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## The Value of Information. Mobility and Border Knowledge Battlegrounds in the Ventimiglia Region

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### ABSTRACT

This contribution explores the acquisition, circulation and negotiation of knowledge related to mobility and border crossing among migrants at the French-Italian border of Ventimiglia. Despite governmental deterrence policies and border controls, the pursuit of “secondary movements” seems not to decrease, and is increasingly putting Europe to the test. In this context, the underground knowledge network that exists can be used to circumvent legal and geographical borders and to gain access to forms of citizenship. The “right” information is thus fundamental in determining the level of risk embedded in the various pathways and practices of de-bordering, as well as in constructing specific behaviors and migration carriers. To examine contentious information issues, we have participated in activities supporting the Progetto20k collective, including: Eufemia Info&legal point, an independent solidarity center in Ventimiglia; and the Italian-French Border Guide, a project designed to produce and spread mobility knowledge.

### KEYWORDS

Ventimiglia; militant ethnography; border knowledge; information hub; migrant network

### The Ventimiglia Borderland as an Information Hub

**Figure 1** In recent years, the Ventimiglia region has once again become a “hot border area” crossed by migrant routes exiting Italy towards other European States (Giliberti 2020; Selek and Trucco 2020; Amigoni et al. 2020). Although systematic border controls had been removed in the framework of the Schengen Agreements of 1990, de facto “Fortress Europe” still poses many “barriers” (Donadio 2020). In June 2015, France resolved to close its border for internal security purposes, such that police checkpoints and controls started to appear anew. With the return of a strict border regime, Ventimiglia has become a compulsory stop for many illegalized migrants along the route towards France; a bottleneck in the underground network of circulation (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2020).

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**Figure 1.** Eufemia Info-point Ventimiglia (credit Emanuela. Zampa. Photo).

The effects of this closure became especially evident in the Italian border town, where considerable numbers of people – at times exceeding the thousand mark – are pushed back and effectively trapped. The EU’s “Politics of crisis” (De Genova, Tazzioli, and Álvarez-Velasco 2016) led considerable numbers of people into a daily struggle of illegal crossing attempts and the consequent development of a massive border control apparatus. The result was a slowing down of onward crossings from Ventimiglia, the increased appearance of migrants in the town, and a multiplication of crossing routes rather than a complete block. At the same time, those stranded at the border typically inhabit makeshift or institutional camps, safe houses and abandoned areas (Menghi 2020; Amigoni, Bacchini, and Daminelli 2023). Coexistence with local inhabitants is not always easy and tensions and racist incidents often occur, such as the beating of Moussa Balde in May 2022<sup>1</sup>, who later died in the CPR<sup>2</sup> in Turin.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, during seven years, the border closure prompted more than 50 deaths during border crossing attempts, while an incalculable number suffered physical and psychological consequences after this umpteenth forced stop.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 2** On the other hand, the presence of such numbers of people on the move transiting the town has also generated different kinds of *solidarity* (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019; Birey et al. 2019; Martiniello et al. 2019; Bauder 2020; Della Porta and Steinhilper 2021), stemming from local and international no border activists, NGOs, religious institutions, all the way to spontaneous actions of local citizens (Potot & Giliberti 2022). The networks and support practices carried out by these solidarity actors are diverse but mainly aimed at supporting movement, survival and recognition during those kind of underground journeys. These have included the first No Border occupation of the rocks at the Balzi Rossi<sup>5</sup> car park near the border police station, the informal camps

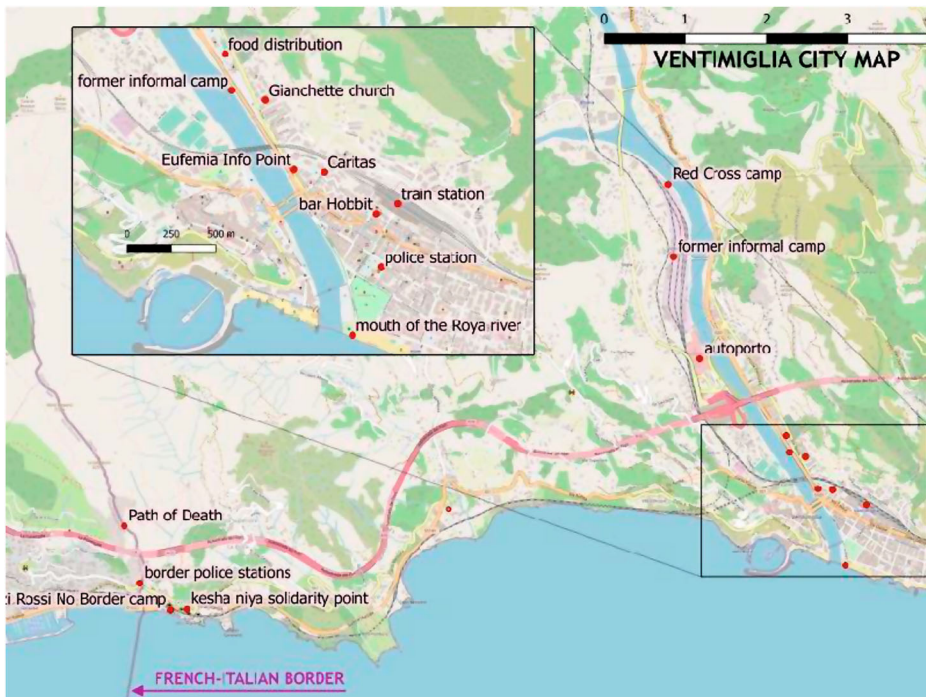


Figure 2. Ventimiglia City Map (Molinero, Zatelli et al. 2020).

