
Border Surveillance Report

2024



Figure 1. Panoramic view of Menton, on the border between France and Italy. Photograph by Enrico Pinto



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Introduction

Project Overview

The Franco-Italian border, a gateway to Europe, has become a focal point of the migration crisis. Being located on the Mediterranean coast, this border crossing has witnessed a significant influx of migrants and asylum seekers attempting to enter France from Italy. People on the move face challenges in navigating legal pathways for migration, with many being forced to resort to perilous journeys across the sea and land. This report aims at empowering readers to better understand the current humanitarian crisis at the Franco-Italian border through an in-depth analysis and a human-centered approach. Each part refers to a topic chosen by one of our researchers to highlight different dimensions of migrants' experiences at the Franco-Italian border. At SPRH, we believe that by informing our attitudes toward the border crisis, we can collectively work towards a more compassionate and effective response to the ongoing political climate with regards to migration.

Solidarity Program for Refugee Help: Who We Are and What We Do

Solidarity Program for Refugee Help (SPRH) Menton is a student-led association at the Menton campus of Sciences Po that seeks to promote the rights of people on the move across the Mediterranean, focusing on those at the Franco-Italian border. Our work is focused on four areas: border surveillance, food distribution, research, and awareness. Our members do weekly actions of border permanence to collect testimonies, register the number of push-backs, and provide some basic information, food, and drinks for people on the move who are denied an entrance to France. At the core of our work is the belief that all people should be treated with respect and dignity, regardless of origin, ethnicity, or cultural background. With the rights of people on the move being systemically threatened at the Franco-Italian border and in the larger routes of Mediterranean migration, we stand to promote the accountability of those actors who disrespect both legal and human rights principles at the border.

Report Methodology

This report contains data and information collected from September 2023 to April 2024. Every weekend, volunteers have shifts from 8:00 a.m. until 7:30 p.m. at the Franco-Italian border. They register their border observations, which may be processed as quantitative or qualitative data. The data collected includes the number of people pushed back to Italy, their estimated ages, and countries of origin, if possible. When appropriate, people are asked if they would like to share their experiences and background. All are informed of the purposes of our report and the reach it will potentially have. People respond either by consenting to being interviewed, interviewing on the condition of anonymity, or declining to be interviewed. Out of respect for, and to ensure the safety of our volunteers and the people interviewed, all testimonies are anonymized to the best of our ability.

This report results from the treatment of this data, and from its analysis through specific research topics. These were chosen based on what we considered to be relevant and covered the gaps of in-depth research on the Franco-Italian border, and what we thought would be suitable to the type of data collected during the academic year 2023-2024. Our team examined topics ranging from the demographic background of people on the move at the Franco-Italian border from issues covering the application of diverse rights, be them the right to healthcare, work, or the rights of minors in situations of migration and/or asylum request. When applicable, our researchers looked into Italian, French, and European Union's migration law to analyze their findings through a legal framework. The main aims of this report are as follows: to shed light into the experiences of people on the move at the Franco-Italian border and to raise awareness about these among the general public; to complement and add to existing research on migratory journeys at this border; and to develop a human-centered research that identifies how institutional patterns at the Franco-Italian border shape the experiences of those who, often for weeks or years, attempts to cross it. This report covers, firstly, research on migrants' background, followed by an analysis of the specificities of the Franco-Italian border dynamics and, finally, an investigation minors' and women's rights, as well as the right to healthcare, at the border.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Historical Context

France and Italy share a 488-kilometer border. The Schengen Agreement, signed in 1985 and implemented in 1995, led to the gradual abolition of border controls between the two countries, facilitating greater mobility and migration within this area. In recent decades, the Franco-Italian border has continued to experience migration flows driven by various factors, including labor market dynamics, political unrest, and humanitarian crises. Challenges such as irregular migration, asylum seekers, and border security have also been prominent in the region's migration discourse.



Figure 2. Night view of city lights along the France–Italy border, separated by the southwestern end of the Alps (2010). Photograph by NASA Goddard Space Flight Center via Flickr.

Historical Context

For many people on the move, Italy serves as a corridor to reach other European countries rather than as a final destination. Italy's northern borders thus constitute an important site of passage to countries like France, with one of the main points of entry being Ventimiglia, separated by approximately 10 kilometers from its French neighbor, Menton. These towns are reached after a long migratory journey, which may last months or years and will often continue for a significant time. The Franco-Italian border, from Mont-Blanc to Menton, is very difficult to cross due to its exclusively mountainous region, and only a few valleys provide routes across the border. As a result, tunnels are used to travel and transport goods, but people attempting to cross the border on foot face dangerous and fatal conditions. As of February 2023, over 40 deaths had been recorded along the French-Italian border by various organizations (Kaval, 2023).

Beginning in 2015, Ventimiglia (the last municipality in Italy before France) experienced an influx of migrants hoping to cross into France (Kaval, 2023). Initially, this led to the establishment of an informal camp to shelter those in transit. However, the camp was dismantled in the summer (DW, 2015). Since the suspension of the Schengen Agreement due to alleged security threats, the Franco-Italian border has undergone continuous fortification and an increased police presence.

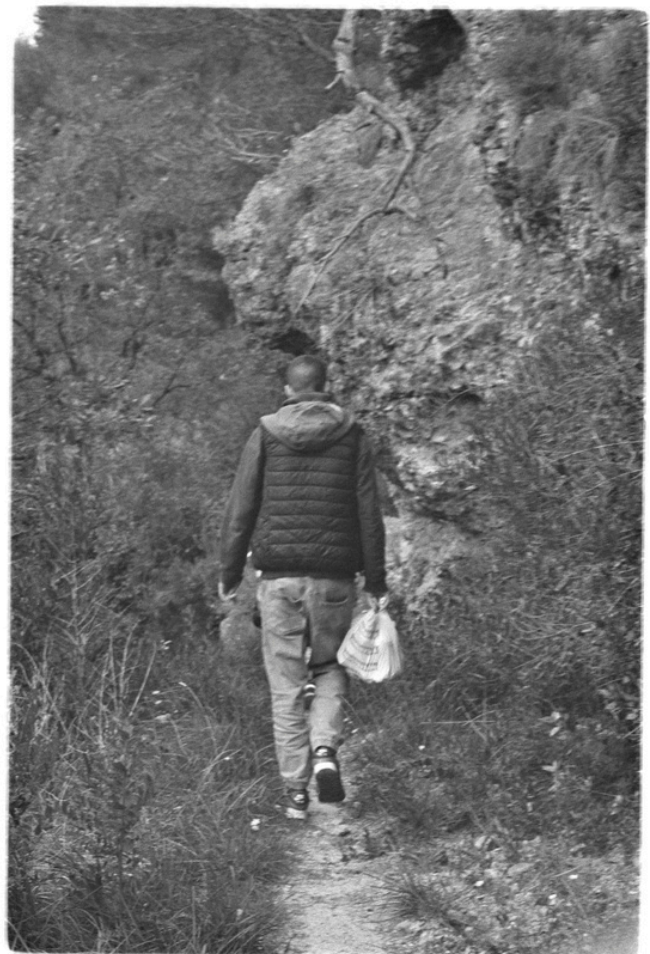


Figure 3. Man walking on a mountain path at the Franco-Italian border. Photograph by Enrico Pinto.

Historical Context



Figure 4. “NoBorders” improvised refugee camp (August 2015). Photograph by Jaime Jover via Flickr.

In July 2016, an official reception center, Camp Roja, was established in Ventimiglia to be administered by the Red Cross. At the height of the migrant crisis, Camp Roja housed approximately 800 people. However, in 2020, Camp Roja was shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving its residents without shelter (ANSA, 2020). No official camp in Ventimiglia has existed since then, forcing migrants to sleep in informal settlements by the river and under the bridge (MSF, 2023). In 2022, it was announced that a new permanent hosting center would open in Mortola (on the outskirts of Ventimiglia) to shelter migrants (Shabani, 2022). However, after the far-right Lega per Salvini Premier (Lega) won the municipal elections on May 28th, 2023, this seems extremely unlikely.

Sources:

ANSA. “Migrant reception camp in Ventimiglia closes.” InfoMigrants, 3 August 2020, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/26391/migrant-reception-camp-in-ventimiglia-closes>.

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Shabani, Arberie. “Italy Opens Permanent Hosting Centre for Immigrants Near French Border.” Schengen News, 27 May 2022, <https://schengen.news/italy-opens-permanent-hosting-centre-for-immigrants-near-french-border/>.

BORDER DATA

Demographic Landscape

According to the 2023 UNHCR reports, new arrivals to Italy originated mostly from Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and Tunisia. Land arrivals increased by 305% compared to the same period in 2022. A trend reversal occurred in the figures relating to the countries of embarkation: from January to March 2023, 58% of the embarkations crossing the Mediterranean towards Italy departed from Tunisia, 39% from Libya, and 3% from Türkiye (UNHCR, 2023). However, one year before that, Libya represented the point of departure of 62% of sea crossings, succeeded by Tunisia (22%) and Türkiye (15%) (Ibid.). This trend agrees with that which is explained by migration scholar for the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights Romdhane Ben Amur: "There has been a rise in migrants coming (to Italy) by land through Algeria, due to the leniency of the Algerian police. And routes through the Canary Islands and the Balkans been closed off, so many migrants shifted to Tunisia" (González, 2023).

From January to September 2023, the UNHCR reported 133,655 sea arrivals to Italy and from January to August, there were 7,642 land arrivals (UNHCR, 2023). By land, the top three countries of departure were Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan (Ibid.). Historically, Libya has been the main point of sea departures toward Italy. The UNHCR identified the explanation of this phenomenon in the increasing number of Sub-Saharan nationals traveling along this route, which, until mid-2022, was utilized mainly by Tunisians. Tunisia had become home to several Sub-Saharan workers in the last years, whose living conditions became more precarious and insecure with the economic instability hitting the country after the war in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic and with President Kais Saied's February 2023 declarations antagonizing and securitizing Sub-Saharan workers in Tunisia (ibid.). Moreover, the country's "visa-free" policies applicable to a significant part of West Africa contributed to the increase in sea departures from the country.

