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Experiencing re-bordered Europe

An ethnography of the Upper Susa Valley

Martina Pasqualetto

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Experiencing re-bordered Europe. An ethnography of the Upper Susa Valley

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Abstract

In the past decade, rising rates of transit migrations across Europe, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemics, have facilitated an internal European *re-bordering* process (Opilowska, 2020; Casella Colombeau, 2020; Karamanidou & Kasperek, 2022). Filling the gap in the anthropological research regarding its impact on frontier communities, this thesis explores the Italian Alpine frontier area bordering with France, in the Upper Susa Valley. Adopting an ethnographic approach, the research delves into how identity checks have been re-established to contain irregular “secondary movements” since 2017, along with the impact of the pandemic in 2020. The thesis builds on the Critical Border Studies theoretical framework, adopting a *bordering* approach, to understand the multi-dimensional nature of boundaries (Van Houtum & Van Naersser, 2002). This framework grounds the analysis of extensive empirical work using both classic and digital qualitative methods, including 28 interviews and a 7-month long participant observation.

Through this exploration, the thesis develops a comprehensive understanding of the various everyday *bordering* practices involving a wide range of agents - state actors, local authorities, solidarity agents, ordinary citizens, transit migrants. These practices contribute to the construction of a complex and polysemic boundary architecture in the Upper Susa Valley (Balibar, 2002). The thesis reveals multiple processes of tangible and intangible *re-bordering* arising from “secondary movements” crossing the Upper Susa Valley and its local public/private management according to a “care and control” strategy (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017), as well as the temporary restrictive mobility regime related to pandemic control.

By analysing the *re-bordering tales* shared by those who inhabit the *borderland*, the thesis highlights how the globalized nature of borders stratifies and fragments their *border experience* (Wille & Nienaber, 2020), according to factors such as citizenship, age, political role and civic commitment. It contributes to broader empirical and conceptual debates on the interplay between state sovereignty and life experience amidst global processes such as “transit migration” and the COVID-19 pandemic. Deeply grounded in the ethnographic tradition, this investigation provides original insights into the everyday reality of the unilaterality and “new normality” (Gülzau, 2023) of the return of identity checks at internal European frontiers. It is through these insights, that the thesis reveals the diverse national interests in frontier management embodied in the daily *bordering* practices of border agents.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Presentation, motivation and main objectives

At the top of the European Council's strategic agenda for the five-year period 2019-2024 stands the Protection of Citizens and Freedoms. It is described as follows:

Ensuring effective control of the EU's external borders and further developing a comprehensive migration policy. Fighting terrorism and cross-border/online crime, increasing the EU's resilience against both natural and man-made disasters.¹

Borders and their management climbed the list of European Union's concerns. The previous agenda for the five-year period barely mentioned this topic, referring mostly to the need of balancing globalized economies with social justice and protection (European Council, 2014). Therefore, such a great emphasis on external border control by European institutions is to be considered an element of novelty that deserves great pondering.

Considering the strengthening of the EU's external borders as a policy related to the citizens' protection and, consequently, undocumented migration from developing countries as a threat to Europe, has characterized European policies since the 1990s (Henry & Pastore, 2016; Hess & Kasperek, 2017b). However, it is certainly on the basis of the migration-related international events of the last 10 years that the protection of external borders and the fight against "illegal" migration have jumped to the top of the EU's strategic priorities.

Since 2011, nearly 3,4 million of non-Europeans have been entering the European territory outside of the legal framework requested by EU member states², as a direct or indirect consequence of the Arab Springs, ongoing wars in the Middle East, economic and environmental upheavals.

Literature has investigated the extent to which international migration are increasingly connoted by irregular and transit patterns (Collyer, Düvell & De Haas, 2012; Düvell, 2014; Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016). Individuals in need for protection and/or a life opportunity engage in long and

¹ European Union priorities 2019-2024. Source: https://european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/eu-priorities_en#:~:text=Promoting%20global%20peace%2C%20stability%2C%20democracy,global%20rules%2Dbased%20international%20order.

² IOM, Flow Monitoring. Source: <https://migration.iom.int/europe/arrivals>

dangerous land or sea journeys in order to reach Europe, due to the almost absence of legal channels for access.

As it has been extensively argued (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999; Newman, 2012; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Konrad, 2015), both internal and external European borders have been undergoing a process of transformation. This can be inscribed in a broader, global phenomenon: international boundaries are increasingly decentralized, dematerialized, technologized. The academic approach to borders as an object of study has also evolved. Critical Border studies introduced differentiated terms for intangible *boundaries* - social, cultural, community, linguistic - and the classical geographical *border*, which marks the dividing line between territories belonging to different entities, at various scales (Paasi, 2012a). In this context, the *bordering* approach (Van Houtum & Van Naersser, 2002) emerged to interpret the changing developments of contemporary boundaries and to grasp their multi-dimensional nature, functioning and meaning.

With reference to the European context, the Schengen agreement has started a dual, process of *de-bordering* of state borders dividing its signatory states, and *re-bordering* of the external border of the European space. Early literature focused on the compensatory nature of this apparently opposite processes, as the tightening of the outer boundary represented a condition to contain the risks related to the internal free circulation (Mitsilegas, 2002; Kramsch et al., 2004).

In the last decade, transit migrations targeting Europe have brought out ground-breaking outcomes, manifested in the long term process connecting internal and external European borders. Since 2015, transit migrations stemmed from the *re-bordering* process of the external European boundary collapsed the containment regimes and asylum systems of frontier countries, Italy and Greece (Kasperek, 2017). Transit migrations converted into “secondary movements”, as thousands of non-European citizens continued their journey within European territory (Collyer & de Haas, 2012). This circumstance has called into question the Dublin Regulation on the competences of states in matters of asylum and the efficiency of the Common European Asylum System. Nevertheless, it has above all brought back to the forefront the question of the cession of sovereignty of states in the process of building and functioning of the European Union.

Consequently, in contrast to the previous two decades, it is also the protection of *internal* borders that is of concern to the European institutions and member states. Since 2015, European countries have increasingly re-established identity controls at their internal frontiers, as a measure to ensure their national security facing the challenges posed by international migrations (Gülzau, 2023). The contradiction between the principle of free movement assured to European citizens, and the functional implementation of increasingly restrictive mobility policies for non-Europeans, has opened up questions about the founding principles of the European system and its future developments (Zaiotti,

2013; Guild et al., 2015; Casella Colombeau, 2020). Almost 40 years after the signature of the Schengen agreement, some internal European borders are being *re-bordered*, while regaining visibility and resuming control functions, directed at countering terrorism and the cross-border mobility of undocumented persons and asylum seekers.

The COVID-19 pandemic and related restriction to people mobility have introduced further elements of change and complexity in the *re-bordering* process. The sudden and widespread, albeit temporary, resort by European states to border closures for health reasons showed an even deeper crack in the Schengen system than that shown by the “refugee crisis” (Opilowska, 2020; Montaldo, 2020).

Given the centrality of the issue of the cession of sovereignty in European perspectives, the institutional and policy debate around the “return” of internal borders is of undoubted interest and importance. Moreover, as this thesis broadly analyses, the general direction of European migration and border management policy suggests that the return of internal borders will be part of our future political and social landscape. Therefore, of equally significant interest are the consequences, both material and immaterial, that the *re-bordering* of internal European Union borders is manifesting in the daily lives of those who concretely experience those transformations.

Literature have widely discussed the nature of border zones, or *borderlands*, as “barometers of political change” (Häkli & Kaplan, 2001), and the capability of “border people” of influencing the states’ policy-making (Sahlins, 1992; Donnan & Wilson, 1998; Brunet-Jailly, 2005). Accordingly, the internal European regions are privileged places from which to observe and analyse how the *re-bordering* process unfolds, develops and influences the everyday lives of European citizens. Moreover, Critical Border Studies have placed at the centre of theoretical analysis the co-participatory and conflictual construction of borders by state and non-state actors (Rumford 2007), as well as their ontological investigation from the *border narratives* of those who experience them every day, able to frame a multi-perspectival understanding of the nature and functioning of contemporary frontiers.

In light of this perspective, this thesis questions: what impact does the *re-bordering* process have on the professional, economic, social and cultural activities of European *borderlanders*? To what extent is the imaginary of the border changing? Or, more specifically, to what extent is the process of *re-bordering* having an impact on the *border experience* (Wille & Nienaber, 2020) of those who inhabit European internal *borderlands*? Helping to answer these broad questions is the aim of my doctoral project, of which this dissertation is the final result.

The development of this dissertation and its key questions have been generated and guided by a personal strong interest in Borders and Migrations, that can be dated back to the very beginning of my research career. In my MA thesis I explored the European citizenship as border builder in the Italian agricultural sector. Through an ethnographic work in the Southern Italian countryside, I

discussed the extent to which the immigration of Bulgarians and Romanians, who at the time were neo-comunitarian citizens, shaped the economic dynamics by triggering a downward spiral in terms of remuneration and work conditions. In that economic sector, the European citizenship was used by major entrepreneurs in the agricultural and canning industry as a criterion to employ legal workers in a context of exploitation, reducing the risk of being fined for using the labour of irregular persons such as Moroccans, who until then constituted the majority of workers in the sector. In general, the European citizenship bordered the Bulgarians and Romanians in a scenario of labour exploitation and ethnic competition.

My academic activity was coupled with activism in social rights promotion, that allowed me to gain a perspective “from the inside” with reference to the events or dynamics that were representing my subject of study, as well as fuelled my motivation in the investigation activity. Since then, this way of “living the field” has characterized my research activity. During my university period I engaged with activism in several spaces where European borders were manifesting in many different ways: the parks in Padua, a university town in northern Italy where I was studying, where Tunisian citizens who had migrated to Italy during the Arab Spring were sleeping outside because they were by law excluded from international protection. The watermelon fields in Apulia, where hundreds of sub-Saharan migrants were piece working for 3 euros a box, and in 2011 organised the first strike of foreign farm labourers in Italy (Brigate di Solidarietà Attiva et al., 2012). The tomato fields in the province of Foggia, where again hundreds of irregular migrants were living in precarious settlements, while expanding the profits of the large-scale retail trade though with their servitude wages (Peano, 2017). The endless greenhouses in the province of Ragusa, Sicily, where Romanian men and women were working in isolation for entire seasons, underpaid and without any reference to the local authorities in the health, social and trade union fields.

In continuity with this straightforward interest in migration topic, I attended the 1st degree master in Immigration and social transformations, in the context of which I structured my final dissertation on the “volunteer work” of asylum seekers in Italy. This form of social engagement was promoted by local authorities since 2016-17 in order to manage popular tolerance against asylum seekers’ supposed inactivity while being ensured temporary protection before their claims were scrutinized. I demonstrated the extent to which this policy manifested at a ground level as a “spectacularized atonement process”, in which migrants’ unpaid work was offered to public view in order to let them “give back” a part of what was offered them, with a distortion of asylum from a right to a concession (Pasqualetto, 2017; Pasqualetto & Perocco, 2020).

It was in the context of a research aimed to investigate the political struggles of asylum seekers in Italy (Pasqualetto & Perocco, 2021), that I realised the growing importance of internal borders of the

European Union in relation to the mobility practices of non-European citizens. In 2015-2016, the protests of asylum seekers and transit migrants on the Balzi Rossi rocks in Ventimiglia (Menghi, 2018) were news events. The reintroduction of identity checks at internal EU borders still appeared as a temporary measure put in place against the migrants' spontaneous mobility, generating violence and deaths (Luppi & Quadroni, 2017). The management of the European Union's internal borders began to be part of my research interests due to their centrality in influencing the lives of the migrant population, but also everyone's everyday experience of Europe. In reference to this, I wondered how do Europeans live a border landscape where national authorities put police to block humans where, for 40 years, the European integration process and freedom of movement had been celebrated daily. Based on this interest, I decided to focus my PhD thesis on this topic.

The thesis explores to what extent global phenomena, such as international migrations and the COVID-19 pandemics, impact on the *border experience* in internal European *borderlands*, through an ethnographic investigation focused on the impact of the *re-bordering* process on the *borderlanders'* daily life. On the one hand, critical to this research is the observation of how do state border mutate according to *re-bordering* policies, triggered by the transit of undocumented migrants and the COVID-19 pandemics. On the other hand, the research seeks a bottom-up contribution on the consequences of the *re-bordering* process on frontier communities, both at a material and imaginary level.

1.2. Research field

The case study of this thesis is the Upper Susa Valley, a *borderland* located in an Alpine area in the north-west of Italy and bordering the south-east of France. Throughout the course of history, this territory has been strongly influenced by the transit of people and goods in their movements between the two sides of the Alps, and since 1713 by its proximity to the political border between France and Italy. Recently, the border dividing the Upper Susa Valley and France has been characterised by a *re-bordering* process. On the one hand, it has been triggered since 2017 by the transit of asylum seekers and undocumented non-European people heading towards continental Europe through the Alpine gates of the valley. On the other hand, it was further implemented in 2020 and 2021 as a measure to contain the spread the COVID-19 virus from Italy, the European epicentre of the pandemic. The *re-bordering* process manifested itself with a return of French border police controls, mainly targeting people with non-European appearances in the first phase and extended to the whole population in the second.

The ethnographic research and fieldwork of this thesis have focused on investigating the extent to which the *re-bordering* process has taken place in the Upper Susa Valley. It also concentrated on revealing to what extent this process has modified *borderlanders*' habits, ties and ideas in relation to the border and as inhabitants of a frontier zone. To this aim, the fieldwork included in-depth interviews and informal conversations with various categories of *borderlanders* - state representatives, local authorities' representatives, non-profit sector's representatives, local dwellers – that allowed an exploration on how the transformation of the border in terms of *re-bordering* has changed their daily *border experience*.

Furthermore, a 7-month participant observation has been implemented, with a particular attention on the *rifugio* Fraternità Massi in Oulx, a 3.500-inhabitant town in the heart of the Upper Susa Valley. Since 2018, this privately run shelter, the only one of its kind in Italy, has been hosting people in transit coming from both the Balkan and Mediterranean routes and heading to France and other European countries. Here, transit migrants receive free food, accommodation, clothing, medical and legal assistance. The *rifugio* also takes in migrants who are rejected by the French police at the Alpine border crossings, to provide basic assistance to those who are not admitted to French territory, in a mountainous location where winter temperatures jeopardise their safety. My participant observation focused mainly on the relationships between actors playing any role inside the organisation - staff, volunteers, migrants - and outside - Italian and French police, Red Cross, no-border activists, local institutions and locals. These categories were included under the label of *borderlanders* and their daily *border experience* was investigated. In addition, interviews and observations have focused on the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the *re-bordering* process, on the transit migration practices, on the solidarity responses and on the *border experience* of border actors.

The fieldwork was accompanied by an intense volunteer activity, which allowed an in-depth experience of the daily reality of the *rifugio* and to understand its complex workings. In addition, this facilitated building relationships based on trust and shared commitment with several of the research participants, as well as it fostered encounters with migrants who cross the Upper Susa Valley daily as part of their migration projects.

It is important to note that the Upper Susa Valley was chosen as the field for my ethnographic study for several reasons, that emphasise its relevance to the phenomenon under study, namely the process of *re-bordering* that actually involves its border with the French *Haute Alpes* region. Nevertheless, prior research had made me realize the extent to which a study about the local communities residing in the Upper Susa Valley would generate a rich and meaningful ethnography on what does *border experience* mean in a re-bordered Europe facing international transit migrations. Academic debate about this underdeveloped field reported of dangerous crossings of transit migrants through a

militarized Alpine landscape and of an intense, grass-rooted solidarity response, largely involving both local groups and international organizations (Bachelier, 2020; Tazzioli & Walters, 2019; Tazzioli, 2020a and 2020b). Therefore, the interest in unravelling the complexity of such a rich and differentiated *border experience* contributed to my decision of choosing the Upper Susa Valley as field for my ethnographic research.

It is essential to acknowledge that this research was always viewed as dynamic and organic. Throughout its progression, the research underwent changes at various stages, each with its distinct focus and direction. What for some years might have appeared as a transitional measure, that of internal border controls, implemented to deal with an emergency, that of the “refugee crisis”, turned out to be a normalized policy in the European border management scenario. This became particularly evident with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which triggered a general and unilateral, yet temporary, closure of almost all internal EU borders. In 2023, migration-related internal controls have still not been removed. Therefore, the daily experience of a *re-bordered* Europe configures as a research topic that will play a key role in ethnographic research at European borders in the near future. In addition, the motivation of the research shifted as my engagement in the field progressed. The volunteering activity at the *rifugio* Massi, that was carried out in continuity with the practice of combining research and activism that has characterised my academic career since the beginning, allowed me to be welcomed into local groups that has put the territory and those passing through it at the centre of their community commitment. After the end of the fieldwork, I decided to remain in the Upper Susa Valley, in order to stay close to the border dynamics that had represented my research interest so far, continue my activism engagement, and be part of the local community. Since January 2022, I was also given the opportunity to be employee in the no-profit enterprise that runs the *rifugio* Massi, where I could turn part of my activism into a paid activity. Therefore, I feel that the drafting of the thesis and the sharing of my research results with those who now represent my community, militant and otherwise, are part of a heartfelt and rightful “return to the field”, in exchange for the time, support and recognition I have received over the past 2 years from the people of the Upper Susa Valley.

With reference to the research field, the main objective of the thesis is pursued by the exploration of intermediate topics with reference to the case study, with a focus on the following:

- Investigating the nature, role and functioning of contemporary European borders, as well as the European migratory policy (Pastore & Henry, 2016), according to Critical Border Studies and the *bordering* approach (Van Houtum & Van Naersser, 2002); the concept of *border experience* (Wille & Nienaber, 2020);

- Exploring the *re-bordering* of internal European state boundaries in light of recent developments in terms of “secondary movements” and the COVID-19 (Casella Colombeau, 2020; Klatt, 2020; Karamanidou & Kasperek, 2022; Gülzau, 2023);
- Examining in depth the Upper Susa Valley and its inclusion in international transit migration routes (Giliberti, 2017; Vergnano, 2020; Tazzioli, 2020a), whilst exploring the emersion and consolidation of a humanitarian scenario in the *borderland*;
- Unravelling the transformation of the Alpine Italian-French border according to the *re-bordering* process facing “secondary migrations”, in terms of *bordering* practices (Van Houtum, 2000) and its militarization (Bachelier, 2020);
- Analysing the fallouts of “secondary migration”, the *re-bordering* process and the humanitarian scenario on the local community, in terms of *border experience*;
- Studying the impact of the COVID-19 on the pre-pandemic context in terms of “secondary movements”, border policies and functioning, *border experience*;
- Examining and revealing how the border transformations have influenced *borderlanders’* perceptions through their *border narratives* (Newman 2003).

The exploration of the field is framed by the ethnographic approach, to capture the reality at the borders as a sociocultural phenomenon as well as an exceptionally embodied experience. This is critical as this thesis explores everyday social responses to unprecedented contexts determined by increasingly connected global and local political, cultural, and social dimensions.

As far as the re-establishment of identity checks at internal European borders is concerned, the research aims to go beyond the policy approach with which this event has been considered so far, looking instead into the dimension regarding how it is produced, reproduced and contested at a daily basis. When it comes to law enforcement agents taking part to the process, the investigation aims to grasp a bottom-up understanding regarding how their *bordering* practices unravel at a daily basis. This is matched with an observation of how transit migrants crossing the Upper Susa Valley relate with the *re-bordering* process embodied by police agents, as well as with solidarity agents and common local people. Indeed, the ethnographic approach also provides an in-depth view on the daily lives of those who took part to the humanitarian scenario, at various levels and with various roles. The research especially investigates the impact of “secondary movements” on their life experience and border imaginary. Related to this, it delves into *border narratives* shared by participant, and in particular ordinary dwellers, with the goal of disclosing meaningful insights into the impact of

national policies on border and migration management on the *border experience* of those who inhabit a *borderland* involved by global phenomena.

Finally, the investigation of the subject of study with ethnographic lenses brings a bottom-up perspective on the everyday reality of a key event within the contemporary European political scenario. By addressing the *re-bordering* process from the grounded experience of those who live daily in the European *borderlands*, the goal of the research is to reveal how the contemporary internal borders of the European Union are constructed, how they function, and how they are experienced and perceived on a daily basis.

1.3. Thesis structure

The dissertation is structured into 9 chapters.

In Chapter 2 “Ethnographies of a re-bordered Europe”, I offer a detailed state-of-the-art regarding the theoretical focuses of the dissertation. It gives centrality to two themes, around which it builds both the theoretical basis and the empirical research work: the concepts of *re-bordering* and *border experience*.

In the first part I introduce the *bordering* approach (Van Houtum & Van Naersser, 2002). A brief overview of the evolution of Border studies in recent decades locates its origin in the *renaissance* of this discipline. On this regard, I explain how it emerged from the need of new interpretative tools to grasp the ontological and epistemological transformation of the modern border, in the face of global processes that changed its nature, role and function in a changing global scenario. In particular, I highlight its capability of including in a coherent, yet multi-disciplinary, theoretical framework for the different types of borders emerged in modern, post-modern and Critical Border studies - hard geographic demarcators, social and cultural boundaries, perceived and imagined frontiers.

In the second part I investigate the European scenario as a “bordering laboratory” (Scott, 2012a), in order to explore the nature, role and function of contemporary European borders. I take on board the “compensatory logic” (Mitsilegas, 2002) of the Schengen system, illustrating that the internal *de-bordering* matched with an external *re-bordering* to ensure the safety of the common area. As far as the *re-bordering* process is concerned, I illustrate the restrictive nature of the European migration policy (Henry & Pastore, 2016). Approaching it under the lenses of the *bordering* theory, I take on board the securitized, externalized, technologized, disseminated and polysemic nature of the contemporary external European border. I particularly focus on the securitization dimension, discussing it in relation to the functioning of the external European border facing transit migrations (Collyer & de Haas, 2012; Düvell, 2014) and according to a structure/agency paradigm (Brunet-Jailly,

2005). Finally, I provide an overview of ethnographic contributions that shed light on the agency dimension of transit migrations in Europe.

In the third part I explore the *re-bordering* process that has been involving internal European borders since 2015. After illustrating its rationale of containing “secondary movements”, I unpack the literature debate that discussed it as a feature of crisis of the Schengen system, or as a policy to be considered as “normalized” within the European migration and border policy scenario.

The massive return of internal EU borders in the realm of the COVID-19 emergency, that I examine in the fourth part, is illustrated to support the argumentation that internal European borders are back to stay. This justified an ethnographic interest for re-bordered European internal *borderlands*, of which I propose an overview. In particular, I emphasise the *re-bordering* role of the pandemic, that in the European scenario backed the massive, unilateral, yet temporary, return of identity checks at internal frontiers.

Finally, in the fifth part I provide a state-of-the-art regarding anthropological perspectives in Borderland studies. First, I explain that the “people approach” to the study of borders that emerged in the 00s (Van Houtum, 2000) has favoured the academic interests for “border people” and, accordingly, for the areas they populate i.e. *borderlands* (Martinez, 1994; Sahlins, 1998; Donnan & Wilson, 1998; Brunet-Jailly, 2005). Then, I explain that *borderlands* have largely represented an anthropological subject of study, insofar as scholars have focused on “border people” to investigate bottom-up dimensions on the relationship between the state, its edges and the individual (Donnan, 2010). Next, I explain that the *bordering* approach introduced innovative tools in Borderland studies. This concerns for example the notion of “borderwork” (Rumford, 2012), able to grasp the multi-dimensional construction of contemporary borders. On this regard, I propose an in-depth study of the category of “humanitarian borderwork”, through which the transformation of European borders into places of both securitization and rescue of migrants in transit grappling with European border violence has recently been studied from an ethnographic perspective. Moreover, I delve into *border narratives* (Newman, 2003), that allow to frame the multi-perspectival meaning of contemporary borders. Grounded on this rich state-of-the-art, I introduce the concept of *border experience* (Wille & Nienaber, 2020), describing its significance in understanding European boundaries in times of *re-bordering*.

In Chapter 3 “Policy overview” I complement the theoretical framework with a policy overview regarding the European migration and border legal framework, and specifically the internal *re-bordering* process.

In the first part I illustrate the Schengen *acquis* and the European migration policy from a policy point of view, focusing on both the *de-bordering* and *re-bordering* processes they support and on their function of containing transit migrations and “secondary movements”.

In the second part I examine the implementation of the securitized approach to migrations in the European scenario in the time frame 2010-2021. I take on board both the Central Mediterranean and the Balkan route and their interconnections, questioning the coping nature of transit migrations and their role in shaping the European border policies. A special focus is dedicated to the “long Summer of migration” (Kasperek & Speer, 2015) of 2015, in order to discuss the role of European authorities, the Balkan countries and the *agency* of transit migrants in determining the re-establishment of internal identity checks.

I unpack the internal *re-bordering* process in the third part. I explore the policy framework within which it unravelled and the role of European authorities and Member states and its modification overtime. Finally, I document under a policy perspective its value as enduring measure matured in a context of unilaterality of the exercise of national sovereignty.

In Chapter 4 “Methodology” I illustrate the methodological corpus of the thesis.

In the first part, I engage with demonstrating the originality of my work by outlining which focal aspects have been investigated so far with reference to the subject of study, as well as those topics and perspectives which deserve further studies. Moreover, I explore the relevance of the ethnographic approach to the subject of study by highlighting the potentialities of Anthropology in expanding the scientific knowledge, as well as the extent to which my research can contribute to the scientific production in multi-disciplinary terms.

In the second part I illustrate the methods and techniques implemented for the data collection, data management and data analysis. First I illustrate that the thesis has relied on both digital and traditional qualitative methods due to the COVID-19 limiting the physical access to the field during the first months of fieldwork. Second, after introducing the difference between “online ethnography” and “online research methods”, I introduce online interviews as representing the core method used for the online fieldwork. A well, I provide details on the access to the field, which has been carried out fully remotely based on web resources. A further part is dedicated to the data collection and the data management. As far as the data collection is concerned, I provide details regarding the sample selected for in-depth interviews, as well as their quantity and type. A table is added for the purpose. Furthermore, I illustrate the participant observation carried out in the field. In terms of data management, I explain how ethnographic data have been systematized and analysed.

The third and final part concerns a focus on the challenges and ethical concerns that characterized this research. In particular, I address the dimension of doing ethnography in times of pandemic.

In Chapter 5 “The Upper Susa Valley” I present the case study.

In the first part, I categorize the Upper Susa Valley as a border zone, describing its state and non-state borders as historically determined, and deeply intertwined with the formation of its cultural profile, its economic vocation and its transnational activities with the French Alpine communities (Bonaiti et al., 2007).

In the second part, I describe the extent to which the Upper Susa Valley has always been a “land of transit”. I explain that its gates into the Cottian Alps have been crossed since ancient times and have served as natural bridges between the Po region and the Rhône area. Furthermore, I illustrate that during the last two centuries, the valley has been at the centre of Italian and European mobility strategies, which has led to the construction of the Turin-Lyon railway and the Fréjus tunnel. Related to this, I dedicate a special focus to the popular struggles against highly strategic works of great territorial impact involving the Susa Valley today.

In the third part, I illustrate the political and geographical reasons behind the recent inclusion of the Upper Susa Valley within international transit migration routes. Afterwards, I provide a detailed description of the migratory flow that, since 2017, has took shape in the Upper Susa Valley, based on NGOs reports (MEDU, 2020, 2021, 2022) and newspaper articles. This is followed by a complete overview regarding the militarization of the Alpine section of the Italian-French border and its practical outcomes in terms of identity checks targeting people in transit (for example: Bachellerie, 2020).

In the fourth part, I account for the development of a solidarity movement in favour of transit migrants, aimed to alleviate the suffering of transit migrants facing the re-bordered Italian-French frontier. Based on a relevant paper by Tazzioli (2020a), I explore it under a “care and control” approach (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015).

In the final part I put forward some insights regarding the impact on the local community of both the development of a solidarity panorama and the passage of transit migrants in the Upper Susa Valley.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 finally illustrate the ethnographic results of the research.

In Chapter 6 “*Re-bordering* practices and hindered mobilities in the Upper Susa Valley” I explore the processes of (*re*)bordering that have involved the *borderland* since 2017 as a containment strategy against “secondary movements”.

In the first part I account for the day-by-day work of Italian and French law enforcement agents that contribute to the production and reproduction of the state border within a containment strategy of *irregularized* crossing by asylum seekers across the Alps. While illustrating *how*, *when* and *where* the *re-bordering* process has been materially performed in the Upper Susa Valley, as well as *who* performs it, I compare *bordering* practices put in place by French and Italian authorities. Based on this, I discuss the different state interests at stake in the *re-bordering* process at the Alpine frontier exposed by the ethnographic analysis.

In the second part I delve into the mobility strategies that transit migrants implemented in the Upper Susa Valley, in order to overcome the *re-bordering* practices at and beyond the borderline. I explain the role of migrants' *agency* in opening and consolidating transit routes towards, across and beyond the Upper Susa Valley. I also explore the adaptation of transit migrants' mobility strategies to permanent and contingent factors hindering them, illuminating the structure/agency dimension of the transit migration (Brunet-Jailly, 2011) and its nature as coping strategy (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2005).

In Chapter 7 "Geographies of humanitarian borderwork in the Upper Susa Valley" I address the *borderland* as a place of "humanitarian borderwork", building on the theoretical framework offered by Pallister-Wilkins (2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2020). Building on empirical findings, I delve into the state actors' everyday implementation of a "care and control" (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015) strategy with reference to "secondary movements" in the Upper Susa Valley.

In the first part I zoom in the humanitarian practices implemented by both state and non-state agents in the spectrum of a management of "secondary movements" backed by the "care and control" strategy.

In the second part I delve into the making of the "humanitarian borderscape" (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017a) in the Upper Susa Valley, shaped by state and non-state actors' everyday solidarity practices. In particular, I debate the extent to which the territorial scope of the humanitarian intervention, as well as the range of actors involved and their activities, resulted by the interplay between the logic of "care and control" adopted by state actors to manage "secondary movements", and the everyday practices of humanitarian agents aimed to support, contrast, transgress it.

In the third part, I illustrate that the state intervention diversified the humanitarian scenario, validating those practices addressing "secondary movements" as an emergency, and repressing those aimed to uncover the political charge and fight the border device. Based on this, I argument that multiple "geographies of humanitarian borderwork" overlap in the Upper Susa Valley, resulting from the

interplay of *bordering* practices and humanitarian activities carried out within and against the “care and control” state-backed strategy.

In Chapter 8 “Border experiences of g/local processes in the Upper Susa Valley” I zoom in the impact of “secondary movements”, the *re-bordering* process and the “humanitarian borderscape” on the daily experience of those who inhabit the *borderland*. In general, I provide a multi-dimensional and multi-perspectival picture of the *border experience* in the Upper Susa Valley, based on the *re-bordering tales* collected from the various categories of border agents.

In the first part I explain that “secondary movements” globalized the everyday life of *borderlanders*, with different outcomes according to their role. I particularly focus on the local authorities’ representatives’ role in managing locally “secondary movements”, and on the ordinary dwellers’ experience of transit migration in the shape of daily encounters, that impacted on their *border perception*.

In the second part I address the *border experience* topic under the lenses of the polysemy of the Alpine Italian French border. I address that of transit migrants with ethnographic vignettes, and I compare it to that of European *borderlanders*, taking into particular account the role of COVID-19 cross-border mobility restrictions.

In the third part I address the impact of the “humanitarian borderscape” (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017b) on both solidarity actors and ordinary dwellers, standing out in the role that the “care and control” strategy has played in determining the impact of “secondary movements” on local communities.

In Chapter 9 “Daily building and living the internal borders” I finally outline the general conclusions of the dissertations. I discuss the significance of the ethnographic approach to illuminate the *border experience* in times of *re-bordering*, as well as to provide meaningful bottom-up perspectives on the everyday reality of the return of identity checks at European internal boundaries. Finally, I identify some themes that deserve further research.

Chapter 2

Ethnographies of a re-bordered Europe

This Chapter provides the theoretical framework of the thesis. It adopts and develops the perspective of the *bordering* approach (Van Houtum & Van Naersser, 2002), within the general aim of investigating the European internal *re-bordering* process through a special focus on the *border experience* of those who inhabits the inner European *borderlands*.

This body of literature provided a ground-breaking perspective for the analysis of *where*, *how* and *when* do contemporary European borders perform their demarcation role, as well as *who* produces, reproduces and contest them. Taking as its reference the “transit migration” that has characterized the global human mobility scenario of recent decades, the Chapter highlights the extent to which the nature, role and functioning of Europe’s modern borders have evolved as a function of increasingly externalised and exclusionary migration and border policies.

Stemming from this debate, this Chapter aims to provide a consistent theoretical framework for the study of the *re-bordering* process occurring nowadays in Europe, as a response to both “secondary movements” and the COVID-19. It also introduces the category of *border experience* as a tool to investigate whether and how this event has affected the daily lives of those living in European *borderlands*.

2.1. The *bordering* approach

This part briefly traces the origins and development of the *bordering* approach theory, examining the historical and academic context in which it emerged, as well as the innovations it has brought to the field of Border Studies.

2.1.1. “Border change” in the 90s Europe

The decade of the 90s has represented a key *momentum* for the evolution of European borders and both their functioning and understanding. The signature of the Schengen agreement and the Treaty of Amsterdam marked a pivotal moment in the European Union integration process. This boosted a “border change” process of European boundaries (Anderson & O’Dowd, 1999), after the stability that had characterized the period after the IIWW (Van Houtum, 2000 cfr. O’Dowd, 1998).

The integration process came along with a deep transformation of both common borders between member states, as well as those borders which from time to time marked the outer limit of the Schengen area, according to the territorial extension of the Agreement. European boundaries assumed multiple understandings: they have been interpreted as *barriers* to the economic trades; as *bridges* enabling cross-border relations between border regions; as *resources* that serve interests of both state and non-state actors; as *symbols of identity*, able to spread a sense of common identity, beyond the classic state sovereignty exercise (O'Dowd, 2002).

Contingently, the debate on "border change" quickly overcame the theorizations of a "borderless world" (Ohmae, 1990; Oommen, 1995; Welchman, 1996; Helliwell, 1998) that predicted the regression of state borders in the face of globalization processes. Indeed, the Globe kept on being organized by international borders: the globalization bolstered both the creation, relocation and transformation of functions and symbolic meaning of existing boundaries, as well as a shift in their location when paired with the creation of supra-national states such as EU or NAFTA (Wastl-Walter, 2012). In the European Union scenario, state borders multiplied, proliferated and differentiated, rather than disappearing (Donnan & Wilson, 2012, Neilson & Mezzadra, 2013).

Literature also engaged with the modified relationship between the state and its boundaries. Since the 90s, global processes put into discussion the classic understanding of state sovereignty (Agnew, 2003). Essentially, they challenged the state-centric system, where borders functioned as territorial markers for the organization of the economic, political and identity-cultural spheres (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999). Transnationalism further modified the relevance and role of state borders in politics, economy, society, and culture (Ernste et al., 2009, Vertovec, 2009). In particular, these processes created a contradiction in the same nature of state sovereignty: the restructuring of economic and financial processes on a world-wide scale relativized it, while the increased human mobility rate strengthened the return to harder migration policies as well as national discourses on identity and citizenship (Sassen, 1996). At the relativizing of the importance of states in economy corresponded an enduring interest in managing citizens' belonging and wellbeing, as well as human mobility and foreign individual admissions (Paasi, 2012a).

Accordingly, the function of state borders as sovereignty demarcations underwent a transformation process. On the economic side, state borders were increasingly overtaken by multinational structures and flows, but still interacted with economic regimes by creating good value dumping and by regulating labour force mobility and salaries (Brunet-Jailly, 2005). When it comes to international relations, state borders are still places of political clash and contestation (Diener & Hagen, 2010). In the contemporary world, states hold a transformed sovereignty that is expressed through borders in

terms of a residual physical power, while they conserve their role as meaning-making and meaning-carrying entities (Donnan & Wilson, 1998).

The European context has taken on primary importance in this scenario. Together with other important contemporary phenomena such as ethno-nationalism, enduring border disputes, political, economic and environmental issues, as well as the phenomenon of state fragmentation after the fall of the URSS (Kolossoff, 2012), the cession of state sovereignty under the EU integration process favoured a renewed academic interest in the study of multiplied and transforming state borders (Paasi, 2012a).

2.1.2. The *renaissance* of Border Studies

In the 90s, the academic interest on the study of borders and border regions grew dramatically. Scholars spoke about a *renaissance* of the discipline of Border Studies (Newman & Paasi, 1998; Newman, 2006a, 2006b). Until then, the study of borders had remained the preserve of political geographers, focused mostly on a static and deterministic description as intra-state demarcations, as well as about their location and the processes that involve their determining (Van Houtum, 2005). Main contributions of this classic positivistic approach, which considered borders as material objects for empirical research, were those of Prescott (1965) and Minghi (1963).

As the geographer Paasi explained (2012a), in the 90s the behavioral approach by Minghi and Rumley (1991) provided a key complementation that gave space to the psychological and perceptual meanings attached to borders. These developments represented the starting point for the transformation of Border studies into a multi-disciplinary field. Borders as an object of study increasingly attracted the attention of scholars from disciplines other than Political geography, such as Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, International law and others (Newman, 2012).

The convergence of different disciplines into Border studies led to a fundamental evolution of the concept of *border* itself. Scholars began to theorize borders as social, cultural, economic, functional bounding elements, beyond their classical political demarcation function. The advent of post-structuralism (Agnew, 1994; Gupta & Ferguson, 1994) broke into Border studies, taken as starting point for a post-modern perspective and building in turn on the debate around de-territorialization and re-territorialization (Agnew, 1994; Shapiro & Alker, 1996; Kuehls, 1996). The post-national and post-modern perspectives on borders theorized them as uncoupled from the state expressions of sovereignty, and far from their territorial nature. Therefore, this debate most referred to borders in a metaphorical, not material, sense (Paasi, 2012a, p. 18), shifting “from the geopolitical to the level of social practices at and across borders” (Scott, 2012a, p. 86).

Both the multi-disciplinarity and the advent of post-structuralist approaches have made the very notion of a *border* heterogeneous (Newman, 2012).

2.1.3. Understanding borders as processes and institutions

Facing the new ontological and epistemological complexity within the field of Border studies, political geographers committed to explore new theoretical conceptualizations with the aim of grasping the nature, role and function of contemporary borders. This dissertation embraces this theoretical challenge, integrating the anthropological perspective within the academic debate about the contemporary nature and functioning of European borders.

In the discussion about the ontological transformation of boundaries facing new globalization and state sovereignty perspectives, Paasi (1998) addressed their “changing meaning as manifestations of territoriality” (p. 72) and proposed a new understanding of borders as *processes* and *institutions*. As processes, while conserving their traditional functions of territorial demarcation and control, they are also embodied in socio-cultural actions and discourses influencing their meaning, and so their same role and functioning. As institutions, they manifest at various scales: at the border area as well as at other spatial scales and social life realms, working as agents of both territorial and social demarcations. On this regard, Paasi claimed:

I do not regard borders as fixed lines, but rather discuss them as arising out of processes in which territories and their contested meanings are socially and culturally constructed. It is important to note that boundaries are not located merely on the border area but everywhere in a society, in diverging social practices and discourses. This also means that the scale of the state manifests itself on other scales as well. (2001, p. 135).

This theorization contributed to put together classical and post-national understanding of borders, proposing a theoretical framework in which to explore borders as state and non-state expressions; material and immaterial entities; practices taking place at the border and beyond them. This perspective has been embraced within the ethnographic purposes of this dissertation, that aims to look at contemporary European border as multi-dimensional entities, whose demarcation functions emerge from a complex architecture of tangible objects in the *borderland* landscape, as well as daily material and immaterial practices carried out by border state and non-state agents and embodying national interests.

2.1.4. Critical Border Studies and the *bordering* approach

The *bordering* theory stemmed from this multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary approach in Border Studies. The research fully relied on this approach to set the theoretical basis for the ethnographic investigation of the contemporary *border experience* in the re-bordered Europe.

According to Van Houtum and Van Naersser (2002), in the *bordering* theory the border construction and reproduction is related to “social practices of spatial demarcation”, to be inscribed in the “ongoing strategic effort to make a difference in space among the movement of people, money or products that take place at the state level” (p. 126). This represents a radical alternative to borders meant as a fixed and material entities.

In their theorization, the two scholars connected the *bordering* process with that of *ordering*. Facing the challenges of a more globalized, interconnected and mobile world, *bordering* practices impose an order, to protect the national identity and wealth from the *unwanted* strangers, normally those without meaningful economic resources and, after 9/11, from the *dangerous* stranger, echoing the “war on terror”. Finally, the *othering* process interacts with *bordering* and *ordering* in a paradoxical way: while differentiating and rejecting the “other”, it constructs and reproduces it.

As well, *bordering* is both an abstract and a concrete process: borders have not lost their material dimension, as they maintain their essential demarcation, regulation and exclusionary function. However, the *bordering* process takes place also beyond them, since it marks differences in both space and identity, at the state, inner-state and transnational level.

Therefore, the nature of borders according to the *bordering* approach is both tangible and intangible. Building on this complexity, its aim is to reason about *how*, *when* and *where* contemporary borders are produced and reproduced. They can materialize in classic territorial demarcation and control; in state policies for the selective access of migrants, their exclusion or integration; in labour policies; in transnational migrants’ networks. In this sense, the approach definitively brought together the classical and the post-modern perspectives to the study of borders (see also Newman, 2012, p. 34).

Finally, its focus allowed to reflect on the role of international migrants as key characters of the *bordering*, *ordering* and *othering* processes. On the one hand, they undergo the dynamics of territorial and identity demarcation put in place to construct the new order, and embody the “other” functional to the consolidation of contemporary identities. On the other hand, their mobility means the transgression of those limits, which makes borders places of tensions and contradictions, as well as it gives room for discussion on the ethical consequences of the contemporary process of *bordering* on the one hand, and of the construction of “negative” identities on the other.

For its versatility in the approach to borders as a contemporary subject, the concept of *bordering* enjoyed soon a great popularity in the field of Border Studies (Van Houtum, 2005, p. 672) and led to a partial re-foundation of the discipline. The “Line in the Sand agenda” (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009, 2012) highlighted as the shift from *border* to *bordering*, universally understood as a series of practices of socio-spatial demarcation, put the basis for the corpus of the Critical Border Studies. Generally speaking, the *bordering* approach concerned a renovated epistemology of borders, in which they are interpreted as dynamic and mobile entities, grasping a changed relationship with time (Kaiser, 2012) and space (Van Houtum, 2012; Scott, 2012a). As well, it emphasized the nature of borders as processes often, but not always, uncoupled from territory (Newman, 2006b). Finally, it stressed that activities of borders (re)production can be participated by other than state actors (Newman, 2003). This renewed epistemology drove to a new ontology of borders, indicating their nature as markers of difference with an *ordering* and *othering* functions, therefore indissolubly linked to identity-building processes (Newman, 2003); or, “socially constituent power practices”, to say it with Van Houtum (2012, 530). Finally, Critical Border Studies gave room to original methodologies and methods for their investigation, of which *border experience* is an example.

Moreover, investigating a border through the *bordering* approach means to question *where* and *when* “ideology, symbols, cultural mediation, discourses, political institutions, attitudes and everyday forms of border transcending and border confirming” take place (Scott 2012a, 86), as well as *who* produces and reproduces it. As Reeves (2016) commented:

If “border” would now seem to appear as a complex, non-linear entity, produced by multiple agencies who are geographically dispersed, this raises both methodological and conceptual challenges. First, it demands that we pay attention to the geographies of such bordering practices: *where* such practices condense and intensify; and *which people*, which movements, which border crossings and which stretches of borderland become sites of concern or intervention for a variety of governmental agencies. [...] Second, if we take borders’ spatial complexity seriously, it is not just the *where* of borders that emerges as an ethnographic problem, but also the *when*; that is to say, the degree to which, at particular moments and for particular groups of people, borders serve to contain, exclude, filter or prohibit certain kinds of movement. (p. 166).

The actor-oriented approach to the study of borders embodied by the *bordering* theory and emphasized in the *who* dimension is central to the Critical Border studies and has significantly contributed to the construction of their theoretical and methodological *corpus*. According to Newman (2003), putting the border actors at the center of the investigation means to study the border as a

dynamic institution from the state point of view (top-down approach) as such as by addressing the participation of non-state actors and the everyday-practices level in their demarcation and reproduction (bottom-up approach). In this regard, the *bordering* approach allows to hook the political to the social and the cultural, as well as conceptual change to the everyday experience (Scott, 2012a, p. 86).

This is of particular interest for this dissertation, and for the investigation of how the contemporary border is experienced in the everyday lives in more general terms. Specifically, the approach of this thesis to the exploration of the *border experience* in the contemporary re-bordered Europe precisely addresses the complex scenario of the actors contributing to the production, reproduction and contestation of reinforced European internal borders.

2.2. Europe as a “bordering laboratory”

In light of the innovations introduced by the *bordering* approach, the European context has been considered a “bordering laboratory”. The European post-Maastricht and post-Schengen context offered a great field for the investigation of contemporary *bordering* in terms of “social production of borders, complexly understood as sites and through which socio-spatial differences are communicated” (Scott, 2012b, p. 123). Applied to the investigation of the European context, Scott adopted the *bordering* approach in order to explore the multi-level process that takes place in the high spheres of politics, that is expressed through physical borders and the visa regime, but also identity, immigration and rights speeches (p. 134). This section aims here to broaden this perspective, investigating Europe as a “bordering laboratory” with reference to the tensions that the processes of *de-bordering* and *re-bordering* have put in place, both at its external and internal borders.

2.2.1. The Schengen process and the fading away of internal EU borders

With the signature of the Schengen Agreement in 1985, Belgium, Germany, France, Luxembourg and the Netherlands laid a milestone in the process of European integration and in the construction of the Single Market, officially inaugurated with the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 (European Union, 1992). Today 23 out of 27 EU member states are part of the Schengen area, together with Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. Croatia is currently the newest signatory country, as it joined the Schengen area in 2023. Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland and Romania are candidate countries. Member states of the Schengen area share a space where the free circulation of capitals, goods, and people (but limited to European citizens) is ensured by the abolition of systematic border checks, regulated

by a set of shared rules whose goal is to prevent free movement from encouraging the flourishing of illegal activities.

Within the scope of interest of this thesis, Political and Social sciences literature have investigated the Schengen system as both a *de-bordering* process involving internal borders, and a *re-bordering* process involving the external border of the Schengen area, functional to the realisation of an “area of freedom, security and justice” as officialized by the Treaty of Amsterdam (Art. 1.3).

The *de-bordering* process that involved internal boundaries between the signatory states of the Schengen Treaty has represented a milestone in the construction of the Single Market. It has been implemented through the measures included in the Schengen Agreement, the Schengen Convention and Schengen Border Code, as detailed in section 3.1.1.

The European integration boosted the “emersion of countless regions” (Paasi, 2012a, p. 12) that assumed a growing importance due to the *de-bordering* process contingent to the creation of the Single Market (Anderson & O’Dowd, 1999). This has been investigated in literature under several points of view, including the cross-border regionalism as a form of governance (Scott, 1999) and the importance of cross-bordering cooperation in the symbolic construction of the European Union (Van Houtum & Struver, 2002). Both internal and external *borderlands* become sites of extensive and multi-layered cross-border cooperation involving regional, national and supranational actors (O’Dowd, 2002, p. 13). This inaugurated a rich debate around multi-level governance, transnationalism and cross-border cooperation in this continent (Blatter & Clement, 2000; Wastl-Walter & Kofler, 2000). The *de-bordering* process has also triggered the massive implementation of a cross-border cooperation policy which has featured *Euroregions*. These consisted in “more or less stable cooperative arrangements between neighbouring local or regional authorities across a European nation-state border (Perkmann, 2002, p. 103). These entities have been investigated as institutions capable of being a driving force for entrepreneurship (Perkmann, 2002); under the perspective of reterritorialization facing globalization processes (Popescu, 2006); as actors of regional development (Lepik, 2009; Howaniec & Lis, 2020).

More generally, the *de-bordering* process has both changed the meaning of European borders and the role of border regions. An early contribution by O’Dowd (2002) explored how, along with the establishment of the Single Market, internal border shifted from being understood as *barriers* to free trade and market integration, to dogmas of the new-born but mostly dominant liberal orthodoxy that aimed to elevate Europe to the role of economic actor able to compete on the global scenario, to work as *bridges* within a cross-border cooperation strategy.

2.2.2. The Schengen process and the European migration policy

According to Dowd (2002), “the incorporation of Schengen under the Amsterdam Treaty meant that the EU now officially has an external border” (p. 566). In terms of state sovereignty, the construction of a shared external border did not represent its transcendence but rather its confirmation, subsumed and partially re-organized on a supranational level, with the aim of affirming the EU as a safe, integrated political community towards the surrounding space and other political actors (Scott, 2012b, p. 136). Within the Schengen project, the management of the shared and unstable³ external border, occurred according to a process of *re-bordering* (Kramsch et al. 2004, III).

External European *borderlands* gained importance along with the shifting of key control function prerogatives on mobility from national boundaries to the external European border, due to the Schengen process (Rumford, 2007, p. 329). As well, according to the enlargement processes in the 2000s, a striking proliferation of *Euroregions* occurred along the external border of the EU in Central and Eastern Europe, many of them instigated by the German government. *Euroregions* involved the EU, national governments and local actors in establishing networks of cooperation and the groundwork for eventual membership of the EU. The Dutch–German model, for example, proved particularly influential on the German–Polish and German–Czech borders (Kirchner, 1998). External border regions became sites to multi-scalar politics, first lines of national and supra-national policies in the construction of the external EU border (O’Dowd, 2002, p. 22). At the *borderlands*’ level, this process went with contradictions. For example, an important literature strand focused on the extent to which the becoming EU external border of some national borders, dramatically affected the relationship between the Eastern Schengen countries and their immediate non-Schengen neighbours (for example: Delanty & Rumford, 2005; Delanty, 2006, Popescu, 2006, Van Houtum & Pijpers, 2007). Finally, great attention has been paid to daily experiences of mobility and commuting patterns in a context of free circulation (Markuszevska et al., 2016; Jóźwiak, 2014, 2020; Martin, 2020), as well as to the consequences of the Irish conflict on the frontier life (Hastings, Donnan & Haller, 2000; Hastings, 2005, Hastings & Donnan, 2010).

A *harder* external border has been interpreted by scholars as a *corollary* to the consolidation of the Single Market (Zielonka, 2003). Others claimed that the principle of free movement in the Schengen

³ A significant policy research on the *re-bordering* of the European Union (Kramsch et al., 2004) claimed that its external border was still an undetermined political object, as “its future geographical demarcation, political efficacy and cultural identity is still highly contested and open to doubt” (p. 1). They referred to the reluctance of member states in ceding sovereignty, with respect to which the opt-out option that characterized many European policies was emblematic, leading to the *de facto* creation of many *Europeres*; to the cultural diversity that still distinguished the communities of, and across, the various nations; to the enlargement process, as great uncertainty was hovering over which countries would be the subject of future annexations and in what order. In general terms the enlargement process meant that the *re-bordering* process was constantly changing in nature and location the external border (Rumford, 2007, p. 333).

Treaty is marginal, while its main range of action is about measures to compensate it through the reinforcement of the external border, police cooperation, common visa and asylum policies (Colombeau, 2020, p. 2). In fact, the Schengen Agreement implemented a “simultaneous process of both dissolving and reinforcing borders” (Casas et al., 2010, p. 77) that responded to a “compensatory logic”, aimed to both contribute to the emerging project of an area of freedom, security and justice, and protect it from external threats (Mitsilegas, 2002, p. 665). The Treaty of Amsterdam itself listed among the priorities of the European Union: “to maintain and develop the Union as an area of freedom, security and justice, in which the free movement of persons is assured in conjunction with appropriate measures with respect to external border controls, asylum, immigration and the prevention and combating of crime” (European Community, 1997).

As per the *de-bordering* process, the *re-bordering* of the external European borders has its fundamentals in the Schengen *acquis* (Schengen Agreement, Schengen Convention, Schengen Border Code), that outlined a legal scenario in which the internal *de-bordering* has as its counterpart a significant corpus of rules providing for the external *re-bordering* of the European boundaries, as well as measures to mitigate the permeability of internal boundaries in the event of an emergency. Together with other legislative measures such as the Dublin Regulation and the directives establishing the Common European Asylum system, the Schengen *acquis* represented the essentials of the European migration policy.

The “European migration policy” is defined as “any form of regulation or management of movement of people towards the EU common territory and across the member states’ internal borders” (Pastore & Henry, 2016, p. 45). If the Schengen *acquis* provided for the rules of access by non-Europeans to the European territory, the common visa system, the SIS, the Dublin regulation and the EURODAC database can be seen as complementary in an overall strategy of an internal mobility regime for third-country nationals (Kasperek, 2016). Thus, the Schengen *acquis* had a twofold impact on human mobility. It implied a deeply controversial and ambiguous European scenario in terms of migration management, since it represented the first step towards the construction of a fluid political space for European citizens, but a hard-to-access, bordered, excluding one for third-country citizens (Pastore & Henry, 2016).

This dimension will be investigated with reference to “transit migration” in section 3.1.2. In this regard, this thesis supports the perspective that policies that aimed at the *re-bordering* of the external EU borders, as well as those ruling the reestablishment of internal identity checks at de-bordered internal boundaries, address the same objective: that of contain undesired mobility of non-European citizens towards and inside the territory of the European Union. As well, the differentiated human mobility based on the European citizenship that stemmed from the Schengen system is examined in

this dissertation as a key factor when investigating *where, when and how* do internal borders play their role in the daily reality of European *borderlands*, shaping the *border experience* of frontier actors.

Next sections propose a brief, non-exhaustive overview about the different forms of external *re-bordering* investigated in literature, with a specific focus on the impact of/on international migrations. It takes on board the construction of the external Schengen border, taking into account the restrictive migration policies that the European Union has adopted in the last 30 years.

2.2.3. Investigating the European external *re-bordering* process: the securitization approach

A first element to be taken in consideration when investigating the external *re-bordering* process is *securitization*, boosted by the 9/11 events. If the creation of the NAFTA and the EU had meant advances in border *softening* (Scott, 2012b), the Twin Tower attack bolstered their *hardening* in the US first (Andreas & Biersteker, 2003) and then at a global level (Chalfin, 2012). Ironically, the globalization of terrorism reversed the de-hardening of state borders that had been occurring since the other globalizing processes had spread (Newman, 2006b, p. 182), such as transnationalism (Vertovec, 2009) and the globalization of markets (Levitt, 1983).

In the US and the EU, a *securitization* of borders took place, represented by the tightening of control checks, the establishment of shared system of information exchange, the transnational police cooperation, and the mainstreaming of a narrative of criminalization of immigration. The multiplication of walled borders emerged as the most evident consequence of the growing demand of security and identity, felt as threatened by global forces (Brown, 2010).

Theoretically speaking, the contemporary *securitization* process has been marked by a conceptual shift in terms of what “security” means (Anderson, 2000). Neal (2009) defined securitization as a process whereby urgent security issues or threats are identified or constructed in order to mobilize opinion and constitute legitimacy and authority for the means of dealing with that threat. According to Anderson (2000), contemporary threats are no longer largely military, but criminal (such as illegal trade, illegal migrations, mafias) and societal (to human rights, to the environment, to cultures).

Parallel to processes of border securitization, a process of “securitizing migrations” – constructing migration as a security issue – occurred (Huysmans, 2000; Bigo, 2002). The 9/11 events marked a shift in terms of state borders’ tightening, aimed to prevent the *undesirables* to cross national borders (Newman, 2012; Nicol, 2012). Reversing the “borderless world” discourse, this process showed the extent to which these institutions kept their role in mobilizing “emotions, racism, xenophobia, and, ultimately, violence” (Paasi, 2012b, p. 2303).

Nevertheless, with reference to the immigration-security nexus in Europe, Huysmans (2006) traced it back before the 9/11 and identified its first steps with the Treaty of Amsterdam, that introduced the concept of security in the European political context by establishing a domain and hierarchies of insecurities, in which immigration was included since the very beginning. Experts of the Challenge program instead dated it back to the Schengen Agreement, in which the “securitization of migrations” and the protection of the internal common space are coupled. In that occasion, “safety” overcame “liberty” and “justice” in the chart of European priorities: “These processes of control have subordinated liberty to the security guarantees and the compensatory security measures deemed necessary in order to ensure the exercise of the freedom to move inside Schengenland” (Bigo et al., 2009, p. 296). A straightforward expression of the securitization of migrations in Europe is the mission of the FRONTEX agency (Neal, 2009; Papastavridis, 2010; Campesi, 2014; for a literature review: Kalkman, 2021), whose budget has been dramatically expanded since 2004.

2.2.4. Securitizing “transit migration”

Pivotal in the process of securitization of migrations in the European context was the emergence in the 90s of the category of “transit migration”. The policy use of this human mobility pattern played a key role in legitimizing the restrictive and containment EU strategy when it comes to international migrations from war contexts and underdeveloped world areas in general. This, the concept of “transit migration” and the securitized policies that have addressed it are pivotal to understand the rationale of the European *re-bordering* process, both at its external and internal level.

“Transit migration” represented a novelty in the European migration scenario at the end of the XX century. According to Düvell (2006), who first proposed a general overlooking on the policy and academy use of the term and put forward a critical approach, it can be explained with the “structure/agency” approach put forward by Brunet-Jailly (2005). For this scholar, *agency* is meant as “the activities of social, economic and political individuals and the processes of production and reproduction of borders [...] which at a given time in history and within a given space – are economically, politically and culturally embedded” (2011, p. 3). *Structure* is represented by “the broader social processes that frame individual action, such as market forces, government activities (law, regulations, and policies), and the regional culture and politics of a borderland” (2007, p. 1).

Taking on board the *structure* dimension, since the 90s ethnographers have observed that migrants aiming to reach Europe have been engaging in increasingly dangerous, time- and money-consuming overland and overseas trips, due to the lack of visa opportunities and, in general, increasing restrictive European policies on migration and citizenship (Koser Akcapar, 2010; Collyer, 2007, 2010;

Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2008; Schapendonk, 2012; Collyer & De Haas, 2012; Collyer, Düvell & De Haas, 2012; Schapendonk, Bolay & Dahinden, 2021; Crawley & Jones, 2021). According to Düvell (2014), “transit migration can be explained with the limits in legal migration channels. [...] This implies that it is the destination countries’ policies that contribute to the emergence and construction of “transit migration”. Control politics impact on and determine transit migration. Each time controls on a popular route are increased, migrants and smugglers search for other opportunities and finally establish new paths, or new strategies” (p. 217). As well, the lack of integration opportunities in countries of first arrival, in both social and economic terms, were shaping transit journeys as trips that were constantly defined or redefined according to opportunities and obstacles, rather than planned trips from A (the country of departure) to B (the country of arrival) through C (transit country/es) (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2005; Düvell, 2012). On the other hand, technological progress in terms of the diffusion of cheaper means of transportation, communication technology, and money transfer systems contributed to boost migration to Europe from far countries and to extend previously regional migration systems (Düvell, 2006; Collyer et al., 2012; Düvell, 2014).

In terms of *agency* instead, Düvell (2006) identified individual conditions that triggers “transit migration” in the lack of financial resources or social capital; in the migrant’s decision making when taking advantage by different policy regimes characterizing potential destination countries; the “class element”⁴.

As said, “transit migration” assumed a significant role in the European scenario. Since the 90s, policy papers by OIM, UN/ECE, the European Commission and other agencies⁵, have addressed the “increasing importance of overland and maritime migration of migrants originating from an increasingly diverse array of Eastern Mediterranean, Asian and African countries, who, on their way to European Union countries, travelled through countries located on the ‘fringe’ of the European Union in North Africa, Turkey and Eastern Europe” (Collyer, Düvell & De Haas, 2012, p. 407).

What has contributed most to consider “transit migration” as a risk for Europe, determining both its conceptual confusion its popularity (Collyer & De Hass, 2012, p. 473) was the association with

⁴ Düvell (2006) illustrated three main individual or collective circumstances that potentially triggers “transit migration”. First, the lack of financial resources to reach B from A, condition that brings migrant to choose a transit in a C country where to try and collect the resources needed to reach their final destination. Second, the lack of information or social capital, whose resolution strategy is similar to that of the previous point. Third, the decision-making process in which migrants define their routes according to restrictions to reach directly B from A as well as favourable conditions offered by countries offering more liberal regulations or smuggling networks. Finally, the scholar introduced in its theory the “class element”: who has financial resources can get a visa for the destination country (from A to B), do not engage in transit experiences. Those with less economic means are those in need to engage in longer overland or maritime, and more dangerous, journeys. In general, financial resources define the length and the safety of the journey. As well, this determines the same possibility to engage in a journey: who has no financial resources would be stuck in the country of origin or in the neighbouring countries.

⁵ For a complete overview on the policy use of the term “transit migration”, see Düvell (2012).

“irregular migration”. On this regard, scholars have shown that transit migration and irregular migration are not to be overlapped (Papadoupoulou-Kourkola, 2005). Transit migration can be certainly partially irregular: irregularity represents an important factor due to its impact on transit journey, as it exposes the person in an irregular condition to the possibility of deportation, or is decisive on his/her need to move forward (Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016, p. 245). However, with reference to Europe, if on the one hand those who engage in transit migration do it outside of the legal framework, the majority of irregular people arrived legally with a visa in their pockets, but then overstay after its expiration (Düvell, 2006, 2009). As well, parts of the journey of a transit migrant can be regular, as he/she can obtain the authorization for the temporary stay in an intermediate country (Düvell, 2014).

Nevertheless, the conceptual confusion around the term transit migration transformed it into a political tool (Collyer, Düvell & De Haas, 2012, p. 407). The politicization of the term has been determined by the connection to the fear of a mass of people from the global south who intended to enter the Schengen area illegally, undermining its stability. Quoting Düvell (2012), favored by roaring political discourses, “transit migration has to some extent become sort of a war cry directed at countries that are expected by European Union states to keep unwanted migration off European territories” (2012, p. 417). The policy conceptualization of transit migration as a pressure favored the creation of a “myth of invasion” (De Haas, 2008), boosted by the over-exposition and mis-narration of maritime tragedies or collective illegal crossing attempts by media or politicians consolidated idea that millions of people were waiting outside EU to enter it (Collyer, Düvell & De Haas, 2012, p. 408). As well, it served as political leverage in the relations between European institutions, the neighboring countries and the country of origin of transit migrants (Düvell, 2014; Collyer et al., 2012). According to Collyer and De Haas (2012), “by providing a convenient term for most migrants in the vicinity of Europe, regardless of their legal status, migration history or future intentions, it serves an important function in EU discourse on migration, allowing all migrants in this region to be primarily identified by their potential to reach Europe, and to cast them collectively as a ‘migration liability’” (p. 477). According to the above, the policy use of “transit migration” played a significant role in securitizing migration policies at the European level. The association of transit migration and irregular migration triggered the legitimization of restrictive migration policies in the European context, in order to protect the European space against the danger of mass uncontrolled onward migration. Nevertheless, referring to the causes of transit migration, according to the structure/agency framework discussed above, what has fostered and fueled transit migration over the years are precisely the restrictive policies adopted by the EU to stem it.

