportations, details about their nationalities, and information about chartered or scheduled flights. In reality, the government creates multiple layers of the same data by including or excluding specific categories and details. Adding these nuanced details strengthens the government's PR campaign to address rising public discontent and the opposition's claims.

For the average citizen, these practices make interpreting and comparing shared data nearly impossible. Moreover, in none of these declarations did the Ministry disclose the methodology for collecting and categorizing data on detained or deported irregular migrants. According to

interviewed lawyers and activists, the government also obstructs the ability to determine the reasons for deportations through independent verification of the publicized data. Consequently, there is no way for civil society to ascertain the proportion of detainees who are migrants overstaying their residence permits versus those who are asylum seekers or refugees under protection. Nevertheless, this bombardment of migration data aims to project an image of resilience and strength through draconian measures being taken against refugees and irregular migrants. Amid a deepening economic crisis, with actual inflation surpassing 100%, the AKP has strategically used data publicity seeking to manage public opinion and prevent the opposition from exploiting anti-refugee sentiments for political gain.

Conclusion

Digital authoritarianism encompasses a wide range of tools, from online censorship and information manipulation to advanced data collection and sorting techniques, known as datafication. While often associated with consolidated, digitally-savvy authoritarian regimes like China and Russia, this study demonstrates that digital authoritarianism is not confined to specific regime types. It has put forward two key arguments. First, liberal democracies, such as the USA and several European states, have adopted digital authoritarianism through ICTs, algorithms, biometric data, and "smart" border surveillance to monitor, control, and even physically harm migrants, often in violation of democratic oversight and international law. Moreover, these states have encouraged and directly funded semi-authoritarian and authoritarian regimes in Africa, the Western Balkans, and the MENA region to develop and implement these digital authoritarianism tools.

Second, by focusing on Turkey's semi-authoritarian regime, the study has illustrated the mechanisms through which digital authoritarianism is implemented: surveillance, datafication, and publicization. The findings have illustrated the different ways digital authoritarianism affects non-citizens and citizens. Turkey has been a primary beneficiary of the EU's financial and political support in migration governance. With this support, the government has implemented surveillance and datafication in its migration policies. After heavily investing in high-tech surveillance capabilities—such as "smart" borders, an integrated national biometric database, and international agreements on interoperable systems—the government has systematically weaponized data to criminalize, detain, and deport migrants and refugees without judicial or civil society oversight. By making asylum-seeking and legal migration increasingly difficult, datafication has entangled non-citizens in Turkey in a cycle of profiling, incarceration, and deportation, producing "ever-controllable" and "disposable" subjects. This has led to their isolation in daily life and reduced access to income, healthcare, and education, even for registered ones, who constantly fear being reclassified as "illegal."

While surveillance and datafication primarily target non-citizens, the study also shows how digital authoritarianism increasingly but distinctly affects citizens through the government's selective publicization of data. By tightly controlling the flow of information—regulating its release, manipulating content, and strategically framing data—the government has constructed a narrative of control over migration and border security. This approach seeks to counteract potential societal backlash preemptively and undermine the opposition's efforts to gain political advantage.

These three mechanisms are intrinsically interconnected. Datafication depends on advanced surveillance technologies, and data publicization relies on both surveillance and datafication. As the government transforms data sharing about migration into a public relations campaign, aiming to satisfy an increasingly anti-refugee public with juicy details on detention, deportation, and border pushbacks, this publicization creates a self-reinforcing loop. This cycle drives further reliance on surveillance and datafication, perpetuating and intensifying the government's digital authoritarianism.

It should be noted that the Turkish case also illustrates how democratic regimes' support for digital authoritarianism can lead to paradoxical outcomes. Turkey's autocratization intensified with the 2016 coup attempt, which happened a few months after the EU sought cooperation with the AKP. Since then, the government resorted to more autocratic legalism and police violence to suppress opposition and criminalize civic dissent while preventing fair electoral competition.⁹⁹ Under the new presidential regime, an increasing number of Turkish citizens have sought asylum in Europe due to the worsening political and economic situation. The EU reported that 101,000 Turkish citizens applied for asylum in EU countries in 2023, an 82% increase from the previous year. Turkish asylum seekers now rank third in nationality after Syrians and Afghans.¹⁰⁰ Giving power-abusing autocratic incumbents political recognition and financial support entrenches them. In the end, more people seek ways to flee from these regimes as refugees, as they make life incessantly intolerable for both citizens and non-citizens within their borders.

Finally, the study underscores authoritarian practices can also arise from intentions and political motivations. The collection and storage of data through border surveillance and biometrics need not necessarily lead to authoritarian practices. However, how data are systematically processed to advance political agendas and weaponized against vulnerable groups can produce and normalize them. In this sense, political science needs more interdisciplinary dialogue to uncover the latent manifestations of authoritarianism. Traditional approaches in comparative politics may overlook covert authoritarian practices in political systems categorized as (liberal) democracy. By adopting an institutional lens typical of comparative politics, scholars may fail to adequately capture such practices when these actions occur outside traditional checks and balances, such as in migration governance. In this sense, the study cautions that the border between consolidated autocracies, (semi-)authoritarian regimes, and liberal democracies might be more fluid than political science scholarship tends to assume, especially in the context of the rights and treatment of non-citizens, who lack the protections of citizenship.

¹ Lilkov, "Made in China"; Ming-Tak Chew and Wang, "How Propagames Work as a Part of Digital Authoritarianism"; Byler, *In the Camps*.