born along the Roya river, as well as the Eufemia Info-point,<sup>6</sup> Kesha Nya kitchen,<sup>7</sup> Delia's bar,<sup>8</sup> or the Sant'Antonio church,<sup>9</sup> and the new solidarity space opened by Progetto20k<sup>10</sup> called Upupa.<sup>11</sup> In addition, there are ethnic and regional networks where different kind of facilitators provide contacts and expertise necessary to cross the border. In fact, the social capital that each migrant community has accumulated over time is made available to other migrants in the form of word of mouth in order to share valuable information about reliable  *passeurs*<sup>12</sup> and thus reduce the risks of crossings (Spener 2004). Most of the time these underground services are essential and recognized by migrants who wittingly choose to rely on them in exchange of payment (Triandafyllidou 2018; Khosravi 2019). Indeed, the current border regime indirectly fosters human smuggling; for every migrant deported by the authorities there is a new client for human smugglers (Khosravi 2019). However, the concept of moral economy (Belloni 2016) and *chav* solidarity (Hunter 2020) are often more appropriate to explain the smuggling phenomena than criminal approaches (Belloni 2019; Amigoni et al. 2020; Sanchez 2017). Solidarity is then conceived here as a complex space of interactions revealing and generating porosity and shifting hierarchies and boundaries (Barth 1998) across and within different social groups in transit space. A situated and multifarious sets of practices and forms of cooperation, enacted by multiple actors, driven by either humanitarian, political, religious, ethical or economic motivations.

The mobilities concerned are largely the result of the so-called "long summer of migration", which has led millions of people, with a peak in 2015, to flee a combination of armed conflict and poverty in Africa and Asia. Broadly, we can identify people arriving

in Ventimiglia via two main migratory routes: the Central Mediterranean and the Balkans. These unauthorized movements – intended as circulations of people inside, across, and to Europe – are putting member states and the Dublin Regulation<sup>13</sup> to test. For the very luckiest who somehow manage to enter Italy, Ventimiglia represents a battlefield (Mezzadra and Neilson 2014) and a field of struggle (Tazzioli 2015) in the attempt of leaving the peninsula. These flows, often referred to as “secondary movements” in order to emphasize the continuation of the journey to another Schengen country, have not been decreasing despite national and EU policies specifically intended and implemented to mitigate the phenomenon. To the contrary, they have continued unabated even during the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic scenario.

The “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) I encountered led me to not drastically narrow down the subjects of the research, but instead to adapt to what I encountered in the field. As Cappello, Vietti and Cingolani (2014) suggest, “the focus on culturally-based variables must be balanced with that on analytical categories (class, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc.) and the focus on a particular group must be accompanied by attention to the broader relationships with the context”. In this sense, the discrimination that undocumented migrants encounter creates a category in which they can be included: people who are denied the right to move freely or ask asylum. Certainly, however, each person has their own social capitals, networks, and personal skills that determine different migratory careers [Figure 3](#).

This phenomenon has been defined by some scholars as “transit space” or “lives in transit,” stressing how migrants in transit are continuously searching for spaces with better opportunities to reshape their trajectories (Bredeloup 2012; Fontanari 2019).



**Figure 3.** Mediterranean and Balkan routes towards Ventimiglia (Molineri, Zatelli et al. 2020).

Transit spaces can be conceived as well as “border assemblage” (Salter 2013) in order to escape the duality between mobility and immobility, instead considering “circulations” as the product of the friction between regulative powers and migrants’ drive to achieve autonomy (Mezzadra 2010). Moreover, these irregular movements have become a common feature of many migratory careers (Martiniello and Andrea 2014) and could be interpreted as a structural feature of modern society more than the outcome of failed policies (Luhmann 1995). An element that remains largely unexplored, and which the present article focuses on, is part of a new field of research centered on migrant networks, information and communication flows (Ros and Marin 2007). It is that underground knowledge, its production and circulation, that fundamentally allows illegalized people to achieve mobility and survival despite governments’ efforts to impede and repatriate them. Border expertise, intermediaries, resources and know-how are shared in networks of solidarity and smuggling that enables routes, shapes their circumstances and determine outcomes. Often it is also the sum of experiences of different people and their accumulated information, unstructured and collected in different times and places, that is embedded in a transnational network of mutual support and care. It is also what Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) define as *mobile commons*, “the ability to cultivate, generate and regenerate the contents, practices and affects that facilitate the movements,” assembled and materialized through: the invisible knowledge of mobility, the infrastructure of connectivity, the multiplicity of informal economies, the communities of justice and the politics of care. Moreover, the mobile commons have to be thought in a framework of a growing globalization and super diversity (Vertovec 2005) in which movements multiply, spread and extend their limits.

In this contribution, we identify Ventimiglia as an *information hub*. A particular place where people gain access, depend on and resort to for a variety of information and knowledge in order to continue their journeys. Indeed, in order to cross this border, knowledge regarding countermeasures and tactics to escape controls is essential. As an information hub, Ventimiglia is also a place where one can obtain other types of information for the next steps of the journey, whether concerning mobility, asylum application, documents, work, family reunification etc. Indeed, it being an almost obligatory stop, this “station” of the underground railroad (Whitehead 2016) on which undocumented people travel, has gathered many social actors facilitating and exploiting (im)mobility. It is a transit point where new arrivals have a good chance of finding “facilitators” (Vergnano 2020), “conductors” (Ambrosini 2017), smugglers and traffickers of different types, who are willing to provide key information, contacts, facilities and services almost immediately, usually in exchange for money or some other type of payment (Cvajner and Sciortino 2009). In this high-risk and high-gain context, border knowledge and accessing the “right” information can lead to profoundly different border experiences, more or less risky, expensive, or prolonged in time. It is also important to consider that for some people the Ventimiglia border has become so demanding that they either give up going to France or decide to try elsewhere.

The research questions that the present article puts forward aim to explore the information battleground and related mobility endeavors that illegalized people face during their journeys, and, specifically, at the Ventimiglia border. More specifically: what knowledge is needed to pass the border? what are the main problematic issues? who is

producing such underground knowledge? how do people get access, circulate and exploit mobility and border knowledge?