In the mis-categorization of “transit migration” as an entirely irregular migration patterns and in its representation of a threat for the *de-bordered* Europe lies the rationale of the securitization of external European borders. The policy mechanism consisted in securitizing the border against transit migrations, identified as a danger, and thus lay an even more solid foundation for its development being those coping strategies for individuals facing diminishing possibilities to enter Europe legally, on the basis of a securitized approach to migrations. This in turn legitimize the adoption of more restrictive measures, as a reaction to a danger perceived as increased.

Part 2 of Chapter 3 will address this dimension from a policy overview, illustrating the European migration policy in the time frame 2010-2021. As well, it will relate it to the *re-bordering* process that since 2015 involved the internal EU borders. On this last regard, what has been *irregularized* and framed as a threat to security, were “secondary movements” across Europe in the context of the “refugee crisis”.

2.2.5. Anthropological perspectives on transit migrations

In the last decade, a consistent literature strand has approached “transit migration” with ethnographic lenses, in order to overcome its mis-representing policy use and shed light on the everyday reality of migrants “engaging in journeys involving various legs or stages with stop-overs of various length, various means of transportation, such as flights, coaches, trains, cars, lorries or boats” (Düvell, 2014, p. 82) in their way towards the re-bordered Europe. According to Mainwaring and Brigden (2016), this finally turned their attention to migrants’ transit journey across the globe: the *agency* they exercise while dealing with state and non-state obstacles along the way; the meaning they attach to their everyday practices of mobility through narrative and identity-shaping; the conditions of uncertainty and vulnerability that characterize their travel experiences. As well, this contributed to deconstruct several biases affecting the policy use of “transit migration” and fostering its securitization.

The policy use of “transit migration” has been strongly criticized. According to Düvell (2006), despite its popularity no shared definition emerged by its use by international organizations, and the term become “as blurred as it is politicized” (p. 3). The politicization of the term favored the state-centric “premature labelling” of transit migrants, who were targeted as illegal even before their entry into European territory (Oelgemoller, 2011, p. 407). As well, scholars also criticized its Eurocentrism (Collyer, Düvell & De Haas, 2012; Collyer & de Haas, 2012), from which stemmed several bias in the understanding of the migratory phenomenon towards the EU that were used to reinforce control on global migration (Crawley & Jones, 2021).

A first bias regards the assumption that Europe is the preselected destination of all transit migrants approaching its edges (intentionality bias). On this regard, Collyer, Düvell and De Haas (2012) claimed that “the term can be seen as an attempt to group a heterogeneous array of migration processes, migrants, potential migrants and countries around a limited series of largely undefined commonalities involving illegality, high risk, lack of control and above all an assumed desire to reach European territory. All this is on the basis that the migrants involved have “transited” or may “transit” somewhere, passing through to a further destination that is assumed to be the EU” (p. 411).

On this regard, the Eurocentric notion of transit migration ignores the fact that many migrants moving to countries that border Europe envision their future there (Snel et al., 2020). As well, many stay in such countries “in-between” for longer periods of time (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2008, p. 5). Moreover, considering a place as mere transit makes the relationship of people with that place, and for that place, invisible (Collyer, 2010; Collyer & De Haas, 2012; Brigden & Mainwairing, 2016; Kaiyoorawongs, 2016; Crawley & Jones, 2021)⁶. Therefore, in favor of a more realistic representation of the transit migration, “in-between” countries need to be re-conceptualized as places where migrants live, and the meaning attached to these places calls for greater consideration (Crawley & Jones, 2021). A second bias in the policy use of “transit migration” assumes that migrants engage in linear and fixed journeys (linearity bias). This consists in a “linear representation” that describes what is between the departure and the arrival as temporary and meaningless, assume that decision-making is a linear process, underestimate both *agency* and structural factors influencing the journey while it happens and “does not adequately capture the complex realities of physical migration journeys” (Crawley et al., 2021, p. 3227-9). The “structure/agency” approach was adopted by Papadopoulou-Kourkoula (2005), who defined transit migration as “a process and a contingency” (p. 4). She argued this by referring to a situation in which a migrant indeterminately resides in a country, and might decide or not to continue his/her trip according to a mix of both structural and individual factors – again, a combination of structure and agency. On this regard, the decision to move further and reach Europe matures after a more or less long stay in what European vision considers “transit countries”, can be triggered by several reasons that somehow “force” migrants to leave, i.e. internal migration control policies in these countries that might deny them the access to a regular status and/or the labor market, or deficiencies in the asylum system, or invasive informal economy (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2005; Snel et al., 2020). Collyer (2007, 2010) elaborated the concept of “fragmented journeys” to focus on the non-linearity of migrant journeys in their way towards Europe or its neighbouring countries.

⁶ A relevant ethnography focusing on migrants residing in Turkey demonstrated that “life in these countries constituted, for most, much more than a temporary ‘stop over’: some of those we interviewed in Turkey had no intention of moving to Europe; others left their home countries months or even years beforehand, only moving on to Europe because life had become untenable” (Crawley et al., 2018, p. 3227).

“Fragmented journeys” stands for a dynamic process, capable to include the multiple legal status as well as situations of mobility or settlement that an individual may go through in his or her migration experience, as his empirical studies with Sub-saharans in Morocco suggested⁷.

Finally, ethnographic contributions shed light on the vulnerability of transit migrants. For example, Dowd (2008) borrowed the policy term “stranded migrant” to emphasize the dimension of uncertainty faced by migrants on the move⁸. This category indicated a recognizable condition of a group of people that cannot move on, due to: the re-bordered Europe; the readmission agreements signed between the EU and the non-EU transit country, in which framework the individual can experience a step back in his/her journey; the lack of documentation; the lack of financial resources and difficulty in getting an income to continue the journey, due to the irregular status. As well, the author stressed the condition of vulnerability of asylum seekers, and the responsibility of European institutions: “the international community has recognized [...] that there is a considerable population of migrants who move for non-refugee related reasons but who become vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, both during their journey and after they arrive.” (p. 28).

A priori categorizations have also characterized the term “transit country”. A generalized self-labelling as transit country by several states involved in migration routes recently took place (Collyer, Düvell & De Haas, 2012). On the one side, this implied the willing of a state of considering immigrants as temporal, no long-term integration policies (p. 410). On the other side, to consider some countries as “transit” ones meant the legitimization for funding aimed to prevent aspirant “transit migrants” to come to Europe. Within the 2010-2020 time frame, that was the case for Turkey and Libya (Crawley *et al.* 2021, 3227). However, the self-representation as transit country had already been observed before, revealing its nature of blurred and bias-filled definition of a much-attended migratory model, popular as it is convenient within EU relations with foreign countries (Ivakhnyuk, 2006; de Haas, 2008; Bredeloup, 2012; Choplin & Lombard, 2013). Currently the term is used quite exclusively in the “European space”, meaning the Schengen zone, in neighboring countries

⁷ The causes for the fragmentation of their journeys traced those that emerged in other ethnographies on transit migrations: the progressive restrictions of legal opportunities to access Europe coupled with the diffusion of technology in terms of communication and money transfer. The latter element also changed the profile of migrants: increased controls cut out the wealthy class from regular journeys, while technology gave a chance to the poorest also. In his research emerged that what marks the difference between who have a consistent availability of financial means and who has not, is the length and the conditions of the journey.

⁸ It appeared in policy documents in early 80s and gained popularity after the fall of URSS. At the time, it indicated the involuntary displacement of people after that event. It was then increasingly used by international agencies to stress the condition of those migrants, stuck in transit countries as unable to return to the country of origin, to move on, or to enter legally or illegally their country of destination, who do not fall under the refugee protection framework but still need protection due to their vulnerability in terms of safety or human rights.

participating to the European migration policy in the realm of its externalization, as well as in consulates and embassies of foreign countries⁹.

The term “transit migration” and its evolution plays an important role in the argumentative development of this thesis. The analysis of its origin and development has made it possible to understand how the securitization of migration paradigm impacts in shaping both migratory movements and the policies that want to govern them, as will be further explored in Chapter 3. Ethnographic investigations helped to overcome the biases affecting its policy use, fighting the understanding of “transit migration” as a threat to Europe and bringing scholars closer to migrants’ plans, intentions and expectations.

2.2.6. The externalization and technologization processes in the European border management

Deeply connected to the securitization of transit migrations as part of the *re-bordering* process, *externalization* is a key migration and border policy that provides further elements to define the *where* dimension of contemporary European external borders. In the case of the European Union, the *re-bordering* process of the outward border has been coupled with an increase involvement of neighbouring countries in managing transit migrations directed to the Schengen territory (Newman, 2012).

The European Neighbourhood Program is a milestone in this policy. It was inaugurated in the first years of the new millennium, with the aim of “promoting security and prosperity on the European continent” as a response to the challenges and opportunities triggered by the enlargement process (European Commission, 2004). Considered as an evolution of the European Mediterranean Policy or *Barcelona process* (Del Sarto & Schumacher, 2005), pillars of the policy were the promotion of a joint political dialogue, social and economic development, trade and financial apparatus, as well as the collaboration in security fields such as fighting terrorism and human beings trafficking.

This last point was particularly explored in literature, as an expression of both the *de-bordering* and *re-bordering* process. On the one side, the ENP meant to soften the external EU border through a cooperation with the immediate neighbouring countries in responses to security concerns (Rumford, 2007, p. 334). However, under the perspective of the *bordering* approach, the promotion of an enlarged community that share common economic regimes, a mutual understanding of threats and common recipe to fight, as well as common values that differentiate it from the “other”, can be seen as supporting the process of *othering*, especially when it comes to manage inwards migrations of non-nationals (Scott, 2012b, p. 136).

⁹ Next section discusses in details the externalization policy of the European Union.

Therefore, when taking the perspective of migrating non-EU nationals increasingly engaging with transit migrations, the externalization policy has to be inscribed within the generalization of restrictive migration policies adopted by the Western countries and supranational authorities, on the basis of the post-9/11 security concerns, as part of the “selective and exclusionary socio-spatial bordering processes of migration” (Van Houtum & Pijpers, 2007, p. 5).

Over the time, the EU externalization process has been implemented at several levels. Especially in occasion of the biggest enlargement processes, candidate countries have been asked to harmonize their border control policies to the European standards, to prevent the inclusion of new members from being coupled with more unsecure external boundaries (Mitsilegas, 2002; Favell & Hansen, 2002; Samers, 2004; Walters, 2010). When it comes to the “external ring” of the European Union, the ENP aimed to outsource migration control operations, promoting the easy movement for tourists, businessman, academics with VISA policies, but requesting the commitment in blocking undocumented migrants by securitizing the border (Casas et al., 2011, p. 79). Many of these countries have also been labelled as “third-safe countries”, where asylum seekers can be redirected when rejected by the EU country responsible to screen the claim (Walters, 2004; Gil-Bazo, 2015). As well, the EU has there promoted the construction of camps for transit migrants, as a containment and deterrence measure (Andrijasevic, 2010).

Finally, the Global Approach to Migration, that was kicked off in the early 2000s as well, saw the EU engagement in combating illegal migration and promoting legal migration through cooperation with non-EU countries of origin and transit (Collett, 2007). From a state-driven approach, third countries were asked to reinforce their boundary controls, restrict their visa policy and readmit irregular migrants in exchange with trade, financial and visa benefits (Strik, 2017). From the point of view of third-country nationals, instead, this policy represented an increased structural obstacle to those who desired to migrate to Europe (Bø, 2009).

With relevance to the scope of this thesis, scholars have addressed the externalization policy with a declination of the concept of *borderland*, intended as geo-political area around Europe and influenced by the European border and migration management (Del Sarto, 2010; Zaragoza-Cristiani, 2017; Sajn, 2018)¹⁰.

¹⁰ Del Sarto (2010) defined *borderland* as “hybrid areas of transition from one geographical space, or functional regime, or identity to another” (p. 151). Her aims were to describe a geo-political area, targeted by border and human mobility policies that provide it a determined role within an institutional regime. In her work, *borderlands* have a peripheral position, lying outside or marginal to the territory ruling institution, but is structural to it, since it is strategically fundamental of its border policies implementation. With reference to the European migration and border policies, this scholar affirmed that externalization policies created a “buffer zone” of *borderlands*, represented by states surrounding the official EU borders that act as a “filter” for unwanted immigration flows. Even though this thesis based its investigation on a different definition of *borderland* (see section 2.5.2 of this Chapter), it is significant to address the diversification of the term within the realms of interest of this dissertation, to avoid conceptual confusion.

In terms of *re-bordering* of the external EU border, the securitization and externalization process have gone hand by hand with the *technologization* of border checks (Pecoud & de Guchteneire, 2006; Amore, 2006; Ceyhan, 2008; Vaughan-Williams, 2015). The EU has created digital borders, represented by databases such as the SIS and the EURODAC, that through the registration and documentation of non-nationals contribute to their tracing, identification, sorting and, in the last instance, exclusion¹¹. These technological tools actually make the borders of the EU thicker from the point of view of non-nationals (Walters, 2006; Inda, 2008). Under this point of view, Europe has turned into a key field for the investigations about “digital sovereignty” (Floridi, 2020; Oliveira Martins et al., 2022).

2.2.7. Where is the external EU border?

The illustration of the securitization, technologization and externalization processes that characterize the management of external EU borders contributed to raise and answer in literature the question: *where is the external EU border?* With reference to the first and second policies, Tsianos and Karakayali (2010) wrote:

The most common manifestation of the border in Europe is not to be found along the geographical border line of the Schengen area but rather in the records on the laptops of the border police; in the visa records of the European embassies in Moscow, Istanbul, Accra or Tripoli; in the check-points of Heathrow, Tegel, Charles de Gaulle or Odysseas Elytis; in the German central register of asylum seekers (ZAST); in the online entries of the Schengen Information System (SIS), where the data on persons denied entry to the Schengen area is administered; in the EURODAC, the data system administered by the European Commission, where the fingerprints of asylum seekers and apprehended illegal migrants are stored. Access to mobility is often via the computer screen. In this sense, Dana Diminescu (2005) talks of a ‘virtual prison’. (p. 374)

This perspective suggests that the European external border has moved away from its territorial line with a process of technological dissemination. Moreover, due to the externalization process, the frontier has move beyond the European territory. On this regard, Bø (2009) claimed:

Entry controls have been geographically moved from the borders of the destination countries to the countries of departures. This transfer of entry control to the country of

¹¹ See section 3.1.2. for more details.

departure in an essential move by the European States to avoid the legal responsibility of processing a great number of asylum claims. (p. 275)

A literature vein within Border studies grasped this new ontological dimension of European borders, observing that contemporary restrictive *bordering* policies have disseminated it within state and supra-national spaces, not only outside them (Pecoud & de Guchteneire, 2006). An author that has extensively discussed this aspect is Étienne Balibar. In his understanding, borders are meant as symbols, discourses and institutions that are present everywhere in society, not only at the political limits of the state (Balibar, 2002, 2004). These observations inspired the proposal of a groundbreaking description of the European political context as a *borderland*, in terms of “land of borders”. Within a wider discussion on citizenship, migration and society, he meant that the proliferation and dislocation of material and immaterial boundaries has transformed Europe in an excluding political, social and cultural environment for poor third-country citizens (2009, p. 203). This multiplication of borders, in all their manifestations, has to be understood as an “accumulation of facts and problems” (2009, p. 201) that has to do with the understanding and exercise of the European citizenship, the freedom of movement, the inclusion of non-European citizens and, finally, the same concept of “other” (2009, p. 2010). Later in his career, the scholar identified Europe as a Borderland as follows: “Europe conceived itself as developing borders of its own, but in reality it has no borders, rather it is itself a complex border: at once one and many, fixed and mobile, internal and external” (2015, p. 85). These and other contributions supported the observation that the external EU border has no fixed position and shape. Rather, it is the result of the encounter between migrant’s agency and the European restrictive migration policies.

A spatial dimension of Europe can be discussed only by taking into account the dialectical role that people’s movement play in defining and activating the EU’s borders. As a matter of fact, virtual borders do not exist unless they are crossed. (Karakayali & Rigo 2010, p. 126)

Under the perspectives offered by investigating the European Union as a “bordering laboratory”, what emerges when considering the *where* dimension of the external *re-bordering* process is a dialectical, structure/agency dynamic between international migrations and highly securitized migration policies. In other words, the external European *re-bordering* can be seen as a strategy of managing migrations under a securitized paradigm. When it comes to transit migrations, it has been demonstrated its importance in the scenario of European migration policies, as it is key in the self-construction of the threat that has led to the external *re-bordering* of the European Union. This includes transit migrants in the arena of actors contributing to the contemporary borders’ production, reproduction and

contestation. Through the ethnographic analysis, in Chapter 6 this *bordering* mechanism will be explored with reference to the internal border of the European Union, with the aim of grasping its everyday reality.

2.3. The *re-bordering* of internal European borders

Since 2015, a process of *re-bordering* involved the internal European frontiers, similar to that occurring at the external boundaries and stemming from the “securitizing migrations” perspective. “Secondary movement” of transit migrants coming from the Balkan route emerged as one of the most important dynamics and legacies of the “refugee crisis”. They triggered a process of “return” of internal boundaries enacted by several EU member states, marking an historical change with reference to the *de-bordering* of internal frontiers introduced with the Schengen system.

2.3.1. Containing “secondary movements”

In 2015, a big influx of persons seeking international protection entered illegally from Greece and approaching Member states’ territories coming from the Balkan route (FRONTEX 2016). For the unprecedented magnitude of the phenomenon, in which the Balkan countries were targeted by transit migrants as preferred gate to enter Europe, the Summer of 2015 is remembered as the “long Summer of migration” (Kasperek & Speer, 2015). According to EUROSTAT (2016), 1.3 million third-national individuals claimed for asylum in Europe in that year, the double compared to 2014, especially coming from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria. The fact that few less than 500.000 individuals claimed asylum in Germany¹² suggested that a significant phenomenon of “secondary migration” happened in 2015 in Europe, as Germany has no external “Dublin frontiers”¹³.

In both academic and policy use, the term “secondary movement” is referred to “the migration of a refugee who had already received or could have claimed protection elsewhere [...] and could potentially be penalized” (Collyer, Düvell & De Hass, 2012, p. 410). At the policy level, it is a mobility that takes place outside of the legal framework (for example: UNHCR, 2003), and nowadays the reference to “irregular secondary migrations” is normalized (Oelgemoller, 2011). These represent a common migratory pattern in the European framework, due to the restrictive nature of European

¹² This information is available in the UNHCR Refugee Data Finder:
<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=85LSvy>

¹³ Please refer to section 3.2.2. for further details.

policies regarding the internal mobility of third country citizens, such as the already mentioned Dublin regulation and its complementary systems, the EURODAC database and the CEAS.

Ethnographic contributions show that, generally speaking, “secondary movements” depend from migrants’ *agency* in face of reception conditions. For example, a poor quality of the receiving system (Brekke & Brochmann, 2013); the lack of real possibilities to access legal protection (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2005; Jordan & Düvell, 2002); the lack of economic and social opportunities (Düvell, 2010); institutional racism and discrimination (Icduygu & Yukseker, 2012).

Since September 2015, “secondary movements” from the Balkan route justified a *re-bordering* process kicked off by those European states most exposed to the migratory flows and targeted as transit or destination countries (Karamanidou & Kasperek, 2022). As further detailed in Chapter 3, they occurred under the framework provided by the Schengen Border Code, and particularly Art. 25 and 29. These enables Member countries to reintroduce border checks at internal boundaries as a temporary last resort measure, to contrast dangers to public safety. The process was backed by European authorities, at least until 2017¹⁴.

This *re-bordering* process was unprecedented in the history of the Schengen system. According to Gülzau (2023, p. 11), in 2015 around 40 percent of land borders in the Schengen area had been *re-bordered*, the majority of them in an attempt to stem the transit migration set in motion by the establishment of the “formalized corridor”¹⁵ through Balkans. The Germany’s decision to “close” its borders, generated a “domino effect” (Biermann et al., 2019, p. 254), as other Member States feared the perspective of becoming a “dead end” for transit migrants (Pastore & Henry 2016, p. 54)¹⁶.

The *re-bordering* process is still ongoing. Despite the European Commission (2017a, 2017b) invited member state to restore the full free circulation across their shared borders in 2017, Germany, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and France extended this policy until 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic in the European scenario as a *re-bordering* factor that disrupted both international migration and European border policies, as examined in part 4 of this Chapter. Even if continuously recommended as a temporary and a last resort measure by European authorities, in 2020 the reintroduction of checks at the internal borders had reached the 5-year mark (Karamanidou and Kasperek 2022).

¹⁴ The European authorities’ role in the re-bordering process is also examined in section 3 of Chapter 3.

¹⁵ See section 3.2.2, in which the “formalized corridor” is illustrated as an event resulting from the shared but unilateral decisions of Balkan countries to facilitate the outbound mobility of migrants.

¹⁶ See section 3.2.2, that illustrates the role of the Balkan route in shaping “secondary movements” in Europe in the time frame 2015-2016.

Once the restrictions on cross-border mobility aimed at containing the COVID-19 pandemic were removed in 2022, many European states maintained identity checks at internal borders. As can be seen from the notifications provided by the states (see section 3.3.4.), in the list of dangers to national security provided by the member states to justify the thickening of their borders, the risks of new international tensions in Asia and the Middle East appear alongside “secondary movements”. This points to an expansion of the *re-bordering* policy under the umbrella of the securitized approach to international migrations.

The internal *re-bordering* process has been lively debated in literature. In particular, it was raised the concern regarding the framing of “secondary movements” within a securitized paradigm, that led to a criminalization of asylum seekers, labelled as “illegal migrants” in states’ policy papers (Guild et al. 2016, pp. 48-50). On this regard, the implementation of art. 29 of the Schengen Border Code (see Chapter 3) was indicated as unclear, due to the lack of an assessment regarding the extent to which “secondary movements” would represent a public threat (p. 17). Politicizing “secondary movements”, European states denied their individual and collective welcoming responsibilities, and rather treated the phenomenon as something to defend themselves against (p. 49). Moreover, according to a significant policy report, the link between secondary movements and terrorism emerged more strongly than in the past, expanding the securitized approach to migrations (Carrera et al., 2018, pp. 13-15).

2.3.2. *Re-bordering* Europe: crisis or normalization?

Beside the debate that has put the *re-bordering* of the internal frontiers of the European Union in the perspective of the European legal framework and the right to asylum, this has been discussed also within a crisis/normalization paradigm. In this section, I debate both positions in order to highlight the positioning of this policy within the European context, and to unravel future perspectives of the return of internal border checks in the Schengen area.

The literature vein that discussed the internal European *re-bordering* process within a “crisis” framework focused on the unprecedented magnitude of “secondary movements” stemmed from the Balkan route, and on the imbalances and malfunctions of the Schengen system. The label “refugee crisis” was widely used by European states and authorities¹⁷, as well as by mainstream media, to

¹⁷ A paramount example involved Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission at the time, who set the “European refugee crisis” as priority issue in his “State of the European Union” speech on September 9, 2015.

describe the migratory phenomenon that characterized Summer 2015 and the following months. Scholars criticized this category. On the one hand, it has been claimed that these events represented an aggravation of an already critical situation, concerning the increasingly restrictive and deadly migration policies brought into play to counter transit migrations in a context of growing crisis worldwide (Kasperek, 2017). Indeed, in 2015 European authorities and states were about to publish the European Agenda of Migrations to deal with the significant magnitude and criticalities of the Mediterranean route (see section 3.2.1.). In light of this, the “long Summer of migration” has been considered as the intensification and propagation of migratory events that were before delimited to certain places such as border zones, migrants’ neighbourhoods, state offices, and an effect of the diversification of migration routes due to the militarization of the Mediterranean Sea (Cabot, 2015). This re-routed migration flows through Greece and the Balkans, that do not represent the easiest or fastest way into Europe, but the most viable in those circumstances of reinforcement of other frontier sections (Hess & Kasperek, 2017a). According to this perspective, rather than a “crisis”, what happened along the Balkan route have been interpreted as a new, harsher phases of an already critical context in terms of migration and border management at the European level.

The literature strand that considered the European border and migration policies as key contributors to the “refugee crisis” claimed that the crisis was *of* Europe, not *in* Europe (De Genova, 2016), or “European crisis facing refugees” (Anderson, 2016 in Sardelić, 2017, p. 4). “Secondary movements” that led to the reintroduction of identity checks at internal borders stemmed by securitization approach to migration, that posed the basis for the unprecedented transit migration transiting along the Balkan route, minimizing the legal entry channels and thus fostering smuggling networks (Pallister-Wilkins, 2016).

Under the “crisis” paradigm, the reintroduction of internal border checks by European Member states facing the challenge and/or risk of “secondary movement” has been described as determining the “crisis of Schengen”. Kasperek (2017, n.p.) described it as “the appearance of a dis-integrative dynamic in the Schengen process” and traced it back before the “long Summer of migration”, to the events of the Arab Spring of 2011¹⁸. According to Borzel and Risse (2017), in 2015 “the Schengen crisis has been marked by the EU’s continued inability to respond effectively and in a co-ordinated manner to the unprecedented influx of refugees and migrants” (p.2). Ceccorulli (2020) attributed this

Source: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/strategic-planning/state-union-addresses/state-union-speeches/state-union-2015_en

¹⁸ “The overthrow of the dictatorships – first in Tunisia and then Libya – effectively destroyed the Central-Mediterranean border regime, since the delegation and externalisation of the practices of migration containment came to an abrupt end. The arrival of about 30,000 young Tunisians in Italy following the revolution, the ensuing French-Italian border conflict around Ventimiglia, and the subsequent patches to the Schengen acquis in 2013 are all well documented.” (Kasperek, 2017, n.p.)

to the fact that the 2015 events have influenced the application of the Agenda on Migration, contributing to a shift towards the security paradigm, of which the reintroduction of internal border checks is a straightforward element. As well, according to the scholar, paradoxically the “crisis of Schengen” showed the limits of Europe as security actor, as the it meant the jeopardizing of a system that aimed to securitize it against external threats.

When it comes to the causes of the “Schengen crisis”, scholars have interpreted it in the spectrum of the unbalances and deficiencies of the Schengen-Dublin-CEAS system (Fullerton, 2016). According to Nascimbene (2016), the Dublin system presents several criticalities. One concerns the excessive burden for frontier states and those who are desired destination by the greater amount of asylum seekers, who tend to escape fingerprint procedures in the first country of arrival and engage in “secondary movements” to do so. Another regards the disharmonization of asylum procedures between signatory states, that as well triggers “secondary movements” by those who are aware of the possibility of being granted a higher level of protection in a different country than the arrival one.

This panorama was exacerbated by the failed CEAS reform in 2013, that has not able to harmonize asylum reception standards among EU member states (Chetail et al., 2016) and thus favoured “secondary movements”. Again, the 2015-16 events have been interpreted as resulting by a long-lasting process. For example, Heller and Pezzani (2016) situated the begin of the “crisis of the EU border regime” well before 2015, citing as example the case of Italy not taking migrant’s fingerprints in Lampedusa in Summer 2013¹⁹. This practice, promoted by the refusal of migrants themselves and the tacit agreement of the state apparatus, with the aim of facilitating “secondary movements” and undermining the logic of the Dublin regulation, showed as the European border regime was under pressure before the “long Summer” of migration.

Moreover, the “Schengen crisis” has been traced back to the same structural imbalances that characterized the whole policy architecture itself. According to Gülzau (2023, p. 5) external states function as front-line, therefore they are more exposed to exogenous factors pressuring the external borders. Therefore, there is a higher possibility for them to take advantage of this circumstance to calling on other states to take responsibility for the management of external borders under threat of loosening their impermeability. On their side, within this unbalanced context, internal countries react by blaming the frontier states for being unable to pursue the common objectives of the Schengen area, and restoring internal boundaries as a consequence, especially to protect themselves against the secondary migration movements that tend to generate from irregular entries (Biermann et al., 2019).

¹⁹ In that year, FRONTEX detected 40 304 illegal border-crossings in the Central Mediterranean route, three times more compared with the previous year. Source: <https://frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-routes/central-mediterranean-route/>

In light of this argumentation, the relationship between “secondary movements” and the internal EU *re-bordering* process responds to the same logic as that of restrictive European migration policies and transit migration. The securitized policies targeting “secondary movements” (the Dublin regulation, the CEAS, the EUROTAC), as well as their unbalances and deficiencies, contributed to their generation and labelling as irregular mobility patterns. This in turn led to the internal *re-bordering* process at the basis for the crisis of the Dublin-Schengen system. When it comes to European border policies in general, if “transit migration” has been included within the reasons for tightening the external EU borders, “secondary migrations” have fulfilled the same role with regards to inner frontiers. As well, both transit migrations and “secondary movements” emerged by the European institution’s logic of categorization as an integral part of its migration policies, directly connected to the perspective of fear and threat to the European security.

According to the “crisis” paradigm, the internal EU *re-bordering* has been debated as an extraordinary event. On the one side, it has been related to the unprecedented magnitude of “secondary movements” and terrorist danger in the heart of Europe (Evrard et al., 2020, p. 1). On this regard, it has been claimed that before 2015 no significant violations at the Schengen *acquis* had been recorded, as Member states *re-bordered* only in few occasion and within the legal framework provided but the Schengen Border Code (Ceccorulli, 2020, p. 305). To support the exceptionality of the event it has been also claimed that the *re-bordering* process started in 2015 lies outside of the Schengen *acquis* legal framework and logic. First, it violated the temporary nature of internal border controls. Second, member states “consciously chose the uncoordinated reintroduction of national border controls as the policy response rather than a common policy to alleviate the burden on the most affected states at the common EU frontier” (pp. 310-311). The “crisis” approach might also explain the prolonging of the implementation of the *re-bordering* policy unsupported by European authorities, as seen above and especially in section 3.3.3.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of the return of identity checks at internal frontiers within a spectrum of “securitization of migrations” as demonstrated above, questions its interpretation as a phenomenon linked to exceptional circumstances, and therefore temporary. To address this perspective, a “normalization” approach has been proposed in recent literature, as an integration of the “crisis” paradigm or in opposition to it.

Its core point concerns the observation of a recent change of European countries’ attitudes within the “securitization of migrations” framework. As noted by De Somer (2020), according to member states’ notifications and reports, their concerns are about the ongoing weakness of the external European

border; the possibility of new migratory waves, as the political context in the Mediterranean and the Middle East is still turbulent; the still existing deficiencies affecting the Dublin system. Therefore, at least for what concerns the pre-pandemic timeframe, member states' decision-making processes have taken into account the *risk* for “secondary movements”, rather than their actual entity.

In the most recent notifications, Austria, Germany and France continue to refer to “secondary movements”, and Sweden, Austria and Germany mention concerns around a “situation at the external borders”. As appears from internal documents and cursory media comments, those member states are concerned about the numbers that are still arriving, even if they are more limited than before, as well as about the possibility of these numbers rising again in the future. In respect of the latter concern, they highlight that large numbers of asylum seekers remain present in Greece and Italy and that there is continued potential for renewed conflicts in Northern Africa which could lead to new increases in arrival numbers at the EU's external borders. In this context, they also repeatedly raise concerns around the insufficient functioning of the Dublin system. These include, amongst others, concerns about the frontline states' insufficient registration of fingerprints in the EURODAC database and continued difficulties in reception condition standards which preclude Dublin returns. Finally, the continuation of internal border checks is also increasingly linked to the problems and frustration surrounding the gridlock in the debates around a new responsibility sharing mechanism within the context of the Dublin reform [...] In the meantime, as the controls continue, they risk becoming the “new normal” in the Schengen Area. (De Somer, 2020, p. 112)

Examining re-bordered internal frontiers as part of the “new normal” European landscape, the scholar showed that Member states' concerns that justifies the resort to the reestablishment of internal border checks range from the possibility of new and increased “secondary movements” in the future, to the situation of internal borders, to the weaknesses of the Schengen system and the difficulty of negotiations to improve it. Against this backdrop, the *re-bordering* process qualifies as a risk management strategy. In this same concern, Karamanidou and Kasperek (2022) highlighted that the “normalization” of the reintroduction of temporary border checks as a containment strategy against irregular “secondary movements” lies in “a shift from a frame of threat to a frame of risk” (p. 2), in a context of exercise of sovereign power by EU member states.

On this regard, Biermann and other scholars' work (2019) claimed that the EU's Member States reactions to the “secondary movements” can be ascribed to a “resurgent intergovernmental paradigm”. In a context of asymmetrical preferences within Member states, as they have been

differently impacted by the “refugee crisis”, the authors observed the rise of unilateralism in a context of crisis, despite the Commission’s efforts to promote a joint response. They could demonstrate that the most affected countries pushed for reforms, while the less affected opted for conserving the status quo, even though the 2015 and 2016 essentially marked the collapse of both the Dublin and the Schengen systems. According to Casella Colombeau (2020, pp. 12-13), “despite attempts to introduce EU oversight of the ability of member states to reinstate border checks at internal borders [...], member states remain largely the final decision-makers on this matter”. She was echoed by Gülzau (2023): “The Schengen member states [...] kept a firm grip on issues of border controls and national security, which touch upon the very core of national sovereignty [...] The hesitancy to share sovereignty rights explains the fact that the shared external borders are national ones once it comes to the exercise of control” (p. 4).

The analysis of the tightening of internal EU frontiers facing the COVID-19 further supported this argumentation.

2.4. The COVID-19 as a *re-bordering* factor

This part illustrates the pandemic of COVID-19 as a *re-bordering* factor that dramatically intervened at a global and European level. After a brief overview that shows the effects of the pandemics on global human mobility and especially on transit migrations, ethnographic contributions are examined to demonstrate the extraordinariness of the internal *re-bordering* process in the European context, facing the sanitary emergency. As well, it debates within in the framework that supported the normalization of the internal European *re-bordering* process.

2.4.1. The impact of the pandemic on transit migrations

The COVID-19 deeply affected the living and mobility conditions of everyone in the world. Nevertheless, it did not hit everyone in the same way. Some early suggestions described this spreading Coronavirus as “the great equalizer”, capable of infecting anyone regardless of age, gender, social status or wealth (Mein, 2020). After three years, it has been shown that this is not the case. According to Chakraborty and Maity (2020), COVID-19 can be considered as the biggest threat to global public health of the XXI century and as an indicator of social inequality. On this regard, Gravlee (2020) introduced the theory of *syndemic* to highlight that the virus’ impact on people depends on both the

health dimension and the socio-economic conditions of the population²⁰. From a socio-economic point of view, the pandemic has acted as a spotlight on a global context of deep disparities, as well as a “social accelerator” and “social detonator” exacerbating previous inequalities and marginalities (Perocco & Della Puppa, 2021, pp. 7-9).

The perspective that looked at COVID-19 as a virus whose impact on the population varied depending on factors such as wealth and social position, foregrounded the migrant population (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; Laster Pirtle, 2021; Sammadar, 2020; Perocco, 2021; OXFAM 2021)²¹. This has been explained with: the access to health care limited by the irregular status, or short-term visa, or fear of being reported to authorities (Guadagno, 2020, p. 5); lack of sanitary information in foreign languages contributing to their exclusion from prevention protocols (Liem et al., 2020); overcrowded living spaces where it was difficult to observe social distancing and the absence of screening facilitate the virus spreading (Kluge et al., 2020, p. 1238). Finally, migrant population has been often targeted with stigmatization and scapegoating processes, blamed for being responsible of the virus diffusion (Guadagno, 2020, pp. 11-12; Acharya & Patel, 2021; Sanò & Tabar, 2021; Ullah et al., 2021; Tiwari, 2020). According to Guadagno (2020), the vulnerability of this category “often lie at the intersection of class, race and status: migrants are overrepresented in low-income and discriminated minorities, and encounter unique sets of challenges linked with their lack of entitlement to health care, exclusion from welfare programmes, and fear of stigmatization and/or arrest and deportation” (p. 5).

Among the migrant population, the spread of the pandemics and the countermeasures taken by transit country to contain it, deeply affected the life (and death) transit migrants facing their journeys towards or within Europe.

Referring to structure/agency theoretical framework proposed by Brunet-Jailly (2005), COVID-19 can be considering as impacting both the structure and the agency of transit international migrations. When it comes to the first aspect, the pandemic made international borders tighter for transit migrants. COVID-19 restrictions “are being coupled with or used as migration enforcement controls” and

²⁰ The theory integrated two concepts: disease concentration, indicating “the co-occurrence or clustering of multiple epidemics as a result of large-scale, political-economic forces and adverse social conditions”, and disease interaction, meaning “the interaction between biological processes and the social, economic, and power inequities that shape the distribution of health” (pp. 1-2). In his theory, he proposed to read the COVID-19 impact under the lenses of the allocation of global wealth, being the virus generating and distributing along the lines of richness, race and unequal access to the health system.

²¹ The January 2021 OXFAM report on the impact of COVID-19 on the world population opens up with four striking data (OXFAM, 2021). The richest 1,000 people took only nine months to go back to their pre-pandemic wealth level, while the poorest will take more than 10 years. With the wealth that the richest 10 people in the world gained since the beginning of the pandemic, they could afford to pay the vaccine for the entire global population. In the US more than 22.000 Black and Asian people would be still alive if the COVID-19 impact rate would be the same as for the White population. And, if the gender balance would be equal in the sectors more affected by the economic consequences of the pandemic, 112 million women would not risk to lose their job.

“disproportionally impact migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in transit irregularly and often prevent them from accessing protection through the filing of asylum and/or other protection claims” (Sanchez & Achilli, 2020, p. 4; see also: Perocco, 2021). As well, border restrictions affected humanitarian corridors and thus represented a cause for refoulements in non-safe countries (Kluge et al., 2020, pp. 1237-1238). Even European coasts got more unreachable then before for migrants heading Europe from Africa. Kluge (et al., 2020, p. 1238) reported that rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean had been suspended due to logistical issues related to COVID-19. Finally, it has been taken as an excuse by receiving countries’ authorities to limit the NGOs’ activity (Stege, 2020).

On the side of migrants’ *agency*, mobility restrictions and human rights violations related to the COVID-19 policies did not stop transit migration patterns. They rather modified its routes and strategies. Sanchez and Achilli’s significant paper on smuggling activities in times of COVID-19 (2020) showed that thousands of migrants found themselves stranded due to the difficulty of moving forward, and tended to undertake more dangerous routes, resulting in less chances to get support or rescue. Evidences from reports of shipwrecked boats, missing migrants, deaths have not stop to flow in media even during the COVID-19 most difficult phase. People in transit continued their journeys, but in worsened conditions and with a higher death risk. As far as the European Union is concerned, the 2021 Annual Risk Analysis report by FRONTEX claimed that detentions related to irregular crossings at external EU borders dropped to 1/3 compared to 2019 on all land and sea routes. As well, asylum claims were 31% less. The detection of fraudulent documentations for internal border crossing fell of 63% percent compared to the year before.

2.4.2. *Re-bordering* Europe against the pandemic: an ethnographic overview

The *re-bordering* process that involved the internal EU boundaries as the COVID-19 pandemic spreaded, supports the thesis that look at this policy as a normalized feature in the European landscape.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 virus propagated worldwide from China and, on a European level, from Italy. In an attempt to limit its spread along with human mobility, EU member states massively resorted to the reintroduction of internal border checks (Gülzau, 2023). This *re-bordering* strategy flanked and overlapped with the one aimed at limiting “secondary movements”, while the pandemic almost froze international migrations.

The COVID-19 pandemics triggered an unprecedented *re-bordering* process, which far exceeded the one that took place since 2015. The European Commission reported that European states notified 186

cases of COVID-19-related internal border tightening between March 2020 and October 2022, when the last border checks motivated by the COVID-19 were lifted (European Commission, 2023). As Montaldo (2020) explained, the reintroductions were enacted taking as legal basis both the Art. 25 and the Art. 28 of the Schengen Border Code, depending on the country. Impressive pictures from the French-German borders in Spring 2020 published by Kany (2020) showed transfrontalier streets blocked by gates in the middle of the countryside, or having for a backdrop remote, bucolic village. This represented a completely unprecedented panorama compared to the European reality of the last 30 years: it was the first massive *re-bordering* process since the openings that followed the signing of the Schengen Treaty (Opilowska, 2020, p. 5).

Accordingly, the COVID-19 impact on border communities attracted the curiosity of ethnographers, who widely investigated the reality of the related *re-bordering* process in the European context. Those studies have addressed the extent to which those barriers that had been almost invisible for the last 30 years, in less than two weeks returned to play a role in *borderlanders'* daily life (Wille and Kanesu 2020, p. 9).

The return of national borders in the Geneva region, a deeply interconnected space where they had disappeared since the IIWW, has been researched by Beylier (2020). In March 2020, many gates were closed, the others militarized. People aiming to cross the border were requested to show documentation proving the urgency of doing it, or adequate authorizations. Through the experience of a transfrontalier worker, living in France but attending his professional activity in Switzerland, the paper reports on borders controls embodied by military but never health professionals, and of different outcomes of border checks according to the attitude of the policemen in charge.

Wassemberg (2020) described his own experience as *borderlander* at the French-German border in times of COVID-19 through a self-ethnographic diary. The border between Strasbourg and Kehl, invisible to EU citizens, had already suffered the return of police checks targeting irregular migrants. However, the spread of the pandemic implied a total closure, meaning the sailing of all four crossings for transit from both directions. According to what the author reports, this shocked locals. "I have become a Franco-German captured on the German side of the border [...] When the border closes, mobility ends, and, as a *borderlander*, my life as a European citizen, navigating daily between France and Germany, also ends" (p. 115). He also reported that no health protocols were performed during border checks, implemented by military personnel only. Finally, the obligation for persons to document the reasons for expatriation was managed randomly: when someone was allowed to cross the border to repair their car, someone else was rejected if aiming to visit her/his son. As well, at the German border nationality only, i.e. being German, often represented a sufficient pass. Local citizens organized simultaneous demonstrations on both sides calling for a quick *de-bordering*.

The same happened at the German-Polish border, according to Opilowska's research (2020). She documented dwellers' demonstrations of two twin cities, Görlitz and Zgorzelec, manifesting against the frontier became a physical barrier and expressing mutual solidarity with those living in the other side. Through a focus on the narrative against border closures of both local elites and common citizens, she identified a strong criticism towards the state decision. In particular, local elites appealed to European principles such as unity and transnationalism, while common citizens suffered the closure on a personal and work level.

Also the German border with Denmark suffered strong crossing restriction, according to Klatt (2020a, 2020b). As per the border with France, it underwent the reintroduction of border checks in 2015. They were performed randomly, and 24/7 only in 3 crossing roads out of 17, targeting people according to a racial profile. But from mid-March 2020 and for a few months, generalized checks targeted all people crossing at the few transnational road that that were not materially blocked by fences, subjected to documentary control by military personnel. Even if the closure was never total, it affected institutional cross-border cooperation, as well as daily life activities in personal and economic terms. Those consequences were strongly denounced by national minorities, that called for a quick opening in order to maintain cross-border cultural ties.

Ethnographic investigations uncovered that identity controls in times of COVID-19 were implemented in a totally random and personalized way. As well, surprisingly, border checks for health purposes never saw the collaboration of sanitary personnel. The ineffectiveness and inconsistency of the controls emerged as a major contradiction to their political scope. Border closures have come up as unilateral initiatives that have been adopted at a regional and national level, jeopardizing the mobility conditions within Europe (Brunet Jailly & Carpenter, 2020, pp. 8-9).

The overview also provided interpretative elements in terms of relationship between the state and its border regions, that in this sanitary emergency has been connoted by the one-sidedness of central decisions. According to Klatt (2020a), "for Europe specifically this raises questions on the multi-level governance processes of the European Union and its complex system of hierarchies. It has become evident that the present crisis is the time of the nation state executive" (p. 43). He spoke about a "renaissance of the executive", with state that imposes itself as a single actor, both towards European organisations and local governance.

2.4.3. A unilateral “new normality”: internal European borders are back to stay

This dissertation aimed to show that, in the last 10 years, the reintroduction of border checks at internal European Union boundaries has shifted from being a temporary, “last resort” measure to represent “a new normality” (Gülzau, 2023, pp. 11-12) in the European border management policies. As a tool to restrict “secondary movements”, it has been interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, as a policy stemming from the crisis of the Schengen system, in the clash between its imbalances and deficiencies and the unprecedented magnitude of transit migrations since 2015. On the other hand, as resulting from a change of the security paradigm of member states. In both cases, the internal *re-bordering* process represents a further output of the securitized approach to “transit migration” that has characterized the European migration and border policies since the signature of the Schengen Agreement. Recent developments in this regard suggest that this trend will not be reversed²².

Under these lenses, the internal *re-bordering* process represents a key factor of the “compensatory logic” discussed at the very beginning of the Chapter with reference to the Schengen *acquis* logic. As well, it contributed to the same generation of those transit migration patterns that underwent the generalized European *re-bordering* process.

When it comes to the *re-bordering* process aimed to contain the COVID-19, it is paradigmatic of the return to a nationalistic logic in terms of global emergency management, with a prioritization of those security mechanism developed in the multi-decade fight against irregular immigration by international and European organizations (Delmas & Goeury, 2020).

In the current political scenario, European states showed to exercise their decision-making regarding the management of their internal frontiers within an expanding framework of unilaterality, marked by a securitarian paradigm, kicking off a process under the spectrum of a “resurgent intergovernmentalism” (Biermann et al., 2019) in the face of the challenges posed by today’s world. This suggests that tightened European borders is highly likely to be part of the political landscape, as well as of the daily life of European citizens, at least as far as the medium-term future is concerned. In other terms, that re-bordered internal EU frontiers are back to stay.

²² A straightforward evidence is represented by the last steps taken by European authorities in the migration management field, that which makes European territory even more inaccessible to asylum seekers, and tightens rules to restrict secondary movement. On December 20, 2023, the Council and the European Parliament found an agreement about a European reform of the asylum and migration management. It introduces the border procedure, i.e., a fast-track admissibility scrutiny of the asylum application to be carried out outside the European territory, and mandatory in certain cases, including when the acceptance rate of individuals of the applicant's nationality is less than 20 percent. In addition, with regard to “secondary movements,” it extends the responsibility of the first state of entry to examine the asylum application to 20 months, from the current 12. Overall, this reform package creates the scope for increased irregularity of migratory flows moving at its internal and external borders. It further externalizes the outer border of the European Union, while it increasingly obstacle the free movement of asylum seekers within it.
Source: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/20/the-council-and-the-european-parliament-reach-breakthrough-in-reform-of-eu-asylum-and-migration-system/>

As a consequence, this dimension deserves to be ethnographically investigated. The relevance of such a change in terms of border management, as well as the political and ethical repercussions of a step-back in terms of freedom of mobility within the Schengen space, is of undoubted magnitude when it comes to the *border experience* in the European scenario of the coming years.

Embracing the significance of the *re-bordering* process at internal European borders, this thesis ethnographically investigates *where*, *how* and *when* do inner frontiers materialize in the European landscape, according to a *bordering* approach framework. As well, it seeks to explore the *who* dimension of the process, focusing on those actors performing *bordering* practices in its broadest sense (Chapter 6).

Furthermore, this dissertation aims to inquire the extent to which the internal *re-bordering* process impacts on the daily life of frontier actors and *borderlanders*. On this regard, the *bordering* approach has provided a theoretical tool that lends itself to the ethnographic objective of this thesis (Chapters 7 and 8). This concerns the concept of *border experience*, which is illustrated in the second part of this Chapter.

2.5. Anthropological approaches to the study of *border experience*

In the first part of this Chapter, the *bordering* approach has been intended as theoretical framework to investigate the nature of contemporary European borders and to explore the reintroduction of identity checks at internal EU boundaries. In this second part, the *bordering* perspective is instead adopted as a method to support the ethnographic focus of the thesis: to investigate the transformation of the internal European border according to the *re-bordering* process, and to explore its outcomes on the *border experience* of frontier communities.

2.5.1. The “people approach”

In the field of Border studies, Van Houtum first spoke about the “people approach” as innovative research strand to investigate the relationship between boundaries and persons. In his introduction to the special issue “European perspectives on borderlands” (2000), he identified precisely three areas in which Border studies developed in the decade of their *renaissance*: the flow approach; the cross-border cooperation approach; the people approach.

The “flow approach” embraced state borders as enduring obstacles to economic flows between border regions, and investigated the variation of their barrier-effect according to progresses in the integration processes. The “cross-border cooperation approach” involved instead the investigation of border

regions (or *Euroregions*) as laboratories of regional development. The scholar's main interests was represented by regional inequalities, and initiatives to promote cross-border networking and social cohesion such the INTERREG program²³. Finally, the "people approach" consisted in the "analysis of human production and reproduction of borders" (p. 67) and the exploration of their meaning as key investigation elements for the understanding of the European integration process. In particular, he called for the need of interdisciplinarity (Political geography, Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology) in order to address "behaviors, actions and mind-sets of human being" in the approach to borders as processes and institutions (Paasi, 1998, p. 51) and as constituents of the social and individual life (Donnan & Wilson, 1998).

2.5.2. *Borderlands* as anthropological subjects of study

The academic interest that Van Houtum grasped regarding the *who* dimension in the border construction and functioning occurred in parallel to a scholars' grown attention on *borderlands*, meant as privileged places where to investigate activities, functions and roles of those actors involved in, or subjected to, *bordering* practices.

Borderland studies were inspired by the pioneering work of Sahlins (1998), that conducted explorations on the relationship between states and their edges. He acknowledged the renewed centrality of border regions, that the globalization processes lifted from marginality. The author interpreted the relationship between state and *borderlands* as reciprocal and non-passive, demonstrating the influence of the region of Cerdanya in the development of both Spain and France with his contribution on the Pyrenees. The centrality of "border people" in his study lied on their capability to influence local representatives of the state to achieve their goals. While lying at the edge of the state, the *borderland* role in its political, economic, social and cultural dynamics was recognized as central, due to its capability to project the state itself beyond its border.

Borderlands have been investigated in literature as "barometers" of political change" (Häkli & Kaplan, 2001, p. 110). In this sense, Donnan (2010) observed that they represent the stage for "centripetal spatial orientations directed inwards to the center of the state that are in dynamic tension with centrifugal forces that direct a focus outwards beyond the border" (2010, p. 254). This highlighted the prominence of *borderlands* in infra-state dynamics in a globalized and inter-connected world (Donnan & Haller, 2000, p. 13).

The background for these explorations was the debate on the transformation of state sovereignty. As claimed earlier in the text (section 2.1.1.), the role of contemporary state borders has been relativized

²³ <https://www.interregeurope.eu/>

by global processes, but preserve their role in exercising the (residual) state power entities, as well as in contributing to culture- and identity-building. To this regard, the anthropological emphasis on “border people” in Borderland Studies concerns the capability of “non-central-state actors, pluri-national communities and stateless nations” to put the sovereign borders under pressure due to the construction of transborder “ethnic, religious, social and economic identities” (Brunet-Jailly, 2005, p. 639). This makes *borderlands* “special types of space” (Donnan, 2010, p. 254), privileged points of view to investigate the relationship between state power and people as “some things only happen in borderlands” (Donnan & Wilson, 1998, p.4). The identity- and culture-building processes that characterizes the everyday life of frontier communities challenges the classical role of borders as bounding nations and cultural homogeneous areas (Horstmann, 2002).

With reference to the American political environment, Martinez (1994) offered the first categorization of *borderlands* moving from his personal experience and studies on “border people”, border societies and *borderlanders* at the US-Mexico frontier. In his understanding, globalization provided centrality to *borderlands*: from strategic, far from the heart-state, isolated buffer-zones to dynamic spaces taking advantage from internationalization of trade relationships and new global border policies characterized by openness and cross-border cooperation. This circumstance provided to *borderlanders* a “unique human environment” to live in, “shaped by physical distance by the central areas and the constant exposure to transnational processes” (pp. xvii-iii). Moving from the analysis of cross-border movements and the circumstances producing them, he proposed four models of borderland: alienated, coexistent, interdependent and integrated (pp. 6-9). In alienated *borderlands*, one can observe the absence of cross-border relationships, due to different conflict options – war, political disputes, nationalisms, religious-based. In coexistent *borderlands*, infra-state relationships are reduced to their minimum, in order to ensure a certain degree of stability and communication. Interdependent *borderlands* are connected by solid economic, political and social relations, as well as shared development projects, favoured by a positive political and economic environment; it implies a mutual beneficiary economic system and a certain degree of cultural transfer between the two sides of the border. Finally, integrated *borderlands* are characterized by the absence of boundaries and limits to people and goods circulation: as an example, the author brings the relations between Belgium and neighbouring countries in the 80s. Regardless of which category it belongs to, for Martinez every *borderland* is characterized by a *milieu*, i.e. the complex of peculiar dynamics that set *borderland* apart from the core state-heart: transnational interactions, international conflicts and accommodation, ethnic conflict and accommodation, as well as separateness, meaning with the last concept the *borderlanders’* perception of otherness in relation to other citizens of the same state.

When it comes instead to the European context, seminal contributions in Borderland studies ascribable to Van Houtum's "people approach" revolved around the topic of "border culture", as a result of the *cultural turn* in North American and European universities. This aimed to challenge the concept of nation-state and that of cultural homogeneity within states (Scott, 2012a). The work of Donnan and Wilson (1998, 2010 and 2012) has been pioneering in giving centrality to the key topic of the anthropological approach to contemporary Borderland studies: the relationship between the border, the state power and its transformations, and border agents. "Border culture" was meant as fundamental in the social construction and negotiation of borders, understood as "ties forming networks transcending political borders" (1998, p. 12). Focusing on the "cultural constructions of everyday life which give meaning to the boundaries between communities and between nations" (2012, p. 6), they made use of the ethnographic tradition to investigate symbols and rituals able to describe how power is embodied, encoded, represented and manifested in the *borderlands'* organs and institutions of the state, including the border, and in the lives of its agents. Manifestations of "border culture" included those at a community level (mortuary rites, feasting, forms of hospitality, religious holidays) or markers of state sovereignty (army presence, guard towers, road signs, national flags), read in their mutual reinforcement or opposition, and considering that some symbols and rituals might be visible only to locals.

That of "border culture" was later considered by the geographer Brunet-Jailly (2005) as a key analytical lens for a contemporary view on *borderlands*. He claimed its importance in determining the very nature of borders, dividing culturally homogeneous communities, as well as the importance of identity activism on its functioning. On the theoretical side, the same proposed a method of studying political borders and *borderlands* under the lenses of "border culture" as resulting from the interaction between agency and structure²⁴.

The developments in Borderland studies inspired the exploration of the border-related processes that characterized the European integration process, under the lenses of border zones and their actors. The collapse of the Soviet Union represented the occasion for interdisciplinary reflections on the impact of the imposition of new state borders on the population (Berdahl, 1999; Berglund, 2000; Allina-Pisano, 2009; Binga & Toje, 2016). As well, ethnographic works targeting the everyday life in European *borderlands* mainly addressed regional processes of identity-building (Schack, 2001; Izotov, 2012; Kiiskinen, 2012) as well as the social and cultural construction of borders (Donnan & Wilson, 1998; Amante, 2010; Zimmerbauer, 2011). Other relevant contributions on the issue regarding "border culture" and *borderlands* were provided by Meinhof (2003), Heyman (2010, 2012), Konrad and Nicol (2011).

²⁴ This paradigm has been examined in section 2.2.4. of this Chapter.

2.5.3. *Who borders?* The notion of “borderwork”

The regionalization of Europe and the transformations stemming from the integration process have been investigated within the *bordering* approach in order to answer to this key question: *who borders?* On this regard, Newman (2003) echoed the need to consider borders as dynamic institutions, shaped by the tensions coming from the “top-down” embedded by state and central actors, as well as from the “bottom-up”, meaning from non-state and local actors. The scholar insisted on the importance of the “bottom-up” point of view within the bordering interpretation, meaning to put at the center of the investigation the “daily practices of ordinary people living in the *borderland* region” (pp. 14-15). Building on this perspective, Rumford (2007, 2013) focused on the contribution of non-state actors to *bordering* processes in the EU, whether in the *de-bordering* or *re-bordering* versions, and introduced the concept of “borderwork”. The scholar claimed that *bordering* was no longer a mere state business, and highlighted “the role of citizens (and indeed non-citizens) in envisioning, constructing, maintaining and erasing borders” (2013, pp. 2-3). For Rumford, people have always performed borderwork; however, this has been finally put into light under the *bordering* approach. Moving from this perspective, people's borderwork bolsters the multiplication and dissemination of borders, uncoupling it from state borderlines. An example is the construction of walled neighbourhoods, based on a dwellers’ perceived fear. As well, it can manifest at state borders, contributing at their relativizing (with the establishment of cross-border relations, for example), contestation (such as the No Border movements in support to free circulation), as well as hardening. Generally speaking, borderwork has been interpreted as no longer the only hands of the states, but including a range of actors (EU agencies, groups, individuals) that share with states the responsibility for “deciding on the location, recognition, and maintenance of many borders” (Rumford, 2006, p. 329).

The notion of “borderwork” was later taken up by other authors. Critically approaching post-modern understanding of *borderlands*, social sciences scholars have recently called for restoring the centrality of a materialist approach to the anthropological study of borders (Jansen, 2013; Troscenko, 2016). In particular, Reeves (2011) invited to “fix the border”, i.e. putting the territorial dimension of the state frontier back at the center of anthropological study. According to the scholar, sovereignty and territory have been progressively uncoupled in the studies on state power due to the affirmation of the academic strand that puts at its center bio-power and its manifestations inspired by Foucault (for example: Hansen & Stepputat, 2006; Amoore, 2006). As a theoretical tool of “border-fixing”, Reeves (2007) proposed “borderwork” as a method to ethnographically investigate “state territoriality as a

process”, producing a methodological shift from exploring “what the state ‘does’” to “how, where, and in which situated practices the state is done and undone, invoked and ignored” (p. 9), embodied in the everyday work of border guards in the Ferghana valley. The author called this perspective “mannerling the border” (2014, p. 9).

2.5.4. “Humanitarian borderwork”: governing vulnerabilities in transit

The notion of “borderwork” has also represented the backbone of ethnographic investigations with reference to the *re-bordering* process in contemporary Europe. In particular, it inspired a literature strand that investigated the “humanitarian borderwork” in European *borderlands*, marking the convergence of studies on the tightening of European frontiers and the management of transit migrations.

Pallister-Wilkins (2017a) defined “humanitarian borderwork” as the ensemble of practices at the border that couple the governing of migration with the aim of alleviating the violence and sufferance resulting from state strategies of exclusion. According to her analysis, it takes two key form: the first concerns the orientation of *bordering* practices towards the protection of vulnerabilities; the second points to the involvement of humanitarian, non-state actors at the border. Generally speaking, it can be considered as a state strategy: “The practices that fall under the rubric of “humanitarian borderwork” marry rationalities of care with those of control and speak to longer-running security practices, as sovereign power has sought to reconcile the needs of mobile populations with territorial sovereignty” (p. 6). As well, beyond the legitimization of border exclusionary practices, it seeks to conceal different interests expressed by different actors at the border: those of “state actors concerned with governing mobility”, those of “humanitarian actors concerned with governing life”, and those of “people on the move made acutely vulnerable in border spaces and by border regimes” (p.7). Finally, “humanitarian borderwork” generates categories of lives, reproducing hierarchies across the actors at the border, as well as “geographies of humanitarianism” (Pallister-Wilkins, 2020), meaning with that both the construction of spaces where migrants are governed through logics of “care and control”, as well as the perpetuation of social practices in which to canalize the liberal need of ensuring protection to both the state and the human beings, “keeping strangers politically distant, cared for but not equal” (p. 1005).

Pallister-Wilkins investigated the “care and control” strategy in managing transit migrations in the European scenario with ethnographic lenses. In particular, moving from her field research at the Evros region (2015), the scholar explored the extent to which the EU and FRONTEX humanitarian approach implied agency’s operations aimed at both saving lives at the Greece-Turkey border, and pursue

smugglers. On the one hand, she showed as, within European migration policies, the humanitarian and policing approach were not separated or competing dimensions. On the other hand, the daily practices highlighted an inner tension as rescue operations and push-backs were implemented in the same area, at the same time, finally giving rise to the possibility of considering humanitarianism as a FRONTEX strategy, a shield to justify the increasing *re-bordering* of the external European borders.

The continuities between the securitarian dimension and humanitarianism (Fassin, 2007, 2011) in the European border and migration policy has been highlighted particularly highlighted with reference to the European Migration Agenda published in 2015²⁵.

For example, Garelli and Tazzioli (2016) illustrated the “hotspot approach”²⁶ as an “enhanced mechanisms of intra-governmental surveillance” aimed at “making humanitarian functions contingent on securitarian ones”, since “hotspots are spatialized as the necessary frontline for international protection programmes, as the filtering border necessary for the humanitarian regime to work” (n.p.). They highlighted that this approach mainly aimed at ensuring that the countries representing the European “soft underbelly” complied with their duties of fingerprinting migrants while providing first aid assistance, in order to pursue the new European migration dispositive of dividing at the very beginning migrants into refugees, deserving protection, and clandestine people, deserving repatriation, based on the mere nationality. On this regard, hotspots worked as nationality-based filtering tools, that challenges the right to individual analysis under international asylum law (Neville et al., 2016). Cuttitta (2018) claimed instead that the humanitarian discourse represented an endorsement and legitimation for exclusionary policies when it comes to the management of the Mediterranean border. Finally, Moreno-Lax (2018) discussed how the re-shaping of European migration policies according to a humanitarian paradigm did not substantially modify the practices on the ground, whose core aim continuously identified with interdicting the access to the European territory to transit migrants. Within this context, through an analysis of the “rescue-through-interdiction” model, the author unravelled the rise of a new humanitarian discourse in which transit migrants’ rights and agency are underestimated, thus they are portrayed as victims, while the attention is centred on traffickers, blamed as only responsible for sea tragedies.

The “humanitarian borderwork” and its contingencies with the securitization paradigm have been mainly investigated with reference to the external EU borders. Literature has recently focused on a range of actors: EU agencies, such as FRONTEX and OIM (Csernatoni, 2018; Perkovski, 2018;

²⁵ See section 3.2.1 for a detailed policy overview.

²⁶ It concerns a policy perspective in which irregular flows entering European territory are concentrated in centres located in border areas and massively fingerprinted, to facilitate the application of the Dublin regulation. See section 3.2.1.

