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NODE REPORT

SOLROUTES

Ventimiglia

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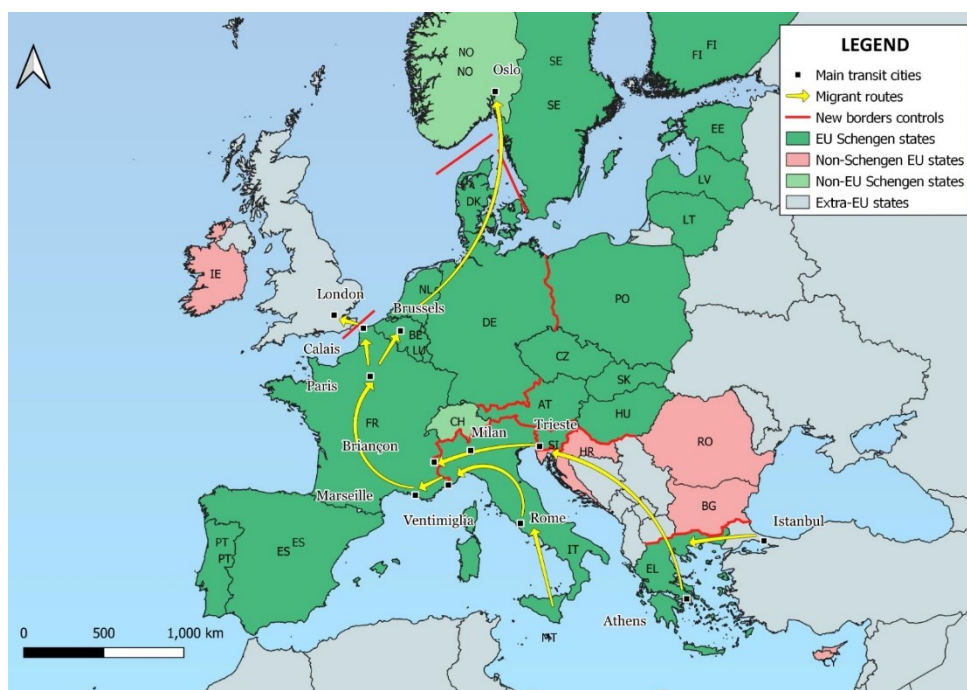
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Ventimiglia general context.

Ventimiglia, commonly known as “la Porta Occidentale d’Italia” (the Western Italian Door), is located 130 km southwest of Genoa by rail, and 7 km away from the border. It overlooks the Gulf of Genoa and it has a small harbour at the mouth of the Roya River, which divides the town. On the other side of the frontier there is the city of Menton, located in the Alpes-Maritimes department in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur region, and about 30 km from the city of Nice.

Historically the region has been a porous borderland, displaying an important tradition of commerce, custom, and smuggling activities. Indeed, it has been an entry and exit door between Italy and France for people that wanted to avoid the mountain roads and passes on the Alps. Over time, this border area has been crossed by a myriad of subjects among which Jews fleeing fascism, Kurds oppressed by the Iraqi army, North African after the Arab Spring and nowadays by migrants and refugees from all over Africa and Asia.

The 2015 reintroduction of border controls has radically reshaped the social landscape of the place as it had become after Schengen liberalisation of circulation. In fact, migrants arriving in the city via Central Mediterranean and Balkan routes, with the hope of smoothly crossing the border and reaching France or other European countries, are often blocked here and forced to temporarily settle in urban spaces of precarious conditions’ (Amigoni et al. 2020). Those recent mobilities are largely the outcomes of the so called ‘Long Summer of Migration’, which has led hundreds thousands of people to flee armed conflicts and poverty in Africa and the Middle East. The European Union’s response to the arrival of asylum seekers has been repressive and disruptive, as evidenced by the political battlefield that has opened over the management of migration flows.



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The French-Italian border offers a good example of this conflict between member states. Prior to that, controls had been removed in the framework of the Schengen Agreements (1990), which officially abolished any kind of systematic control between the two neighbouring states. Since that June, the control and rejection of movements considered 'irregular' began to materialise on cross-border trains and buses, on provincial roads, at motorway toll booths and even on mountain trails. Thus, for many illegalised migrant people Ventimiglia has become a compulsory stop along the route towards France or other European destinations, a bottleneck in the underground network of circulation (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2020) where transit slows down and temporarily solidifies into a 'long-lasting' present.