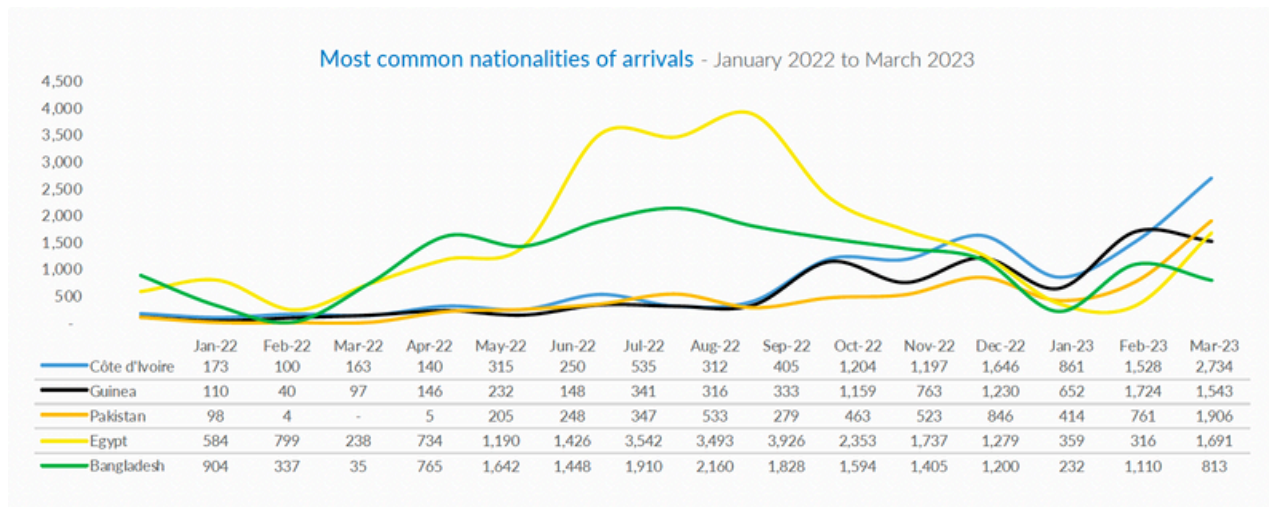
Sources:

González, Ricard. 2023. "Tunisia overtakes Libya as the top migrant launch point for Europe." El País (Tunis), August 11, 2023. <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-08-11/tunisia-overtakes-libya-as-the-top-migrant-launch-point-for-europe.html>.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard – March 2023. March 2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/100615>.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 2023. Italy: Bi-Annual Fact Sheet, January–September 2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/104652>.

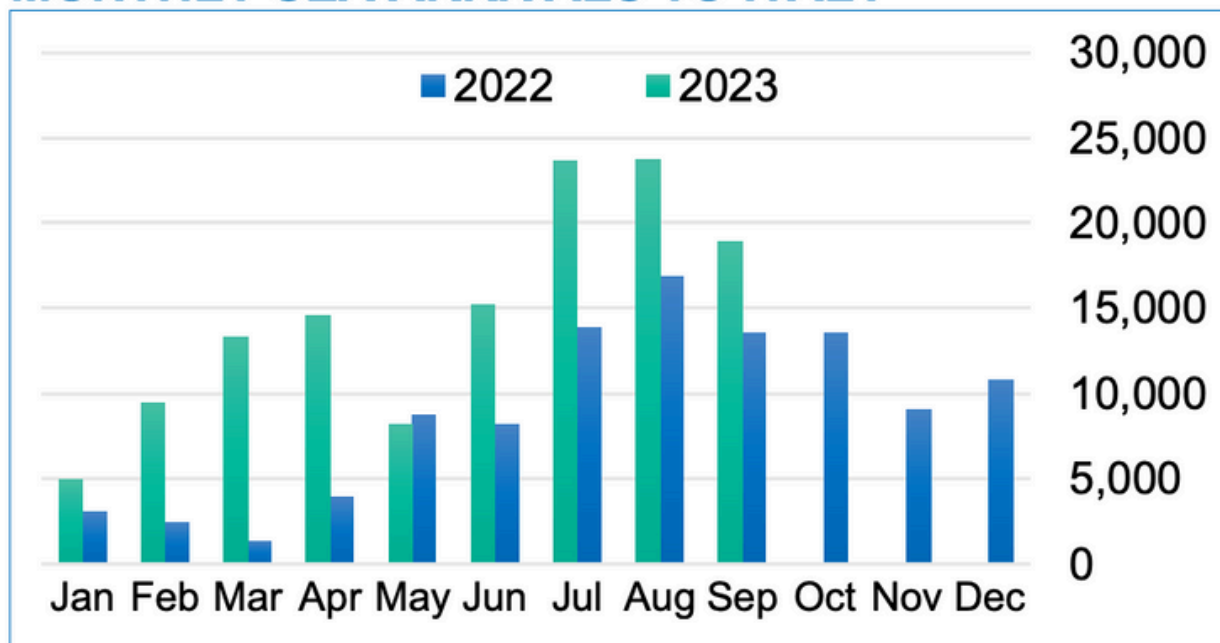
Most Common Nationalities



Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Sea Arrivals Dashboard: March 2023. [UNCHR \(March 2023\)](#).

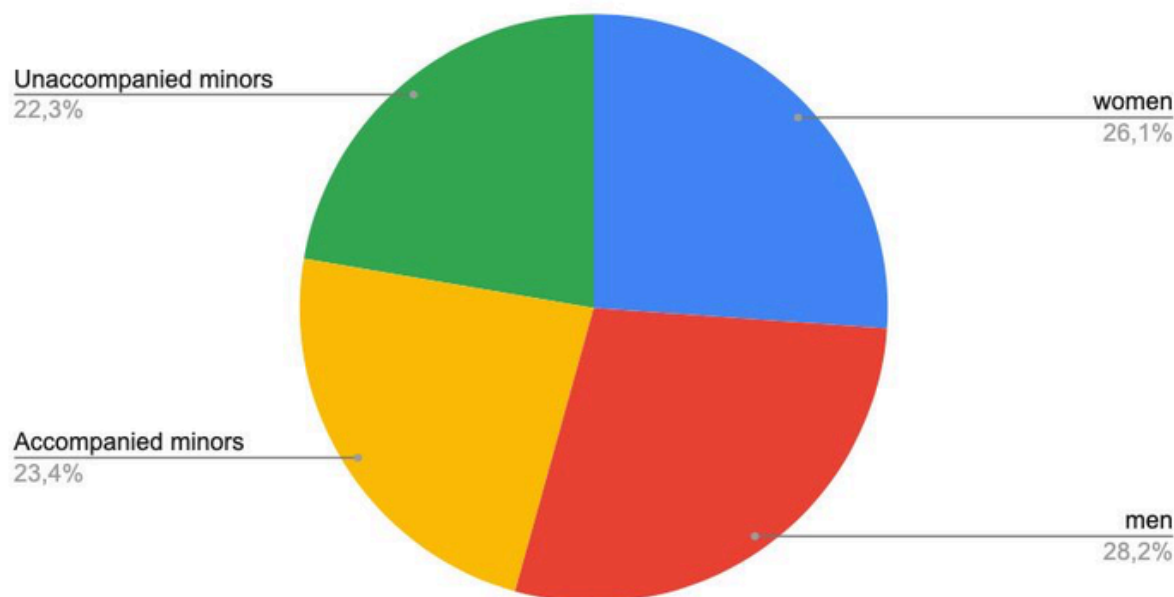
Monthly Sea Arrivals

MONTHLY SEA ARRIVALS TO ITALY



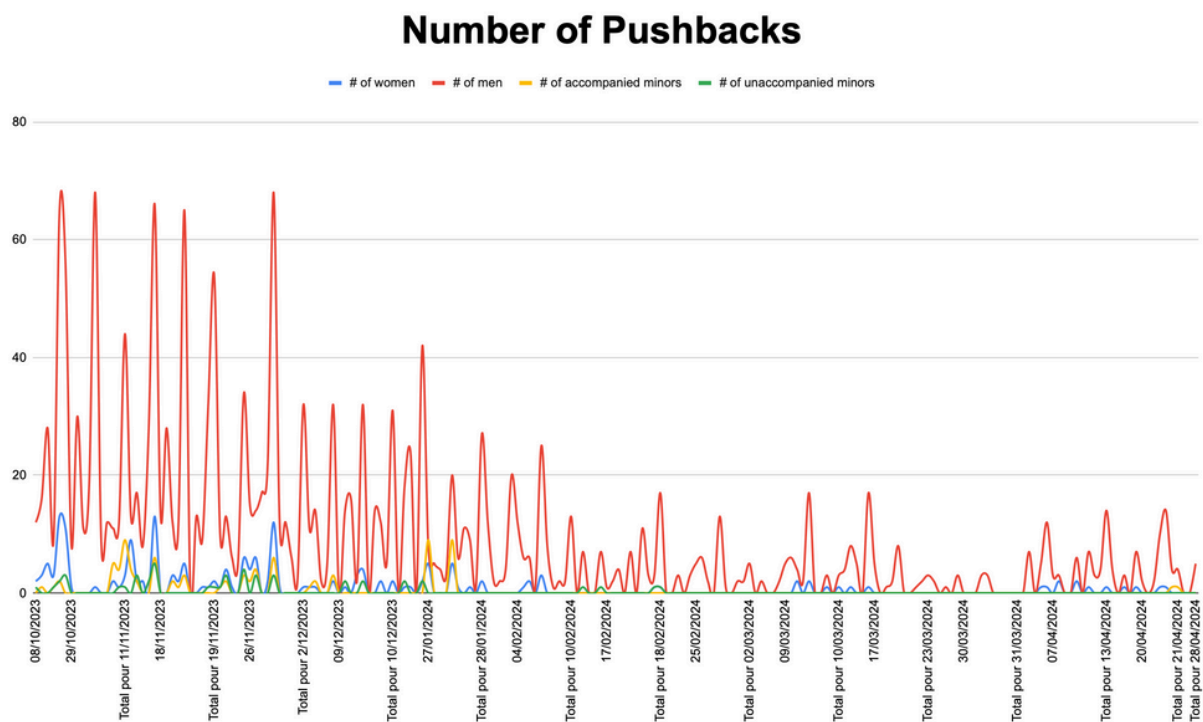
Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Sea Arrivals Dashboard: March 2023. [UNCHR \(March 2023\)](#).

