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The Southern French–Italian Border Before, During, and After COVID-19 Lockdowns

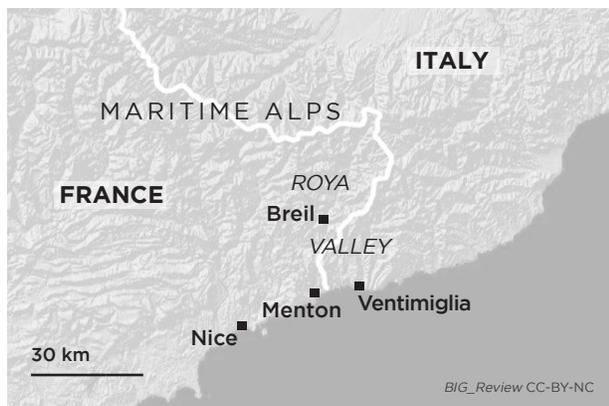
Daniela Trucco *

This essay focuses on the French–Italian border of the Maritime Alps. Grounded on previous research and on more recent data, it examines both “desirable” (cross-border workers and customers) and “undesirable” (illegalized non-European migrants) circulation before, during and after the COVID-19 French and Italian lockdown.

Introduction

This essay is grounded on previous research on the Maritime Alps borderland¹ and on more recent interviews with spokespersons of different social groups: activists and NGOs but also Roya Valley and Ventimiglia inhabitants and cross-border workers. It aims to show the continuity and changes in the border filtering process during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on circulation that is considered both “desirable” and generally legalized (cross-border workers, cross-border customers, tourists) and “undesirable” illegalized mobilities (non-European migrants in transit).

If controls and pushbacks at this border are systemic and have been standard practice since at least the summer of 2015, the way they are applied has not significantly changed since then (first part). The Italian and French anti-pandemic measures represent a state of exception in so far as they were extended to all travelers, thus becoming universal, and not only to non-European-looking persons identified as potential illegal migrants (second part). The removal of the restrictions on movement tied to COVID-19 largely restored the racially profiled character of the border (third part).



The Border Before COVID-19

The southern French–Italian border of the Maritime Alps includes the urbanized Riviera area of Menton, in France, and Ventimiglia, in Italy, and the rural area of the Roya Valley in the hinterland, which is cut in two by the border line. This border region is both a zone of high circulation and exchanges and a reflection of the similar borderization of Europe in other places such as Lampedusa or Calais. Cross-border mobilities are dense. The region lies at the crossroad of different flows of “desirable” mobilities. Some six-to-eight thousand cross-border workers travel on a daily basis

* Daniela Trucco, PhD, Université Côte d’Azur, France. Contact: daniela.trucco@gmail.com



from Ventimiglia, in Italy, to the French district of the Maritime Alps and the principality of Monaco. In the other direction, thousands of customers from France and Monaco travel to the trade town of Ventimiglia to purchase lower-price goods. In both directions, tourists from all over the world cross the border without any inconvenience to visit the French and Italian Riviera. Also, due to the geography of the Roya Valley, both French and Italian inhabitants regularly need to pass through the neighboring country’s territory to reach a destination located in their own country of residence: for instance, the main road connecting Breil, in the French Roya Valley, to Nice, on the French Riviera, passes through Ventimiglia, and the latter is connected to the Italian towns of Cuneo and Torino by the same road that crosses the French part of the Roya Valley.

This border region also has a long history of illegal trespassing dating back to its very origin at the end of the 19th century, which has led to the reinforcement of police controls, political attention, and media coverage. Italian peasants, Jews and opponents to fascist regimes in the region took high risks and in some cases lost their lives crossing the sadly known “death step”: a dangerous mountain path between Ventimiglia and Menton. Implementation of the Schengen agreements on free movement within Europe did not stop border controls and the pushback of “unwanted” non-European migrants, even if their intensity varied and generally increased throughout the years. Since 2011 and the first Schengen “crisis” coinciding with the arrival of Tunisian and Egyptian citizens, controls have been gradually strengthened to eventually become systemic starting in the spring of 2015. That same year, in November, when France declared a state of emergency, border controls were carried out in derogation of the Schengen agreements.