The border city was daily passed through by hundreds of people on the move and the closure soon resolved into thousands being stuck there for months, without adequate structures. Ever since, we have witnessed the spectacle of border controls, check points, arrests, detentions, pushbacks and forced transfers. Ventimiglia has thus constituted for the last eight years one of those spaces of contention resembling *battlefields* among undocumented migrants, Italian and French police, NGOs, smugglers, and pro/anti migrants citizens and groups.

The selective closure has created repeated situations of tension throughout the years, violences, discomforts to local citizens and more than 50 certified deaths in the attempt of trespassing. There have been wide-spread reports of racial profiling, with police only checking the documents of 'people of colour'. Violence is common during the arrests (mostly on trains), use of tear gas and pepper spray in closed ambiances, punches, slaps and verbal humiliations. Only in Ventimiglia there has been an average of 20.000 push backs per year. At the same time, in order to reduce pressure on the border, the Italian police started to chase and forcibly transfer migrants who were randomly found in town. People were brought to the Hotspots in the south of Italy to be identified and subsequently released with an order of expulsion from the Italian territory.

During these eight years, the return of the French-Italian border led to the development of an inhuman control apparatus, which exposed the travellers to further stress and caused direct death of many of them. In addition to these, an incalculable number of people suffered serious physical and psychological damage and experienced the violence of the border once again, even here in the Europe of human rights.

French-Italian border regime.

The French border apparatus currently deployed in the area between the extreme edge of the western Ligurian, the Côte d'Azur and the Val Roja acts to detect and reject persons in transit without the right documents to circulate in the European area of 'free' movement. Far from targeting the totality of movements and compromising the fluidity of authorised exchanges, the apparatus aims to exclusively obstruct the flow of illegal subjects. In the spring of 2015, the hands

of history were not turned back. Today's situation is quite different from the pre-Schengen era, when, unlike today, all persons and goods crossing national borders were subject to systematic control. Now, highly targeted security operations are taking place on internal borders' (Amigoni et al. 2022).

On the Italian side, new controls have also been introduced, although not as permanently and extensively as on the French side. Checks take place at the main train stops on the way to Ventimiglia and on the trains themselves, and the border station is constantly manned. Controls and joint operations have also been put in place in recent years.

However, our fieldwork has highlighted how Italian police practices are often ineffective and moreover it is not in the national interest to block people in Italy against their will. What we are witnessing are evictions and arrests of people bivouacking in Ventimiglia with the intention of crossing the border or because they have nowhere else to stay after leaving the reception system.

In practical terms what is crucial for the border management is to recognise the subjects to block, and to do that only racialized people are controlled. Indeed, 'the hunt for migrants is a hunt for non-whites, it is therefore a racial issue. Although anyone can theoretically not have the right documents in their pocket, it is only people who differ from the 'hegemonic whiteness' of European citizenship who are systematically stopped. Except in exceptional circumstances, i.e. when there are special security considerations, white people are not checked. Thus the colonial matrix of this border, clearly oriented against the Global South, emerges' (Amigoni et al. 2022). The 'colour line' (De Bois, 1903) shape in a clear manner the migration policies showing the institutional racism contributing day after day in a decisive way to producing and reproducing it on migrant bodies.

The control apparatus deployed at strategic points of the communication and transport network that innervates the border region have been developing in the last eight years. The use of mixed patrols, thermal cameras, dogs, drones, helicopters and even the involvement of the foreign legion have characterised the increase in means and resources to control this border. Controls are articulated through an integrated set of checkpoints, fixed and mobile, intermittently activated and deployed deep in the territory, usually in areas most prone to clandestine transit.

Car checkpoints cover all the road in the region leading to France and even cars are stopped randomly on the high ways at the toll booth near Nice and at the previous exits so as to cover every passage. In particular are susceptible of being stopped those means of transport that are suitable for concealing a 'human cargo' on board, such as trucks, vans or large cars. All trains are stopped and searched at the station of Ventimiglia and then at the first station of Menton Garavan, while other checks on trains and at subsequent stations take place sporadically. The same applies to buses, both public and private companies, which are regularly searched by the French police force, which arrests everyone without a regular entry permit. Moreover, the best-known mountain paths are also controlled by special police forces and real ambushes are prepared for those who try to enter the country of Menton from the mountains.