Frowd, 2018; Oliveira Martens et al., 2022), border guards (Reeves, 2014; Jubany, 2017; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019) and non-state entities such as NGOs and social movements (Gerard & Weber, 2019; Gazzotti, 2020). Other works have implemented explorations under this perspective at the Greek border, showing how the multiplicity of actors in play contributed to a negative management of transit migrants (Pascucci et al., 2018; Kallio et al., 2018). The same geographical focus has been chosen by Pallister-Wilkins (2017b), and Gordon and Larsen (2021). The first discussed the making of an “humanitarian borderscape” as NGOs, in this case Médecins Sans Frontières, have their range of intervention both structured and limited according to the geographical distribution of those structural elements (border checks, walls, corridors) capable to shape the time and space of transit migrations along the Balkan Route in 2015 and 2016²⁷. In turn, the humanitarian borderscape is influenced by the “times, spaces and types of care” (p. 133) carried out by NGOs, that maintains an active role in relation to migrants’ im/mobility. The second mentioned paper focused instead on the extent to which poor conditions of refugee camps, such as those of Moria and Kara Tepe in the Greek island of Lesbos, support a strategy of discouraging both the humanitarian assistance of NGOs and the migrants’ arrival, and serve therefore as a deterrence and punishing tool. Facing the “violent inaction” of the state, authors demonstrated that humanitarian actors in the field contributed to the poor conditions of the camp due to competition and lack of organization, but also fill the gap left by the state engaging in effective borderwork.

With reference to the Mediterranean route instead²⁸, many scholars (for example: Sciurba, 2016, 2018; Cuttitta, 2018; D’Angelo, 2019; Calarco, 2023) addressed the political-humanitarian borderwork carried out by NGOs in Sicily, where these actors are illustrated as both supporting and challenging the European Border Regime. Gazzotti (2020) and Aris Escarcena (2022) provided ethnographic insights from the Spanish-Maroccan border. Gazzotti addressed the role of NGOs normally intervening in emergency context in sites where transit migration and border violence are routine, and highlighted the extent to which their activities perpetuated the “less-than-citizen, less-than-human form of existence” (p. 3) of sub-Saharan citizens. The recent contribution by Aris Escarcena illustrated instead the nature of Ceuta temporary welcoming centres for immigrants as “humanitarian detention” sites, highlighting their contribution in filtering and selective migrants while providing them basic assistance. Finally, Phillips (2023) addressed the *humanitarian borderwork* in Libya, discussing the extent to which NGOs carry-out a dual work in transit sites, both humanitarian and implicated with migration managements, and highlighted the existence of an investigation gaps about the role of humanitarian actors on transit sites.

²⁷ Please refer to section 3.2.3.

²⁸ Please refer to section 3.2.4.

Literature on “humanitarian borderwork” have instead overlooked the scenario of re-bordered internal European boundaries. Relevant ethnographic works mainly addressed sites other than *borderlands*, such as solidarity and activism in support of transit migrants in Germany (Karakayali et al., 2016; Fleishmann et al., 2017, 2019; Braun, 2017), as well as in Austria (de Jong et al., 2017; Hagelbacher, 2019), in the UK (Guma et al., 2019), in Greece (Tsavdaroglou, 2019). Other relevant contributions in this terms is that by Kallius, Monterescu and Rajaram (2016) who discussed from a ground-based point of view the patterns of im/immobility and the surprising forms of solidarities that emerged in key Hungarian hotspots in the hottest moment of the “refugee crisis”. In their research, these scholars approached the “border” in an extensive way, and even though their research was not carried out at the territorial edges of the state, they could account for the *bordering* practices that influenced the time and place of transit migrations. The same approach has been put in place in the work by Fontanari (2016, 2017, 2018), who has explored the daily experience of asylum seekers in Europe, and especially in Germany, coping with the post-crisis European Border Regime.

For the scope of this thesis, the theoretical perspective of “humanitarian borderwork” is particularly able to shed light on the daily work of non-state actors in carrying out *bordering* practices in areas – in this case, *borderlands* – characterized by a degree of humanitarian emergency. This is the case of the Upper Susa Valley: thus, the topic of “humanitarian borderwork” is further debated in Chapter 7.

2.5.5. The polysemic nature of contemporary borders

Literature on transit migrations, the *re-bordering* process and the “humanitarian borderwork” has highlighted the role international migrants as *bordering* agents (van Houtum & van Naerssen, 2002; Balibar, 2009; Jones, 2012). The inclusion of international migrants within the actors who perform *bordering* practices raised question about the distribution of power in the contemporary production, reproduction and contestation of borders, synthetized by the question: *borders for whom?* (Newman, 2003, p. 22).

What the “clash” between Western reinforced borders and transit migrations made emerge is that borders not only mean differently to people according to their positionality (Troschenko, 2016), but work differently according to their legal status. The modern border assumes a different thickness or role depending by certain characteristics of the individual interfacing with it: legal status, nationality, skin colour. As revealed by the *bordering* approach through its focus on the role of border actors in producing and reproducing the boundary, ontologically speaking borders do not exist *per se*, but stem from the *bordering* practices that border actors put in place, as well as the meaning they attach to it

(Sohn, 2015). With a suggestive metaphor, Smart and Smart (2008) explained the functioning of contemporary state borders as follows:

The world is punctuated by barriers, the most important of which are national borders. For some people and things, borders act as periods, full stops denying legal entry. For others, they are like semi-colons, requiring visas and work permits. For the global elite, by reason of their citizenship status or their assets, borders are like commas, slightly slowing movement at various checkpoints. (p. 175)

This reveals the *polysemic nature* (Balibar, 2002, pp. 78-81) of contemporary Western state borders. On this regard, Donnan and Wilson spoke about a “frontier effect” (1998, p. 129) to explain the symbolic and physical relation between the state, the border and the body when it comes to mobility, and on the influence that state power exercise on *borderlanders* and transit migrants through power and domination. They pointed out that:

In borderlands, international borders are [...] simultaneously both accepted and unproblematic [...] Borders are “things” and “ideas” that sometimes matters and sometimes do not, in ways that suggest to outsiders that borders are often invisible to borderlanders, yet they seem to continue to matter a great deal and are always manifestly visible to travellers in the region and those who wish to cross into other countries. (2010, p. 10)

This resulted on the key observation that state borders do not treat everyone the same way, therefore they are differently experienced (Rumford, 2013, p. 2).

Brambilla (2015) further provided innovative elements for investigating contemporary borders from different perspectives. In her opinion, the *bordering* approach does not sufficiently grasp the capability of contemporary borders of shifting and changing their location, that implies their multiplication as well as their being visible or invisible depending to different categories within the society (p. 19). In order to overcome this gap, the scholar proposes the concept of *borderscape* “to better grasp the spatial dimension of the border, in a context of its multiple displacement, negotiation and representation” (p. 20). What is interesting for the present argument is Brambilla’s point of view on the more relevant methodologies to catch the multiplicity of border, which are border experiences and representations. When it comes to the first, “great emphasis is placed on the need to ‘humanize’ borders” that allows to understand to what extent:

The experience of borders often clashes with the assumptions of geopolitical theory, and to investigate how the rhetoric and policies of borders impact, conflict and are in a dynamic relationship with everyday life; how these rhetoric and policies are experienced,

lived and interpreted by those who inhabit borders by paying particular attention to issues of citizenship, identity and transnational migration. (p. 27).

The concept of *borderscape* has been further discussed by Pallister-Wilkins (2017a, 2017b) in its debate on “humanitarian borderwork”. According to the author, it is able to take on board the complexity of practices and actors in humanitarian responses to violent *re-bordering* processes, engaging with their territoriality, the dimension of border contestation by mobile bodies and their everyday reality. On this regard, the “humanitarian borderscape” is “a specific borderscape with particular features relating to im/mobility and the times, spaces and types of care” (2017b, p. 5), deeply connected to patterns of im/mobility embodied by international migrants and asylum seekers. Chapter 7 builds on the category of “humanitarian borderscape”, investigating the everyday reality of state and non-state actors engaged in the protection of transit migrants in the Upper Susa Valley to explore the complexity of the solidarity scenario, crisscrossed by tangible and intangible borders that shape their daily experience of the *borderland*.

2.5.6. *Border narratives* and the multi-perspectival approach to border perception and meaning

A further research topic addressed in literature with reference to the polysemic nature of transforming European borders regarded their perception. At the turn of the 2000s, the *bordering* approach revealed that the “border change” ongoing in Europe not only helped to understand *who* contributes to producing, reproducing and contesting borders, but also to what extent different actors *perceive* the state borders differently. A scholar that particularly focused on the *border perception* was Newman (2003), who speculated on the relationship between a transforming ontology of the border, and its relationship to the imaginary of people.

Borders may be as much perceived as they are concrete and tangible phenomena in the landscape. Borders may be perceived by people in places where no physical boundary exists. Equally, physical boundaries may be ignored in places where people perceive them as being irrelevant in their daily lives and cross them at ease with little, or no, restrictions to trans-boundary movement. The study of borders has been opened up to include the representations, images and narratives that people have of the lines that separate them from others. The stronger the barrier function of the border, the more powerful the imagined, the more abstract the narrative of what is perceived as lying on the other side. (pp. 19-20)

With the aim of grasping the complexity of contemporary borders, Newman set *border narratives* at the centre of the focus within the investigation of *border perception*: “It is at the level of narrative, anecdote and communication that borders come to life” (2006a, p. 10). He highlighted their role in the emersion of the perception of borders by non-state actors (2003, pp. 14-15), opening up to the issue of their multiple understanding as borderland-scaled consequences of their polysemic nature. According to the scholar, the exploration of how the border is perceived, when both constructed or removed, whether in tangible or intangible ways, allows the understanding of how people see “the other”, as well as what is “beyond” it, offering a key ontological insight. Building on contributions collected in volumes edited by Mainhof (2002) and Van Houtum, Kramsch and Zierhofer (2005), the author indicated that the challenge for border scholars who want to perform *people-approached* studies on borders consists in putting together different *border narratives*, collected from multiple actors, and compare them in order to construct a holistic view about how contemporary borders work and are experienced from below (2006a).

Other scholars worked later on this concept. Border narratives have been investigated in in order to question how they serve to build everyday ideology about state and immigration, and the extent to which they back forms of physical violence at the boundary (Pickering, 2006). Or, the “narrativization” of borders have been considered as critical to understand how people communicate their experience as *borderlanders*, make sense of the everyday *bordering* and *de-bordering* practices beyond institutional discourses, and construct their “borderland identity” (Prokkola, 2009). Finally, border narratives have represented the backbone for border investigations “from below”, in order to explore their multi-perspectival meaning from the point of view of *borderlanders*: from a desired barrier to a state institution, from an “othering” tool to an opportunity (Doevenspeck, 2011).

Further adding at the debate following the introduction of the *bordering* approach, Rumford (2012) discussed the need for a multi-perspectival approach to contemporary Border studies first introduced by Newman. Building on the “Lines in the Sand” agenda (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009, 2012) on the acknowledgment of the polysemic nature of border (Balibar, 2002, pp. 78-81) and on the concept of borders as “cultural encounters” (Rovisco, 2010), the author highlighted that the multiplication and differentiation of state and non-state boundaries grasped through the *bordering* approach has overcome the feature of mutual consensus. Contemporary borders have no need for being recognized by all parties to exist and generate effects (2012, pp. 890-893). Therefore, Border studies asked for new approaches to interpret “the multiplicity of borders, their bespoke nature, and the range of actors who create them” (p. 892). Rumford proposed an approach that invites to “see like a border” (pp. 897-898). According to the author, this implies: first, that effects of contemporary state borders can be experienced far from their physical presence, “wherever selective controls are to be

found” when specifically speaking of international migrants (cfr. Balibar, 2002, pp. 84-85); second, that non-state actors can perform bordering for non-state purposes, as claimed by those who explore borders in terms of borderwork; Third, that the point of view must not be necessarily that of subalterns, but it means “taking into account [all] perspectives from those at, on, or shaping the border” (2012, p. 898).

2.5.7. The concept of *border experience*

Within the anthropological approach in contemporary Border and Borderland studies, the category of *border experience* has recently emerged to put the perspective of *bordering* actors and *borderlanders* at the centre of scientific analysis. According to Wille & Nienaber (2020), it is supported by the multi-perspectival understanding of border deriving from the shift to the *bordering approach*, that as said considers the border as a process resulting by the everyday practices and the meaning production by both institutional and non-institutional actors. As well, the multi-perspectival approach to the understanding of state borders emerged from the early innovations in the field of both Border and Borderland studies, in terms of considering non-state actors alongside state actors as agents contributing to the production, reproduction, and contestation of state boundaries. *Border experience* privileges the point of view of the latter, especially of border-zone residents, emphasizing their agency in producing and reproducing the border through practices, representations, narratives, objects. Moreover, according to the scholars, it conveys a holistic view of the border, thanks to the possibility of considering and bringing into dialogue the points of view – the *border narratives* - of all the actors involved permanently or temporarily in its construction and reproduction, and includes marginalized actors.

In the introduction to their ground-breaking book on the topic, the authors claimed that their work aimed to explore the contemporary nature of European borders in this “epoch of *re-bordering*” through the perspective of the “everyday cultural realities of borderland’s residents [...] as agents of the border” (p. 9). Embracing the conceptual innovations that have emerged in the field of Border studies over the past 30 years, they approached state borders in terms of “borderwork”, meaning as institutions resulting from social practices produced and reproduced by multiple actors, including people; as well as in terms of their multiple understandings, suggesting that the border is diversely experienced by different state and non-state actors. Moreover, they built on contributions by scholars previously taken into account to put forward a concept of *border experience* that “strengthen the perspective and thus the role and agency of those who ‘inhabit’ the border, meaning those who are entangled in them and who with their (bodily and sensory) experiences or generation of meaning in

and through everyday practices, narratives, representations or objects continuously (re-)produce them” and as “an approach that focuses on ‘border(lands) residents’ and their border experience in order to better understand the modes of action and function, but, above all, the ways in which borders are appropriated and thereby produced” (p. 10).

Building on Rumford and his “seeing like a border” approach, they aimed to focus the attention on how the border is produced through the *border experience*, and thus they invite to focus on “moments of representation or meaning production coded in practices, discourses or objects and in which borders are (made) relevant” (p. 10). As well, in their understanding border experience embrace the multiplicity of contemporary borders, their polysemic nature, and thus the need to investigate them through a multi-perspectival approach (pp. 11-12).

2.6. Final remarks

The Chapter has illustrated that Critical Border studies and the *bordering* approach represent a significant theoretical framework to investigate this dimension in the context of the “border change” of internal European borders, stemmed from the massive reestablishment of identity border checks facing “secondary movements” and the COVID-19. By addressing the European context as a “bordering laboratory”, Critical Border Studies have offered the tools to investigate the ontology and functioning of contemporary European borders, and have focused on the diverse practices, values, experiences and narratives of those who construct, reproduce, contest, and experience the securitized modern European boundaries in their daily lives.

Moving from the innovative framework provided by the *bordering* approach and illustrated in this Chapter, my work is particularly interested in studying the everyday life of *borderlanders* living in the proximity of *re-bordered* internal European borders in times of “secondary movements” and the COVID-19 pandemic. As well, it aims to anthropologically decline the notion of *border experience* as approached by Wille and Nienaber, through an ethnographic exploration of the extent to which the *re-bordering* of internal European Europe has impacted on the daily life of frontier communities. Here lies the potential of the concept of *border experience* for anthropologically-based observations of contemporary European state borders, that this research puts at the center of its ethnographic approach.

Chapter 3

Policy overview

This Chapter integrates Chapter 2 with a detailed policy overview.

The illustration of the Schengen *acquis* will focus on its complementary process of both dissolving and reinforcing of European borders (Mitsilegas, 2002; Casas et al., 2011) embedded in the Schengen *acquis*. Then, the extent to which this policy architecture shaped the management of “transit migration” (Collyer & de Haas 2012; Düvell, 2014) and “secondary movements” (Collyer, Düvell & de Haas, 2012) according to a securitized approach (Huysmans, 2000) is explored with an overview of its implementation in the time frame 2010-2021. Both the Balkan and the Central Mediterranean routes are illustrated, representing the gateways most used by transit migrants and asylum seekers to access Europe during the period analysed. Based on this framework, the “long Summer of migration” (Kasperek & Speer, 2015) is taken into special consideration, showing the agency/structure framework (Brunet-Jailly, 2005) within which European migration and border policies and “transit migration” backed its genesis, development and effects. Of the latter, the Chapter offers a detailed policy analysis of the process of returning identity checks to the internal borders of the European Union (Gülzau 2023) since 2015 up to the present.

3.1. The Schengen system

This part offers an overview on the Schengen system. It takes into consideration the *de-bordering* and *re-bordering* process embedded in: the Schengen Agreement, signed in 1985, that put the basis for the intergovernmental deal about the functioning of European internal and external borders (European Union, 2000a); the Schengen Convention (European Union, 2000b), that in 1990 complemented the Agreement and further regulated the *de-bordering* and *re-bordering* process²⁹; the Schengen Border Code (European Union, 2006, 2016), that provided the operational guidelines for collective management of European boundaries. The section also examines the Dublin regulation

²⁹ It entered into force in 1995 and was integrated within the EU framework in 1997 with the Treaty of Amsterdam (European Community, 1997). The same Treaty of Amsterdam also determined the definitive communitarization of border and migration policies (Papagianni, 2014). In facts, these were transferred them under the 1st pillar, providing supranational consistency to the management of internal and external borders, as well as pursuing the aim of creating an “area of freedom, security and justice”. The harmonization of national migration and asylum policies and a common and shared strategy against external threats, such as illegal immigration and illicit businesses, represented the key aims for this project.

(Council of the European Union, 1990), the EURODAC database (Council of the European Union & European Parliament, 2013b) and the Common European Asylum System in their role of governing “secondary movements”.

3.1.1. *De-bordering* Europe: the removal of internal borders and the INTERREG program

As far as the *de-bordering* process in the Schengen system is concerned, the Schengen Agreement, Schengen Convention and Schengen Border Code envisaged the dismantling of customs posts used for document control at the internal borders of the European Union, as well as the removal of checks on people and goods themselves.

The internal *de-bordering* finds its basic principles in the Schengen Convention. Title II, Chapter I only counts with 4 articles and determines that internal border can be cross at any point by anyone, with no checks. However, it preserves the states’ option to reintroduce border checks if required by security concerns, or controls on aliens in states’ territory, when other parties to the agreement have been duly informed.

The functioning of internal Schengen border is further regulated since 2006 by the Schengen Border Code, whose latest reform is dated 2016. It performs a key role within the European migration policies and deserves a punctual analysis. Title III concerns the management of the Schengen area internal borders. Art. 22 established the free circulation to any individual, that can cross internal borders without checks, “irrespective of their nationality”. Art. 23 preserves the member state sovereignty to carry out police controls: when unrelated to border controls, but with the possibility to include border areas; when carried out differently than at external boundaries; in case of well-founded risk to public safety. Art. 24 foresees the removal of obstacles to traffic, and represents the basis for the material de-functionalization, and in many cases dismantling, of border posts. Finally, Chapter II rules the “Temporary reintroduction of border control at internal borders”, which includes the legal basis for the internal *re-bordering* process that represent the core of this thesis and will be detailed in part 3 of this Chapter.

The *de-bordering* process was coupled by policies aimed to support the cross-border cooperation between European states, and thus exploit its potential in terms of free trade. The program INTERREG represent a meaningful example. At the economic and political levels, it aimed to promote trans-border alliances involving state and non-state actors, opportunities for regional development, as well as the enhancement of trans-border participatory decisional practices (O’Dowd, 2002). At the symbolic level, the cross-border cooperation aimed to *Europeanize* the European space (Scott, 1999, 2012). This was backed by discourses encouraging the spread of a common identity,

especially in those border regions characterized with ethnic divisions; as well as the creation of shared regional identities, contributing to the overall project of a multi-cultural but integrated Europe (O'Dowd, 2002). In this sense, and in *bordering* terms, INTERREG was planned to de-build not only state borders, but also cultural and social boundaries. Recent contributions on the cross-border cooperation concerned: current patterns of cross-border relations and regional development in Europe (Jakubowski et al., 2016) and beyond (Brunet-Jailly, 2022); transnational policy making in terms of border management at the European level (Infantino, 2019); the risky outcomes of securitization with references to transnational exchanges in European *borderlands* (Deleixhe et al., 2019).

In the context of this thesis, INTERREG is explored in the case study as an example of a policy that, in the 30 years of its application, has helped to build a solid foundation for cross-border exchange in the economic, social and cultural sense.³⁰

3.1.2. *Re-bordering* Europe: exploring the European migration policy

Despite the mainstream rhetoric of the Schengen process being a milestone in ensuring a greater mobility in the European Union, scholars referred to *de-bordering* as marginal within a more significant trend of *re-bordering*, aimed securitizing and reinforcing the European borders (Zielonka, 2002; Casella-Colombeau, 2020).

Chapter II of the Schengen Convention rules the crossing at Schengen area's external borders. This is restricted in space and time (fixed gates, fixed schedule), and aliens must comply with determined criteria for authorized crossing. According to Art. 5.2, "an alien who does not fulfil all the [above] conditions must be refused entry into the territories of the Contracting Parties unless a Contracting Party considers it necessary to derogate from that principle on humanitarian grounds, on grounds of national interest or because of international obligations. In such cases authorisation to enter will be restricted to the territory of the Contracting Party concerned, which must inform the other Contracting Parties accordingly". External borders are patrolled, and states work in close cooperation in this regard. The Convention establishes common rules for cooperation in terms of security measures enforcement. Chapter III provided for the first time for common visa management at the European level. It establishes the creation of a single visa for all member states, both transit or travel, both short- and long-term. Chapter IV rules the conditions of internal mobility for visa holders. Chapter V regulates the relationship between asylum seekers and the states of the Schengen area (Art. 28-38). Finally, the Convention introduces the SIS, Schengen Information System. It is a shared database that allows officials of member states "to have access to alerts on persons and property for the purposes

³⁰ Please refer to section 2.2.1. in Chapter 2.

of border checks and other police and customs checks carried out within the country in accordance with national law and, in the case of the specific category of alerts referred to in Article 96, for the purposes of issuing visas, residence permits and the administration of legislation on aliens in the context of the application of the provisions of this Convention relating to the movement of persons” (Art. 41). Art. 96 refers to aliens who have been acknowledged by a member state as representing a threat to public security, or having been targeted with a refusal of entry.

Similar to the *de-bordering* process, the *re-bordering* process envisaged by the Schengen Convention is further regulated by the Schengen Border Code. In particular, Title II is dedicated to the management of the external borders of the Schengen Area. Chapter I foresees the arrangement of border gates, whose crossing is regulated by pertinent member states, as well as the conditions of entry for third-country citizens. Chapter II rules the checks at external borders and the conditions under which third-country nationals might be refused entry. Art. 7 states that border checks could never harm the human dignity, none be discriminatory. Art. 8 arranges a double level of checks: the first, minimum, targeting everyone and through the check on identity papers. The second, targeting third-country nationals, foresees additional steps in order to evaluate whether the individual has a valid travel documentation, has not exceeded the maximum length of the authorized stay, has the means of subsistence for the duration of the intended stay, and if does not represent a threat for the public safety. Art. 13 specifies the nature and aim of border surveillance, that can be stationary or mobile, and directed to discourage and act against cross-border criminality and illegal border crossings. Finally, Art. 14 ruled the refusal of entry, to be issued to those third-country nationals not fulfilling the entry criteria, excluding the cases in which the right to asylum and to international protection is concerned. Finally, Art. 3 excludes from its competences those people asking international protection, whose relationship with the Schengen member states is regulated in Title II, Chapter V.

The dimension of the right to asylum is in fact regulated by the Dublin Convention, signed in 1990, that together with the Schengen *acquis* and the Common European Asylum System supports the fundamental migration policies of the European Union. The regulation entered in force in 1997 and was amended twice, in 2003 and in 2014. The last version is Dublin III (2013/604/CE; European Union, 2013a). In general, the main aim of the regulation is to establish the member state responsible for considering the asylum application issued by a third-country national or a stateless person (in other terms, a non-EU citizen). In case the claimer is a visa holder, the state responsible for the claim examination is the issuer (Art. 12). Otherwise, in case of an irregular crossing, the state responsible is the first entered (Art. 13), as established though the criteria included in Art. 22 (either proofs or circumstantial evidences). This rule is partially derogated in case of minors or dependant individuals,

as well as in case the claimer can prove to have spent at least 5 months in a signatory state different for the first transited, whether he entered the EU illegally. If the claimer issues the asylum demand in a state different from the responsible, the latter has the duty of taking him/her back (Art. 18).

Complementary to the Dublin regulation is the EURODAC, the EU's asylum fingerprints database created in 2003 and more recently reformed by the Directive 2013/63/EU. The database is functional to establish the identity of the asylum claimer, in order to pinpoint the state responsible for the application processing, as well as to check on aliens who might have illegally moved to another member country for asylum claiming purposes ("secondary movements"). It is also considered as a tool to prevent and fight terrorist crime. According to Art. 9 and 14, each signatory state has the duty to promptly take finger of both asylum applicants and apprehended individual in the context of irregular border crossing. Both are shared within the EU member states, to check if the applicant has already filed a claim in another state.

Finally, the Dublin regulation has, together with other European legislative acts³¹, ruled the Common European Asylum System. First elaborated during the Tampere Council in 1999, the CEAS fulfilled the need emerged by the refugee crisis connected to war events in Yugoslavia in the 90s, of a harmonized asylum system in the EU. It provides with minimum asylum standards to whom Member states are obliged (Fullerton, 2016, pp. 64-73).

As examined in Chapter 2, the legal framework offered by the policies above have built the European migration policy (Henry & Pastore, 2016) and responds to a containment strategy with reference to "transit migrations" and "secondary movements". In the decades before the 90s, non-European individuals with visa and without visa could get basically the same opportunities in entering Europe due to lack of controls (Collyer & De Hass, 2012). Since the 90s, the *re-bordering* process implied increased identity checks on non-Europeans aiming to cross the external European border. Having a visa or a permit to stay determine the possibility to travel easily or to engage in long and dangerous maritime and overland mobility (Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016, p. 244).

As far as the internal borders are concerned, both the Dublin regulation and the CEAS concern the EU strategical priority of limiting "secondary movements" (European Parliament, 2017). According to the European institutions, they occur "when refugees or asylum-seekers move from the country in which they first arrived to seek protection or for permanent resettlement elsewhere". This are often irregular migrations, as they are implemented "without the prior consent of the national authorities or without an entry visa, or with no or insufficient documentation normally required for travel purposes,

³¹ These are the EURODAC Regulation (2725/2000), the Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55), the Reception Conditions Directive (2003/9), the Qualification Directive (2004/83) and the Asylum Procedures Directive (2005/85).

or with false or fraudulent documentation (UNHCR, 1989)³². The Dublin regulation has been interpreted as a continuum with reference to the tightening of the EU external border, “a policy of internal externalization through which an inner rim of control was erected in order to select and control migrants’ movements” in favour of northern European countries (Heller & Pezzani 2016, pp. 5-6).

Finally, if the SIS system has been indicated as a technological feature of the securitized Europe along with intensification of border checks (Anderson in Andreas & Snyder, 2000), the EURODAC system contributes to control and contain, and sometimes disrupt, migrants’ agency and migrations within Europe (van der Ploeg, 1999).

3.2. Securitizing transit migrations and “secondary movements”: a policy overview

3.2.1. The securitized approach to transit migrations (2010-2015)

In Chapter 2 “Ethnographies of a re-bordered Europe” I claimed that, according to the rationale behind the securitized approach to migrations, “transit migration” can be understood as a coping strategy to overcome the both literal and figurative higher walls around Europe. In turn, European policies adapt to the diversification of migration routes, showing the interconnection between the European migration policy and irregularized “transit migration”. This section aims to illustrate this mechanism through an overview of the European migration and border management scenario in the 2010-2015, seeking to demonstrate from a policy point of view that the “long Summer of migration” (Kasperek & Speer, 2015) and the “secondary movements” that determined the internal *re-bordering* process stemmed from the securitized approach to “transit migration”.

In the period 2010-2015, the Mediterranean route had seen an increase of irregular sea crossing. In 2011, the end of Ben Ali regime in Tunisia created a power vacuum that boosted the irregular travels towards Italy of thousands of Tunisians (more than 20.000 individuals between January and March only, according to FRONTEX³³). This brought to serious political clashes at the European level with reference to the management of both external and internal Schengen borders (Zaiotti, 2013). Again in 2011, thousands of Sub-Saharan migrants left Libya due to post-Gheddafi unrest, and approached the Italian southern coasts (FRONTEX, 2012; see also Mainwaring, 2012).

³² Source: <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/problem-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-who-move-irregular-manner-country-which-they-had>

³³ Source: <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/publications/ara-2012-o9ohcz>

In 2012, the attention of human rights watchdogs still focused on Italy, which was found guilty within the process *Hirsi Jamaa and Others v. Italy* at the European Court of Human Rights, for violating the prohibition of collective expulsion under the Geneva Convention³⁴. At the end of 2014, Italy decided not to renew the humanitarian and search-and-rescue operation *Mare Nostrum* (Heller & Pezzani, 2016) started the previous year and triggered by the October 2013 shipwreck, in which 368 migrants died in front of Lampedusa (Cuttitta, 2015). According to Triandafyllidou and Mantanika (2017, p. 22), its political elites considered this EU-Italian operation, that had rescued more than 170 thousand people in the period October 2013 - October 2014, a pull factor for immigrants leaving Africa and choosing Italy as preferred gate to enter Europe. Thus, it was substituted by Operation Triton, guided by FRONTEX and characterized for a less search-and-rescue and more border monitoring aim (Tazzioli, 2016). In few months, this change materialized into a dramatic event: on April 19, 2015 850 migrants died or disappeared in front of Lampedusa, in the worst border-crossing shipwreck in the Mediterranean Sea so far.

European authorities and member states responded to the tragedy with a further increase in the securitization of the EU outer border. In the first half of 2015 European institutions and states joined a process of re-framing of the European migration policy, whose result was the publication of the European Agenda of Migration in May (European Commission, 2015). Its key measures were: the tripling of funding to FRONTEX missions in the Mediterranean to stem irregular migration and smuggling, and the involvement of the CSDP in fighting traffickers' networks; a relocation plan benefiting frontline member states challenged by the arrival of unprecedented migratory flows; a resettlement plan of asylum seekers; a relaunch of bilateral relations with non-member origin and transit countries; the "hotspot approach"³⁵.

Due to the Mediterranean route becoming more dangerous because of the Triton operation, and the parallel exacerbation of the Syrian crisis, the migratory movement heading towards the EU re-orientated towards the land routes, especially that across Greece and the Balkans (Cabot, 2015). Some reports indicated an increase in irregular entries from Turkey into Greece, but the focus was all on the central Mediterranean route (Hess & Kasperek, 2017a). Confirming the nature of coping strategy of the "transit migration", the route towards Europe diversified and redirected towards the Balkans.

³⁴ In 2009, the Italian Guardia di Finanza had returned two hundred Eritrean citizens to Libya, an internationally recognized unsafe country, after intercepting them in the Mediterranean Sea (Facchini & Rondi, 2022, p. 89).

³⁵ The "hotspot approach" planned an increased and key involvement of EU agencies at the most pressured external borders. "In this approach, the Commission posited the deployment of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), Frontex, Eurojust, and Europol to the hotspots of migration, namely parts of the border perceived as especially under migratory pressure, in order to 'swiftly identify, register and fingerprinting incoming migrants'" (cfr. European Commission, 2015a, p. 6). In 2015 and 2016, hotspot facilities opened in Southern Italy and Greek Islands.

3.2.2. The 2015 “long Summer of migration”

Following the militarization of the Mediterranean Sea, in the first months of 2015 transit migrants who had irregularly entered Greece from Turkey were reported to move northward towards the Schengen area (FRONTEX, 2016). While discussing the initial stages of the “long Summer of migration”, Hess and Kasperek (2017a) noted that “the advent of a quantitatively and qualitatively new level of migration to Europe” seemed to caught the European Union institutions by surprise (p. 49). The annual FRONTEX forecasts for 2015 did not foresee significant differences compared to 2014 (FRONTEX, 2014). However, “the arrivals on the Aegean islands, and the number of people organizing their transit from Greece, through the Balkans, and towards Central and Western Europe, were already rising sharply” (Hess & Kasperek, 2017b, p. 61).

Even though Greece is part of Schengen, returns under the Dublin regulation had been suspended since 2011³⁶. Therefore, the “first country of arrival” rule did not work as a legal deterrent for migrants willing to reach Central and Northern European countries (Kasperek, 2017). Thus, transit migrations of individuals mainly fleeing from the Afghan, Iranian and Syrian wars and unrests, “converted into” secondary movements along the Balkan route. These was boosted by the Italian and Greek receiving system being poor and overwhelmed (Niemann & Zaun, 2018); by the temporary formal corridor established along the Balkan route (see later); by migrants’ *agency* clashing with the principle of first country of arrival of the Dublin regulation (Hess & Kasperek, 2017b).

“Secondary movements” were labelled as a serious challenge for the European authorities and member states, to be managed within a security paradigm. The FRONTEX “Annual Risk Report” published in 2016 stated that: “The unprecedented volume of these secondary movements created new challenges for Member States, including the registration and transport of large flows of persons, as well as internal security issues linked to the challenges in determining the identity and motivation of the migrants” (p. 53).

Mobility policies by Balkan states also triggered “secondary movements” in Summer 2015. The first steps of the development of the “Balkan route”³⁷ were characterized by low-profile short-term

³⁶ They have been resumed since March 2017. Source: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/greece/asylum-procedure/procedures/dublin/>

³⁷ Sections 3.2.2. and 3.2.3. are built on significant papers by Cabot (2015), Kasperek and Speer (2015), Beznec et al. (2016), Sardelic (2017), Hess and Kasperek (2017a, 2017b), Kasperek (2017). Sources not included in this list are specified, as well as quotes.

measures by Macedonia³⁸ and Serbia³⁹, that allowed migrants entering from Greece to move along their territories northwards up to Hungary.

Since Greece's substantial withdrawal from the Dublin system in 2011, Hungary was the southernmost Dublin state in Southeast Europe. Its migratory policies were restrictive: in June 2015, returns according to the Dublin regulation had been suspended, in order to exercise some pressure in view of the European Summit held at the end of the month. As well, in early July the construction of a 175 km fence at the border with Serbia, along its entire length, had begun. When "secondary movements" on the Balkan route grew in consistency, Hungary became responsible for processing the largest part of asylum claims related to refugees entering Europe from the south-east. First, it opted for mass detention centres, violence against migrants and deplorable welcoming conditions. This strategy became soon obsolete, due to the unbearable number of migrants entering Hungary from Serbia every day. Consequently, authorities converted Hungary into a "transit country" and tolerated the flourishing of an informal transportation economy favouring the transit of migrants outside the country.

Transit along the Balkan route went unnoticed until end of August, when a clumsy operation by the German government made it explode in terms of numbers. On August 25, Germany suspended returns to Hungary according to the Dublin regulation for Syrian migrants. Despite the communication was intended to be for an internal use, the news became public and the word spread among Syrian migrants transiting through the Balkans, who massively targeted Germany as their final destination country. But soon Austria re-established controls at the border with Hungary after discovering 71 death migrants in a truck outside Vienna. As thousands of migrants found themselves stranded in Hungary, Germany and Austria organized international trains for transporting stranded migrants from Budapest to Munich. After a few days, this mechanism came to an end, and migrants found themselves again stranded in Budapest stations as regional trains were stopped by the police a few minutes outside the city. At the end of August hundreds of transit migrants organized the March of Hope (The Guardian,

³⁸ Macedonia had harmonized its asylum policies standards with the CEAS as part of the roadmap to enter the EU. However, in 2015 agencies had denounced important gaps in their implementation, resulting in an almost total absence of an asylum system in the country (UNHCR Macedonia, 2015). In June 2015, after a dramatic train accident that costed the life to 14 refugees and brought the attention to the thousands of migrants who were transiting the country northward, the Macedonian authorities approved the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, with which it introduced a 72-hours visa allowing migrants to legally cross the country. This mobility-driven conjuncture came to an end in August 2015, when Macedonia decided to seal off its border with Greece. Due to the international lights on the violence of Macedonian police against refugees, the border was opened after only 3 days. State authorities inaugurated a Crisis Management Centre to coordinate the inward and outward flux of migrants, as well a dedicated train service was equipped, with the sole aim of travelling migrants out of Macedonia through the border with Serbia.

³⁹ Serbia had seen the magnitude of transit migration grow since 2014. Migrants concentrated in Belgrade, in particular in the surroundings of its main train stations, where informal camps were tolerated. The attitude of Serbian authorities towards transit migrants was generally welcoming, even though NGOs reported violations of human rights in the country. Serbia established a 72-hours visa and provided for an organized transportation service for transit migrants up to the Hungarian border, despite the ongoing construction of a fence.

2015) towards the Austrian border. Under this self-organized pressure, Hungary set up a bus service, and Austria and Germany lifted border checks. Over that weekend, more than 10,000 migrants reached Germany from Budapest.

This represented the peak of the so-called “formalized corridor” (Beznec et al., 2016) through the Balkans. By October, an efficient infrastructure of transit had been organized across the Balkans, reaching from the Greek ports to several German regional distribution hubs. This happened with the approval of the European Union (Kasperek, 2017, n.p.), and according to the will of Balkan countries of converting into “transit countries”⁴⁰. Facing the impossibility of managing the extraordinary trans-border movement of people, states pre-set a strategy that confined and regulated transit itself, re-establishing some sort of control.

In this regard, Sardelić (2017) claimed that Balkan countries “self-labelled” as transit countries, implementing coherent legislation and practices, facilitating migrants’ movements towards and within the EU. They considered this label as an advantage, in order to avoid to take responsibility for potential asylum seekers, both from a material and policy point of view. Accordingly, they provided migrants with a weak, “hyper-temporary protection” (p. 15) lasting the transit time only. Guild and others (2016) have instead interpreted the “formalized corridor” as an *ad hoc* solution to the lack of existing legal channels for asylum seekers to enter Europe in search of protection. Accordingly, the Balkan route has shown the incomplete nature of the Schengen system (p. 14). Finally, for Beznec and other scholars (2016), the “formalized corridor” resulted from the transformative power that persistent informal migratory transit practices exercise on national and European and national policies and practices.

This debate set the phenomenon of “secondary movements” along the Balkan countries within the perspective of transit migration as a phenomenon whose time/space dimension generated from, and changed according to, the interaction between structure (national and supranational legal framework) and *agency* (migrants’ decisions and actions).

3.2.3. “Secondary movements” as coping strategy against the *re-bordering* process in the Balkans (2016-2021)

The “mobility conjuncture” ended on November 18. Austria first, quickly followed by Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia, limited the access to the corridor to migrants coming from either Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq. People was filtered according to their nationality at the Greek-Macedonian

⁴⁰ For an overview on the policy use of this term, please refer to section 2.2.4.

border post near the town of Eidomeni. Thousands of other nationalities' migrants got stuck in the near camp, that was soon evacuated by the Greek police following hard protests. According to UNHCR, this segregation policy based on nationality was enacted by states in accordance to EU (cfr. Beznec et al., 2016). Transit migrants found themselves stranded also in the other Balkan countries, hosted in camps characterized by deplorable living conditions. As well, illegal push-backs rose dramatically⁴¹.

On February 2016 the corridor was closed for Afghani people, and then definitively in March 2016 with the signature of the EU-Turkey deal⁴². Framed as “statement” and not “agreement” to avoid the legal bearing (Slomiski & Trauner, 2018, p. 109), according to Niemann and Zaun “it saved EU from complete failure and full-blown institutional crisis” (p. 9). This agreement raised several criticisms: many NGOs argued that it represented a violation of the international legislation on asylum, others complained for the unprecedented power offered to Turkey in terms of international relations balances, others denounced the unfair consequences on migrants' lives and agency (for example: Oxfam, 2016, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2016).

In this context, “secondary movements” converted into a coping strategy of asylum seekers willing to reach the heart of Europe, and aimed to overcome increasing restrictive border and migration policies put in place by Balkan and European countries.

Despite the signature of the EU-Turkey deal, in Spring 2016 the situation along the Balkan route was similar to that antecedent to the establishment of the “formalized corridor”, in terms of overcrowdings at stations, parks, informal camps, where thousands of migrants found temporary shelter, waiting to proceed further. The example of Belgrade, where migrants were continuing to transit despite the Hungarian-Serbia border sealing, showed that the deal did not stop the transit, it rather made it slower, more dangerous and more expensive, as the flourishing smuggling economy around the train stations was there to demonstrate. As well, in 2016 Hungary had set up two transit zones at the border with Serbia, through which 15 people per day were allowed to enter. Lone men were often sent back to Serbia through a legal loophole, while families were admitted into the reception circuit. However, due to the very small numbers admitted for entry, informal settlements were created around the transit zones, as more and more people tried to enter illegally, and were subjected to violence and illegal push-backs. The latter were *de facto* legalised by a Hungarian law in July 2016. This increased the

⁴¹ It was the case of Macedonia, that after declaring safe country all its neighbours, proceeded with deporting transit migrants at its outward borders and forcing them back to Greece.

⁴² It foresaw the relocation of undocumented migrants from Greece to Turkey, compensated with a legal entry channel for entitled Syrian according to a 1:1 scheme, as well as the Turkey's commitment to prevent migrants from leaving towards the EU (Heck & Hess, 2017).

number of migrants stuck next to the transit zones, who partially re-routed towards the Croatian border. Croatia reacted in the same way, proceeding with mass push-backs.

In the time frame 2016-2021, the Balkan route kept on offering a stage for the *re-bordering* process and the securitised approach of containing “secondary movements”. The scenario was characterized by an unprecedented level of violence and human rights violations, especially at the Croatian Border with Serbia⁴³ and in formal camps and informal settlements⁴⁴ (UNHCR, 2017; Border Violence Monitoring Network, 2020; Rivolti ai Balcani 2021a, 2021b; Facchini & Rondi, 2022).

To this corresponded a transformation in the mobility strategies of transit migrants in the Balkans (Hamersak et al., 2020), that included the involvement of Bosnia and Herzegovina⁴⁵ as transit country. As well, push-backs grafted a circular transit migration pattern along the Balkan route, transforming it into a “Balkan Circuit” (Stojic Mitrovic & Vilenica, 2021, p. 540).

Despite the EU-Turkey deal signed in March 2016 that aimed to seal off the external European border, as well as the *re-bordering* process along the Balkan route that generated massive push-backs and human rights violations, “secondary movements” developed dramatically (FRONTEX, 2017). In 2021 they reached the pre-pandemic quantitative dimension, fostered by the growth of irregular entry into European territory from Eastern countries (FRONTEX 2022). This justified the *unilateral*

⁴³ The Croatian push-back system, coupled with denial of access to the right to asylum and humane and degrading treatment of migrants on the ground, was funded by the EU with EUR 130 million between 2014 and 2022 (Facchini & Rondi, 2022, p. 67). In 2020, the Border Violence Monitoring Network published an “Yearly report on torture of asylum seekers by Croatian authorities at EU external borders”, reporting several cases of degrading treatments suffered by transit migrants throughout the 2019 (BVMN, 2020). Illegal and collective push-backs were part of the daily experience of transit migrants all along the Balkan route. Facchini and Rondi, in their book *Pushed-back. The “dirty borders” of Europe*, from the Balkans to the Mediterranean consider them as a contemporary border management tool (2022, p. 39). According to the Protecting Rights at Borders network, more than 12.000 persons suffered a push-back along the Balkan route only in 2021, suggesting the orderliness of this practice (PRAB, 2021).

⁴⁴ As their passage through the Balkan route was slowed down by push-backs and bureaucratic deficiencies, transit migrants experienced enduring harsh living conditions in both formal camps and informal settlements. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina OIM was the facto responsible for the management of six camps, of which the last one, Lipa, opened in 2020 to cope with the COVID-19 emergency (Rivolti ai Balcani, 2021a, p. 21).

⁴⁵ Transit migration through ByH increased already in 2017, while in 2018 it marked a dramatic surge as 24.000 transit migrant were detected in its territory, against the 200 of the previous year. This event corresponded to a non-reaction of Bosnian authorities, as the latter passed the responsibility for reception on to each other, taking advantage of the country's institutional fragmentation. According to UNHCR (2019), already in 2018 “reception capacity was not sufficient to accommodate all people in need, leaving them exposed to the elements and obstructing their access to asylum procedures”. Generally speaking, transit migrants were concentrating in Sarajevo, then approaching the northern cantons of Una Sana and Velika Kladuša, before trying the game across forests in the effort of crossing the border with Croatia unnoticed. In 2019 the transit increased again, up to around 30.000 individuals from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Iraq, but also Algeria, Morocco, Bangladesh and Eritrea. The NGO collective Rivolti ai Balcani (2021a, 2021b) claimed that in the country was written one of the most tragic pages of the “refugee crisis”. Transit migrants suffered overcrowding and privation of freedom in the formal centres, where basic services were not ensured and winter months were unbearable for the lack of adequate structures. Those who opted for living in informal squats, in order to grant him/herself the necessary freedom to try the game, was intercepted and brought to camps, and settlements evicted. Local people was mainly unwelcoming, and transit migrants were banned from entering bars and supermarkets (p. 23). Human rights were generally violated, despite the huge EU funding to face the crisis: 88 million euros between 2018 and 2020 (Facchini & Rondi, 2022, p. 59).

reintroduction of border checks at internal boundaries by several EU member states (see part 3 of this Chapter) and its extension over the years.

3.2.4. The Central Mediterranean route (2017-2021)

On the Central Mediterranean route, the long wave of the “long Summer of migration” was represented by an increased externalized and securitized approach to transit migration, which resulted in the transformation of this route into the deadliest at a global level.

In 2017, around 120.000 individuals approached the southern Italian shores (UNHCR, 2017). In 2018, the FRONTEX operation Triton was replaced by Themis, that removed the obligation of the previous mission to bring rescued migrants only to Italy (Mustăţea, 2021). As well, since 2015 the EUNAVFOR operation Sophia have been implemented with the aim of detecting and destroying vessels and other assets used by smuggling networks, as well as training the Libyan Guard Navy (Stepka, 2018). It was replaced in 2019 by operation Irini, which unlike Sophia has no search-and-rescue tasks but to monitor the UN arms embargo in Libya (Pricopi, 2020).

In this time frame, migratory events along the Central Mediterranean route and their magnitude were strictly related to the political situation in Libya, as well as the different sea operations put in place in the Mediterranean. The involvement of Libyan authorities in policing operations in the Mediterranean represented indeed a key factor on the management of the Mediterranean European borders. Since 2016, the construction and implementation of the Libyan search-and-rescue area has begun, resulting in more than 100.000 transit migrants intercepted in the Mediterranean Sea and brought back to Libya between 2016 and 2021. Similar to the developments along the Balkan route, this has triggered a circular migration pattern, with migrants trying several times the crossing of the Mediterranean (OHCHR, 2021).

The border securitization implemented in the Mediterranean area was further reinforced by the signing of the Libyan-Italian *memorandum* in 2017⁴⁶, in which both countries agreed on a common strategy to fight and contain “clandestine migrations” through the Central Mediterranean route. Core actions were individuated in training of Libyan law enforcement personnel for coastal and sea policing activities, as well as in the financial support by Italian authorities of temporary accommodation camps for transit migrants on the Libyan territory⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ Source: <https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Libia.pdf>

⁴⁷ This securitized and externalized policy has been put in place despite the several NGOs reports denouncing the violence and the degrading conditions to which transit migrants are submitted in Libya. For example, the OHCHR 2021 report “Lethal Disregard” claimed that the increased involvement of Libyan authorities in transit migration management has negatively impacted on the protection of human rights along the Central Mediterranean route. On the one side, living conditions in Libyan camps are described as inhuman and degrading (see also: Amnesty International, 2021; Human

Under the conditions characterized by the “let the Libyans work” guidelines (Facchini & Rondi, 2022, p. 96), the Central Mediterranean route has kept its primacy among the deadliest migratory routes in the world: the Missing Migrants project by OIM⁴⁸ reported the death of around 20.000 migrants since 2014. Since 2017, when the Libyan SAR has been *de facto* established, the death rate is almost stable (5.000 to 6.000 per year). Nevertheless, the decreased implementation of European rescue operation in the Mediterranean Sea, together with the criminalization of NGOs, have increased the possibility that fewer shipwrecks could not only be prevented, but also notified: this have made the statistics on fatalities largely unreliable.

The dangerousness of the Central Mediterranean route marked a decrease in terms of numbers of irregular arrives through it in 2017, 2018 and 2019. After the general slowing down of transit migrations in 2020, in 2021 it become again the most used route to enter Europe (around 68 thousand individuals)⁴⁹.

3.3. The internal *re-bordering* process: a policy overview

This part illustrates the policy overview regarding the internal EU *re-bordering* process implemented to contain “secondary movements” in the time frame 2015-2020.

The process is unpacked into phases, taking on board the legal procedure backing it, offered by measures contained in the Schengen Border Code and to which countries have resorted, and the changing EU-countries relationship within with the process has taken place.

3.3.1. Phase one: *re-bordering* as a response to an unprecedented event

Since September 2015 until the signature of the EU-Turkey deal, in March 2016, the internal European *re-bordering* process was unprecedented since the Schengen system was put in place (Gülzau 2023). In the realm of a first phase of a containment strategy against irregular “secondary movements”, Germany reinstated identity controls at its internal border with Austria between September 13, 2015 and May 13, 2016, when the EU-Turkey deal was signed. Austria enacted the measure in roughly the same period. Slovenia re-bordered itself between September 17 and October 16, 2015, Hungary in October 17-26, 2015. When it comes to Northern Europe, Sweden reintroduced

Rights Watch, 2019, 2021). On the other side, the assistance to migrants on boats or vessels in distress have significantly reduced, also due to the limitations to the NGOs sea operations (Fekete, 2018; Tazzioli & Walters, 2019).

⁴⁸ Source: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/data>

⁴⁹ Source: <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-routes/central-mediterranean-route/>

internal border checks since November 12, 2015 and January 9, 2016; Norway since November 26, 2015 and January 16, 2016; Denmark between March 4 and June 2, 2016.

The process occurred within the legal framework offered by the Schengen *acquis*. The mentioned countries implemented Art. 23 and 25 of the 2013 consolidated version of the Schengen Border Code (Karamanidou & Kasperek, 2022, p. 2). This concerns the version in force at the time of this body of rule, published in 2013 and amended again in 2016. The main amendments of the 2013 version concerned the possibility to reintroduce internal border checks in case of “serious deficiencies” detected at external European borders, as well as the revision of the evaluation and monitoring mechanism. This assumed an intergovernmental nature and was indicated as in charge of the Commission (Guild et al., 2016, pp. 25-31). Art. 23 stated that:

Where, in the area without internal border control, there is a *serious threat to public policy or internal security* in a Member State, that Member State may exceptionally reintroduce border control at all or specific parts of its internal borders for a limited period of up to 30 days [...] The scope and duration of the temporary reintroduction of border control at internal borders shall not exceed what is strictly necessary to respond to the serious threat [...] Border control at internal borders shall only be reintroduced as a last resort. [Italics added]

In case of persistence of the threat,

Member State may prolong border control at its internal borders [...] for renewable periods of up to 30 days [...] The total period during which border control is reintroduced at internal borders, including any prolongation [...] shall not exceed six months. Where there are exceptional circumstances as referred to in Article 26, that total period may be extended to a maximum length of two years.

Art. 23a stated instead that Member States must look for proportionality and adequacy when reintroducing border controls, taking into consideration the negative consequences on free movement. Art. 25 regulated that Member States facing “cases requiring immediate action” could reintroduce border checks for limited periods of up to 10 days, that could be prolonged with periods of up to 20 days, for an overall period that could not exceed two months.

In this first phase, the European Commission (2016a) acknowledged the Member states’ reintroduction of checks at internal borders as a reaction to the Greek deficiencies in “protecting” the external border. As well, it declared its willing to stop the “wave-through approach” that led, under its point of view, to the construction of the Balkan channel and the encouragement of irregular secondary movements. In particular, the support to the internal *re-bordering* of exposed Member

states was implicit in its invitation to refuse the entry to all third-country national who did not fulfil the conditions of Art. 5 of the Schengen Border Code (2013 version; Art. 5 in the 2016 version), at both external and internal borders. This suggested the acknowledgment of the need for the re-establishment of internal controls as well due to the extraordinary migration-related circumstances. Nevertheless, the Commission invited all Member states to put in place the efforts needed to fully restore both the Schengen and the Dublin system, including France, who reinstated its internal border checks for non-migratory causes (the terrorist attacks in November 2015) and in 2016 had not yet removed them⁵⁰. Finally, the Commission claimed that, in case the situation at the Greek border had not improved by May 2016, it would have proposed a plan for a coordination of internal border controls.

This policy was criticized under the perspective of the right to asylum. According to Guild and other analysts (2016), the unbearable amount of asylum seekers for Greece should have been management under the existing burden-sharing CEAS framework, rather than by recourse to the *re-bordering* strategy. Moreover, in this concern, they highlighted that the Art. 3 of the Schengen Border Code states that:

This Regulation shall apply to any person crossing the internal or external borders of Member States, without prejudice to:

- a) the rights of persons enjoying the right of free movement under Union law;
- b) the rights of refugees and persons requesting international protection, in particular as regards non-refoulement. (p. 14)

In the light of this legal dimension, the internal re-bordering process has been debated as framing a securitized instead of a protection approach.

3.3.2. Phase two: the application of Art. 29 of the reformed Schengen Border Code

In 2016, a temporary *de-bordering* happened right in conjunction with an external *re-bordering* event, i.e. the signature of the EU-Turkey deal, in March. Austria and Germany, the most exposed countries to the influx coming from the Balkan Route, removed internal identity checks. But the *de-bordering* was just, as said, temporary. While the agreement further *re-bordered* the external EU border, the events that happened in the following months and years demonstrated that many EU member states considered it appropriate to unilaterally tighten their internal frontiers in order to protect themselves against enduring “secondary movements” (Karamanidou & Kasparek, 2022).

⁵⁰ The French *re-bordering* process is detailed in section 5.4.3.

In May 2016 Germany, Austria, Denmark, Sweden and Norway reintroduced checks at their internal borders according to Art. 29 of the reformed Schengen Border Code, as the time limits imposed by Art. 25 of the 2013 version of the Schengen Border Code were exhausted. Art 29 entered into force in 2016 and rules “Specific procedure where exceptional circumstances put the overall functioning of the area without internal border control at risk”.

1. In exceptional circumstances where the overall functioning of the area without internal border control is put at *risk* as a result of *persistent serious deficiencies relating to external border control* as referred to in Article 21, and insofar as those circumstances constitute a *serious threat to public policy or internal security* within the area without internal border control or within parts thereof, border control at internal borders may be reintroduced in accordance with paragraph 2 of this Article for a period of up to six months. That period may be prolonged, no more than three times, for a further period of up to six months if the exceptional circumstances persist.

2. The Council may, as a last resort and as a measure to protect the common interests within the area without internal border control, where all other measures, in particular those referred to in Article 21(1), are ineffective in mitigating the serious threat identified, recommend that one or more Member States decide to reintroduce border control at all or at specific parts of their internal borders. The Council’s recommendation shall be based on a proposal from the Commission. The Member States may request the Commission to submit such a proposal to the Council for a recommendation. [Italics added]

As far as the allowed duration of this policy is concerned, the new version of Art. 25 states that “where there are exceptional circumstances as referred to in Article 29, that total period may be extended to a maximum length of two years, in accordance with paragraph 1 of that Article.”

The European authorities supported again the member states’ *re-bordering* process. Following the proposal by the Commission (European Commission, 2016c), in May 2016 the Council of the European Union (2016) recognized that, despite the signature of the EU-Turkey agreement, the external border was still weak and that secondary movement continued to pose “serious threat to public policy or internal security”. Therefore, it indicated that the conditions to enact Art. 29 were fulfilled, and recommended Germany, Austria, Denmark, Sweden and Norway to implement it at their internal borders. In September 2016, the European Commission (2016b) reported that internal border checks had been “proportionate and in line with the Council Recommendation”, and that had adequately addresses the serious threat posed by secondary movements.

Supported by European authorities (Council of the European Union 2016), Germany, Austria, Denmark, Sweden and Norway renewed Art. 29 until November 2017. In that year the irregular arrivals in Greece had dropped, but the country was experiencing an important concentration of transit migrants that European authorities were expecting to trigger “secondary movements” (FRONTEX, 2017).

3.3.3. Phase three: European authorities take a step back

In November 2017 the procedure under the Art. 29 was no longer renewable. Facing this, Germany, Austria, Denmark, Sweden and Norway decided maintain their borders checks under the Art. 25 procedure, that foresees the possibility to temporarily reintroduce them in case of serious threats to public policy or internal security for a maximum of 6 months.

This occurred without the support of the European authorities. In September 2017 the Commission (2017a, 2017b) stated that the migratory pressure could no longer been invoked by member states as a reason to justify their *re-bordering* strategy. On the first hand, the Art. 29 time frame had expired. On the second hand, efficient measures had been taken to reinforce the external European border. According to a significant policy report by Carrera and other analysts (2018, p. 12), a new implementation of Art. 25 was highly questionable, due to its exceptional and “last resort” nature. Finally, the link between secondary movements and terrorism emerged more strongly than in the past (pp. 13-15). It is the case of France, that unilaterally re-bordered itself until April 2020, invoking again the terrorism threat.

As observed in Chapter 2, despite the internal *re-bordering* process was no longer supported by EU authorities, European countries extended this policy until the COVID-19 pandemics began in 2020 and massively reduced “secondary movements”. This, despite FRONTEX statistics on “secondary movements” for the years 2018-2019 had cast a shadow on the effectiveness of the internal re-bordering process aimed to contain them⁵¹.

⁵¹ FRONTEX claimed that in 2018 non-frontier member states reported an increase in detection of both illegal stayers and illegal entries. In addition, “a significant increase in document fraud detections on secondary movements was recorded in 2018” (FRONTEX, 2019, p. 9). 42% increase to 2013 levels, and especially involved Syrian, Afghan, Iraqi, Iranian and Turkish nationals moving from Greece. According to the agency, this is an evidence of an increased number of migrants stuck in a country which is not their final destination, who explore every strategy to move on, included fake documents. As far as 2019 is concerned, in its 2020 report FRONTEX observed an increase in secondary movements, according to the increase in both detections of illegal stayers in countries with no external borders and double asylum claims. That year was the third in a row that marked an increase of those indicators. As well, in contrast to the detection of fraudulent documents used by migrants at the external borders, that experienced a drop, their use at internal borders increased by 33%. Finally, the agency also observed an increase in secondary movements by sea, especially through the English Channel, frequently crossed in a risky way by transit migrants trying to reach the UK, as well as between Greece and Italy. “FRONTEX estimates that secondary movements by sea from Greece to Italy generate particularly high profits per smuggled migrant for people smuggling groups. Pakistani, Iraqi and Iranian migrants made up the vast majority of all

3.3.4. The unilateral “new normality” in policy terms

Part 3 of Chapter 2 has examined that a massive *re-bordering* process occurred in 2020, aimed to limit the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Once the health emergency subsided, European countries exposed to transit migrations did not lift controls and kept their internal boundaries, citing again as justification “secondary movements”. This has been carried out outside of a negotiation with the European authorities, supporting the perspective for which European states have been *re-bordering* their internal boundaries following a unilateral approach to border management. As illustrated in parts 3 and 4 of Chapter 2, in literature this has been interpreted within a paradigm of “resurgent intergovernmentalism” (Biermann et al., 2019), according to which European states are increasingly relying on their residual sovereign power in managing their internal borders.

At the time of writing (November 2023), 11 European countries are implementing a *re-bordering* process at their internal borders⁵².

Italy has tightened its border with Slovenia, due to the “raise of the threat of violence within the EU following the attack on Israel⁵³, risk of possible terrorist infiltration, constant migratory pressure by sea and by land, increase in the Central Mediterranean migratory flow⁵⁴”.

Slovenia has reinstated internal controls at the border with Croatia and Hungary, due to “threats to public order and internal security in the EU, the situation in the Middle East and in Ukraine⁵⁵, recent terrorist attacks in some Member States⁵⁶, increased security risks due to organised crime in the Western Balkans and violent extremism, risk of infiltration in mixed migration flows”.

Austria has recovered the frontier controls with Czechia, because of “high migratory pressure, extensive secondary migration, increase in trafficking along the illegal migration routes”.

migrants who used this relatively expensive option (there are instances where migrants have purportedly paid up to EUR 10 000 for the journey) to reach the EU from Turkey” (p. 25). In general, transit migrants, in vast part coming from Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, used to hide in trucks, cars, vans, buses and ferries, or to use fraudulent documents in ferry journeys.

⁵² Source: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen-borders-and-visa/schengen-area/temporary-reintroduction-border-control_en

⁵³ On November 8, the Islamic group Hamas carried out a series of attacks on Israeli citizens around the Gaza Strip, leading to a very heavy military response from the Israeli government and a new escalation in the area.

⁵⁴ 2023 marked a new record in terms of arrivals *via* sea on the Southern Italian shores. Following a racial campaign initiated in Tunisia by the local dictatorship, between June and September 2023 over 80.000 individuals from the Sub-Saharan region have successfully faced the Mediterranean Sea. Source: https://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/2023-11/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_14-11-2023.pdf. In the same time frame, over 1000 have been the documented fatalities according to the Missing Migrants project. Source: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>

⁵⁵ In November 2023, the Russian occupation of Ukraine area and the related war is still ongoing.

⁵⁶ Following the Israeli military responses to Hamas offences, some isolated terrorist attacks have been carried out in France (October 13, 2023) and Belgium (October 16, 2023). Source: <https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/teacher-killed-in-knife-attack-in-france-607290b>; <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/10/16/europe/belgium-brussels-shooting-intl/index.html>

Germany has re-bordered its frontiers with Poland, Czechia and Switzerland claiming as justifications “the migratory situation via the Eastern Mediterranean route, the Balkan region and through the Eastern route, and the increase in human smuggling”.

Denmark addressed “significant threat to public policy and internal security by terrorists and organized crime, threat of espionage from foreign state intelligence, uncertainty in Europe due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, increase in irregular migration” when restoring identity checks all internal borders (land, sea and air), “with a focus on the Danish-German land border and Danish ports with ferry connection to Germany”.

Slovakia re-bordered its internal boundary with Hungary because of “intensified migration pressure along the Balkan route, serious threat to the internal security and public order, high rate of illegal migration”.

Poland reintroduced controls at the border with Slovakia due to “intensified migration pressure along the Balkan route”.

Norway restored identity checks at its ports with ferry connections to the Schengen area, due to “threat to critical on-shore and off-shore infrastructures”.

Czechia aligned with the other countries when it comes the management of the border with Slovakia, and claimed as justification the “significant increase in illegal secondary migration; increase in activity of organised groups of smugglers; deterioration of the migration and security situation at the EU’s external borders”.

