

THE EXACERBATION OF A CRISIS

The impact of Covid-19 on
people on the move at the
French-Italian border.



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Photo credit: Progetto 20K

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Refugees and displaced people in transit at the French-Italian border have faced critical conditions for years.¹ With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation has further deteriorated in the Italian border town of Ventimiglia.

Civil society organisations are witnessing a weakening of already stretched services, resulting in an overall decline in living conditions for refugees and asylum seekers in Ventimiglia. Covid-related restrictions also prevented organisations and solidarity groups from operating in the area and providing essential services and assistance during periods of the pandemic.

The aim of this report was to investigate and outline the current situation at the French-Italian border in the town of Ventimiglia during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research conducted reaffirms existing observations by civil society actors on the ground and highlights disconcerting developments in numerous respects for people on the move.



Photo credit: Diletta Mastria

¹ See Refugee Rights Europe, [Report](#), In Dangerous Transit, 2017.

In regard to shelter, the closure of Camp Roya in 2020 – the only reception centre at the time – represented one of the biggest challenges caused by the pandemic. It left people on the move without a safe place to sleep, forcing them to take shelter under bridges, beaches and in abandoned buildings while facing severe health risks – especially for vulnerable individuals – due to their inability to take proper protective measures against Covid-19. Despite this, occupied buildings in Ventimiglia continue to be evicted, and people find themselves destitute in informal settlements without heating, electricity or hygienic facilities. Without a safe place to sleep, people on the move – women and children in particular – are additionally highly exposed to violence and crime organisations.

Access to healthcare has remained limited and overly complicated. The pandemic has hindered the operation of medical care services that were in place for refugees and asylum seekers. Some of the services provided by organisations on the ground, such as psychological support and one-on-one visits, have had to be suspended for several months due to inadequate infrastructure. Additionally, even when people do get access to medical care, it is often insufficient or low quality.

Women and children have been particularly affected. Despite facing harrowing journeys while crossing the Central Mediterranean, many women faced, and continue to face, trafficking and sexual abuse or the risk of becoming victims of it. Inadequate assessments, follow-up measures and service

provisions aimed at these women and girls led to a failure to offer sufficient protection and aid for years. Moreover, existing infrastructures were stretched even further during Covid-19. Likewise, unaccompanied children have been left to their own devices, and they continuously face detention, violence and pushback at the border with no regard for their rights or vulnerable status as children.

Our analysis of pushback data and detention at the Ventimiglia border reveals that these illegal practices continue undeterred and at a worrying rate despite the health risks facing people on the move. Individuals and families are detained in small containers which do not respect minimum standards of hygiene, safe distances, or safe spaces for women and children, and detainees are often abused. Moreover, the requirement for CPR tests at the border is an additional barrier for border crossing. We see a lower number of pushbacks following a new French-Italian police agreement signed in December 2020, a consequence of fewer arrivals and increased controls on the Italian territory. This has resulted in Ventimiglia's increased militarisation, constant patrols of the trains to France, and document controls at train stations based solely on racial profiling.

The pandemic presented a critically needed opportunity to acknowledge the need for, and to increase access to, shelter and healthcare for people on the move. Unfortunately, this potential for change was not harnessed; instead, the pandemic further exacerbated a situation which has been desperate for years.



Photo credit: Jeremy Gothren

METHODOLOGY

This report utilised mixed research methods. It is based primarily on broad desk research, drawing extensively on official reports from humanitarian organisations and NGOs, as well as other secondary resources such as newspaper articles.

We also used published data sets from local grassroots organisations and presented the data visually in graphs in order to analyse key trends and development during the Covid-19 pandemic, mainly in regard to pushbacks.

The report is also based on primary data collated through interviews with activists, members of associations and NGOs working in the area, who provided first-hand testimonies and observations from the field. Moreover, one of the report's authors lived in Ventimiglia and was immersed in the situation at this border for over a year through work with grassroots organisations. In doing so, he was able to contribute observational data regarding ongoing trends from the field. The second researcher and author furthermore collected data and observations on the ground in May 2021 for the purpose of this report.



Photo credit: Diletta Mastria

INTRODUCTION

Ventimiglia is located on the Italian Riviera in the region of Liguria, approximately ten kilometres from the French border.

Since France's declaration of a state of emergency in 2015 and the ensuing closure of the French-Italian border, large numbers of people on the move ended up stranded in town. Ventimiglia consequently became a bottleneck where people in transit to France end up spending days, weeks and months stuck at the border.

The increasing militarisation of the border and the enhanced checks on trains and transit points, which have become entrenched practice, have resulted in more people trying their luck through dangerous paths in the mountain ranges of the Maritime and Ligurian Alps, often risking their lives.² Furthermore, many asylum seekers pay smugglers to take them across the border,³ and large numbers of people attempting the crossing are pushed back by the Police Aux Frontières (PAF).⁴ To reduce the concentration of people, the police have been forcibly transferring people to the hotspot of Taranto, the largest in Italy.⁵

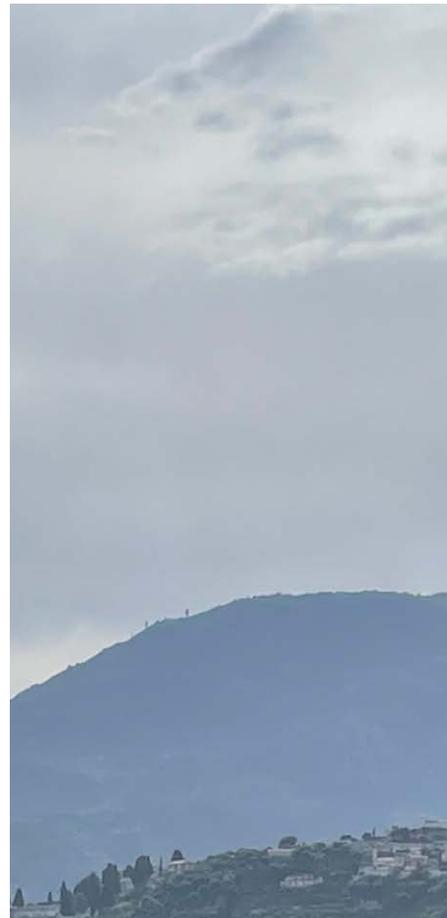


Photo credit: Diletta Mastrìa

² Medecins Sans Frontières, [Article](#), Migrants et réfugiés abandonnés au pied des Alpes, January 2021.

³ Medecins Sans Frontières, [Article](#), Migrants in Italy Risk Everything to reach France, August 2017.

⁴ The PAF is a directorate of the French National Police that is responsible for border control at certain border crossing points in France, such as Calais, Lille, and Ventimiglia.

⁵ LA 7, [Article](#), Migrants, da Ventimiglia a Taranto e ritorno, January 2017.

Individuals trapped at this border point have oftentimes tried to access protection in Italy but have either been refused or been left to wait for such an extended time that they have lost hope. Others have been removed from other European countries but are determined to cross the border once more in search of safety. As a legal advisor from Diaconia Valdese suggested: *"When someone ends up in Ventimiglia, it is because they have exhausted, or think they have exhausted, their legal options in Italy. Some people end up here after years in the country with an expired resident permit, others are 'Dublined'⁶ and come back to Italy to get their documents even if they already had a job and a good life in another country. Once here though, they get stuck in this cycle of pushbacks."*⁷

Many displaced people and asylum seekers have reported facing violence by the police on both sides of the border.⁸ Ventimiglia's

hostile environment means that displaced people often feel unsafe and under threat. In recent months, there have even been cases of displaced people getting beaten up by locals.⁹

In addition to these pre-existing issues, the Covid-19 pandemic created an urgent exacerbation of a longstanding crisis. People on the move, who would already before the pandemic find themselves struggling to access healthcare and dignified living conditions and being pushed back at the border, have been particularly affected by the pandemic and have faced worsening conditions in all vital regards.

This report explores the impact of Covid-19 across key thematic areas, including the particularly harmful effects on vulnerable groups such as women, girls and unaccompanied children.

"...SOME PEOPLE END UP HERE AFTER YEARS IN THE COUNTRY WITH AN EXPIRED RESIDENT PERMIT, OTHERS ARE 'DUBLINED' AND COME BACK TO ITALY [...] ONCE HERE THOUGH, THEY GET STUCK IN THIS CYCLE OF PUSHBACKS."

– A legal advisor from Diaconia Valdese



Photo credit: Progetto 20K

⁶ The term 'Dublined' here refers to when an asylum seeker is returned from one EU member state to another under the Dublin Regulation. The purpose of the regulation is to determine which country is responsible for processing an asylum seeker's application. Usually, this is the first EU member state that the individual sets foot in. Further information [here](#).

⁷ Legal advisor from Diaconia Valdese, phone interview conducted in May 2021.

⁸ Refugee Rights Europe, [Report](#), In dangerous transit, 2017.

⁹ On the 9 May 2021 a 23-year-old man from Guinea-Conakry called Moussa Balde was beaten up with iron bars by three Italian citizens in the streets of Ventimiglia. He was hospitalised and released with sustained medical conditions. Nevertheless, as he was undocumented, he was immediately transferred to a CPR (detention centre in Turin) where he was held in solitary confinement, without any given reason. Despite calls for support by his lawyer, who reported him to be in great physical and psychological pain, no action was taken, and the man was found dead on the 23rd of May, reportedly by suicide. See RRE & Progetto 20K, [Fact sheet](#), Key updates and trends at the French-Italian border, April & May 2021, June 2021.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS DURING COVID-19

According to the National Institute of Health, refugees, asylum seekers and minority ethnic groups have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.¹⁰

It has created additional barriers for people on the move. Proof of negative Covid tests are mandatory to cross the border, and the pandemic has increased the health-related risks faced by displaced people.