The filtering process at the border has been described by scholars and activists as racially profiled and as

violating international and national rights of asylum in several respects. Controls are carried out by different French law enforcement agencies (border patrol, army, *gendarmerie* agents, and riot and mobile police agents, the *Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité*) deployed on all the main roads and railway lines connecting the two sides of the border. When a person is denied entry into French territory, his or her pushback takes place at the Menton main border police station, from where he/she has to walk the nearly 10-kilometre distance back to the Ventimiglia town center and try again. Scholars and activists have baptized this circuit the “border carousel” (ObsMigAM 2020). In the urban area of Ventimiglia, the presence of pushed-back migrants has been politicized as a public problem with humanitarian, security, and image repercussions, since the town’s economy is highly dependent on trade and tourism. Squats and informal camps have regularly been set up by both migrants and activists and dismantled by Italian public authorities. These authorities opened up a temporary transit camp in July 2016, run by the Italian Red Cross, but access to it has often been limited over the years, thereby regularly increasing the visible presence of migrants in town and reinforcing the framing of the issue as an “emergency” (Trucco 2018).

Besides this institutional facility, more spontaneous or activist solidarity towards illegalized migrants has been the object of repression and criminalization as shelters and helpdesks have regularly been dismantled (such as the No Border camp, in the summer of 2015, the St Anthony church shelter in 2016 and 2017, and the Eufemia legal helpdesk in 2017-2018) and more than sixty activists have been banned from the territory of Ventimiglia since 2015. Immediately before the COVID-19 measures, three solidarity points remained operational: a solidarity café near the Ventimiglia railway station, the local Caritas humanitarian association, and a permanent presence of activists monitoring the pushbacks in the vicinity of the border police station.



Figure 1. French authorities control all vehicles at the Pont Saint Ludovic border in three lines. Photo © Vincenzo Condina, April 29, 2020.



Figure 2. Cross-border commuters in a traffic jam caused by COVID-19 border controls. Photo © Vincenzo Condina, June 2, 2020.

Even though the border filtering process had a high impact on “unwanted” and illegalized mobilities and caused no less than thirty fatalities since 2016 (fatal incidents include car and train collisions, electrocutions on and inside trains, drownings, falls from mountain paths: see Anafé 2019), the border remained “open” and largely invisible for other fluxes such as those of cross-border workers and tourists, with some infrequent exceptions (Barabino 2018). Cross-border trade unions had nevertheless denounced some side effects of “anti-migrant” border controls such as traffic jams, highways closed when migrants were seen walking along them, delayed or detained trains, tear gas intoxications inside trains (tear gas is commonly used to smoke migrants out of train toilets or electric cabinets).

The Border During the French and Italian COVID-19 Lockdowns

When Italy (on March 9) and France shortly after (on March 16) introduced national lockdown measures to slow down the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (including the need for a written justification for any travel limited to “urgent” matters within both national

territories), controls were extended on all routes. All vehicles in both directions were stopped and checked by Italian and French police on the highway and on the coast road while a second road connecting Menton to Ventimiglia was closed to circulation. Between March 17 and April 17, the French border police controlled 76,000 vehicles, issued 102 entry denials (*refus d'entrée*) to European citizens (mainly Italian), and 107 to non-European citizens, mainly coming from Afghanistan, Iraq and Turkey (France 3 2020)

The number of trains was reduced and controls at the Menton Garavan railway station, which usually focused only on “non-European looking” passengers, were generalized. Cross-border workers had to produce official documents of authorization and were advised on social networks to paste their permit to the car’s side back window in order to avoid contact and speed up controls. Worker representatives also complained that controls caused traffic jams and delays. Because of this unusual situation, an international agreement was signed allowing Italian employees of Monaco companies to work from home. This actually met a long-standing demand by cross-border trade unions. As shops and markets were shut down in Italy and



Figure 3 — In a train connecting Ventimiglia to Menton and Montecarlo, cross-border commuters watch as Police officers break open a toilet door in which illegalized migrants have been hiding. Photo © Vincenzo Condina, June 18, 2020.



Figure 4 — At the French border checkpoint in Menton, three pushed-back migrants start the 10-kilometre walk back to Ventimiglia. Photo © Emanuela Zampa, June 2020.