Sweden reintroduced internal checks according to the “Islamist terrorist threat, recent threats by terrorist organisations, statements by state actors, serious threat to public policy and internal security” at all internal borders.

Finally, France claimed “new terrorist threats” and a critical scenario at external borders to reintroduce identity controls at all its internal borders.

The French *re-bordering* process will be the focus of the next chapters. Chapter 5, and in particular section 5.4.3., will consider its legal and political aspects. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 will explore its implications in the lives of people living in an area where the return of identity checks at the Italian-French border extends its political, social and cultural influence.

3.4. Final remarks

Based on a detailed policy framework on the Schengen system and the European migration policy, Chapter 3 provided a grounded perspective of the securitized approach to international migrations

implemented in Europe since the 90s. As well, it showed the extent to which transit migrations and the European policies aimed to govern it and manage external and internal borders, mutually influenced each other. On the one hand, this brought out the European containment strategy toward transit, irregular and asylum-seeker migration movements. On the other, it highlighted the nature of the latter as coping strategy, in a continuous adaptation to new physical and legal obstacles that are introduced to stem them.

Finally, the Chapter exposed that from this interplay emerged the re-establishment of identity checks at internal European borders, aimed to contain “secondary movements” that derived from the “long Summer of migration” and the management of the Balkan route according to phases of *de-bordering* and *re-bordering*. The policy overview illustrated its legal basis and political developments, presenting it as a measure of increasingly unilateral, broad and sustained implementation.

Chapter 4

Methodology

This thesis embraces the anthropological tradition for the achievement of the research objectives. Chapter 4 provides an overview of both the methodological approach and specific methods applied for the investigation.

First, it illustrates the relevance of ethnography to the study of the internal European *re-bordering* process and its impact on the life experience of *borderlanders*.

Then, it delves into the data collection methods put in place to conduct the empirical research, explaining that the COVID-19 pandemic meant that fieldwork was carried out by both digital and traditional techniques. As well, it details the methods of empirical data management and presentation. Finally, it examines some ethical issues that emerged from the conduction of part of the ethnographic work with digital methods, away from the field.

4.1. Relevance and importance of the ethnographic approach to the subject

The state of art illustrated in Chapters 2 and 3 has shed light on a gap in the anthropological investigation of the *border experience* in the re-bordered European *borderlands*.

As discussed, European *borderlands* have been widely investigated from a policy approach, in terms of cross-border relations and cooperation. Furthermore, anthropologists have studied the everyday life in European *borderlands* since the last decade of the XXI century, mainly focusing on the “border people” and “border culture”. Moreover, as far as the European *re-bordering* process is concerned, a wide literature has been produced regarding the impact of transit migrations on external European *borderlands*, in terms of state and solidarity responses, especially studied through the lenses of “humanitarian borderwork”. Likewise, many academic contributions looked into the point of view of transit migrants facing with the re-bordered Europe, shedding light on their *agency*. Nevertheless, as explained throughout the different sections of the mentioned Chapters, the perspective of frontier communities facing transit migrations and “secondary movements”, and experiencing the relative re-establishment of internal identity checks, has been instead overlooked. On this regard, ethnographic contributions on the internal *re-bordering* process have focused on the COVID-19 as *re-bordering* factor.

In general terms, the anthropological research on the outcomes on border communities of the *re-bordering* process in Europe at *internal* boundaries is under-developed, as demonstrated extensively in Chapter 2. Moreover, none of the academic contributions targeting the Alpine Italian-French border provided a comprehensive contribution on the *border experience* of frontier communities facing the *re-bordering* process in times of “secondary movements” and the COVID-19. It is in this sense that this thesis aims to fill this gap, investigating the daily lives of those who inhabit the Upper Susa Valley in times of multi-level *re-bordering* processes.

The ethnographic approach is critical to provide this specific insight into the subject of the study. When it comes the *re-bordering process*, the research aims to go beyond the common macro-perspectives on this politically over-exposed phenomenon, by investigating how the actors involved in the process perform *bordering* practices and contribute, are subjected to, or contest it. As far as law enforcement actors are concerned, the ethnographic perspective aims to gather a grounded perspective on their daily work as border-builders. When it comes to transit migrants, the research aims to unravel how those individuals irregularly attempting to cross a border face with state sovereignty prerogatives, influence the frontier control patterns and relate with state agents, the solidarity scenario and common local people.

Besides, the ethnographic approach provides an in-depth view on the experience of those who decide to live these processes in the first line and perform proactive “humanitarian borderwork”. This concerns their understanding of “secondary movements” and border dynamics; how these impact on their lives and believes, and on their imaginary as “border people” that choose to engage with the support of vulnerable transit migrants crossing the place that they inhabit.

Furthermore, *border narratives* by ordinary *borderlanders* offers an original insight on how *borderland* communities live the border along those changes determined by state central policies (sovereignty prerogatives, territorial control enforcement, migration policies); how the meaning of state itself and of state power modifies when state agents and devices' presence intensifies; how they change their relation with the place they call “home”; how their values as individuals and national identity as citizens transform when their territory becomes the site of a humanitarian crisis.

Finally, approaching the subject of the study from an ethnographic lens contributes to build a bottom-up perspective on the contemporary European political scenario, seen from the *border experience* of those who inhabit the micro-level, by living day-by-day in the proximity of the powerful expression of state sovereignty represented by the border in times of securitization of migrations and sanitary emergencies.

As a final remark for this section, I'd like to point towards the relevance of ethnographic approach beyond Anthropology. By this I refer to how the research will contribute to Border studies by unravelling a bottom-up perspective on the internal European *re-bordering* process and "borderwork", as well as on their intertwining with patterns of transit migrations and "secondary movements". Also, the investigation will advance in the field of Migration studies, as it will expand the knowledge on migrant's agency in a context of *re-bordering*. In addition, the research will contribute to Political geography, as it embraces the investigated classic topics of this field such as the relationship between the material and symbolic expressions of state power in border landscapes and the territory. Finally, the ethnographic investigation will contribute to Social movement studies, shedding light on bottom-up social responses to global processes that bring into play values related to European citizenship, ethical dilemmas concerning the management of state sovereignty and borders, and respect for universal rights.

4.2. Techniques and methods

The thesis' ethnographic approach has been grounded on both traditional and digital methods. The COVID-19 sanitary emergency deeply affected human mobility and, consequently, the opportunities for face-to-face on-field research. This unprecedented worldwide phenomenon called for the need of rethinking ethnography and qualitative research methods. With specific reference to this research, this circumstance affected both the planning and conduct of fieldwork. Finally, the 7-month fieldwork on which the ethnographic material of this project is based, was carried out remotely for 3 months, and on-field for the remaining 4 months, during which I performed participant observation. Fieldwork resulted into a 100-page field diary. As well, I carried out 22 in-depth interviews and 6 informal conversations. With reference to the sample, participated to the research 6 state and local authorities' representatives; 6 non-state representatives, i.e. representatives from NGOs or umbrella associations; 4 volunteers of the Massi shelter; one representative of a No Border group; 11 ordinary citizens. Interviews and informal conversations are detailed in a table below, that specifies whether they have been carried out online or offline, as well as their duration.

4.2.1. Ethnography going digital in times of pandemic

Even though the spread of the COVID-19 represented a challenge for the conduction of the fieldwork, ultimately it also constituted an opportunity to enrich the ethnography from the methodological point of view. This reflection is expanded in this section, that also offers an overview on digital

ethnographic methods and details the methodology with which the fieldwork has been carried out. While in the initial planning this project would have relied solely on the traditional ethnographic methods, as soon as the COVID-19 pandemic spread I explored alternative digital methods to on-field ethnography. This occurred in a context of long-lasting uncertainty with respect to whether the fieldwork would have been entirely or partially conducted digitally. The investigation on literature exploring the relationship between ethnography and the digital world helped me to understand a fundamental division, that between online ethnography and virtual ethnographic methods; to consider how technology plays a pervasive role in people's everyday lives and how this should be subjected to ethnographic studies itself (Pink, 2000), not only used by ethnographers to conduct research; to broaden my knowledge of the methods of digital ethnography.

When it comes to the first aspect, Møller and Robards claimed that "ethnographers have gone digital" since internet entered people's everyday life in the late 1980 (2019, p. 95). From that point, many scholars have investigated different aspect of this new method of conducting ethnographic research and developed several definitions, including: cyberethnography (Warn, 1999), virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), network ethnography (Howard, 2002), webnography (Puri, 2007), netnography (Kozinet, 2019), ethnography in virtual worlds (Marcus et al., 2012), digital ethnography (Murthy, 2008; Pink, 2016). Behind all these definitions, the most relevant aspect to be stressed for the purposes of my methodological reflections is the great division between "online ethnography", which is the application of the ethnographic research concept and procedures to online environments, and "online/Internet research methods" or "virtual methods" (Fielding et al., 2008; Hine, 2005), which represent the conduction of ethnographic research using online and digital methods. In the context of uncertainty mentioned above, this project relied on the second methodological strand.

As explained, digital ethnographic methods had begun to take hold in the field of anthropology well before the COVID-19 pandemic. Amongst the most popular in ethnography we find *online interviews* (Salmons, 2009, 2015; Bauman, 2015), that represent the digital method of reference in this thesis. Following Salmons, the category includes "rich media", involving videos, and "lean media", represented by text-based communications, as well as synchronous and asynchronous text-based communications (2009, p. XVII). Specific methods can be mixed, and are chosen according to research purposes (2015, p. 5). Synchronous and asynchronous interviews have pros and cons with reference to the ethnographic research. While the first offer non-verbal clues as a face-to-face interview, that a text does not allow for, the latter favour time for reflection, time flexibility, an already available transcription (2009, p. 28). Other researchers who have worked on Skype interviews

or other audio-visual connections are Deakin and Wakefield (2014), Kivits (2005) and Weinmann et al. (2012). Other digital methods have been explored recently⁵⁷.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a further boost for the exploration of digital ethnographic methods, as well as it represented a topic for ethnographic investigation. Ethnographic literature on COVID-19 impact is too large to be taken into consideration here. Nevertheless, for the scope of this methodological chapter it is worthy to look at the part of it that has addressed the extent to which the pandemic has represented a transformative challenge for ethnography itself. Generally speaking, the COVID-19 put at stake an issue that was already emerging in anthropology, represented by the need to experiment with non-traditional research methods. Some claimed for overcoming traditional fieldwork in favor of a more effective taking into consideration of researchers' lives and needs (Günel et al., 2020). Others called for re-thinking fieldwork as a long in-person period of observation far from home, favoring "alternative readings of "fieldwork" as a relational and emergent process in which proximity and knowledge production are bound to sensitive research practice more than to physical (co)presence" (Eggeling, 2002, p. 1345). Finally, methodological reflections in times of pandemics regarded the need to re-think face-to-face interactions and intimacy in a context when these key ethnographic elements might turn into safety danger.

4.2.2. Access to the field

The first part of the ethnographic research was carried out online, using digital methods. After the field was selected, I explored its relevant dynamics in terms of border management and social and cultural features through press material and web resources in order to gather first information on local actors involved in *bordering* practices. These were catalogued into specific categories: state representatives, including local and national authorities as well as law enforcement bodies; non-state institutions, including umbrella organizations, focused NGOs and community activism actors; ordinary inhabitants. I collected as much information as possible on those actors using sources of

⁵⁷ *Epistolary interviews* are used as a method of "asynchronous, one-to-one interviews mediated by technology" (Ferguson, 2009) to partially substitute face-to-face interviews. They allow in-depth examination of the contents of the interview, as well as the possibility of requesting to expand certain topics in the following letter and a continued relationship between interviewee and interviewer. *Photo, video or voice elicitations* (Ahlin & Li, 2019; Harper, 2002) are used to provide targets as an alternative way to observe social events or daily routines. This method requests participants to use technology in order to take photos, make videos or voice memos about their everyday life, to be shared with the researcher, who can guide this activity. *Online Discussion Platforms* (Lindgren et al., 2019) have been implemented in fieldworks to gather data from several participants at the same time. Forums are usually opportunities provided by social media, and represent "virtual fields" where to gain a first insight about basic characteristics of the observed population, useful for a preliminary shaping of research questions. Online platforms also constitute easy channels to get in touch with possible members for future in-depth interviews. Finally, on a later step the researcher can use this same tool to engage long-term discussion on a topic (MacLeod et al., 2016).

information such as Facebook, where I deeply investigated the posting activity of non-governmental institutions; websites; newspaper articles. As far as the "ordinary people" category was concerned, I explored the demographic and economic parameters of the key settlements of the field, in order to gain a general idea of the profile of local communities. As the information coming from Facebook, websites and local newspaper turned out to be rich and complex, a "press review" folder was created, embracing the 2017-2021 period. This contained relevant Facebook posts and articles, with the indication of the actor that posted the content, or the actors mentioned in the newspaper article.

This method was particularly useful to define a chronology of relevant facts happened in the field, and to relate later it with the subjective perspective represented by significant facts mentioned by informants during interviews. Based on the information gathered and organized, I drafted a general outline of local actors in the field with profile, history, activities, and contacts. Finally, I used that information to prepare an informed interview guide for each of them, based on guiding questions I elaborated for each categories and reflecting the theoretical pillars of my research plan. This process was also important to structure access to the field. To this aim I completed with a timetable, indicating the gatekeepers identified during the previous information gathering exercise, and a fiche to collect first-time reflections after each interview.

4.2.3. Data collection

Thanks to the great feedback received in terms of availability for an interview by almost all actors, I was able to start the interviews on March 15, 2021. The response from the field was also promising in terms of the snow-ball effect. For example, one informant proactively mobilized her personal contacts and found 7 ordinary citizens willing to be interviewed on issues of their daily and professional life as border zone dwellers. These conditions encouraged me to continue the fieldwork. By the end of May 2021, I had carried out 10 interviews: 7 with informants coming from the non-governmental environment, and 3 with state actors. To the latter I had access thanks to an informant that worked both in the activism context and the local institutions. Methodologically speaking, during the first remote phase of the fieldwork I conducted *online interviews*, meaning interviews that occur with the mediation of some technological apparatus (Baym, 1995; Correll, 1995; Salmons, 2009; Bauman, 2015). Platforms used were Skype first and Zoom later, as it stores all videos offline for an unlimited time.

In Spring 2021 the pandemic evolution started to give a glimpse of the possibility of doing some on-site fieldwork, and a decision in this sense was taken in April 2021. Beyond the pandemic situation,

it was also based on the reflection that the snow-ball effect was strongly influenced by my informants' perception of the project, formed during the short interview time. In more specific terms, they suggested contacts who they thought might have relevant life experiences in relation to the subject of my research. Indeed, going to the field opened to the possibility of obtaining richer information from a more diversified sample.

In early June 2021, taking advantage of the Italian government allowing intra-regional mobility (I needed to travel by car from Veneto to Piedmont) I started the fieldwork. Between June and October 2021 I conducted 12 face-to-face in-depths interviews and 6 informal conversations.

In total, I carried out 28 interviews, including 22 in-depth interviews and 6 informal conversations, which are reported in the table below. In terms of access to each category, the “state actors” category was the hardest to reach. I could carry out 6 interviews with representatives of national and local authorities, while no representatives from law enforcement bodies made themselves available for research purposes, despite numerous attempts. I gained an interview with a technician from *Prefettura* (the territorial State entity), while senior State officials and law enforcement bodies declined my interview request or did not reply at all. Eleven interviews, formal and informal, have been carried out with representatives of the non-governmental environment and individuals involved in solidarity activities. Finally, I performed 11 interviews, formal and informal, with “ordinary citizens”. Another remark regards on in-depth interviews and conversation carried out refers to the fact that, despite my efforts to differentiate the most the profile of my informants in order to gather the richest possible field data, the profile of most of my non-state informants is somehow linked to the “Rifugio Massi” and the social circles that know it and support its activities. The access to informants were both resulting from the snow-ball effect, as well as by frequenting the social circles in which I carried out participant observation.

N	CODE	CATEGORY	METHOD	DURATION
1	SV_RD_ZI_20210421	Volunteer	Online interview	01:51:39
2	SV_PE_ZI_20210411	Volunteer	Online interview	01:11:19
3	SV_MS_ZI_20210323	Volunteer	Online interview	01:03:45
4	SV_GS_ZI_20210411	Volunteer	Online interview	01:17:58
5	SR_DP_ZI_20210501	State representative	Online interview	01:16:14
6	SR_GD_ZI_20210810	State representative	Online interview	01:27:07
7	SR_CF_ZI_20210511	State representative	Online interview	00:31:09
8	SR_AF_ZI_20210512	State representative	Online interview	01:11:28
9	NS_TF_ZI_20210331	Non-state representative	Online interview	00:59:00

10	NS_FE_ZI_20210315	Non-state representative	Online interview	01:37:51
11	NS_CL_ZI_20210915	Non-state representative	Online interview	00:35:57
12	NS_BM_ZI_20210317	Non-state representative	Online interview	01:04:57
13	SR_TA_PI_20210608	State representative	Offline interview	01:01:38
14	NB_MA_PI_20211208	No-Border collectif	Offline interview	00:54:16
15	LD_EV_PI_20211008	Local dweller	Offline interview	00:27:35
16	LD_ME_PI_20210909	Local dweller	Offline interview	00:28:28
17	LD_MG_PI_20210719	Local dweller	Offline interview	00:36:05
18	LD_PG_PI_20211130	Local dweller	Offline interview	00:50:09
19	LD_R_PI_20211209	Local dweller	Offline interview	00:35:57
20	LD_AT_PI_20210923	Local dweller	Offline interview	00:54:29
21	LD_E_PI_20210723	Local dweller	Offline interview	00:53:09
22	LD_UD_PI_20210715	Local dweller	Offline interview	00:32:53
23	NS_BM_IC_20210717	Non-state representative	Informal conversation	ND
24	NS_GL_ZIIC_20210821	Non-state representative	Informal conversation	ND
25	SR_C_IC_20210831	State representative	Informal conversation	ND
26	LD_PM_IC_20211027	Local dweller	Informal conversation	ND
27	LD_LD_IC_20210712	Local dweller	Informal conversation	ND
28	LD_AT_IC_20210712	Local dweller	Informal conversation	ND

As far as participant observation is concerned, it mainly took place in the village of Oulx, that lies both at the geographical centre of the *borderland* and of *bordering* and “borderwork” practices. I spent time in the local welcoming centre called *rifugio* Massi, that provides facilities to transit migrants heading towards France. More details on this institution are provided in the following chapter. As far as the fieldwork is concerned, I entered this context as a volunteer, to carry out some participant observation as well as part of the “return to the field” strategy. The shelter turned out to be a privileged place where to collect information about, and to observe *bordering* practices, as well as to come across potential informants to be involve in the interviewing activity. The other key participant observation site was the border zone itself, where I could observe the daily work of law enforcement actors, the transit strategies implemented by migrants in the context of a militarized frontier, as well as the solidarity practices implemented by non-state actors. On this last regard, I took part to a monitoring intervention at the border with the local Red Cross team.

The data collection has been completed by writing short notes on a notebook, of which each page was headed with the date and code. At the *rifugio*, these notes have been written during the brief breaks

that I was able to carve out during the busy summer period, when the high number of guests imposed a very intense work/volunteering rhythm. Outside of the shelter I adopted the same method, while I sometimes recorded my voice with my mobile phone or recorder, especially on car journeys between observation sites, or on journeys home.

4.2.4. Data management and presentation

As far as in-depth interviews are concerned, I manually transcribed and save them in an offline video reproduction programme rather than a cloud, for security purposes⁵⁸. The online interviewing activity was coupled with online fieldwork, that I conducted by redacting a field diary collected during the interviews with informants on the field, recording also methodological notes about the opportunities and challenges posed by the remote ethnographic research.

In terms of data systematization, each in-depth interview has been conducted following an outline that included: relevant personal data; the informant's experience of the dynamics crossing the *borderland* and their impact on his/her personal life; his/her perception of the border over time. In terms of anonymization, all interviews have been anonymised and coded⁵⁹.

In terms of data from the participant observation, notes taking while on the field have been developed in full text and reported in the field diary on the following day or days, in chronological order. Voice records have been also transcript in the field diary. The photos I took to integrate the diary have a reference throughout the text, and have been collected in a dedicated, codified folder. The final version of the field diary counts 100 text pages and 35 photos.

The analysis of the ethnographic material has been carried out using the software for qualitative analysis Atlas.it. Taking advantage of the tools offered, the ethnographic material has been subjected to a first level coding according to the main topics of the research (bordering practices, borderwork, border experience) and then further sub-coded.

All ethnographic results are used and presented in this thesis by means of anonymization, through the use of pseudonyms. Further empirical data is presented in form of a vignette (Erickson, 1985;

⁵⁸ The webinar "Research in Times of Covid-19: Online Research Tools" on May 17, 2021, promoted by the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR) represented an extremely useful formative occasion on how to perform digital ethnography in a context of privacy protection. Source:

<https://aissr.uva.nl/content/events/events/2021/04/online-interviewing.html?origin=UerSgCmLQ3%2BWc12pnH0RUg>

⁵⁹ The code has been built indicating the category to which the informant belongs (SR=State Representative; NS=Non-state actor; SV=Solidarity Volunteer; NB=No Border; LD=Local Dweller); the method implemented (ZI=Zoom interview; PI=In-person interview; IC=Informal Conversation); a reference to the date the interview has been carried out; a reference to the encrypted identity of the informant.

Demetriou, 2021; Schöneich, 2021), used as an ethnographic text to support analytical analysis, and to illustrate a “portrayal of an event of everyday life” (Schöneich, 2021, p. 117).⁶⁰

4.3. Researching in times of pandemic

This last part of the Chapter on Methodology explores the dimension of researching in times of COVID-19. In particular, this research and its time development, that intertwined with the initial and second-stage phases of the pandemic of COVID-19, offered the chance to experiment the extent to which “doing ethnography” in times of restriction to mobility poses both challenges and ethical concerns, as well as opportunities in terms of comparison with classic ethnographic research methods. Many reflections on the regard are included in the field diary I wrote during the online phase of the fieldwork, while not physically on the field. This was not planned from the very beginning. Nevertheless, it resulted in an interesting tool to elaborate and document insights regarding the methodological and ethical challenges involved in doing ethnography remotely. From the field diary:

The idea of being able / having to write a field journal while I am not in the field, but doing fieldwork, did not occur to me until last Thursday, the day I spoke with [a local volunteer and informant] - but that seems like ages ago. She was the first person, after the first two I talked to, who seriously challenged me in my role as a remote researcher.

(Field diary: March 23, 2021)⁶¹

As emerging from the quotation, the first part of the field diary is rich in notes in which I reflected on both challenges and opportunities offered by the circumstances. When it comes to the firsts, a difficulty was represented by finding a remote mode of being on the field yet not physically. This resulted even more engaging as the field revealed as extremely rich in terms of dynamism, actors, political relevancy, ethical concerns and so on. In another note, I wrote about the confusion of having the body in one place while the brain on another. And more:

Something that really costs me a lot is to do things “the other way round”: in my previous researches I went to the field, observed, identified contacts, built a trust relationship and then interviewed, based on my observations. Now, I contact people via email, and talk to them via Skype. I click the red button, and I am outside of the field. In this inside / outside, my role is difficult to be managed. It is very frustrating, it limits me in my need of showing

⁶⁰ While it can be used to describe a hypothetical real-life scene (Hughes et al., 2004), in this dissertation all vignettes report events witnessed during the participant observation activity.

⁶¹ The field diary has been redacted in Italian. Quotations reported throughout this dissertation have been translated by the author.

empathy, to get closer through what we have in common, my past, my research interests and why I am interviewing them. It limits my expressions, as a person. I have no occasions for informal exchanges, or they are very difficult to get.

(Field diary: March 23, 2021)

A key event was of particular importance on this concern. In occasion of the eviction of a key place for the informal welcoming of transit migrants, that happened right at the beginning of my online fieldwork⁶², I received a notification on that regard while still in Barcelona, at dawn. The first reaction was to ignore the news, which happened hundreds of miles from my physical location. But, suddenly I realized I could not pretend that it didn't concern me as well, as I was carrying out an ethnographic research and that was something of primary importance for the *borderland*.

The field had just slipped under my sheets - this is what it means to do ethnographic research in the time of COVID and social media.

(Field diary: March 23, 2021)

4.3.1. Embodying online ethnography

The field diary page that followed the report of this event express uncertainty about how to act as a researcher (at a distance) in the face of this circumstance. Should I call my informants to follow the events remotely, and enrich my ethnography in real time? I felt it was a bad idea. It would have been in my interest, but why should a person engaged with an emergency *in situ* (in the building were living lots of families in transit) spend his/her precious time with an unknown researcher at the phone, disclosing information that would be published in months, maybe years? I felt dissociated, as well as undecided with respect to how to move "in the field": "I am and am not in the field. I have to handle this professionally and emotionally"⁶³. After a few days, reflecting on the same event, I wrote that of positive there was the possibility of looking at the facts from a useful distance to place them in a chronological context, which experiencing them directly often distorts. In general, the happening of a key fact for the *borderland* while I was in remote mode helped me to explore the meaning of doing ethnography afar from the field, both methodologically and emotionally.

Some more concerns were about the limits in conducting online interviews. I noted that in an online environment it was more difficult to interrupt the informant in order to ask details, for example, or in general to guide the interview. On the contrary, face-to-face interviews allow the use if a range of

⁶² For further references, see sections 5.5.4. and 7.3.2.

⁶³ Field diary: March 23, 2021.

non-verbal expressions that can be adopted to ask the informant to go deep in a topic, without interposing the researcher's voice to the informant's. While transcribing, I realized that many details were missing as I decided not to interrupt the informant, showing the increased difficulty level of conducting interviews digitally. Moreover, in a note I wrote:

Here it is an important ethnical issue, meaning how to gather, analyse and publish material on communitarian dynamic without damaging the community itself [...] the situation there is kind of tense, to an extent that I would have never imagined before the start of the fieldwork [...] the material is much and relevant, but delicate.

(Field diary: April 17, 2021)

According to this impression I questioned myself about the danger that the informant might run in case he/she felt like speaking freely of sensitive matters due to the researcher being physically far and disengaged from his/her daily life. To limit this possibility, I learned to inform clearly about the purposes and the publication of the thesis, even if postponed in time. As well, researching community dynamics in a closed group of people made me reflect about the need to pay particular attention to the anonymization of the informant upon publication, as details that apparently might be irrelevant, especially remotely where the knowledge of informants is deeply affected by the distance, can disclose one's identity even if not classical sensitive data. I reflected on the importance of making sure that the informant had clear the use of information disclosed, as well as the relevance of managing different levels of information with the adequate confidentiality according to their publicity.

Finally, again with reference to informants but in this case about the access and the snow-ball effect, I expressed my concerns about the fact that researching remotely would have implied that informants would have put me in contact with other actors according to my capability of expressing the range of my interests, or their understanding of it. In all cases, not being on the field implied that there would always be a filter between me and the field, consisting of the informants as I got to know them and interviewed them online, and that this would profoundly affect the results of my project. I dealt with this circumstance as a problem, as my research was interested in exploring the *border experience* of frontier actors holistically, not limited to those who actively engage with the production, reproduction, contestation of *bordering* practices. Indeed, for almost the whole conduction of the online ethnography I was still unsure about the possibility, or opportunity, to go on the field. At some point, I asked myself about how to avoid having a list of interviews including different opinions on a same phenomenon and methodological notes, instead of a full, rich, complete fieldwork available to

carry out my ethnography. On this concern, I interrogated myself about the need to review my objectives:

Will be my results based on the confrontation between different *border experiences*, according to different border actors, reflecting their narrations gathered through technological means and outside a daily and trustworthy relationship, selected by the informants themselves or depending by the opportunity to meet them remotely?

And, more generally:

How does an anthropologist who is interested in the everyday life implications of macro phenomena reconstruct the frontier if she cannot go there and interrogates its actors from afar?

(Field diary: April 13, 2021)

4.3.2. Opportunities in “doing ethnography” online

Despite the complications of conducting online ethnography, I noted the opportunities it brought at the research level.

On the one side, being away from the field allowed me several times to think lucidly about the goals of the research, and to review the interview guide according to what was emerging from carried out conversations. The opportunity to step back and re-formulate was easy and provided by the same research conditions. I understood that disengaging is sometimes a plus in ethnography. As well, it was not only about methodological disengagement, but also emotional. This was not a secondary element, given the density of the field. “I click the red button, and I am outside of the field” ⁶⁴. While this put me initially in a state of frustration, I rather understood that emotionally disengaging from the field gave me the opportunity to think rationally, as well as to gather information at least partially “purified” from emotional elements that would have come along with the physical presence on the field.

As well, the online ethnography made room for the possibility to experiment. After having interviewed several actors, I could hypothesize the creation of a digital mapping project, in which the different *border experiences* would have converged in a single map, based on the geographical one but enriched by those created by single narratives, including informants’ stories, significant places, perceptions of the border. This was formulated as alternative method of presenting the research

⁶⁴ Field diary: March 23, 2021.

findings, in case the fieldwork would have been entirely digital. Due to the opening of the possibility to go on-site, I had no opportunity to put in place this project. Nevertheless, this represented a great chance to search for methodological solutions in unprecedented and uncertain ethnographic environments.

4.3.3. Comparing online and on-site ethnographic methods

As explained in the introduction to this Chapter, the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemics to the development of this project turned out to represent a rich opportunity to carry out methodological reflections with regards to the comparison between online and on-site ethnographic methods.

With reference to the interviews carried out for the purposes of this project, face-to-face conversations offered several advantages in comparison with online exchanges. Specifically, they offered the possibility to integrate the interview with some off-the-record interactions; to observe the informant's personal or professional environment; to carry out some additional observations of the town or village or structure where the interview took place. However, the online interview also offered some pros. For example, the possibility to register and re-watch the video of the interview, and to catch non-verbal clues that during an offline interview can go unnoticed.

Another aspect concerns the fact that, in case of an online interview, it is necessary to pay attention to specific aspects like preventing IT issues, protecting the security of videos and information when recording and transferring video, ensuring that the informant is comfortable with the digital tool proposed and finding alternatives if necessary, caring of the informant's and your own connection quality. On the contrary, offline interviews offers more flexibility and few dangers to security as far as these factors are concerned.

A further comparison concerned the emotional engagement as a researcher. During the online phase, using digital methods kept me away from emotional aspects and adaptation to a new context, helping me to focus on research in a more exclusive way. Nevertheless, on-site interviewing and participant observation allowed me to deal with emotions and personal engagement as part of the investigation, allowing for further reflections of positioning and on the role of the researcher on the field. These are put forward in Chapter 8, in the section dedicated to "Border experiences of g/local processes in the Upper Susa Valley".

4.4. Concluding remarks

The concluding remarks of this Chapter on Methodology focus on the impact of the pandemic on the research project.

As illustrated throughout the Chapter, the COVID-19 acted as a restructuring factor as far as the research planning and chronology are concerned. It also determined the methods with which the investigation has been carried out, resulting in a mixed online/offline research.

This certainly presented a challenge. The uncertainty that the pandemic trend dumped on the planning and conduct of the research deeply impacted on the choice of investigation methods, resulted in the need to revise the schedule and planning several times with the knowledge that it may have to be reworked further, as well as opened up unknowns about the development of the subject of the study. However, the COVID-19 also involved turning challenges into opportunities to conduct an original research, both methodologically and in terms of content and results.

As far as the focus of this Chapter is concerned, the “interference” of the pandemic of COVID-19 offered an opportunity to reflect on the positioning of the researcher during fieldwork away from the field itself, a condition that should characterize the future of anthropological research given the trend of “digital ethnography”. It was also an opportunity to highlight and interrogate ethical dilemmas about the challenge of establishing remote, yet trusting and accountable relationships with informants who live and work in a militarized place of enhanced sovereignty, border transgression and “humanitarian borderwork”.

The ethnographic Chapters that follow will instead examine the extent to which the pandemic represented an extremely interesting element to investigate with reference to border dynamics in Europe and their impact on the border population.

Chapter 5

The Upper Susa Valley

This Chapter illustrates the case study, the Upper Susa Valley.

First, the Chapter provides a brief historical overview, highlighting the significance of the *borderland* as both a "land of borders" and a crucial transit channel as far as the inter-Alps mobility is concerned. Then, it offers an in-depth analysis of the "secondary movements" that have unfolded within this frontier context. This historical backdrop serves as a foundation for our exploration of the circumstances that have led to the Upper Susa Valley's inclusion in international transit routes.

Furthermore, the Chapter delves into the *re-bordering* processes that unfolded between 2017 and 2020, shedding light on the extent to which these changes have contributed to the militarization and border control practices carried out by Italian and French law enforcement agencies at the Alpine border crossings.

Drawing from this analysis, the Chapter presents the ethnographic results to explore the experiences of various *borderland actors* focussing on three key dimensions: the involvement of public authorities and law enforcement agencies in the re-bordering process; the emergence of solidarity networks driven by ethical concerns sparked by this process; and the impact on the local social fabric.

5.1. The Upper Susa Valley: a land of historical and contemporary transnational exchanges

The Upper Susa Valley is situated in the Cottian Alps, in the far north-west of Italy. As the name suggests, it covers the highest area of the broader Susa Valley in terms of altitude above sea level. In geographical terms instead, it is situated at its West. The Upper Susa Valley is delimited by the political border with France in the West and North; in the East, by the historical border of the *Escarton* of Oulx, a political entity that existed until 1789; in the South, by the Orsiera and Sestrière mountain massifs. It counts with approximately 12.000 inhabitants, distributed on a roughly 500 square kilometres area. Since the 70s, the Upper Susa Valley is devoted to touristic economy, both summer and winter. Its main centres are, proceeding from East to West: Oulx, a small town of approximately 3500 inhabitants located in the centre of the valley; Bardonecchia, a well-known tourist resort, strategically located on the Italian side of the Frejùs tunnel, the main land communication route between the valley and France; Cesana Torinese, a small ski resort located at the foot of the Montgenèvre pass, the key communication route with the French Briançonnaise valleys.

The state border divides the Upper Susa Valley by French *Haute Alpes* and *Savoie* departments and determines its nature of *borderland*. It is approximately 100 kilometres long, and goes from the Mont Cenis massif at North to the Sestrière massif at South-West. Furthermore, this geographical area represents a *borderland* in terms of the classical anthropological approach, as socio-political space lying at the immediate proximity of the border and whose social fabric dynamics are directly influenced by the border's geographical presence (see section 2.5.2). In this thesis, the Upper Susa Valley is framed as a “special type of space” that generates “a particular kind of social relation” (Donnan, 2010, p. 254), in which *borderlanders* are meant as being “[not] passive beneficiaries or victims of world statecraft [but] often major agents of change, in processes of social, political and economic significance to many people beyond their locality and even beyond their state” (Donnan & Wilson, 2010, p. 7).

5.1.1. A history marked by multiple boundaries

The Upper Susa Valley boundaries, whether political or historical, as well as its cultural characters, have common roots in its genealogy. In the early 1300, the fate of the Upper Susa Valley has begun to drift away from that of the rest of the Susa Valley, and mingling with that of the Transalpine valleys. This happened as soon as the Albon family, a powerful local lordship, established its power over the Upper Susa Valley in the XI century (Berton, 2002, pp. 32-38). In 1133, the Albon dynasty took on the nickname of *Dauphines*, and the territories under their rule were called *Dauphiné*. It spanned the Alpine area and its southern border was set just above the Comba di Susa, dividing what are now the Susa valley's localities of Graveres and Chiomonte. Until the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, this boundary has divided the Duchy of Savoy and the Kingdom of France. Today, the state border between Italy and France lies on the Alpine watershed, but the ancient *Dauphinè* border still holds a linguistic value, as it divides the communities speaking the Occitan dialect of the Upper Valley from those speaking the Franco-Provençal dialect in the Low Valley. As well, it marks the geographic division between the Upper Susa Valley territory and the Middle and Low parts.

As the Alpine communities belonged to the same administrative entities for centuries, they shared a common culture. In particular, it is the case of the Upper Susa Valley and the Briançonnaise Valley, located in the French side of the Montgenèvre pass. On this regard, it is of special interest that they shared the administrative rules that characterized the *Escartons*, as regions of the Dauphinè were named. This concerns the “carte di franchigia”⁶⁵ and the Great Briançon Charter of Freedoms

⁶⁵ In 1343 by the local Albon ruler Humbert II decided to grant the “carte di franchigia” (agreement of exemption) to the communities in the Dauphiné in order to deal with a difficult financial situation. Through this concession, the Dauphin

published in the XIV century, that granted some form of autonomy to Alpine communities and favoured a common administrative and local development (Girodo & Zonato, 2010, p. 134).

In 1349 the *Dauphiné* was sold to the Kingdom of France, marking the begin of a 400-year period of French political dominion for the people of the Upper Susa Valley. This period further deeply influenced the culture of the populations of the Upper Susa Valley, among whom the French language spread, so as to a democratic way of life based on community management of both resources and adversity (Girodo & Zonato, 2010, pp. 87-89). In terms of landscape, villages and cities of the *Dauphiné* shares a common architectonic style, especially in church towers, that unites the Upper Susa Valley with the Briançonnaise (p. 101). In addition, the almost total absence of castles and fortifications highlights the homogeneity of the territory from a political point of view, not traversed by struggles between families and potentates. On the contrary, the landscape of the Lower Susa Valley is scattered by ancient castles and ruins (Ruggiero, 1996, pp. 118-129).

The year 1713 deeply marked the future of the Upper Susa Valley. The Treaty of Utrecht dissolved the *Escartons* and annexed it to the Kingdom of Savoy, including the Upper Susa Valley. As well, the border with the Kingdom of France was set on the Alpine watershed (Girodo & Zonato, 2010, p. 134). Although under Savoy rule, for much of the XX century the populations of the former “Piedmontese” *Escartons*⁶⁶ lived in the tradition of mountain life. The local dialect spoken by all was *patois*. Beyond the dialect, this term indicates the self-definition of the inhabitants of the Upper Susa Valley (*Val d’Ols*) in defining themselves as part of the Occitan culture (Valla, 2003, p. 7)⁶⁷.

Finally, the XX century assumed a great significance for the Upper Susa Valley, in relation to the history of its state border. The Second World War led to a dramatic confrontation between France and Italy⁶⁸. The Treaty of Paris in 1947 entailed the revision of the Italian-French border and provided its definitive shape. According to it, some Italian territories inscribed in the territory of the Upper

demand a one-off payment instead of periodic taxes, but above all, he ensured that local communities could administer their own taxation according to their needs. These financial conditions became official with the signing of the Great Briançon Charter of Freedoms (Girodo & Zonato, 2010, p. 134). This opportunity acknowledged the ancient custom, called *escartoner*, which reserved the power to distribute taxes to the men of the community. This gave rise to the term *escarton* to refer to the autonomous communities of the Dauphiné (Bonaiti et al., 2007, pp. 31-32). There were five *escartons*: Briançon, Queyras, Chateu-Dauphin, Pragelato, and Oulx. The latter two extended into what is now partly the Upper Susa Valley, including centres such as Oulx, Bardonecchia, Cesana, and down to Chiomonte.

⁶⁶ See previous note.

⁶⁷ Occitania refers to a linguistic community comprising the south of France, a valley in Catalonia, twelve valleys in Piedmont, one in Liguria and one in Calabria (Valla, 2003). As the book by Valle shows, these territories are homogeneous in terms of language, history and culture, architecture, customs, artistic expressions, gastronomic culture. In the 60s, the Occitan culture was revalued, and inspired an autonomist movement (*ivi*, p. 10). Since 1999, Occitans are recognized as a historical language minority by the Italian Parliament. The Occitan culture is still recalled in many cultural expressions such as popular dances and gastronomy.

⁶⁸ It started with the event recalled as “colpo di pugnale alla schiena” (stab in the back) on the 20th June 1940, when Italian forces attacked France at the Alpine defensive lines (Romeo, 2020) when the latter was already dealing with the Nazi occupation. Italy and France clashed repeatedly in the Upper Susa Valley during the war events called “battaglie delle Alpi” (Battles of the Alps).

Susa Valley were annexed to France. This is the case of the Valle Stretta, in French *Vallée Étroite*, traditionally a pasture valley for Italian farmers (Bonaiti et al., 2007, p.49). As well, there were claims among the population demanding annexation to France, to which many felt culturally attached (Berton, 2002, p. 98-100). A last border dispute concerned the village of Claviere, close to the Montgenèvre pass. The borderline agreed in 1947 with the Treaty of Paris split the centre in two. Only in 1973 the borderline was modified reuniting the whole village in the Italian territory, but customs remained in the centre of the country until 1989 (Suttora, 2021).

5.1.2. Cross-border transnational activities

The cultural heritage of the Alpine common roots has kept alive a dense exchange between communities on both sides of the Alps. Today, the Upper Susa Valley is a space of intense transnational activities. The communities at the two sides of the border share smooth economic, political and social relations, as well as common development projects. This includes a mutual beneficiary economic system, mainly based on tourism, and a certain degree of cultural homogeneity. This is supported by the infrastructure network conformation that links the Upper Susa Valley with the French *Haute Alpes* department. These regions are connected by the SS24/N49, a road that originates in Turin, goes up the entire Susa Valley, crosses both the political border and the Alpine Montgenèvre pass (open all year) and ends in Gap, the capital of the *Haute Alpes* department. When it comes to the *Savoie* department, it is the Fréjus tunnel that connects it with the Upper Susa Valley, which is mainly used for goods circulation and tourism and does not favour locally-scaled exchanges. The latter occurs across the *Col d'Echelle* Alpine pass, on one side of which is Bardonecchia, and on the other the village of Nevache. The road is nevertheless closed in Winter and not served by public transportation. The cross-border connection between the Upper Susa Valley and the French departments is also supported by the same economic vocation: tourism⁶⁹. Significant examples of transnational activities can be found in the touristic and sport fields and are located at the border area between Claviere and Montgenèvre. On the one hand, the Via Lattea ski resort⁷⁰ is a district that connects the ski infrastructures of Sestriere, Sauze d'Oulx, Oulx, San Sicario, Cesana and Pragelato in Italy, as well as Montgenèvre in France. Inaugurated in the 80s, it includes 274 slopes and allows skiers to practice

⁶⁹ From an economic point of view, the Upper Susa Valley did not develop as an industrial area like the Lower Susa Valley. It rather rose as a tourist destination, whose economic development was linked to the fate of mountain sport (Girodo & Zonato, 2010, pp. 134-135). As Court and other local experts refer, "Skiing in Italy was born in Val di Susa" (2002, p. 248). This testified the importance of this area at Italian and European level for the winter sports dimension. Winter sport events attracted an increasing number of people, even if in the first part of the XX century most of the holiday activity was concentrated in the Summer period (p. 259).

⁷⁰ <https://www.vialattea.it/>

in a transnational space, which is touted as a strong point in the area's marketing campaign. According to the website, the site attracts 10 million visitors every season, mostly Italian and French people in the Montgenèvre area, and English and other European citizens in the Sauze d'Oulx area. The ski resort map does not provide any indication on the positioning of the political border, taking for granted its non-relevance in the local tourism activity. The only reference is on the two flags on the right-top of the map.

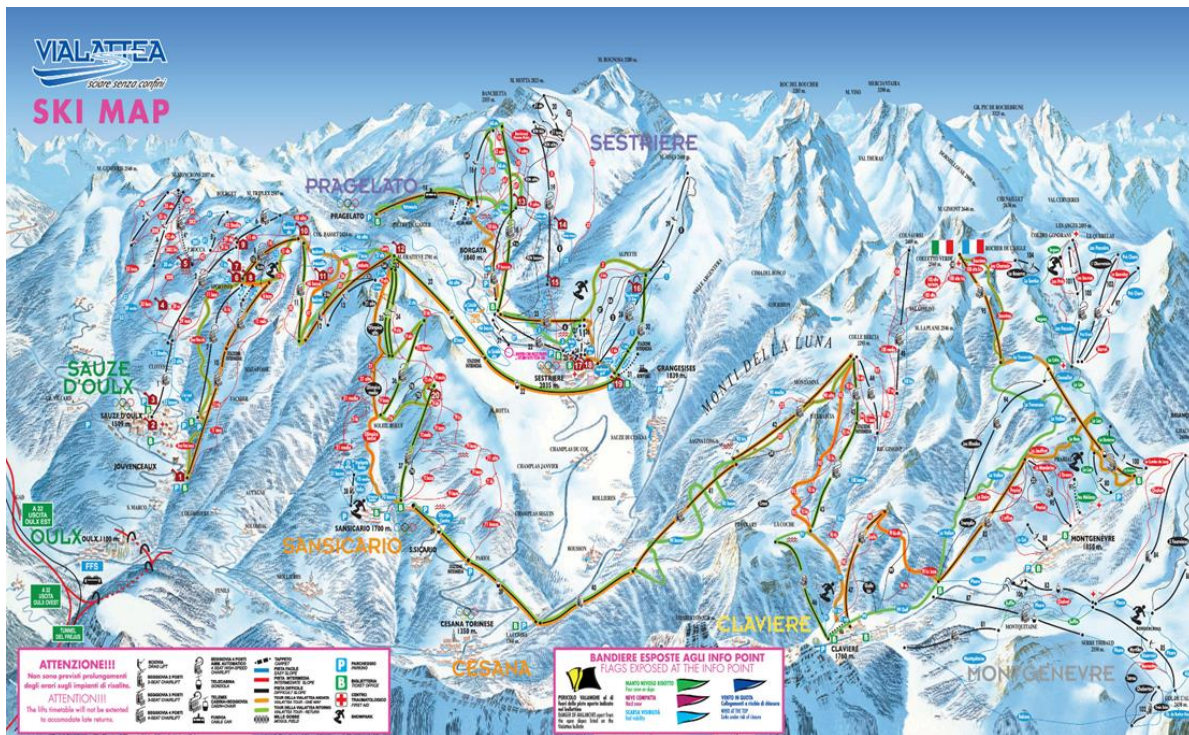


Figure 1. Map of the Via Lattea ski infrastructure.
Source: <https://www.vialattea.it/>

On the other hand, the partnership between the Claviere Golf Club, owned by the famous coffee family Lavazza, and the Montgenèvre Golf Club⁷¹, gives practitioners of the sport “the unique opportunity to play an international 18-hole course across the border (hole 7 on the outward journey and 16 on the return journey) throughout the season [...]”. Again, the cross-border feature is a *plus* for the marketing strategy, while the border is poorly marked in the golf field map.

⁷¹ <https://montgenevre.com/en/summer/station/international-golf/>



Figure 2. The international golf station between Claviere and Montgenevre.
Source: <https://montgenevre.com/en/summer/station/international-golf/>

The presence of both a transnational Golf Club and ski resort in the few square kilometres of the Claviere and Montgenèvre valleys highlights the economic dedication of this area to sports and entertainment for the wealthy segments of the population. This makes the contrast with the night and daytime transit of people in transit and in vulnerable conditions in these very places even more evident and controversial, as will be seen later in this Chapter and the following ones.

Another significant example of transnational activity is included in the tradition of the European integration process, as it forms part of the INTERREG program⁷². Interreg-ALCOTRA⁷³ is a European cross-border cooperation programme dedicated to the Alpine region between Italy and France⁷⁴. In the area of ALCOTRA-funded cross-border cooperation in the health sector, one example is the Prosantè project⁷⁵. Funded in the period 2014-2020, it was based on evidences regarding the use of the Briançon hospital by Italian people living in the Upper Susa Valley, and of the Susa hospital by French citizens. In particular, the agreement took into consideration the wealth of services offered by the French hospital⁷⁶, in the face of the dismantling of the Italian one (Falcone, 2015). Its aims were: to provide patients with a homogeneous legal environment in which to use medical services,

⁷² Please refer to section 2.2.1. and 3.1.1.

⁷³ <https://www.interreg-alcotra.eu/it>

⁷⁴ It is funded by the European Fund for Regional Development and involves several regions: for Italy, the provinces of Turin and Cuneo in Piedmont; the province of Imperia in Liguria; the region of Valle d'Aosta. For France, the departments Alpes Maritimes, Alpes de Haute Provence, Hautes-Alpes, Savoie and Haute Savoie. Its aims are to foster cohesion, to provide common responses to communities with similar needs, to promote the environmental protection and the digitalization. For the period 2014-2020 it has been funded with slightly less than 200 billion euro, though which dozens of programs have been realized in multiple realms: from sustainable tourism to local culture, from trans-border infrastructural connections to vocational trainings in mountain professions.

⁷⁵ <https://alcotraprosante.eu/>

⁷⁶ <https://www.ch-briancon.fr/fr>

regardless of Italian or France nationality; to encourage cross-border experimentation and technology sharing; to build a common database on medical and sociological aspects of the area.

5.2. The Susa Valley as a “land of transit”

According to the historical events described above, the Upper Susa Valley has been referred to as a “land of borders” (De Rossi et al., 2011). Nevertheless, what probably characterizes it most is that it has been and is a “valley of transit”. This dimension has influenced the economy, culture, and landscape throughout its whole history of the Susa Valley up to the present, determining its inclusion in international transit routes.

5.2.1. The Susa Valley: an overview

The Susa Valley, of which the Upper part represents the westernmost area, covers 1 200 km² at the westernmost part of the metropolitan municipality of Turin, the third largest city in Italy, in the Piedmont region. It is 80 kilometres long and is longitudinally traversed by the Dora Riparia river, a tributary of the Po river. The catchment area of the latter, the longest river in Italy, roughly determines the geographical extension of the valley until the political border with France. Geographically speaking, the Susa Valley is composed by three valleys of glacier origins that made their way between mountain ranges: The Lower Susa Valley, that roughly covers the area between Turin and Susa; the Upper Susa Valley, described in the previous section; the Novalesa Valley, which stretches between Susa and the Mont Cenis peak, also shared with France. The Susa Valley territory boasts the westernmost point in Italy, the Rocca Bernauda peak, in the municipality of Bardonecchia. Its lowest altitude is 300 meters above the sea level, while its highest peak is the Rocciamelone (3612 meters above the sea). The latter is one of the symbols of the Susa Valley together with the Sacra di San Michele, a monastery founded in the year 983 and located in Avigliana, the most populous town in the valley. Demographically speaking, it counts with 100 000 inhabitants according to the latest statistics (ISTAT 2022)⁷⁷.

⁷⁷ Source: <https://demo.istat.it/app/?i=POS&l=it>

5.2.2. A land of transit: from Hannibal to the XIX century

From the very past, the Susa Valley has hosted some of the most popular routes to cross the Alps, connecting the European continent to the Italian peninsula. Therefore, that of mobility has been one of its founding characters.

The oldest legend tells the story of the Hannibal's passage through these mountains and his descent into the Susa Valley, complete with army and elephants, in the III century BC (Patria, 2002, p. 17). Historical evidences indicate instead that the Susa Valley was used as an access route to Transalpine territories back in the II century BC by the Romans (Bonaiti et al., 2007; Ruggiero, 1996). Their presence in the area is also testified by the Arch of Augustus, erected in 8 BC in the city of Susa⁷⁸.

The city of Susa boasts a strategic position within the valley: it is located where the road from Turin forks into the two main traditional routes crossing the Alps. In the Roman times, the *via Galliarum* connected the Po valley with the Val de Durance through the Alpine pass of the Mongenèvre, and represented the easiest way to cross the Alps in what is now North-western Italy (Centini & Centini, 1992, pp. 40-41). The *via Cozia* transited instead on the right side of the Dora river and through the Mont Cenis, representing a way to the Arc Valley and the Val de Isère (Girodo & Zonato, 2010, p. 97).

The Roman Empire itself recognized the importance of the Susa Valley and potentiate its communications routes, especially those crossing the Montgenèvre. This Alpine pass, a natural gateway within the Alps - *genev* means “door” in the Celto-Ligurian language, spoken by populations that settled in the territory in question between the V and IV centuries BC (Ruggiero, 1996, p. 8) - became crucial in the Imperial period for the passage of armies defending the Roman Empire against Barbarian invasions (Centini & Centini, 1992, p. 40).

In the VI century, important historical events linked to the Barbarian populations occurred. The Lombards stopped in Turin, while the Franks settled in the Susa Valley (Bonaiti et al., 2007, p. 25)⁷⁹. The presence of the Franks is coupled with the existence of an important route, the *Sentiero dei Franchi*, used by Charlemagne to cross the Mont Cenis and reach and stop the Lombards' armies.

⁷⁸ It stands as a symbol of the alliance between the Roman Empire and the local king Cottius, after whom the local mountain range is named. According to Ruggiero (1996), Cottius is credited with having freed the Susa Valley from its isolation by undertaking the first systematisation of the paths and mule tracks that crossed the Alps at the time, in order to facilitate contacts between tribes (pp. 17-22).

⁷⁹ At Chiusa di San Michele, at the foot of the Sacra di San Michele, the remains of a defensive wall testify to the victory of Charlemagne's Franks over Desiderio's Lombards in 773. The history of this battle and its places is detailed in the short book by local historians Centini and Centini (1997), who underlined that this defensive infrastructure might have represented the very first border of the Susa Valley, dividing the territories of those two Barbarian population up to the battle.

The latter is today a well-publicised hiking route, which starts in Oulx and ends at the Sacra di San Michele (Centini & Centini, 1992).

Another historical route inherited from the Middle Age is the *Via Francigena della Val di Susa*. It overlapped both the *via Cozia* and the *via Galliarum* and linked Turin to Chambery via the Mont Cenis and the the Novalesa Abbey. It soon become a key communication route for the cultural unit that characterized Europe in that times (Carnisio, 2022, p. 9). For this reason, it gained the 'Cultural Route of the Council of Europe' status in 1994⁸⁰.

In the Middle Age, even if in the XIII century the Albon family determined a political division between the Lower and the Upper Susa Valley by bringing the latter under their power, the routes across the Alps strengthened their centrality. In particular, the former *via Cozia* became one of the most important itineraries through the Alps during the Middle Age, surpassing in importance that of Montgenèvre following the shift of the trade axis. With the annexation of the *Dauphinè* to the Kingdom of Savoy in 1713 (see above), the *Route Royale*, integrating the two sides of the Alps with Turin and Chambery as reference centres, became the “centre of gravity of the Savoy state” (Dini, 2011). It gradually took over the “delta road” a dense network of secondary paths, mule tracks and impregnable mountain passes, used by local communities both for their daily activities and to defend themselves from interests outside the valley. This process marked that historical period and represented the embryo of the modern road configuration in the Susa Valley (see Ruggiero, 1996, pp. 145-146; Patria, 2002, p. 19; De Rossi et al., 2011; Malengo, 2021).

5.2.3. The contemporary mobility configuration in the Susa Valley

The modern setup was definitively shaped in the XIX century. The Napoleonic age in the Susa Valley was characterized by the invention and construction of the first modern mountain carriageway, at the Mont Cenis peak, in 1802. As well, the Napoleonic Road, built on the route of the *Sentiero dei Franchi* (Centini & Centini, 1992, p. 33) definitively substituted the previous “street areas”, which indicated the easiest passages rather than actual routes (Sergi, 1991) and represented the decline of villages on the *Route Royale*. The Napoleonic Road centralized and modernized the Alpine crossing via Mont Cenis, as well as it modified the economic structure of the valley by deleting the social potential of mountain roads and depriving the local population of the livelihood derived from *marron* activity, which was essential in Winter (Girodo & Zonato, 2010, p. 61).

The 100 years between the 1840 and the 1940 were marked by the “rail hegemony” in the Alps (de Rossi, 2011, p. 17). In 1854 the Turin-Susa railway was inaugurated, followed by the construction of

⁸⁰ Source: <https://www.coe.int/it/web/cultural-routes/the-via-francigena>

a futuristic rack-and-pinion railway along the Napoleonic road with the aim of connecting Susa to the territories of the Savoy beyond the Alps. This remained in operation for only three years, until the inauguration of the Fréjus tunnel. The latter opened in 1871 and, together with the Suez Channels, attracted journalists and visitors as outpost of modernity and progress (p. 18). The Fréjus tunnel was served by the new railway Turin-Modane, that cut off Susa and caused its decline politically, economically, demographically, while favouring the near Bussoleno as an industrial pole. In fact, in the late 800s it represented a boost for the industrial development of the Lower Valley (p. 135), and important manufactures, like the Cotonificio Wild&Abegg in Bussoleno, were settled (Girodo & Zonato, 2010, p. 133). In the Upper Valley, the Fréjus tunnel changed completely the village of Bardonecchia, that turned from a rural village into a bustling modern and touristic centre, easily reachable from Turin thanks to the train connection (Bonaiti et al., 2007, p. 43). While tourism was already present in the Upper Susa Valley since the late XIX century, the railway represented the “first root” of the modern city-mountain relationship (de Rossi, 2011, p. 19).

The 1920s and 30s saw instead the implementation of infrastructure for road transport in the valley. In 1928, state roads SS24 and SS25, the first linking Turin to the Montgenèvre pass and the second linking Turin to the Mont Cenis pass, built on the old Roman historical paths, were paved and took on their current profile. After the construction of the Napoleonic route and the railway, they marked a new historic break that definitively turned infra-Alpine valleys into crossing routes (de Rossi, 2011, p. 21). As well, they determined a further boost of Bardonecchia, Claviere, Sauze d'Oulx as touristic sites and contributed to their devotion to this economic sector. According to de Rossi (2011), the bringing of the city closer to the mountains through the construction of modern communication infrastructures outlined a sometimes problematic relationship. As early as the 50s, the Susa Valley was already being spoken of as an “urban mountain”. Quoting Mila, “the railway, industries, interactions with citizens and travellers, had long since transformed the mentality and imaginations of local communities” (1953, p. 8).

In those years, the transformation involved also the settlement configuration, due to several factors: the internal migration of people from the valley banks to its floor; the development of winter tourism and the consequent real estate boom in the Upper valley; the advance of the Turin metropolitan front within the valley system; the increase of through traffic along transalpine routes; the spread of the car as a means of mass transport (Mila, 1953, p. 21). This led to the concentration of housing in the centres at the bottom of the valley, and to the detriment of the villages at high altitude. As well, in the Upper valley, it boosted the concentration around the few centres favourable to mass construction and the proliferation of second homes, according to the Western tourism model (p. 23). From the 80s, the Susa Valley experienced a further boost in terms of major works, infrastructural and otherwise.

In 1980, the Fréjus tunnel was modernized. Between 1983 and 1994, the A32 motorway was built, connecting Turin to the Fréjus tunnel. As well, the planning of the contested Turin-Lyon base tunnel, part of the Turin-Lyon high-speed railway, begun⁸¹.

The tunnel project, popularly known as TAV⁸², still at the embryonic stage of construction after 40 years, is at the root of the birth of a social movement that has profoundly shaped the Susa Valley in its political and social dynamics. Since the first announcements, a large part of the local administrators opposed the project, claiming that the valley was already over-exploited in terms of infrastructures and that the tunnel would have damaged the natural environment (Sasso, 2006, p. 17); that the already existing railway serving the Fréjus tunnel, and connecting Turin to Lyon, was underused (Margaira, 2005, p. 9); that the costs would far outweigh the benefits (Bobbio & Dansero, 2008, p. 32). The popular dissent was led first by the environmental committee Habitat, that promoted the construction of a common “knowledge heritage” (p. 34). The contributions of experts that offered their knowledge for the cause was fundamental in this process. In the following 10 years, the dissent assumed a generalized dimension, with the convergence of local authorities and dwellers, organized in committees that joined together under the variegated umbrella of the No TAV movement (Margaira, 2005, p. 138; Bobbio & Dansero, 2008, pp. 25-29). Local committees aimed to raise awareness of the health and environmental dangers embedded in the TAV project, and organized demonstrations attended by thousands of people (Sasso, 2006, pp. 27-56). Parallely, the No TAV demands were taken to national and even European level (Magaira, 2005, pp. 81-110). The start of work in 2005 led to the establishment of territorial presidia, scattered throughout the valley and serving as organisational hubs for the No TAV movement (Sasso, 2006, pp. 59-104). The violent eviction of the popular presidium in Venaus on 6th December 2005 inaugurated an enduring clash between law enforcement agencies and the No TAV movement, as the peacefulness of the popular demonstrations immediately met with a heavy-handed response from the state, given the strategic nature of the TAV. According to Bobbio and Dansero (2008), what has occurred in the Susa Valley is a clash between “competing geographies”. On the one hand, the projection of national institutions and major economic players on the future of the valley and its inclusion in pan-European transport corridor n.5 or “Mediterranean corridor”, which would link Algeciras in Spain to Budapest⁸³. On the other hand, a part of the local population fighting for a different future for their territory, inspired by altermondialist, de-growth,

⁸¹ Source: <https://www.fsitaliane.it/content/fsitaliane/en/strategic-projects/turin-lyon-base-tunnel.html>

⁸² In general terms, the project plans the excavation of a total of 162 kilometres of tunnels, both in the Italian and French territory, connecting Saint Jean de la Maurienne and Susa. The project has been modified several times, but its impact on the valley has remained essentially unaltered (Bobbio & Dansero, 2008, pp. 9-12). Its aim was to serve French high-speed trains, and thus speed up the movement of goods and people between the two metropolis.

⁸³ Source: https://ec.europa.eu/transport/infrastructure/tentec/tentec-portal/site/brochures_images/b1_2013_Brochure_lowres.pdf

environmentalist, sometimes anti-capitalist theories, and projected towards “low speed” instead of “high speed” development (p. 15).

Finally, the most recent international event that has taken place in the Susa Valley were the Winter Olympics, in 2006, which involved the whole province of Turin, and in the Susa valley took place a part of the skiing, bob and skeleton competitions. New infrastructures were built for the occasion, implying a great landscape impact. According by a study by Mancini and Papini (2021) and commissioned by *Banca d'Italia*, the Olympics had few positive outcomes on the territory⁸⁴.

To conclude this historical overview on the Susa Valley as a “valley of transit”, it is significant to note the tensions that still characterizes the relationship between its past and its future(s). As de Rossi (2011) claimed, an idealized representation of the past emerged, to be opposed to infrastructure projects that reflect the interests of those who want to promote the Susa Valley into an international dimension:

For centuries, the Susa Valley has managed to be [...] a territorial cell with its own identity and a crossroads of crossings. Its history, its fortunes, have developed from this co-presence. And if today a technocratic vision of trivial modernisation of the territory no longer makes sense, an idea of local space played out entirely on retreat, on a regressive nostalgia for an idealised past and an alleged “good old days” that perhaps never existed, can be just as risky. (p. 25)

At the same time, its geographical position, the infrastructure projects of which it has been the stage, the historical and demographic events, have made the Susa Valley a place where locality and internationality coexist. Quoting Vernetto: “The Susa Valley has always breathed with two lungs: one local and the other international” (2011, p. 162). This specificity makes the Susa Valley a privileged vantage point for investigating contemporary tensions between global phenomena and local spill overs.