Photo credit: Diletta Mastria

¹⁰ The European Journal of Public Health, Epidemiological characteristics of Covid-19 cases in non-Italian nationals, *Vol. 31*, No. 1, 37-44, 8 January 2021.

The relative lockdown and border closures over the last year also resulted in anomalies in the number of arrivals. During the full Italian lockdown between March and May 2020, the number of people in the city was at its lowest. Covid-related restrictions also meant that organisations and solidarity groups were not allowed to operate, resulting in a gap in reliable data involving numbers of arrivals. Since then, the operations on the ground have normalised, and the organisations working in the area witnessed an average of 250 individuals arriving per day during the past winter.¹¹

The closure of Campo Roya, at the time the only reception centre in the area, represented the biggest challenge caused by the pandemic. Two positive cases in the camp in April 2020 brought about a period of quarantine, followed by the full closure of the centre at the end of July 2020.¹² The closure aggravated existing inadequacies in shelter provision, meaning that a lot of people had to spend the winter sleeping outside in informal settlements without heating, electricity or hygienic facilities. Food, legal support and healthcare were distributed by

activists and local organisations, who only had the capacity to cover essential needs.

The UN called for state members to end all forced evictions of these informal settlements.¹³ The evictions contradicted the 'stay home' policy, which aimed to limit the spread of the virus.¹⁴ The UN furthermore recognised that in the face of the pandemic, being evicted from your home is a potential death sentence.¹⁵ Despite this, the police continued to forcibly evict informal settlements in Ventimiglia, in violation of international human rights law.

Since April 2021, arrivals have stabilised to 200-300 people per day, and with the onset of summer, activists and organisations working in the area predict a further increase. Arrivals are coming through both the Balkan and Mediterranean routes, and people on the move in Ventimiglia originate predominantly from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Kurdistan and Bangladesh, as well as Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Mali, Sudan and Eritrea.¹⁶



Photo credit: Jeremy Cothren

¹¹ ASGI, [Article](#), La situazione al confine tra Italia e Francia: effetti della pandemia e tendenze consolidate, 22 February 2021.

¹² Sanremo News, [Article](#), Ventimiglia, chiude il Campo Roya, 31 July 2020.

¹³ UN Human Rights Special Procedures, Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, Covid-19 [Guidance Note](#): Prohibition of evictions, 28 April 2020.

¹⁴ Governo Italiano Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, [Government Announcement](#), Coronavirus Covid-19.

¹⁵ UN Human Rights Special Procedures, Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, Covid-19 [Guidance Note](#): Prohibition of evictions, 28 April 2020.

¹⁶ Progetto 20K and Diaconia Valdese data shared through interviews in May 2021.

SHELTER

The shelter situation and overall living conditions for people on the move have been extremely dire at the French-Italian border for many years; however, we have witnessed further deterioration during the Covid-19 pandemic, leaving individuals exposed to increased health and safety risks. After the closure of the transit camp Campo Roya in July 2020 by the prefecture of Imperia last year, no alternative solution has been put in place.

The camp had capacity for up to 500 people and was opened by the Italian Red Cross in 2016 due to the significant number of displaced people in the region who lacked shelter.¹⁷ Initially intended to be a short-term solution, the centre's function changed in March 2017 to become a more permanent reception centre, hosting people in transit to France and those who decided to apply for international protection in Italy.¹⁸

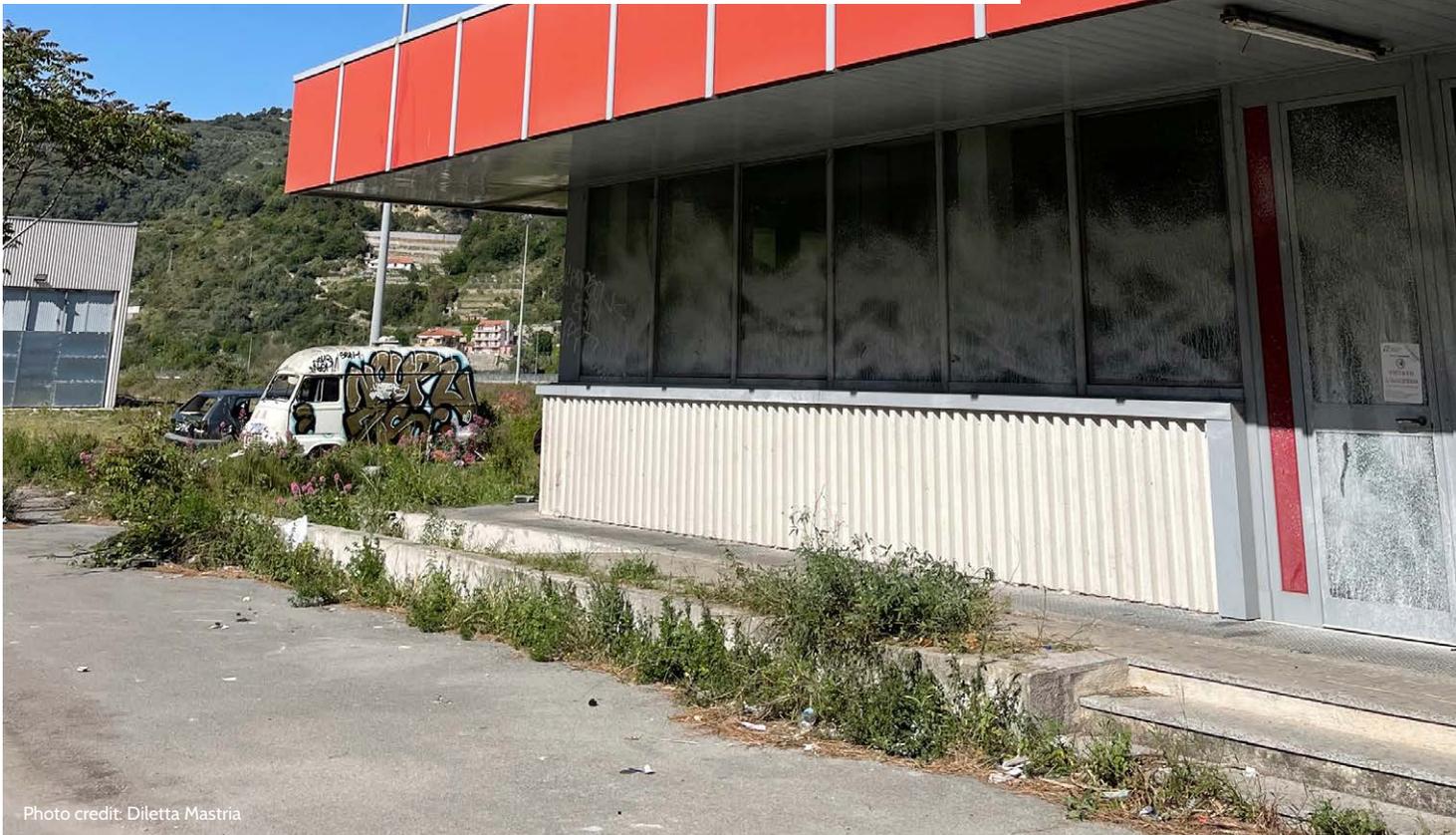


Photo credit: Diletta Mastria

¹⁷. Parole sul confine, [Article](#), Mappe del confine di Ventimiglia: 1# Campo Roya, 10 January 2019

¹⁸. Médecins Sans Frontières, [Report](#), 'Dangerous crossings at the northern borders of Italy', December 2020.

The centre was presided over by the police, who requested fingerprints in order to be admitted, and people were not allowed to re-enter after being away from the camp for three days or longer. Among the criticisms raised against Campo Roya was the lack of a dedicated space for women and families, as well as the fingerprint process, which discouraged people without documents from entering. After two positive Covid-19 cases were identified in the centre in April 2020, the camp barred new admissions and the residents were not allowed to leave. They were gradually relocated to other centres in the region until the camp was officially closed on 30 July 2021.¹⁹

Since then, no alternative official shelter solution has been established, and people have once again started to gather in informal settlements around the city. Hundreds of displaced people have been spending cold nights outside during the winter without access to clean water, sanitation, hygiene provisions and heating. Other settlements have formed at the beach on the seashore and in abandoned railway offices close to the former Red Cross camp, referred to as 'red houses.' These red houses are abandoned buildings where people found temporary refuge after the closure of Campo Roya. The buildings were forcibly evicted by the police in April 2021. At the time of eviction, there were 50-60 people sleeping inside each building.²⁰ The police, with the help of private companies,²¹ blocked the entrances to the buildings, sealed the water pipes and threw away all of the residents' belongings. A few weeks later, displaced people

found a way back in. They have been sleeping in dire sanitary conditions, with non-functioning toilets and surrounded by garbage, ever since.²² Around 50 people have also relocated around the red houses but stay outside as the police keep patrolling the area to force people out of the buildings.²³

The rise in forced evictions means that refugees and asylum seekers have no choice but to live in hidden locations in a state of growing fear and frustration. Despite the alarms by civil society organisations, there are no plans in place to open a new reception centre.²⁴

Most of the people in transit here are now sleeping under the bridge on the riverside, by the distribution parking lot, evoking a crisis similar to the one in 2016.²⁵ In the last few months, 50-100 people have been sleeping in small beds made of cardboard and a few tents, forming a small informal camp that is predicted to swell with the expected increase in arrivals in the summer.²⁶

Without an institutionally guaranteed shelter, the organisations working in the area have only been able to provide a limited number of beds and hosting solutions dedicated to vulnerable people such as women, minors and families.²⁷ The legal shelter provision provided by WeWorld, Caritas and Diaconia Valdese assisted 362 people in April 2021, of whom 29 were women.²⁸



Photo credit: Progetto 2OK

19. Sanremo News, [Article](#), Ventimiglia: da oggi è chiuso il Campo Roya, a Ventimiglia almeno 400 migranti e dalla Francia 50/60 riammissioni al giorno, 31 July 2020.