People Pushed Back



Source: Solidarity Program for Refugee Help (October 2023 - April 2024)

Number of Push Backs



Source: Solidarity Program for Refugee Help (October 2023 - April 2024)

Language

The (Minority) Language & Dialect Question

General Notes regarding the testimonies collected during the academic year 2023-2024:

- No major barriers to communication between the researchers and migrants were observed, suggesting that many migrants were able to communicate in French, English, or Arabic. There are some cases, however, where it is also noted that migrants were accompanied by translators. Some knowledge of Italian is noted among migrants, although rare.
- Migrants' French and English abilities are unsurprising considering the African origin of many of these migrants. We can only infer their language capabilities from their country or region of origin, an outline of which is given in the following table, which mentions the 30 most frequently reported origins by the migrants (and thus do not reflect the views of SPRH).
- For clarity, the term 'minority language' is chosen as the appropriate definition here, even if it is a flawed concept. On a micro level, in many regions within these countries, languages or dialects considered 'minority' would indeed be 'majority languages'. The term is chosen to reflect languages spoken by minority groups, or groups minoritised by the dominance of majority languages.

Origin (number of days mentioned in testimonies)	Majority language situation	Minority language situation
Morocco (24)	Modern Standard Arabic and Standard Moroccan Berber are the official languages; French is widely used (36%). English is spoken by 14% of the population.	Berber minority languages (Tarifit, Tachelhit, Central Atlas Tamazight) are spoken by 26% of the population.
Tunisia (23)	Arabic is the official language; French is recognised and widely used.	Judeo-Tunisian Arabic, Jerba Berber, Matmata Berber, and Domari notable.
Guinea (13)	French is the official language.	Fula, Maninka, Susu, Kissi, Kpelle, and Loma are recognised as national languages.
Sudan (11)	Arabic and English are the official languages.	Beja, Nubian, Fur are recognised regional languages, among other minority tongues.

Egypt (9)	Standard Arabic is the official language. Around 40% speak English; around 3% speak French.	Egyptian Arabic as lingua franca. Sa'idi Arabic is a widely-spoken minority dialect, among numerous others.
Syria (8)	Arabic is the official language.	Levantine Arabic and Mesopotamian Arabic are vernaculars. Numerous minority languages and dialects including Najdi Arabic.
Nigeria (8)	English is the official language.	Over 500 native languages recorded.
Algeria (8)	Arabic and Tamazight are official languages. French is spoken by a majority of the population.	Many regional languages, Arabic dialects, and Berber languages are unrecognised.
Bangladesh (6)	Bengali is the official and most widely spoken language.	Around 40 recorded indigenous living languages.

Pakistan (5)	Urdu is the national language; English is used for official purposes.	Over 70 languages are spoken as first languages.
Eritrea (5)	Tigrinya, Arabic, and English are working languages.	Many Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan languages and dialects are spoken.
Gambia (5)	English is the official language, despite only being spoken by a small minority.	Mandinka is spoken as a first language by 38% of the population. Pulaar, Wolof are also widely spoken, among others.
Afghanistan (4)	Pashto and Dari (Persian) are the official languages. Around 5% speak English.	Over 40 distinct languages.
Ethiopia (4)	Amharic the most populous by number of total speakers, Oromo most populous by number of native speakers. English is the most widely spoken foreign language.	Around 100 distinct languages.

Côte d'Ivoire (4)	French is the official language, spoken by around 36% of the population.	Around 70 languages are currently spoken.
Romania (3)	Romanian is the official language, spoken by over 90%.	30 living languages, 5 of which are indigenous.
Iran (3)	Persian is the official language.	Various languages spoken by minority groups.
Mali (3)	French is the working language, spoken by around 20% of the population.	More than 80 languages are spoken.
Senegal (2)	French is the official language.	36 languages recorded, Wolof being the most widely spoken.
Cameroon (2)	Official languages are English (spoken by around 40% of the population) and French.	Lingua franca is Cameroon Pidgin English. Around 250 recorded indigenous languages.
Peru (2)	Spanish, Quechua, and Aymara are the official languages.	An estimated 50 different languages.
Iraq (2)	Arabic and Kurdish are the official languages.	Numerous minority languages.

Burkina Faso (2)	Mooré, Bissa, Dyula, and Fula are official languages. French is a working language, spoken by around 22.8% of the population.	An estimated 70 languages are spoken, of which around 66 are indigenous.
Turkey (2)	Turkish is the official language.	Armenian, Bulgarian, Greek, and Hebrew are recognised, with many other minority languages.
Papua New Guinea (1)	English is the most widely spoken language.	More than 800 recorded indigenous languages. The most linguistically-diverse country in the world.
Ghana (1)	English is the official language; eleven further languages have the status of government-sponsored languages.	More than 70 ethnic groups, most, if not all, of which have a distinct language.

Comparability with other research:

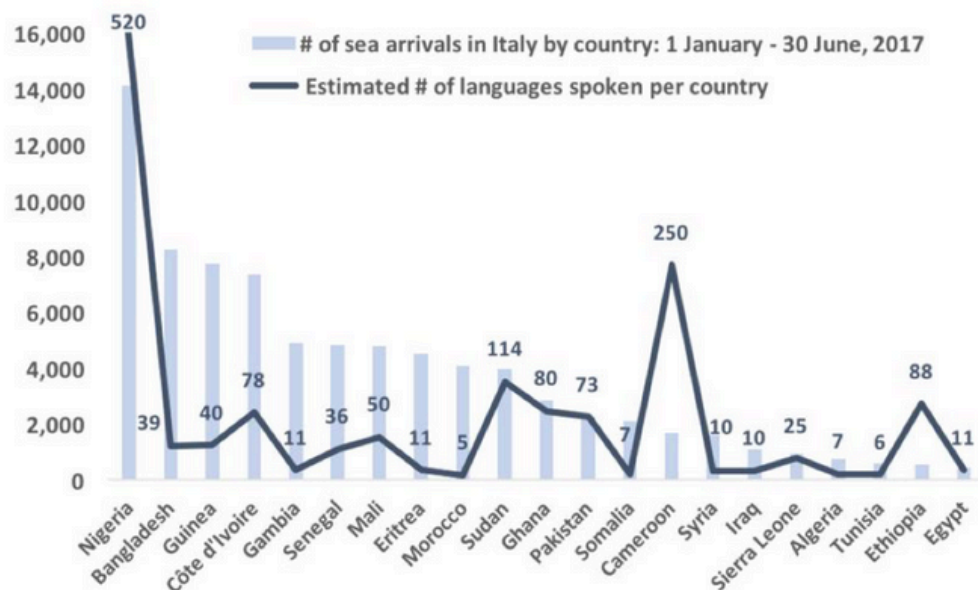
Other research conducted in the field, such as that by Translators without Borders, also has to rely on countries of origin as a proxy for linguistic capabilities. Their 2017 report on Sicily, Italy, and Chios, Greece, reflects a similar general pattern in terms of origins (Translators Without Borders, 2017).

Source:

Translators Without Borders. 2017. "Putting Language on the Map in the European Refugee Response." (September). https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Putting-language-on-the-map.pdf?utm_

We also observe that there are unique aspects and particularities, like the migratory flow towards the Franco-Italian border.

Source: Translators without Borders. (2017, September). Most common countries of origin of sea arrivals in Italy from 1 January to 30 June 2017, and estimated number of languages spoken in each country. Translators Without Borders.



Legal Framework:

Newly arrived immigrants are required to sign an Integration Agreement, committing to attaining at least A2 proficiency in French (Ministère De L'Intérieur, 2023) or Italian (Ministero Dell'Intero, 2012) within two years.

Conclusion:

Countries of origin are rarely a reliable indicator of the languages spoken, yet we can infer from the migrants' communicative abilities that they have acquired globally widely-spoken languages such as French and English. However, the data is highly inconclusive as to the general linguistic portfolio of these migrants. Given the linguistically diverse nature of their origins, it would be difficult to imagine a scenario where migrants do not speak languages that are considered minority languages. It is clear that more granular research is required to investigate the situation of such languages, and the impact of migratory flows on the livelihood of minority languages, for the individuals themselves as well as more generally.

Sources:

Ministère De L'Intérieur. 2023. "Le parcours linguistique au-delà du CIR / Au-delà du contrat d'intégration républicaine (CIR) / Le parcours personnalisé d'intégration républicaine / Intégration et Accès à la nationalité - Direction générale des étrangers en France - Ministère de l'Intéri." Immigration.interieur.gouv.fr. <https://www.immigration.interieur.gouv.fr/Integration-et-Acces-a-la-nationalite/Le-parcours-personnalise-d-integration-republicaine/Au-dela-du-contrat-d-integration-republicaine-CIR/Le-parcours-linguistique-au-dela-du-CIR>.
Ministero Dell'Intero. 2012. "Accordo di integrazione per lo straniero che richiede il permesso di soggiorno." Ministero dell'Interno. <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/temi/immigrazione-e-asilo/modalita-dingresso/accordo-integrazione-straniero-richiede-permesso-soggiorno>.

The Language Question: Interpretation Services at the Border

Transnational borders are characterised by the heavy bureaucratization of movements across them. While the complex immigration and customs systems require this for logistical and legal reasons, the bureaucratization of migration ultimately affects the experience of the people on the move (Gren et al., 2024). Legal documentation and information within the immigration process propose a multilayered challenge entailing questions of legal literacy, language and translation, administrative shortcomings and consequent psychological distress. Bureaucracies may also reduce the experience of migration into documentation, diminishing the dignity and needs of migrants and giving rise to their dehumanization (Ibid.). Therefore, bureaucratization poses a threat to migrants' rights in the context of transnational borders.

The bureaucratization of migration relates to the migration question all over the world, including at the Franco-Italian border. According to testimonies collected, the issue of bureaucratization is manifested in various forms, including the diversity of documentation migrants either possess or lack, misunderstandings on documentation due to contradictory information or language and administrative shortcomings by authorities.

Given the transnational nature of the bureaucratization issue, referring to European Union law is considered most appropriate. This report will refer to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Regulation (EU) 2016/679) and to the Asylum Procedure Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2016/679). The GDPR stipulates the rights of persons to access their personal data and regulates its processing, while the Asylum Procedure Regulation states the rights of migrants, for instance in relation to written documents in the asylum seeking process. Additionally, the 2013 Directive on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (Directive 2013/32/EU) will be referred to as it specifies migrants' rights to translation and interpretation in the process of seeking protection.