To this end, the article firstly presents the framework of “militant ethnography” or “ethnographic activism,” in which our research activity has developed and interacted with various actors in the field. Secondly, we analyze common circumstances and interactions related to crucial mobility issues people on the move experiment, such as border crossings, push backs and identification. Thirdly, we discuss some recurrent dynamics related to the strive for movement, such as resorting to smuggling networks, information understanding and distortion, as well as incidents and resource shortcomings affecting the journeys.

### **Doing Research, Doing Activism: Eufemia Info&Legal-Point and the French-Italian Border Guide**

This contribution originates from an ethnography at the border based on personal encounter, militancy, and research periods of both authors in the Ventimiglia region. The idea of studying the information battleground at the border arose exactly after prolonged periods of involvement with the collective Progetto20k while supporting undocumented people in their journeys. Following the example of Scheper-Hughes (1995), the authors could not have entered the field without actively being part of it, as a means for the emancipation of the oppressed subjects. An attempt was made to find an intersection between academia and activism such that these could boost one another, contributing to the knocking down of borders. The possibility arose to meet and occasionally combine the research and fieldwork activities of the academic research collective (Laboratorio di Sociologia Visuale<sup>14</sup>) and several students of the University of Genoa and the militant activities of Progetto20k. We performed ethnography as a “mobility facilitator” (Amigoni 2022) in order to support – to the greatest possible degree – the continuation, awareness, and safety of people’s journeys.

Ethnography, understood as a total human experience that involves emotions, intuitions and biography of the researcher (Crapanzano 1980), represents a valuable tool for engagement in the field. The militancy aspect therefore represents the will of the authors to co-generate changes and not to be reduced exclusively to observers (Juris 2007; Boni, Koensler, and Rossi 2020). As Rachele Borghi proposes in *Privilegio e Decolonialità* (2020), to perform decolonial direct actions makes it possible to create new worlds, new spaces for subversion of dominant norms and for the realization of a world where everyone has the same right to move freely.

A very important feature of acting as mobility facilitator are monitoring activities, something similar to what Guy Debord experimented in the situationist practice, the *drift* (1958). Drifting is an action research approach, which combines practices of mobile and activist research traditions in which knowledge is constructed by researchers and participants while moving together through everyday environments and engaging in discussions and actions. This was possible for example with some migrants who decided to stay and participate in the activities of the collective. In addition, the possibility of living together in the project’s collective houses allowed us to deepen our relationships in safe and convivial places. Those people in particular were instrumental in my access to the field, facilitated communication, shared their knowledge and helped

with mediation and trustee issue. Had it not been for this collaboration and sharing of collective actions and projects, this level of depth would certainly not have been achieved.

Participant observations and informal conversations were undertaken in several situations, but, in particular, the authors managed the topic of information at the front office of the Info-point Eufemia<sup>15</sup> dedicated to people on the move, as well as contributing to elaborate an online Border Guide.<sup>16</sup> In addition, relating to the crucial role of information providers, the present article is built on several conversations with legal operators and participants of the Eufemia Info-point and Welcome to Europe project; facilitators and smugglers, people in transit and already settled in France, cultural mediators and activists, all of whom were involved in the border struggle.

Such involvement in these solidarity activities necessarily required a level of sacrifice of time and energy dedicated to the research process, which sometimes had to be paused and resumed after particularly demanding events or periods from a participation and activism point of view. The information collection has not always been systematic; the authors tended to interact with people participating in activities associated with the aforementioned projects, neglecting other migratory networks. At the same time, it has not always been possible to explain to all stakeholders and informants the research project being undertaken beyond the solidarity projects. This is because many times support activities were performed as primary activity, given the high number of people involved and the associated time and resource demands. Moreover, the in-depth involvement in the border struggle also implied being subjected to high tensions and conflicts that led to successive periods of burnout in which it was necessary to halt activities and temporarily leave the border area.

Two of the key projects that the collective Progetto20k developed in Ventimiglia in relation to the information access and spread are: a physical location structured as an information point,<sup>17</sup> and the creation of an online and printable border guidebook.<sup>18</sup> Both projects must be considered as an integral part of the methodology with which to be active in the field and support the sharing of information and continuation of journeys. The projects are hereby presented in order to clarify the authors' access and participation in the field, and the context in which border knowledge was collected and proposed. The analyses that follow in later sections focus on the more frequent issues and discourses embedded in the information battleground, rather than on discussing the means and organization that activists have adopted at the Ventimiglia border [Figure 4](#).

*Eufemia Info&Legal-Point* (hereafter simply “Eufemia”) was conceived as a free, multi-functional, anti-racist, and welcoming spot for migrants transiting in Ventimiglia: a place where people could obtain useful information and orientation for their trip. It was organized in two rooms with street view windows onto the main route of migrant transit and close to the Red Cross camp – informal shelters inhabited by eight hundred or so people on average. Eufemia had the objective of aiding transit at various levels, including the facilitation of communication and translation with locals and public authorities, lawyers, dedicated services and contacts all around Europe. A “map of services” has facilitated the spread of timetables of train and bus lines, schedules of doctors and medical points, the addresses of relevant dedicated services, contacts of associations, maps of the territory and food distribution. For example, when someone encountered a





**Figure 4.** Front Desk Eufemia Info-point (credit Emanuela. Zampa. Photo).

vulnerable situation, the Info-point had a direct line with the NGOs Terre des Hommes, Intersos, Save the Children, and We World to deliver assistance. The multifunctional space also provided legal aid, access to computer stations, electricity, and a warehouse. As legal operator Alessandra explains:

it was a physical place, it seems unimportant, but in a place of passage that is generally hostile, it was instead a relevant factor. It was a place dedicated to certain activities, though flexible enough for other activities to take place; a fixed and recognisable place where information was also offered from a legal point of view, it was a protected place because it was accessible to all without discrimination... information about what happens if I pass the border, pushbacks, expulsions, and everything concerning the asylum and protection system, was among the most common.