20. Progetto 2OK, [Report](#), 25 May 2021.

21. RRE& Progetto 2OK, [Fact sheet](#), Key updates and trends at the French-Italian border, April & May 2021, June 2021.

22. Observation from the field in Ventimiglia during the May 2021 visit by one of the report authors.

23. RRE& Progetto 2OK, [Fact sheet](#), Key updates and trends at the French-Italian border, April & May 2021, June 2021.

24. Genoa Primocanale, [Article](#), Necessaria la riapertura del Campo Roya, 17 March 2021.

25. Refugee Rights Europe, [Report](#), In dangerous transit, 2017.

26. Progetto 2OK, [Report](#), 25 May 2021.

27. Save the Children can host up to 8 people and the Diaconia Valdese, We world and Caritas host up to 15 people for max three days.

28. Data from Diaconia Valdese, We World and Caritas, shared in interviews conducted in May 2021.

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Despite the ongoing global health crisis, access to healthcare for refugees and displaced people stranded in Ventimiglia has remained complex and extremely limited.

Undocumented people on the move who are temporarily on Italian territory have the right to obtain a Straniero Temporaneamente Presente (STP) code.²⁹ This code gives them access to emergency and essential healthcare in any hospital, including longer-term healthcare when needed, but it must be acquired in a dedicated STP clinic. Emergency healthcare includes care that cannot be deferred without danger to life, and essential care encompasses diagnostic and therapeutic services relating to pathologies that are not dangerous in the short term but could lead to significant harm over time.³⁰



Photo credit: Progetto 20K

²⁹ The STP code (Temporarily Present Foreigner) is the tool for the application of the right to health care by non-EU citizens illegally present on the territory. The STP code is issued by the local health authorities, at the time of the request for treatment. Access to healthcare facilities cannot lead to any reporting to the authorities. See ASP, [Guidelines](#), Schema Sintetico Assistenza Sanitaria per i migranti extracomunitari.

³⁰ Ibid.

However, in the region of Liguria, there are no dedicated STP clinics, and undocumented people can only acquire their STP code through the emergency room in Bordighera (7 km from Ventimiglia) and local women's consulting rooms.³¹ Furthermore, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reports that health personnel are often unwilling to provide healthcare, even when the person in need has access to the code, for fear of being requested to reimburse the regional health system.³² When care is provided, generally with MSF's help, it is often of low quality and patients are quickly discharged.

A volunteer and activist from Progetto 20K noted a case which illustrates these challenges: "A minor was beaten up and tortured by smugglers over a money-related issue. The police took him to Bordighera's emergency room, but he was discharged the same day after some routine tests. We noticed he wasn't eating or drinking, and he kept being sick. We took him to Bordighera's hospital two more times but he was always discharged in a few hours. We finally took him to the bigger hospital of Imperia where he was hospitalised for two days and diagnosed with a subluxation of the cervical spine, which should

have been spotted at the first visit to the emergency room."³³

Caritas offers medical consultations for 2 hours a day. MSF reports that the conditions in the consultation room are not up to standard in times of Covid-19 and lack appropriate ventilation. Therefore, if a patient has a fever, that person is barred from accessing the room.³⁴ Caritas used to offer psychological support once a week, but the lack of an appropriate room during the pandemic meant that this service had to be suspended for several months. It was only reintroduced in June 2021.³⁵

Médecins du Monde is also present twice a week with a mobile clinic offering basic healthcare assistance. Many of the refugees and asylum seekers exhibit medical symptoms and ailments related to poor hygiene and sanitary conditions, as well as injuries caused by the long walks in the woods or wounds from torture suffered along their journey.³⁶ It is to be noted that free CPR tests are not provided by any of the organisations or institutional bodies, despite being a strict requirement to cross the border.³⁷

"A MINOR WAS BEATEN UP AND TORTURED BY SMUGGLERS OVER A MONEY-RELATED ISSUE. THE POLICE TOOK HIM TO BORDIGHERA'S EMERGENCY ROOM, BUT HE WAS DISCHARGED THE SAME DAY AFTER SOME ROUTINE TESTS. [...] WE FINALLY TOOK HIM TO THE BIGGER HOSPITAL OF IMPERIA WHERE HE WAS HOSPITALISED FOR TWO DAYS AND DIAGNOSED WITH A SUBLUXATION OF THE CERVICAL SPINE..."

– Volunteer and activist from Progetto 20K

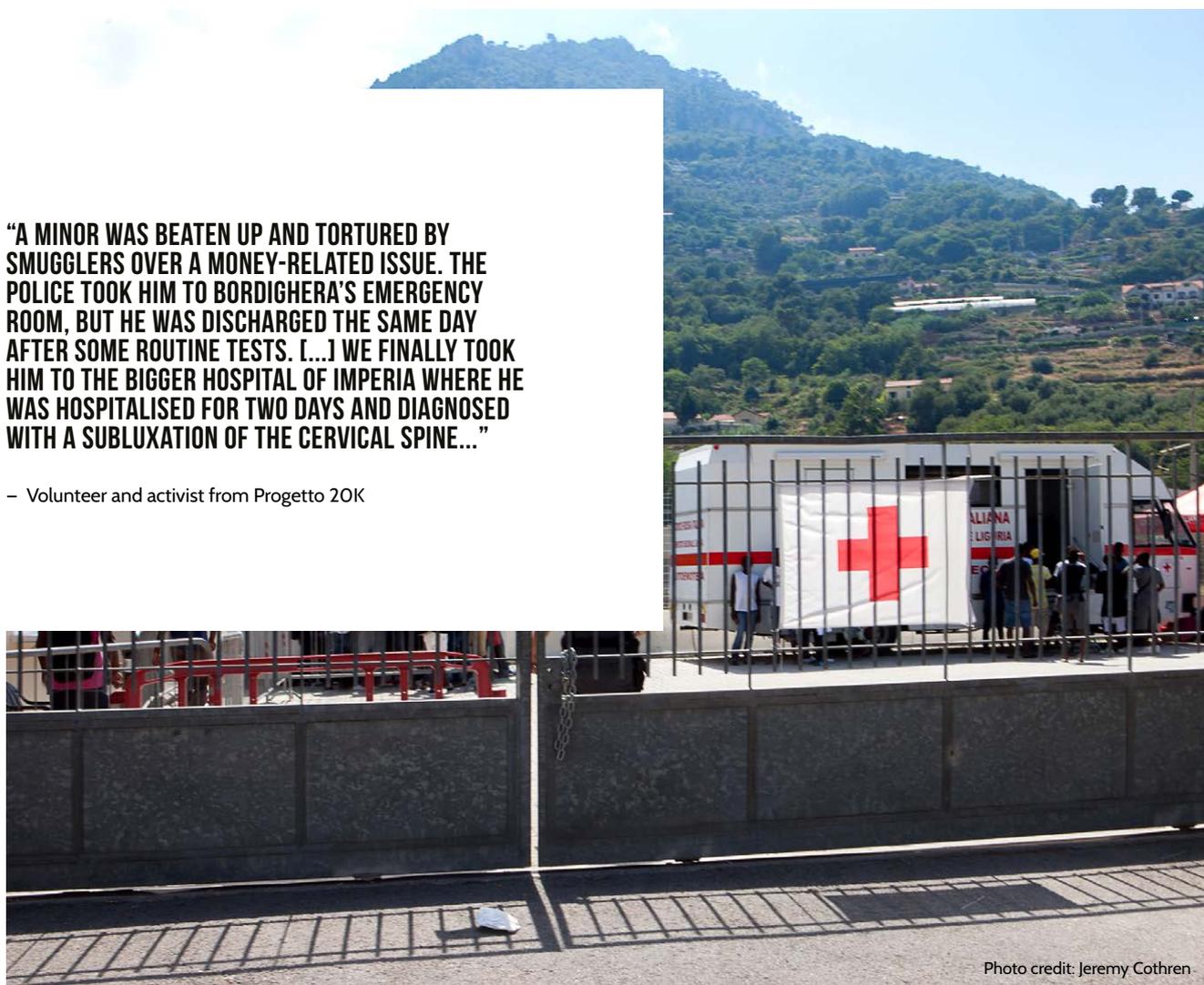


Photo credit: Jeremy Cothren

31. Médecins Sans Frontières, [Report](#), 'Dangerous crossings at the northern borders of Italy', December 2020.

32. Ibid.

33. Activist and volunteer from Progetto 20K, interview conducted in June 2021.

34. Ibid.

35. Employee of Caritas, interview conducted in May 2021.

36. Observation from the field in Ventimiglia during the May 2021 visit by one of the report authors.

37. Ansa, [Article](#), Covid: Ventimiglia, code verso Francia per controllo tamponi, 1 February 2021.

TRAFFICKING AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

Covid-19 has aggravated the already vulnerable situation of women and girls on the move. During the lockdown, prospects of identification of vulnerabilities, violence and trafficking diminished.³⁸

A key driving factor is the challenge of gaining access to crucial places where women in need can meet, such as associations and civil society organisations that can offer them assistance.³⁹

The Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons stated that the situation for victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation has taken a turn for the worse globally due to a lack of financial resources and poor access to services, causing further vulnerability and exposure to abuse by traffickers.⁴⁰



Photo credit: Diletta Mastria

³⁸ RRE, [Report](#), An Overlooked Crisis, January 2021.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ UN Human Rights Special Procedures, Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, Covid-19 [Position paper](#), 8 June 2020.