5.3. Contemporary “transit migration” through the Upper Susa Valley

While the Upper Susa Valley has been characterised by the “border” and “transit” features since the ancient times, in recent years these dimensions have retaken centrality due to its involvement within

⁸⁴ More specifically, they resulted positively in terms of tourism flow, municipal debt per capita, and the increasing of the average price of houses in the Turin proximities compared with those in the centre. On the contrary, the study concluded that there were no positive effects on the value added per capita, the employment rate, the trade openness and the overall level of house prices (Mancini & Papini, 2021, p. 21). Other studies demonstrated that costs (around 3 billion euros) overcame earnings (around 2 billion euros) (see for example: Ramella, 2006). When it comes to the new infrastructures, some on them are under-used or abandoned. It is the case of the Olympic village in Bardonecchia (La Valsusa, 2021) and the bobsleigh track in Cesana Torinese (Pagliassotti, 2016).

international transit migration routes. Since 2017, as an increasing number of migrants in transit coming from the Mediterranean and Balkan routes have targeted the Upper Susa Valley as an intermediate stage on their journey to continental Europe, as part of so-called irregular “secondary migration” movements explored in Chapter 2 and 3. Consequently, the Alpine border gates of the Upper Susa Valley have been targeted by undocumented transit migrants as crossing-points to enter France within their transit journeys. This has resulted from geographical and political circumstances.

5.3.1. The inclusion of the Upper Susa Valley in international transit routes: political factors

To unravel the political and geographical circumstances that determined the involvement of the Upper Susa Valley within international transit migrations, it is necessary to go back to 2011. In that year, following the “Jasmin revolution”, several thousands of Tunisian citizens reached the Italian southern coasts (Garelli & Tazzioli, 2013). The Italian government, among other responses to manage this event, granted a six-month temporary visa to allow those migrants the free circulation in Europe (DPCM April 6, 2011)⁸⁵. Fearing the arrival of a great amount of Tunisian migrants in its territory, France temporarily reintroduced identity checks the border at the Ventimiglia gate (Zaiotti, 2013; Paoletti, 2014). A communication by the French Interior Ministry remarked that, according to the Schengen Borders Code⁸⁶, individuals holding temporary stays issued by a Member state can be targeted with checks verifying their financial resources when intercepted in crossing the border⁸⁷ (Casella-Colombeau, 2020).

According to Gülzau (2023), this first *re-bordering* event can be inscribed within a general reluctance by France with reference to the Schengen *de-bordering* process, testified by the record held by this state as far as temporary reintroductions of border checks are concerned. In fact, since the Schengen system has been established, France has completely removed identity checks at internal boundaries for only 4 years. The 2011 events led to a diplomatic crisis between Italy and France (Schmidt, 2011) that receded within a few months. Contributed to its solution diplomatic manoeuvres in which European institutions opened to the option for a temporary and strictly ruled unilateral reintroduction of border checks within Europe for exceptional migration-related reasons⁸⁸, as well as the temporary exhaustion of that specific migratory flow.

In 2015 the same scenario occurred. Border checks at the Ventimiglia – Menton gates were occasionally reintroduced in conjunction with the Cop21 held in Paris in June, and again in November

⁸⁵ Source: <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2011/04/08/11A04818/sg>

⁸⁶ Please refer to the policy overview in Chapter 3 (in particular, section 3.1.2.)

⁸⁷ Source: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/download/pdf/circ?id=32978>

⁸⁸ Source: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15181-2015-INIT/en/pdf>

after the Bataclan terrorist attacks (Giliberti, 2017, p. 161). As a consequence of the “long Summer of migration” (Kasperek & Speer, 2015)⁸⁹, in December 2015 France announced instead the reestablishment of internal controls as a measures implementing the “state of emergency” declared by the President of the Republic Sarkozy⁹⁰.

The *hardening* of the border gates between Ventimiglia and Mentone configured an enduring humanitarian emergency, as reported by many NGOs (WeWorld, 2018, 2021; Oxfam, 2018). In facts, it has resulted in a dramatic and long-lasting concentration of transit migrants in Ventimiglia. The Italian state granted a mere partial response to it, aimed more at confining migrants and removing them from the city than at providing reception and support (Bonnin, 2017; Trucco, 2018). Limited accommodation and services were granted by NGOs and other formal and informal organization, which over time have formed a solid and heterogeneous network involved in advocacy and material support for people in transit (Trucco, 2016; Le Maquis, 2017; WeWorld, 2021). Unfortunately, this commitment could not fully grant their safety. The majority of them found shelter in a state-owned area near the Roja river, under an overpass, just outside the city centre. Their informal settlements were regularly cleared (for example: MeltingPot, 2018).

Beyond the living conditions, the safety of people in transit was also at risk due to crossing conditions. Systematic identity checks at road gates pushed undocumented people to try extremely dangerous crossing routes: one of them is called Death Pass and is suspended vertically over the sea (Barnaba & Trentin, 2019). As well, several fatalities occurred among those attempting to cross the border on foot, along train tracks or the motorway (Luppi & Quadroni, 2017; MeltingPot, 2022).

The absence of a state humanitarian response, together with the difficulties and danger involved in crossing the border, have fostered the establishment of a network of smugglers offering information and passage for a fee (Vergnano, 2020; Amigoni et al., 2021). On the side of the state response, it is worthy to report the targeting of the solidarity movement in Ventimiglia with administrative ordinances limiting their scope of action, such as the ban on providing food to migrants in public spaces (Escarcena & Da Silva, 2018).

Finally, some studies highlighted the spreading of hostile sentiments towards migrants among the local population (for example: Gemmo, 2018). The harshening of the situation in Ventimiglia favoured the opening of a crossing route through the Val Roja and the Fanghetto gate, roughly 20 kilometres northward. There, the same dynamics of border militarization, as well as local solidarity joint with intolerance manifestations, reproduced (Giliberti, 2017, 2020).

⁸⁹ See section 3.2.2.

⁹⁰ Please refer to the “Legal framework” section, later in this Chapter.

At the time of writing, the situation at the Ventimiglia – Menton border gate and at the surrounding area is unvaried (MeltingPot, 2023; Médecins Sans Frontières, 2023). In 2017, these circumstances framed the *political* scenario that have favoured a partial shift of the international “transit migration” across the Italian-French border towards the 100 km of state border separating the Upper Susa Valley and the French Haute Alps and Savoy departments (Giliberti, 2017; Vergnano, 2020; Tazzioli 2020a).

5.3.2. The inclusion of the Upper Susa Valley in international transit routes: other factors

In addition, further orographic and historical factors contributed to the re-routing of international transit from the Mediterranean sector to the Alpine sector of the Italian-French border.

The 515-km-long French-Italian border is essentially marked by the Alps: crossing points are thus limited to the most accessible mountainous areas⁹¹. Italy and France are connected by two international tunnels, the Mont-Blanc tunnel in the Aosta region, and the already mentioned Fréjus tunnel located in the Upper Susa Valley. The Liguria region presents lower mountains, as in its territory the Maritime Alps descend to the Tyrrhenian Sea. Its border gates⁹² have represented the scenario for the first French *re-bordering* and the humanitarian emergency described above. Heading north up the border, one encounters passes at altitudes close to 2,000 metres above sea level, far from large population centres. Only few Alpine passes representing border crossings are passable and served by roads or railways, and even fewer are open all year round. The Upper Susa Valley hosts the sole two Alpine border passes that are relatively close⁹³ to big or medium cities, Turin and Briançon in this case⁹⁴. I refer to the *Col d’Echelle* (1762 meters above s.l., closed to motorised vehicles in Winter) and *Col du Montgenèvre* (1860 meters above s.l.). The Fréjus tunnel completes the infrastructural availability in terms of cross-border mobility that characterizes the Upper Susa Valley.

The “closeness” of the Upper Susa Valley with important infrastructural hubs is key for transit dynamics. As seen in Chapter 2, migration plans are usually long and expensive. Therefore, public

⁹¹ The state border is mostly situated on the peaks of the Graian, Cottian and Maritime Alps. Its starting point is in the proximity of Chamonix-Mont-Blanc in France and Courmayeur in Italy. It extends over two regions in France (*Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes* and *Provence-Alpes-Côte-D’azur*) and three in Italy (Aosta Valley, Piedmont and Liguria). It ends with the Mediterranean Sea, at the level of the villages of Menton in France and Ventimiglia in Italy.

⁹² The “coastal” section of the Italian-French border (I use this name to distinguish it from the “Alpine section”) counts with four gates: San Ludovico, San Luigi, Fanghetto and Olivetta. San Ludovico and San Luigi connects Ventimiglia (IT) and Menton (FR), coastal cities whose area extends seamlessly across the border.

⁹³ The “closeness” does not refer here to a distance parameter, while in terms of reachability with infrastructure networks available to public and private transport.

⁹⁴ An exception is represented by the Colle della Maddalena, in the province of Cuneo. This pass, at 1996 meters on the level of the sea, is crossed by a road that is closed in Winter. Press news have reported of a transit activity involving smuggling network and with the use of trucks, that leave the migrants just before the border.

transportation, when accessible, is privileged by people in transit for its relative cheapness and speed. Therefore, the “Turin – Oulx – Clavière – France” and “Turin – *Col d’Echelle*/Frejùs tunnel – France” routes have been configured to be a viable alternative to the “Milan – Turin – Ventimiglia – France” route for transit migrants.

5.3.3. “Secondary movements” through the Upper Susa Valley

According to the above factors, the Upper Susa Valley has been included within “transit migration” routes. This section moves a first step into the conduction of the ethnographic investigation of this *borderland*, by providing a detailed description of the involvement of Italian Alpine gates in “secondary movements” towards France for the time frame 2017-2020, as well as of the transit’s dimension and profile, its inner danger when occurring in the Alpine landscape, and its relationship with local mobility routes and infrastructures.

“Irregular secondary movements” across the Upper Susa Valley targeted first the crossing points which appears on maps as the fastest way to reach France from Turin: the Fréjus tunnel and the *Col d’Echelle*. A first substantial flow of people in transit of African origin, wishing to cross the *Col d’Echelle* to reach the cities of Modane, Nevache and Briançon in France, gained visibility in the Bardonecchia station in Autumn 2017⁹⁵ (La Stampa, 2017). The transit of undocumented migrants was visible already since the Spring, but in Winter the phenomenon rose the concerns of local politics and civil society. Local authorities (the mayor of Bardonecchia, the directors of the police station, the mountain rescue coordination), as well as ordinary citizens, were concerned that the transit turned into a tragedy, “that, with the arrival of spring, the melted snow will return the bodies of the missings” (Sassi, 2018, n. p.).

In that season the crossing is very dangerous, temperatures drop well below zero and the risk of avalanches is very high, especially on the Italian side of the *Col d’Echelle*. Migrants were unequipped and unaware of the risks of the mountains. The journey can last at least 6 hours before approaching Nevache and then Briançon, where transit migrants could find refuge in the *Refuge Solidaire*⁹⁶. This configured a dramatic scenario for transitants’ safety (Scavo, 2017; Peggio, 2017).

A 2018 newspaper article (Camilli, 2018) described this first route following Traorè, a 17 years old boy from Guinea. He approached Bardonecchia by train, as suggested by some friend. At the Bardonecchia train station he received basic support in the *Spazio Calmo*, an informal support

⁹⁵ Since Autumn 2017, an increasing number of transit migrants showed up in the station of Bardonecchia, few kilometres from the beginning of the path connecting Italy and France through *Col d’Echelle* and final stop of the railway originating in Turin, and therefore well connected to other main Italian centres.

⁹⁶ See section 5.5.3. in this Chapter.

initiative set up by local dwellers as well as the local administration together with other⁹⁷. After a short time spent in the train station, at night he challenged the cold and the snow of the *Col d'Echelle* in order to reach out France. This was his second crossing effort: the day before, Traorè tried to pass the border by train through the Frejùs tunnel, but at the station of Modane was intercepted by the French police and escorted back to Italy. One hour after having left Bardonecchia, Traorè and other friends took the path to climb the *Col d'Echelle*. After four more hours and 500 metres of difference in altitude, they past a couple of small tunnels on the road that can be travelled by car in summertime; in wintertime, Traorè and his friends sank into knee-deep snow. At this point, they were already in the French territory. Once in Nevache, a tourist couple gives them a lift to Briançon, twenty kilometres away. In Briançon, they finally find a safe place at the *Refuge Solidaire*. Luckily, they did not meet the Gendarmerie along the way.

After few months, in the same winter 2017-18, most of the transit moved to another route: that connecting Turin to Oulx and then Briançon through the Montgenèvre pass (MEDU, 2020; Tazzioli, 2020a). A set of circumstances contributed to this shift. First, the high difficulty crossing both the *Col d'Echelle* and neighbouring passes on foot, as well as the Fréjus tunnel, either by foot (the tunnel is strictly monitored) or by train, bus or car, due to systematic police checks (MEDU, 2020, p. 10). Secondly, the local administration of Bardonecchia favoured this shift via the practices and discourses of cultural mediators and volunteers in the *Spazio Calmo* in Bardonecchia (MEDU, 2020). As well, people in transit started privileging the Montgenèvre pass because, while sharing with the *Col d'Echelle* a huge presence of police patrolling the border, it lends itself to easier and safer crossing, as well as it is served by local means of transportation that allowed people in transit to easily reach the border line. Finally, the scenario of humanitarian assistance to people in transit consolidated on this second route, including institutional and non-institutional accommodation structures on the route (the *Fraternità Massi* shelter and the *Casa Cantoniera Occupata* squat). This change in the transit route is illustrated in depth in section 6.2.1. of Chapter 6 “*Re-bordering practices and hindered mobilities in the Upper Susa Valley*”.

The scenario that emerged in early 2018 broadly reproduces that on which my fieldwork engaged in March 2021. The village of Oulx has been the main stage where transit-relevant events have since then taken place. As empirical observations also revealed, there concentrated the more rooted and lasting formal and informal assistance activities. There arrived the majority of transit migrants aiming to reach France, thanks to the frequent and cheap train connection with Turin (Tazzioli, 2020b). From Oulx, a train-bus connection set a public transportation continuity with the Montgenèvre border gate. On this regard, the route Oulx – Briançon was regularly served by cheap buses of the French company

⁹⁷ The *Spazio Calmo* is detailed in section 7.2.2. of Chapter 7.

(Invernizzi & Lovato, 2021). Transit migrants got off in Claviere, right before the border, in order to avoid systematic border checks targeting buses covering trans-border routes, and then covered by feet the “last 12 kilometres” (Pagliassotti, 2019) until Briançon. Consequently, the Alpine villages of Clavière (IT) and Mongenèvre (FR), emerged as key step-overs of this transalpine route. It ideally ended in Briançon, town at the foot of the Montgenèvre pass where the *Refuge Solidaire*, a shelter run by actors of the civil society, had been set up.

5.3.4. Quantitative and qualitative features of the “secondary movements” in the *borderland*

A statistical overview of the magnitude of the transit migration that passed through the Upper Susa Valley since 2017 gives a first dimension of the potential impact it had on the *borderland*. The numerical estimates of transit are partial. This is due to the very nature of “transit migration”, which tends to escape state control networks and preferably moves in invisibility, as well as to the lack of a state or non-state database that systematically collected data with respect to hospitality and border-crossing mobility.

Tazzioli (2020a) has devoted a paper to this topic, moving from a notion of state border whose demarcation and sorting functions can be investigated as separated from its physical location (Szary & Giraut, 2015; Casas-Cortes et al., 2015), as well as place of data collection (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015). Building on her ethnographic investigation carried out in 2018 and 2019, she theorized about the “disjointed knowledge” and “obfuscated visibility” that affected the transit of migrants in the Upper Susa Valley. She demonstrated that, when it comes to the first aspect, the multiplicity of actors involved in migrants’ monitoring and their different interests at stake produced uncoordinated data collection with regard to migrants in transit. The Italian police, the Red Cross, NGOs and volunteers working in temporary reception facilities had different communication systems that were not coordinated with each other, and produced inconsistent statistics with regard to crossings and rejections. In addition, the number of fingerprints checks on apprehended migrants by French police in the border area were not shared with the Italian counterpart. This resulted in the construction of a “disjointed knowledge” on the phenomenon, that according to the scholar stemmed from “the states’ will not to govern too much, in order to eschew legal responsibilities” (p. 2). This also produced an “obfuscated visibility” with reference of the presence and passage in the area of transit migrants. On the one hand, local authorities’ purposes and volunteers and activists’ practices converged in the effort of making the transit migration the less visible possible in the territory, to preserve its touristic

activities. On the other hand, at the state level, it satisfied the interest of states in not representing what was happening in the Upper Susa Valley as a “migration crisis” (p. 8)⁹⁸.

Since Tazzioli’s fieldwork, the data collection scenario has not changed. The only institutional data collection that accounts for the transit through the Upper Susa Valley is the total number of *refus d’entrée* issued by French authorities at the Alpine border section. The publishing of this information by member states is requested by Art. 14.5 of the Schengen Border Code. These are reported in Anafé reports (2022, pp. 11-12). According to the Ministry of Interior, in 2017 have been notified more than 50,000 *refus d’entrée*; more than 30,000 in 2018; more than 25,000 in 2019; over 26,000 in the first ten months of 2020. Nevertheless, these data referred to the whole French territory and do not help to give consistency to the Upper Susa Valley’s scenario.

However, even a dedicated data collection on the number of *refus d’entree* issued at the western Alpine border between Italy and France would not help to precisely quantify the phenomenon. Indeed, statistics on *refus d’entrée* do not include those who managed to cross unnoticed; those who have been intercepted by police and push-backed with no *refus d’entrée* notification, as observed on the ground (MEDU, 2020); the real possibility of an individual of receiving several *refus d’entrée*.

Facing this institutional lack, but still willing to give numerical evidences to the phenomenon, non-state actors have carried out their own data gathering. It is the case of the only publically available statistics on the issue compiled by MEedici per i Diritti Umani – MEDU (*Doctors for Human Rights*) with data collected on the ground from 2017 to 2022. Their reports account for the approximate number of people present on a daily basis in the formal and informal accommodation facilities in Oulx. Nevertheless, not even their statistics concerned the overall number of people crossing the *borderland*, nor of those attempting to cross the border. In fact, the same individual might be present for several days in Oulx due to French police push-backs, or autonomous choice. Moreover, not all migrants in transit are intercepted by the solidarity structures. Finally, the numbers provided by the latter, especially the informal ones, are neither precise nor exhaustive. Therefore, non-state actors’ statistics should be understood as approximate, indicative of the magnitude of transit migration and its quantitative variations over time.

According to the MEDU report published in 2020, from 2017 to August 2020 around 10,000 transit people approached Oulx (p. 5). As said, this number is limited to those who were intercepted by the accommodation structure implementing a form of counting, namely the *rifugio Fraternità Massi*⁹⁹. In this time frame the majority of the people in transit was of African origins (p. 16). In some periods,

⁹⁸ Italian interests in managing “secondary movements” crossing the Upper Susa Valley are explored in depth in Chapter 6 and 7.

⁹⁹ The *rifugio Massi* is explored in depth in Chapter 7.

the year 2019 for example, a continuity was observed between the magnitude of landings on Italy's Mediterranean coast and that of transit migrants' arrivals in the valley (p. 17). Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemics and related mobility restriction measures are reported to have significantly reduced, if not stopped, arrivals at reception facilities in the Upper Susa Valley (p. 5).

In Summer 2020, after the most severe period of mobility restrictions due to COVID-19 came to an end, the flow resumed strongly (MEDU, 2021, p. 5). In the second half of 2020 around 6000 presences were intercepted in Oulx. These concentrated mostly in the informal shelter *Casa Cantoniera Occupata*¹⁰⁰, that experienced peaks of 50-80 people per day. The institutional shelter, opened only at night, hosted mainly people pushed-back at the Fréjus gate and taken there by the police, according to a public-private cooperation mechanism (p. 6). The increase was contextual to a radical change in the composition and origin of the migration flow, as observed by MEDU, the managers of the Massi refuge (Tessa, 2020) as well as by the Red Cross (Bauducco, 2020). Whereas those who turned to the assistance networks were previously mainly single men of sub-Saharan origin, especially from Guinea Conakry, Gambia, Mali and Senegal, since mid-2020 there has been a massive arrival of people in transit from the Middle East and Central Asia (Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria). In 2020, 75% of people had transited through the Balkans, and 60% were Afghans. As well, a major change was represented by families, involving the presence of women and children and therefore challenging the established solidarity services and strategies (MEDU, 2021, p. 6).

For the year 2021, in which I carried out my fieldwork, statistics showed that the transit rate kept on increasing. That year more than 15000 presences were estimated in Oulx, including 400 families and 400 unaccompanied minors. October registered a record, as testified by field notes: 1600 presences in that only month (MEDU, 2022).

5.3.5. The Upper Susa Valley in the broader “transit migration” scenario

“Secondary movements” crossing the Upper Susa Valley since 2017 and justifying the *re-bordering* process stemmed from both the Central Mediterranean and the Balkan routes¹⁰¹. According to FRONTEX (2017), since the last months of 2016 France experienced an increase in asylum already registered in the EURODAC database in Hungary but entering in its territory from Italy. This witnessed the growing importance of a new route across the Balkans, involving Slovenia, Italy and then France. The agency also notified an increase of the magnitude of the transit through the Central Mediterranean route: “The number of French EURODAC hits in relation to a prior asylum application

¹⁰⁰ See section 5.5.2. in this Chapter and more details in Chapter 7.

¹⁰¹ Please refer to section 2 of Chapter 3.

or illegal border-crossing in Italy (about 11 000) increased by more than 156% compared with the same period of the previous year. The vast majority of these hits was related to migrants who had arrived on the Central Mediterranean route” (p. 28). In 2017 “secondary movements” increased in the overall Europe of 9%, including between Italy and France (FRONTEX 2018). In 2018, intra-Schengen “secondary movements” in the Mediterranean area were especially those through Greece (FRONTEX 2018), to overcome the harsh situation in the Balkan route. In 2019, these irregular flows grew of a further 38% compared to the previous year (FRONTEX 2020).

Finally, as far as 2021 is concerned, as mentioned earlier after the peak of the pandemic of COVID-19 the Asian population coming from the Balkan route was predominant in “secondary movements” between Italy and France. This corresponded to the harshening of the overall situation in Afghanistan and the *re-bordering* process at the Mediterranean Sea. As well, in this regard activists reported a relation between the increase of arrivals in Oulx from the Balkans with the softening of border controls along the route (MEDU, 2020, p. 17), as well as with the harshening of conditions in welcoming centres, pushing people faster and massively towards Europe (MEDU, 2021, p. 7).

Additional observations by MEDU (2020, pp. 21-22) suggested that in some cases transit migrants decided to move towards the Upper Susa Valley after being pushed-back several times in Ventimiglia. In more general terms, the routes fluctuate between Ventimiglia and the Upper Susa Valley depending on whether or not the two sectors of the border are permeable at a given time.

Finally, another aspect to be taken into consideration is the presence, in the Upper Susa Valley, of a manifold welcoming infrastructure able to cover the basic needs of people in transit. Something similar is missing in Ventimiglia, since the closure of the Red Cross camp (MeltingPot, 2020). In the coastal city, people in transit is more exposed to smuggling networks and harsh life conditions. This difference might interact with the agency of people in transit.

On this latter regard, the results from the thesis highlight new veins of research, among which is the exploration of the extent to which migrants’ agency creates links between different route options. This would expand the literature strand that looks at transit migration as resulting from a structure/agency framework and as a coping strategy facing a re-bordered Europe (see Chapter 2).

5.4. The reestablishment of identity border checks at the Upper Susa Valley’s state border

Along with the increase of the magnitude of the transit migration through the Upper Susa Valley, the implementation of a system of border checks marked the *re-bordering* of the Alpine section of the Italian-French boundary.

5.4.1. The Upper Susa Valley as “border zone”

Since June 2016, the area of the Upper Susa Valley, including the *Col d'Echelle*, Montgenèvre and the Briançonnaise has been converted in a “border zone” due to the establishment of a regime of “mobile police practices” (Bachelierie, 2020, p. 2). The process of border militarization has been described as follows by the French NGO Anafé¹⁰², that since the very beginning have been carrying out monitoring activity at the border and has filed denounces regarding human rights violations at the Italian-French border:

To the PAF [*Police Aux Frontières*, Border police] staff already present in Montgenèvre, at the PPA [*points de passage autorisés*, authorized crossing-points] of the Fréjus tunnel and in Modane, have been added human reinforcements with a reinforced presence of the anti-crime brigade, the customs service, the local gendarmerie, the PSIG [*Pelotons de Surveillance et d'Intervention de la Gendarmerie*, Gendarmerie Surveillance and Intervention Platoons], the police and the high mountain police and gendarmerie, the CRS [*Compagnies républicaines de sécurité*, Republican Security Corps], and mobile gendarmes, as well as soldiers from Operation Sentinel. This military and police personnel is further reinforced by the presence of police dogs, particularly since the end of the summer 2018. (Anafé, 2019, p. 28) [Author translation from French]

The border checks dispositif has taken different forms according to the different conformation of each crossing gate in terms of orography and infrastructures, and the consequently different strategies of cross-border transit implemented in the realm illegal secondary movements. In general, the *hardening* of the Alpine sector of the Italian-French boundary made no border gate totally impermeable to the undocumented transit of migrants, as statistics concerning an oscillating but continuous growth of transit arrivals in the *Refuge Solidaire*¹⁰³ in Briançon show.

This section takes into consideration three border gates: the *Col d'Echelle*, the Fréjus tunnel, the Mongenèvre pass.

The border gate pertaining to the *Col d'Echelle* was the first pass targeted by migrants for undocumented crossing¹⁰⁴. There mobile police checks were implemented on both road streets and hiking paths (Anafé, 2019, p. 48).

The Fréjus area, situated in the proximity of the *Col d'Echelle*, is characterized by the presence of the trans-border railway and motorway, but is surrounded by very harsh Alpine peaks. Therefore, the

¹⁰² <http://www.anafe.org/>

¹⁰³ <https://lesterrassessolidaires.org/>

¹⁰⁴ See section 5.3.3. in this Chapter.

border *hardening* dimension targeted cross-border mobility via trains and wheeled vehicles. The Fréjus tunnel represents a *PPA* according to the French regulation (see later in this section).

At the motorway level, the checkpoint is located at the Italian side of the tunnel (Anafé, 2019, p. 48). Border checks target bus passengers, big vehicles such as trucks and vans, as well as the boots of cars considered suspicious by the police. The NGO denounced that identity checks are carried out according to a racial profile criterion, as police agents mainly stops coloured individuals or those whose attitudes seems suspicious (p. 49). Since November 2021, the presence of a building where apprehended migrants are taken in charge by French police when still in the Italian territory, has been observed by Anafé, that denounced its extra-legal status (2022, p. 7). Whether the French police verifies that an individual is not to be admitted in France according to the Schengen Border Code and the national legal framework, he/she is handed over to the Italian police, that drives he/she back to Italy. In a first phase, they were left at the Bardonecchia station (Anafé, 2019, p. 80). On a second phase, after a humanitarian agreement has been signed between the police and solidarity actors¹⁰⁵, refouled migrants are taken to the Massi shelter.

When it comes to train traffic, it is worthy to mention that TVG only, namely French high-speed trains, carry out trans-border connections¹⁰⁶. Therefore, identity checks only target these convoys. Local trains connected Turin with Modane only for a short period in 2017, and only at weekends¹⁰⁷. According to Anafé (2022, p. 71), right after the reintroduction of border checks French police got on the trains in Bardonecchia, and were taken advantage of the time before approaching the following station Modane to carry out identity checks. Since an incident involving undue French police irruption into a solidarity space occurred, checks are carried out in the station of Modane. In the latter is situated a *ZA*, *zone d'attente*, where apprehended unaccompanied foreign minors are apprehended; migrants older than 18 years old are directly pushed-pack to Italy by forcing them on the next train going back, according to what refereed by the PAF to Anafé, that could visit the premises only very few times. The newspaper article published in *Internazionale* (2019) is also a good illustration to contribute to the understanding of the border controls implementation at the Fréjus tunnel from the point of view of those subjected to them. Camilli reported of migrants forced off trains and buses, taken to a police station and then unloaded with a minibus in front of Bardonecchia train station. The categories of

¹⁰⁵ Please refer to section 5.5.2. in this Chapter, as well as Chapter 6.

¹⁰⁶ Since December 2021, the route is covered by Italian high-speed Frecciarossa trains. Source: <https://www.ferpress.it/ferrovie-servizi-regionali-sfm3-torino-gestiti-da-trenitalia-si-estendono-per-la-prima-volta-in-francia/>

Since December 2022, a stop in Bardonecchia has been established. Source: https://www.lastampa.it/torino/2022/09/28/news/il_frecciarossa_milanoparigi_fermera_anche_a_bardonecchia_in_alta_val_di_susa-9891588/

¹⁰⁷ Source: <https://www.ferpress.it/ferrovie-servizi-regionali-sfm3-torino-gestiti-da-trenitalia-si-estendono-per-la-prima-volta-in-francia/>

rejected migrants she mentioned were individuals who have left Italian reception centres but also foreigners residing in Italy but with flaws in their expatriation documentation. Volunteers interviewed by the journalist reported that rejections also involved minors, in violation of international laws. Finally, the Mongenèvre pass is relatively easy to cross compared to the other close Alpine passes, and its road (SS24/N49) is open all year. As described in the historical background, Montgenèvre has always served as a transalpine connection zone. Since 2017, here have concentrated the biggest and more visible regime of police checks embodied by French police against irregular border crossings engaged by individuals who decided to try and reach the French territory by feet across the Alps. Transit migrants have been taking advantage of a bus service covering the distance between Oulx and Briançon¹⁰⁸: in most cases, they were getting off the bus in the Italian town of Claviere, right before the border, and continue by feet using the maze of mountain paths. The state response evolved accordingly.

5.4.2. The “human hunt” in the Montgenèvre area

Building on the *bordering* theoretical apparatus that considers the border as the result of policies and practices, the ethnography by Bachellerie (2020) described how border checks had been implemented in this area in the years 2017-2019. In Winter 2017 block roads were settled on the road from Montgenèvre to Briançon, as well as military representatives were patrolling the territory by car and with the use of a helicopter. As the touristic season started, the control enforcement became more discrete and concentrated on the area surrounding the office of the French Border Police, located approximately one kilometre from the state borderline. Two types of control were observed. A stationary mode, at the border gate located in front of the French Border Police office, where police representatives invited drivers to decelerate and evaluate the car passengers with a quick check. A mobile mode, in the surrounding mountainous area, where mobile police teams patrolled the territory especially by night with the aim of intercepting transit migrants on the paths. For this second kind of control, French police used the cooperation of the Italian police, who informed them about how many “migrants” took the bus in Claviere; of the bus drivers, who were asked how many “migrants” had disembarked in Claviere and who sometimes felt under pressure to provide this information; of the staff of the ski facilities in the area, who sometimes reported the presence of “migrants” on the trails on the indication of the owners; of ordinary citizens who anonymously informed the PAF about “migrants” spotted in villages. Thanks to these contributions, in most of the cases the police team merely went to the area indicated by its informants and intercepted migrants. As the scholar herself

¹⁰⁸ This service was cut in December 2021. Source: <https://www.passamontagna.info/?p=3077&lang=en>

highlighted, this ethnographic material collected by Bachellerie helped to grasp two important elements characterizing the implementation of border control in this area. On the one hand, the contribution of multiple actors in reporting the presence of transit people in the border area configured a context of “police territory” (Jobard 2001). On the other hand, and this is the reason why I put the word “migrant” in quotes, she observed that in both border control practices identity checks targeted only those who could *look like* illegal migrants, according to these features: “carrying a backpack or suitcase; travelling at night and/or in a group; showing signs of fear, hiding; and having a skin colour identified as black” (p. 4).

A further observation by Bachellerie regarded the “tracking” practices by French police, describing what happened in details in the mountains at the border between Italy and France. Generally speaking, border checks had been organized according to an invisibility strategy, aimed to hide the “hunt” from the eyes of tourists, searching for “migrants” in mountain trails outside of villages, and carrying out identity checks on intercepted “migrants” in closed space like the PAF office. Furthermore, she reported a discrepancy regarding the practices of border controls between the day and the night, and between the touristic and the non-touristic season. If during the night and the low season patrols and checks were more evident, during the day and the high season they were more discrete, and police tended to mingle with ordinary citizens and tourists. Furthermore, the scholar gathered several accounts of “chases” and “ambushes” carried out by the French police using cars and night vision equipment, against people spotted on the trails by night who had no equipment. Accordingly, migrants incurred in risks to their own safety when attempting to escape in the dark and in mountainous terrain. Many transit people interviewed reported that when they realized that they had been sighted by police, they simply stop and waited by fear of wounding themselves. This, as Bachellerie argued, contributed to build a “hunt” scenario, with police acting as the predator and the migrants acting as the pray. Again in terms of security risks, over time these police practices led to people in transit attempting to cross the border via higher and more deserted paths, and therefore more dangerous, as also observed by MEDU (2021, p. 4).

If the arrest, the detention in police offices for identification and the denial of access to France through the *refus d’entrée* protocol represented the first phase of the push-back mechanism taking place on French territory, the second phase was in charge of Italian authorities. The ethnography by Tazzioli (2020a) accounted for this scenario. She observed that rejected transit migrants, of which only a part had been issued the *refus d’entrée*, were taken in charge by the Italian police, which has in use some premises in the PAF building in Montgenèvre. Policemen proceeded with the identification through the SPAID system, a fingerprint-taker mobile device that allows to control if the individual’s identity

had already been registered in the Italian and in the EURODAC databases. As reported by the press, in the very beginning of these events the French police operated push-backs in the Italian territory, more specifically in Claviere. This semi-deserted village at high altitude often suffers of night very cold temperatures (Anafé 2019, p. 53; D'Angelo, 2018). Later, an institutional mechanism was established to reduce the risk to personal safety during push-backs, as illustrated later.

5.4.3. Legal framework

The militarization and re-bordering process that unravelled in the Upper Susa Valley were carried out according to a both national and European legal framework.

France reintroduced border checks at its internal boundaries as a measure to contain “secondary movements” in 2011 first, mainly at the Ventimiglia-Menton gate¹⁰⁹.

In December 2015, France kicked-off a second phase of *re-bordering*, following terrorist attacks in Nice and Paris and according to the “state of emergency” declared for this reason, as illustrated by Anafè (2019). According to the NGO, the country justified the reestablishment of identity checks at its internal gates under a security paradigm. This *re-bordering* event was not implemented under the Schengen Border Code, since the identity checks at the border were justified by the state of emergency unilaterally declared in France. The latter has been in power from November 2015 to November 2017, and was hardly criticized by NGOs advocating for human rights and civic freedoms who denounced breaches in the application of national and international laws protecting undocumented migrants aiming to cross the Italian-French border¹¹⁰. Additionally, identity checks at the border have been observed to be implemented according to a racial profiling criteria, in violation of art. 7 of the Schengen Border Code (Anafè, 2022, p. 12).

After the “state of emergency” came to an end, in May 2017, French authorities decided to continue exercise identity checks at internal boundaries in application of the Art. 25, Title III, Chapter II of the Schengen Borders Code¹¹¹. Evidently, the country pursued its security prerogatives outside of the institutional dialogue carried out at the European level until 2019¹¹².

¹⁰⁹ See section 5.3.1 in this Chapter.

¹¹⁰ Those not allowed to enter France were reported to be temporary hold in containers next to French Police office at the Saint-Louis gate, or in some rooms at the train station of Menton before being “readmitted” in Italy. These places are claimed to be temporary prisons for migrants outside of the legal framework (Anafè, 2022, pp. 20-21). Some reported physical and psychological violence and abuses (MeltingPot, 2019).

¹¹¹ As explained in Chapter 3, this measure can be implemented according to Article 25 “as last resort [...] in case of a serious threat to public policy or internal security” for a period of 30 days, with the possibility of extending it if duly justified to European authorities and member states. If the circumstances backing the measure last, border checks can be reintroduced for 6-months periods, for a maximum total length that cannot exceed 2 years.

¹¹² Please refer to the overview on the European internal *re-bordering* process offered in section 3 of Chapter 3.

Complying with its border monitoring efforts, France established 17 internal PPA (*points de passage autorisés*, authorised crossing points), in order to communicate to the EU and the member states where identity checks were reintroduced as per art. 27 of the Schengen Border Code (Anafé, 2019, p. 21). Relevant for this analysis are PPA located on the border section between Liguria and the *Alpes Maritimes* department, as well as on the border section dividing the Upper Susa Valley and the *Haute Alpes* and *Savoie* department.

After a first 6-month period come to the end, France maintained border checks expanding them temporarily for 6-month or 3-month periods up to March 2020. As can be read in the countries' notifications published by the EU authorities¹¹³, French government indicated as justification a “persistent terrorism threat” first, and then also the “situation at external borders” or “secondary movements”. As soon as the pandemic spread, France justified the reintroduction of internal border checks according to “continuous terrorist threat and the risk of terrorists using the vulnerability of States due to COVID-19 pandemics, support to measures aiming at containing the spread of virus”. The COVID-19, together with the terrorist threat in terms of “risk of arrival of persons who could pose a threat among the flow of refugees” as well as “secondary movements” have been indicated as events on which the French *re-bordering* process was based until the end of the sanitary emergency. At the time of writing (November 2023), France has extended its *re-bordering* period at all its internal frontiers and up to April 2024, according to “new terrorist threats and external borders situation”.

France has then totalled a period of *re-bordering* of about 7 years, much longer than the period foreseen in the Schengen Border Code. As well, PPA have increased to 182¹¹⁴. The whole process has been carried out outside of a process of negotiation with the European authorities, highlighting a high degree on unilaterality in the implementation of this policy¹¹⁵.

The return of French internal frontiers has been brought to the attention of national and European courts, with opposite results but recently moving in a condemning direction. The *Conseil d'Etat* rejected in December 2017¹¹⁶ and October 2022¹¹⁷ appeals by NGOs against the temporal extension of the measure, backing the French government decisions about extending the *hardening* of internal borders. Nevertheless, the European Court of Justice sentenced in April 2022¹¹⁸ that Art. 25 of the Schengen Border Code cannot be interpreted extensively, as a Member State may not re-establish

¹¹³ Source: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen-borders-and-visa/schengen-area/temporary-reintroduction-border-control_en

¹¹⁴ Source: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-12472-2021-REV-2/en/pdf>

¹¹⁵ Please refer to the debate in sections 3 and 4 of Chapter 2.

¹¹⁶ Source: <http://www.conseil-etat.fr/fr/arianeweb/CE/decision/2003-07-30/237649>

¹¹⁷ Source: <http://www.conseil-etat.fr/fr/arianeweb/CE/decision/2022-05-13/463851>

¹¹⁸ Source:

<https://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?mode=DOC&pageIndex=0&docid=258262&part=1&doclang=EN&text=&dir=&occ=first&cid=8186638>

controls at its internal borders for a period exceeding 6 months, unless a new threat appears, distinct from the previous one. As well, in September 2023 the CJEU sentenced¹¹⁹ that foreign individuals that are intercepted during an irregular border crossing at internal borders can be issued a refusal of entry according to the Schengen Border Code, but their treatment is ruled by the Directive 2008/115/EC “on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals”¹²⁰. According to the sentence, France should not forcibly remove rejected migrants from its borderline.

The national law framing the *re-bordering* of internal French boundaries helps instead to understand *where* identity border checks can be carried out. In general, the implementation of border checks and the consequences in case of irregular border crossing have underwent a process of tightening.

For example, in 2018 the now abrogated¹²¹ law 2018-778¹²² “*pour une immigration maîtrisée, un droit d’asile effectif et une intégration réussie*” (for a controlled immigration, an effective asylum rights and a successful integration) emending the immigration and asylum code in force (CESEDA) extended to 10 kilometres from the border line the frontier area within which a foreign coming from a country that signed the Convention of Ginevra and having crossed the border unauthorized, can be intercepted and issued with a *refus d’entrée*¹²³.

At the moment of writing (November 2023), identity border checks are carried out in a frontier zone that extends 20 kilometres from the border line¹²⁴, according to the Art. 78.2 of the French *Code de procédure pénale*, as emended in 2019¹²⁵ by the law 2017-1510 of October, 30¹²⁶, the so-called “counter-terrorism act” promoted by President Sarkozy. Moreover, this further defined the

¹¹⁹ Source:

<https://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?text=&docid=272086&pageIndex=0&doclang=EN&mode=lst&dir=&occ=first&part=1&cid=1016398>

¹²⁰ Source: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32008L0115>

¹²¹ This measure is now abrogated by the Ordonnance n° 2020-1733, December 16, 2020.

¹²² Source: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/LEGIARTI000037382633/2018-09-12/>

¹²³ The mentioned rule is included in Art.213-3-1: “In the event of the temporary reintroduction of checks at internal borders provided for in Chapter II of Title III of Regulation (EU) 2016/399 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 March 2016 on a Union Code on the rules governing the movement of persons across borders (Schengen Borders Code), the decisions mentioned in Article 213-2 may be taken in respect of foreign nationals who, coming directly from the territory of a State party to the Schengen Convention signed on 19 June 1990, have entered mainland France by crossing an internal land border without being authorised to do so and have been checked in an area between that border and a line drawn ten kilometres beyond it.” (author translation from French original, italics by the author) Source: https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/texte_lc/LEGITEXT000006070158/

¹²⁴ The newest version of the CESEDA, which serves as the regulatory code for French migration and asylum policies, entered into force on the 1st May 2021. Art. 313, that rules the controls at internal borders, does not specifies the extension of the area within they can be legally carried out.

¹²⁵ Source:

https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article_lc/LEGIARTI000037399447#:~:text=%C3%80%20ce%20titre%2C%20la%20mise,%22

¹²⁶ Source: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000035932811/>

framework of internal border checks by establishing “transfrontalier zones”, extending border checks within the state territory such as in train stations. According the NGO Anafè (2019, p. 26), the declared aims of these counter-terrorism measures are refuted by their implementation: border guards were sent to patrol mainly boundaries with Italy and Spain, when terrorist menaces were coming mainly from North Europe. Therefore, the NGOs inscribed the mentioned rules within the French strategy of keeping transit migrants in a vulnerability condition in the whole territory.

Finally, the French law complements the European framework¹²⁷ ruling also *how* non-European citizens intercepted at the Italian-French border lacking the necessary visa for border-crossing have to be handled. According to the Schengen Border Code, they are subjected to a refusal of entry. The *refus d’entrée* is ruled in the French law by the art. 332 CESEDA, as emended again by Ordonnance n° 2020-1733. The article refers to the Schengen Border Code and excludes the regime of international protection. Individuals targeted with this measure shall be readmitted in the country from which they entered France under the bilateral agreements in force.

In the case of Italy, readmissions should be implemented in accordance with the Treaty of Chambéry, a bilateral agreement of transfrontalier cooperation signed in 1997¹²⁸. However, according to Anafè (2019, pp. 18-19), since 2017 France have operated push-backs through the *refus d’entrée* protocol, readmissions are not carried out under the Treaty of Chambéry but are implemented in accordance to the Art. 32 of the Schengen Border Code. In this case, the rights under its Title II would apply. It establishes that border checks shall not be discriminatory, nor they shall impair the dignity of the individual, and she/he has the right to invoke international protection. As well, the CJEU sentenced that that internal borders cannot be assimilated to exterior borders in case of reintroductions of identity checks¹²⁹. Ignoring this decision, France has kept on issuing *refus d’entrée* (Anafè, 2022, p. 11). The possibility to issue *refus d’entrées* at internal borders has been finally subject of interpellation by the *Conseil d’Etat* to the CGEU in February 2022¹³⁰, on the basis of a question to this effect posed by a group of French NGOs. The extension of the period of reintroduction of identity border checks at

¹²⁷ According to art. 32 SBC, “Where border control at internal borders is reintroduced, the relevant provisions of Title II shall apply *mutatis mutandis*”, which means that the internal border is compared to the external border, whose functioning is ruled by Title II of the same SBC. On this latter regard, Art. 6 rules the criteria of entry for extra-Schengen citizens.

¹²⁸ The act provided for the establishment of two police and customs cooperation centres, one in Ventimiglia and one in Modane, whose tasks include enabling cooperation between the Italian and French police to implement readmissions of irregular migrants. Since 2002, the treaty has enabled mixed patrolling on both sides of the border, to prevent irregular immigration.

Source: http://legislature.camera.it/_bicamerale/schengen/docinte/ACCITFR.htm;

https://www1.interno.gov.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/sezioni/sala_stampa/notizie/rapporti_internazionali/notizi_a_16920.html

¹²⁹ Source: <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2019-03/cp190035fr.pdf>

¹³⁰ Source: <https://www.conseil-etat.fr/fr/arianeweb/CE/decision/2022-02-24/450285>

internal borders beyond two years with the same reason, as well as the issuing of *refus d'entrée* at internal borders, put the French *re-bordering* process outside of the European legal framework.

Further observations by scholars, NGOs and human rights activists let emerged that identity border checks controls carried out since 2015 by French police at the Italian-French border have configured a scenario of systematic legal violations (Tous Migrants, 2019; Bachellerie, 2020; Anafé, 2019, 2022; Facchini & Rondi, 2022). Anafé (2019, pp. 44-84) claimed that identity checks in the contexts are illegal as: they are discriminatory, since they are carried out according to a racial profiling criteria what targets individuals with specific, non-European, physical features; *refus d'entrée* were completed in a perfunctory manner; the individual situation of each apprehended undocumented migrants was not taken into consideration; apprehended undocumented migrants were not informed about their rights; they were not provided with medical assistance; they were not provided with a translation service; were not inform about the possibility to appeal the *refus d'entrée*.

In terms of protection to the right of asylum, Anafé observed that:

Since 2015, exiled persons have explained: that they had applied for asylum in French without success; when in English using the words "refugee" or "asylum", some officers or agents had replied that they did not understand English or that to apply for asylum they had to in French; that they presented themselves with small papers on which were written "asylum", "I wish to apply for asylum" (in French or English): the papers were allegedly torn up by the police before they were sent back to Italy. (2019, p. 60. Author translation from French.)

Most recent publications by the same NGO (2022) suggested that the context has not changed in terms of human rights and both international and French law violations. Further observations made it possible to ascertain that: discriminatory control practices have not ceased (p. 12); transit migrants are notified of *refus d'entrée* without having their individual situation considered and without being informed of their rights (pp. 12-13); transit migrants are not informed about the opportunity to claim for asylum, as well as their claims are disregarded (p. 15); the conditions of the rooms in which people in transit are detained are humiliating (pp. 19-22); while staying at the police premises, the basic needs of transients are not met (pp. 25-30); these premises are still not recognized in the French legal framework, bringing the profile of these stops closer to that of arbitrariness (pp. 35-44).

Finally, according to Facchini and Rondi (2022, p. 136), France has deprived of this right undocumented migrants apprehended at its internal border with Italy, because it has invoked the principle of the "first country of entry" and "safe country" included in the Dublin to justify push-backs towards the Italian territory. In this case, individuals should be nevertheless identified by

French authorities through the information contained in the EURODAC database. France violated this disposition (Facchini, 2020).

5.5. Non-state actors in the solidarity scenario of the Upper Susa Valley

The *hardened* state border and persistent and increasingly articulated transit flows stemmed an important ethical dimension. This mobilized several non-state actors who committed to support transit migrants with different practices and values, as well as it significantly impacted on the social fabric of the Upper Susa Valley.

5.5.1. Violence and death at the border

Reports by MEDU (2020, 2021, 2022) and Anafé (2019) gave account for border violence impressed in the transit migrants' bodies and shed light on their health conditions. Some of them bore signs of the long months of transit through militarized borders (trauma, infections, unreconstructed fractures in the lower limbs, often unreconstructed fractures in the lower limbs and often sores on the feet and infections due to brambles and thorns, which have become infected). Many cases of transit-related psychological suffering are also reported. Medical evidences concerning the difficulties involved in crossing this specific border illustrated that rejected migrants have shown signs of frostbite in Winter, or abrasions from crossing the mountain or fleeing from the police.

Another dimension that allows to grasp the danger of border crossing in the Alps is the rescuing activity carried out by authorities and organizations in charge. Since 2017, many rescues of people in transit in difficulty in the mountains have seen the involvement of the Alpine Rescue, the Red Cross, the Fire Brigade (here only few examples: Peggio, 2017; Valsusa Oggi, 2018; Livesay, 2019).

Despite the continuous presence of rescue teams and the various solidarity mechanisms that have been set in motion, as explained in detail in the next section, in 2018 and 2019 at least five people lost their lives while trying to cross the border. Their names were Mohammed Fafana, Mamadou-Alpha Diallo (Rocci, 2018), Tamimou Derman (La Repubblica, 2019), Mohamed Ali Bouhamdi (OpenDDB, 2020), and Blessing Matthew (Tous Migrants, 2019, p. 8). Blessing Matthew's death in particular had a certain media resonance. It has also been the subject of a counter-investigation by the Border Forensics team¹³¹, which questions the French state's version of the non-responsibility of border agents in the drowning of the young migrant at La Vachette, not far from Briançon. Another transit-related death occurred in March 2018, when a Nigerian woman died in a hospital in Turin

¹³¹ <https://www.borderforensics.org/investigations/blessing-investigation/>

giving birth to her baby, after being rejected at the Frejùs gate (D'Angelo, 2018). In the years 2020 and 2021 there are no known fatalities on this sector of the French-Italian border¹³². However, the chances of there being any are not low, given the ease of getting lost and losing one's life, especially in Winter, and the lack of a nominal record of those attempting to cross which would make it possible to make known any missing.

Push-backs suffered by transit migrants always convey both ethical and material concerns (Facchini & Rondi, 2022). The second dimension deals with the temporary condition of homelessness of transit migrants as well as their potential lack of financial resources for basic needs. In the case of push-backs operated by the French police at the Alpine border section, the physical and psychological violence suffered by transit migrants was coupled with the hard environment represented by the Alps, especially in Winter, that makes push-backs extremely dangerous in terms of human safety. Del Biaggio (2020) called this transformation of the Alpine landscape, potentially but not inherently dangerous, “oplopoiesis” of the frontier. According to the author, the militarization of the mountain area responded to a state strategy of using natural obstacles to make the journey more difficult for those who need to travel irregularly to cross their borders. It is in this scenario that the Western Alps emerge as a potentially lethal environment for transit migrants.

5.5.2. The solidarity scenario in the Upper Susa Valley

As the field diary shows (Chapter 7, “Geographies of humanitarian borderwork in the Upper Susa Valley”), the “oplopoiesis” of the Alpine frontier favoured the emersion and consolidation of a variegated solidarity scenario in the Upper Susa Valley, that included both institutional and non-institutional reception centres, supported by a range of actors of the most diverse nature and by a strong network of volunteers and activists. This dimension has been examined by several recent meaningful ethnographic researches (Laszczkowski, 2018a, 2018b; Tazzioli & Walters, 2019; Petrozzi, 2020; Tazzioli, 2020a, 2020b; Manzon, 2022; Ferroni, 2022).

As this section and Chapter 7 will explore in detail, the humanitarian response in the *borderland* was rich and heterogeneous. On this regard, Tazzioli (2020b) pointed out that “the solidarity infrastructure to support [transit migrants did not] appear out of nowhere” (p. 5), but was grounded on historical anti-Nazi and environmentalist experiences, such as those against the highway and the TAV. The

¹³² MEDU's 2022 report states that in January 2022, after years in which there were no fatal accidents, two young people lost their lives trying to cross the border: Fathallah Blafhail, 32 years old of Moroccan origin, drowned in the Freney dam near Modane, and Ullah Rezwan Sheyzad, a 15 years old Afghan, who was run over by a train near Salbertrand. Another corpse was found on Montgenèvre in August 2023.

ethnographic analysis will further expand this topic, searching for the roots of the *borderland's* “geographies of humanitarian borderwork” in the *border narratives* of its solidarity actors.

In Winter 2017, facing the increase in number of transitants, the public company responsible for the railway stations granted the municipality of Bardonecchia two rooms to be used as a safe place. Some days before the same company had ordered the closure of the Bardonecchia station at night, to prevent it being used as a shelter for the night by migrants in transit, and despite the cold temperatures (MEDU, 2020, p. 12). Thus, the *Spazio Calmo* was born, managed by the public administration together with an association of medical staff (Rainbow for Africa), an association of lawyers (ASGI, *Associazione Studi Giuridici per l'Immigrazione*) and a network of volunteers. This included local dwellers as well as representatives from the new-born transnational solidarity group “*Briser les frontières*”, joined by No TAV militants from the Low Susa Valley (Camilli, 2018; Scavo, 2017; Chiale, 2018). The *Spazio Calmo* was backed by an institutional project, the Freedom Mountain mission, financed with 100.000€ and involving the collaboration of many institutional actors including the *Prefettura*, the territorial expression of the state (MEDU, 2020, p. 12). The aim of the project was to make the migrants aware of the dangers of the mountains; make them desist from attempting to cross the border (Peggio, 2017); provide them with medical and legal assistance; offer them the possibility guaranteed by the *Prefettura* of being readmitted to the reception centre from which they had escaped from, if the case (MEDU, 2020, p. 13); inform asylum seekers on the rights guaranteed by the Italian system, that they would lose in the event of an illegal passage to France in accordance with the Dublin Regulation (Sassi, 2018). In fact, it's noteworthy that at the time most of the migrants reaching Bardonecchia to try to cross into France had been in Italy for some time, disheartened by the poor prospects for integration and the poor reception they received from the Italian asylum system (Camilli, 2018).

On March 30, 2018, the *Spazio Calmo* was the stage for an episode which made national headlines and opened a debate on border sovereignty and the scope for cooperation between border police corps. Few agents of the Gendarmerie carried out an armed raid on the reception premises in the alleged context of a drug check on an undocumented migrant (Tomasetta, 2018). This episode caused a diplomatic clash between Italy and France and led to a temporary increase in Italian police controls on trains heading for the border, reducing arrivals, which at that time were around 50 per day (Ricca, 2018). Between December 2017 and March 2018, the *Spazio Calmo* supported around 1000 people (D'Angelo, 2018).

In the following months, the *Spazio Calmo* saw its user base progressively decrease, as most of the transit moved to the Turin - Oulx - Claviere - Montgenèvre – Briançon route. The *Spazio Calmo* closed in Summer 2020 (MEDU, 2020, p. 15).

While the institutional project was taking shape in Bardonecchia, at the beginning of 2018 the first of several non-institutional initiatives in support of transit migrants in the Upper Susa Valley took place. On March 22, the collective *Briser les Frontières* occupied the room located under the church of Claviere, right close to the border. This space was ironically called *Chez Jésus*. The experience wanted to link solidarity in favour of people in transit with the questioning of the *hardening* and militarization of the state border (Tazzioli & Walters, 2019). On the one side, it worked as a shelter for transit migrants who were about to cross the border, as well as for those pushed-back by the French police. In this sense, it granted a first response to the emergency configured by French police releasing pushed-back people right at the border. It provided a warm place in that freezing Winter, as well as clothes and food. On the other side, it aimed to challenge the “border dispositif”, composed by its militarization, the man hunting and the push-backs.

On October, 10 of the same year, *Chez Jésus* got evicted by the police, after the local priest urged the *Prefettura* on the illegality of the activity, and the mayor claimed for the inappropriateness of a squat in a highly touristic area and allegedly acting as a pull-factor for the flow of migrants in transit. As illustrated early in this Chapter, the valley in which Claviere lies boasts a concentration of ski infrastructures dedicated to an affluent clientele. Chapter 7 will illustrate that the economic interests surrounding the tourist exploitation of the area have driven the repeated expulsion of solidarity bases in favour of transit migrants.

In the communiqué (*Chez Jesoulx Rifugio Autogestito* 2018a) following the eviction, the promoters of the initiative polemically referred to the imminent opening of the *Fraternità Massi* institutional shelter in Oulx. They criticized the state’s strategy that favoured purely humanitarian initiatives over those they considered spontaneous and political in content. In addition to the state, the police and those who promoted the eviction, they also attacked the associations in the area that intended to contribute to the institutional project, the Freedom Mountain mission. Finally, they considered the latter to be part of the repressive action of the state.

The opposition to NGOs and more institutional forms to humanitarian support was also grasped by the anthropologist and videomaker Laszczkowski, who did some fieldwork in the Upper Susa Valley in 2018. He described the collectif *Briser les frontières* as a transnational movement. As well, he pointed out that the social and cultural backgrounds of its members has contributed to the birth and political orientation of *Briser les frontières*. Specifically, he referred the politicization of the Susa Valley communities by the No TAV movement, to which, moreover, many militants belonged.

The diversity of backgrounds and outlooks among those making up the network translates into tensions over the network’s goals, modalities of action, and relations with other actors. It is remarkable how the activists are able to work together, negotiating their

differences while sharing a fundamental ethical commitment. It is worthwhile, however, to highlight that the network is a difficult process that takes a continuous effort from all those involved. An early controversy concerned collaboration with humanitarian NGOs. For some, the matter was uncontroversial. For others, however, NGOs are essentially ambiguous, seen as complicit with the neoliberal order. For those more politically motivated participants of *Briser*, it was important to make clear from the start that, as one person put it, they were “not volunteers but political activists”. That is to say, their role would not be limited to providing charity aid to the migrants, but it would also centrally involve denouncing the responsibility of the state and the EU for producing the extreme conditions the migrants face. (2018b, n.p.)

The ethnography revealed a more pluralistic view of the humanitarian work of NGOs and institutional actors, compared to those expressed in the official communiqués published on *Chez Jésus*’ social pages. This data also exposed a tension to distinguish this universe of solidarity from the institutional one, the former based on humanitarianism, the latter on political struggle through solidarity. Laszczkowski concluded his work with a speculation on the duality of border, being at the same time a place for sovereignty exercise, and a politically generative space: “As the experience of *Briser les Frontières* shows, the border generates unprefigured political relations, novel axes of contention, and unlikely alliances. It becomes a catalyst of political identities and innovative forms of mobilization” (n.p.).

In October 2018, close to the eviction of *Chez Jésus*, the *rifugio* Massi was inaugurated in Oulx (named also “Massi shelter” in this text). The initiative came from a Catholic foundation named Talità Kum and headed by a parish priest from the Lower Susa Valley¹³³. The opening of the *rifugio* was funded by the Fondazione Magnetto¹³⁴, a philanthropic organization rooted in the lower valley, and benefited from the loan of some premises of the local parish, near the train and bus station. Those premises, abandoned for a long time, due to a curious circumstance had been used in the past as a hostel for travellers on the Via Francigena. Since then, it prepared to welcome other “travellers”. A few paid employees responsible for the night reception were joined by medical staff from Rainbow for Africa and volunteers from the Red Cross committee of Susa, who began to take care of the transport to the Massi shelter of the migrants pushed-back at Claviere.

This represented a humanitarian institutional mechanism in the realm of the project MigrAlp, which replaced in 2018 the Freedom Mountain mission. MigrAlp saw the cooperation of Talita Kum, who

¹³³ <https://talitaonlus.weebly.com/>

¹³⁴ <https://www.fondazionemagnetto.org/aree/sociale/>

granted the availability of accommodation in the Massi shelter; the Susa committee of the Red Cross, that took care of transporting pushed-back transit migrants from the border to the shelter when not carried out by Italian Police (see also Tazzioli, 2020a, p. 6); Rainbow for Africa, ensuring the sanitary assistance; the local administrations of Oulx, Bardonecchia and Claviere. No other information was found on the project. Finally, a network of volunteers also consolidated around the experience, a part of which coming from the *Spazio Calmo* experience (MEDU, 2020, p. 12; Camilli, 2019) while some were coming from *Chez Jésus*, belonging to the *Valsusa Oltre Confine* (literally, “Susa Valley beyond the border”) collectif¹³⁵. The MigrAlp project represented an interesting example to *bordering* practice carried out at a public/private level, as Chapter 7 will illustrate. In there, different interests pertaining to securitarian and humanitarian interests converged, resulting in a unique experiment in Italy in the management of “secondary movements”.

The *rifugio* Massi was soon joined by a parallel non-institutional reception initiative, the *Casa Cantoniera Occupata*. On December 9, 2018, the same group who got evicted from *Chez Jésus* two months before occupied in Oulx an abandoned building located at the edges of the town (MEDU, 2020, p. 10). In the communiqué (*Chez Jesoulx Rifugio Autogestito* 2018b) following the occupations, its promoters claimed that they aimed to grant people in transit a reference place open all day, differently from the Massi shelter which covered the night only, as well as to provide a space for organizing the fight against the “border dispositif” and its violence against migrants. Since that moment and until the occupation got evicted, in March 2021, two buildings welcomed migrants in transit have coexisted in Oulx: one institutionally backed (the *Fraternità Massi* refuge) and one *against* the institutions, *Chez JesOulx*. The name intended to combine continuity with the previous experience in Claviere with the new location in Oulx.

Over time, the occupation was more frequently referred to as the *Casa Cantoniera*, from the name of the type of building occupied (state-owned, usually for storing road maintenance material) or more simply *Casetta* (small house). In line with the previous experience, the *Casa Cantoniera* matched tangible solidarity activities with a political fight against the border. When it comes to the first dimension, it provided accommodation as well as food and clothes sourced through solidarity collections, to transit migrants approaching the building. According to MEDU (2021, 2022), people in transit approaching Oulx and preparing for border-crossing were preferring to a greater extent to refer to the *Casa Cantoniera*, while the Massi shelter was mainly attended by people accompanied there by the police or the Red Cross following push-backs. The NGO hypothesised that this was due to the Massi shelter being open only at night, the few available beds, and the minimal serviced provided. On the contrary, in the informal circuit people in transit were able to find a more horizontal

¹³⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/valsusaoltreconfine/>

and efficient relationship with reference to their needs and desires. However, criticalities were to be found by the NGO in the risk of overcrowding, especially within the pandemic context, and the poor hygienic and heating infrastructures.

With reference to the second *political* dimension, the *Casetta*'s occupants supported "No Border" activities and discourses. They organized protests at, and marches across, the border (January 18, 2018; April 22, 2018; May 16, 2018; July 22, 2018; November 19, 2018; April 20, 2019; January 12, 2020; September 20, 2020; November 1, 2020)¹³⁶, as well as campsites joined by No Border activists from other Italian cities and abroad (September 2018, July-August 2020)¹³⁷. When it comes to the discourse level, in their communiqués they called for a non-institutional and horizontal, non-humanitarian but political solidarity in favour of people in transit (Chez JesOulx Rifugio Autogestito 2018c, Passamontagna 2020c). They blamed the state, the government and the police for the fatalities among transit migrants, claiming that it is not the mountain to kill, but the "border dispositif" (Chez JesOulx Rifugio Autogestito 2019).