Over the years, Eufemia has demonstrated a capacity to bring people together and to be a landmark for both communities – people in transit and associations/NGOs in Ventimiglia. This exchange has allowed the building of a cross-border knowledge about services, possibilities and passages present in Ventimiglia. At the same time, the Info-point became a reference point for the migrant community that did not use the space simply as a service user, but as a safe space to meet others, share music, read books, realize paintings and poems. In December 2019 the Info-point had to close due to pressure received from the neighborhood and the municipality. However, it re-opened in April 2022 in the form of a new project called Upupa,<sup>19</sup> in a new space organized by activists of Progetto20k.

The *French-Italian Border Guide*<sup>20</sup> is a joint project led by Welcome to Europe<sup>21</sup> in collaboration with Carovane Migranti<sup>22</sup> and Progetto20k. Its aim was to offer a written guide, including practical and legal information, maps, public transport information, and dedicated services in an easily accessible format and different languages for people wishing to trespass the border. In addition to the main information regarding the border, it featured names of organizations and groups that could provide help in different cities. The guide has been a cross-border effort bringing together the experience of both Italian and French activists and lawyers. Of course, several information endeavors and leaflets already existed. The border guide attempted to structure and incorporate all such information from both sides of the border [Figure 5](#).

Accessibility and dissemination are two key aspects of the effectiveness of the guide in being useful for people transiting the border area. As Davide, co-creator of the guide, explains:

the guide was born on fertile ground, an effort by a network of activists. It was born from the desire to increment the networking effort and create a tool containing all the updated info and contacts on the border, a complete tool. This is a cross-border guide, unlike the previous ones that were national, this is made for those who want to move from Italy to France. We always put migrant agency at the centre. We do not instruct on what to do, but advice is offered by those who know the area and know what types of situations can occur. It is a guide that aims to be a travel companion, helper, always putting the freedom of people first, an even more valid concept at the border.



**Figure 5.** Border Guide Cover.

The last consideration touches on the approach an information giver should try to adopt in performing such a delicate role. On one hand, it is fundamental to provide access to correct and up to date information, sustained by local and underground knowledge and professional experience. On the other hand, it is important to employ horizontal methods in the relation with beneficiaries, leaving freedom of choice and supporting every personal decision. This has the aim of rendering migrant journeys more autonomous and boosting the safety of movements. The credibility of the information and the support does much to help build trust with migrants and to foster alliances with solidarity networks. As narrated by an Eufemia legal operator, many people have perceived the reliability of the project beyond the bounds of their immediate interests and plans, even for a fraternal chat while drinking a cup of tea:

I had the impression that what they [migrants] knew or what they wanted to do often did not emerge. For many reasons, the importance of the info-point was its presence and its approach, regardless of the information provided. The people taken in charge are much less than those who have passed, the impression I got is that most of the people wanted to sit down and talk to someone. Then what they did with the info is perhaps the least important thing. The fact of having someone who listens and takes care of you and does not expect you to do what you are told was significant to people.

### Trespassing the Border: Information Access, Contentions and Sharing

We arrived in Ventimiglia from Milan. I didn't know about this border. I spent six months here, during this time I tried to cross the border many times. I tried with other people that were there before me. Sometimes the police arrested me and they sent me to Taranto, twice. Every time I came back I met new people. I tried by walking on the mountains many times before succeeding.

These are the words of Sudanese informants now living in France. We met at the border during the winter of 2018 and got to know each other during a prolonged stay in the border town. Indeed, due to large funds invested in border patrol, crossing the Ventimiglia border and entering France can reveal itself to be a difficult task. It can depend on a layered and interconnected set of personal and environmental variables, such as: gender, age, physical appearance, language(s) spoken, health, local events, season of the year, weather, skills, economic possibilities, and encounters, among the others. It can require a significant investment of resources and time to undertake various attempts. Passages and techniques vary considerably and carry different degrees of risk.

As another Sudanese informant in Ventimiglia explained to me:

If you have money the safest way is to go by "taxi". That's what the car ride is called, normally on the motorway. It all depends on your contacts and how much money you have. With the right people, it can become a very quick and easy ride. You are picked up somewhere in the city, and depending on the scruples of the driver you are hidden in the boot of a car, maybe even more than one person, or ducked between the seats.

Invisibility is a strategy. It is the attempt to not be seen during the crossing (Bonnin 2020). This case is about how to be invisible to the eyes of the people in charge of patrolling the border. For example, hiding in the electrical compartments of trains, in the boot of a car, or in the bushes of the forest at night. This way, people manage to cross because they are not seen and thus continue towards their destination. Camouflage, instead,

entails resembling other ordinary people that are allowed to pass, and it concerns visual appearance. This means adopting countermeasures to pass for Europeans at first sight. Therefore, the way one dresses is of great importance in the chameleon-like attempts to blend in with the mass of citizens. The same applies to attitude and reactions to the sight of controls. Indeed, on the border transportation infrastructure, police controls are carried out following a racial profiling practice that aims to avoid disturbing white, local, and foreign travelers by slowing down their movement. In practice, only black people, those not “well dressed,” or those who fit the migrant stereotype are asked for documents. This custom, which should be an illegal practice because of racial discrimination, on the one hand tries to maximize police efforts through a *pragmatic racialism* (Fassin 2010) and, on the other, expresses the colonial nature of borders.

The continuous tension between the wishes and plans of migrants and the EU and state border system is selective in relation to different subjects and produces practices of resistance and circumvention of blocks. Border knowledge consists of a know-how and expertise that make it possible to stay and move between the two sides of the border without being intercepted by the police. Moreover, having contact details of people and places where certain services can be accessed will aid daily survival and movements.

When I arrived in Ventimiglia, I stayed one night and the second day I moved from Ventimiglia to the Roya. I passed [the border] by walking to the Roya Valley, I found many people that explained to me the way. It is kind of lucky, I tried and I passed at the first attempt. When I arrived at night, the people that I encountered at the village hosted me for two weeks and helped me. They brought me to Nice by car and then I went to the Var.