According to UNHCR data, 10% of the displaced people who arrived in Italy by sea in April 2021 were women and 18% were unaccompanied children.⁴¹ Girls and women on the move in Europe face grave risks of sexual and gender-based violence at each step of their journey.⁴²

Ventimiglia is a key transit point where women victims of human trafficking are taken. The victims are predominantly from Nigeria⁴³ and are under the control of a trafficking network that preys on women and girls for sexual exploitation.⁴⁴ This network has grown increasingly stronger over the past ten years.⁴⁵ The extent of the issue of victims of trafficking in human beings (THB) has been reported in a video⁴⁶ from the association On the Road and the Guardian, which quotes UN figures stating that 80% of Nigerian woman who arrived in Italy via the Central Mediterranean on a boat will be trafficked into prostitution. The trafficking starts in Nigeria, where women and girls are recruited with the promise of a good job in Europe and are kidnapped or given away by their families to pay off debts.⁴⁷ The traffickers

then take them on a journey through the desert and Libya, where they are typically sexually exploited before being taken across the Mediterranean.⁴⁸ Once in Italy, women are typically put in contact with a 'Madam,' a female trafficker who controls the girls on a day-to-day basis and takes care of the collection of money.⁴⁹

To fight this growing trend, in 2016 Italy adopted the "National plan against trafficking and serious exploitation on human beings,"⁵⁰ which supported the identification of survivors of trafficking based on the Istanbul Convention.⁵¹ The plan, aimed for implementation throughout 2016-2018, hasn't been updated since 2018.⁵² For the same purposes, the region Liguria launched a project titled "Hope This Helps, the Liguria system against trafficking and children exploitation" (HTH Liguria), initially planned to run between 2017 and 2019 but later extended into 2021.⁵³ The project currently operates in the cities of Genova, La Spezia, Savona, Chiavari and Ventimiglia and is funded by the Equal Opportunities Department (DPO).⁵⁴

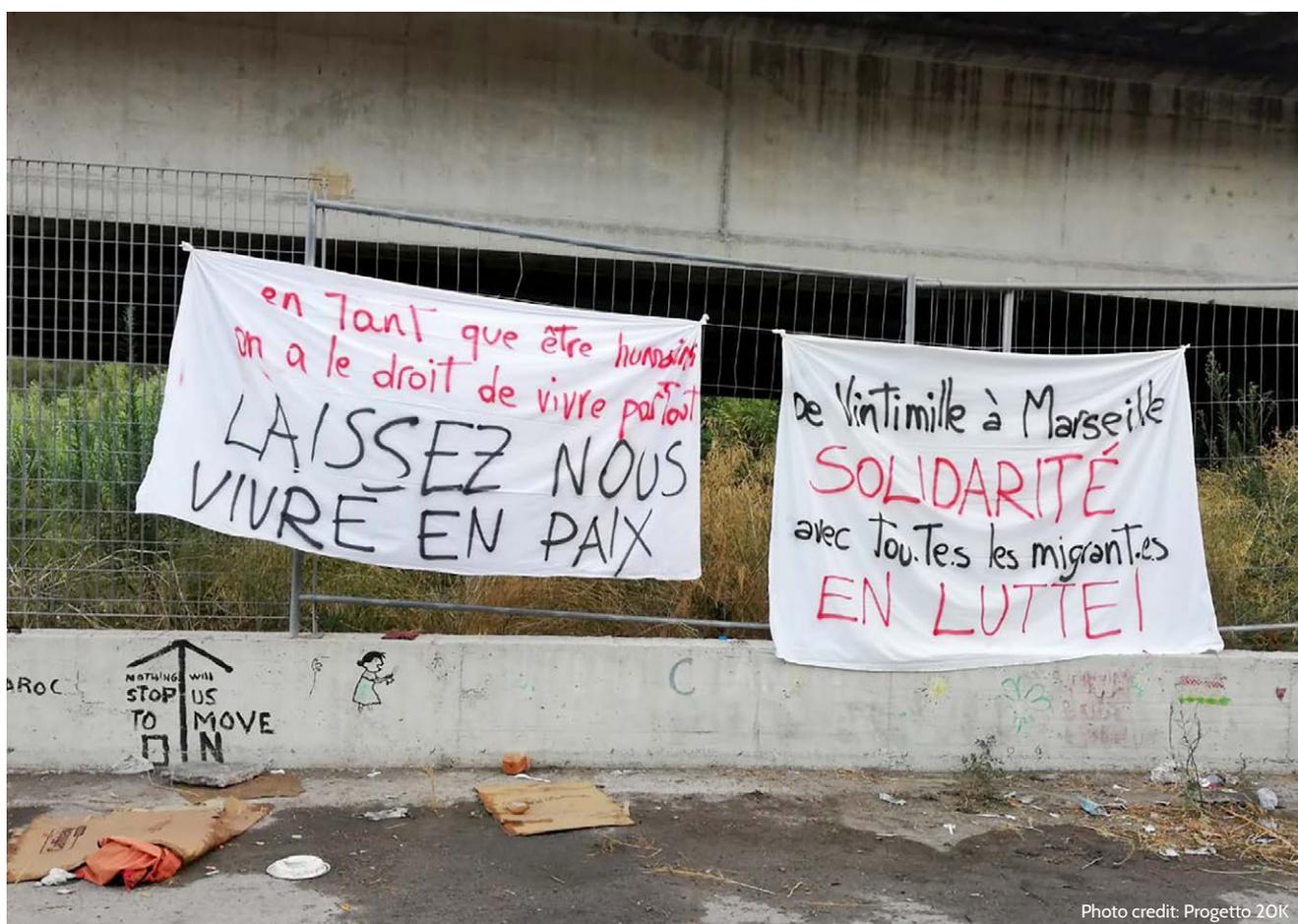


Photo credit: Progetto 20K

41. UNHCR, [Fact Sheet April](#), 3 June 2021.

42. UNHCR, [Article](#), Refugee Women on the move in Europe are at risk, says UN, 20 January 2016.

43. It has been reported by Diaconia Valdese that in the month of June 2021 there have been many arrivals of women and girls from Cote D'Ivoire. Data collated in interview in June 2021.

44. Il Sicilia, [Article](#), Cosa Nostra e 'Ndrangheta 'cedono' alla mafia nigeriana prostituzione e tratta di esseri umani, 2 June 2020.

45. The Guardian, [Article](#), Trafficking of Nigerian women into prostitution in Europe 'at crisis level', 8 August 2016.

46. On the Road, [Article](#), The Guardian documentary "On the Road", 26 June 2018.

47. Human Rights Watch, [Article](#), "You Pray for Death", 27 August 2019.

48. Geopolitica, [Editorial](#), La tratta delle schiave sessuali dalla Nigeria all'Italia, 1 October 2020.

49. Ibid.

50. Department for Equal Opportunities, [Action Plan](#) against trafficking and severe exploitation.

51. The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention, is a human rights treaty of the Council of Europe against violence against women and domestic violence which was opened for signature on 11 May 2011.

52. RRE, [Report](#), An Overlooked Crisis, January 2021.

53. Regione Liguria et al., [Report](#), Rapporto di ricerca Lo Sfruttamento lavorativo Lo Sfruttamento lavorativo in Liguria Analisi, problematiche, risorse Analisi, problematiche, risorse, May 2021.

54. Cooperativa Lindbergh, [Project Note](#), HTH - Hope This Helps.

“ONE OF THE GIRLS TRIED TO LEAVE THE TRAFFICKING BUT THE MOMENT THE MADAM STOPPED RECEIVING MONEY, SOMEONE VISITED HER FAMILY IN NIGERIA AND HER BROTHER HAS DISAPPEARED EVER SINCE.”

– HTH Employee



Photo credit: Progetto 20K

The HTH's work is based on different levels of intervention. The workers carry out a monitoring service in which they observe the situation on the streets, make note of the number of women and girls on the territory and try to approach them to put them in contact with other associations.⁵⁵

Campo Roya provided a space where association members could reach out to women and girls to offer help and protection. With the closure of the camp last year, the outreach process has become more complicated as the traffickers keep the victims as far as possible from the organisations.⁵⁶ In Ventimiglia, women usually arrive with a man, identified as the husband or a family member. If the woman is alone, they are approached by the traffickers and hidden away very quickly. The lack of safe shelter for women leaves them exposed to sexual violence and exploitation at the border at the hands of the traffickers.⁵⁷

The traffickers in Ventimiglia provide free fake documents for trafficking victims to cross the border. Some women are particularly exposed to scams, as illustrated through this quote from a representative of Hope this Helps: “a Nigerian girl bought a fake French asylum request from a trafficker for EUR 100. The document was a copy of a request made for a Senegalese man and the authorities pushed her back. She bought a second fake document for EUR 250.”⁵⁸

“Women are particularly difficult to approach, as they often don't trust us,” reported an HTH employee. Even when association members manage to approach some women, they are reluctant to talk as they fear the consequences: *“One of the girls tried to leave the trafficking but the moment the Madam stopped receiving money, someone visited her family in Nigeria and her brother has disappeared ever since.”*⁵⁹

Some of the women and girls in Ventimiglia are ‘Dublined’ back to Italy. Once they arrive, they are scared because they don't know if the ‘Madam’ is still looking for them.⁶⁰ *“We had a woman who came crying to Caritas as she was scared of her Madam being after her. We called the national number for protection⁶¹ but they didn't have space to host her,”*⁶² according to Hope This Helps.