In addition to the police and their actions, tourists and leisure infrastructures of Claviere and Montgenèvre, such as ski lifts and the golf field, were targeted during some demonstrations. An emblematic one was organized over the Easter weekend of 2019 (Passamontagna, 2019). Activists interfered with the activity of the ski lifts in order to highlight the contradiction that Claviere is: by day, a tourist destination; by night, a place of toil and sometimes death. The account published by the activists themselves on their social profiles reveals the irritated reactions of tourists and operators. On other occasions they have also accused the Red Cross, or the public transport company covering the route between Oulx and Briançon, of being part of the "border device" (Passamontagna, 2020a). Finally, some demonstrations have been organized in Italy or France to express solidarity with French activists on trial, accused of aiding illegal immigration or illegal protest (Passamontagna, 2020b). On this regard, on the French side solidarity manifestations in favour of people in transit organized in and around Briançon have been obstructed by the state and local governments, contrary to what happened on the Italian side.

5.5.3. The solidarity scenario in the Briançonnaise valley

In 2017, the association Tous Migrant opened in Briançon a shelter, the *Refuge Solidaire*. This is a 12.000-inhabitants centre overlooking the Clarea valley, on the French side of the Montgenèvre pass. The centre aimed to host those transit people who made it across the mountain and the border.

¹³⁶ Source: <https://www.passamontagna.info/?cat=72&lang=en>

¹³⁷ See previous note.

Generally speaking, the city has a long-lasting tradition of welcoming. In 2015/16, after the Calais camp got evicted¹³⁸, the city made itself available to host groups of foreigners from that dramatic experience (Yolka, 2022). In Spring 2017, locals joined together in an association (called first *Collectif Refuge Solidaire*, later *Refuges Solidaires*) and entered into an agreement with the local authorities of Briançon for the use of a room near the railway station to be used as a shelter for migrants in transit. In cooperation with other French associations (*Secours Catholique*, *Médecins du Monde*, *Médecin sans frontières*, *Tous Migrants*), the *Refuge Solidaire* equipped itself from the outset to offer people in transit first aid, accommodation and responses to basic needs, medical and legal support, as well as guidance on local public transport to continue their journey to their desired destination (Refuges Solidaires, 2018). Even if the 15 beds in the space provided proved to be insufficient from the outset, facing arrival numbers acknowledged as extraordinary by the association (Refuges Solidaires, 2019), the shelter kept on providing accommodation in accordance with local authorities up to June 2020, when the political leadership of the municipality of Briançon changed colour and it was announced that the convention for premises near the station would not be renewed (Refuges Solidaires, 2020). A national campaign was organised in support of the shelter, which had received 11,000 people in transit since the day it opened (Libération, 2020).

In August 2021, the new shelter *Les Terrasses Solidaires* was inaugurated. It took over the legacy and cooperation between actors of the previous experience, that founded a new association of the same name to manage the new building. The latter, which cost around one million euros and was bought by a consortium of private individuals, covers an area of 1,500 square metres on six floors (Les Terrasses Solidaires, 2021).

In addition to this dimension of institutional clash over spaces of solidarity, which has led associations to private initiatives, many activists have been arrested and /or involved in trials for allegedly supporting illegal immigration. According to Tous Migrants (2019, p. 11), between 2018 and 2019, 14 solidarity activists were arrested on various occasions. Some of these arrests occurred during border demonstrations. This is the case of Ele, Théo, Bastien, who were detained on 22 April 2018 during a spontaneous demonstration in reaction to the one organised by the far-right organisation Identitary Generation¹³⁹ (Reporterre, 2018). That of the “three of Briançon” was an example used in literature (e.g. Escarcena, 2021) to highlight the process of criminalisation of solidarity at Europe's internal and external borders. They, together with four others also accused of illegally helping

¹³⁸ In 2015 and 2016, French authorities planned to clear the Calais “jungle”, where thousands of transit migrants found refuge and informal accommodation before trying to pass the English Channel and reach UK. For a reference, The Guardian (2016).

¹³⁹ The mentioned have been the only public manifestation organized by an extreme right-wing group so far, November 2023.

migrants to enter France during demonstrations, were acquitted on appeal in September 2021 (Le Monde, 2021).

Another solidarity-based activity that has been monitored and punished by the French state is that carried out by the *marauyeurs*. It concerns groups of citizens that organize themselves to help transit migrants in the mountains, especially by night and in Winter, when dangers increase. Their activities include: “giving food or drink, showing the way, taking people to safety, guiding them when they are lost, simply being there to observe what is happening on the ground, observe how the police behave, collect testimonies of the border crossing to documenting the lawyers, and of course calling 112 whenever the situation requires it” (Tous Migrants, 2019, p. 15. Author translation from French). As said, *marauyeurs* have been persecuted by French authorities on the charge of “facilitating the entry of irregular foreigners into the national territory” (for example, Libération, 2021).

5.5.4. Italian state’s attitudes on formal and informal solidarity initiatives

Back to the Italian side, the relationship between solidarity networks and the state has been more differentiated. Indeed, the Ministry of Interior has tolerated the presence of the Massi shelter and has contributed to its funding, as pointed out when illustrating the MigrAlp project. In contrast, towards informal initiatives such as *Chez Jésus* and *Chez JesOulx*, Italian authorities have shown little tolerance towards their activities and presence in the *borderland* (Tazzioli, 2020b). Evictions of squatted spaces, although operated months after the occupations began, are the clearest evidence of this. As well, Italian activists have also been targeted with legal measures. In June 2020, 17 people were served a residence ban in Oulx and the surrounding municipalities, for the crime of occupation (Passamontagna, 2020d). Against the activists of *Chez JesOulx* two lawsuits were filed for illegal occupation of state property. In both cases all the defendants were acquitted, as it was recognized the tenuousness of the fact as well as the solidarity purpose of the *Casetta*, which according to the judgment had contributed to the management of the migratory flow in the face of the scarcity of institutional resources (La Stampa, 2022a; La Stampa, 2023). Finally, one trial that made national headlines in both Italy and France was the one against Emilio Scalzo, a No TAV militant. This was a transnational affair, because it involved an Italian individual, active on the international militancy front in support of people in transit, being charged with a crime committed on French soil. According to the prosecution, the activist had assaulted a gendarme during an anti-borders demonstration in Montgenèvre. A European arrest warrant was issued against him for this, accepted by Italy (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2021). After spending several months in a French prison, he was released in December 2022 on a technicality (La Stampa, 2022b).

As the ethnography exposed, the *Casetta* was evicted in March 2021, a few days after the start of the online phase of the fieldwork. The *Fraternità Massi* shelter became again the only centre available in Oulx for accommodation of transit migrants. Against the eviction, the network of volunteers afferent to the Massi shelter had organized a campaign, that was supported by more than 10.000 signatures¹⁴⁰. MEDU (2022) informed that after the clearing, that showed the reception limits of the *rifugio* Massi (at that time, the average presences were around 100 per night), the logistic centre of the Red Cross committee of Susa, in Bussoleno, began to receive those migrants in transit that the centre was unable to accommodate. As well, the refinancing of MigrAlp for €500,000 was requested to the Ministry of the Interior. The project was approved and the money slowly arrived. This represented a fundamental novelty, as until then the institutional support mechanism had been based entirely on private funds (MEDU, 2022).

As will be shown in Chapter 7, the multiple evictions suffered by the promoters of informal initiatives showed a pattern of immaterial *bordering* practices, in which state actors circumscribed purely humanitarian initiatives and support them, while expelling those with a more manifestly political orientation through deterrence or repressive actions.

5.5.5. The impact of the pandemic on the solidarity context

When it comes to the COVID-19 pandemics, little information is available concerning its impact on the solidarity scenario in the Upper Susa Valley.

MEDU reports (2021, 2022) referred to the first, harder pandemic period in Italy (March-May 2020) as a phase of little transit of migrants, that was matched with a reduced intensity of support activities. That was especially the case for medical staff, due to the dramatic growth of workload in hospitals. Nevertheless, the NGO denounced the increased health vulnerability of transit migrant who were forced to live in overcrowded spaces while waiting for mobility restrictions to be relaxed, while local people were asked to lock themselves in their homes. Still, no cases of infection positivity were reported, at least in the Massi center.

Meanwhile, the medical attention support present in the latter organized preventive interventions. For example, a study published in medical scientific literature has given account of a vaccination campaign to benefit people in transit in the Massi shelter (Torre, 2022; Storer et al., 2022). In particular, that ethnography exposed the issue of “vaccine hesitancy” among people in transit. Generally speaking, scholars points out that that category have been over-represented in the infection

¹⁴⁰ https://www.change.org/p/prefetto-di-torino-c-%C3%A8-chi-accoglie-e-chi-respinge-no-alla-chiusura-della-casa-cantoniera-oulx?source_location=search

rates, as well as they have been particularly affected by COVID-related travel restrictions. As well, they suffer little access to the health system while on journey, due to their undocumented legal status or the same transit condition. When it comes to the context in the Upper Susa Valley, ethnographic material demonstrated that a principle of pragmatism guided the choice of those who accepted the vaccine: the possibility of obtaining vaccination documentation, which in the observation period was necessary for both local and transnational travel. On the contrary, part of the migrants was hesitant with reference to being vaccinated while on journey. That was again due to a transit-relevant reason: the fear of suffering side-effects that could have prevented them from moving on quickly as planned, and eventually slow down the whole family or group.

The ethnographic work presented in next chapters will provide further evidences on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mobility of both *borderlanders* and transit people and on the functioning of the state border.

5.6. Conclusion

This Chapter has illustrated in depth the case study selected for the ethnographic investigation, the Upper Susa Valley. Delving into its history as “land of borders” and “land of transit”, it has exposed the continuity factors with the present, marked by solid economic and social cross-border relations with the French border areas, grass-rooted environmental struggles, as well as its inclusion in international transit migration routes. “Secondary movements” crossing the *borderland* since 2017 determined the militarization of the border area, its transformation into a deadly landscape for transit migrants, as well as the rise of a heterogeneous public/private, formal and informal solidarity scenario which set out to support migrants humanitarially and/or politically on their journey across the Europe of borders.

As exposed by ethnographic contributions, this scenario has deeply impacted on the daily life of the Upper Susa Valley *borderlanders*. For example, Laszczkowski (2018a, 2018b) accounted for the positioning of local administrators and local dwellers facing transit migrations and the first solidarity initiatives that followed, highlighting their different positioning and internal divisions. Tazzioli (2020a) offered instead an insight of the impact of migrants’ transit on local actors’ concerns, reflecting around the topic of its visibility and invisibility. Finally, Bachellerie (2020) illustrated the tourist infrastructure workers’ involvement in detecting migrants in transit in the surrounding mountains, as well as incidents where villagers in the Briançonnaise valley alerted the Gendarmerie to the presence of migrants.

As claimed in the introduction to Chapter 4, none of these contributions specifically addressed the topic of *border experience* in the Upper Susa Valley. This dissertation aims to fill this gap, embracing the subject of the study from an ethnographic perspective. The process of militarization to which it has been subjected, the material and moral concerns that this has entailed, the diversity of the actors involved in bringing solidarity to people in transit, being the stage for a humanitarian experiment unique in Italy - all this made the Upper Susa Valley an extremely significant case of study to be considered when aiming to unravel *border experience* in times of European internal *re-bordering*.

Chapter 6

Re-bordering practices and hindered mobilities in the Upper Susa Valley

While the first part of this thesis has been devoted to the theoretical and methodological dimensions, the following chapters are dedicated to the ethnographic analysis, and thus present the empirical findings of the dissertation. In this regard, based on the *bordering* approach strand within Border Studies, the aim of this Chapter is to explore the processes of *(re)bordering* that have involved the Upper Susa Valley since 2017 as a containment strategy against “secondary movements”.

As debated earlier in the thesis, particularly in Chapter 5, since 2011 “secondary movements” have involved the Italian-French border at its easier land section to be crossed, the Ventimiglia-Menton gate. Following its militarization, the transit partially re-routed to the other few border gates offered by the Alpine landscape characterizing the 515 km of Italian-French state border. Likewise, the Upper Susa Valley started to be crossed by “secondary movements” towards France, as it counts on its territory the international Fréjus tunnel and the easiest Alpine pass to cross by feet, Montgenèvre. Finally, the solid but inexpensive public transport infrastructure that links the Turin and the mentioned Alpine passes, have been another determining factor. In the time frame 2017-2018, the most used transit route across the Upper Susa Valley was the Turin - Oulx - Claviere – Briançon, across the Montgenèvre, after the Turin - Bardonecchia - *Col d’Echelle*/Fréjus tunnel was mostly abandoned. In the absence of an official database, the magnitude of “secondary movements” across the Upper Susa Valley have been provided by non-state actors forming part of its solidarity scenario, especially the NGO MEDici per i Diritti Umani¹⁴¹. Their data collection based on informal records of presences reported daily in accommodation centres. According to these sources, from 2017 to August 2020 around 10,000 transit people approached Oulx, mainly of sub-Saharan origin and especially from Guinea Conakry, Gambia, Mali and Senegal (MEDU, 2020). After a stop due to COVID-19 and the mobility restrictions worldwide, the transit strongly resumed in the second half of 2020 (MEDU, 2021). In the same timeframe, transit migrants from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, became predominant. Finally, in 2021, when fieldwork for this thesis was conducted, 15.000 presences were reported in Oulx, with a peak of 1600 in October (MEDU, 2022). Based on this scenario, this Chapter presents the results of the ethnography of the *re-bordering* unravelling in the Alpine Italian-French border, as well as of transit mobilities as coping strategies in the Upper Susa Valley.

¹⁴¹ See section 5.3.4.

It starts by accounting the day by day work of those state actors contributing to the production and reproduction of the border, within a containment strategy of *irregularized* crossing by asylum seekers across the Alps. Grounded on the empirical data collected, it analyses *bordering* practices that take place *at* and *beyond* the political border. Through this, it illustrates *how*, *when* and *where* the *re-bordering* process has been materially performed in the Upper Susa Valley, as well as *who* performs it. Beside this analytical dimension, the aim is to shed light on different state interests and agents' role at stake at the Alpine Italian-French border, in a policy context of "new normality" as far as the unilateral implementation of the internal European *re-bordering* process is concerned, as discussed in Chapter 2 "Ethnographies of a re-bordered Europe".

Further on, the Chapter introduces the ethnographic results on the mobility strategies that transit migrants implement in the Upper Susa Valley in order to overcome the *re-bordering* practices at and beyond the borderline. The aim is to shed light on the extent to which the structure/agency dimension of the "transit migration" is embodied in the Upper Susa Valley, as well as to investigate the factors that hinder mobility in the *borderland*, highlighting the nature of "transit migration" as coping strategy.

6.1. Embodying *re-bordering* practices in the Upper Susa Valley

This part addresses the everyday reality of *re-bordering* practices as they unravelled in the Upper Susa Valley, embodied in the daily work of border agents and further law enforcement agents in general. In particular, it illustrates the everyday activities of the Italian and the French police in terms of containment of "secondary movements" in the Upper Susa Valley.

On the one hand, it documents the "human chase" (Bachelierie, 2020) against transit migrants carried out by the *Police Aux Frontières* and other police corps in the Montgenèvre area¹⁴². On the other hand, it recounts the low-profile activities implemented in the *borderland* by Italian police bodies¹⁴³.

¹⁴² Please refer to section 5.4.2.

¹⁴³ I investigated the daily activities of *Carabinieri* as well as *Polizia di Stato* (state police) and *Polizia di Frontiera* (border police). *Carabinieri* represent an Italian armed force and depend from the Ministry of the Interiors. They carry out activities for the protection of public order and safety, from territorial control to public order services. In the Upper Susa Valley, the *Carabinieri*'s station is in Oulx, right at the side of the train and bus station. The *Polizia di Stato* (state police) is instead a civil corps and belongs to one of the Italian police forces directly under the Department of Public Security, which in turn is a branch of the Ministry of the Interior of the Italian Republic. It is militarily organised for the protection of the state and citizens from crime and disturbance of public order. The *Questura* represents the head office of the state police on the territory of the province (an administrative entity formally suppressed in 2014 but still existing as second level entity). The peripheral representation of *Questura* is the *Commissariato* (police station). In the Upper Susa Valley, the *Polizia di Stato* station is in Bardonecchia, again right in front of the train station. Finally, in 2019 a *Polizia di Frontiera* (border police) station has been established in the same building in Bardonecchia. This specific sector of the state police is in charge of carrying out monitoring activities at borders, airports and ports, as well as ensuring their safety.

Sources: <https://www.carabinieri.it/arma/oggi/organizzazione/organizzazione-territoriale#:~:text=Oltre%20ad%20assicurare%2C%20al%20pari,autonome%20attivit%C3%A0%20di%20polizia%20>

Based on this findings, it accounts for the *who*, *when*, *where* and *how* dimensions of the *re-bordering* process in the Upper Susa Valley. Through these, I reveal the extent to which the Italian and the French police's daily activities at the border show different state interests in terms of border surveillance and containment of "secondary movements". Finally, I take on board reflections regarding the room left to subjectivity as far as the embodiment of state power is concerned in the border zone.

6.1.1. Border marks of different national interests at stake

During an in-depth interview, a statement by Giulia, the coordinator of a support initiative for transit migrants in the *borderland*, caught my attention:

There are different interests (smiling), [...] the Italian police are interested that they pass, what do they care? the French police are interested that they don't get in, so...¹⁴⁴

She referred to the different attitude of the Italian and the French police towards transit migrants in the Upper Susa Valley. In the course of other interviews and conducting my fieldwork I would realise what she meant.

A first key to understand different state interests embodied in *bordering* practices at the Alpine Italian-French border, is the same border area landscape and configuration. The ethnography exposed that substantial differences distinguished the Italian and French management of Alpine border patrolling. The French local border management implied the enhancement of the police post facilities, while the Italian one was removed.

Gianna has lived in the Upper Susa Valley all her life, and is a keen observer of border dynamics. She explained that, right after the signature of the Schengen agreement, the Italian police post facility in Claviere was removed and "now there's no more Italian law enforcement, so there's no more *Guardia di Finanza* there, or the *Carabinieri*."¹⁴⁵ On the contrary, the presence of French police facilities and staff at the border is highly effective.

It is reinforced there, at Montgenèvre, at the PAF. So at the PAF, now, if before you passed by and they almost didn't look at you, [...] there was no one in the cage, they were in the building [...] now they don't. It started [...] with the migrants, because since the thing happened, they practically stopped, that is, you were stopped, they looked at you,

giudiziaria; <https://www.poliziadistato.it/articolo/i-commissariati>;
https://torino.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/12/18/news/a_bardonecchia_un_ufficio_di_frontiera_per_gestire_i_lpassaggio_dei_migranti-243779939/; <https://www.poliziadistato.it/articolo/la-polizia-di-frontiera-1>

¹⁴⁴ NS_FE_ZI_20210315

¹⁴⁵ SV_PE_ZI_20210411

they looked at you if you had a vehicle with tinted windows, or with a box behind, a closed part at the back, they made you open up, etc...¹⁴⁶

Different *bordering* practices also impacted on the border area landscape. The area in front of the French police station, in which Italian offices are also located, is organized to handle differently the passage of cars from Italy to France and vice versa. Cars arriving from Italy are obliged to slow down because the carriageway is partially diverted, due to the presence of a small structure from which French officers carry out a visual surveillance of the vehicles. These are not forced to stop under normal circumstances, just obliged to slow down. On the contrary, vehicles coming from France do not find any obstacles or deviations in front of them as they pass through the same point.

A different approach to border patrolling is also deductible by the practices of *sconfinamenti* (trespassings) operated by French police in the Italian territory, in the first phases of the return of identity border checks. Participants witnessed that the PAF used to drop off unadmitted transit migrants in the Italian territory, 50 meters from the borderline or even directly at the train station of Oulx, hoping that they would take the train back to Turin instead of try again to cross the border. This episode was brought to the attention of the *Prefettura*¹⁴⁷ and the Ministry of the Interior, who contributed to develop different and less invasive push-back practices. To this regard, a crucial episode concerned the irruption of French police in the *Spazio Calmo* of Bardonecchia. In that occasion, the French police irrupted into the area used by local Italian authorities to assist migrants in transit, creating a diplomatic incident that had a significant media echo¹⁴⁸.

6.1.2. The French police in action

In accordance with what has just been discussed, empirical findings uncovered that the French police operation at the border was characterised by a higher staffing level and stricter border control practices. In terms of *bordering* approach, this relates to the *how* and *where* dimensions of *bordering* practices implemented at the borderline by the PAF, supported by the Gendarmerie and other police corps.

Luigi, a participant with a leading role within the Italian institutional humanitarian mechanism, interacted with the French law enforcement agents at a daily basis. He provided the most significant set of information regarding the *bordering* mechanism put in place by the French police, in terms of

¹⁴⁶ SV_PE_ZI_20210411

¹⁴⁷ The *Prefettura* administers the state power at the territorial level. It represents the peripheral organ of the Ministry of Interiors, and is responsible for the public order and security. As far as the case study is concerned, the territorially competent *Prefettura* is in Turin.

¹⁴⁸ See section 5.5.2. for more details.

containment practices of “secondary movements”¹⁴⁹. Many of his statements on the French organization of border checks at the Fréjus tunnel and at the Montgenèvre pass roughly reproduced the information contained in NGOs’ reports on the topic. He confirmed that the Italian police implements light controls, while the French one is deeply involved in border patrolling. On the one hand, this targets buses and trains passing through the Fréjus tunnel. On this regard, the French police operates on the Italian territory, in the area facing the tunnel entrance itself according to a cooperation agreement. The place where the borderline is, implies that push-backs happen in safe conditions.

On the other hand, Luigi witnessed that during patrolling activities in the forest paths of the Montgenèvre pass, French police push back migrants intercepted up to kilometres from the French border line, but in the *refoulement* paper they report that the readmission is made at the Claviere border gate. In this way, the French police always state that the entry into France took place at that exact point, i.e. as if the migrant had entered on foot through the customs gate, from the road.

Luigi’s point was that the French do execute a very active control of the border, which goes beyond the road crossing. They make use of helicopters and snowmobiles to increase their potential of intercepting people in the wood and in the snow. As well, they are equipped with advanced technological devices to track human movements, such as heath detectors installed in key point of the most used paths¹⁵⁰.

A further critical aspect revealed by the observation of *bordering* practices put in place by the French police in the aim to contain irregular crossings is the importance of the border zone conformation. The village of Claviere lies on the bottom of a valley pertaining to the Italian territory, but immediately surrounded by mountains belonging to France. The borderline forms a U inside the French territory. Looking towards Montegevre, at the left side it is marked by a small river, that flows right behind the last Claviere buildings. On the right, it runs a few dozens of meters up the mountain. Ahead, it lies right after the village’s end. The borderline is largely unmarked. Boundary stones have been placed, one on for each side of the village. At the street level, there is an only border sign which has been placed already within the French territory.

What makes the border visible in the Montgenèvre area, is the presence of French border guards. They stand in front of the police building, behind which there are two anonymous white containers that serves as *extra legem* “protection centers” for migrants waiting to be taken in charge by Italian police (Anafè 2022). Alternatively, they are placed on the walking paths. On this second case, the PAF has settled two observation points halfway up to the hill, on both sides of the village, from where

¹⁴⁹ NS_BM_ZI_20210317

¹⁵⁰ Field diary: June 25, 2021.

they can monitor what happens in the Italian village, taking advantage of the U shape of the borderline:

From the church [of Claviere] you can see the space halfway up the hill, where the chairlift is, where at night the PAF lurks with binoculars to get an idea of who is coming down. The bus unloads right there in front.

(Field diary: June 25, 2021)

The PAF locations was chosen for their capability of offering a large view on the obliged transit passages used by migrants to walk out the bottleneck of the Claviere valley. They served to monitor the migrants' use of the local bus service to approach the border, and to alert the other PAF teams in the area. The following vignette describes this scenario and is based on field diary notes gathered from observations carried out in the Claviere valley on the October 22, 2021.

It is a cold October afternoon. Low clouds hide the peaks of the mountains around Claviere, and soon it will be dark. Challenging the bad weather conditions, P., M. and me decided to reach the border zone to observe the PAF patrolling in the mountains around Claviere. We hiked a bit on the right side of the valley, called *Montquittaine*, and now we have a good visual on the bus stop and the and the slopes on the left side, behind the church, where French officers in their black uniforms are usually stationed. This afternoon does not represent an exception. Two, or maybe more, police agents are positioned in the same point as usual, with a same good view on the bus stop.



Figure 3. Observation point n.1 above Claviere. (Fieldwork diary: October 22, 2021)

From our position, we decide to walk a little on the path and go check the situation on the other observation point, that at Hotel du Soleil. Here too, some officers are positioned to visually intercept migrants who decide to take the paths on the right side of the valley to reach Montgenèvre, avoiding the main road. Compared to the other observation point, the team is larger and there are also some vehicles.



Figure 4. Point of observation n.2, above Claviere. (Fieldwork diary: October 22, 2021)

We go back to our first location, that above the bus stop. We know that a bus should arrive soon, maybe with some migrants on board. A bit late, a small bus approaches the stop and gets four people off. We recognise them by their clothes, they were at the Massi shelter this morning. We immediately lose sight of them, as the area is full of houses and trees. We decide to wait a bit more, and in the meantime we check the police team on the slope behind the church to grasp any alarm given, any sign that they saw the four people. Suddenly, we see the migrants walking along a treeless area of the slope manned by the team. We are surprised, their direction points to the Italian side, not the borderline. We understand the reason as we see the team on the observation point n.1 and an additional team converging on their position. They are actually escaping, trying to hide in the forest. Police teams move on the slope, inside and outside groups of trees, from our perspective it looks like a videogame.

We cannot see the four guys anymore, but from the position of the police teams, we understand that they are closed in the area drawn by the boundary line, which is marked by a small river, the half slope and the mountain top.

Clouds are descending from the peaks, and with the fog it is difficult to orientate in the mountains. We decide to head for the car, knowing that the four guys know the emergency number and will call for help if succeed to escape the police but get lost. On our way back, we observe traces of the passage of migrants in the *Montquitaire* area: clotes, rubbish, documents.



Figure 5. Traces of passages in the area of *Montquitaire*. (Fieldwork diary: October 22, 2021)

We leave behind us a landscape now covered in fog.



Figure 6. The fog hides the mountains surrounding Claviere. (Fieldwork diary: October 22, 2021)

The episode revealed in a vivid manner how the border patrolling is organized: the team on the observation points alerts those on the area, who start the “human chase”, as described by Bachellerie (2020), in order to intercept migrants and bring them to the police building for the push-back formalities. This mechanism work for the whole area included in the 20 kilometres from the borderline, within the French territory.

6.1.3. The Italian police in action

According to the empirical information gathered, the presence, attitude and tasks of Italian law enforcement corps and agents at the borderline and in the *borderland* deeply differed from the French police's. While at the borderline they performed merely complementary tasks in push-back operations, diffused *bordering* practices carried out by a variety of *bordering* agents were observed. Different corps had different tasks in the *borderland*. On the one hand, in the complementary push-back management at the borderline worked almost exclusively the *Polizia di Frontiera*, that occupied some space in the PAF building in Montgenèvre. There, Italian police usually *checked* on the refused migrants' identity through the national and European database, before asking for the support of the Red Cross for the transportation to the refuge in Oulx. In only one occasion I reported on the field diary of a registration compatible with those operated within the EURODAC system:

Yesterday a group of 5 migrants (of mixed nationality) were registered (5 finger and palm prints, photo) by the Italian police when they were turned back at Montgenèvre. G. confirms that this is a novelty; usually they only took a finger to check that the person had no legal charges in Italy.

(Field diary: July 14, 2021)

The *Polizia di Frontiera* was also observed in implementing the task of bringing pushed-back migrants back to the Massi shelter in the event of the unavailability of a vehicle of the Red Cross. Their role was related to the logistics of push-backs operated by the French police in a border zone characterized by an Alpine militarized environment, putting at risk human safety of transit migrants. The risk of push-backs let migrants take the most hidden, and then dangerous paths to try not to be intercepted by the French police. This put their safety at serious risk. In this regard, Luigi reported a significant episode concerning the crossing dangers to which transit migrants were exposed in that border area:

On January 16, exactly two months ago, there was a group of 7 migrants, who also followed a trace of this app, climbed up a very very high peak, *Col Sorel*, above Claviere,

2400 meters, starting in the daytime [...] and then darkness arrived, so they were in trouble because they realized [...] by [...] 9 p.m. [that] they had only made it to the pass, they still had to do as much walking to get down the other side, in the dark, and so basically 3 of them went down to a refuge on the Italian side asking for help, and saying precisely that the other 4 were still missing. So the search started [...] two were found in good condition, instead two had, you know, a serious hypothermic condition. [...] Both were hospitalized at the CTO [*Centro Traumatologico Ortopedico*, orthopaedic trauma centre] in Turin for some months, and unfortunately one they had to amputate four phalanges.¹⁵¹

Claudio, an activist and volunteer, explained his experience as observer of French push-backs in these terms, highlighting their relation between the Alpine landscape and the dangers for human safety.

So imagine, the average people would arrive, in the afternoon, they would take the bus at 7:30 p.m. from Oulx, they would make it those 40 minutes to Claviere, they would get off in Claviere at 8:15 in the evening, that means, in December, -10 degrees. And they would start their march on foot. Maybe not all of them, not right away, staggered, eh. At some point the police would get them, hold them a couple of hours, it would be 11 o'clock, midnight, at which point they would say, "Okay, we're going to hand you the *refus d'entrée*, whether you're an unaccompanied minor, whether you're an adult, we don't give a damn, get out of the box, go." Occasionally, they would drive him to the village, but they couldn't actually come there because it meant going to Italy, so. Most of the time they would kick them in the butt and throw them out of customs, and that was done.... Then always they were in groups... You would do your 800 meters, one kilometre back to the village, but in the village, in Claviere, in the winter, with the hotels... who the fuck opens? [...] It's one matter, you know, if you have 5. It's another matter if you have 40, every night. And if those 40 pass, fine. But if those 40 get rejected? You end up in Claviere, you know.¹⁵²

Building on the observations by Del Biaggio (2020) on the oplopoiesis of the Western Alps, the ethnography exposed a context in which *bordering* practices implemented by the French police transformed the mountain environment in a potentially deadly place, not only because of the "human hunt" that they carry out on a daily basis against transit migrants, but also due to the logistics of push-backs they adopted. Empirical data showed that Italian border police's practices actively addressed

¹⁵¹ NS_BM_ZI_20210317

¹⁵² SV_RD_ZI_20210421

this dimension, removing migrants from the border zone and taking them to the institutional welcoming place in Oulx.

The *Polizia di Stato* was instead observed in random monitoring activities at the bus stop in Oulx. In some occasions, they have been observed implementing some kind of control on people in transit. Sometimes they took photos of boarding operations:

In the [bus] square, for the first time there is a police car, taking photos, and a *Carabinieri* car also passes by.

(Field diary: June 27, 2021)

J., who had passed [at the bus station], later tells me that [...] when I was talking to the driver, the plainclothes officer photographed the bus from the front, very close to the glass.

(Field diary: October 24, 2021)

In some other occasions they interacted with migrants, but without any effect.

On Friday, the person who accompanies the people in transit to the 7:45 p.m. bus reports that the police discourage them from taking the bus, but still make them leave. C had also described similar behaviour in the past: police not checking documents, but telling the people in transit not to leave, because it is cold up there, and they will be stopped anyway [by French police]. At that juncture, the people in transit had left anyway after talking to [...].

I was having a beer at the station bar, which has now become an important observation point. At 7:40 p.m. the police arrive. Most of the migrants have already gone up, some arrive at that moment and stop to wait. The Red Cross is also present. The police get on the bus and apparently count the people. From the time it stays in the bus, I would say he does not check the documents. It gets off, and the person in charge exclaims: “Man, 40 people without papers!” Nevertheless, he lets the last group get on and pays the fare. Then they walk away.

(Field diary: September 29, 2021)

In the afternoon, the Red Cross and the Police bring back together 18 rejections, most of the families who had left the night before. The person in charge, again the same brunette from a few evenings before, gives a speech: she brings them back down [to Oulx] because they are people, but we must advise them to go back to Turin and present themselves at

the *Questura* [the Police head office] for the asylum request. She cannot communicate with the people in transit because of language barriers, she asks the volunteer of the Red Cross to do so. He asks us. We take advantage of the Police's departure to speak with the people in transit about what just happened, [and we translate them the policewoman's speech. A boy there with his family smiles. He is on his way to Germany, where the rest of his family is. He was fingerprinted in Slovenia and hopes to arrive and be able to appeal. His group has been rejected three times.

(Field diary: October 2, 2021)

[At the bus station] There is also a police patrol, with a uniformed officer in the middle and a plainclothes one outside, who talks to the driver at times, then admonishes the people in transit not to push, has a word with me after asking who I am [...] Not far away, a taxi is loading a family, under their nose.

(Field diary: October 24, 2021)



Figure 7. A taxi takes in transit migrants, in the presence of Italian police officers (off-screen). (Fieldwork diary: October 24, 2021)

The police also arrive [at the bus station] and do a document check. It goes first to some African boys, who show them something. Then to an Afghan family. P. and I are talking to a group of people, in a circle, in front of the shelter. Some Afghan adults, a couple of

them, join the group and wink at us: they mingle with us so as not to be checked, although in fact the check is without consequences for everyone.

(Field diary: October 22, 2021)

In other occasions, their monitoring activities on transit migrants took place into the train station in Oulx or on board of trains of the line Turin-Bardonecchia, again with no repercussions on their journeys.

Today G. reports of police checks at Oulx station, without consequences: “Good morning! This morning I was at the station with a group of young Iranian men and I saw the police of Bardonecchia carrying out document checks on all the migrants present at the station... there were no consequences: they just checked that they had no documents and ordered them to regularise their position, or leave the country, but it is a worrying sign. I had never seen the Italian police checking documents in Oulx”.

(Field diary: July 19, 2021)

The police did not carry out any more checks at the bus yard, but T. told me that he had witnessed document checks on the Turin - Bardonecchia train, checks directed only at migrants and without any consequences. T. heard the officer say “Who understands anything about these documents”.

(Field diary: September 1, 2021)

As we can see by the revealing field notes, Italian agents’ control practices on migrants in transit to the border with France showed did not represent an obstacle to their mobility, despite the fact that it is a preliminary step to an irregular border crossing. They merely discouraged migrants from approaching the borderline in some occasions.

The few episodes in which the *Polizia di Stato* hindered migrant transit strategies, are also revealing. This happened directly, with the Police preventing them from taking the bus, as well as indirectly, when the mere presence of the Police at the bus station or near the bus, performing some kind of control activity, made the migrants choose to leave the bus yard:

In the morning, the police prevented the migrants from boarding the 8:55 a.m. bus, checking their documents and leaving those who did not have them in order on the ground. According to the lawyers, this is not illegal; in Ventimiglia they do it in mixed teams with the French. However, it certainly represents a novelty.

(Field diary: July 23, 2021)

The bus is late, another guy arrives. Through another who translates, he explains to me that he has just returned from Bardonecchia, where the police took him. He tells me that the police that morning prevented access to the 8:55 a.m. bus. After arguing with some North Africans, he sent everyone to take the train to Milan and Turin.

(Field diary: August 3, 2021)

We go with six people in transit to the 7:45 p.m. bus. The tourists start to get on, a Police patrol arrives. They park behind the bus, get out, talk to the driver and his assistant. The tourists get on, the policewoman also gets on, and stops inside for a few seconds. We, motionless, discuss what to do. It was me, F. and some scouts in a circle, behind us the migrants in groups of 3, the Africans and the Asians. The police look at us, they look at the people in transit, they look at us, we look at the police. In the space of time it takes for the migrants to get on the bus, they “hide” behind the bus to Sauze d’Oulx. We stall, and finally, at 7:44 p.m., we decide to retreat. Everyone waited for the others to move. No one made a move. We returned to the shelter, the patrol followed us, glanced down the driveway, and pulled straight ahead.

(Field diary: August 11, 2021)

The station forecourt starts to get crowded, a police squad car arrives too. G. and I rush out of the bar, catch up with the Red Cross, the volunteer on duty, and 5 people [in transit]: a couple and the dad with daughters from the day before. The little girl recognises me, hugs me, and gives me a piece of her Kinder egg. And the surprise too. We explain to them that they don't have to worry, that if they check their documents they can stay in the shelter and leave the next day. The bus starts to load, the two Police officers call out in Italian: “Prepare your documents!” and start checking ID cards. There are also two or three tourists who show their documents. Our people decide to go back. G. and I remain in the forecourt to observe the Police's practices with the other passengers. Then, the police take the car back.

(Field diary: September 15, 2021)

Empirical data showed the *Polizia di Frontiera* and the *Polizia di Stato* implemented low-profile and random *bordering* practices during the fieldwork period. These were unsystematic and of low impact, especially when compared to those implemented by the French Border Police on the other side of the border. Thus, even broadening the spectrum of investigation in a territorial sense, encompassing not

only the border line but the *borderland* in general, the two national police had very different attitudes towards migrants in transit.

The distance between Italian and French law enforcement corps was even broader when considering the activities implemented by *Carabinieri*. Differently from the *Polizia di Stato*, *Carabinieri* were reported to be devoted to more general territorial monitoring activities. This was confirmed by an internal source¹⁵³, who claimed that *Carabinieri* simply monitored the phenomenon on the ground. They intervened in case of crimes, as well as they provided assistance to people in transit and informal help, especially in the first winter 17/18. As well, they indicated services and bus times or they sent people in transit to the shelter, or accompanied them there. This was confirmed by the words of Vittorio, a local authority's representative:

When [the route] opened, so we're talking about mid-2017, I must say that I found, as [qualification], an enormous contribution and support from the *Carabinieri*, who never intervened in an investigative, accusatory spirit, but tried to assist, as if it were Caritas, these people. In the sense that at the beginning we found them sleeping in the station subway, inside the bins, because then here, you know very well the temperatures in the mountains, here you risk even minus 15, don't you? Serenely. [...] But the *Carabinieri* of Oulx never asked for the documents, eh. Theirs is a great humanitarian operation, I mean, a great collaboration. We've never asked for the documents, and there's never any interest...¹⁵⁴

As uncovered by empirical observations, Italian and France authorities unravelled at the borderline and the surrounding areas deeply different operational patrolling modalities. On the one hand, the PAF implemented tight, diffuse, technological and organized controls around the border line, taking advantage of its physical conformation, and in the area extending 20 kilometres beyond it. Due to the type of territorial organisation adopted, their containment strategy was reminiscent of a hunt, the "human chase" illustrated by Bachellerie (2020). On the other hand, Italian law enforcement agents interfered as little as possible with migrants' mobility practices, aiming rather at securing them.

¹⁵³ SR_C_IC_20210831

¹⁵⁴ SR_DP_ZI_20210501

6.1.4. Embodying state power: the subjectivity dimension

A further critical aspect revealed by the fieldwork concerns a peculiar feature drawing a line of continuity between the diverging practices of the two police forces: subjectivity. In the field diary I included some notes regarding an Italian policeman working in the *borderland*:

There is one policeman in particular, [...], who has a rigid and hostile attitude. He asks, in plain clothes, for the documents of the volunteers, refuses to show his badge, photographs the migrants and then heads for France (to take photos to the PAF?). He also insinuated to the volunteers that “already being on that [bus yard] square is aiding and abetting”. He is only present at weekends, perhaps operating in this off-duty manner. [He] is also the one who, on one occasion, broke into the *rifugio*’ dormitory, in plain clothes. The incident was not repeated.

(Field diary: July 25, 2021)

The mentioned episode is referred to an anecdote told in the volunteers’ circle: one day this agent, in plain clothes, entered without apparent justification the dormitory room of the Massi refuge in Oulx, where some thirty people were housed in that moment. There he gave a high-flown speech to the migrants present, in Italian and therefore misunderstood, in which he explained to them the futility of their being there at that moment and their future attempts to cross the border, the latter being militarized. Clearly, the speech was without consequences, as no migrant understood a word the officer said. Nevertheless, it highlighted the presence of personalities within the Italian police force who, although quite exceptionally, acted in a manner completely at variance with the observed low-impact practices.

The extraordinariness of this episode and its being clearly the result of a personal initiative is supported by the observations of Giulia, who stated:

Okay, [the Massi is] a safe space (resolute) [...] But these impromptu “I’m going in now, I’m going to look, in the room” requests were more episodes of hotheads (pause) Than that is, of individuals who wanted to be superheroes than something that happened many times. And when it happened there was an immediate (pause) Let’s say, we immediately referred, maybe to the superior, and it was -- it stopped there.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ NS_FE_ZI_20210315

As well, the subjective level is even more relevant when compared to the normality of relations between law enforcement agencies and the Massi shelter, who had been organized as a “safe zone” for migrants.

The shelter has an “unwritten boundary”, so [the person in charge] agreed with the Police that the migrants’ trust in the shelter must remain intact, because especially in winter this implies their survival.

(Field diary: July 25, 2021)

Finally, some participants reported also of the individual material support offered by members of *Carabinieri* to the shelter:

I remember him telling me that [...], a *Carabiniere*, used to bring clothes to the shelter on the sly from his wife.

He advised me to talk to [...] Who the other day [...] intervened at the shelter for the incident of theft of money and cell phone, and once he was alone with P, he took out 15€ from his own pocket.

(Field diary: June 16, 2021)

As far as the subjectivity level in the daily work of law enforcement agents is concerned, as we see on the Italian side it was mainly revealed in their relationship with the Massi shelter. On the French side, this had instead to do with the ontology of the border.

In general, the permeability of the Alpine Italian-French border to transit migrants was demonstrated by the existence of an invisible line connecting the Massi shelter in Oulx and *Les Terrasses Solidaires* in Briançon. This stemmed from the incessant walking of thousands of migrants who, despite the militarization of the border, cross the border every day and night since 2017. Nevertheless, the border patrolling mechanism illustrated above suggested that it was organized to spot almost every individual approaching the border by bus and moving forward to the French territory across the funnel represented by the valley in which Claviere is located. On the factors that determine the success or fail of crossing efforts plays a key role the subjectivity of police agents.

P. tells me about the Gendarmerie’s actions vary depending on the following variables: on who is on the team, who arbitrarily decides whether to let people through or not (this on calm days); on decisions from above, who order more or less rigidity (this on complicated days, such as these); on other factors, such as dinner time or the broadcast of a football match.

(Field diary: October 26, 2021)

Claudio, a very active participant in supporting people in transit in the Upper Susa Valley, explained that this is expression of a precise strategy:

And so fortunately people keep coming through. Also because the day the French police decide to really close them down, we're in deep shit. In the sense that, in 3 days, here you have 200 people, "But where the fuck do I put them?" [...] That's why I think the French police know very well what they're doing. (lowers voice) Every now and then they let them through. [...] More than anything else, I don't think it's in anyone's interest right now to have a nice cap of 200 people... they did this crap at Ventimiglia, because they had too many at Ventimiglia, and the French didn't want to let too many pass through there.¹⁵⁶

As we can see, the *bordering* practices put in place by the French government to contain "secondary movements" turn out to look more like a "scenography of the border", as they could block everyone, but they choose not to do it.

The ethnographic analysis of the *bordering* practices put in place by Italian and French law enforcement agents, as well as of the border area landscape, revealed meaningful differences in the ways in which the approach to "secondary movements" is conducted, and the logic behind it.

French authorities unravelled a broad militarization of the territory, which suggested that "secondary movements" should be treated from a security risk containment perspective. However, the observation of the impact of the subjective level in the implementation of border practices showed that the underlying rationale is not to stop the flow of migration, but to hinder it, to underline the irregularity and dangerousness of "secondary movements", and the political need to defend against them.

Instead, the Italian authorities deployed a model of control that on the one hand recognized the dangerousness of the *re-bordering* process for human security, and on the other hand chose to limit itself to not really hindering the exit of migrants in transit from the national territory.

As suggested by Giulia in the quote at the very beginning of this section, this uncovered opposing interests on the same migratory flow. On the one hand, the French one seems to be that of exercising its sovereignty according to a categorization of "secondary movements" as dangerous for its own security, and to *show* that it is making the necessary efforts to contain them. The Italian one, on the other hand, seems to be that of containing the *visibility* of the phenomenon and its management, so as not to shed light on the exit of migrants in transit from the territory.

¹⁵⁶ SV_RD_ZI_20210421

This divarication of *bordering* practices and state interests contributes to the exploration of the paradigm of "resurgent intergovernmentalism" discussed in Chapter 2. The ethnographic analysis of police officers' practices helped to understand of how unilateralism in the management of the internal European borders affects their day-to-day functioning in terms of containing "transit migration". Further elements in this regard will be provided in Chapter 7 "Geographies of humanitarian borderwork in the Upper Susa Valley".

6.2. Embodying transit strategies across the Upper Susa Valley

The second part of this Chapter illustrates how transit strategies have been implemented by migrants in transit at the local level, in order to reach the borderline and cross it unnoticed.

In this regard, ethnography uncovers how migrants' mobility results from a structure/agency framework. This refers to the nature of transit migrations as coping strategies, stemming from the interplay between migrants' plans and adaptability, and structural obstacles hindering their mobility¹⁵⁷.

In particular, this part of the analysis relates at the micro-level the *re-bordering* process, the local mobility infrastructure network and the COVID-19, with relevant mobility strategies put in place by migrants.

6.2.1. 2018-2021: adapting crossing strategies to a militarized Alpine environment

As explained and detailed throughout the thesis, and especially in part 5 of Chapter 5 illustrating the case study, the 2018-2020 period was characterized by the consolidation of the route Turin – Oulx – Claviere – Briançon via Montgenèvre.

The shift from the *Col d'Echelle* route was determined, among other factors, by its dangerousness:

It is a winding road with a scree like those in the Dolomites to understand, in 4 kilometres it does 400 meters of elevation gain, so it is also quite steep, which in winter becomes quite dangerous in the sense that it avalanches. And that's why they keep it closed. On the French side it is gentler. As well, it's a much longer route than what they do now [the Oulx-Claviere-Briançon], because from Bardonecchia it was 2 or 3 kilometres more or less false flat, then 4 kilometres straight, two kilometres of plateau, two more to go down on another little village in France, and then a long valley to Briançon but it's another 10

¹⁵⁷ This is detailed in Chapter 3, and in particular in sections 3.2.2. and 3.2.3.

kilometres. So they would work their asses off, and then get 3 kilometres from Briançon, on the highway, and then get caught. So this route we were the first ones to discourage it, also because here one ends up-there was a lot of snow that winter, “Here one ends up going under an avalanche.” ¹⁵⁸

Research findings revealed that the change was not publically encouraged by state or non-state actors, while it mainly resulted from migrants’ agency. They got to know about the border-crossing options, as well as the presence of formal and informal welcoming facilities and their addresses, though one only channel: the word of mouth:

We tried a little bit to figure out how information was being passed, there is definitely a network so they know that they have to come to Claviere or [...] to Bardonecchia and how to cross, so [...] it was known that it was easier to cross from Claviere, a little bit because of the shift of the route, a little bit because there was this possibility [...] as you say... the Salesians who were in Oulx to have this space... ¹⁵⁹

Well then, the kids or families come mostly in the evening, around 6:30 p.m., by train, they have channels on Whatsapp or Telegram or I don't know what, they already know where to go, they already know about this shelter, so they come, that's it. ¹⁶⁰

Moreover, while the *Col d'Echelle* route had been chosen by the first transit migrants as easily accessible by Turin¹⁶¹, the route Oulx – Claviere - Montgenèvre resulted to be more complex in terms of local infrastructure network. Most people in transit were taking advantage of the bus service provided by a French company Resalp, that covered the route Oulx-Briançon as a complementary service of the TGV, the French high-speed train who has a stop in Oulx¹⁶². Transit migrants used to take the last bus, at 7:45 p.m., in order to reach Claviere in 30 minutes and then try to cross the mountains with a greater chance of not being intercepted due to the dark.

Once the bus approached Claviere, the last Italian village before the border, migrants used to get off in order to avoid police controls at the road check-point situated 2 kilometres ahead, and proceeded on foot. As the borderline is located a hundred meters from the bus stop, “[transit migrant] in French territory always enter, that is, [they] enter 100%, then [they might be] detected as [they] go, however

¹⁵⁸ SV_RD_ZI_20210421

¹⁵⁹ NS_FE_ZI_20210315

¹⁶⁰ SV_TF_ZI_20210331

¹⁶¹ Please refer to section 5.3.3.

¹⁶² Due to the city of Briançon being badly served by the French train infrastructure, for a dweller living in that city was far more convenient in terms of time to reach Oulx and take the TGV there for the journeys to/from Paris or Lyon. For this reason, a shuttle service between Briançon and Oulx had been established to coincide with the arrival at the Italian station of TGV trains on the Turin-Lyon line, five times a day.

[they] enter, [they] enter”¹⁶³. Nevertheless, transit migrants had in front of them two obstacles before they could consider themselves safe in the French territory: French police, and the Alps. Leaving the militarization aside, and focusing on the Montgenèvre as an Alpine landscape, Luigi explained:

The Montgenèvre pass [...] is the main pass [...] I mean, which is open all year round and that... Then [...] in that area there is a galaxy of passes, minor passes, like the Col Busson, the Col Chabot, the Col Gimont... these are minor passes, which are also crossed in the summer by hikers, and these are all routes by which you reach France, these are all marked routes, hiked in the summer, and ski-mountaineered in the winter. ¹⁶⁴

In a way, the shift of the route meant a diversification of crossing opportunities for transit migrants. Despite being easier to cross in comparison with the *Col d'Echelle*, the Montgenèvre pass presented the same risks for human safety. Luigi explained that in lack of mountain experience and proper equipment, the Alpine landscape is always dangerous, no matter the altitude of its peaks and passes.

I mean, we're not talking about mountains - I mean, unreachable. For a person who goes to the mountains, and has good experience, good technical equipment, they are doable. The problem is clearly related to the fact that the migrant who comes there doesn't have that knowledge and doesn't have the equipment, then they often venture out at night... that's where the critical issues come from. ¹⁶⁵

The diversification of crossing route offered by the Montgenèvre pass, combined with the police checks, implied a context of increased risk for transit migrants.

And after that [...] these people in small groups, staggered, some earlier and some later, try to pass in the evening, along the various routes [...] From the easiest which is the golf course, which is a safe route, but it is also the one where you are most likely to be intercepted, clear! So the more you want to escape detection, the higher you get and the more you risk putting yourself in unpleasant situations. Then [...] word of mouth counts a lot, so there are GPS tracks that you upload to Open Street Maps, with the route, with landmarks... this can be a help in one side, in other ways many times this leads them on wrong routes, because many times a good track in the summer is not good in the winter. So this sometimes caused problems as well [...] Then on the outcome of the passage

¹⁶³ NS_BM_ZI_20210317

¹⁶⁴ NS_BM_ZI_20210317

¹⁶⁵ NS_BM_ZI_20210317

attempt, in our opinion the weather matters a lot, because a bright evening, with the moon, it helps the migrant to pass but it is also easier to be intercepted.¹⁶⁶

The increased risks for human safety were connected by the logistics of push-backs in the Montgenèvre area, as taken on board in section 6.1.3. of this Chapter with reference to activities of Italian *Guardia di Frontiera*. If push-backs in the *Col d'Echelle*/Bardonecchia area were carried out in a safe environment, those carried out in the Claviere area needed an additional humanitarian mechanism due to the high altitude and isolation of the village.

Finally, the last quotation showed a controversial role played by the *agency* dimension represented by the word of mouth, which the ethnography revealed was channelled by technological devices such as smartphones. In the context explained above it helped migrant to find routes and accommodation options that can facilitate their transit project, but it also increased their vulnerability in the Alpine militarized environment. This adds on theoretical perspectives on the importance of technology on the generation and expansion of transit routes. As explained in section 2.2.4. of Chapter 2, the technological development was considered in literature as one of the as a factor in the expansion of transit migration in a quantitative and geographic sense, in the form of the possibility for individuals to have an affordable communication and information channel at their disposal (Düvell 2006, 2014; Collyer and de Haas 2012). The ethnographic investigation in the Upper Susa Valley shed light on a peculiar micro-level of this dimension in transit migrations which deserves further investigation.

6.2.2. 2021: observing local transit strategies on the field

When it comes to transit strategies embraced by migrants to reach the border and then try to cross it unnoticed, fieldwork exposed a situation where migrants were mostly gathering in Oulx to enjoy of the accommodation provided by the Massi shelter. Thereafter, they were taking the last bus provided by the French company Resalp, at 7:45 at night, in order to reach Claviere and try to cross over the Montgenèvre pass under cover of darkness.

¹⁶⁶ NS_BM_ZI_20210317

Observation took place at the square used as a bus station, next to the train station and only a few hundred meters from the Massi shelter. The place, named Europe Square and also overlooked by the local *Carabinieri* station, was also a prime location for observing “humanitarian borderwork” in the Upper Susa Valley, as will be explored in depth in part 2 of Chapter 7.



Figure 8. Photo of Piazza Europa in Oulx. In the foreground, the Carabinieri barracks. In the background, the bus station. (Fieldwork diary: June 25, 2021)

At the bus station flocked migrants in transit eager to attempt the crossing, supported by volunteers engaged in the activities carried out at and around the *rifugio*. For some it was the first time; for others, after being already pushed-back in the previous days, it was another attempt. What follows comes from notes of my very first day as volunteer at the *rifugio* Massi:

At 7:30 p.m., I believe, we go to the bus. There is a *Carabinieri* car on the road between the shelter and the station, but they literally look the other way. Many transitants are already in the square, there are the bus going to Sauze d'Oulx and the bus to Briançon. There are some migrants who have just gotten off the train [from Turin]. The bus driver is the same as every day, he chats with P. and S. [...] Two Red Cross vehicles arrive. All volunteers are young, like 8, just handing out cookies and puncturing a tire. I ask F. if they [migrants] pay the ticket, he says yes [...]

(Field diary: June 10, 2021)

In that period the numerical magnitude of the transit was relatively significant, and in the departure phase it was necessary to come to terms with the limited capacity of the bus.

The bus is late leaving, the driver asks me to translate that it is leaving late because it has to wait for the TGV from Milan, which is also late. Some transit migrants ask me to express their concern that they won't all get in, but the driver reassures them, there are 61

seats, they all get in even if they are many. [...] The atmosphere is quiet, even though the transit migrants are all crowded in front of the [bus] door. Loading operations begin, they pay their tickets to the driver.

(Field diary: June 10, 2021)

The relatively high number of people aiming to cross the Italian-French border in that period (30 to 50 people present every night at the Massi shelter in April-May 2021, according to Claudio) was sometimes creating tensions at the bus station, being the limited capacity of the bus provided by the French company an important factor when it comes to mobility strategies of migrants in transit. These notes are from my second day as volunteer:

Migrants are crowded at the [bus] door, we count more than 60, to which must be added the TGV tourists. The assistant-driver struggles to manage them by small groups [to facilitate the ticket purchase], the stress grows. I also lose my temper for a moment when I translate into English to stand back and they don't care about me.

(Field diary: June 13, 2021)

At that early observation stage, I noticed that, in addition to the constraints posed by Resalp's service, other factors with an impact on mobility to the border were represented by disruptions due to strikes, works and delays on the rail network:

Yesterday, due to the Trenitalia strike in Piedmont, almost no one made it to the refuge.

The TGV was almost two hours late, but the 7:45 p.m. bus left anyway, loaded with only migrants practically, and will make two rounds.

(Field diary: June 21, 2021)

From yesterday (Sunday) until Wednesday, the Oulx - Briançon connection is suspended, because the TGV connection is suspended. [...] Only the 10:40 a.m. Arriva company bus remains.

(Field diary: July 12, 2021)

As mentioned in the last quote, in case of unavailability of the Resalp' service transit migrants used to take buses of the Italian company Arriva, covering the route Oulx – Claviere and operational during daytime hours. In the June – September 2021 period this eventuality occurred sporadically, but it posed many challenges for migrants who intended to reach Claviere by bus and for the volunteers who supported them at the bus station:

Another episode by A.: “This morning I accompanied 7 people on the bus to Claviere. The driver initially refused to load that “rascal”. I insisted to get more precise explanations, and he justified himself by telling me that they were without tickets and that it was not possible to make them on the bus. At that point I insisted by asking for an explanation as to why an Italian girl had been let on without a ticket. He replied that she would do so in Cesana [an intermediate stop] and then get back on the same bus. I rode the wave explaining to the driver that the group of seven would also do the same. At that point he could not refuse. Finally, I asked the Italian girl, with whom we had talked at the bus stop while waiting for the bus, to follow the group by perhaps getting back on the bus last in Cesana once everyone had bought a ticket. 10:40 a.m. bus Italian company”.

(Field diary: July 19, 2021)

At this juncture, drivers’ aptitude for transporting large numbers of “non-traditional travellers” to the border had a clear impact on their mobility strategies:

The second driver [of the French company], a person we are now familiar with from seeing each other every day at the bus, approaches us and says in French: border police are more tolerant of families arriving on the intermediate buses, the 11:45 a.m. and 3:45 p.m. buses [of the French company]. We are surprised about his attitude [...].

(Field diary: September 15, 2021)

This added on the importance of the subjectivity level in the unravelling of “secondary movements” in the Upper Susa Valley. The bottom-up, “people approach” perspective (Van Houtum, 2000) on the day-to-day experiences of transit migrants revealed that even practices by secondary actors, such as bus drivers, can represent factors that facilitate or hinder their mobility across re-bordered frontiers.

6.2.3. Local events’ effect on transit strategies

Since October 1, 2021, a significant change in the local public transportation offer had an important impact on migrants’ mobility strategies.

From Oct. 1 to Dec. 15, French buses will discontinue stops at Cesana and Claviere. The Italian ones will remain, the 10:40 a.m., daily, and the 1:05 p.m., Monday through Friday as a school service. The decision comes from the *Hautes Alpes* region, because all businesses are closed, so the stop makes no sense to be served.

(Field diary: September 29, 2021)

The bus stop at Claviere, used by the great majority of transit migrants to get off the bus as closely as possible to the borderline, but before the road check point set in the Montgenèvre village, was temporarily suppressed. This highlighted the importance of the bus service within the dynamics of approaching the border. For its relevance with regard to local transit's dynamics, this event was at the basis of the decision to prorogue the fieldwork, whose end was planned for the end of September.

From a conversation with a call centre operator of the bus company, it was inferred that the low season one was a pretext. Instead, the suspension of the Claviere stop was part of the company's response to drivers' safety questions in the face of several incidents of tension between foreigners inside the buses during the trip to Claviere¹⁶⁷.

Facing this situation, migrants focused on the bus service provided by the Italian company Arriva, multiplying the obstacles to migrants' mobility. On the one hand, it had an impact on the established routine implemented by transit migrants of reaching the borderline by night:

On September 30, many families took the 7:45 p.m. bus knowing that it was the last one that would allow them to reach the border at night.

(Field diary: September 29, 2021)

Even if no increase in push-backs was reported according to this change, this impacted on transit migrant's experience of the *borderland*. For example, the observation revealed an extremely different attitude of Italian drivers compared to the French, that temporarily limited the opportunity of transit migrants to make use of the bus service:

At the bus, I observe the driver's discontent. Offering to help, he asks me to explain that the guys can ticket on board, but must show up with coins or small bills. He refuses to let a couple board with €50. The banknotes denomination adds another complication to people in transit. Tickets can also be bought at the tourist office, in front of which is the other city stop, but it is closed Monday, Tuesday and Thursday.

(Field diary: October 2, 2021)

Today, S. reports that the driver of the 10:40 a.m. bus did not pick up migrants because the bus was full, unlikely. They left [...] with the next bus.

(Field diary: October 14, 2021)

¹⁶⁷ Field diary: October 14, 2021.

Italian drivers' disorientation at seeing their 10:40 a.m. and 1:05 p.m. runs crowded with migrants in transit fostered direct reactions of rejection such as the one documented above, but also of other kinds. For example:

On Friday, October 8, I am at the bus station for monitoring [...]. Numerous transit migrants are present. Upon the arrival of the bus, which they recognize independently, they quickly approach. The driver diverts them to the back door and picks them all up without a ticket. I converse briefly with him. He is very frustrated and frightened. He asks me for information about who these people are, why they are crowding his bus, why they are going to Claviere. I give brief explanations about their need to travel without documents. I ask him for an explanation as to why he let everyone on without a ticket. He explains to me that he is in a clash with the company, he does not intend to make tickets on board as a matter of time, but also for security: he does not want to travel with cash on board, he already had his wallet stolen a few days ago. Although he loses out, because he is entitled to 30 cents per ticket. He explains that they have asked the company for a second driver to be present. He would like people in transit to ticket at the tourist office; I explain that it is closed 3 days out of 7. About 50 people get on, over maximum capacity, considering that 8 seats are kept free for the main square stop and many children are on adults' laps.

(Field diary: October 14, 2021, morning)

Today at the bus all sorted. Departed 41 people, the maximum capacity leaving the station. There was the cooperative driver, the one who opens the doors first and charges 2.80€ [instead of 3.80€, the ticket fare for on-board purchases]. When I approached to ask if it was the right bus, he asked me to call people and start getting them on, in short, an okay guy. Two families got off the train and got on the direct bus [...] I counted five children and four women. From the shelter, no families.

(Field diary: October 14, 2021, afternoon)

As volunteers, we tried to cope with drivers' reactions by intensifying the supporting activity at the bus station. As explored in Chapter 7, in that period of overcrowding and changes in the bus service several groups of migrants remained stranded at the bus station. Volunteers organized support and orientation activities outside the Massi shelter, as it was open only from the afternoon, right in the bus station yard, converting it into a place of "humanitarian borderwork".

Another consequence of the French run's suppression concerned the decision of groups of migrants to cover night-time the whole distance Oulx – Briançon by feet (around 30 kilometres) as soon as they were informed that the 7:45 p.m. bus was no longer useful for their crossing strategy¹⁶⁸.

6.2.4. G/local events' impact on local transit strategies

The local transportation scenario changed again on October 15, forcing people in transit to adopt further coping strategies to continue their journeys across European boundaries. While up to that point the observation period had shown that it was endogenous and local factors that had an impact on mobility to the frontier, from that point on it was an exogenous factor.

A driver told us that with the introduction of mandatory *green pass* on workplace, some rides will be suspended from October 15 because some drivers are not vaccinated. Until the last we will not know which ones.

(Field diary: October 14, 2021)

By Decree Law No. 127 of Sept. 21, 2021, the Italian government introduced a requirement for various categories of workers, including bus drivers, to be entitled with the “green certification” in order to work, from Oct. 15 to Dec. 31, 2021. The green certification, or *green pass*, had been introduced by Decree Law No. 105 of July 23, 2021, whereby citizens who underwent anti-COVID vaccinations could obtain certification and participate in social life and re-access certain forms of mobility and tourism. The decision to make it mandatory in workplaces was followed by much controversy, especially from numerous NO-VAX citizens. When it comes to the observed transit dynamics, it resulted in public service disruptions and several obstacles to migrants' mobility, to which they reacted implementing further coping strategies¹⁶⁹.

The governmental act deeply impacted on the public transportation service to the border, to migrants' mobility strategies and to the overall functioning of the Massi shelter. Notes from the field diary regarding the period October 15 to 31 revealed a situation where the lack of universal possession of

¹⁶⁸ Field diary: October 2 and 5, 2021.