The story of Samad, landed in Lampedusa one month before, tells us about his choice of passing into France through the Roya valley after people in Ventimiglia explained to him the way. Even so, people do not have the certainty of passing, though with good advice one’s chances increase. For him and many others Ventimiglia represents a hub where several pieces of information circulate and are made available by both locals and the past experiences of hundreds of thousands of people that have transited the area in recent years.

The following passages attempt to discuss relevant migration issues faced during conversations at the Info-point, which are incorporated in three main blocks, although discourses are highly interrelated: Border Crossings, Pushbacks, Fingerprints.

The most evident and essential information battleground concerns access to border crossing knowledge; how to circumvent controls, which route to take, where to find smugglers, which ones can be trusted. In general, people arriving in the Ventimiglia region are in most cases resolute on leaving Italy. The majority of people are stopped while transiting through the first entry train station to France, Menton Garavan, where all trains are searched and black passengers controlled. In the last year, Italian police personnel have also started patrolling Ventimiglia station and blocking those who do not have the legal right to enter France. Many other controls occur daily on provincial roads and highways and at certain other strategic points. In response to the above, a variety of smuggling networks exist, either re-born or developed in recent years, with the aim of bringing people into France. Heterogeneity characterizes smuggling practices, national groups, forms of organization, and underlying values. The size of smuggler

groups may vary from a single person, who personally recruits his clients at the border and leads them into France, to transnational groups with split tasks and a vast network (Amigoni et al. 2020). As told by Amad, an asylum seeker in Italy who volunteered at the Info-point during his stay in Ventimiglia:

When people arrive here (Ventimiglia) they don't know anything, but there are smugglers who are waiting for them in the train station. Some of them arrive with a name, exactly looking for someone ... Those who try to pass by themselves and perhaps fail one, two, three times, then turn to passers thinking it is the only solution ... The groups are organised mainly among nationalities. But the price is different: walking in the mountains for 50, by truck 70, by taxi 200 euro. Let's say the guarantee is 150, but they can ask for more if they see that the person has more money. ... I too immigrated like them, I paid for the desert, I paid for the sea, until I arrived here. I have no documents. I have no fingerprints. I do not want to stay in Italy, the idea is to pay and pass, because staying here is worse.

In the smuggling business, information contention is a core value and each piece of information can become monetized. From the sharing of the right contact, to the explanation of a particular passage, the guidance during a crossing, or simply the loan of a document to access money sending services. However, autonomous crossings are also a notable fraction of the total and attempts relying on acquittance past experiences, improvisation and luck.

During our activities at the Info-point many stories of crossing attempts were encountered; some successful, others not. A prolonged period of being present in the area allowed the authors to understand the most frequent risks and dangers that people encounter such that they could be made known to others. However, given the high number of people who daily cross the border and the increasing of controls, accidents and deaths occur incessantly.<sup>23</sup>

Pushbacks are an undesirable yet common feature of many migrant journeys. Authorities and border guards attempt to stop and deter migrant movements to the limit and beyond what international law prescribes. Many people arriving in Ventimiglia already hold an expulsion order in which they were “invited” to leave the Italian territory within seven days. Fundamentally, they are following the order prescribed on the paper but they are not allowed to do it in practice. It is a paradoxical situation, since they are not allowed to stay in Italy but are at the same time refused entry by France. Most of the time, they are without relevant documents, so taking a flight and/or obtaining a visa to go elsewhere is impossible. In essence, they are rejected by everyone [Figure 6](#).

It is typical in Ventimiglia that every day up to 150 people are pushed back to Italy by the French border police after being detained for several hours in containers. In this way, France prevents people – even unaccompanied minors – from seeking asylum even if this right is clearly stated for everyone in the Geneva Convention.<sup>24</sup> It was common to receive pushed back people at the Eufemia legal front office with a bunch of papers looking for translation and clarification of documents. As an activist of Eufemia describes:

Then there was the taking in charge of pushed back people, rejection decrees, refusals of entry. We explained what the papers were, their contents and what could be done, all the possibilities. Then, not having a lawyer present who could represent the affected individuals, we redirected them to the lawyers of the present NGOs or through a network of Asgi<sup>25</sup> lawyers, depending on where the decrees had been issued ... We gave information on



**Figure 6.** French Police Border Checkpoint (Credit Emanuela. Zampa. Photo).

legal pathways, but this world of laws, as it is constructed, is a loser compared to creativity, after all, if I tell a minor that he can go to his uncle in England in eight months following all the procedures, it is clear that my option is a losing one compared to investing some money in smugglers and passing, at least then something will happen.

Moreover, it was often difficult to propose alternative and legal ways to move because most of the time there were either no possibilities for undocumented people to travel legally, and in other cases it required a long time that the people on the road were not willing to wait for.

Other highly relevant issues concern the fingerprint process and the possibility of getting some form of regularization out of Italy once arriving at the destination. In contrast, the Dublin Regulation forces people that seek asylum to do so in the first state of entry. An attempt was made to resolve the “problem” of people movements in 2015, via the so-called “hotspot approach” (Vradis 2019). According to this, states, with the support of European agencies (EASO, Frontex), must take migrants’ photo-identification and fingerprints at the moment of entry. In this framework “secondary movements” are not permitted and people who have entered Italy should claim asylum in the peninsula. However, the unilateral reintroduction of border controls by some Member States demonstrates that neither the Dublin System nor the hotspot approach were sufficient to satisfy national states’ aspirations of control over migrants’ movements. If it is true that the effective biometric registration of fingerprints at the moment of arrival in the

EU is essential to guarantee the possibility of legally deporting migrants back to the first country of entry (as prescribed by the Dublin Convention), it is also true that such spatial order enforcement mechanisms can be effective only a posteriori, via large and complex procedures (Amigoni et al. 2020). De facto most migrants continue exiting Italy looking for regularization and forms of income in other Schengen states.