In order to grasp the impacts of bureaucratization on people on the move, this text will explore it through the notion of bureaucratic violence. Opposed to a static and one-dimensional understanding of the concept of bureaucracy, bureaucratic violence highlights the multiple forms in which migrants experience violence, illustrating that harmful abuses of migrants are not always physical. Instead, bureaucracies create legal, linguistic, administrative and psychological barriers that prevent migrants from experiencing their full rights (Gren et al., 2024).

This report aims, therefore, at examining the bureaucratization of migration on the Franco-Italian border. It will serve this purpose by drawing from SPRH testimonies on phenomena such as legal literacy, language, administrative abuses and psychological distress. Discussing the testimonies in accordance with the notion of bureaucratic violence, the text will assess the compatibility of everyday bureaucratic practices with European legal frameworks.

Testimonies

A number of Solidarity Program for Refugee Help testimonies illustrate the phenomenon of bureaucratization in migration and its consequences on the experience of people on the move. The testimonies include accounts on the lack of understanding of documentation, insufficient provision of appropriate documents by the police, and the wrongful rejection of documentation and other administrative abuses by the police.

An exemplary instance of the multifaceted consequences of bureaucratization occurred on March 8th, 2025, when an SPRH testimony elaborated on the situation of a Sierra Leonean migrant in Ventimiglia: "He then requested asylum to the French police, but they gave him no documents related to an asylum request. When he was turned back, he was given documents he did not understand. He asked them what they entailed but received no explanation, and was just told to sign them". The situation illustrates how interactions with the police go undocumented, leaving migrants with no proof of any official decisions taken on their status. It also highlights how the highly bureaucratic system can be complex to understand, whether it is related to, for example, language or legal literacy.

The failure of the police to provide any documentation of the rejection to enter France was also noted in a February 9th 2025 testimony: "No document or copy of the police rejection documents was given by French and Italian police to any of the four men we managed to talk with", referring to migrants from Gambia, Mali, Senegal and Côte D'Ivoire. The frequent failure to provide documentation is indicative of a pattern.

The barriers to understanding documentation as well as contradictory statements from the police were addressed again in a testimony on February 16th 2025. A Gambian man was given papers by the police "saying he had to go to Imperia, however he (had) arrived first in Spain and he is trying to legalise his situation there so he is confused. He says the police did not help with any translation, he does not speak French or Italian". The consequences of limited linguistic understanding and contradictory statements by the police are not limited to the bureaucratic consequences. Given the challenging conditions of migration, additional confusion may contribute to increased psychological distress as a form of bureaucratic violence.

Legal interpretation

The different ways in which the bureaucratization of migration complicates migrants' experience in the Franco-Italian border can be interpreted to contradict European law. Legal instruments such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Regulation (EU) 2016/679) and the Asylum Procedure Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2016/679) stipulate rights and obligations related to the transparency of data processing and more specifically those related to migration and asylum seeking processes. The 2013 Directive on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (Directive 2013/32/EU) addresses migrants' rights to translation, which is also considered significant in relation to the question of bureaucratization of migration.

The testimonies discussed above reveal certain issues related to the documents and information provided by the authorities to migrants on the Franco-Italian border. According to Article 15 of the GDPR, "the data subject shall have the right to obtain from the controller confirmation as to whether or not personal data concerning him or her are being processed". Additionally "where that is the case", the subject has the right to obtain "access to the personal data".

Similarly, Recital 39 of the Asylum Procedure Regulation stipulates that “in order to guarantee the rights of the applicant (for international protection), a decision concerning his or her application should be given in writing. Where the decision does not grant international protection, the applicant should be given reasons in fact and in law, information on the consequences of the decision and the modalities for challenging it”. Violations of these provisions have potentially occurred in instances where authorities have failed to provide information or documents on the processing of migrants’ asylum cases or any recorded information at the border, as illustrated in the March 8th and February 9th testimonies cited above. In these cases, the police failed to provide documents related to an asylum request and to rejections of entry. Therefore, the administrative practices in regards to providing accurate documents on the Franco-Italian border entail shortcomings that can be interpreted as violations of the rights of migrants under European law.

The testimonies also illustrate the challenges migrants face in understanding documentation. According to Recital 31 of the Asylum Procedure Regulation applicants should receive information “of his or her rights and obligations... in a language that he or she understands or is reasonably supposed to understand, in writing and if necessary orally”. A potential violation of the Recital can be identified in the testimonies due to both the documentation and a language barrier. The testimony from March 8th illustrates the importance of the right to an oral explanation of the situation as the documentation was considered confusing. The February 16th testimony in turn demonstrates the need for linguistic clarity. It should be noted that this right is also stipulated in the 2013 Directive of the European Union on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection, in which Article 8 states that “detention facilities and (border) crossing points, Member States shall make arrangements for interpretation to the extent necessary to facilitate access to the asylum procedure”. Therefore, the administrative practices at the Franco-Italian border can be considered insufficient under European law in providing migrants with a clear understanding of documents related to the process.

Overall, the Franco-Italian border sees potential violations of the legal rights of migrants when it comes to documentation.

Conclusion

The practices on the Franco-Italian border can be seen to constitute potential violations of European law in relation to the rights of migrants to transparent information of the asylum and immigration processes. These violations relate to the shortcomings in the provision of documents and of sufficient services, such as translation and oral explanation, to facilitate migrants' understanding of the documents. It should be noted that while the legal interpretation of the testimonies reveals certain shortcomings under European law, non-legal aspects should also be considered. Through an understanding of the notion of bureaucratic violence (Gren et al. 2024), the complexities of navigating the bureaucratic system may contribute to psychological distress related to the precarious situation of migrants and asylum seekers. Additionally, it can be questioned whether the bureaucratic nature of migration processes may have a dehumanizing effect on people on the move.

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European Union. 2016. Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the Protection of Natural Persons with Regard to the Processing of Personal Data and on the Free Movement of Such Data, and Repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation). Official Journal of the European Union L 119, May 4, 2016: 1–88. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32016R0679>.

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Gren, Nina, Barzoo Eliassi, Marta Bivand Erdal, and Mette Strømsø. 2024. "The Role of Documentation in the Lives of People Seeking Asylum in Europe." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 40 (1): 32–45. <https://refuge.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/refuge/article/view/41163/37072>.

The Academic Background of People on the Move at the Franco-Italian Border

The Academic Background of People on the Move at the Franco-Italian Border

The question of professional and academic skills of refugees and asylum seekers has often been raised in various European political debates because of economic and integration challenges. This section proposes a brief analysis of the professional experience, educational level, and relationship to work of refugees arriving in Europe.

Previous career and willingness to work

We aim to analyzing data on the past professional careers and current willingness to work of refugees arriving in Europe. We will focus on data collected at the Franco-Italian border by Solidarity Program for Refugee Help Menton during the academic year 2023/2024.

The testimonies dealing with the question of work show, first and foremost, a motivation to look for a job to live a decent life. Among these testimonies, one dating from November 2023, regarding a Moroccan migrant who arrived in Europe three years ago, illustrates this observation perfectly. He worked for a year in Italy, first in Milan and then in Rome, where he was paid very little for working sometimes more than 15 hours a day. He wanted to come to France to find a better-paid job and to improve his living conditions.

A testimony dated October 15, 2023, concerns a woman from Cameroon who had four children back home and wanted to travel to Marseille. In her own words : "I'll clean floors, I'll do anything in France".

Asylum seekers, upon their arrival in Europe and during their migratory journey, very often take up extremely arduous, poorly paid, commonly described as 'thankless work'. It also happens that a person who is not yet a migrant already has a job in the country of origin, which he or she will be able to do in the host country at the end of the migration journey.

There are many testimonies of Moroccan migrants, for example, who have taken on arduous jobs in Italy, one of which paid €200 a month for 16 hours a day (the average wage in Italy is 1,600 euros a month). The migratory journey does not end in Italy, but in a northern European country, in this case, the Netherlands.

The migratory journey is often long and arduous, as illustrated by the testimony of an Eritrean migrant who passed through Sudan, Libya and Egypt to find work. He then worked in Israel for six years without a work permit before deciding to continue to Europe, aiming to reach the UK. For the person on the move, this constitutes work experience that can help them find a job, even if the working conditions are difficult, degrading or alarming. The professional experience of the younger migrants is sometimes limited to work during their migration journey.

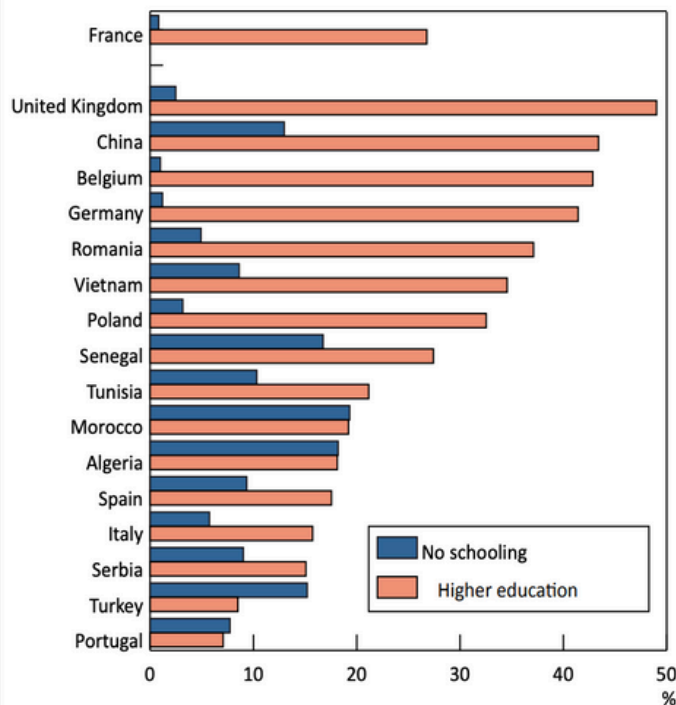
Degree Level and Recognition

When addressing the issue of vocational integration, it is important not to overlook the academic background of migrants arriving in Europe.