After the Decree Law No. 13/2017 was converted into Law No. 46/2017, it became more difficult for women exposed to trafficking and exploitation outside the reception centres to ask for asylum; the law stipulates that people must be hosted in a reception centre or private residence to be able to access the asylum procedure.⁶³ With the closure of Campo Roya in the midst of the pandemic, as well as limited shelter availability in other cities in the region, women have been particularly exposed to trafficking, and their right to access asylum procedures has been compromised.⁶⁴

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Employee working for the “Hope this Helps” project, interviewed in June 2021.

⁵⁷:58: 59; 60. Ibid.

⁶¹ The procedure to help victims of trafficking is to call the national number, “Antitrattra”, managed by the Equal Opportunities department.

⁶² Employee working for the “Hope this Helps” project, interviewed in June 2021.

⁶³ For more information on women victims of THB and SGBV see RRE, *Report*, An Overlooked Crisis, January 2021

⁶⁴ RRE, *Report*, An Overlooked Crisis, January 2021.

PUSHBACKS AND DETENTION

Pushbacks and detention have been reported at the French-Italian border in Ventimiglia for several years. These abuses continued during the Covid-19 pandemic despite the additional risks and vulnerabilities facing people on the move during this time.⁶⁵

Based on Chapter II (art. 25 and 29) of the Schengen Border Code, France reintroduced border controls at the EU Internal Schengen border in November 2015 following the terrorist attacks in Paris.⁶⁶ As reported by many French, Italian and International Organisations, the French government is preventing displaced people (men, women, unaccompanied children and families) from entering their territory, hence depriving them of their right to seek asylum. One of the first reports of this practice was published by ASGI in 2015,⁶⁷ which warned of the numerous human rights and international law violations taking place at the border. In the last six years, these pushbacks have become an increasingly frequent and entrenched practice. After a year and a half of Covid-19 restrictions, asylum seekers and people on the move in transit face a desperate situation on multiple fronts.

Moreover, despite the maximum duration of Schengen suspension being two years, the closure has since been renewed every six months. The latest renewal announced by France to the European Commission is running from May to October 2021.⁶⁸

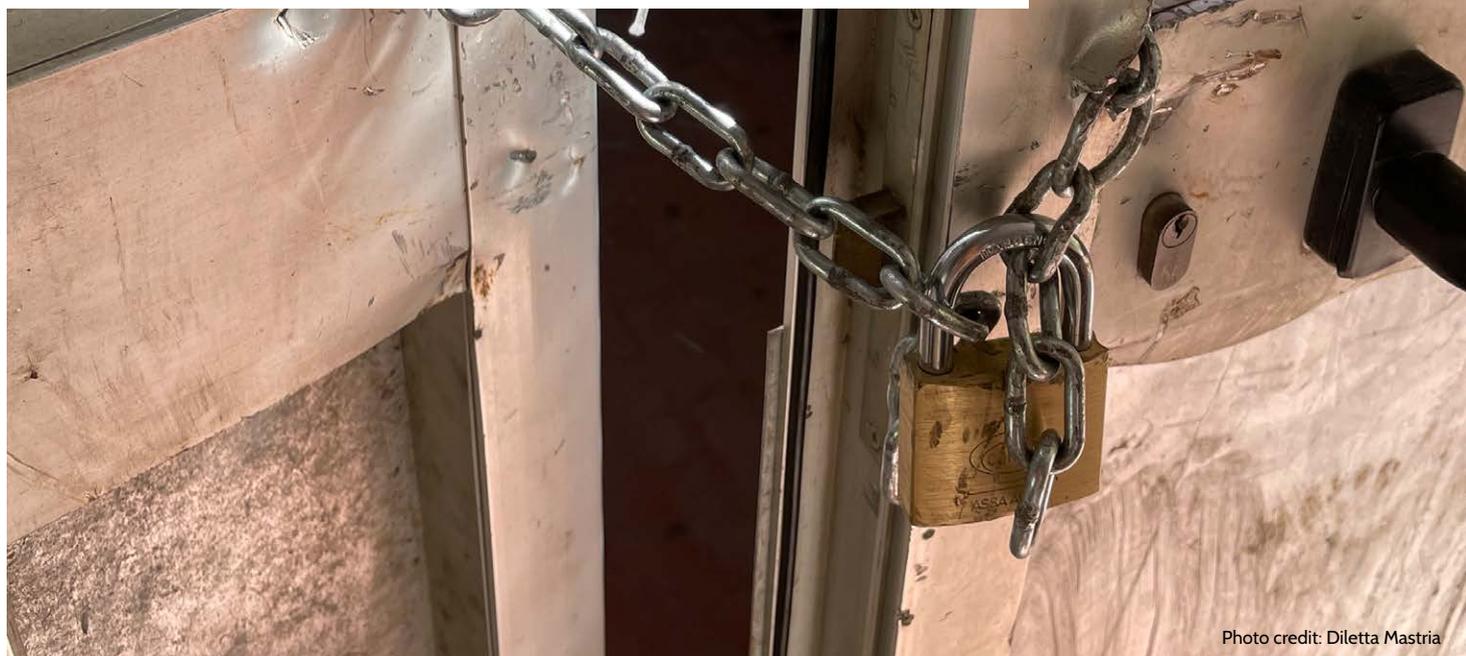


Photo credit: Diletta Mastria

⁶⁵ See e.g. Refugee Rights Europe, [Report](#), In dangerous transit, and Anafe, [Report](#), Persona non grata, Consequences of security and migration policies at the France-Italy border – Observation report 2017-2018.

⁶⁶ End Pushbacks Partnership, [Report](#), Pushbacks and Rights Violations at Europe's borders: The state of play in 2020, November 2020.

⁶⁷ ASGI, [Report](#), The readmission of foreign citizens in Ventimiglia (June 2015), Unlawful aspects, September 2015.

⁶⁸ European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, [Policy note](#), Temporary Reintroduction of Border Control.



Photo credit: Progetto 20K

The French-Italian border in Ventimiglia is composed of two official border points: the low altitude point of Ponte San Ludovico, which is just above sea level, and the high altitude point in Ponte San Luigi.

Undocumented individuals are stopped and taken back to the Menton border police (Police aux frontières, PAF)⁶⁹ premises where they are given a *refus d'entrée*, effectively a refusal of entry. The *refus d'entrée* is an expedited procedure used by the French police to return people arriving from Italy while intra-EU border controls are in effect. French law allows the police to use this procedure while Schengen is suspended.⁷⁰ These people are then sent back to the Italian border police station, which reports their re-entry into Italian territory with a request for personal data and, sometimes, a photo and fingerprint identification.⁷¹ The French police patrols all border crossings into French national territory: roads, trains and railways, train stations such as the one in Menton Garavan and dangerous mountain paths, like the infamous 'Path of death' on which several individuals have tragically died over the years.^{72, 73}

People are detained in three containers outside the PAF station for periods lasting from three hours to the whole night depending on the availability of the Italian police to receive them on the other side of the border. These containers reportedly resemble prison cells and do not appear to respect the minimum standards of hygiene, personal space or safe spaces for women and children. Above the courtyard of the containers, a net completely closes off any possible escape routes. During the Covid-19 pandemic, individuals continued to be detained here despite the exacerbated health risks that such deprivation of liberty entailed. For instance, one individual from Cote d'Ivoire reported being detained for eight hours and said

that French police sprayed him and others with pepper spray – seemingly just for fun – at least three times during the day. The container was overcrowded, and people could not safely distance from each other.⁷⁴

Progetto 20K, a grassroots group active for many years at the FR-IT border, carried out a monitoring activity in May 2021, during which they observed that these containers were seriously overcrowded. Around 80 people were inside each container at the same time, which was well above capacity. A person reported to the monitor that he had been beaten and brutally pushed into a minivan which was on route to return people to the Italian police station. According to the monitor, the man had done nothing wrong; he had simply taken a moment longer to follow orders as he wanted to say goodbye to his friends who were still inside the containers.⁷⁵

As reported by Progetto 20K: *"In this time of global pandemic, the situation is even more dramatic: no sanitary standards are respected inside the containers, people are crammed in, with no access to drinking water, no sanitation and no safety distances. Usually, people who try to complain are dismissed and told that Covid-19 is not important. At the same time, since the beginning of the health emergency, information sheets are distributed with some minimum measures to be respected in order to limit the spread of Covid, which obviously cannot be respected due to the structural conditions of these places."*⁷⁶

Over the last few months of monitoring activities made by civil society organisations from both sides of the border, it has become increasingly evident that PAF's *refoulement* procedures at the French-Italian border frequently involve violence and the detention of people without any legal basis.⁷⁷

⁶⁹ La PAF (Police aux frontières) is directed by the Central Direction of the Borders Police (Direction Centrale de la Police aux Frontières) and is in charge of controlling immigration and France national borders.

⁷⁰ European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, [Policy note](#), Temporary Reintroduction of Border Control; Human Rights Watch, [Article](#), France: Police expelling migrant children, 5 May 2021.

⁷¹ ASGI, [Report](#), Le Riammissioni di Cittadini Stranieri a Ventimiglia, (giugno 2015) Profili di illegittimità, July 2015.

⁷² End Pushbacks Partnership, [Report](#), Pushbacks and Rights Violations at Europe's borders: The state of play in 2020, November 2020.

⁷³ The "Path of the Death" is a historical mountain path, crossing Fr-It border, used by people of different ages. We recommend two books to better understand this mountain path: G. Broglio, "The Path of Hope. Illegal Border Crossings and Reflections on Historical Subjectivities, Stories and the Archive (1861 – 2019)", in *Debordering Europe. Migration and Control Across the Ventimiglia Region*, edited by L. Amigoni, S. Aru, I. Bonnin, G. Proglgio, C. Vergnano, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 17; E. Barnabà, *Il Passo della Morte. Storie e immagini di passaggio lungo la frontiera tra Italia e Francia*, Infinito Edizioni, 2019.