Mohammed, Sudanese refugee in Paris, frames it as follows:

Yes, people know about fingerprints, in Ventimiglia we got some information, but it is not clear, it is not sure, when I arrive I see it in real, yes some people know some information before arriving, about how to apply to asylum, about the Dublin system. When I arrived (in Italy) they didn't explain to me, we didn't have any choice, there was no time, they took my fingerprints and then you go. Few people who arrived in Sicily didn't know about Dublin regulation.

Indeed the issue of leaving fingerprints in Italy and its consequences is well known among undocumented people. However, given the lack of other legal channels to move, it is thus common to continue seeking asylum in other states different from the one in which the fingerprints were left. It can be interpreted as a kind of gamble (Belloni 2016) and it is worthwhile checking whether one's print is really in the database in a different state and if one may find other forms of regularization. Gianni, an activist of Eufemia Info-point comments:

concerning fingerprints, I saw that there was mistrust that these circulate throughout the European police system, people normally assumed they could escape it. At the Info-point we tried to explain the effects of Dublin, the risk of being sent back. While I explained the matter in Ventimiglia, it does not seem close. I explained it can happen, but not necessarily, and it can take a long time anyway. People don't worry about it in the present, they are more worried about the border or the police.

Secondly, we should always consider the comprehensively restrictive migration system that undocumented people are subject to and their will of reaching their goal, even if in doing so they infringe migration laws. Indeed in order to actuate their right to mobility, migrants encounter a limited spectrum of possibilities of which the legal is often long-winded or impossible.

### **Is the Right Information Enough? Smuggling Networks, Word of Mouth, Resource Shortcomings**

**Figure 7** Borders can be regarded as crucial and revealing areas where the underground railroad of circulations to and within Europe becomes visible in hardship and resistance. The Franco-Italian border of Ventimiglia is one of these forced stops. There, facilitators of any kind make their knowledge available to users in their networks, helping to keep certain hidden passages and safe places active. Crossing attempts are repeated on a daily basis supported by compatriots and local people, between knowledge sharing, debordering practices, arrests, and pushbacks. In addition, the increasing militarization of the border has led to a necessary specialization in crossing techniques, making autonomous crossing more difficult and increasingly dependent on smugglers. Often the knowledge people may access and learn is not enough because there are material and contextual limitations that make certain persons disadvantaged. Here, recurrent dynamics and factors that intertwine with and shape the information battleground at



**Figure 7.** Phone charging station informal camp Ventimiglia (credit Emanuela. Zampa. Photo).

the border are discussed: the smuggling network, word-of-mouth distortion, and resources shortcomings.

When migrants struggle to succeed autonomously in border crossings, they call upon the support of more experienced compatriots or experts with established practices on the ground. During prolonged crossing attempts, migrants themselves accumulate a wealth of informal knowledge and experiences, forming a cultural and social capital. Gaining access to this specific knowledge – e.g. contacts and expertise necessary to avoid a certain control – allows some migrants to facilitate the border crossing of others. As a matter of fact, the boundaries between smugglers and migrants are shifting and evanescent, given that migrants themselves are in most cases also *facilitators* (Triandafyllidou 2018). Practices of border-crossing facilitation become a source of income for people who decide to temporarily stop in strategic border



locations along their migratory route. Indeed, migrants and smugglers often share similar struggles, routes, services, and networks of people being transported. Acknowledging the above is especially significant because it contributes to deconstructing mainstream narratives about predatory smugglers and victimized migrants. Conversely, the facilitators' specific expertise is recognized by migrants whom, de facto, don't have other solutions available. However, verbal and factual evidences suggest the presence of large-scale criminal organizations exploiting the smuggling and trafficking business. This especially concerns women and children trafficking. Various people are managing the business in a more or less hidden way, perpetrating violence and gaining huge profit not only from border crossing, but especially from prostitution, organ sales, and labor exploitation.

Another relevant aspect is the evaluation of one's own experience as a smuggled person and the sharing of information chains. Indeed, smugglers' reputation is an essential feature in understanding border-crossing dynamics. For smugglers, a good reputation, built up from reviews of past customers, assures new clients and the continuation of their business. Peter, an asylum seeker that lived for two years in the Ventimiglia region, explains accurately his point of view on smugglers:

They are honest, mostly, because they need people, and they need migrants to trust them. They don't want to ruin their image for a few hundred euros. They want to preserve their business. If someone fails, they assure to bring them again. I kept the money of migrants until they passed and then I paid the smuggler, this because both of them trusted me. Smugglers who do not respect agreements made or cheat migrants normally do not last long at the border.

He also claimed that he sometimes acts as a mediator between the newly arrived undocumented people and the smugglers. He tries to facilitate the movements of other people in the spirit of solidarity with which others helped him. Indeed, it is important to consider that, in order to complete the transaction, it is fundamental for this type of organization to operate in an environment where sufficient trust exists between buyers and sellers (Achilli et al. 2018). For this reason he used to keep the money in *guarantee* until the people have successfully crossed the border and then paying the smugglers.

In fact, although smuggling services take place outside a regulated market, they follow cultural and local norms. For this reason, smugglers (single persons or groups) mostly recruit migrants according to their national or regional community. At the same time, migrants tend to privilege compatriots in their search for reliable smugglers. Nevertheless, risks migrants are subject to, in most cases, are not generated by smugglers themselves but are rather the outcome of restrictive migration policies and law enforcement at the border. As other authors have highlighted, violence in smuggling should be interpreted in the context of global migration systems that criminalize irregular travelers, also referred to as "structural violence" of the border regime (González 2018; Maher 2018; Sanchez 2017).

The smuggler point of view, rarely taken into account and discussed, is reported and discussed hereafter. Having had the possibility of getting to know and talk in depth with some of the most known Sudanese smugglers in town, views were exchanged about their activities and understandings. Of course, this is just one of the many groups and

individuals but is nonetheless worth discussing. Beyond employed techniques and strategies, which are not reported here, the central questions raised by him was the ethical principles that guide their work. In particular, the morality-based form of solidarity among migrants was opposed to the morality of European governments that reproduced colonial relations of domination based on capitalist exploitation and white supremacy.