For migrants, it is not enough to cross the border, indeed the border chases them. If they are caught in a 20-kilometre border zone, which the police often extend illegally, migrants can be legitimately sent back to Italy. All those arrested on any of the above steps are automatically arrested and rejected, even if they express a wish to seek asylum in France. The blocked persons are taken to prison containers at the border police buildings, where, sometimes after 12 or more hours, they are sent back to Italy with an expulsion order. Both the cramped containers at the Ponte San Luigi offices, freezing in winter, scorching in summer, dirty and overcrowded, and the control practices by which these detentions take place are the scene of blatant violations of the fundamental rights of the individual repeatedly denounced in national and international courts. One of the most egregious cases that continues despite complaints and court prosecutions concerns, for example, the expulsion of unaccompanied minors by falsifying the birth dates of those rejected.



Police check point on the mountain road. photo of Emanuela Zampa

On the Italian side it is also possible to notice the control apparatus implemented in recent years, even if smaller and ineffective compared to French. Primarily police forces garrison the hot spots such as the station and the city centre while in the more peripheral areas informal camps spring up one after the other. The most visible actions concerns the evictions of these encampments, mainly located along the banks of the river Roya and near the red cross camp opened from 2016 to 2020.

The institutional camp managed by the Red Cross was born as a temporary reception structure for migrants and informally defined as a 'transit camp'. 'Within the normative vacuum created by the so-called *hotspot model*, the camp does not fully assume the profile of a detention centre, nor

does it properly follow the form of a temporary reception centre. This kind of indeterminacy, combined with the emergency nature it has assumed since the outset, makes the camp an expression of a particular economy of containment *beyond detention*. The function of this camp, therefore, lies at the junction between measures of administrative detention and the pre-border containment of migrants in transit' (Menghi 2020). However. Even if it was hurriedly set up to avoid the creation of informal camps it never manage to do it and during the cover time it was closed without the development of alternative places or measures. People in transit nowadays have no dedicated institutional facilities where they can stay, sleep, receive medical care, information and guidance on their journeys. On the other hand, the evictions of encampments and makeshift accommodation continue with relentless brutality, destroying people's belongings and forcing them to find other, increasingly marginal and uncomfortable places. In any case, camps continue to spring up given the constant arrival of new people and the increasing difficulties in crossing the border. In recent months there has also been talk of the construction of a centre for detention and repatriation (CPR) to be built at the border to deport people found to be irregularly present on Italian soil.

'In conclusion, it is worth mentioning that despite the controls, crossings still take place, Ventimiglia remains a busy transit point. As things stand, the strength of the social movement of migration - a mixture of determination, creativity and cooperation - is greater than that of the border power, in such an area it is still possible to cross. On the other hand, as supportive people who believe in freedom of movement, the point that is crucial to emphasise is the unnecessary, cruel, physical and/or psychological suffering that the border entails. Almost everyone crosses it, but often with difficulty, paying a great toll in material and economic terms' (Amigoni et al 2022).

Last but not least, the high number of people who have lost their lives trying to cross the French-Italian border in recent years must be denounced. Data collected by local activists speak of more than fifty people who have died by drowning, electrocution, being run over by cars and trains, or falling in the mountains. Indeed, squeezed between French rejections at the border, deportations to southern Italy, administrative detention in the CIEs, and returns decided under the Dublin Regulation, the mobility of those who (by law) cannot stay in Europe inevitably leads to increasingly dangerous and mortal journeys.



Informal camp under the bridge. Photo of Emanuela Zampa

State of solidarity.

Solidarity is increasingly used in academic work to describe diverse practices and actions, inner intentions and political orientations of supporting migrant movements and survivals. The term represent an umbrella notion including direct support in border crossing and underground movements, dwelling and hosting people, and more broadly anything that aims at self-determination and the fulfilment of migrants' desires and plans. Among those it is included all kind of complicity, cooperation and services provided by various actors to sustain and make it possible illegalised movements and border transgression.

The political battleground I have analysed in the Ventimiglia region can be defined as the intersection between three key actors: migration flows, the presence of State control and the activity of solidaristic networks. These terms are in a dialectical relationship and each one, by different ways, intervenes in the permanent de/re-bordering processes. Alliances and frictions among different actors on the territory constitute the dynamic of border geography in which I take part as both activists and researchers.

In the context of Ventimiglia a variety of actors have been involved in supporting migrants passing at the border, from churches and religious groups, to NGOs, left-wing political associations and citizens, local and international activists, ethnic communities, facilitators and smugglers. Most of these experiences and actors have been hindered and persecuted by public authorities especially when they were acting outside of the legal framework and trying to raise public attention on the issue. For instance, the Sant Antonio church, informal solidarity spot hosting thousands of people, was closed by order of the Prefecture, activists continuously expelled from Ventimiglia with ban-orders and charges. Moreover, with the arrival of the Covid pandemic in July 2020, the Red Cross camp was dismantled without developing any alternative. In addition, time to time police arrest one of the smuggler network active at the border but other flourish almost immediately and without major problems.