We find that migrants have academic qualifications of varying degrees, reflecting a range of skills and qualifications in diverse fields (INSEE, 2023). Here, we are concerned with the level of tertiary qualifications.

In 2017, Mathieu Ichou, a researcher at the National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED), and Anne Goujon, a researcher at the Vienna Institute of Demography, published a study in the journal *Populations et société* entitled "The Education Level of Immigrants: A mixed record, but often higher than the average of their country of origin". It analyses the educational level of the immigrant population in France by nationality (Ichou & Goujon, 2017).

Figure 1. Proportion of individuals with no schooling or with higher education in France, by country of birth (%)



Mathieu Ichou, *Population & Sociétés* n° 541, INED, February 2017.

Source: 2012 population census, INSEE (author's calculations).

Coverage: French-born individuals and immigrants in France aged 18 and above from one of the 16 most frequent countries of origin (which account for nearly three-quarter of all adult immigrants).

Interpretation: Among immigrants aged 18 and above living in France and born in China, 13% never went to school and 43% have completed higher education, versus 1% and 27%, respectively, among French-born individuals.

The figures show that a large proportion of the immigrant population has completed higher education. Some of them (the United Kingdom, China, Belgium, Germany, Romania, Vietnam, Poland, and Senegal) have a higher average level of education than the French population. Even within nationality groups with levels of tertiary education lower than or equal to those in France, there are often more immigrants with tertiary qualifications than without (Tunisia, Spain, Italy, Serbia) or the same proportion (Morocco, Algeria, Portugal). (Ichou, 2017)

Ichou's research also shows that immigrants arriving in Europe have, on average, a higher level of graduation rate than the population in their country. Goujon presents a similar picture: 10% of Syrians who remained in Syria had tertiary qualifications, compared to 27% of Syrians who arrived in Austria.

France has set up the ENIC-NARIC France programme, an offshoot of the Council of Europe and UNESCO's ENIC-NARIC network. It allows refugees and asylum seekers to have their qualifications from their country of origin recognized free of charge and, for those who have not completed their studies, to obtain a certificate of comparability of qualifications or level of study (Dive, 2024). This certificate has no legal value, but it can be used to prove a level of education and/or skills when seeking employment.

Anissa Dziri, Programme Officer in the Diploma Recognition Department, explains that this French programme received 1,493 applications for diploma recognition, mostly from Iraqi and Syrian refugees, out of a total of 19,899 refugees concerned in 2015. Inspired by the European EQPR, UNESCO has launched the UNESCO Qualifications Passport (UQP) at the international level, with the same objectives.

SPRH notes that none of the migrants at the Franco-Italian border in 2023–2024 mentioned the existence and use of these various tools offered, in particular by state institutional and governmental bodies. This lack of information may lead to the conclusion that these tools have not been disseminated or sufficiently communicated to the main stakeholders and beneficiaries, i.e. refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

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Ichou, M., Goujon, A. et L'équipe de l'enquête DiPAS, . (2017) . Le niveau d'instruction des immigrés : varié et souvent plus élevé que dans les pays d'origine. *Population & Sociétés*, N° 541(2), 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.3917/popsoc.541.0001>.

LOCAL POLICIES

Reception Area

On September 18, the Alpes-Maritimes mayor's office — the highest regional authority — discussed the possibility of establishing a temporary reception area for migrants at the border, where they would be held before being denied entry and returned to Italy, with the municipality of Menton. After inaccurate news began to spread, the mayor made it clear that this site would be temporary and not a camp. Yves Juhel, Menton's mayor, stated in a communication release that there would not be any installation of migrant camps in Menton; however, to handle the influx of migrants, a municipal plot next to the border post and police services could be made available if needed (Hélin, 2023).

Alexandra Masson, the deputy from the Rassemblement National for the fourth constituency of the Alpes-Maritimes department, stated in a press release that "The establishment of a new waiting zone at the port of Garavan by the Border Police is [...] inconceivable: migrants must remain at the Saint-Louis border post! It is neither possible nor conceivable that Menton will become a new Calais or a new Sangatte" (Danguin, 2023). The Saint-Louis border post refers to the upper border, whereas the Port of Garavan, by the police station, is the lower border crossing at the Saint-Ludovic bridge.

The prefect also announced that it would requisition the Ibis Budget hotel in Menton to accommodate unaccompanied minors who are migrants. On Friday, September 15th, the prefect informed management at Ibis Budget, and the request was formalized on Monday, September 18. Gérald Darmanin, then French Minister of the Interior, said, "Adults and minors are not treated in the same way, but that has nothing to do with what is happening in Lampedusa" (Pazzi, 2023).

Note: "Préfecture" has been translated to the "prefect's office" and used interchangeably as the "prefect" for short. Here, it refers to the administrative jurisdiction of the Alpes Maritime region.

Sources:

Nicolas Daguin, "Crise migratoire à la frontière franco-italienne : un hôtel réquisitionné à Menton pour accueillir des mineurs isolés," *Le Figaro*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/nice/crise-migratoire-a-la-frontiere-franco-italienne-un-hotel-requisitionne-a-menton-pour-accueillir-des-mineurs-isoles-20230920>.

Lucas Hélin, "«L'idée est bien de les renvoyer» : à Menton, un espace supplémentaire pour faire face à un afflux de migrants de Lampedusa," *Le Figaro*, September 18, 2023, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/nice/lampedusa-la-prefecture-des-alpes-maritimes-reflechit-a-un-terrain-pour-accueillir-des-migrants-20230918>.

Jacqueline Pazzi, "Il n'est 'pas question' de créer un camp de migrants à Menton, Gérald Darmanin réitère son message de fermeté," *FranceInfo*, September 20, 2023, <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/provence-alpes-cote-d-azur/alpes-maritimes/menton/il-n-est-pas-question-de-cree-un-camp-de-migrants-a-menton-gerald-darmanin-reitere-son-message-de-fermete-2842511.html>.

Nevertheless, on September 19th, FranceInfo reported that, according to the mayor's office, the Ibis Budget Hotel had so far "not been used and will only be used in the event of effective need..." (Bernouin and Le Hars, 2023). If the Ibis Budget Hotel were used to house unaccompanied minors, the Alpes-Maritimes administration would cover the costs. In 2023, the department announced that it would spend 28 million euros to care for unaccompanied minors (Ibid.). According to Le Figaro, Matthieu, manager of Ibis Budget, told the newspaper, "It's the first time we've seen that," referring to the requisition (Daguin, 2023). Le Figaro reported that since the start of 2023, the Franco-Italian border has seen a 105 percent increase in minors compared to the same period in 2022 (Ibid.). To determine whether a migrant is a minor, the Bone Density Test can be used.

The Bone Density Test

The bone density test, in the context of dependent status applications, refers to the use of radiological testing to assess the skeletal development of an individual, to determine whether an applicant qualifies for the derivative status of a child under the age of 18. This test is considered to be an unreliable method for age determination by many NGOs, medical institutions such as the French Academy of Medicine, and policy-making guidelines (ECRE, 2019). However, the French Constitutional Court upheld its legality in a 2019 decision, receiving support from various deputy leaders such as RN parliamentarian, Alexandra Masson.

Notably, the UN Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families stated: "states should refrain from using medical methods based on, inter alia, bone and dental exam analysis, which may be inaccurate, with wide margins of error, and can also be traumatic and lead to unnecessary legal processes" (Quan & Skelton, 2025).

Sources:

Bernouin, Michel, and Anne Le Hars. 2023. "5 questions sur l'accueil de jeunes migrants dans un hôtel réquisitionné à Menton." FranceInfo, Septembre 19, 2023. <https://france3-regions.franceinfo.fr/provence-alpes-cote-d-azur/alpes-maritimes/menton/5-questions-sur-l-accueil-de-jeunes-migrants-dans-un-hotel-requisitionne-a-menton-2841896.html>.

European Council on Refugees and Exiles, "France: Bone Tests to Determine Migrant Age Ruled Constitutional: a 'Disgraceful' Decision according to NGOs," March 29, 2019, <https://ecre.org/france-bone-tests-to-determine-migrant-age-ruled-constitutional-a-disgraceful-decision-according-to-ngos/>.

Quan, Gertrude Mafoa, and Ann Skelton. 2025. "Age Determination of Unaccompanied Migrant Children: An Appraisal of the Jurisprudence of the Committee on the Rights of the Child." *Nordic Journal of Human Rights* 43 (1): 59–81. doi:10.1080/18918131.2025.2458401.

By codifying article 338 of the Civil Code (which states that a minor is an individual who has not reached the age of 18), the Council of Europe declared that, despite this acknowledgement, these tests are permitted "in the absence of a valid identification document and when the alleged age of an individual is not plausible, ..., at the discretion of the administration". Alexandra Masson declared in a Facebook post published on June 6, 2023 that "any refusal of this examination leads to a presumption of majority," meaning that if an individual refuses to be examined, they will be declared as adults — over 18. As the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) has officially stated, "being misidentified as an adult rather than a child when seeking international protection can have considerable implications on the level of rights and protections afforded to them by a receiving state," including limiting their access to legal counsel or even risking detention (ECRE, 2019).

Masson contends that this will solve departmental budget insufficiency, particularly in regions affected by the crisis, as is the case in Menton. This demonstrates a serious political will with a tangible effect. In April 2023, the Department of Alpes-Maritimes and the prefect's office requisitioned the Careï gymnasium in Menton to accommodate around a hundred unaccompanied minors. As a parliamentarian, Masson accessed the gymnasium. She stated "Menton is not meant to become the new Calais." (Daguin & Hélin, 2023)

The effects of local politics are not exclusive to a single party. On September 21st, 2023, Menton's Mayor, Yves Juhel, candidate from the liberal-conservative party Les Républicains, refused to build a migrant camp in the town to host unaccompanied minors affirming that "there is no migrant camp in Menton, and there will not be one. Nor will there be a detention center, or any place where these people would be gathered. That is very clear, definite, and precise, there will be none on the city's territory." (France 3 Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, 2023). Although a requisition plan regarding the Ibis Budget hotel had been proposed, this option is not being considered, according to the mayor. The issue of housing for unaccompanied minor migrants therefore remains unresolved.



Figure 5. Checkpoint at French-Italian Border (May 2008). Photograph by bobbled via Flickr.