¹⁶⁹ The events of October 2021 were not the only ones related to the COVID pandemic that impacted migrant transit that I observed during my fieldwork period. For example, I reported of a push-back of a foreign girl who decided to cross the border with France in lack of proper documentation, whose issuing had been delayed due to COVID-19, unsuccessfully (Field diary, July 12, 2021). Or, episodes of push-backs at the Fréjus gate because in lack of the vaccination certificate required by the French authorities to enter the territory (Field diary: June 27, 2021). Finally, the refuge in Briançon experienced a temporary phase of self-management in August 2021, after the association that ran it decided to temporarily withdrew due to its inability to handle too large numbers of people. In fact, since vaccination passes were mandatory in France to move by public transportation, it had become extremely difficult for migrants in transit to move to other cities, leading to overcrowding at the shelter (Field diary: August 11, 2021).

green certification among drivers jeopardized bus rides, due to service disruptions that were notified with very little or no advice on the company website.

I don't go to [monitor] the 10:40 a.m. bus, it wasn't running in theory. However, [...] a driver, the one from the day before, informs me that the 10:40 bus has left. A person in transit, whom I had seen the day before, tells me that the 2:45 p.m. bus we had advised them to take, whose presence had been confirmed to me on the phone by the company, was not there.

(Field diary: October 23, 2021)

In more than one occasion, volunteers were going with 50 to 80 people at the bus stop, and then come back with all of them as the bus did not pass. Together with the relatively high number of presences, this brought to several days of overcrowding at the shelter. This crowding also affected the events at the bus stop.

There were about 70 people at the bus this morning. [...] Then the bus came, the blue one, and all the people in transit only got on through the back door, beyond the maximum capacity [...] The driver driving was the one from the previous day, with whom we have no relationship. On the ground, however, talking to us, was another driver with whom we know each other. Some tension arises: the driver had already warned that he would not leave with people standing, or not sitting on a seat. People in transit do not want to get off. G. and I try to explain to them that the bus does not leave under those circumstances, and that we were there to help them look for other options. Indeed, the driver turns off the engine. [...] The driver on board warns that he would call the *Carabinieri* to get the overflow people off the bus. He risks his license, then his job.

(Field diary: October 20, 2021)

Monitoring 10:40 a.m. bus departure. There is a lot of chaos. People in transit are pushing each other to get on. About 50 people succeed; one group of 11 argues with the driver to get on in a block, but that would mean going over the maximum capacity. They stay down.

(Field diary, October 21, 2021)



Figure 9. Chaos at the bus station due to limited bus service in times of mandatory green pass for drivers. (Fieldwork diary: October 21, 2021)

Monitoring bus departure 10:40 a.m. I arrive that all transit people are on board, the driver has arrived half an hour early on his own initiative (unpaid) to facilitate access and ticket payment. The driver is quiet, even finds time to show us that he has paper tickets, the old-fashioned way, to obviate any problems with the vending machine and to be able to make multiple tickets. He also informs us that the 10:40 bus will be suspended on Saturday and Sunday.

(Field diary: October 22, 2021)

October 24 marked a record in terms of presences at the bus stop.

At 10 o'clock [...] I call the shelter [...] I am informed that there are supposedly 100 people at the terminal. [...] We arrive at 10:30 a.m., the bus is there even though the company had assured that it was not, and it is loading. There is much chaos, with children in the crush.

Fifty people get on, many are stranded, others arrive from the train [...] from Milan, they spent the night out in the cold. Having finished the access operations, I ask the driver for clarification about the presence of the bus. He explains to me that service cuts are decided until 5 p.m. the day before, and that if there is then no driver, then it is cut the same morning.



Figure 10. Record of presences at the bus station. (Fieldwork diary: October 24, 2021)

In the same day, the refuge in Briançon closed due to overcrowding. All guests were moved to the local train station where they received basic assistance. The French railway company SCNF allowed to keep the station open at night in order to recover more than 150 people. The COVID-relevant mobility limitations in France led to an overcrowding of the shelter, as people were unable to leave Briançon while in lack of a vaccine certification.



Figure 11. Migrants and activists gather in front of the Briançon train station after the *Refuge Solidaire* has closed due to overcrowding. October 24, 2021. Author: Anna Manzoni

Empirical data showed that the pandemic had indirect consequences on transit migrants' mobility to the border. For example, I reported in the field diary many episodes in which they decided to cover the whole distance between Oulx and Briançon on feet, after they could not find space in several bus rides¹⁷⁰. As well, some local taxis started to offer the ride Oulx-Claviere, overpriced:

They [some migrants] inform us that a cab, whose business card they show us [...] does service on Claviere for 70€; those who left were 6.

(Field diary: October 23, 2021)

This event showed the extent to which the pandemic had *indirect negative* outcomes on transit migrants' mobility within *borderland* and beyond them. Nevertheless, in some limited cases, anti-COVID requirements had *indirect positive* effects on migrants' mobility. For example:

In the morning, I observe the following circumstances. One of the drivers explains to me that he refused to serve the route because he finds it unacceptable to work under those conditions. At the last, a blue bus arrives and picks up all the people in transit from behind, and leaves. A driver who remained on the ground explains to me that those buses are older, and were not equipped with the Plexiglas curtain for selling tickets on board, as the white ones were (although I did not see any drivers using it).

(Field diary: October 19, 2021)

Finally, ethnography results revealed some cases in which mobility limitations connected with the COVID-19 had a *direct* impact on migrants transiting in Oulx:

Two boys approach the gate of the shelter: I had suggested that they stop by the Tourist Office, which is open on Fridays, to buy a ticket and make the drivers' job easier. They explain to me that the clerk did not sell them any tickets because they do not have green passes. Instead, she gave them the numbers of two taxi companies and informed them of the presence of the 10:40 a.m. bus the next day (which according to the drivers is suspended due to staff shortage). We go to the tourist office to check. On the way to the shelter, two guys tell me that they tried to haggle for a taxi, which turned them down because in the absence of green pass, even though they had the valid negative swabs.

(Field diary: October 22, 2021)

¹⁷⁰ Field diary: October 23 and 29, 2021.

6.2.5. Local transit strategies between structure and *agency*

In the case of the Upper Susa Valley within the observation time frame, several structural factors of a very different range of influence impacted on “secondary movements” towards France. Locally, the transportation infrastructure and its dynamics had a double impact on migrants’ mobility, as the variable conditions of the service facilitated and/or hindered their migratory plans. Globally, the spread of the COVID pandemic impacted on the national legislative measures put in place to limit its spread (Gülzau, 2023; Opilowska, 2020).

In this ethnography, the *re-bordering* nature of the pandemic, explored in part 4 of Chapter 2, shed instead light on public transportation disruptions and an adaptation process carried out by transit migrants. In this context, the subjective dimension of *borderlanders* emerged as a factor impacting on “secondary movements” fluidity as in the case of police agents, in this case embodied by bus drivers. In terms of *agency*, local transit strategies confirmed their nature of coping mechanism enacted by transit migrants within their “secondary movements”, as widely explored in Chapter 2 “Ethnographies of a re-bordered Europe”. The ethnography showed the extent to which they take advantages of mobility opportunities, or overcome those obstacles of every magnitude they have to face in the realm of their long, dangerous and time-, energy- and money-consuming transit journeys.

6.3. Final remarks: observing securitized transit migrations in an Alpine militarized landscape

The ethnographic investigation on the daily reality of the *re-bordering* process in the Upper Susa Valley, and on the mobility strategies of transit migrants aiming to cross the Alpine Italian-French border, helped to shed light on the embodied dimension of the securitized approach to migrations (Huysmans, 2000; Bigo, 2002) in an Alpine militarized *borderland*.

On the one hand, I ethnographically took on board the *who, where, when, how* dimensions of the *re-bordering* process in the Upper Susa Valley, moving from the analytical framework offered by the *bordering* approach. This investigation allowed to shed light on the different state interests embodied by law enforcement agents while carrying out their daily activities. Through a bottom-up perspective, the daily reality of the unilateral implementation of the *re-bordering* process as the “new normal” (Gülzau, 2023) in the management of internal European borders has been revealed. As raised and discussed in Chapter 2, this contributes to the understanding of how the “resurgent intergovernmentalism” (Biermann et al., 2019) unravels in European *borderlands*.

As well, this Chapter shed light on the subjective dimension in embodying state power, according to which the individual behaviour of law enforcement agents is able to impact on the daily development of “secondary movements”.

On the other hand, the ethnographic approach to mobility strategies of transit migrants across the *borderland* and the borderline contributed to explain the human dimension of “transit migration” in a scenario of returned European borders. This add to ethnographic perspectives debated in section 2.2.5 of Chapter 2, that highlighted the extent to which the bottom-up point of view on transit migrants’ “fragmented journeys” (Collyer 2007, 2010) allows to overcome bias-filled understanding of their plans, expectations and experiences.

As well, it exposed the nature of “transit migration” as coping strategy to overcome the factors that hinder transit migrants’ mobility (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2005). In particular, I have highlighted the heterogeneous nature of the latter, that goes from the global such as the COVID-19 indirect consequences, to the local, such as the dynamics linked to the territorial transport network, up to the subjectivity of the most diverse border actors, such as bus drivers.

In general, ethnographically approaching the Upper Susa Valley as a *bordering laboratory* (Scott, 2012a) provided a bottom-up understanding regarding how the resurgent European state sovereignty and “secondary movements” coping with it, interact in an Alpine militarized border environment.

Chapter 7

Geographies of “humanitarian borderwork” in the Upper Susa Valley

This Chapter explores the Upper Susa Valley as a place of “humanitarian borderwork”, building on the theoretical framework offered by Pallister-Wilkins (2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2020). Following this author, we defined it as “a range of practices” aimed to “relieve suffering and prevent deaths” implemented by “a range of actors from state agencies, humanitarian organizations, volunteer NGOs and individual citizens” in response to “the danger and suffering of Europe’s border regime that prohibits safe and legal routes for those fleeing conflict and poverty” (2017a, p. 86). As illustrated in section 2.5.4. of Chapter 2, this literature strand, which emerged within Critical Border Studies, engaged with the practices of production, reproduction and contestation of borders performed by non-state actors (Rumford, 2007, 2008). Building on these debates, the current Chapter takes on board a recent contribution by Tazzioli (2020a) on the dynamics and logics of the solidarity scenario in the Upper Susa Valley, involving both state and non-state actors. The author shed light on their “care and control” approach (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015) in the governance of populations categorized as both *a* risk (De Somer, 2020; Karamanidou and Kasperek, 2022) and *at* risk (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015).

Within this framework, this Chapter presents an analysis of the empirical data collected to delve into state actors’ everyday implementation of a “care and control” strategy with reference to “secondary movements” in the Upper Susa Valley. This analysis of ethnographic data exposes the different approaches to irregular “secondary movements” and cross-border mobility plans of migrants in transit to France, embodied by different actors within a scenario of humanitarian aid and safeguarding people's security¹⁷¹. Through this exercise, it zooms in on the everyday solidarity activities carried out by the diverse humanitarian actors intervening on the field with reference to the management of transit migrants in the *borderland*. The Chapter builds on the category of “humanitarian borderscape” (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017a) in order to discuss the multiple “geographies of *humanitarian borderwork*” that state and non-state actors draw in the everyday reality of the Upper Susa Valley.

¹⁷¹ In no case did the research participants and other actors observed in the field facilitate the irregular transit of undocumented non-European individuals.

7.1. “Caring and controlling” transit migrants

Along with “containment” policies as explored in Chapter 6, “secondary movements” in the Upper Susa Valley have been subjected to state initiatives joined by the state peripheral authority (the *Prefettura*), local administrations¹⁷² and non-state actors, aimed to reduce their impact on the *borderland* as well as to limit the *re-bordering* consequences on transit migrants’ safety.

As discussed in part 5 of Chapter 5 “The Upper Susa Valley”, the projects Freedom Mountain and MigrAlp represented the acknowledgment of state and non-state actors of the territorial need to provide a temporary shelter to transit migrants exposed to push-backs and environmental dangers of an Alpine militarized border landscape. The project Freedom Mountain supported the *Spazio Calmo* in the railway station of Bardonecchia, aimed to limit the human costs of the militarization of the Fréjus tunnel and the re-routing of transit across the *Col d’Echelle*. The project Freedom Mountain supported instead the Massi shelter in Oulx, as well as the Red Cross committee of Susa operational in Claviere aimed at securing the migrants in transit pushed-back at Montgenèvre pass.

In her ground-breaking ethnographic paper focusing on the management of “secondary migrations” at the Italian-French Alpine border, Tazzioli (2020a) depicted the state strategy as responding to a logic of “care and control” (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015). This resulted in the “obfuscated visibility” of transit migrants in the *borderland*, as local actors built a cooperation in which “migrants are supported and concealed from the public sight at the same time” (Tazzoli 2020a, p. 8). This approach responded to the aim of preventing the Upper Susa Valley from suffering a “human-plug effect” such as it occurred in Ventimiglia. There, state decision not to manage “secondary movements” under a “care and control” spectrum but according to repressive police policies, caused an enduring humanitarian emergency, severe risk for human safety, and limitless xenophobia.

This section presents an ethnographic analysis of daily practices engaged by *borderland* actors in the spectrum of the state “care and control” strategy in the Upper Susa Valley.

¹⁷² At the local level, state projects have been participated by the municipalities of Oulx, Bardonecchia and Claviere. In Italy, the role of municipalities is to administrate all functions relatively to the population and its territory, the services to people and the community, the use of territory and economic development. The municipality of Bardonecchia counts with around 3130 inhabitants distributed in a 132km² surface at meters above the sea level. The municipality of Oulx counts with around 3350 inhabitants on a 100km² surface at 1100 meters above the sea level. Finally, the municipality of Claviere is at 1760 meters at above the sea level, at the top of Montgenèvre and right next the borderline with France, and counts only around 200 inhabitants.

7.1.1. “Reconsider it!”: discouraging migrants from crossing the border

The ethnographic investigation of daily practices embedded by solidarity actors in the militarized Alpine landscape of the Upper Susa Valley produced interesting results. It showed which strategies were put in place facing the double risk to which transit migrants were exposed: that of being pushed-back by French border police, and that represented by the mountain landscape itself. On this regard, empirical data showed that the first approach implemented in the realm of institutional initiatives to manage “secondary movements” in the Upper Susa Valley, was that of discouraging migrants from crossing the border.

We can see this clear through the experience of Giorgio, a representative of the local administration of Bardonecchia. With reference to the activities carried out in the *Spazio Calmo*, first expression of “humanitarian borderwork” related to “secondary movements” in the Upper Susa Valley, he explained the “discouraging approach” as resulting from the priority of both containing suffering and deaths of transit migrants and their irregular crossings.

The first signs of people arriving from Africa occurred in the summer of 2017. [...] During the summer we said “Boh... let’s see... let’s monitor”. [...] “This thing maybe, with the bad weather... it will end a little bit”. We were witnessing this passage on a route that [...] in summer the walk is also very pleasant, [...] In winter it is dramatic, very risky and deadly. [...] In December, we realised that nothing stopped there. [...] So at that point [...] we started to tackle the problem head on. [...]

We made a banal reflection, which we then shared with the *Prefettura* and with everyone, namely: let’s *lower the attack line*, that is, it’s pointless for us to put volunteers, as well as boys, at risk in the snow when it’s too late, let’s lower the attack line. Hence the talk of convincing the railways to give us a space in the station. ¹⁷³ [Italics added]

Here emerged the “care” logic, backing the decision of opening a space to secure the presence of transit migrants in the area. The “control” element was then represented by discouraging transit migrants of crossing illegally towards France. For the purposes, dedicated staff was employed.

We hired mediators, first 1, then 2, then 3, then 4, who worked and worked 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, in shifts... they were African guys, people who had done the same journey as everyone else, very good at emotionally connecting with the people who were arriving... [...] They did something like this, that is: “Look, if you pass that way, today is January 7, tomorrow we’ll come and pick you up dead somewhere, because from there

¹⁷³ SR_AF_ZI_20210512

you risk an avalanche, or frostbite, or frostbite.... Who are you? You're a Ghanaian. Well, you know... look, we'll pick up the phone, talk to the Ghanaians in Turin, right? Who are you, what do you do, you need two days there, you need to figure out what to do. Let me see the documents: but look, maybe if you took the plane, you are in the conditions because you are... you have the title to pass..." ¹⁷⁴

At the time, most transit migrants were leaving Italian welcoming centres for asylum seekers in search of a second chance in France. The project included an agreement with the *Prefettura*, according to which migrants could be readmitted in the assistance program. Vittorio, another local administrator, explained:

At that time, there was a reception hub in Settimo Torinese, so the method was to say: "You arrive, I assist you from the health point of view, I assist you from the legal point of view, I refresh you, but with the Red Cross afterwards I take you, after agreement with the Prefecture, I take you to Settimo Torinese where you start a relocation process". This was very useful, because many people were relocated throughout Piedmont, with various projects. ¹⁷⁵

The discouragement approach fully inscribed in the "care and control" logic, and showed its peculiarities when adopted in an Alpine militarized border: migrants were invited to reconsider their journey plan, with the double aim of preventing irregular cross-border activities and saving their lives. Unlike the "sprinkling" containment intervention of police officers, within the humanitarian initiative cultural mediators embodied the state approach with a one-to-one form, directed at taking into account the subjectivity of each migrant, whose numbers at the time were small.

7.1.2. "Hiding" migrants: managing the risk of a "transit migration" impact on local tourism

On the other hand, as Luisa, an inhabitant of Bardonecchia and a volunteer from the first hour pointed out, "secondary movements" and the tourist vocation of the Upper Susa Valley have been locally experienced as hard to combine.

The Susa Valley is extremely socially active above all in its Lower-Middle part, which is all the part that goes back to a service economy, ex-industrial, small handicrafts, etc. It is extremely less so in the Upper part, say from Oulx upwards, because... because here there is an economy linked to tourism, therefore an economy linked to the fact that they are

¹⁷⁴ SR_AF_ZI_20210512

¹⁷⁵ SR_DP_ZI_20210501

places that by their definition must be beautiful, fun, pleasant, clean (we laugh), decent, and above all the theme is fun. I say this in the objective sense, that's what tourism is! And it is very understandable that those who go on holiday have opportunities to spend their leisure time in a pleasant way. It's just that the two themes clearly... don't mesh very well, so the impact of the arrival of people in transit was felt strongly.¹⁷⁶

As the empirical data collected shows, the prevention of damages to the local touristic industry stand for a further pivotal scope in “caring and controlling” the passage of transit migrants across the Upper Susa Valley.

As explored in section 5.1.2., tourism is traditionally a key sector in the economy of the Upper Susa Valley. Especially in the strictly border area, infrastructures have been installed that serve a medium-high segment of customers. As well, this element plays a central role in the cross-border relations between the Upper Susa Valley and the Briançonnaise area.

Luisa's point of view is reflected throughout the rest of the ethnographic data gathered. The research related the management of “secondary movements” in the Upper Susa Valley with the priority of limiting its impact on the local tourism industry. Nevertheless, what emerged was the dimension of “risk”, rather than an effective negative outcome. Fieldwork has shown that the presence of migrants in the Upper Susa Valley area has not interfered with tourist activities. However, it has raised many concerns among business holders. Roberto is a manager in the touristic accommodation industry in Bardonecchia. On this regard, he explained:

In Bardonecchia [...] there have been times when [migrants] have been seen in great numbers [although I have never] seen situations that some might even describe as delicate, or that could represent a problem for the tourist aspect of the town [...] In fact, in the first wave [...] of young people arriving, there was a bit of controversy on the part of some, who said “Eh, but we have to do something here, because we live on tourism, so if these guys arrive...”¹⁷⁷

He further explained that that on the damages of “secondary movements” in the tourism sector of the *borderland* was more a perception than a reality, and that it was increased by the press narrative:

It was more a fear [...] in the sense that hoteliers and shopkeepers were very worried. And then there was an aspect that I think did real damage, that is, the press and the media, instead of focusing on the positive aspects of the tourist resort, at times when Bardonecchia actually has spectacular tourism peaks, during the summer and winter, the

¹⁷⁶ SV_MS_ZI_20210323

¹⁷⁷ LD_MG_PI_20210719

television stations that come on [...] In the end, they were always on the subject of migrants, looking for situations, trying to film the young people at the station with their cameras when there were maybe two or three compounds... I mean, I strongly perceived a tendency to focus on the polemical aspect of the crisis [...] Probably, if there has been a little damage to the tourist resort's image, it has been more because of what was said than because of what actually happened. [...] If there has been a little damage to the image, which, in my opinion, is no longer perceived today, the difficulty that perhaps the tourist does not come because there are migrants, or if there has been, it has been more because the negative aspects have been emphasised rather than the positive ones.¹⁷⁸

The empirical data collected exposed that the deep interplay between the “secondary movements” and the tourism industry is that of the *risk* of a negative impact. This opens to the interpretation of the state “care and control” approach in the Upper Susa Valley as a strategy aimed to contain a threefold risk. In addition to the framework discussed by Pallister-Wilkins (2015) and represented by the priority of managing “secondary movements” as a risk for European borders under a “securitization of migration” approach (Huysmans, 2000; Bigo, 2002), as well as embodied by people *at risk* due to the violent profile of the *re-bordering* process, the ethnography of the Upper Susa Valley uncovered a further risk that has been managed under the “care and control” spectrum: what “secondary movements” represent for the local tourism industry. As the ethnography shows, in the Upper Susa Valley the risk management strategy was embedded by the concentration of transit migrants in dedicated spaces of assistance. As far as the Massi shelter is concerned, the state representative and local dweller Vittorio explained:

I mean, [Oulx] responded very well [to transit migration]. Now I don't want to be misunderstood [...] The country never perceived the presence of the migrants. (pause) But because they were not seen, not because they were invisible, but because there was a place dedicated to them, those who took the bus were at the bus stop and were quiet...¹⁷⁹

Giulia explained the strategy of “caring and control” migrants through their invisibilization, with that of limiting outcomes on the *borderland*, by taking as negative reference Ventimiglia.

These guys didn't know where to go. We opened a room next to the waiting room [the *Spazio Calmo*] with all the difficulties of the case, because the fact that there was something there that helped, and in my opinion also somewhat invisibilized the presence of these migrants, helped here... because it's not an area... although there is a border, it's

¹⁷⁸ LD_MG_PI_20210719

¹⁷⁹ SR_DP_ZI_20210501

a very difficult border to cross, and the numbers are perhaps a little less but not even that much, it has never become Ventimiglia.¹⁸⁰

Furthermore, the ethnography revealed that many local people, included workers in the territorial infrastructure network used by migrants to move towards or within the *borderland*, disregarded its transit dimension as well as the existence of the Massi shelter. This was supported by observations about the “obfuscated visibility” of migrants in the Upper Susa Valley by Tazzioli (2020a), implemented within the spectrum of a “care and control” strategy with the double aim of protecting transit migrants’ safety and the local tourism industry by the risk of a negative impact of “secondary movements”.

7.2. Making of a *humanitarian borderscape*

As argued and revealed throughout this thesis, the *re-bordering* process implemented at the Alpine Italia-French border favoured the rise of a significant humanitarian scenario. This stemmed from the meaningful ethical concerns entailed by the vulnerability of transit migrants in the Alpine militarized environment, and involved a variegated range of actors performing solidarity activities of the most diverse nature and purpose. This section engages with the profiling of an “humanitarian borderscape” of the Upper Susa Valley. Based on the empirical data gathered, it shows that the territorial scope of the humanitarian intervention, as well as the range of actors involved and their activities, resulted by the interplay between the logic of “care and control” adopted by state actor to manage “secondary movements”, and the everyday practices of humanitarian agents aimed to support, contrast, and transgress it.

7.2.1. Supporting migrants’ *agency* in an Alpine militarized environment

As illustrated earlier in part 5 of Chapter 5, accounting for non-state solidarity actors, the *Spazio Calmo* emerged as first expression of “humanitarian borderwork” related to “secondary movements” in the Upper Susa Valley, and covered the time frame December 2017 – March 2020. Its main aim was to intercept the passage of those migrants on their way to the *Col d’Echelle*, mainly African males leaving Italy after a first experience in Europe, to make them aware of the dangerousness of their transit plan and provide with legal counselling and medical assistance. One of the main actors was the medical association Rainbow for Africa. Augusta, member of the association, described its daily

¹⁸⁰ NS_FE_ZI_20210315

activities in the *Spazio Calmo*. Every shift was covered by a doctor and a logistician, i.e. a non-sanitary professional. While the first was taking care of sanitary needs, the second was in charge of intercepting and relating with migrants in transit, as well as to facilitate them to the services offered. In the time of activity of the *Spazio Calmo*, Rainbow for Africa only came to mobilize about 120 volunteers. Augusta explained that they were approaching migrants as soon as they arrived with the train in the station of Bardonecchia.

The important thing was to be smiling, to have a waistcoat that could be recognizable as something sanitary, to put these people at ease as they got off [the train], they came to the bottom of a valley they didn't even know geographically where they were, and to understand where they wanted to go, at that time of night.¹⁸¹

Then, they were offered shelter and basic necessities. Humanitarian activities were carried out first in one room, then two, in the outbuildings of the train station, obtained through the *Prefetto's* mediation. As discussed earlier, a key activity in the *Spazio Calmo* was to share with migrants the dangerousness related to the cross-border transit in an Alpine landscape, in order to discourage them from engaging in that plan. Giulia, another member of the association, explained:

So, one thing we do, are these steps here: first of all, to understand what their possibilities are, also with the lawyers, maybe there are people who [...] wanted to stay in Italy, but they say, 'I don't feel like it, I can't, because my permit has expired', we try to understand with ASGI what their legal ways are to stay in Italy and we explain it to them, that is, "you in Italy have the possibility of this, this and this". After that, we explain to them, we dissuade them from leaving at night, because leaving at night, in winter, with temperatures as low as minus 15 degrees (she scolds), in the dark, in the middle of the woods, you are facing death (serious).¹⁸²

The ethnography exposed the general alignment of the scope of humanitarian actors in the *Spazio Calmo* with the state "care and control" logic. Nevertheless, Giulia explained a different positioning of the non-state actors compared with the state actor embodied by cultural mediators, as far as the "discouraging approach" is concerned.

Nobody tells him, "don't leave tomorrow". We [...] discourage them from leaving [...] because keep in mind that our space opens in the evening [...] Leaving at night is a death sentence [...] We, however, and I'm not saying no, it's something we do, we clothe them. [...] Everyone for us must have the freedom to do what he/she wants, but he must do it

¹⁸¹ SV_GS_ZI_20210411

¹⁸² NS_FE_ZI_20210315

when he/she is informed. [Transit migrant] is a political subject, and it becomes a political subject the moment you are informed of your rights [...] Your freedom lies in deciding what you want, and you can only do that if you know things. [...] It is a *politically humanitarian* work, in the sense that [...] the physical life of the person is important, we are doctors, we are there for that, but we know very well that life is not limited to this thing here [...] So our dissuading is in this sense here. Surely we tell them, “No *ragà*, (pointing to the clock), it’s two o’clock in the morning, it’s minus twenty degrees (pointing behind her), what do you want to do, go and throw yourself in the snow? Because the snow, there, in winter, reaches you up to here! (pointing under her armpits), I mean, it gets up to half your torso (pause) And if you’re not used to it, if it’s cold, it’s still 20 kilometres in the snow (pause). It’s not a thing.”¹⁸³

Empirical data showed the different approach of the state and the humanitarian actors within the same experience, embodied in the daily activity of their representatives: while the first aimed to protect both borders and people, the second supported migrants’ *agency*.

7.2.2. The *Spazio Calmo*: a bottom-up institutional initiative

Empirical data regarding the genesis of the *Spazio Calmo* also highlighted the bottom-up construction of the Upper Susa Valley as an “humanitarian borderscape”. The deeper roots of the *Spazio Calmo* were to be found in the spontaneous initiative of *borderlanders*. Luisa, an inhabitant of Bardonecchia that directly engaged in the embryonal stage of the support activity, described her experience as follows:

The activity [with migrants in transit] came about absolutely... (thinks about it) randomly, in the sense that it was born because... (she interrupts) It was born because we simply started having young people who were arriving before our eyes, they were in difficulty, they were passing through the streets of Bardonecchia, they were hungry and needed things, and they didn’t know where the road to France was. And so when one is faced with this situation for months, we started in the autumn. We, when I say “we” I mean my sons and I, initially, and then other people on their own, we started going to the station in the evening with jackets, and things to eat, because that was happening... [...] There’s nothing prepared, nothing thought out, nothing planned behind it. [...] In the autumn of

¹⁸³ NS_FE_ZI_20210315

2017 there was a time when every night we were at the station, basically, and slowly a network of people started to arrive at the station and help out, that's it.¹⁸⁴

As Luisa also explained, the state-backed initiative developed on the intervention of a further grass-rooted solidarity network:

It was an absolutely spontaneous network, born because at the beginning it was “Let's go to the station that there are boys in difficulty”, so every evening we went to the station [to help] them. We started to have jackets, biscuits, etc. in the cars, because when we went around, it happened to find young people... Then, slowly, the Red Cross arrived to make the evening passes, but from the Middle and Lower valley many people began to arrive, [...] For more than 20 years, 25, how many are they, the Susa Valley has a large movement that was born from the No TAV struggle and then became a movement [...]. So at that time, those were the forces that came, above all. And then in December, when a local organization was created, then the institutions came into the field, then at that point Alpine Rescue, the Red Cross, then later on Caritas [...].¹⁸⁵

Luisa referred to local organized groups, that joined the support activities before the *Spazio Calmo* was officially settled. Those collectives were mainly part of the No Tav movement, active in the Middle and Lower valley in the social and environmental fight against the construction of the Turin-Lyon high-speed railway tunnel.

A further significant episode helps understanding the ground-breaking practices put in place by those groups. In early Winter 2017, the para-state company that runs the stations had decided to close waiting rooms to those lacking a train ticket. In the field diary I noted an episode in which *Fornelli in Lotta* (fighting cooks), an off-shot of the No TAV movement, bought to the migrants in Bardonecchia a ticket to Beaulard, the next station, to get them all into the waiting room¹⁸⁶.

In terms of “humanitarian borderscape”, the ethnography revealed that the activities of medical association Rainbow for Africa first, and the institutional project Freedom Mountain then, were organized around ground-breaking, grass-rooted solidarity practices. These were initially local and completely informal. On a second stage, they consolidated according to an “up-the valley” movement, according to which social movements rooted in the “transit” nature of the Susa Valley displaced to the border zone and joined solidarity activities in favor of transit migrants. The same “up-the-valley” movement is at the origin of *Chez Jésus*, the first non-institutional solidarity support in the *borderland*.

¹⁸⁴ SV_MS_ZI_20210323

¹⁸⁵ SV_MS_ZI_20210323

¹⁸⁶ Field diary: June 25, 2021.

7.2.3. *Chez Jésus*: informal response to the human cost of the logistics of pushbacks

On March 22, 2018, the transnational collective *Briser les Frontières* occupied the room located under the church (*sottochiesa*) of Claviere, right close to the state border, and ironically called this space “*Chez Jésus*”¹⁸⁷. This event followed, and maybe contributed to, the route shift that in 2018 moved the majority of transit passages from the Bardonecchia area to the Montgenèvre area. The occupation of *Chez Jésus* responded to the increased danger for human safety that transit attempts across the Montgenèvre area implied, compared to those in the Bardonecchia area. This was due to the logistics of push-backs carried out by the French police and in the inner risks of implementing a cross-border activity in a militarized Alpine landscape.¹⁸⁸

As far as the genesis of this initiative is concerned, this resulted to be less spontaneous than that of the *Spazio Calmo*, as the occupation emerged in the realm of the heterogeneous social movements that had structured around the latter. Nevertheless, some reduced local solidarity initiatives had already taken place around the Claviere church¹⁸⁹. In any case, as per the events that led to the creation of the *Spazio Calmo*, the initiative filled a gap left by state and local institutions in terms of protection of human lives, as Luisa explained,

The sore spot was at Claviere, and so the border at Claviere became the place... of evening action, let's say. In the sense that every night we had to go up to Claviere because there were people left in the middle of nowhere, that is. Claviere is at 1800 metres, the village has 200 inhabitants. I think, and there was... then, there was absolutely nothing, nothing and nobody. [...] The prevention and rescue forces [were] again completely, completely left to the volunteers, and to the action of those who every evening went up with the cars to try to save the abandoned people, and the people were taken down to sleep in Bardonecchia, all those who refused to leave [...] Those who refused to leave, or were rejected, were left by the police in front of the church of Claviere, 1,800 metres, minus 15, minus 20 in temperature, and there they were left, simply left there (smiles). [...] This was until March, at the end of March there was the creation... the occupation of the hall under the church of Claviere, and from that moment in Claviere there was a place of reception... a squat, in fact, an occupation, that is, an occupation that created a stopover place on Claviere.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Please refer to section 5 of Chapter 5 for further details.

¹⁸⁸ See Chapter 6, section 6.1.3.

¹⁸⁹ “Luisa tells me that, in the first terrible winter of 2017, the owner of the [color] shelter you can see from the *sottochiesa* had stationed a van in front of [it] and was shuttling thermos of hot drinks.” Field diary: June 25, 2021.

¹⁹⁰ SV_MS_ZI_20210323

Furthermore, empirical data showed *Chez Jésus* was born within those environmental movements in the Lower and Middle Valleys that already came to consolidate the *Spazio Calmo*. This further structured the up-the-valley movement, for which migration issues provided the basis for organizing political initiatives in the Upper Valley.

The occupation was decided and carried out by a part of the *Briser les frontières* collective, composed by Italian and French activists. This emerged from the heterogeneous scenario of the No TAV movement, that is a broad social organization that opposes the construction of the Turin-Lyon high-speed railway tunnel according to political and environmental claims¹⁹¹. The occupation of *Chez Jésus* represented the transfer of the radical practices and discourses of one part of the movement into the raising “humanitarian borderscape” of the Upper Susa Valley, as Claudio and Gianna, militants of the collective, explained:

Then after a while there was a little piece of this group, which we can then discuss, we partly agreed and partly didn't, decided at a certain point that this little room, which was under the church, could serve a purpose, and the purpose was to prevent this ever-increasing flow of people [...] You know, it's one thing if you have five. And if those 40 get through, fine. But if those 40 get turned away? You find yourself in Claviere... ¹⁹²

This collective was created, let's call it that, which was called *Briser les frontières*, that is, let's crumble the frontiers, right? “Let's crumble the frontiers”. Which someone had translated as “Let's burn the frontiers”, which was much more guerrilla (ironic, we laugh). This was born that way, so there were people from various areas there. [...] That's how it started. ¹⁹³

The frontier support network in favour to transit migrants structured upon the already existing social grounds provided by the No TAV movement.

The solidarity network in the valley moved with various levels. [...] The interesting thing was precisely this, that is, to see how the network gradually structured itself around this need. [In Claviere it was] complicated because obviously the people who were largely part of this network did not live in the Upper Valley at the time. [...] So there was already a political network, structured, [...] and also such a confidence that you could say: “There are 30 of us, we are organising. Every night a car goes up, we bring four jackets, some tea, something to eat, some shoes” [...] So, you can do this because you have a habit,

¹⁹¹ See section 5.2.3.

¹⁹² SV_RD_ZI_20210421

¹⁹³ SV_PE_ZI_20210411

consolidated, in a valley with 20 years of political struggle [...] So, first level of the network, those who go up at night. They bring food, shoes and so on. Second level of the network, people in the valley that if there's a problem situation, the mother, the child, the one who's sick, they take on a couple of people at home for a few days, and then we see what to do. [...] Then, there was the even bigger network of the No TAV movement, and other people, who said "What can I do? I give you two pairs of shoes, a used windbreaker, or some money. Or let's have benefit dinners".¹⁹⁴

As strongly emerged in the ethnography, as far as the support of transit migrants is concerned, the No TAV movement played the role of driver of initiative and political change from the Lower Valley to the less active Upper Valley. The connection between the No TAV movement and the identity of the valley unveils a kaleidoscopic political and solidarity space, to which the historical dimension of transit has significantly impacted.

The Susa Valley is a self-defining "resistant territory", with a great political identity, a great identity of struggle, from the Second World War but also from before. So it is also something that characterises it, a beautiful thing. It's everything, the presence... now the No TAV movement, but first the partisan movement [...] It's a territory of exchange, the border really becomes inter-kingdom of exchange... the two communities, and it's always been like that, more than a real border... and then you calculate that even the place where... it's the same place where people tried to go to France and stay there, they've always gone to work there, so... (hand gestures)... there is a... continuous exchange.¹⁹⁵

It is in this scenario of transnationality that *Chez Jésus* emerged as "a kind of intervention [that] started from the outset as international"¹⁹⁶, as Luisa explained.

7.2.4. "Humanitarian borderwork" as a *de-bordering* factor

The first informal solidarity initiative settled in the Upper Susa Valley, *Chez Jésus*, as well as the group *Briser les frontières* that gave it life, was joined by both Italian and French activists. The same was observed with regard to *Chez JesOulx*¹⁹⁷. Elena explained that:

I happened to meet French activists who do support work, let's say, as do the Italian ones. They tend to make people aware of the risks of the mountains, provide them with clothing,

¹⁹⁴ SV_RD_ZI_20210421

¹⁹⁵ NS_FE_ZI_20210315

¹⁹⁶ SV_MS_ZI_20210323

¹⁹⁷ See section 5.5.2., and later in this Chapter, section 7.2.5.

give them the opportunity to cook in a self-managed way within this space, and in short, be able to advise them not to take certain paths. These are more or less the activities I did in Italy, then in France we usually went to, or retrieve clothes left by those who had managed to cross, or to do the shopping for example for the occupation [...] So generally the activities I did as a cross-border worker were these.¹⁹⁸

This confirmed that informal solidarity initiative in the Upper Susa Valley had an integral transnational nature. When it comes to the institutional solidarity mechanism, the ethnography showed side but significant transnational practices. These are “embodied” in the Decathlon boots.

An interesting *borderland tale* [...] is the story of the Decathlon boots. Out of 7 participants I interviewed, 3 told me about these boots. This the story: No TAV activists bought them in large quantities through self-financing dinners and lunches. They were chosen for their cheapness but quality for walking. They are then made available to the migrants at the Oulx refuge [in case they decide to] tackle the snow. Once in Briançon, the migrants dispose of them. French volunteers dry them, and bring them back to Italy [...]. Reflecting on this I thought: what a journey these little boots are taking. If they told me so much about them, they must have something important, these little boots, no? So I said: let's take the point of view of a pair of boots [...]. The boots are objects, of course. Assuming that they were not made and assembled in the shop, or in Italy, they probably crossed some border, with the freedom that goods have. Then, they were a pretext for organising community dinners and lunches, or at any rate, they were bought with the money collected. They then enter the community relationship as protagonists, they dialogue with it [...] They then arrive at the shelter, where they are donated to the migrants [...] as a means to survive [...] What do the boots represent? They are the contrivance, they are the act of caring, they are the passage of experience [...] And at that point the boots walk towards the mountain, clandestinely. If they have luck, they pass. If they don't, they are rejected. The same border that they smoothly cross in the form of goods, stands before them as obstacles when they protect the feet of human beings deemed illegal. Here they embody the polysemy of the border¹⁹⁹. Just as they embody it when, dry and cleansed, they re-cross the border in the car of an activist person, still freely because they are with a person who has papers. [...] And in this exchange, cross-border relations are

¹⁹⁸ NB_MA_PI_20211208

¹⁹⁹ This dimension is explored in Chapter 8.

strengthened, constructing a border radically different from the one constructed by states and police.

(Field diary: April 22, 2021)

The transnational nature of humanitarian practices and relations in the “humanitarian borderwork” of the Upper Susa Valley extended its “humanitarian borderscape” beyond the political borderline. In this sense, solidarity actors play the significant role of *de-bordering* agents in a border zone deeply characterized by the internal European *re-bordering* process.

7.2.5. The *Casa Cantoniera*: matching humanitarian assistance and political struggles

As far as the relation with the state “care and control” strategy is concerned, the local administrator Vittorio claimed that *Chez Jésus* signified the “irruption of politics into the management of “secondary movements” in the Upper Susa Valley”²⁰⁰. The experience aimed to link solidarity in favour of people in transit, with the questioning of the *hardening* and militarization of the state border. In addition to providing a proximate shelter for the push-backed people and a security outpost for those about to cross the border, the occupation represented a political presidium of the fight against the militarization of the border and its violent practices.

The occupation of *Chez Jésus* marked a first stage of clash among a part of the solidarity actors with state authorities²⁰¹. After its eviction, activists converged in the occupation of an abandoned building in Oulx, the *Casa Cantoniera*.

The *Chez JesOulx* experience, more commonly called *Casa Cantoniera Occupata* or simply *la Casetta*, started on December 9, 2018 with the occupation of an abandoned building located at the edges of Oulx by part of the group who got evicted from *Chez Jésus* two months before. For two years, it was centre of reference for transit migrants in the Upper Susa Valley, together with institutional Massi shelter, opened shortly before²⁰². As the empirical data shows, the experience of *Chez JesOulx* was strongly characterized by its political profile, matching tangible solidarity activities with the fight against the *re-bordering* process. The first referred to providing migrants accommodation, food and clothes, medical and legal support. The second had to do with political practices framed by the No Border practices and discourse. This included marches, demonstrations and gatherings denouncing the deadly dimension of the *re-bordering* practices, as well as a

²⁰⁰ SR_DP_ZI_20210501

²⁰¹ NS_FE_ZI_20210315

²⁰² For more details about *Chez JesOulx - Casa Cantoniera Occupata*, please refer to Chapter 5, section 5.

dissemination activity through local initiative and social media promoting a non-institutional and horizontal, non-humanitarian but political solidarity in favour of people in transit. Building on this, ethnographic analysis uncovered that the *Casa Cantoniera* covered a paradoxical role the broader scenario of “humanitarian borderwork” in the Upper Susa Valley. On the one hand, it was marked by radical practices and discourses, as well as by a strong opposition to the state and non-state actors involved in the humanitarian mechanism inherited by the *Spazio Calmo* and gravitating around the Massi shelter. On the other hand, it filled the gap left by the institutional humanitarian mechanism they opposed.

In terms of radicalism of practices and discourses, these are graphically revealed by the numerous signs and murals that *Chez Jesoulx* activists have scattered throughout the area between Oulx and Claviere, along Highway 25.

I note some of the writing in the tunnels leading to Claviere. Some strike me for their violence. "The border kills - Tourism is complicit" is one of them.

(Field diary: July 23, 2021)

This radicalism took shape also in terms of relationship with the other state and non-state institutional local actors. The local administrator Vittorio shared with me an episode:

On the relationship between [the *Casetta*] and local administration, he recalls [...] the episode of the *Carabiniere* puppet [which] dates back to a Carnival, when the No Borders hoisted a puppet with a real Carabinieri uniform on the fence of the occupied building. [A law enforcement actor] phoned [Vittorio], and asked him to mediate for the removal, which was ordered from above, because he really didn't want to go there with police trucks for a puppet. The mediation was difficult, because according to [the *Casetta* occupants] they had to decide in assembly. The puppet was removed two weeks later.

(Field diary: August 3, 2021)

In the field diary²⁰³ I noted some observations regarding the communiqué I read in the Chez JesOulx Facebook account after the eviction, in March 2021²⁰⁴. One was about the activists denouncing the involvement of Red Cross not only in the eviction, providing logistical support for the distribution of migrants, but also in the push-backs at the border. On this regard, the local administrator Daniele referred of episodes in which activists were organizing disruptive actions in the vicinity of the border to hinder the activity of fostering those rejected by the Italian police to the Red Cross²⁰⁵. The other

²⁰³ Field diary: March 29, 2021.

²⁰⁴ See section 5.5.4. in Chapter 5.

²⁰⁵ SR_CF_ZI_20210511

regarded their very critical attitude toward Rainbow for Africa, in which they were blamed of orientating their activity within a repressive humanitarianism that does not give individuals the power of choice.

The political orientation of *Chez JesOulx* inspired also its functioning. When it comes to assistance activities, the *Casa Cantoniera* was managed according to the values of horizontality and solidarity among groups of activists and migrants themselves. These characteristics marked a great difference with the Massi shelter, and favoured the spontaneous influx of the majority of people in transit approaching Oulx. Elena, an activist who took part to the experience, explained that:

[The *Casa Cantoniera*] received those at the shelter who didn't want to be there, [...] those who couldn't be accommodated at the shelter because of different problems, the complicated subject, that's it. [...] So many people went directly to the *Casa Cantoniera* because the information they had from the camps in Slovenia and from those who had passed through there was to go to the *Casa Cantoniera*, not to the shelter. [...] What's more, it guaranteed people a kind of hospitality that in my opinion, as I see it politically but also from a humanitarian point of view, is much fairer, is much more dignified, in many ways, than the shelter. For example, the possibility of cooking, which people in transit who come here haven't done for at least three years, because in the IOM camps, in Lesvos, in short, in all those concentrationary facilities that are along the Balkan route, there is no real possibility of cooking. In fact, some even told that they would seize things from them if they tried to make an attempt at camp cooking. So, this cooking thing I always found very important, those who arrived there would head straight to the kitchen, either to grab food, maybe because they had experienced quite heavy periods of hunger, or to cook some typical things, I don't know, Persian or Afghan. I found it a much more dignified context, also because you were not being welcomed by an operator, you were being welcomed by someone who together with you is carrying on a struggle. Then, certainly from the migrant's point of view, there is maybe not a political awareness of this struggle, not in everyone, but it is also true that crossing a border is (emphasis) a political act in this moment, in this context. So there was a relationship that sought much more horizontality than there is at the [Massi] refuge.²⁰⁶

As Luigi's experience shows, the influx towards the *Casa Cantoniera* was determined also by its being managed without hourly or influx limits to welcome people in transit, in contrast to the Massi

²⁰⁶ NB_MA_PI_20211208

shelter, which was only open at night. This element was particularly significant, especially given the harsh winters in the Alpine environment.

It is also true that in the end, the then perverse dynamic is that so many times the migrant sleeps, showers and eats at the institutional shelter, and then during the day he leans on the occupied *Casa Cantoniera*, which still gives him shelter for those 7 to 8 hours that remain uncovered. (We laugh) So much so that (we laugh again). ²⁰⁷

In a context of such oppositional practices and discourses toward the institutional response to "secondary movements," what made *Chez Jesoulx's* role controversial in the landscape of "humanitarian borderwork" in the Upper Susa Valley was its factual complementarity with the same as Marco, the local administrator, explained:

The anarchists, the No Border, [...] clearly fit into the flaws of the state, that is, where the state does not give an answer they are (inc) to give it [...] (points me to the building, which is 100 meters from the City Hall). That was the occupied *Casetta*, which after endless reminders was cleared, but it undeniably gave a big service. That is, it was replacing the state a lot. ²⁰⁸

This was also revealed by a part of the occupying collective: Elena, for instance, pointed out that the overwhelming of the *Casetta* allowed the "lightening" of the Massi shelter in a period in which presences could amount to over 100 per night²⁰⁹. On this regard, Augusta shared an interesting mass quantification of how much the *Casetta*, while illegal, has saved the state in the management of "secondary movements":

I estimate that the two and a half years of the *Casetta* saved the state 750 thousand euros. Because we, to put up such a service we ask for more. [...] They didn't pay for the electric light, they were all volunteers... however (inc) had to pay for such a facility, with the operators and everything, they would have had to spend at least 750 thousand euros. [...] So we're around a million and a half, in two and a half years, now [the state] going to have to get it out. ²¹⁰

"Now the state is going to have to get it out": with these words Augusta referred to the situation that followed the eviction of the *Casetta*, on March 2021. This event is later analysed as a *bordering* practice put in place by state actors, and shaping the "geography of humanitarian borderwork" in the

²⁰⁷ NS_BM_ZI_20210317

²⁰⁸ SR_TA_PI_20210608

²⁰⁹ NB_MA_PI_20211208

²¹⁰ SV_GS_ZI_20210411

Upper Susa Valley²¹¹. In the meantime, the contemporary consolidation of the project around the Massi shelter testified the state acknowledgment of the need to govern “secondary movements” by providing a place to recover transit migrants in the Upper Susa Valley.

7.2.6. The *rifugio* Massi: *borderline* handling of an emergency, far from the *borderline*

The opening of the *rifugio* Massi is recognised in this thesis as a state response to the eviction of *Chez Jésus* in Claviere (see part 5 of Chapter 5 “The Upper Susa Valley”). This initiative, privately funded and managed by the no-profit association Talita Kum, occurred within the broader humanitarian project MigrAlp.

As the ethnography reveals, the Massi shelter was the brainchild of Talita Kum, a foundation born in 2010 in the Lower Susa Valley. The foundations agreed to manage a building in Oulx, in the pertinences of the local parish, and provided initially three staff members in charge of taking care of transit migrants. Private funds came mainly from a philanthropic foundation linked to a steel industry of the Lower Valley, and the religious environment. This reinforced the perspective of an “up-the-valley” contribution consolidating the “humanitarian borderscape” of the Upper Susa Valley. As well, this marked a significant distinction with formal solidarity initiatives observed in other re-bordered frontier contexts (for example: Gazzotti, 2020; Gordon & Larsen 2021; Aris Escarcena, 2022)²¹².

When it comes to its positioning within the state “care and control” strategy, the Massi shelter backed the public representatives’ perspective on the management of “secondary movements” across the Upper Susa Valley, even if privately founded until 2021. That is, dealing with it as a humanitarian emergency. Sandro, who holds a leading role in the management of the Talita Kum foundation, described the purpose of the Massi shelter intervention as follows:

We started three years ago [...] with a focus, in that winter of 2017 some people had died, found later in the spring under the snow. At the same time the *sottochiesa* in Claviere had been occupied by the No Global, No Border, so who certainly held together the two dimensions: the politics of not having borders, and the emergency of taking in the people who were passing through. The idea right away, on [our] part, was to separate these two aspects, no, in the sense that [we] did not care, [we were] not interested and it was not [our] task to make it a political issue, but it was certainly [our] task to make it an emergency issue, hence of caring for people. That is why we chose not to settle on the border, but to settle 15 kilometers from the border, because Oulx is not a border town. It

²¹¹ See part 3 in this Chapter.

²¹² On this regard, please refer to ethnography contributions reviewed in section 2.5.4.

was precisely for this reason, to separate the two dimensions, so we took care of the emergency part and started with this spirit.²¹³

The “transit migration” was described as a phenomenon that cannot be handled at a local level, thus making the object of a political fight was pointless. The decision to settle the shelter far from the borderline was strategic to pursue this distinction. Nevertheless, he recognized that intervening in favor of transit migrants in a re-bordered *borderland* somehow entails a political dimension:

We are always a bit borderline, as an experience, because it is logical, on the one hand you welcome illegal people [...] on the other hand, people who go to France, and France many times rejects them... [...] Logically [this] entails a very borderline situation, and we work hard to be recognized at government and state level, we have to work a lot on the emergency aspect, that is, 100 people show up every day in the territory, we need to give an answer, a solution to this presence... in basic needs, in public safety, in all these aspects. In fact, we cooperate with the Police, with the *Carabinieri* [...]. Bearing in mind that on average 6, 8, 10 thousand people a year pass through [the *borderland*]. [...] This is why I say that, safeguarding the emergency aspect is fundamental, because I don’t want to become political, even though what you’re doing is political, because it’s a dimension of the territory [...] this is difficult (emphasis) because with so many people involved everyone has their own sensitivity, [...] but [...] this distance in my opinion is fundamental to carry on the experience, because when you characterize it on a political level, then it becomes difficult, it becomes sectorial, and sometimes even marginalizing.²¹⁴

All these experiences reveal that the decision to manage on pure humanitarian grounds a highly political issue such as “secondary movements” (Guild et al., 2016) had direct consequences on the organization of shelter activities, as Luigi explained further:

This institutional shelter, for a thousand reasons, some political, some economic, some organizational, is only a night shelter. That is, it is a bit like the principle behind dormitories for the homeless in the city. It opens at night, in the morning at 9 a.m. you go out... This was also the political choice on the part of the administrators, or rather, it was a bit of a balance, a political compromise found between the no-profit sector and the administrators to say “We’ll open it”, because the administrators’ fear was that opening a center open H24 would become a factor in attracting migrants.²¹⁵

²¹³ NS_CL_ZI_20210915

²¹⁴ NS_CL_ZI_20210915

²¹⁵ NS_BM_ZI_20210317

Luigi's standpoint is backed up by the experience of Sara, a state representative from the *Prefettura* of Turin:

There is no management like a reception centre could be. But it was a bit of a choice, with pros and cons. It had to be, as the Massi was structured but as the room was also in Bardonecchia, like an emergency reception, for two or three nights... Then, either you ask to go back into reception [system], and we let you back into reception, or you go and try... and do what you want to do, right? Because a reception structure, even at 60 places, in Oulx, permanent, would have been deadly.²¹⁶

As these data reveal, in the first stages of the state logic of “care and control”, the point of the management of “secondary movements” through the settlement of welcoming center in the *borderland* was to consider it as an emergency and to provide the services strictly necessary to limit their impact on the territory and fatal consequences on migrants in transit, far from the borderline.

7.2.7. Beyond emergency: keeping the shelter “fluid”

When my participant observation at the Massi shelter began, in June 2021, the MigrAlp project had entered a second phase. The Massi shelter was no longer a privately funded night dormitory managed by 2 or 3 staff members. “Transit migration” had resumed after the halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic and it was the only reference of migrants transiting to France in the *borderland* after eviction of the *Casa Cantoniera*, in March of that year. As Sandro explains in the next quote, the average “guests” number was around 50 or 60, and that this opened for the perspective of an enlarged and more structured accommodation building. In the meantime, the staff had been increase up to 8/10 people. Thus, Talita Kum and its partners aspired for public funding, and had presented to the Ministry of the Interiors a two-year plan requiring 400/500 thousand euros.

It is a situation that in any case does not stop at today [...] The problem is always a bit sustainability, because now with private individuals we have managed to get there, but structuring the project differently [...] now we also need public money, otherwise we cannot manage a volume of reception, management, that today the shelter requires.²¹⁷

As well, in March 2021 the Massi shelter had extended its opening time. In the period immediately following the evacuation of the *Casa Cantoniera*, it remained open 24 hours a day. Then, the opening hours were reduced, from 5.30 p.m. to 9 a.m., due to the lack of funds as the public financing got

²¹⁶ SR_GD_ZI_20210810

²¹⁷ NS_CL_ZI_20210915

delayed²¹⁸. Finally, from October 1, the 24-hour service was guaranteed for families and frail persons, while for other users it remained closed in the afternoon.

On Monday, September 27, Gabriele confirms the 24/24h opening from October 1, and points out the related problems: [...] "the spaces are still not right, we don't have a daytime area, the bathrooms are insufficient, and we don't know how to organize cleaning with the migrants present. [...] Throughout October, the opening will be H24 for families and fragile individuals. It will close from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. for everyone else in order to carry out cleaning and maintenance. (And to avoid the temptation of stasis). [...] In case of very bad or cold weather, the staff will assess how to proceed, of course."

(Field diary: September 29, 2021)

"And to avoid the temptation of stasis". Gabriele, holding as Sandro a head role in managing the Massi shelter, suggested with this formula that ensuring of the "fluidity" in terms of permanence of users, i.e. to keep the Massi shelter "a place of transit", represented a priority in the public-private local management of "secondary movements". This was clearly expressed by Luigi:

At the institutional shelter, the migrant really tends to be in transit, i.e. he/she sleeps there one night, two nights, but not much more, i.e., there is no *sedentariness*.²¹⁹

As the ethnography reveals, clearly the key political sustainability strategy of the institutional shelter aimed to protect transit migrants in a militarized re-bordered *borderland*, was intended also to keep their permanence period as short as possible. This opens for significant reflections in terms of Italian state's interests as far as the internal European re-bordering process is concerned. Daily practices observed on the field were clearly aimed at validate the "two-day-rule", i.e. allowing migrants to stay at the Massi shelter for the shortest time possible represented an impact factor on the time of mobility of transit migrants. As the reason behind their presence in the Upper Susa Valley was the proximity with the Italian-French border, most of the times it put migrants in the conditions of needing to speed-up the planning and implementation of irregular "secondary movements".

²¹⁸ "In essence, the shelter will close at 9 a.m. and reopen at 5:30 p.m. even for families. This is the result of the non-arrival of public funds. [A member of the Talita Kum foundation] had submitted a project proposal for 600 thousand euros, of which 180 thousand were then initially granted, but without specifying on what time basis [...], but there was never a written agreement, and in any case they are not coming. That money is used to pay the operators, in fact. They also tell me that between March and May the shelter went ahead with the 60,000 euros left over from the previous project [...] The staff was being paid by Talita Kum, who in addition to not having any more money, has to guarantee summer vacations." (Field diary: June 30, 2021)

²¹⁹ NS_BM_ZI_20210317

At the diplomatic and inter-state relations, Italy and France adopted aligned and cooperative policy and discourses in terms of fighting irregular migrations, securing European border, as well as activating joined border patrolling activities and readmission protocols²²⁰. Yet, as the ethnographic analysis showed, there is a more multifaceted reality in the Italian state “secondary movement” management, revealing a “transit country” attitude. Zooming in the daily practices embodied by the “humanitarian borderwork” agents, the ethnography uncovered that embedded in the “care and control” strategy implementation in the Upper Susa Valley oriented at limiting the territorial impact of “secondary movements” there is a sustainability prerogative, i.e. “keeping the transit fluid”. As with the different border practices implemented by the Italian and French police in the Upper Susa Valley, ethnography brought to light different national interests embodied in the daily practices of “humanitarian borderwork”.

7.2.8. Embodying the “transit” strategy in a militarized Alpine landscape

A further critical aspect revealed by the ethnography concerned the implementation of different practices embedded by solidarity agents as far as the “keeping the transit fluid” strategy is concerned. The humanitarian purposes of the Massi shelter favoured the inclusion of a broad range of solidarity actors. Alongside the formal actors joining the MigrAlp project, as well a legal support service funded by the Waldesians, around the Massi shelter converged a significant network of volunteers: activists from *Valsusa Oltre Confine*, people who had participated to the experience of *Spazio Calmo*, part of the No TAV movement. Over time, the volunteer contribution was fundamental to the management of the shelter:

Without volunteers that shelter in my opinion may close (laughs) If we only rely on those poor desperate men [the workers] [...]. ²²¹

This exposed a clear division of labour between paid staff and volunteers, as far as the management of activities within the Massi shelter was concerned, On the one hand, staff held responsibility of managing the structure and ensuring its smooth running, as well as maintaining day-to-day communication with project stakeholders. In addition, this staff was also in charge of taking care of cleaning, preparing meals, managing the timing of activities as well as keeping the guests' time in the shelter under control. What is most important, they were accountable to ensuring the “two-day rule”, in order to keep the shelter a “place of transit”.

²²⁰ Section 5.4.3. offered an overview on this regard.

²²¹ LD_E_PI_20210723

As the empirical data showed, keeping under control the permanence time of transit migrants turned out to be particularly challenging. This was since “guests” registration in the Massi shelter was informal. To ensure its primary objective, namely the security of people in transit, the only criterion observed for admission to the facility was the migrant’s declaration of being “in transit”. Identity checks were not envisaged to prevent potential “guests” from staying away from the facility fearing police identification. However, the lack of a nominal register made it difficult to monitor the length of stay of individuals and families, which relied on the staff’s visual memory.

Moreover, given the vulnerable nature of the “guests”, there was no mechanism for expulsion at all, except in the case of behaviours attempting at the security of the facility. People in transit with medical vulnerabilities, or who expressed the need to rest, or who stayed too long in the shelter, were instead temporarily sent to the Red Cross logistics centre in Bussoleno, a civil protection shelter located 50 kilometres away, in the Lower Susa valley. The lack of a nominal register made this staff’s task also difficult to fulfil.

A further bias in the staff control of the “two-day” rule referred to the fact that it based on the dialogue with “guests”, that was however mostly entrusted to the volunteers. This was included in their general task of “securing” the migrant, should he or she decide to pursue his/her plan to cross the militarised Alpine border. In addition to collecting, storing, and distributing suitable clothing and shoes to prevent the risk of injury or frostbite in the mountains, volunteers were responsible for informing “guests” about the risks of crossing, supporting their *agency* while taking into consideration their subjective characteristics and conditions.

Mattia, a staff member²²², explained that this favoured the circumstance whereby volunteers and operators were often in a state of difference of knowledge with respect to the subjective reasons why a guest might violate the “two-day rule”. Volunteers had access to a greater and better information, useful to situate the subjective condition of the “guest” within the kaleidoscopic everyday reality of “transit migration”. Nevertheless, it was the staff’s duty to ensure the “fluidity” of transit through the Massi shelter. Based on this, the holistic prerogative of keeping the Massi shelter a “place of transit” embodied by everyday practices of both staff and volunteers fractured along two different interpretations of it. The following vignette²²³ gives account for this circumstance.

Luisa and I are in the shelter courtyard, heading for the clothes storage space. It's September, it's not yet time to take out the winter reserve, but it's time to get an idea of how much and what's there. As we pass the containers that have been used to house

²²² Field diary: July 12, 2021; LD_AT_IC_20210712.

²²³ Field diary: July 4, 2021.

families over the summer, to keep them separate from the group of individuals, a girl stops us. She is part of an Afghan family that has already been turned away three times in the Montgenèvre area. She's pregnant, and in tears. She just argued with his husband about the decision to take after the third push-back. She wants to try again, their family is waiting for them in Germany, she would feel safer there. Her husband wants to wait. She asks for additional help, and gets desperate when we explain her that the help we can provide stops inside the shelter fence. One of the operators on duty, Mario, approaches us. He is already upset: "You who talk to them, explain to them that they must be transferred to Bussoleno, to the Red Cross centre! It's already the third day I've seen them here!" Luisa and Mario start arguing. He claims that if the family does not leave the shelter within few hours, he will organize the transfer. Me and Luisa already know what it means. It means that we will have to explain the family what is going to happen. To understand their confusion. To explain them where this place is. To explain how to move from there. To explain that no volunteers will be there to help them. And, to explain the reason behind the decision. At that point, normally "guests" will protest, saying that it is not their fault if they are slow in crossing the border area, and easily intercepted by the police. This is exactly Luisa's opinion. As well, she adds, the application of the "two-day rule" in their occasion was pointless. "They didn't even spend a night here! For three nights in a row they were dealing with the French police at the borderline!"

The family left that night and did not come back, suggesting that they successfully crossed the border.