⁷⁴ Informal interview carried out by Progetto 20K in May 2021.

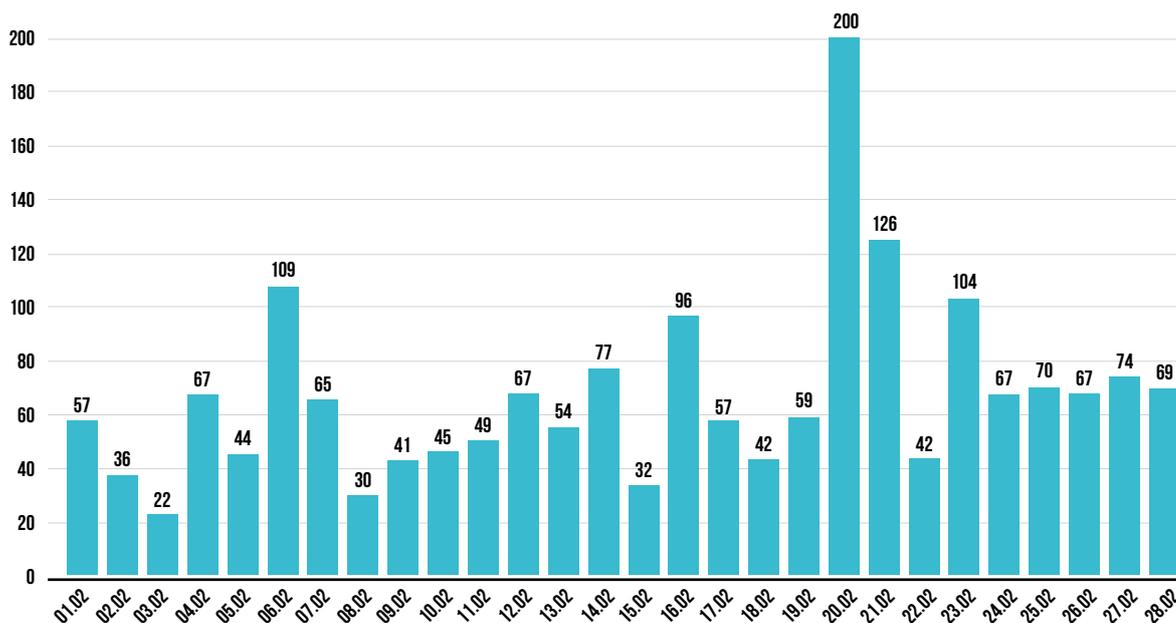
⁷⁵ Report from direct observation by Progetto 20K in April 2021.

⁷⁶ Melting Pot, [Article](#), Respingimenti e abusi al confine tra Italia e Francia: condizioni infernali all'interno dei container francesi.

⁷⁷ Anafe, [Article](#), Enfermement illégal à la frontière franco-italienne : le Conseil d'Etat s'en lave les mains, 28 April 2021.

NUMBER OF PUSHBACKS FEBRUARY 2021

Source: Report by Kesha Niya grassroots group

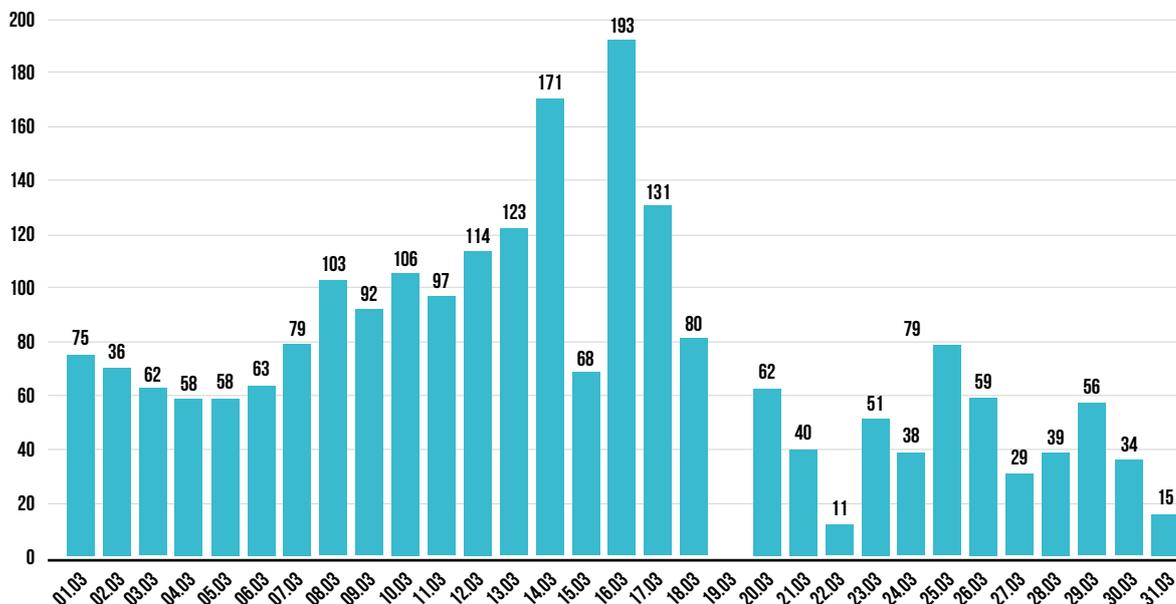


Kesha Niya, a grassroots organisation working at the FR-IT border,⁷⁸ reported that 1,868 people were pushed back in February 2021. Among them were 81 women, 22 children and

62 unaccompanied children. On 20 February, around 200 people were pushed back, the highest figure in that month.⁷⁹

NUMBER OF PUSHBACKS MARCH 2021

Source: Report by Kesha Niya grassroots group



On 14 and 16 March 2021, the highest numbers of daily pushbacks were registered at 171 and 193 people, respectively. In total, 2,256 people had been pushed back by the end of March,

showing an increase compared to the previous month. Among them were 182 women, 48 children travelling with a family member and 72 unaccompanied children.⁸⁰

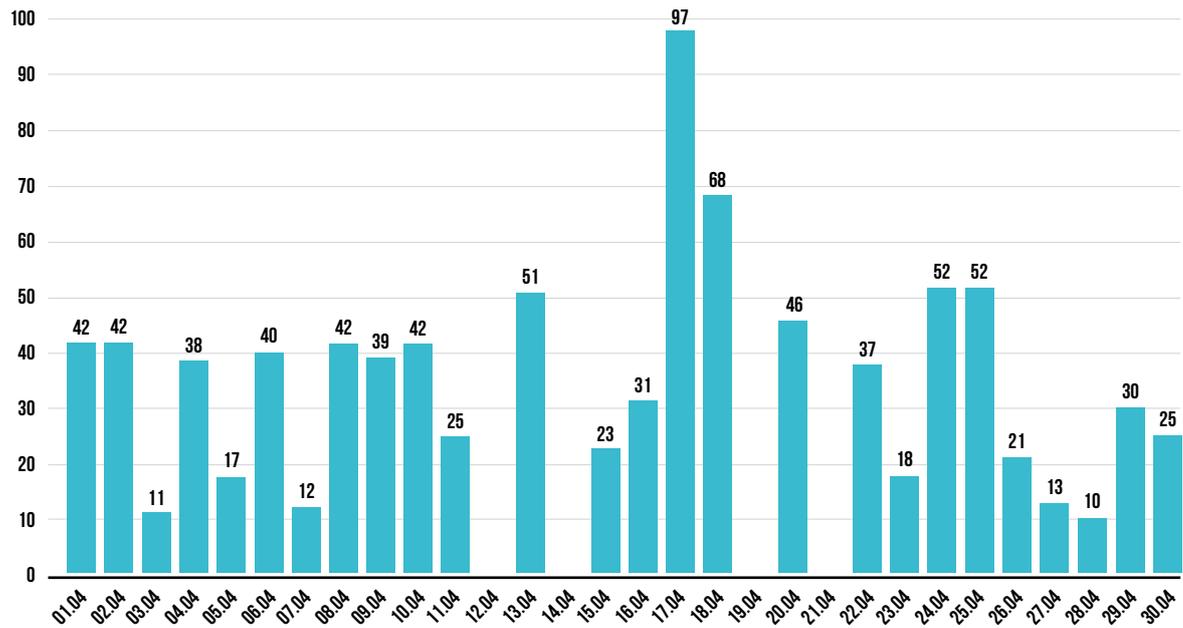
⁷⁸ Kesha Niya is a collective that operates on the field in Ventimiglia. They run a "breakfast spot" on the side of the road on the Italian side of the border where they welcome people who are pushed back or released from detention. Given the strategic location, they monitor and keep a record of the number of daily pushbacks.

⁷⁹ Kesha Niya, [Report](#) on Facebook, 14 March 2021.

⁸⁰ Kesha Niya, [Report](#) on Facebook, 29 March 2021.

NUMBER OF PUSHBACKS APRIL 2021

Source: Report by Kesha Niya grassroots group



During the month of April, 924 people were pushed back, among them 63 women, 55 accompanied children and 18 unaccompanied children.⁸¹ Although four days of data are missing from this period, the overall number of people shows that pushbacks decreased considerably compared to the

previous month. This is reportedly due to enhanced police controls at the Ventimiglia train station,⁸² which is specified in more detail in the following paragraph. People reported that they had been stopped only because they did not have a PCR test result, resulting in them being pushed back.⁸³



Photo credit: Progetto 20K

⁸¹ Kesha Niya, [Report](#) on Facebook, 12 May 2021.

⁸² Result of extensive monitoring activities carried out by Progetto 20K in April 2021, data provided by Progetto 20K.