Sources:

BFMTV, "Lampedusa: Un centre pour migrants va être installé à Menton sur réquisition de la préfecture," September 18, 2023, https://www.bfmtv.com/cote-d-azur/lampedusa-un-centre-pour-migrants-va-etre-installe-a-menton-sur-requisition-de-la-prefecture_AN-202309180432.html.

Alexandra Masson, "PROPOSITION DE LOI" Facebook, June 6, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/AlexandraMasson06/posts/-proposition-de-loi-depose-une-proposition-de-loi-pour-renforcer-le-contrôle-d/588504803422627/>

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Colette Yamashita Holcomb, Menton Times, October 2023, "Menton Grants Land for Policing Migrants," <https://www.mentontimes.com/news/menton-grants-land-for-policing-migrants>.

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POLICING

Misinformation

Over the course of the research period, SPRH members observed that the police would either omit or directly misinform people who were pushed back to Italy regarding transportation times. While not always systematic, this was a frequent pattern documented by volunteers. This was specifically a practice on Sundays when no buses were running. As a result, all people who were pushed back to Italy had to walk from the border to Ventimiglia.

In February, the police provided inaccurate information about the availability of bus services on Sundays. They also appeared to lack effort in explaining immigration procedures, which, as one individual reported, added to the difficulty of navigating the next steps—our team of volunteers assisted by translating instructions to the immigration office in Imperia. An Ethiopian man with an Italian residence permit was told by the French police that it was not valid for the rest of Europe. Indeed, he cannot live in an EU country outside of Italy because he has an Italian residence permit, meaning he is only authorized to live in Italy. While not authorized to work or live for longer than three months in another EU member state outside of Italy, he was certainly permitted to cross the Franco-Italian border with his residence permit, as it is part of the Schengen Area.

In March, a man pushed back to Italy told another association at the border that the French police asked him very personal questions, such as “Would you be ready to have sexual intercourse with another man?”. He added that they searched his phone, which is legal with cause, but the man clarified that he was not told the purpose of the search. Other people on the move expressed similar instances of feeling information was withheld, or they were not fully informed of what the police were investigating, or of their rights. Such a scenario was detailed by two women with two young children under 10 years old. They reported that the police asked them to sign a document but refused to show them its content or provide any explanations, even after they complied to record their signatures. In October, several men reported that they had spent the night at the French police station without food or water. They did not receive information on why they were being held or what they should do procedurally.

Misconduct

While some instances of police misconduct were directly witnessed, others were reported by people researchers spoke to. When reported to us and not directly witnessed, we cannot verify the accuracy of the claims.

Falsifying or Misrecording Minor's Birth Dates

A prevalent issue at the border is the misrecording of the birth dates of minors. For example, a sixteen-year-old boy had his birth date mistakenly recorded in Italy, leading to his being turned back. The Protection of Unaccompanied Migrant Minors states that unaccompanied children are entitled to international protection applied under international human rights law, international refugee law, and international humanitarian law (EESC, 2020). When birth dates are modified, making individuals adults, they become subject to expulsion in France. They are no longer protected as minors by law, regardless of their nationality or residence status. This also occurred with a 15-year-old boy from Cameroon (born in 2008) who shared his experience of migrating unaccompanied with SPRH. He explained that authority figures had increased his birth year on two occasions, making him appear older than he was. Subsequently, he was sent by bus to Torino and made his way to the Franco-Italian border. When he attempted to enter France, the French police refused him entry and requested his birth certificate. He presented them with a photo of his birth certificate that indicated his actual birth year as 2008. Despite this, the police recorded his year of birth as 2005. In another instance, a 16-year-old Moroccan boy was turned back by French police after police wrote the wrong birth date on his documents in Italy.

Another example that proves this issue is that of three minors who informed us that their ages were inaccurately recorded by the police. Despite being 16 years old, the police documented them as 18 years old. On another date, a young boy from Guinea showed team members his *refuse de entrée*, who clearly had a modified birthdate to make him not qualify as a minor.

However, there were also documented instances in which volunteers observed individuals being escorted back to the French police station (instead of being pushed back), including those who were recorded as minors.

Inappropriate Behavior

In another incident, volunteers assisted two individuals and witnessed a concerning interaction where a male French officer mocked a man while walking him to the Italian police station. The officer walked behind the migrant in an exaggerated and sneering manner, clearly mocking the man's movements.



Figure 6. Italian Police Station at the Franco-Italian border. Photograph by Enrico Pinto.

Sources:

EESC. "The Protection of Unaccompanied Migrant Minors in Europe (Own-Initiative Opinion)." European Economic and Social Committee, February 24, 2020. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/protection-unaccompanied-migrant-minors-europe-own-initiative-opinion>.

Minors' Rights Violations

According to an Oxfam study published in June 2018, approximately one in four migrants who pass through Ventimiglia are unaccompanied children. As young as 11, children on the border face abuses from both French and Italian police (Oxfam, 2018).

Beyond the expected hardships that unaccompanied minors face, children at the Franco-Italian border are subject to physical and verbal abuse by police. The soles of their shoes are cut, their phones and SIM cards are stolen, and they are turned away from camps, forced to sleep on the motorway outside of towns (Al Jazeera, 2018). A testimony of an SPRH volunteer depicts a conversation with a young Eritrean girl who was forced to walk across the border, on an unpaved road, with her 40-day-old baby. Border data from February 2024 cites 10 young boys being held at the station while the police refused to provide them with food or water (Al Jazeera, 2018).

Already lacking guidance from a guardian, these children are kept in the dark about their status and rights. Without an opportunity to attend school or training, and often facing significant language barriers, police withhold information regarding how they can claim asylum to cross the border or join family members in other countries. The lack of interpreters and information in detention centres renders unaccompanied children vulnerable and in the dark about their rights and status (Oxfam, 2018).

The ECHR has denounced border police for abuses of minors 11 times, as of May 2023 (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The “renewed” strategies included increased evictions from camps and the use of drones to attack migrants. WeWorld legal advisor, Jacopo Colomba, refers to the detention centers as “black hole [s]” (Human Rights Watch, 2021), where migrants lack food, water, blankets, beds, medical care, and electricity. The lack of these necessities renders the detention centers, themselves the size of shipping containers, approximately 15 square meters, unlivable. A woman with two children, each under the age of four, who passed through Ventimiglia in the fall of 2023, described the living conditions at the dorms as frigid. Even with jackets on, she stated that it felt as though they were sleeping outside (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Some children do not have access to cover at all - border data from February 2024 includes the testimony of a young adult who described that the volunteers he met were the only people who "looked at him like a person". He had been sleeping outside in the rain.

While organizations such as Human Rights Watch have called upon French and Italian authorities to improve the living conditions of migrants. Moreover, the French police are legally required to offer unaccompanied children the option of applying for asylum. However, French authorities do not refer to the "modular units" that migrants are kept in as detention centers; rather, they call them "mise à l'abri", or places of "shelter", a name that erases their reality (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

A key adversity that unaccompanied migrants face is the alteration of their birth date on documents to make them appear to be adults, thus relieving authorities of abiding by laws regarding minors' rights, which are protected under European Union law and international law. Article 22 of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child details a list of requirements which states must fulfil to uphold the rights of children, ones which can be bypassed if authorities alter the birth dates on refugees' documents. The age of children could be altered up to ten years older than they are; for example, one minor's age was changed from 17 to 27. Sometimes, authorities sign the documents in place of the migrants themselves. Border data from October of 2023 highlights the documents of a teenage boy, migrating unaccompanied, being altered multiple times as he travelled to France. The first time, he was marked as 21 years old by a Red Cross worker in Italy, and the second time, marked as 18 by a French police officer (European Union Agency of Asylum, 2017).

The director of the Human Rights Watch's French branch states that "[t]he French border police have no legal authority to decide who is and is not under 18". Forging minors' ages on documents is not the only violation carried out by authorities, however. The prolonged detainment of migrants violates rulings regarding the rights of migrants. A Nice Administrative Tribunal Judge ruled in 2017 that migrants should not be detained for over four hours, yet this ruling is rarely upheld. A mother and her infant son were kept in a closed center for nine days in May of 2023 (European Union Agency of Asylum, 2017).

The rights of child migrants are protected in multiple legal bodies; however, their rights at the Franco-Italian border are often violated and disregarded, highlighting a serious abuse at the border (Menton Times, 2025)