² Howells and Henry, "Varieties of Digital Authoritarianism Analyzing Russia's Approach to Internet Governance"; Morgus, "The Spread of Russia's Digital Authoritarianism"; Toepfl, "Innovating Consultative Authoritarianism."

³ Jones, *Digital Authoritarianism in the Middle East*.

⁴ Polyakova and Meserole, "Exporting Digital Authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese Models," 1.

⁵ Feldstein, *The Rise of Digital Repression*; Schlumberger et al., "How Authoritarianism Transforms"; Kalathil, "The Evolution of Authoritarian Digital Influence"; Maati et al., "Information, Doubt, and Democracy."

⁶ But see: Cupać, Schopmans, and Tuncer-Ebetürk, "Democratization in the Age of Artificial Intelligence"; Maati et al., "Information, Doubt, and Democracy."

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- ⁷ Semi-authoritarianism refers to regimes with an authoritarian core yet with some democratic pockets and practices, such as civic dissent, non-coopted political opposition, regular elections, and free voting despite unfair electoral competition and a degree of judicial independence. There is an extensive literature on classification of different sub-types. Semi-authoritarianism is preferred here as an umbrella term due to space limitations.
- ⁸ Lyon, *Surveillance Studies*, 14.
- ⁹ Kitchin 2014 cited in Mejias and Couldry, “Datafication,” 2.
- ¹⁰ Frowd, “The ‘Datafication’ of Borders in Global Context,” 1.
- ¹¹ Gerschewski, “The Three Pillars of Stability.”
- ¹² Frowd, “The ‘Datafication’ of Borders in Global Context”; Scheel, Ruppert, and Ustek-Spilda, “Enacting Migration through Data Practices”; Broeders and Dijstelbloem, “The Datafication of Mobility and Migration Management”; Leese, Noori, and Scheel, “Data Matters”; Pollozek and Passoth, “Infrastructuring European Migration and Border Control”; Tazzioli, “Digital Expulsions”; Jacobsen, “Experimentation in Humanitarian Locations”; Wienroth and Amelung, “‘Crisis’, Control and Circulation.”
- ¹³ Franko, *The Crimigrant Other*.
- ¹⁴ Keremoğlu and Weidmann, “How Dictators Control the Internet.”
- ¹⁵ Greitens, “Authoritarianism Online”; Rød and Weidmann, “Empowering Activists or Autocrats?”; Topak, Mekouar, and Cavatorta, *New Authoritarian Practices in the Middle East and North Africa*; Kalathil, “The Evolution of Authoritarian Digital Influence”; Byler, *In the Camps*; Feldstein, *The Rise of Digital Repression*.
- ¹⁶ King, Pan, and Roberts, “How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument”; Jones, *Digital Authoritarianism in the Middle East*.
- ¹⁷ “The Evolution of Authoritarian Digital Influence,” 34.
- ¹⁸ “Authoritarian Practices in the Digital Age | Illiberal and Authoritarian Practices in the Digital Sphere — Prologue.”
- ¹⁹ “The End of Entry Fiction.”
- ²⁰ “Immigration Surveillance.”
- ²¹ “Smart Borders or a Humane World?”
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- ²³ Miller, “More Than A Wall.”
- ²⁴ Funk, “How ICE Picks Its Targets in the Surveillance Age”; Guerrero, “Surveillance Capitalism Has Taken over Immigration Enforcement.”
- ²⁵ Broeders and Dijstelbloem, “The Datafication of Mobility and Migration Management,” 243.
- ²⁶ Januzi, “EU Countries Are Building Fences All Around Their Borders With Third Countries & This Is How They Look.”
- ²⁷ Ozkul, “Automating Immigration and Asylum: The Uses of New Technologies in Migration and Asylum Governance in Europe”; Latonero and Kift, “On Digital Passages and Borders”; Ruiz-Benedicto and Brunet, “Building walls | Transnational Institute.”
- ²⁸ Stavinoha, Fotiadis, and Zandonini, “EU’s Frontex Tripped in Its Plan for ‘Intrusive’ Surveillance of Migrants.”
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- ³⁰ Meaker, “Europe Is Using Smartphone Data as a Weapon to Deport Refugees.”
- ³¹ Gabrielsen-Jumbert, Bellanova, and Gellert, “Smart Phones for Refugees: Tools for Survival, or Surveillance?”
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- ³⁴ Bouvier, “The EU Migration Pact.”
- ³⁵ Leese, Noori, and Scheel, “Data Matters,” 6.
- ³⁶ Simonsen, “Crossing (Biometric) Borders”; Olwig, “The Right to a Family Life and the Biometric ‘Truth’ of Family Reunification”; BVMN, “Violence Within State Borders.”
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- ⁴¹ Tsagarousianou, “The Datafication of Migrant Bodies and the Enactment of Migrant Subjectivities.”
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- ⁴³ Akkerman, “Expanding the Fortress,” 29.
- ⁴⁴ Akkerman, “Outsourcing Oppression.”
- ⁴⁵ Pacciardi and Berndtsson, “EU Border Externalisation and Security Outsourcing”; Statewatch, “Statewatch | Blackmail in the Balkans.”
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- ⁶⁵ Akkerman, “Outsourcing Oppression.”
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- ⁶⁷ Akkerman, “Expanding the Fortress,” 73.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid.
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