As the "migration crisis" worsened in Europe in 2015, exposing the limited capacity of public institutions to provide adequate responses, several Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) were born to bridge gaps, providing various forms of support at internal and external border zones (Schulpen & Huyse, 2017). There is a growing amount of academic interest regarding those bottom-up and spontaneous groups, born independently of previous aid networks (Ataç et al., 2016, Ambrosini and Leun, 2015). Sandri (2017), for instance, describes the peculiar origins of those groups defined "volunteer humanitarianism", as different from more traditional aid providers such as International NGOs in their informality, light organisational structures and adaptability to a situation in continuous development. Besides structures and activities, which as we will see are site-specific depending on the needs, scholars have focused on spelling out the political content the actions of some of those groups carry, against their humanitarian appearances. Scholarship available on the issue (Cutitta 2018, Ishkanian 2020) is exhaustive in describing a purely philanthropic approach as unfit to challenge power structures at the roots of distress.

One of those civil society organisation born in recent years, which I am part of, is called Progetto20k¹. The collective is constitute as a network of people acting in solidarity and supporting migrants stuck in the region of Ventimiglia. The main objective of the group is to support the freedom of movement for all people and to be active so that rights are obtained and guaranteed. We started in August 2016 monitoring the border and distributing food when the former town major Enrico Ioculano issued an injunction forbidding distributions of food to people on the street². The network first developed supporting basic needs of those living in informal shelters, grown spontaneously around town and recursively at risk of eviction. As time passed the project broadened its scope to include providing information, public communication, and different forms of material support for people in transit. As one of the activist of Progetto20k explain: *one of the interesting things about the project is that the evolution of the territory leads to an evolution of the project, we are not bound by tenders or funding, all we receive are donations, if we encounter a new*

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/progetto20k>

² <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/04/23/ventimiglia-vietato-dare-cibo-e-acqua-ai-migranti-solo-la-mobilitazione-costringe-il-sindaco-pd-a-revocare-lordinanza/3538898/>

problem, a new camp, and there are necessity, the project evolves in that sense, constant evolution, every time we learn new things.

Moreover, thanks to the build up of internal knowledge, acquired through collective experiences and shared in daily meetings, we identify the most urgent interventions to reduce difficulties for people on the move of passing the border and to self-determinate themselves. In order to manage the activities, constant fundraising campaigns are organised. The funding mainly came from events organised in social centres or donations from associations, NGOs and private supporters. Most of the time fund-raising events also contribute to efforts to raise awareness and to generate transnational solidarity networks and alliances.

The major fields of intervention developed through the years are monitoring, information, hospitality material support and communication. For instance, in June 2017 the collective opened a multifunctional space, called first *Eufemia* and then renamed *Upupa* conceived as a free, antiracist and welcoming spot for migrants in Ventimiglia. The Info-point was intended to be a place where migrants could obtain information and useful orientation for their trip. The project had the objective of aiding transit at various levels, including the facilitation of communication with locals and public authorities, with relatives and friends left in migrants' home countries or with those already settled at their destination or still travelling.



Info-point Eufemia Ventimiglia. photo of Emanuela Zampa

The multifunctional space also provided legal aid for all. The need to receive a correct legal orientation on the migration system and on Italian and European asylum procedures is clearly crucial for the transiting people, who mostly arrive in Ventimiglia a few days after entering Italy. In parallel, a group of lawyers was carrying out monitoring and legal research on the major violations of migrant rights in order to produce an advocacy report to present publicly to the main international organisations for the protection of human rights. This network has allowed to build in the migrant community a cross-knowledge about the services and the possibilities here in Ventimiglia.

Through a “map of services” it has been possible to spread schedules of doctors and medical points, the addresses of services and the contacts of associations. At the same time, the Info-point became a reference point for the migrant community that didn't use the space just to receive a service but to meet in security with other people, share music, read books, realise paintings and poems. With some of the materials (poems and drawings) collected at the closure of the info point it has been created a collective art exposition called Eufemia³. There have been migrants settled in the Ventimiglia area that decided to help in the daily activities of the Info-point and their involvement resulted crucial for the creation of trustworthy multicultural relationships. In particular thanks to the close relationship built with the Sudanese community, the project was exposed to constant cultural mediation including linguistic support for non Arabic speakers.