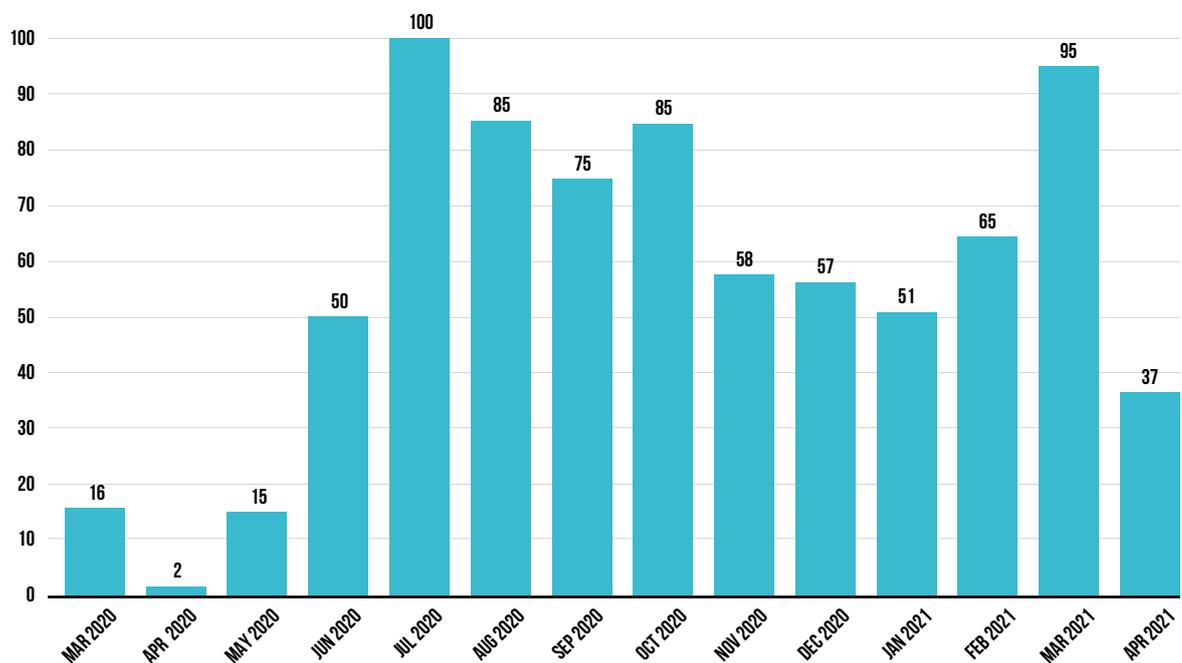
⁸³ Kesha Niya, [Report](#), 14 March 2021; Progetto 20K, [Report](#), 5 March 2021.



Photo credit: Progetto 20K

DAILY AVERAGE OF PEOPLE PUSHED BACK AT THE FR-IT BORDER

Source: Reports by Keshu Niya grassroots group; EPP report; Italian official police pushbacks and readmission data⁸⁴



The data in the last graph refers to the daily average number of pushbacks from the PAF of Menton for each month from March 2020 to April 2021. The Italian police's official data in March, April and May 2020 report an average of respectively 16, 12 and 15 pushbacks per day.⁸⁵

When analysing the graph, which draws on cross-examining data from different sources,⁸⁶ it is readily apparent how Covid-19 restrictions impacted people's movements to and around the French-Italian border. The low number of people who reached Ventimiglia between March and May 2020 was subsequently followed by an increase during the summer season until October 2020. The second lockdown, which took place from November 2020 until January 2021, clearly affected flows of movement, which never exceeded 60 people daily on average. In February 2021, we again witness an increase in pushbacks, which reaches

a peak in March and severely drops during the following month. This phenomenon is likely due to more stringent controls along the Genova-Ventimiglia railroad⁸⁷.

Over the last five years, many NGOs and associations have appealed to the French Administrative Court of Nice asking for the end of illegal pushbacks and detention at the border. The organisations Anafé and CAFFIM announced that on 23 April 2021, the French Council of State (Conseil d'État) refused to order the closure of the 'shelter' premises of the border police stations (PAF) of Menton (Alpes-Maritimes) and Montgenèvre (Hautes-Alpes). There, foreigners who have been refused entry to France are locked up extrajudicially despite admitting that this type of detention is taking place without being "provided for in any context."⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Keshu Niya, [Report](#), 14 March 2021, [Report](#), 29 March 2021, [Report](#), 12 May 2021; see also Polizia di Stato I zona polizia di frontiera, Settore Ventimiglia, [Police data](#), 4 November 2020.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.; also see End Pushbacks Partnership, [Report](#), Pushbacks and Rights Violations at Europe's borders: The state of play in 2020, November 2020.

⁸⁷ Riviera 24, [Article](#), Sottosegretario Difesa a Ventimiglia. «Per migranti rete accoglienza». Disponibilità da Pigna e Bordighera, 12 April 2021.

⁸⁸ Statewatch, [Article](#), Illegal detention at the French-Italian border: The State Council washes its hands of the issue, 5 May 2021.

ILLEGAL PUSHBACKS AND DETENTION OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN (UAC)

Unaccompanied children remain largely unprotected by state authorities, finding themselves in highly unsafe sanitary conditions, consistently pushed back at the border, and prevented from seeking asylum in France. The pandemic has made these living conditions and circumstances even more challenging and dire for these children.

During the period covered in this report, the French police intentionally pushed back dozens of unaccompanied minors every day to Italy, in violation of French, European and international law.⁸⁹ It has been widely reported that the police routinely change the declared dates of birth on the *refus d'entrée* documents of minors, especially when they do not have identification documents, as a way to refuse them entry into France.⁹⁰



Photo credit: Refugee Rights Europe

⁸⁹. See [article 22](#) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

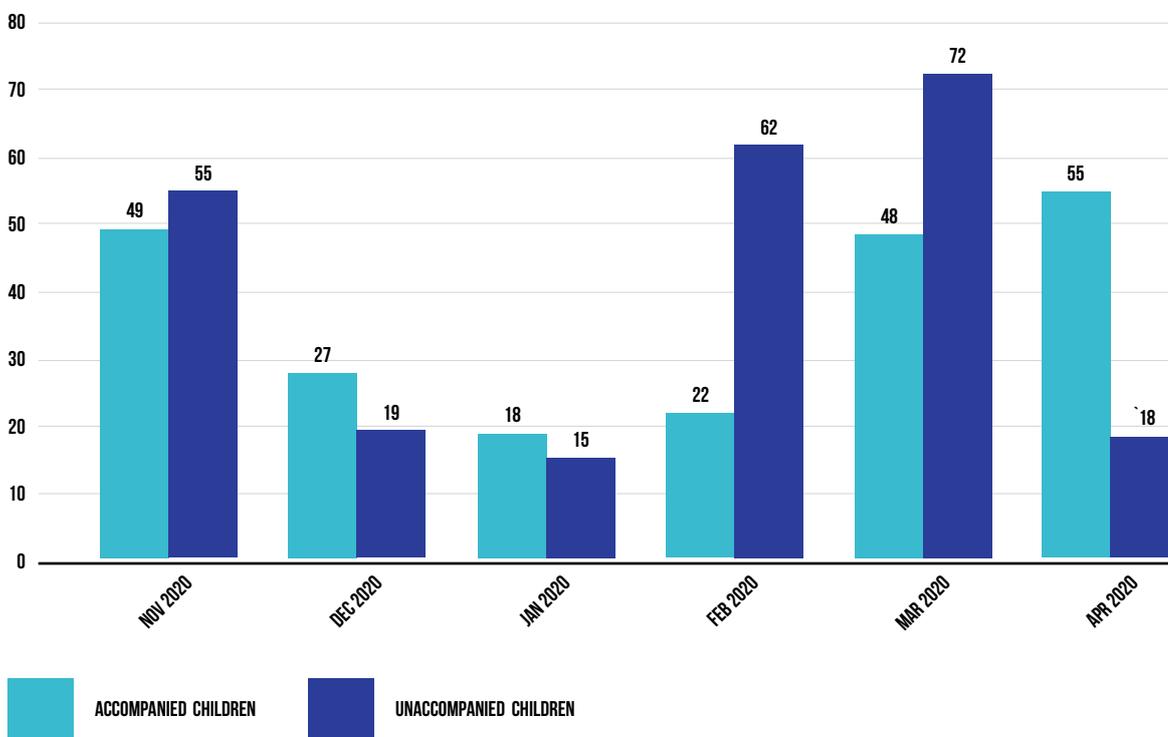
⁹⁰. Human Rights Watch, [Article](#), France: Police expelling migrant children, 5 May 2021.

In February 2021, Keshu Niya recorded testimonies from more than 60 unaccompanied children who had been pushed back.⁹¹ Diaconia Valdese, which works in collaboration with Save the

Children to give legal support and provide temporary shelter to minors in Ventimiglia, confirmed the overall rate of 50-60 UACs being pushed back every month.