Moahmmed especially highlighted the collective behavior that characterized their activities at the border:

Beyond organising border crossings, we live together with shebab,<sup>26</sup> we share information that is useful for people on the move, we provide food and a safe place to rest, we share fraternal chatter, we open our minds. All these are tools to make the [migrant] subject autonomous of which we take care. Sometimes they are pushed back and we encourage them to continue, they have to remember why they left their home, we have the same motivations, the same mentality, we obtain this with collective effort.

Indeed, the sense of community they create among the group and the social proximity with newcomers (Maher 2018) are key factors to consider in improving understanding of mobility facilitation and the moral obligation that such facilitators feel towards the people they transport. Most of the time, they share similar migratory careers, such as the condition of irregularity, difficulties in working legally and the uncertainties that characterize the process of asylum applications. Indeed, *chav* solidarity (Hunter 2020), that is to say peer solidarity, among people with similar goals or needs, is a key elements in the processes that underpins the smuggling activities they are performing at the Ventimiglia border.

Another key element of the knowledge network is word-of-mouth, its distortion and misinterpretations in place and time. Information circulates in several languages, with sensible contents, which must be constantly updated and which can be purposefully falsified. Therefore, in order to discern migratory choices, it is fundamental to grasp how information circulates and is understood.

The first sources of information are always migrants themselves and their broader community. Knowledge spreads easily among people on the move through word of mouth, Facebook, chats or other social networks, triggering specific behaviors. This is firstly because it is easier to trust people you know. Moreover, often people either do not know where to access certain information or do not understand it due to language barriers; they may not speak Italian, English or French. The examples and storytelling of friends and con-nationals instead constructs imaginaries that travel across continents and that no border or police force can stop. Indeed, ties to and exchanges within social networks not only facilitate the circulation of practical information about passages but also contribute to the transnational flow of aspirations, images, and expectations that affect individual choices (Bang Nielsen 2004).

There are multiple social actors that spread and broadcast knowledge to support migrant mobility, both for economic, criminal or solidarity reasons. Mentioned earlier, for example, were smugglers who seek to earn from their ability of passing the border illegally, or a local person that explains which path is less patrolled or at which hours police change shifts. Significant amounts of information like this circulate; the most difficult aspect is to discern what and who is trustworthy. A volunteer of Eufemia offers this summary:

There is a world that moves beyond laws, unforeseen, facilitated and supported. A lot of information is conveyed by word of mouth, by experiences of others, perhaps not very well understood. Migrants trust only a few of them, but if your cousin tells you something, you trust him.

Another relevant aspect is the possibility of comparing and verifying knowledge with local people, whether other migrants, or trustworthy actors. In fact, the process of continually acquiring and updating knowledge allows plans to be adjusted or changed on the fly. Given the high risk and precariousness of this kind of movement, the ability to adapt and build new plans is critical to achieving the goals set. In this sense we can try to explain mobility patterns that may appear sometimes inconsistent and even counterproductive from an outsider perspective. Let us consider, for example, the place of arrivals. Most of the time people move where they know they can find some other compatriots or people who can support their arrival and installation. Word of mouth about desirable destinations is often based on personal stories rather than the socio-economic conditions of the place in question. The most important thing is that there is someone you know who has already arrived and may help. One must always consider the limited mobility chances and precarity undocumented people experience and the situation of lawlessness in which they are constantly confined.

Access to reliable and up to date information is fundamental, but is it enough to guarantee safe and autonomous movement? Research shortcomings, new circumstances of the journey and incidents of different nature represent additional variables that can affect, both positively and negatively, underground journeys. The variables are many and often costly.

As we mentioned before, access to information and knowledge is getting easier with new technologies, the Internet and means of communication. These also allow easier circulation of knowledge in transnational networks increasingly playing a key role in shaping journeys and triggering migration. On the other side, not everyone has access to structured networks or assets and migrants enact different strategies to achieve the right to mobility. Something crucial to take into consideration when we try to give meanings to specific behaviors is the resources people possess when they have to make choices. The amount of money migrants can invest in their trip determines very different routes, means of transport and associated risks and outcomes. If people have the money to pay a smuggler it is more or less easy to continue to the next stop. If not, the importance of tools and skills people have at their disposal escalates in determining routes and practices.

Having a smartphone with an internet connection, for instance, radically increases a person's possibilities of moving. It allows one to access online maps, or timetables of various means of transport, to buy online tickets, to use simultaneous translation apps, to communicate in real time with people located in other countries or to call for help, among other things.

Another factor is equipment: having winter clothing, boots, a backpack and a sleeping bag makes it possible to spend days in natural areas – e.g. in the mountains – and to pass through poorly controlled areas without being stopped. Moreover, the physical and physiological condition of people coming from tragic journeys have to be taken into consideration; in many cases they are exhausted and weakened by the time they arrive at the Ventimiglia border. Indeed, destinations can be chosen depending on the resources available, the energy left and the possibility of gaining some documents. Mohammed, refugee in Marseille, explained:

people don't really know where they want to go, people arrive from Libya to Italy and if there are possibilities you stay. First you think about the paper. When I came to Europe I didn't know where I wanted to stay, in Italy, France, Germany, I didn't have any idea. First I went to Italy then I arrived in France and I decided to stay. Every person has his own plan, many people want to go to England.

In this sense, we should always consider that the various events experienced and information accessed by people on the move during their journeys, leads to changes in initial plans and subjectively contributes to the mobility choices that are made.

## Conclusion

This article presents the analysis of the Ventimiglia border struggle from a novel perspective by emphasizing the “battle” for the access, management and limitation of migratory knowledge. The border area of Ventimiglia is conceived as an information hub where people on the move get access and rely on a vast array of information in order to cross into France and survive at the border area. Indeed the information domain and its reproduction are presented in the article as key processes to consider when trying to grasp migrant choices, borders patterns, and interconnected dynamics. Moreover, it is crucial to conceive migratory social actions and rationales embedded in transnational and local frameworks made of actors communicating, impacting and supporting each other in an increasingly globalized world.