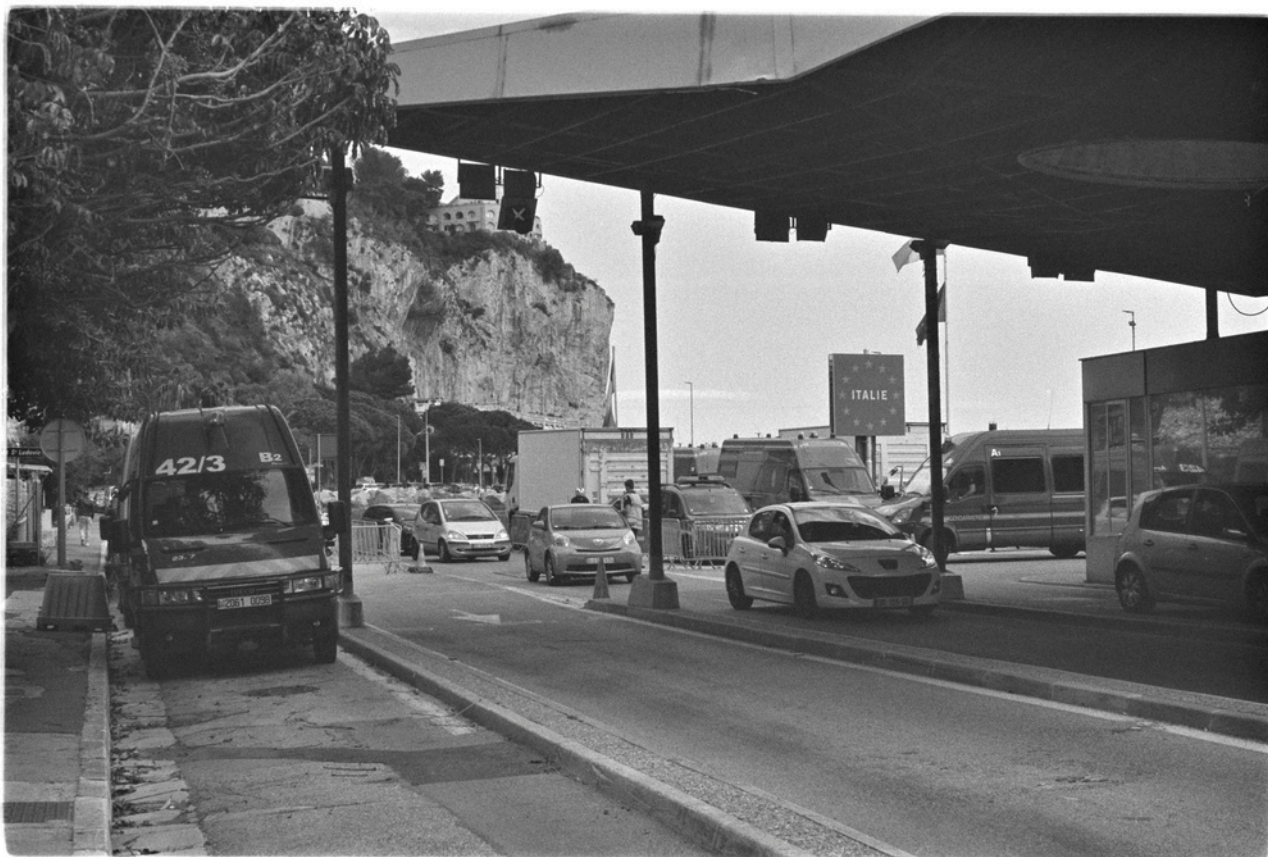


Figure 7. The Franco-Italian Border. Photograph by Enrico Pinto.

Sources:

Oxfam France, Rapport Oxfam : des enfants maltraités et renvoyés illégalement à la frontière franco-italienne, 14 juillet 2018, <https://www.oxfamfrance.org/communiqués-de-presse/rapport-oxfam-des-enfants-maltraités-et-renvoyés-illegalement-a-la-frontiere-franco-italienne/>

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Law and Healthcare at the Border

Background: The Treatment of Injury in Accordance with European Union, Italian, and French Law

European Union - EU: Directive 2013/33/EU, Article 19

Member states shall provide necessary medical or other assistance to applicants who have special reception needs, including appropriate mental health care where needed

France - Article L1110-1 of the Public Health Code

The fundamental right to health protection must be implemented by all available means for the benefit of all persons.

Italy - Italy: Law No. 40 of 1998, Article 33

Right of foreigners not registered with the health service to "urgent or in any case essential" care, even when an individual is in an "irregular situation to the regulations concerning entry and residence."

Sources:

Legislation, European. "Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 Laying down Standards for the Reception of Applicants for International Protection (Recast)." Legislation.gov.uk, 2020. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/eudr/2013/33>.

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The Treatment of Injury on the Franco-Italian Border:

People on the move at the Franco-Italian border face significant challenges in their access to healthcare. Testimonies from the border demonstrate the difficulty these individuals have in accessing emergency care, made worse by their trans-border situation, which regularly disrupts the continuity of their care. Furthermore, testimonies provide evidence that individuals in both France and Italy faced treatment contrary to national and European laws governing the right to emergency care.

Those attempting to seek asylum in France often stay in the Italian border town of Ventimiglia. According to the Italian Law No. 40 of 1998 (Article 33), foreigners are guaranteed "urgent or in any case essential" care, even when the individual is in an "irregular situation about the regulations concerning entry and residence". Furthermore, through Directive 2013/33/EU (Article 19), the European Union compels member states to provide emergency care to asylum applicants. Despite this, data from Médecins Sans Frontières (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2023) and our testimonies demonstrate a lack of care, even in precarious medical situations. Observers from SPRH document the care given to an individual on the border:

"..a woman on the move had been raped, and she had a very young child from it. She was experiencing abdominal pain. They had called an ambulance... a Carabinieri [Italian gendarmes] car came with the ambulance... The [Carabinieri] was coordinating everything and asking questions such as whether they had taken her fingerprints in France... The ambulance did not move for about 40 minutes."

The Treatment of Injury on the Franco-Italian Border:

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), who provide healthcare to individuals on the move in Ventimiglia, report high levels of complications related to pregnancy, with half of the pregnant women in the clinic suffering from obstetric morbidity (MSF, 2023). MSF's figures and our testimonies demonstrate a lack of care towards pregnant women and young mothers, representing a risk towards the health of both the mother and child, who already face an unstable situation.

Individuals on the move often face repulsion or expulsion from France towards Italy. For those who seek medical treatment or receive medical coverage in France, the border significantly disrupts their continuity of care. Our testimonies demonstrate not only alleged violence from authorities but also a lack of care towards injury:

"...a man with a thick head bandage was let out... [he said] his vision was blurry due to the head injury... he showed us an X-ray scan of his skull, which showed that it had been fractured... he explained that he and his three friends had been stopped on the train at Garavan... The border police allegedly acted aggressively and pushed the men causing one of them to fall and hit their head badly on the floor... he had been taken to a hospital in France... after receiving treatment he was taken back to the border where he was held overnight without food or water or any further treatment and then released on Sunday" (SPRH, 2023).

Beyond the allegation of violence by the police, this testimony, recorded on November 18, 2023, demonstrates an issue in the continuity of care for people on the move. This individual, who suffered a significant injury in France, was quickly released from care and expelled to Italy. As an STP (Straniero Temporaneamente Presente) number is required to access specialist care in Italy, he may not receive any immediate follow-up treatment. According to MSF, STPs remain difficult to access in Ventimiglia due to a lack of government presence to issue them in the region (MSF, 2023).

Individuals ejected from France also risk losing the healthcare coverage they have managed to secure, further emphasising the impact of borders on healthcare access: A man who was in France (his wife and children were still in France) was sent back to Italy. His AME [French medical insurance] card was taken by the police at the border.

Relevant Testimonies Collected by SPRH Volunteers

- A woman experiencing abdominal pain had an ambulance called for her. It came with Italian police and questioned the woman about her status. The ambulance remained stationary for 40 minutes.
- AME (Aide Medical de l'État) card confiscated by French police from a man who was pushed back at the border.
- The police pushed a man to the floor at the Garavan station, causing a skull fracture. The man was treated in a French hospital and released the next day with no further treatment, although he had weakened vision.
- A man who has a long-term injury from getting shot during migration gets pushed back at the border.
- A woman who has asthma was unable to walk to Ventimiglia after being pushed back at the border. She affirmed that she explained her condition to the French police, but was not offered medical assistance.

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SEXUAL & GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-Based Risks

Worldwide, women and children face the harshest migration journeys. Whilst rates of male and female migrants to Europe are roughly equal (International Organization for Migration, 2024), female migrants are nearly twice as likely to face discrimination in their host countries (Migration Data Portal, 2024). This gender-based discrimination can take many forms and is not limited only to overtly prejudiced actions but also to negligence from authorities. For instance, a major challenge for refugee women is their menstrual hygiene, for which they are rarely provided adequate resources. Furthermore, most refugee facilities are not equipped with proper toilets, and this lack of resources leaves women with few but unsanitary options to manage their periods. According to Marion Ravit, a researcher at the Institute of Research for Development (IRD), “the inequalities suffered by women are further exacerbated by menstrual precarity” (SOS Mediterranee, 2024). These trends are symptoms of the prevalent issue of inhumane conditions in places that receive refugees.

60% of female refugees in Syria and Lebanon did not have access to underwear (Reuters, 2017)

Conditions in Ventimiglia

In Ventimiglia, migrants endure a massively unsanitary environment. Refugee Rights Europe conducted interviews in the area and found that “[m]ore than 85 per cent of respondents said they washed in the river, which they also used as a toilet and at times for drinking water” (Refugee Rights Europe, 2017). Consequently, reports of spreading health conditions are very common. However, it’s important to note that all respondents to this interview were male, and the scarcity of women on the move in Ventimiglia is inconsistent with general migration trends. This has led local NGOs to attribute this to human trafficking in Italy and North Africa, which places women migrants at risk of sexual violence.

Sex-Trafficking

In 2022, the UNHCR reported the sex trafficking of an estimated 105,000 asylum seekers, unaccompanied children, and undocumented migrants in Italy. In Italy, trafficking victims predominantly women, most frequently from “Brazil, Bulgaria, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Côte d’Ivoire, the Gambia, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, and Romania, including ethnic Roma” (US Department of State, 2023). Since the war, Ukrainian refugees, particularly women and children, have become increasingly vulnerable to sex trafficking

While foreign nationals who are victims of trafficking are entitled to temporary residency/work permits, authorities may not properly identify them, which makes them subject to deportation. Lack of proper training and education, as well as under-resourced groups, mean shelters often fail to prevent traffickers from recruiting vulnerable victims. In theory, foreign nationals are entitled to the same protections as Italians, but foreign workers living in informal encampments have less access to government services and protections.

105,000

asylum seekers, unaccompanied children,
and undocumented migrants in Italy were
trafficked in 2022 (UNHCR 2022)

In Ventimiglia, where 10% of migrants are women, young girls are vulnerable to forced prostitution as a means to pay to get into France. Smugglers charge between 50-150 euros to go across the border. There is a tendency among young migrants to leave reception facilities to attempt crossing themselves, which leaves them extremely vulnerable to traffickers. In 2017, 91% of child migrants to Italy were unaccompanied (UNICEF, 2017). While human trafficking, particularly sex trafficking, is a prevalent issue at the Franco-Italian border, it is a present threat along the journey of migration. There is an absence of women actually making it past the Ventimiglia transit point, which indicates the prevalence of trafficking. Conditions such as the bathrooms for migrant women in Ventimiglia, lacking security and supervision, give traffickers easy access to vulnerable women. It is reported that women crossing through Ventimiglia don't look people in the eye, and don't talk, indicating that they have been ordered not to (by traffickers).