CHILDREN & UAC PUSHED BACK AT THE FR-IT BORDER

Source: Reports by Keshu Niya and HRW



The graph data displays pushbacks of children in the period from November 2020 to April 2021.⁹² The graph outlines the number of pushbacks of children accompanied by family members or relatives and of unaccompanied children respectively. It is to be noted that children under the age of 11 are generally accompanied by a family member, while children aged between 11-17 are largely unaccompanied.⁹³

In terms of shelter, conditions on the Italian side of the border are still highly problematic for UACs. Various organisations operating on the ground have reported that children are sleeping rough under the bridge in Ventimiglia or on the beach, exposed to all kinds of dangers. They struggle to access water and healthcare and often distrust employees from NGOs and civil society organisations due to the many abuses and violence they experienced throughout their journey. Save the Children reports the abuse of minors at borders across Europe; for instance, as mentioned in their last report,⁹⁴ Croatian police repeatedly beat

up a 17-year-old Pakistani boy, as well as two Afghans minors aged 16 and 17.⁹⁵ Minors caught by the PAF trying to cross the border often experience further violence and are detained for numerous hours in containers at the border. Progetto 20K reports the testimony of a minor from Mali who, after receiving his *refus d'entrée*, was brutally hit and attacked with pepper spray. Furthermore, an Afghan who was already registered as minor in Austria was refused entry. The French police then recorded his age as 18 years old before sending him back to Italy.⁹⁶

The list of abuses on both adults and minors reported by grassroots groups is not exhaustive.⁹⁷ Dozens of people have reported having their personal belongings confiscated while in French custody,⁹⁸ losing critical documents, phones and money.⁹⁹ During the Covid-19 pandemic, adults and children interviewed by Human Rights Watch also reported that French authorities denied masks and protective equipment to people detained in containers.¹⁰⁰

91. Keshu Niya, [Report](#), 14 March 2021.

92. European Law recognises every person under the age of 18 as a child, in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989.

93. Keshu Niya, [Report](#), November-December 2020, Report, January-March 2021, Report, March-April 2021.

94. Save the Children, [Article](#), Hundreds of migrant children face abuse at European borders, 17 June 2021.

95. *Ibid.*

96. Progetto 20K interviewed the people concerned in the town of Ventimiglia in the month of April 2021.

97. RRE & Progetto 20K, [Fact sheet](#), Key updates and trends at the French-Italian border, April & May 2021, June 2021.

98. *Ibid.*

99. Human Rights Watch, [Article](#), France: Police expelling migrant children, 5 May 2021.

100. *Ibid.*

MILITARISATION OF THE BORDER TOWN

During the pandemic, the city of Ventimiglia as a whole witnessed a wave of what could be described as ‘militarisation,’ with the military and the police joining forces to guard many of the town's strategic points.

Since 14 December 2020, as part of a new French-Italian police agreement,¹⁰¹ mixed patrols of Italian and French police have operated on both sides of the border to prevent people from attempting border crossings. These operations are carried out as far inland as Imperia in Italy (50 km from Ventimiglia) and the Alpes-Maritimes in France.



Photo credit: Jeremy Cothren

¹⁰¹ Riviera Time, [Article](#), Una ‘squadra mista’ italo-francese: parte da Ventimiglia il progetto pilota della Polizia di Frontiera, 21 December 2020.

The cooperation between the French and Italian police is largely based on the Schengen Agreement and the Chambéry Agreement.¹⁰² As reported by the Italian Border Police, the new joint investigation team, initially made up of twelve members from the Italian Border Police and twelve from the PAF, was established with the clear aim of fighting so-called 'illegal' immigration as part of the police control system already in place at both sides of the border.¹⁰³

Grassroots organisations, supported by legal advice from ASGI,¹⁰⁴ have denounced the militarisation of the town as an attempt to prevent people from requesting asylum on French territory.¹⁰⁵ The disproportionate number of police and military troops has created an increasingly impassable barrier at the border with the aim of checking, deterring and turning away people on the move travelling along the rail network between Genoa and Ventimiglia.¹⁰⁶ In addition, from the beginning of 2021, the police further increased documents controls outside the train station and at the platform where the trains to Menton arrive from Ventimiglia.¹⁰⁷ The new agreement allows joint teams of French and Italian police to cooperate in pushbacks activities, which occur daily at the train station of Ventimiglia.¹⁰⁸

During this period, the organisations monitoring the area have observed a worrying rise in police controls at the Ventimiglia

train station.¹⁰⁹ The police have always checked the trains arriving from France and the areas surrounding the station, but they are now patrolling the platform of the train to Menton at nearly all hours of the day.¹¹⁰ The train keeps all of its doors closed except one, which is blocked by the police.¹¹¹ The practice of racial profiling by the police at these train stations has also been reported. Grassroots groups are under the impression that mainly non-White people get stopped and are asked to show their documents. The Gendarmerie and police who operate the transalpine route appear to be carrying out similar practices characterised by racial profiling. Furthermore, the same grassroots groups report that throughout the pandemic, Italian police waiting at the platform appear to only request Covid-19 PCR tests from non-White travellers. These apparent behaviours would only serve to perpetuate the same aforementioned racial discrimination against people on the move, under the guise of public health concerns.¹¹²

Such practices can be interpreted not only as a reinforcement of internal border controls in the Schengen area but also as an attempt by one member state (France) to 'externalise,' or outsource, its border controls and asylum responsibilities onto another member state (Italy), a phenomenon which has been referred to as 'internal externalisation' of asylum responsibilities within the EU.¹¹³



Photo credit: Progetto 20K

¹⁰² The Chambéry Agreement was signed in 1997 and established the cooperation between French and Italian police. The Mixed Committee and the Employment Regulations signed by the Chiefs of Police of the Province of Imperia and the Department of Alpes-Maritimes, also regulate French-Italian cooperation. These last two agreements refer to the operational agreement signed at a national and a regional level by the correspondent police chiefs. See Agreement Document in [Italian](#) or in [French](#).

¹⁰³ Polizia di Stato I zona polizia di frontiera, Settore Ventimiglia, [Police data](#), 4 November 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione, progetto Medea Frontiere Interne e Balcani.

¹⁰⁵ Progetto 20K, [Report](#), 22 December 2020, Report, 14 April 2021.

¹⁰⁶ As claimed by the mayor of Ventimiglia and the Undersecretary for Defense in Riviera 24, Article, Sottosegretario Difesa a Ventimiglia, «Per migranti rete accoglienza». Disponibilità da Pigna e Bordighera, 12 April 2021.

¹⁰⁷ RRE & Progetto 20K, [Fact sheet](#), Key updates and trends at the French-Italian border, April & May 2021, June 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Field observation by Progetto 20K at the train station of Ventimiglia in April and March 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Field observation by Progetto 20K at the train station of Ventimiglia from December 2020 to May 2021.

¹¹⁰ Field observation by Progetto 20K at the train station of Ventimiglia in April and May 2021.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² As recounted by grassroots groups Keshia Niya and Progetto 20K, based on first-hand observations in December 2020-April 2021. Refugee Rights Europe has not been able to verify these accounts, and no official state response has been sought on this matter.

¹¹³ See the work of Barbero and Donadio, [Article](#), The internal externalisation of borders for migration control in the EU, September 2019.

CONCLUSION

As this report showcased, the acute impact of the pandemic has been felt across key areas by people on the move, including access to adequate shelter, medical care, protection, and the treatment and rights at borders. However, it has been felt particularly acutely by vulnerable individuals and groups such as women and unaccompanied minors.

Vital civil society services were significantly diminished throughout various episodes of the pandemic, including medical services for people on the move, while the medical system at large was difficult to access, even in emergencies, and/or provided insufficient medical assistance. Existing practices, such as pushbacks and detention at the border, continue to be carried out with the additional health risks posed during the pandemic and without corresponding safeguards.

No official provision of shelter has been erected since the closing of Campo Roya, and informal settlements with dire living conditions are not safe from evictions despite calls from the UN to stop evictions during the pandemic. As organisations lack shelter and safe spaces, women and children, many of whom have already survived abuse along their journeys to Italy, are frequently exposed to violence and are at exponential risk of sexual abuse and trafficking.

A new French-Italian police agreement signed in December 2020, which focuses on preventing border crossings by increasing controls on the Italian territory, has resulted in what could be described as the militarisation of train stations and public spaces in Ventimiglia. This has consequently reinforced the well-established racial profiling practices inherent in the 'checks and controls' carried out by mixed French-Italian policing teams.

As such, it is evident that while the pandemic presented a crucial opportunity to acknowledge the need for, and increase access to, shelter, healthcare and protection for people on the move, it merely exacerbated a deplorable situation further.

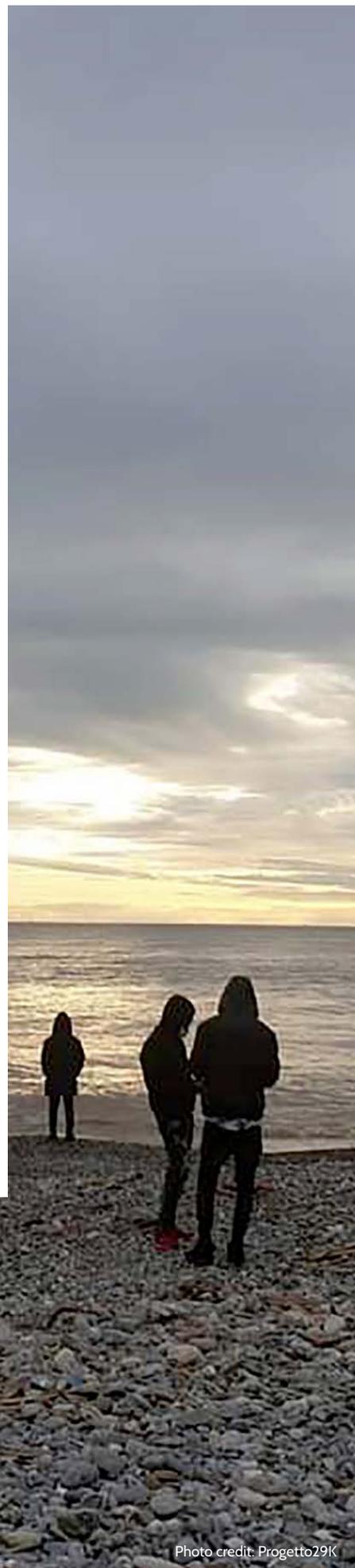


Photo credit: Progetto29K