Firstly, the Ventimiglia area, a bottleneck in the underground network of circulation, is presented. Since the reintroduction of a strict border regime in 2015, it has become a compulsory stop for hundreds of thousands of illegalized migrants. Secondly, the militant ethnography methodology developed through the support activities of Progetto20k, Eufemia Info-point and Border Guide, is discussed. Acting as “mobility facilitators” boosted the degree of intimacy with migrant stories and trajectories that would have been impossible to access via classic ethnography means, thus deepening the authors' understanding and analysis. Border crossings, knowledge sharing, monitoring actions, legal guidance, hospitality, material, logistical and emotional support were some of the practices put in place. In doing so, particular interest was paid to the production, circulation and resilience of migratory knowledge roaming in transnational networks and resulting in consequent mobility patterns, tenaciously and ceaselessly reproduced. The knowledge acquired was brought back to the field and shared with actors involved in the struggle for movements. It is precisely in the continuous process of critique and application to the social reality that the knowledge continues to be true and explanatory. It is in the complicity with the people with whom we shared moments of the journeys that the possibility of building collective and decolonial knowledge arises. This intimacy was nonetheless reflexively elaborated, and somehow placed at a distance thanks to a permanent embeddedness of the authors' activism inside a scientific milieu.

The core of the contribution, focused on exchanging views on the more recurrent information contentions and struggles that migrants are forced to handle, such as border crossings, pushbacks, fingerprints identification, smuggling and resources shortcomings. Flexible border regimes, as well as debordering practices, are based on the access, understanding and continuous production of a transgressive border knowledge, both by migrants, smugglers, activists and other local and transnational actors involved. The

circulation of specific information is crucial for undocumented people in order to survive and move both within and across the border areas and Europe. Moreover, the production and circulation of this kind of expertise and information are increasingly mediated by the new digital communication platforms and the widespread access to internet and devices.

Differently, people access a variety of data that they compare and process according to their common experiences, needs and dreams. Indeed migration has to be framed not only as an individual choice or the sum of them, but as a social practice rooted in a specific social context and network. In this sense the concepts of mobile commons and facilitators, conveying specific patterns and habits, result in being central to understand underground mobility.

To conclude, when we study current migrations it is crucial to consider the personal and environmental conditions in which these illegalized journeys developed, the resources people handle and the support network they may have access to. The increased militarization of the border have determined a growing precariousness for both smugglers and migrants. The reason being that, with the tightening of controls, more sophisticated passage techniques are required, depending upon means and knowledge that many migrants arriving at the border do not have. The peculiar and often accidental intertwining of these interactions determines the multi causality and multi directionality of people movements leading to continuous adjustment and recalculation of plans until a place worth staying is found, perhaps for a while. In addition to the lack of effective institutional campaigns to provide safe mobility channels for people fleeing wars and difficulties, this contribution aims to highlight the extent of the restrictive migration system undocumented people are subject to. On the other side, knowledge and desire constitute major factors in structuring current migrant routes and challenging restrictive European border regime.

## Notes

1. <https://parolesulconfine.com/moussa-balde-e-morto-di-razzismo/>
2. Centro di Permanenza e Rimpatrio (Detention and Repatriation Centre)
3. <https://parolesulconfine.com/moussa-balde-e-la-sua-famiglia-non-sono-soli/>
4. <https://www.meltingpot.org/2023/01/ventimiglia-lennesima-vittima-del-regime-di-frontiera/>
5. <https://www.graphic-news.com/stories/la-bolla-di-ventimiglia/#>
6. <https://www.facebook.com/EufemiaVentimiglia/>
7. <https://keshaniya.org/>
8. <https://parolesulconfine.com/per-il-bar-hobbit-avamposto-dumanita/>
9. <https://www.rivieratime.news/don-rito-alvarez-prete-scampato-ai-narcos-accoglie-migranti-ventimiglia/>
10. Progetto20k is a political and self-managed collective that since 2016 has been fighting against the system of racist, capitalist, and patriarchal violences embodied by the border device. Its genesis lies in the encounter of activists who arrived in Ventimiglia to support people in transit. The collective, which has settled permanently in the Ventimiglia region, is concerned with informing people in transit about their rights, offering dedicated services, providing material and logistical support for travel, guaranteeing safe accommodation for vulnerable people, and developing local and international solidarity networks. (<https://www.facebook.com/progetto20k/>)
11. <https://www.gofundme.com/f/aiutaci-a-supportare-le-persone-in-transito>
12. Emic term for smuggler
13. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=celex%3A32013R0604>
14. <https://www.laboratoriosociologiavisuale.it/new/>

15. <https://www.facebook.com/EufemiaVentimiglia/>
16. [https://borderguide.info/src/files/Borderguide-FR-IT\\_v2\\_English\\_screen.pdf](https://borderguide.info/src/files/Borderguide-FR-IT_v2_English_screen.pdf)
17. <https://www.laboratoriosociologiavisuale.it/new/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Catalogo-Eufemia-Ita-Eng-WEB.pdf>
18. <https://w2eu.info/en/countries/italy>
19. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1je1BkKAbRDU0PzPE58nolPn72-I1kIObzyeSElf5-ok/edit?usp=drivesdk>
20. [https://borderguide.info/src/files/Borderguide-FR-IT\\_v2\\_English\\_screen.pdf](https://borderguide.info/src/files/Borderguide-FR-IT_v2_English_screen.pdf)
21. <https://w2eu.info/en>
22. <https://carovanemigranti.org/>
23. <https://altreconomia.it/i-morti-senza-nome-lungo-la-frontiera-tra-francia-e-italia/>
24. [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.33\\_GC-IV-EN.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.33_GC-IV-EN.pdf)
25. <https://www.asgi.it/>
26. Shabab or shebab is a very common word in Sudan. The primary meanings are “a group of young men,” “youth,” “you guys.”

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