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Sexual Assault

Many women in Ventimiglia report becoming pregnant by rape in Libya or refugee camps along their journey. The Italian government collaborates with Libya to prevent “irregular migration” to limit trafficking; however, in practice, this results in migrants being returned to Libya, where trafficking and assault run rampant in detention centers (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Testimony

A Relier Menton (a humanitarian organization based in Menton) border surveillance volunteer explained that a woman on the move had been raped, causing severe abdominal pain. The woman had a very young child with her. An ambulance was called, and Relier Menton needed someone to accompany the woman as their members had to leave with other people back to Ventimiglia. One of our members went with her, while the other stayed at the border permanence post. The ambulance arrived shortly after, a couple of meters across from the remaining member. The woman was placed on a stretcher and taken inside the ambulance.

Upon the return of the accompanying volunteer, they reported that a Carabinieri car (the Italian national police force, organized as a military unit that often assists the local police) accompanied the ambulance, with a man and a woman in uniform inside. The Carabinieri mentioned the woman had been raped in Libya, as confirmed by another member from Relier Menton. This member from Relier Menton added that the woman had attempted to cross to France in a truck, stopped the night before, and was detained until that moment. The woman possessed an entry denial document.

GENERAL TESTIMONIES

General Testimonies

To conclude the report, we want to share some of the testimonies we gathered throughout our research. These testimonies illustrate the diversity of experiences of people on the move — from their backgrounds to their journey to Europe and their ambitions. Due to translation, many of the testimonies featured are summaries, rather than direct quotes.

A man from Russia (Chechnya) was released from the Italian Police station. He previously lived for a year in Germany, but was deported. Since then, he has been trying to get to France but can't due to his Russian passport. He said he keeps trying to get to France and keeps getting caught and sent back to Italy.

A 29-year-old Egyptian man was released from the Italian police station. He lived in Italy as a kid, spent seven years in France, and then returned to Egypt three years ago. He later came back and spent a month in Italy, and now he is stuck between the two countries at the border. He is trying to reach Nice.

An Algerian man told us he lived in Nice and that his residence permit had expired. He wanted to go through the procedures to renew it, but he was not allowed to return to France, and the police informed him he had to register in Italy.

A family comprising one man, a woman (his wife), and a child was pushed back by the police. The man told team members that he had been sent back to Italy after visiting a family member for one week in their home country, Tunisia. According to him, their family had lived in Marseille for six years, and their child had been enrolled in a French school for three years. They paid taxes and rented a house in France. It was the first time they had been turned back at the border. He told us he asked the police about the paperwork but was told to wait "until July, until 2025". He clarified that the problems occurred with the French, and not the Italian police.

A 26-year-old man from Egypt spoke poorly of the conditions faced in Ventimiglia: "I spent ten days without sleep in Ventimiglia without food or water. The biggest problem there is that we cannot sleep, there are no clothes, and only sometimes food."

A Tunisian man stated he was pushed back for the first time, even though he had a working permit and other official papers, including a French driver's license and valid identification. He said he works as a hairdresser in a town near Cannes and would need to spend the night in Ventimiglia before taking a BlaBlaCar the following morning, before returning to the town. He arrived from Tunisia to Genoa in the afternoon because he had gone home for vacation. His sister works nearby in the region.

He travelled to Turkey, primarily on foot, through Iran. He worked in Turkey for several years in a town close to the border with Iran. He was shot in the leg twice in Turkey, although it was unclear why or how it had happened. As a result, he said he could not walk for several months. Now, he walks with a slight limp and uses a crutch. After recovering, he left Turkey to go to Italy by boat.

He sees a physician in Italy, but he struggles to afford it, and he said he does not receive as good benefits in Italy as he would in France. He has a brother with him in Italy (who was not crossing with him) and another brother in France. He has a young daughter and wife who are back in Pakistan to whom he sends money, but he has not returned to Pakistan in over seven years. He first worked as a hairdresser for two years, but most recently, he works at a restaurant in Genoa. He originally travelled by bus from Genoa, since he cannot walk.

Two Syrian men were on a train from Ventimiglia to Milan, and the train stopped somewhere up on the French-Italian border near Turin. They were forced to get out and were sent back to Ventimiglia even though they assured officers that they only intended to go to Milan and not cross the border. They had no money to buy another ticket to Milan and were stuck in Ventimiglia. No one spoke their language at the police and train services, so they were confused why they were unable to continue on the train and what they should do.

A Moroccan man was unable to obtain a work permit in Italy. The only job he could find paid him just 200 euros a month for working 16-hour days. Due to these harsh conditions, he decided to attempt crossing into France. He now hopes to seek asylum in the Netherlands.

An Ethiopian woman in her mid-thirties tried to cross into France with two young children under the age of 4, but was apprehended by the police. Her husband was already in France. She told the volunteers of the poor conditions at the dorms: "[it was so cold] it was like sleeping outside, even with multiple jackets, we were shivering from the cold".

A young man from a small town in northern Syria said he had been working for ten years and was the only one in his family to do so. His father had passed, and his mother and four sisters could not work, so he had to support them. To get to France, he went from Syria to Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, and then Italy. He wanted to reach England. He also detailed his experience in Turkey: the Turkish police beat his feet on the border with Syria, and his friend was killed in Osmangazi. He mentioned he had no problems with the French police.

One man from Bangladesh told the volunteers that he came to Europe for the work opportunities. He had no family or friends in Europe. He had been living in Italy for two years. When he first arrived, he applied for his Italian residence card, but when he received it was only valid for roughly 7 days. He reapplied, but only received residency for three months. That permit expired a year ago, but he is still waiting for reapproval. He has tried to cross into France 6 or 7 times.

An unaccompanied minor from Papua New Guinea said he was born in 2006 (making him 17 at the time of recording in 2023), but the police declined his passage without any explanation.

Conclusion

At the core of SPRH's mission is the belief that migration, as a phenomenon, should not be politicized - rather, humanized. Our efforts are, therefore, directed towards highlighting the stories and experiences of those who, for a multiplicity of reasons, have left their home countries towards Italy, France, and beyond. Sciences Po Menton's proximity to the Franco-Italian border has allowed us to meet some of those who attempt to cross it every day, but who are pushed back. Acknowledging the privilege stemming from our distance from these experiences, we are grateful towards those who have allowed us to listen to their stories.

Despite being separated by little more than 10 km, Ventimiglia and Menton represent different realities for those who are consistently, arbitrarily, and many times illegally, pushed back at the Franco-Italian border. This report results from our willingness to share individual stories. However, it also results from our hope that some of the border dynamic patterns we find here also echo the difficulties people on the move undergo every day, elsewhere in Europe, and in the rest of the world.

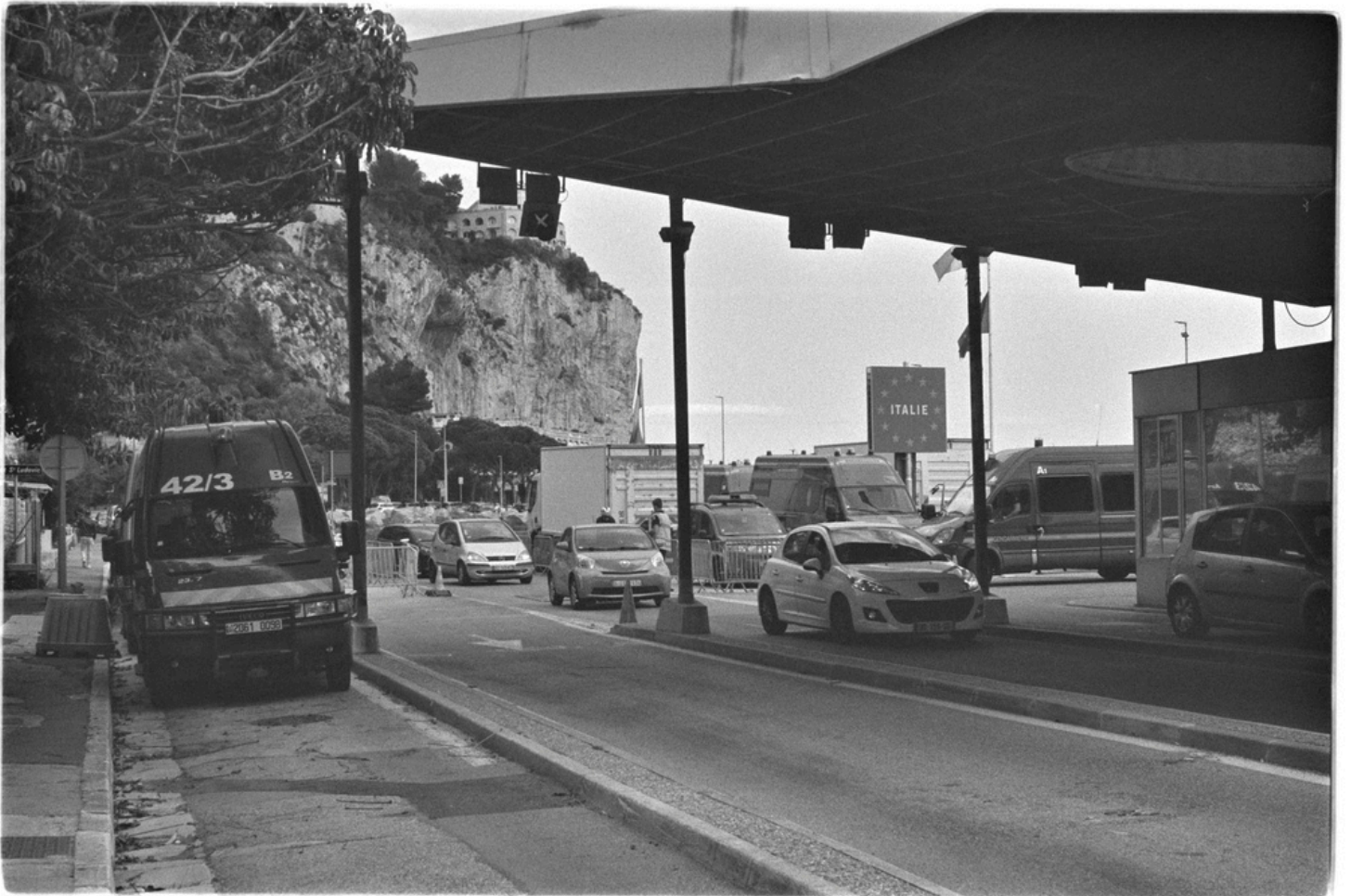


Figure 8 and 9. The Franco-Italian Border. Photograph by Enrico Pinto.

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