Militants of Progetto20k conceive their action as contestative - rather than collaborative - with regards to institutional players, whose role they understand as responsible for the situation faced by people in transit. Together with the close monitoring of procedures followed by formal actors, and efforts to hold them accountable, Progetto 20k appear to be recursively on the look for strategies and alliances to strengthen the effectiveness of their action. They are structured as freely and horizontally as possible, to grant to their participants the recreation of alternative spaces of socialisation favouring the values of equality and self-determination over any consideration about efficiency. The project offers a valuable possibility of engagement in direct action in order to support the freedom of movement and fundamental rights of everyone.

Methodologies.

The information reported in the report came from more than seven years of participation in the field of Ventimiglia either as an activist and researcher. Indeed militancy, as well as ethnography, requires the person who aims to carry it out to be deeply involved in the field and to bring their own subjectivity into play. During the last years, the two paths of activism and academia overlap, collide and melt in various and unexpected ways. It is an ongoing militant ethnographic path based on both personal and collective political experiences at the French-Italian border that allowed to produce critical academic knowledge and sometimes it can also assume the form of a critical auto-ethnography. It is important to mention that, during my activism at the Ventimiglia border, I was not active as a single individual but within the collective Progetto20k.

³ <https://www.laboratoriosociologiavisuale.it/new/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Catalogo-Eufemia-Ita-Fra-web-bassa.pdf>



Phone charging station at Eufemia. Photo of Emanuela Zampa

Throughout this approach I, researchers/militants, contribute to understand and redefine geographies and power relations inside a particular *social space* (Bourdieu 1986), which is at once the object of our analysis, together with the political actors involved in this battleground. The perspective adopted looks at social sciences as a form of engagement into society with several aims: revealing structural processes of oppression, domination, supremacy and their reproduction in the historical present; exploring other practices and alternative worlds of political creation and human liberation; creating alliances with the subaltern and oppressed classes in order to be part of the social change.

Main research activities consist in participating in the Progetto20K actions, participant observations, interviews and building personal relations with the same people we struggle with in Ventimiglia's border area. I claim that the analytical process can assume a collective and collaborative dimension, of plural investigation, in order to reveal different aspects of the social reality.

By crossing macro structures and concrete experiences, moving from different analytical scales we can get to a complex knowledge, much more adherent to the complexity of reality than the neutrality claimed by the positivist paradigm. For these reasons, political activism and scientific research are not in a contradictory relationship; on the contrary they can coexist and mutually enrich each other. The idea of our militant ethnography and partisan social science is to be an active practice of social and political transformation. Following Antonio Gramsci's perspective, the researcher- as the organics intellectual- can't put him/herself outside or above the social classes' conflicts: knowledge and its production is part of the battlefield.

Such a stand is proposed for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon as well as to offer some sort of support to the people that experience the racism of the migratory system. Indeed placing race and its structure of racism at the centre of our analysis and action while doing migration studies is crucial for deconstructing the racism we carry and for imagining new forms of staying together.

Moreover, during the training program of the ERC Solroutes project I was on the field with Ismail Oubad, PhD student of the team. We were at the Ventimiglia region for three short periods in order to test the methodology of the project and strengthen our knowledge and working practices. The idea was to test the Generative Narrative Workshop (GNW) bringing together researchers, artists and a selected groups of informants to create narrative and story-telling environments. However, given the limited time available, we assumed activities that we could not complete

Suggestions for further research.

- Ventimiglia, like every border, is part of a global network of increasingly unequal and violent mobility control and sorting sites. The migrants who cross these places try to pursue their paths, plans and desires despite the border regime attempts to block them and/or channel their transit into predefined routes. The confrontation between the 'logic of control' on the one hand and the 'reasons of migrants' on the other defines a real field of tension in which migrants play a leading role. Given that assumption I think more research are needed on the ethnic and migrant communities supporting relatives, friends and compatriots in their movements and survival on the EU ground.
- The nature and characteristics of the smuggling phenomenon in the border area of Ventimiglia should be interpreted in the light of different and evolving dynamics during the years, which have determined a growing precariousness for both smugglers and migrants. Indeed, smuggling has changed over the years depending on both contextual factors and people involved. The militarisation of the border has increased and most of the informal settlements have been evicted. What has only been briefly studied so far is the point of view of the smugglers themselves and the perception of the people on the move who use their services.
- Civil society organisations (CSOs) born and active to provide different kinds of support at the French-Italian border are vary and with disparate structures and goals. In recent years the amount of formal and informal organisations operating is rapidly growing and new forms of humanitarian and political engagement are multiplying and diversifying. It would be of a scientific interest to understand more the composition of them, which social processes they boost and the coalitions and forms of cooperation they put in place.

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