Figure 5 — In Ventimiglia, Sudanese migrants wash their clothes in the river, having arrived in Italy before the lockdown and staying in a facility until they could travel again to the French border. Photo © Emanuela Zampa, June 2020.

circulation limited, customers from France and Monaco no longer shopped in the Italian territory, and this until June 3. The “reopening of the Italian border”, which corresponded to the end of the Italian lockdown, was widely covered by French local newspapers and media, with images of French citizens lining up to buy cigarettes and alcohol at the border (Zanichelli 2020), but also stuck in traffic jams as they were returning to France along with cross-border workers (Spagnolo 2020), and had to pass through border controls (C.C. 2020). A diplomatic incident nearly occurred when Italian trade union representatives complained of the annoyance caused by controls to cross-border workers, and the French consul tried to justify the controls by claiming that it prevented illegal immigration. The issue was solved by introducing an employer certificate for Italian cross-border workers.

In the other direction, during the Italian lockdown, French inhabitants of the Roya Valley who had national circulation permits for work or family reasons were denied access to the Italian territory and roads. In order to reach the French Riviera, as their representatives pointed out, they had to take much longer and dangerous roads including two mountains passes to remain within the French territory (Rousselot and Wiélé 2020).

As a consequence of closing the EU external borders and the Italian harbors to all traffic including emergencies, access to the Italian coast and circulation within the Italian territory of non-European illegalized migrants was even more limited than before, as confirmed by the decrease observed during the sanitary crisis in the number of arrivals at the French-Italian border of Ventimiglia-Menton. Nevertheless, controls and pushbacks continued to target migrants, without significant changes in both the composition of the staff (different law enforcement officers and no health operators) or procedures, as observed by activists and scholars at the beginning and at the end of the lockdown thanks to the slight time lag between the Italian and the French lockdown. The presence of migrants in the public space in Ventimiglia that had been previously heavily discouraged became formally illegal as it was no longer allowed to remain outside one’s residence without a valid justification. To implement lockdown measures, police presence increased in all Italian and French cities, including in Ventimiglia and in all the border region which was already heavily militarized. After a few weeks of lockdown, the Red Cross transit camp was put under quarantine and access was refused to new entries. The migrants’ living conditions in Ventimiglia became even harsher during the lockdown as they were forced to find precarious shelter and were encouraged to hide. On April 30, a migrant who was hiding and probably sleeping in a garbage bin barely escaped being crushed by a trash compactor (F. Q. 2020). During the first semester of 2020 some 760 “migrants in transit” contacted the local Caritas (Caritas Intemelina 2020).

During the lockdown, the work of activists became even more difficult: the last solidarity café in Ventimiglia had to close and the presence of activists at the border checkpoint was considered “unjustified” and was thus prevented. They continued their action in a more discrete and risky way by walking to the railway station looking for migrants or driving to the border checkpoint to see how controls were maintained. It became more difficult to monitor police controls and pushbacks. And yet controls and pushbacks continued. As soon as movement within the French territory was allowed, starting on May 11, activists confirmed the ongoing violation of asylum seekers’ rights at the border: the pushback of a young woman and her five-year-old son was denounced by the association on May 15 (Anafé 2020).

The Border After the Lockdown

With the lockdown measures suspended, migrant arrivals and pushbacks in Ventimiglia started to increase. Since the Red Cross transit camp did not reopen and remained closed to new entries, the presence of migrants in town once again became very visible and their conditions precarious generating both calls for solidarity and protests for their eviction: “Migrants are back in town” (Spagnolo 2020b) claimed several local newspapers in June. Activists denounced record numbers of daily pushbacks by French authorities (up to 140 per day in July 2020) and non-compliance with sanitary measures: refused foreigners were still detained for several hours without any possibility of maintaining safe distances and with no regular access to medical staff (Keshu Niya Project 2020). The side effects of immigration controls on commuters and cross-border workers were once again denounced by trade unions and other spokespersons (Spagnolo 2020c), while activists and NGOs demanded that Italian authorities reopen the transit camp (Spagnolo 2020d).

Conclusion

As had occurred during previous periods considered “emergencies” (the “Tunisian emergency” in the aftermath of the Arab spring, the “security emergency” in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in France, and the “migrant emergency” that started in the summer of 2015: see Casella Colombeau 2019), the 2020 sanitary COVID-19 emergency proved once again that much more than causing interruptions or significant changes in the border control regime, the “emergency” only provided new legitimacy to and reinforcement of a well-established filtering process targeting “unwanted” illegalized mobilities while finding legal and practical arrangements to preserve and encourage the more “desirable” cross-border mobilities.

Notes

- 1 Namely a four-year ethnographical research including participant observation and in-depth interviews with more than fifty respondents.

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