As the ethnography revealed, two understanding of "transit" coexisted and often collided at the Massi shelter. On the one hand, staff oversaw ensuring its fluidity and placed "guests" in the conditions of leaving in the shortest time possible, in a sort of "supporting mobility". On the other hand, volunteers were responsible for reducing the real risks embedded in an eventual cross-border activity through the Upper Susa Valley's militarized Alps. This can be defined as "securing mobility". Flaking those that aimed to "discourage mobility"²²⁴, this distinction further stratified the range of practices observed in the "humanitarian borderscape" of the Upper Susa Valley, as far as the humanitarian agents' attitude towards the cross-border mobility of transit migrants is concerned.

²²⁴ See section 7.1.1. in this Chapter.

7.2.9. The COVID-19 as an impact factor on the “humanitarian borderscape”

This final section unveils the impact of the containment measures against the spread of the COVID-19 on the range of solidarity places and activities of the “humanitarian borderscape” in the Upper Susa Valley. As examined in section 6.2.4. of Chapter 6, these indirectly impacted on the mobility strategies of migrants in transit. In October 2021, the Italian government declared as mandatory the possession of the *greenpass* certification in workplaces, jeopardizing the Oulx-Claviere bus service as few drivers met the requirement. This affected and diversified the mobility strategies of transit migrants, as the few bus heading the *borderland* available were usually overcrowded. From this scenario stemmed additional and displaced support activities, that transformed the bus station in Oulx in a space of “humanitarian borderwork”, and thus expanded the “humanitarian borderscape” in the Upper Susa Valley.

Empirical data collected between October 15 and November 1 showed that a significant number of transit migrants missed the opportunity to approach the border by bus were stranded every day at the bus station, as the Massi shelter opened only at 4 p.m.:

P. picks me up by car a few dozen metres from the bus station, we park [and] we put our hands in our hair: there must be 80 to 90 people. Many I already know. The bus arrives, it stops, people crowd to the door. [...] The bus leaves, empty; the driver intercepts my gaze and waves his hand at me: later. I sense that he is giving us time to explain to the migrants that precedence must be given to families, to avoid children being crushed in the crowd, and that not everyone will find a seat. [...] The bus returns, P. stands in front of the door and acts as a human shield for the women and children to get on. When the women and children are finished, the men start pushing harder. We pull P. out of the group by force. Some fathers and brothers want to get on because their families boarded the bus, single men want to get on because they have missed the chance for three days. Chaos is created by selling group tickets, some will stay down even though they have paid for the ticket. The bus fills up quickly, some men are in the middle but without a seat, the driver asks them to get off, they refuse because their families are in there, the driver threatens to call the police. P. and I get on the vehicle to negotiate with the people who don't have a seat, the women call us pointing at their families, some want to get off but can't find a way through. Eventually the police are not called, those who have no seats get off, but the driver warns us: I don't work in these conditions. The bus leaves. [...] Among the people left on the ground, about 30, are family members of those who left, a man also put his bag on the bus as a strategy to get on, but the bag left without him. Some

lonely men are angry with us, families have been walking past them for three days. They want to know if there is another vehicle, at what time, if there are taxis. There is also a group that has just arrived from Milan, they have not eaten for 3 days. I call the shelter, we go and pick up some food. We bring crackers, tuna, juice and croissants.

(Field diary: October 28, 2021)

As the empirical data collected showed, in order to fill the gap created by the jeopardized bus service on the one side, and the limited opening hour on the other side, a group of volunteers organized to assist transit migrants at the bus station. That concerned the mediation between migrants and the driver, the orientation to the available bus services, serving lunch in order to limit the possibility of transit migrants unsafely engaging in energy-consuming cross-border practices lacking the needed resources. As well, this concentrated the stranded transit migrants in the bus station, limiting their presence in the town centre. Thus, by focusing on the COVID-19 as impacting the “humanitarian borderwork” in the Upper Susa Valley, the ethnography uncovered that it extended the “humanitarian borderscape” in terms of territorial and activity range. As well, grass-rooted initiatives decisively contributed to keep the shelter “fluid” and sustainable:

The shelter is still functioning thanks to our [informal] work at the bus terminal.

(Field diary: October 28, 2021)

7.3. Bordering “humanitarian borderwork”

By exploring the everyday reality of the “care and control” strategy implemented by the state actors and the “humanitarian borderwork” carried out by local, not-that-local and transnational agents, this Chapter has unveiled a fragmented solidarity scenario. In particular, it showed a polarization between solidarity agents that carried out their activities under the aegis of a public vision oriented towards “caring and controlling” transit migrants, and more politically characterized groups that have opposed this perspective, in word and deed.

This section illustrates that state actors’ *bordering* practices intervened on this polarization, further defining the boundaries of the “humanitarian borderscape”. These were not aimed to govern “secondary movements”, but to contain those “political” initiatives that matched humanitarian support with daily practices of denouncing border violence.

7.3.1. Taking the political struggle away from the border(line)

The “humanitarian borderscape” of the Upper Susa Valley has been strongly characterized by the interplay between informal transnational groups, supporting radical and No Border-inspired practices and discourses, and state actors aiming to contain and limit them. As discussed earlier, the foundation of the first informal support initiative in favour of transit migrants, *Chez Jésus*, represents the irruption of politics into the scenario of the “secondary movements” management in the Upper Susa Valley. Its eviction, on March 10, 2018, marked instead the first step of a state strategy aimed to distance politics from the *border(land)*.

As also noted by Tazzioli (2020b), empirical data collected showed that in the time frame 2017-2021 all stable initiatives founded by informal groups that did not developed in, or converged into, institutional initiatives, were removed by the police. It was the case of *Chez Jésus*, whose eviction occurred despite the recognition of the fundamental role it played in healing the suffering of transit migrants. For example, Luigi reputed their activity as fundamental in the management of “secondary movements” in the Upper Susa Valley, despite the hostility received from the occupants to his association’s work.

[The] reality of the occupied *Casa Cantoniera*, which clearly, is a reality yes, illegal, formally, which ... however, it still gave hospitality and reception to people and is in fact self-managed [...] It has to be said, in short, it still gave a hand, in so many situations, that is. It is true that without this (pause) this, this, how to say, this help... they are still energies, without this help, probably only the system of institutions, only the public system, probably would not have made it. This in my opinion but it is worthy to be said, here.²²⁵

Other two occupations carried out in August and October 2021 had an extremely shorter life. For instance, the occupation of the abandoned custom in Claviere, under the slogan “*Dogana Occupata, Frontiera Spaccata*” (custom occupied, border pulverized)²²⁶ last only 5 days²²⁷. The occupation of the *Casa Cantoniera* in the same border town²²⁸ was evicted after only 4 days²²⁹.

In addition to this, every demonstration organized by those informal transnational groups were highly kept under surveillance and contained by law enforcement agents:

²²⁵ NS_BM_ZI_20210317

²²⁶ Field diary: August 2, 2021.

²²⁷ Field diary: August 5, 2021.

²²⁸ Field diary: October 2, 2021.

²²⁹ Field diary: October 5, 2021.

Claudio and I go to the refuge, then decide to pass through Claviere. A 3-day anarchist camp is planned on the border, to coincide with the Zapatista tour. [...] There is a huge deployment of police, which clashes with the holiday atmosphere of the village. The Digos [political police] from Turin are sitting at the tables in the bar, two small trucks are in front of the church, with policemen sitting in the shade, and other small trucks are at the end of the village.

(Field diary: July 23, 2021)

In analysing the extension of the “humanitarian borderscape” in the Upper Susa Valley, as the ethnographic results showed, the push *towards* the borderline operated by part of the solidarity scenario, corresponded a “lowering the line of attack” state strategy, using the expression suggested by the local administrator Giorgio²³⁰.

A further critical aspect revealed by the ethnography concerned that the removal of radical solidarity experiences from the border zone also responded to a logic of protecting the local economic interests. In Chapter 5 the strategic importance of sport and leisure infrastructures in Claviere has been broadly illustrated (section 5.1.2.), as well as the boycott practices put in place by some No-border groups (5.5.2.) On the relationship between *Chez Jésus* and the local community, the representative of the municipality Daniele explained:

We had the *sottochiesa* occupied for about 5 or 6 months, and there the numbers were very large for as large as we are. And yet also big in absolute terms, because if we think of an average of 30, 40, 50 people staying in the *sottochiesa*, that was really a lot for us. Besides the anarchists who occupied it. Initially it was a space occupied by voluntary associations, which [...] very quickly were supplanted by these other realities. With all that goes with it: writings on walls, murals, damages... We have tried to coexist peacefully by saying, “If you take care of the purpose you say you have set for yourselves, that’s fine with us. But let’s try to coexist, meaning don’t make camps outside, don’t write on the walls of the church like you did ... so try to live peacefully”. Unfortunately, that was not the case, so they did acts of vandal damage at a camp that was made, which were on what for us is life: artificial snow cannons are life and economic survival. And that then resulted in them being cleared out of this venue. “For us, it is important tourism, of which we live 99 percent, really it becomes difficult for us to accept you”.²³¹

²³⁰ SR_AF_ZI_20210512

²³¹ SR_CF_ZI_20210511

Accordingly, the empirical material exposed that, as for the “care and control” strategy, evictions and in general a repressive policy against the more politicized part of the humanitarian scenario pursued a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, that of removing grounded solidarity practices from the borderline; on the other hand, that of protecting local interests based on the flourishing tourism industry.

7.3.2. Taking the political struggle away from the border(land)

In terms of state *bordering* practices targeting and defining the territorial and activity range of solidarity actor, the eviction of the *Casa Cantoniera* acted to a more structural level. This filled the institutional gap left by the state-backed intervention, and last two years. As Elena commented, the eviction caused both material and political deep consequences on the *borderland*:

My assessment of the eviction... is that it was an extremely hypocritical game, [...] The paradoxical thing that is very funny, which I find extremely hypocritical, is that at the moment when spring starts, two days after the solstice, the house is cleared out. Anyone who lives here knows very well that spring does not start on 21 March or 23 March, but begins in May, June. The snow and the cold begin in that season. So all this attempt to safeguard people during the cold emergency, I have not seen it as real and concrete. If we then want to speak in human, political, social terms, evicting a space like the *Casa Cantoniera* made the situation much more complex and much more difficult to manage than before, because the *Casa Cantoniera* was a space that was comfortable for everyone, both the institutions and the shelter. [...] So in my opinion evicting it was a losing game from all points of view, both from the point of view of the cold and raw management of migration, and from the human point of view.²³²

As we can see, along with the eviction of the *Casa Cantoniera* the institutional project MigrAlp was boosted, the logistical centre of the Red Cross in Bussoleno was opened to receive transit migrants, a state-non-state dialogue was started to consider the possibility of giving a more structural shape to the Massi shelter. This further showed the state implementation of *bordering* practices aimed to facilitate a “down-the-valley” organization in the management of “secondary movements”, as well as to delimit the scope of “humanitarian borderwork” in terms of actors and activities.

This way, the ethnographic analysis uncovered that these aimed to separate and legitimate the range of actors and activities aligned with the state emergency-based solidarity infrastructure put in place,

²³² NB_MA_PI_20211208

penalizing those aiming to explicitly match the humanitarian and the political. Moreover, in the *borderline* context earlier described by Sandro with reference to the political issue embedded in any solidarity work in favour to illegalized individuals, state *bordering* practices observed set the borderline between the illegal and the legal. According to a *bordering* theoretical approach, this represent an immaterial yet clear frontier in the “humanitarian borderscape” of the Upper Susa Valley. Finally, further empirical data regarding the informal support activities in the *borderland* supported again the interpretation of an interplay between informal transnational groups initiatives and law enforcement agents’ practices. In Summer 2021, the first adapted to the repressive policy against their initiatives by adopting a low-profile attitude. They showed up at the bus station, and organized in a decentred area in Oulx an informal daily settlement to receive transit migrants during the closing hours of the Massi shelter, once again filling a void left by the institutions at a time of high numbers in terms of transit migrants.

For a few weeks there has been a truck with some German guys in Oulx [...] in the morning they go to meet the families coming out of the refuge to accompany them and give them food, or rather, they give people the chance to eat on the truck. [...] They told me that the Digos went there that day to check their documents. The day before it had been the Carabinieri to go there, again checking documents, and also ordering them to remove the tents the truckers had set up to protect the migrants from the rain.

(Field diary: September 9, 2021)



Figure 12. German activists informally run assistance activities during the closing hours of the Massi shelter, in the Sotto la Rocca area of Oulx. (Fieldwork diary: September 15, 2021)

Clearly the analysis presented revealed how law enforcement agents targeted those solidarity actors with increased controls, marking a further borderline between the illegal and the tolerated, the tolerated and the forbidden, in the “humanitarian borderscape” of the Upper Susa Valley.

7.4. Final remarks

The Chapter has zoomed in the everyday reality of the “humanitarian borderwork” in the Upper Susa Valley. Taking as theoretical reference the Critical Border studies perspectives that looks at *bordering* practices as both tangible and intangible processes, the analysis grounded on the ethnography has delineated two overlapping “geographies of humanitarian borderwork” in the realm of the management of “secondary movement” in the *borderland*.

A first “geography of humanitarian borderwork” has emerged from the exploration of the Upper Susa Valley as “humanitarian borderscape”, investigating the territorialization of solidarity practices in contexts involved in processes of *re-bordering* (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017b) with ethnographic lenses. This revealed that the state strategy of “care and control” in the Upper Susa Valley adapted to the prerogatives of an Alpine militarized border based on a tourism industry. Its priority was that of “lowering the line of attack”, embodied in offering transit migrants a temporary shelter far from the borderline and discouraging them from illegal border crossing. On this regard, ethnographic results showed that this responded to a threefold priority based on a risk-management approach: to protect the state border, limiting the risk of irregular “secondary movements”; to protect human security, limiting the risk connected to the transit migrants’ vulnerability in an Alpine militarized landscape; to protect the local industry based on tourism, supporting the creation of welcoming facilities that granted at the same time assistance to transit migrants and a place to concentrate them, limiting the impact of their presence on the *borderland*.

In this dimension of the “humanitarian borderwork” in the Upper Susa Valley emerged a controversial positioning of the Italian state with regard to the local management of “secondary movements”. Ethnographic results showed that the local sustainability of a “care and control” strategy in an Alpine militarized *borderland* also passed through the need to “keep transit fluid”, as far as its passage through the area is concerned. This entails a significant paradox in the European *re-bordering* policy aimed at contain “secondary movements”.

The state “down-the-valley” approach has also *bordered* the development of the “humanitarian borderscape” in the Upper Susa Valley. Ethnographic results showed that its territorial range, as well as that of its actors and activities, resulted from the interplay between state practices embedded in the “care and control” strategy and everyday practices embodied by the diverse solidarity actors that

supported, contested and transgressed it. On this regard, solidarity practices emerged from localized, spontaneous initiatives put in place by local dwellers and small groups. Then they got consolidated with the contribution of organized social movements, according to an “up-the-valley” dynamic. On this regard, the ethnography uncovered that solidarity practices were organized on those social networks that embody the traditions of the Susa Valley as a “transit” space and a fuzzing reality in terms of political activism. Moreover, solidarity practices embodied in transnational agents expanded the “humanitarian borderwork” beyond the border, thus making it a *de-bordering* factor. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has been discussed as able to further expand the “humanitarian borderscape” of the Upper Susa Valley in terms of space, actors and practices.

A second “geography of humanitarian borderwork” in the Upper Susa Valley has instead emerged with reference to the political space *bordered* by the “care and control” strategy implemented by state actors. On this regard, the ethnography revealed that the “humanitarian borderwork” has filled assistance gaps left by the state. This in turn *re-bordered* it, by repressing those initiatives that did not remained within the boundaries delimited by addressing emergency-based project, and transgressed them by favoring the irruption of politics in the “secondary movements” management. As well, empirical data portrayed this second “geography of humanitarian borderwork” as fractured along many lines: that between different approaches to transit migrants’ *agency*; that marking the division between the legal and the illegal within a context of a *borderline* humanitarian support; that distancing solidarity practices that support state-backed projects from those contesting it.

The complex and fragmented nature of the “geographies of humanitarian borderwork” is addressed in Chapter 8, to further explore the extent to which it significantly impacted on *border experience* in the Upper Susa Valley.

Chapter 8

Border experiences of g/local processes in the Upper Susa Valley

This Chapter explores the everyday *border experience* in the Upper Susa Valley. In particular, it builds upon the findings regarding the daily reality of the *re-bordering* process at the Alpine Italian-French border (Chapter 6, “*Re-bordering* practices and hindered mobilities in the Upper Susa Valley”) and those addressing the shaping of an “humanitarian borderscape” aimed to limit its negative outcomes on both transit migrants’ safety and the *borderland* (Chapter 7, “Geographies of humanitarian borderwork in the Upper Susa Valley”).

The Chapter presents a multi-perspectival understanding of the *border(land)* (Rumford, 2012), by bringing into dialogue *re-bordering tales*, i.e. *border narratives* (Newman, 2003, 2006a) regarding the return of identity checks at the Alpine Italian-French border. The daily experience of various categories dealing with the *re-bordering* process, “secondary movements”, and the fragmented “humanitarian borderscape” is interrogated. The analysis uncovers tangible and intangible boundaries that stratify and fragment the *borderland* since the unfolding of the *re-bordering* process at the Alpine Italian-French frontier. Based on this, the ethnographic approach offers a multi-perspectival framework that set the grounds for discussing the polysemic nature of the Upper Susa Valley.

8.1 Experiencing “transit migration” in times of *re-bordering*

This first part addresses the impact of “secondary movements” on the *border experience* of the inhabitants of the Upper Susa Valley. Ethnographic results uncovered its significant g/local nature. As has been argued throughout the thesis, this investigation builds on an understanding of “transit migration” as generated according to a structure/agency paradigm by the securitized approach to migrations implemented at the European level. This is combined with political unrests and wars that acted as push factors, and technological progress that allowed long, time- and money-consuming journeys. This makes “secondary movements” challenging the re-bordered internal European boundaries a phenomenon whose origins, dynamics and developments are framed by global processes. Thus, *borderlanders* of the Upper Susa Valley experience at the local level a global phenomenon. This section particularly addresses the point of view of local authorities’ representatives, and that of ordinary dwellers.

8.1.1. State actors: governing global dynamics... locally

The relationship between the state and its edge is a central topic in Borderlands studies. It is from the first pioneering contributions to Borderland studies that this issue gained a specific attention by scholars²³³. The ethnographic approach on the *border experience* of local authorities' representatives grasped significant elements to define the nature of the state-periphery relation in times of European internal *re-bordering* and "secondary movements".

By applying this analytical framework to the data collected, the ethnography revealed that, facing the first informal support initiatives left in the hand of activist and volunteers, local authorities' representatives felt abandoned by the state. In this regard, Daniele was part of the local administration of Claviere, the 200-inhabitants border village lying at the proximities of the state borderline. His experience of the "secondary movements" phenomenon in 2017-2018 was that of feeling to be over-exposed with regard to a global phenomenon that he could not handle: "Our communal road is one and a half kilometres long, but actually the town centre is 5/600 metres long [...] This gives the dimensions that any small number in Claviere becomes large: [...] Five people going back and forth here are perceived as 50".

During the period when there was occupation [of *Chez Jésus*], the relationship [with state authorities] was... how should I say, institutional but not frequent, despite all my requests and things, because the first period was really terrible for us. [...] We felt almost abandoned despite the fact that there were policemen [during] mass demonstrations in the churchyard. And so in this period, the relations were institutional ones, trying to make people understand the difficulty for a small place like ours to overcome that moment.²³⁴

Later, it was thanks to the structuration of state-backed projects²³⁵ that the distance between the state centre and its peripheries got reduced. Giorgio, local administrator in Bardonecchia, explained:

We immediately took the matter to the higher bodies, didn't we? And so we immediately addressed the issue with the Prefect of Turin, [a position held at the time by a] person from my point of view who was out of the ordinary, because he took charge of this issue with us, preventing it from being left like this (makes a gesture of fatality). And so he carried out a local activity, [and thanks to it] we managed to get [the *Spazio Calmo*]. [...] I'll tell you the truth. The first phase was a very adrenalin-filled phase, precisely because of the fact that we had to deal with [secondary movements] in a tight timeframe [...].

²³³ Please refer to section 2.5.2. for further references.

²³⁴ SR_CF_ZI_20210511

²³⁵ Please refer to Chapter 7, especially parts 1 and 2.

However, in that adrenalin-fuelled phase, in which we all got really involved, in a very active way, to have found that we had two interlocutors in the Prefect [...] and in the deputy Prefect [...] who were really *interested* (emphasis added) and who came here to hold meetings! That is, the Prefect of Turin took his little car and came to the town hall of Bardonecchia to have the meeting, with the mediators, with the NGOs, with the parish priest... [That] was something that I had not even foreseen, but which I had no difficulty in doing, because I had an interlocutor in front of me who had taken on the problem, who had understood, probably because of his personal sensitivity, his experience as a prefect, and so on. [Therefore] we really didn't perceive [an abandonment] at all, and maybe it's more unique than rare [...] because we had an institutional interlocutor who immediately identified the issue, tried to support us in the best way possible, found the resources to do so, so what more did you want? For us that thing there was galvanising! So we surfed a wave where everybody was rowing in that direction there! (surprised face) "Is this Italy?!" We said it to each other a few times (laughs) "Yes, it is!" ²³⁶

Giorgio's experience and view shows how the empty space that had been created in the first phase of "secondary movements" in the Upper Susa Valley was physically reduced by subjectivities that emerged as protagonists in the peripheral representative bodies of state power. The same space, in fact, widened again with the change of Prefect, as Vittorio, local administrator in Oulx, explained:

Prefect [name] arrived while I was still there. Let's say that the profile has always been: let's be calm. But that depends on the people [...] He is a little more relaxed (ironic). ²³⁷

Marco took office as administrator of Oulx after the change of Prefect. This is how he explained his experience as manager of his territory:

Marco: Even now [June 2021] we still have very high numbers, around 50 people a day, which compared to the population is an immensity. I mean, here in six months a country big like Oulx has passed under your nose without you noticing.

Me: How have you experienced the relationship between the periphery and the centre?

Marco: Not good, total abandonment. It took me 2 years and 3 months to get the *Casa Cantoniera* cleared out. [...] I said "There is a situation of illegality, I demand its resolution". After two years and three months they shit on me, making fun of me, I remember a year before the eviction actually happened, "Don't worry, we're working on

²³⁶ SR_AF_ZI_20210512

²³⁷ SR_DP_ZI_20210501

it, it's a matter of days, and you wake up and it's all done". So you say "No, that was bad faith, you were just telling me that to keep me quiet".²³⁸

Beyond feeling abandoned by the state in containing issues related to "secondary movements" in his territory, Marco also pointed out that he felt invested at local level with responsibilities that should instead have been handled at state level:

"Guys, but that's your problem, not mine". [...] Municipalities have a lot of competences, but I am sure of one thing: they are not competent in matters of public order, nor in migration policies, and municipalities must offer assistance to their *residents* (emphasis added). These are not my residents. [...] I have always told them, "I have to make identity cards, fix potholes in the streets and change light bulbs, not take care of migrants" [...] It's a *state* competence (emphasis added) and therefore of the Prefecture and the Ministry. [...] If the municipality *wants* to (emphasis), it can help, it can enter the system. If it *wants* it can (emphasis), but it's a state competence. Of this I am very certain. [...] It's not a joke. I mean, the disregard that the central state [...] has for the peripheral areas is not something that is just (inc), it is a very concrete thing unfortunately."²³⁹

On this regard, empirical data revealed that the subjectivity dimension in the state-borderland relationship deeply impacted on the local management of "secondary movements" and on the *border experience* of local administrators.

The significance of the subjective micro-level in the unravelling of g/local interplays between "secondary movements" and their local management reveals the relevance of the ethnographic approach on the subject of the study, and its capability to grasp analysis perspectives that would otherwise remain under the radar. It is to this focus that the "people approach" in Borderland Studies (Van Houtum, 2000) points, and to which this research aimed to contribute.

At a broader political level, ethnographic results reveal an even wider distance between the state and its *borderlands*, as far as the management of "secondary movements" is concerned. Local administrators explained that in the Italian parliament, an amendment to the budget law was discussed in 2019, allocating 5 million euro to border areas. With this, the initiating deputy intended to reimburse them for the financial resources spent to locally manage migration flows, both incoming and outgoing. Giorgio explained how he found out about it and how this significant allocation of funds to *borderlands* was managed.

²³⁸ SR_TA_PI_20210608

²³⁹ SR_TA_PI_20210608

One day I received an email: “I am the Honourable [name], ah, I wanted to inform you that (we laugh) all border municipalities, maritime or land, crossed by the phenomenon [of transit migration], are benefited by an amendment in the budget law, according to some simple parameters” [. ...] To give an example, Courmayeur, which (we laugh) is a border town, which is a tourist resort like Bardonecchia [...] in the collective imagination, the *Milano da bere*, the six-star hotels, the Russians... [...] on the basis of the number of rejected immigrants [and as] a border town, has taken 150 thousand euro! Claviere, which is on the border, the same! [...] It worked like a reimbursement [...] Do you understand? Me, if I wanted to make a pavement (ironic), maybe nobody would come and tell me anything! That’s logical, isn’t it? [...] The mayor of Claviere says the same, Claviere is a village with 200 inhabitants, he sees 150 thousand euro coming, so he says the same... So just to say, that it then generates stuff... In facts I wrote an email to this one, “Thank you, you’re kind, I’m very pleased, you’ve been very kind, we’ll try to make good use of it” (ironic) What did he want me to say? I invited him to come “If you want to come and eat polenta and sausage in Bardonecchia, come” (ironic). ²⁴⁰

As local administrators illustrated, the parliamentary initiative created discord among the municipalities of the Upper Valley, due to the paradoxical situation whereby Oulx, not being a border town, was not the recipient of any reimbursement despite its centrality in the “secondary movements” management in the *borderland*. Vittorio explained:

The Ministry reasons with the numbers of push-backs... Here they occur in Bardonecchia and Claviere, Oulx does not appear in the statistics! [...] [The amendment] has institutionally complicated the matter, because the municipality of Bardonecchia takes 500 thousand euro and more for this stuff here, the municipality of Claviere takes 160 thousand, they can put cameras, do the lighting, the municipality of Oulx takes nothing because it does not exist in the statistics, but it is the one that then feeds these people [...] But I don’t say this with rancour, I say it with the fact that how disconnected national politics is from the territories in certain situations. ²⁴¹

As the empirical data regarding the impact of the *re-bordering* process on local administrators’ *border experience* unveiled, there is a deep estrangement process and disconnection between central and peripheral authorities, reduced only by subjectivities expressed at the level of territorial representation of the state. This represents a significant bottom-up contribution in the understanding of the state-

²⁴⁰ SR_AF_ZI_20210512

²⁴¹ SR_DP_ZI_20210501

periphery relationship in times of *re-bordering* process. While internal borders and their *re-bordering* process represent a central topic in the European and national political agendas, the ethnography mirrored the image of a great distance between the centre of the state and its edges as far as its local management is concerned.

8.1.2. Local dwellers: local experience of a global phenomenon

From *border narratives* (Newman, 2003, 2006a) shared by ordinary *borderlanders* stemmed significant points of view regarding their daily experience of the local spillovers of the securitized approach on borders and migrations. The ethnography revealed that, as far as the presence of transit migrants in the Upper Susa Valley is concerned, the *re-bordering* process hindered, channelled, slowed-down their journeys through the *borderland* and allowed day-to-day *encounters* between them and those who inhabit it.

In this regard, Pietro²⁴²'s case as a former employee in the company that manages the motorway, and a former volunteer fire fighter, is particularly relevant. In the last years before his retirement, he lived "as a spectator, with some regret, everything that was happening". Working on the motorway, "it often happened that people made a mistake and physically walked right on the motorway, therefore with very high risks. I used to send my men with the police to pick them up, to take them to a station, to the nearest point." He lived with discomfort "this identifying myself with these poor people who, with nothing, with two bags, were trying to go to a place where to live better, and instead found themselves in difficult conditions because of this treatment [...]." In the years when he was a fireman, it happened to him "to go... when they took a wrong turn, to go and fetch them, to go and look for these people, and you would see them exhausted..."

Daniela²⁴³ belongs to a different generation than Pietro. She is in her 30s, and recently joined the staff stationed at one of the Alta Val di Susa railway stations. Speaking of her daily work, she explains that by keeping the office door open, it often happens to give information to migrants in transit: "I get a lot of guys who come up with the last train, I don't know what fucking information they have [...] the last trains that arrive in Bardonecchia go back empty [...] so you are stuck in Bardonecchia for the whole night. [...] It's happened to me a few times already, counting that I've been there for two months, to tell some guys, "Go to Oulx because there's nowhere for you to stay here". [...] If the *Carabiniere* is willing, he gives them a lift, it's the only thing to do." Daniela is also a sporadic volunteer at the Massi refuge in Oulx: "I go because my mum told me to go (laughs). Actually I'd

²⁴² LD_ME_PI_20210909

²⁴³ LD_E_PI_20210723

like to spend more, I just can't in this period. No, actually because in my opinion it's good, selfishly speaking, for the spirit and the human being to exchange. That is, to remember that there are other people who have had different experiences from you, who come from other places, who have other stories."

As for Daniela, "secondary movements" have been also experienced by *borderlanders* in form of an opportunity to engage in support activities. This is the case of Luisa²⁴⁴, that in Autumn 2017 informally assisted migrants in the station of Bardonecchia and started a solidarity movement²⁴⁵. Or Gianna²⁴⁶, already No TAV activist, who "didn't want to be involved in this also", but "around December, I said: "Well, I go up with them once, [...] and I try to understand, right?" And there she felt "stuck", because then "at a certain point there was this guy, whose name is Mathieu, who is now in France, who left on his own, one morning, and the next morning at 4 o'clock he was in the hospital in Susa with the risk of amputating his feet, because they were frozen. [...] At the moment when someone had to go to Bardonecchia to retrieve his belongings, I said "It's my turn now", because I was the only one up here. [...] And so we started this relationship with this guy [...] After 40 days he had to go out [from the hospital]. Partly because of that, partly because he had been quite traumatized by this experience, even though he had already survived Libya, and had survived the boat, at this point... [...] I told him "Boh, there's no other alternative [...] Let's say I'm available and I'll take you in my house". And in fact he stayed at my house for four and a half months, and that was the strong experience, let's say." ²⁴⁷

These empirical data demonstrate the extent to which "secondary movements" have been experienced locally by those who inhabit the Upper Susa Valley, projecting in their daily life global processes and their personal stories.

8.1.3. Border perception in times of *re-bordering*

For their capability of grasping the daily experience of *borderlanders* in times of return of internal borders, Pietro's, Daniela's, Luisa's and Gianna's narratives can be considered as *re-bordering tales*. In literature, *border narratives* have been put at the centre of ethnographic investigation for their ability to unpack the state border at an ontological level, shedding light on its contemporary nature based on the different *perceptions* that *borderlanders* communicate (Newman, 2003, 2006a). In this ethnography, *re-bordering tales* uncovered the extent to which the *re-bordering* process, "secondary

²⁴⁴ SV_MS_ZI_20210323

²⁴⁵ Section 7.2.2. widely describes these events.

²⁴⁶ SV_PE_ZI_20210411

²⁴⁷ The story of Gianna and Mathieu was narrated in the documentary "Dove bisogna stare" (Gaglianone D., 2018).

movements”, and the border militarization modified the image of the Alpine Italian-French state border within the *borderlanders*’ imaginary.

Pietro²⁴⁸ explained that he experienced the return of identity checks, even if limited to transit migrants, as a step back on his idea of Europe as a place of freedom. He lived almost his entire life in Bardonecchia, a town “projected towards France”, as he self-defined it. He has always been a cross-border dweller: Modane and Briançon were places where he went shopping, went to stock up on cheap medicines, took his children to the swimming pool. He explained that to reach Modane, Bardonecchia’s French twin town, before the removal of identity checks it was necessary to show ID cards anytime, justify the presence of children of friends. After Schengen, he experienced an increased freedom, “a freedom that wasn’t there before, the fact that one could freely, quietly move around, feeling, I won’t say at home, but still experiencing these close realities very well.”. The return of internal identity checks, while sporadic and discriminatory, meant for him the *perception* of a re-established barrier.

My idea of a border is that there should no longer be borders (laughs) because here, in any case, the border didn’t exist once, in our valleys, because those who lived on this side of the mountains, and those who lived on the other side of the mountains, were the same, with exchanges of work, but also of relatives, marriages that took place, it was one country, there wasn’t this border on the crest of the mountains that there is now.

Due to her younger age, Daniela²⁴⁹ experienced instead the materiality of the Italian-French border as an absolute novelty. She explained that, before 2017, according to her perception there was no border between Italy and France, “it was always an open thing.” Daniela particularly referred to the militarization of the borderline by the French police, and more generally to the modified frontier landscape and configuration, as factor that most influenced her changed perception of the border after 2017.

On this regard, different *bordering* practices put in place by Italian and French law enforcement agents²⁵⁰ played a role in the *borderlanders*’ perception of the frontier, to the extent that they impacted on the border area landscape and configuration. As explored in the Chapter on “*Re-bordering* practices and hindered mobilities in the Upper Susa Valley”, there is a significant difference in the organization of the border controls carried out by the Italian and French police. The French presence is much more imposing, and the road conditions on the SS94 have also been changed. Cars coming

²⁴⁸ LD_ME_PI_20210909

²⁴⁹ LD_E_PI_20210723

²⁵⁰ See Chapter 6, part 1.

from Italy are forced to slow down, for those coming from France the checkpoint is hardly noticeable. As Luisa explained, this impacted on her perception of the state border:

The thing one [...] perceive[s] is that it is the fact of entering France, not vice versa! I mean, in Claviere, you don't have any Italian policemen. At the tunnel, Italian policemen, very little. It's mainly... it's one way, one way, not the other way. So, that's what's a bit peculiar, if you like.²⁵¹

In terms of border perception, Daniela explained that the return of law enforcement agents at the borderline since 2017 did not impress her. She has always experienced the Upper Susa Valley as a militarized *borderland*, due to the reinforced police presence linked to the social unrests generated by the No TAV movement. "If I see border checkpoints... I don't know how to say... [...] I am used to it. [...] It's a militarised valley, but it's militarised on all sides, so I personally am sadly used to it."²⁵² On this regard, ethnographic results showed that one key factor influencing the change in perception of the border following the arrival of "transit migration" and its relative containment strategy in the Upper Susa Valley, is the age of the participant. More specifically, whether they experienced the pre-Schengen era or not. While for Pietro the contemporary border was a space of restricted freedom after a period of unlimited mobility, for Daniela the border is a militarized place of privilege, where the possibility to cross is a matter of arbitrary power embodied by law enforcement agents:

The other day in Bardonecchia, an Iranian [...] or Afghan guy, with a passport, regular and everything [...] A young guy, he must have been 20-something years old, he said to me "I was on the Flixbus going to Modane through the tunnel, they stopped me, they gave me this slip of paper, they asked me if I had money, I told them I had 1000 euros in cash, they told me that 100 euros was too little, so they sent me back" And then he looked at me, he was so tender, and he said "But I have a passport! [...] I took the anti-COVID swab, why can't I go to France? My friend went the other day, why can't I?" I told him "Because you're not white, you don't have European citizenship, and unfortunately it seems that a French policeman has the power of life, arbitrarily, over another person" (polemic) I told him "There's no reason, is there. The reason is that he doesn't like your face, he dislikes you, so he pushed you back".²⁵³

²⁵¹ SV_MS_ZI_20210323

²⁵² LD_E_PI_20210723

²⁵³ LD_E_PI_20210723

As a further significant aspect, the ethnography revealed that the Italian-French border is back in the perception of those who engaged in solidarity and humanitarian practices, or those in a family or friendship relationship with *borderlanders* who have made this choice. For example, Luisa has lived all her life as a *borderlander*, and is a typical cross-border dweller. She explained that “I struggle to perceive that there is a border, we re-perceive it in the last five years, let's say, after 2015, in short.”

²⁵⁴ Or Augusta, who explained:

I had never thought before about the idea of this boundary, that it was so difficult, I mean, I had the idea like all of us who have a certain freedom, that it didn't exist. (inc) The border exists for those of a certain category, so this human discrimination yes, is a new reality for me. ²⁵⁵

The cases of Luisa, Augusta, Daniela, Pietro, and many others gathered through the fieldwork, revealed the point of view of individuals that joined the solidarity scenario at different levels. The ethnography uncovered that, on the contrary, the Italian-French border does not matter, and the European space is still perceived as fluid, for those participant who did not engaged in humanitarian practices. This is the case of Matteo²⁵⁶, a transnational dweller that lives in Bardonecchia and works in *Vallée Étroite*. This area has been Italian until 1947, when it passed under the French sovereignty²⁵⁷. Traditionally a grazing area, it is now inhabited mainly by Italians who have renovated the buildings and installed tourist activities. Matteo runs one of these. It is the building where Mathieu, Gianna's guest, found refuge during the snowy night when he got lost and froze his feet. Matteo rescued him and brought him down to the valley. His life, however, remained far from the “humanitarian borderscape” characterizing the Upper Susa Valley. This is how he spoke about his perception of the border.

Me: Considering that your life is divided between Bardonecchia and the *Vallée Étroite*, and there is a state border in between, does this borderline play a role in your life?

Matteo: No. It's as if it doesn't exist.

Me: If you could describe the border in relation to your life in one word?

Matteo: I would say that the border does not exist (laughing) anymore.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁴ SV_MS_ZI_20210323

²⁵⁵ SV_GS_ZI_20210411

²⁵⁶ LD_R_PI_20211209

²⁵⁷ This is explained in section 5.1.1. of Chapter 5.

²⁵⁸ LD_R_PI_20211209

The same perception is shared by Lucia, who was also local authority representative but in times of *de-bordering*. Her border narrative showed a great distance from that of her colleagues, dealing with the contemporary *re-bordering* process.

Me: Could you describe to what extent and how the border plays a role in your life?

Lucia: That's a question I've never asked myself. For example, I had colleagues who lived in Modane, with whom we would exchange and go.... For us, going to France was simply going a bit further than around home, but we never imagined... I never felt the problem of the border, that's all. [...] Borders are things that people construct in their heads.²⁵⁹

As the ethnographic results illustrate, the state border is back in the perception of those who, directly or indirectly, had their daily life impacted by humanitarian practices in support of those who experience the internal European re-bordering process on their skin. This speaks in support to the literature that looks at contemporary borders as polysemic (Balibar, 2002; Smart & Smart, 2008; Brambilla, 2015; Sohn, 2015). The re-bordered internal European border in the spectrum of the containment of “secondary movements” can be invisible. As far as the Upper Susa Valley is concerned, it projected into the *border experience* of the ordinary dwellers that daily interacts with those for whom the border is all but invisible, as described in Chapter 6 “*Re-bordering* practices and hindered mobilities in the Upper Susa Valley”. For transit migrants, the border materialized in the form of the *bordering* practices implemented by police officers in the area of the political border, and beyond.

8.2 Internal European borders... for whom?

The ethnographic analysis of *border narratives* collected from *borderlanders* uncovered that the state border with France is back in the perception of those who experience a daily engagement in support to those for whom the political border is back for real, i.e. transit migrants. But what about its materiality, its everyday functioning, its capability to mark the *border experience* of individuals with real, concrete, visible, measurable effects?

Building on the debate on the polysemic nature of contemporary European borders, the *bordering* approach investigated the “*borders for whom?*” question (Balibar, 1999, 2002; Rumford, 2008) in order to shed light on the “frontier effect” (Donnan & Wilson, 1998). This concerns the extent to which, states establish different relations of power with different individuals as, according to subject characteristics, political borders perform various degrees of demarcation and exclusionary functions

²⁵⁹ LD_EV_PI_20211008

(Smart & Smart, 2008). In this sense, the contemporary borders can matter or not (Donnan & Wilson, 2010)²⁶⁰.

The ethnographic analysis reveals that this is the case of the Alpine Italian-French border. On this regard, Bachellerie (2020) demonstrated that since 2015 it holds a polysemic nature: identity checks and their infrastructures, in terms of agents, structures and technology, are back in the Upper Susa Valley with the aim of containing “secondary movements”²⁶¹.

Furthermore, since 2020 the return of internal identity checks does not respond only to a logic of securitization against “secondary movements”, but it has been dramatically implemented as a health measure to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemics. This had dramatic consequences in terms of mobility and the everyday life around Europe. In this sense, the COVID-19 has been considered as a *re-bordering* factor²⁶².

This section focuses on *border experience* in the Upper Susa Valley in order to offer an ethnographic perspective on the polysemic nature of the Alpine Italian-French boundary, with the aim to unpack its multiple mobility regimes and the “frontier effect” experienced by *borderlanders*.

8.2.1. Transit migrants: experiencing the securitized border on your skin

As pointed out, the *border experience* of transit migrants crossing the Upper Susa Valley relates with this dissertation as a further research vein that deserves to be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, in my on-field activity as researcher and volunteer I collected many stories that are able to offer an insight on the subjectivity of “secondary movements” across the Upper Susa Valley.

The following vignettes depict the “human dimension” of the functioning of the Alpine Italian-French border in times of “securitization of migrations”. As illustrated in Chapter 4 “Methodology”, ethnographic vignettes are portraits of scenes from everyday life that enrich the empirical analysis. In this section, they aim to frame an incomplete, yet significant, answer to the question: *for whom* is the Italian-French border back?

Vignette n. 1

I am sitting on a bench in the yard of the shelter, taking a break from the intense activities we carry out as volunteers. As usual, in my free time I win the curiosity to interview transit migrants and prefer to leave interactions to their own decision. Anyway, it is

²⁶⁰ Please refer to section 2.5.5. of Chapter 2.

²⁶¹ Chapter 6 has addressed this dimension, delving into the border device established between Claviere and the Montgenèvre area.

²⁶² Part 4 of Chapter 2 offered an overview of this topic.

everything but uncommon that someone just sit next to me and start talking, sometimes in English, sometimes with the help of a translator. This is how I meet Said. He is traveling from Kabul, where he survived a bomb attack. I don't understand his English very well, but "bomb" is hard to misinterpret. He studied engineering; it's what he wants to do, and the reason why he left Afghanistan and engaged in his migration project.

"You look young... how long have you been travelling?", I ask.

He says that he left his home country long before his 18th birthday. He spent three years in Turkey, a few months in Greece. Then from Serbia he found a *passeur* who for 7500€ took him to Udine. From there he travelled to Milan, then Turin. He explained that he got to know about Oulx from a friend who is already in France. I mark on his offline map Claviere and Briançon, the "safety information" we are allowed to share as volunteers.

"And now?" He is not sure where he wants to go, perhaps to England. He thanks me for listening, asks me for the contact, to let me know when he will be in France. But this conversation will not have a follow-up, we are not allowed to share personal contacts to travellers whose mobility is illegalized.

Vignette n. 2

We stand close to the shelter's gate, looking at Reza walking on the small side street heading for the train station. He is about to re-take his journey alone, as he was alone when he arrived at the shelter. Every one of us wonders how is that possible. That 24-year man looks definitively older. He walks leaning the weight of one leg on his toes. With the help of Google translate, as he speaks no English, he told us that it is the result of the tortures he suffered in Iran, his home country, 7 years before. The muscle of the leg never took its original form again. He came to the shelter with the Red Cross, pushed-back by French police. The following night we proposed him, with the help of a translator, free medical treatments for his legs. The translator verbalized his gratitude, but the perspective of staying several months in Italy was not an option for him.

That in which he walked the street to the station was the last time we saw him.

Said's and Reza's stories are paradigmatic in showing how European borders are made ever higher and more violent to "protect" national territories from people who themselves seek protection, and deserve it according to international laws. Getting to know people in transit and their stories overturns many of the stereotypes and generalizations underlying migration regulations that justify restrictive approaches to their mobility.

Vignette n. 3



Figure 13. “Dangerous terrorists going to create public order problems in France, just left the Massi shelter for the bus station in Oulx” (Field diary: June 27, 2021)

The shelter yard is crowded and noisy this afternoon. The responsible for such a confusion are two really numerous families from Kuwait. One of those counts with three children – 3 years old, 1 and a half years old, 2 months. The men are really talkative. On the contrary, their wives are really silent and discretely look after the children, semi-hidden by long black dresses. Amused by our disappointment at having so many children, prams, clothes and luggage crowding the passageway formed by the shelter courtyard, one of the men proudly tells us, pointing each of his three daughters: “Look! Kuwait (pointing the big one), Greece (pointing the middle one), Bosnia (pointing the small one). Big problem!” We laugh together.

The man becomes serious while sharing their story: they are stateless, as they come from a region in Kuwait that no state has claimed in the post-Saddam era. He also explains the bandage on his hand. “At the border with Bosnia a Croatian policeman kicked my wife, she was 3-month pregnant, she fainted. I saw black, smashed a policeman's nose, then a group of policemen assaulted me”. He remained in the hospital 15 days, including 5 days in serious condition. Upon discharge, he was made to sign a document stating that he got

the wound in an accident, as a condition to cross the border with Bosnia and follow the journey.

The next day, we meet all families in the shelter in Briançon. They managed to pass the border a couple of days before. They are beaming, the mood is relaxed, you can tell that those who are there have unburdened themselves. “Last night it was the first time, after two years, that we actually slept”.

Vignette n.4

The Red Cross van parks in front of the shelter gate. The door opens, a family gets off. A noise of disappointment spreads among us: it is always difficult to see pushed-back families return, and as much as we know it is harder for them to pass, we always hope that they will have good luck. Another van parks, another door opens. Two more families get off and enters the shelters’ fence, downcast glances and slow pace. The last one is formed by elderly adults, two teenagers, and two 10-year-old children. We approach them to listen to what happened to them at the borderline, to ask if they need something, to offer a cup of tea. One of the pushed-back teenagers speaks a good English.

“We took the 8.55 a.m. bus this morning, and get off in Claviere tried not to be noticed, but we are a lot, we knew it was hard. The French police stopped almost immediately. They took us to some white boxes, behind the police station. It was 10 a.m. when we entered there, and already 5 p.m. when they let us out, no food, no water”.

An older boy interrupts her: “They played at us! They played at us! One hundred meter from the bus stop a police man came to us, and said ‘Asile?’ We all replied ‘Oui, oui asile’ and we followed him, and they detained us! They are not going to stop us, we try again!”

All the families left on the 7.45 p.m. bus, including a woman with a small child who was vomiting up to 30 minutes before.

These vignettes showed instead how it is often the most vulnerable groups, i.e. those that include children, who pay the highest price for the *re-bordering* process at the European level. For many, travel becomes life: many women give birth during their “fragmented journeys”; many children are born while traveling. In the Alpine Italian-French border, as in the others along the Balkan route, rejections affect most violently those who would be entitled to greater protection.

Vignette n. 5

In the group of dark-headed, mountain-clad men huddled near the fence separating the bus area from the railway tracks, a family of four stands out. They are Afghans, two parents and two young girls. The women stand out in the crowd of dark heads by the colour of their hair: platinum blond. The family as a whole is very talkative. They speak very good English, a presumable sign of past cooperation with international bodies stationed in Afghanistan, and in general a good standard of life. Of all of them, the one who is most eager to establish a relationship with us volunteers, also waiting for the bus, is Yara.

“I left Afghanistan when I was 13”, she explains, “so I would not end up married early. It was my mother who decided so. She understood that I could ask more from life, so she took me to Iran and allowed me to study”. That explained her high education background. No international collaborations, but a family migratory project that, for here, started very soon.

“But we were illegal, there”. Yara could not join any official school, so her great English is not certified. Her chance to improve came in Greece, where the family stayed for two years in IOM camps. She helped international activists as translator, in support of other Afghans facing the Balkan route.

“I want to go to Germany. My dream is a simple one. I want to have a normal life, a place with a kitchen to cook in, some neighbours, a café down the street to have coffee, friends... Like you.”

Her brother was 3 years a soldier in Afghanistan, where a Kalashnikov compo pierced his hand. He has other wounds on his hands, inflicted by the Taliban, and several broken fingers. He will stay in France, because he was fingerprinted in Greece, and Germany would send him back to Greece by bilateral agreement.

Finally, Yara’s story offered an intimate, everyday glimpse at the expectations of people in transit and how theirs is an ongoing negotiation between their universal desires and the Western laws that stand in the way of fulfillment.

Documenting the “human dimension” of “secondary movements” across the Upper Susa Valley, these ethnographic vignettes provided a bottom-up answer to the question: *for whom* is the Alpine Italian-French border back? They uncovered that the “securitized” border slows down, vulnerabilizes and precarizes the migratory journeys of people who escape from the violence of the civil war, as in Said’s

case. Or, that are in need of protection, like Reza. Many of them started their journeys many years ago, some of them long before their 18th birthday, some were born “on the way”. As well, most of them already experienced the violence of other re-bordered European and non-European boundaries, as it was the case of the Kurdish families, or had to deal with the paradoxes of the Dublin regulation, as Yara’s brother. In general, the majority of transit migrants that approached the Massi shelter during the observation period deserved international protections according to the international law. Facing the violation of human right that the internal European *re-bordering* process implies on their regard, their efforts in adapting to even the most difficult conditions and make any effort to fulfil their migration plans revealed the strength of their desires and expectations.

8.2.2. The pandemic dimension in the *re-bordering* practices: revealing border polysemy to Europeans

I jump and I'm in France, I jump again and I'm back in Italy.²⁶³

I mean, you take your walk in the mountains, you pass through these beautiful places [...] And there you just pass by and you don't realise you're in France, “Oh, toh, there are signs in French. *T'è vist che sono in Francia?*”²⁶⁴ That's how it works. (laughs)²⁶⁵

Maybe it's because my husband has always gone to the mountains, so he never had the idea of the border, because when you go up to the top of the mountains, I think you go up for the pleasure of going to the top, but you don't have the problem of saying “Here is a border” or “Here is another border”. So, I have never experienced that.²⁶⁶

Border narratives by the local authority representative Giorgio, by the solidarity actor Giulia and by the local dweller Lucia show with their directness the polysemic nature of the Alpine Italian-French border. For those who hold the European citizenship, the state border is invisible, is not something to worry about, *does not matter*, it is not materially part of their *border experience* as it does not impact on their private and professional life, or leisure time organization.

This dimension strongly emerged through the ethnographic analysis. Participants shared various aspects of their daily lives in which the border is an opportunity, rather than a barrier, in terms of the concrete aspects of their *border experience*. Many told of the habit of going to France to buy medicines because they cost less there. Or of taking the children to the better equipped swimming

²⁶³ SR_AF_ZI_20210512

²⁶⁴ “Did you realize that we are already in France?” in local dialect.

²⁶⁵ NS_FE_ZI_20210315

²⁶⁶ LD_EV_PI_20211008

pool in Briançon. Or of working as a seasonal worker in French border towns because the wages are higher. A recurrent *border narrative* says that it is common to find *panettone* sold by pastry shops in Val di Susa in August, because the French are fond of them and stock up on them during their summer holidays. As we have seen, the state border has entered people's daily lives only indirectly and only for some, through the experience of the militarized border embodied by transit migrants. On this regard, the Europeans' experience of the polysemic nature of the Alpine Italian-French border was an abstract and indirect one. This has changed since 2020, when it has been revealed to the Upper Susa Valley *borderlanders* in form of COVID-19 as *re-bordering* factor.

The overview of ethnographic contributions on the matter offered in section 2.4.2. of the theoretical Chapter 2 showed that, in March 2020, border fences appeared in the middle of nowhere along internal European borders. As well, people testified that the cross-border mobility become very hard even in the realm of professional activity, very discretionary according to the nationality of the policemen checking, as well as implemented by solely military personnel, while it regarded a sanitary emergency. Similarly, the ethnographic analysis regarding the *bordering* practices at the Italian-French border according to the aim of containing the COVID-19 spread have produced interesting outcomes.

According to the results of my fieldwork research, none of the above happened at the Alpine Italian-French border. In facts, the COVID-19 had a very limited impact on the border functioning. In a *borderland* already militarized due to the containment strategy against "secondary movements", participants reported that the only pandemic-related modification in the landscape and police practices was the controls on non-migrant individuals crossing the borderline:

I mean, now in Montgenèvre there are controls, they check you... something that hasn't happened since 2000 or so.... 2005, 2004 there were no more border controls. I mean, the Claviere - Montgenèvre passage is a passage I did many times. Now you have the control. But you have it for the COVID issue, not for the migrant issue.²⁶⁷

When it comes to mobility rules, the possibility to pass the border and enter France during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020, depended on the area of residence. In facts, dwellers living within 30 kilometres from the borderline were granted that possibility, so COVID-related mobility restrictions did not impact significantly on their daily activities. When it comes to my experience as a researcher, during my fieldwork period when the COVID-19 emergency was still ongoing, I noticed that in the occasion of my several border crossings at the Montgenèvre check-point, nobody never checked on my documents or certifications. On the contrary, I reported in the field diary more than

²⁶⁷ SV_TF_ZI_20210331

one episode in which non-EU citizens were pushed-back at the Fréjus tunnel for the lack of COVID certification.²⁶⁸

This opened for further reflections on the polysemic nature of the contemporary Alpine Italian-French border. Interviews revealed that the French police checking on non-European individuals only, as highlighted in Bachellerie's ethnography²⁶⁹, was somehow taken for granted by participants. However, as the tightened border due to police checks aimed to verify if European citizens were eligible to cross it, e.g. they were *borderland* citizens, the "frontier effect" (Donnan & Wilson, 1998) emerged in their accounts.

Being border zone [citizens, we are eligible for] this possibility. [...] We don't have to... until now, eh? Going [in France], have the certification. Instead, those who arrive from further away, or those who arrive, of the migrants who want to pass... apart from those who don't have the documents, but there are some people... for example, a family arrived, who were made to get off the Flixbus because they didn't have the molecular swab, they only had the rapid one. So that's another element.²⁷⁰

In terms of "frontier effect", in 2020 the state bordered mattered again for European citizens, as the pandemic-related restrictions revealed them that the border was back. If before the pandemic the French police control was only part of the experience of non-Europeans, with the COVID-19 it also became part of the Europeans'. As well, beyond the landscape and practices' changes, with an increased presence at the borderline of the French police and checks, local dwellers had to face the prospect of having to meet requirements to cross the border. Their chance to do so, denied daily to migrants in transit, further revealed the polysemic nature of the Italian-French border in a scenario of multiple overlapping *bordering* regimes.

8.3 Experiencing "humanitarian borderwork" in a militarized Alpine *borderland*

This part explores how, in addition to the "secondary movements" as seen so far, the "humanitarian borderwork" put in place to contain the negative effects of the *re-bordering* process on transit migrants also played an important role in shaping the daily lives of Upper Susa Valley residents. In particular, people involved in solidarity activities and ordinary citizens taken into consideration.

²⁶⁸ See note 169.

²⁶⁹ Bachellerie (2020). See section 5.4.2. of Chapter 5.

²⁷⁰ SV_PE_ZI_20210411

8.3.1. Solidarity actors: global processes, local concerns

As mentioned earlier, the *rifugio* Massi in Oulx was the place where I did most of my participant observation, side by side with a volunteer activity. This intensive, multi-dimensional immersion allowed me to grasp in depth the point of view of those who ensure the operation of the facility at various levels, and to gather first-hand elements regarding how their daily lives have changed since 2017, when the first migrants in transit appeared in the Upper Susa Valley. The following vignette accounts for a day of ordinary efforts in supporting migrants in transit at the *rifugio* Massi shelter.

This is my first day as volunteer in the Massi shelter in Oulx. I arrived at the Oulx station 30 minutes earlier than we had planned with Luisa and F. So, I took the opportunity to take a tour of the village. Luisa told me in advance that the shelter is full: about 50 people a night sleep in the dormitory. Nevertheless, I don't see any migrant around, or individuals who might appear to be such. I can't see the shelter either, nor from the perspective I had from the station, neither in the surrounding area. Yet I have been told it is just a stone's throw away the train station. Wandering around, I enter a small driveway marked "Abbadia" [*Abbey*]. I imagine it might be a site worth seeing, so I go on to have a look. Instead, I come across the secondary entrance to the Massi shelter, the one most used by the volunteers. In fact, behind me is F.'s car, who stops to let me in and accompany me up to the gate. Behind the gate, in the courtyard, there are several small groups of men, F. immediately starts asking who is leaving and who is staying. "This is to figure out how many people are to be dressed and how many are to be given dinner early, in time for the 8 o'clock bus", he explains me. Around the courtyard there is a stair leading to the dormitory, which is a basement. There is also a stair that goes up to the kitchen, the infirmary and the staff rooms. Toilets are in autonomous boxes, on the side of the courtyard facing the station, from where "guests" enter and exit. Finally, Luisa arrives, she is very stressed: "This week is really hard, there are more than 50 people and some of them are families that are stuck here since days. Go to the free shop, it's time to give clothes, we must hurry, go help out"! The "free shop" is the clothing warehouse, hidden by a door plastered with signs in many languages urging "guests" to enter one at a time, not to take clothes they don't need, to be careful on the mountain. One sign also says that the opening time is at 6 p.m. But now it's 5.20 p.m. and the door is already open.

I immediately find myself dressing boys in jackets, socks, pants. Everything is organized per item and per size, in cardboard boxes behind a table that marks the threshold between the space for volunteers and that for the “public”. I share the “volunteers’ space” with Monica and Caterina, two expert volunteers in their late 50s’. They definitely seem to want to entrust me with the task of dealing with guests. They do not speak much English, but above all they are very tired. Apparently “guests” arrive wearing all that they own. They are given what they ask for, “then if they have 5 jackets in the room we can’t know,” says Monica. A guy “tries on” a pair of pants by closing them around his necks, a gesture I had never seen done. I also hear for the first time the word “game” from his mouth. “I need a jacket ‘for the game’.” This suddenly reminds me that this is a stage, a station in the game of the goose that absorbs all the energy of the local volunteers, but is just one more station for migrants. As they pass me clothes from the boxes, Monica and Caterina are letting off steam. “I’m tired, I can’t take it anymore! With all these families coming to pick up clothes every day, and then never leaving... you’ll see that as soon as the line of single men ends, we’ll find them besieging the warehouse for two hours!”, Monica exclaims. “You are right, snow is melting and we need to store those winter clothes for the next Autumn. Next November I don’t want to end up like last November, not sleeping at night for fear of not having enough jackets to cover them all! Families will take all our time; we won’t be able to start storing today. We are supposed to have our own life, too!”, agrees Caterina.

After about half an hour, the bad omens of the volunteers materialized at the warehouse door in the form of a Syrian family of four. Luisa shouts at us from the outside: “They said they are leaving!” Monica smiles: “Ok, let’s see what they need, even if we gave them clothes three times already”. “I’d be curious to have a look to the room where they slept, imagine what a mountain of clothes to be re-washed will be in there!” echoes Caterina. “These pain in the asses”, “Send them away”, “Tell them they’ve already been dressed yesterday”, “Which then I’m sorry, but they take the piss out of us.” With some surprise, I find myself suddenly in the shoes of Caterina and Monica. In fact, it is complicated to handle the family’s requests, they point at clothes with the finger and sentence with “big” or “small” as soon as you open them in front of them. If they do not find what they are looking for, they express dissatisfaction. “What a paradox!”, I think. “The traditionally most vulnerable categories, women and children are the least endured, because of the kind of behaviour they adopt toward volunteers and services”.

This long vignette actually reproduced the experience I actually had during my first day as a volunteer at the *rifugio* Massi. In the account of that first day there are all the elements that I would later analyze as characterizing the *border experience* of solidarity actors helping out transit migrants in a re-bordered militarized Alpine landscape.

A first significant aspect revealed by the ethnography is that the *border experience* of solidarity actors was impacted at a daily level by ethnical concerns linked to the material *re-bordering* process. This was due to their daily relationship with transit migrants exposed to the violence of militarization, discriminatory identity checks and push-backs in violation of asylum rights, carried out in an unsafe environment. In the vignette, Caterina shared that the worry of knowing about unequipped people at the mercy of the snow and cold at the Montgenèvre border crossing doesn't let her sleep at night. This is strictly related with a second dimension uncovered by ethnographic analysis, as far as the *border experience* of a solidarity agent in the Upper Susa Valley is concerned: that of the significance of the seasonality. In June, Caterina and Monica were concerned about the storing of warm clothes for the next Winter. On this regard, in that same day Luisa introduced me to a separate area of the shelter, which operationally responds to this perspective.

Before I leave, I take a walk in a building that she says is abandoned, where they are storing things for the winter. [...] The volunteers are working on the long term, they are worried about the coming winter, about not knowing how to save from freezing those who will arrive.

(Field diary: June 10, 2021)

A third significant aspect is embodied by Monica and Caterina's annoyance expressed towards families in transit. "Secondary movements" in the Upper Susa Valley have been characterized by different phases, determined by the profile of transit migrants ²⁷¹. This division is field-based, as it emerged from *border narratives* collected from *borderlanders* engaged at various levels with "secondary movements" crossing the Upper Susa Valley. This picture resulted from encounters between the people *in loco* and the people in transit, and it has been filtered by the formers' perspectives, priorities, and concerns on the topic. For this reason, it represents itself an ethnographic finding, showing that the *border experience* of local authorities' representatives and solidarity agents has been framed by the changes occurred at the "secondary movements" profile's level.

As resulting from *border narratives*, the first stage of the phenomenon concerned the Winter 2017-2018. The crossing activity concentrated on the Bardonecchia - Col d'Echelle - Nevache - Briançon

²⁷¹ See Chapter 5, part 3 for a general overview on "secondary movements" crossing the *borderland* since 2017.

route, and the number of passages was low but still visible: 3, 4, 10 per day. The profile of transitants was almost exclusively represented by Africans, single male and already with experience in Italy behind them. *Borderlanders'* concerns regarded the great degree of danger that crossing the *Col d'Echelle* in Winter entailed, and the lack of mountain experience and equipment of migrants approaching Bardonecchia. The local administrator Vittorio explained:

Here we're talking about people, all in T-shirts, sandals [...] We also had very funny videos of people seeing snow for the first time, and jumping into the snow without seeing the risks of these stupid things, which are chilblains, rather than... But then, actually this difficulty was there.²⁷²

The second phase covered the period 2018-2020. The profile of transit migrants had not changed, but what had instead modified was the nature of *borderlanders'* concerns due to the logistics of push-backs in the Montgenèvre area, as explained in section 6.2.1. of Chapter 6. The militarization of the border area pushed transit migrants away from the regular paths, increasing the risk for their safety. The solidarity scenario structured its activities around the need to protect transit migrants from the cold and the snow in Winter during their irregular cross-border efforts, as well as from the hazard of getting lost all year round.

The third stage framed the vignette opening this section. It started right after the peak of COVID-19, in Summer 2021. That was characterized by the arrival of Asian populations (Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq), that placed the *borderland* in continuity with the Balkan route.

We dozed off in fall-winter 19-20 with an African flow, and woke up in May-June with a Balkan flow.²⁷³

Many of those were families, therefore the female and juvenile components grew, together with the quantitative dimension of the transit in general as well as of vulnerable individuals. Difficulties in communicating also increased: while Africans were predominantly Francophone or Anglophone, Asians spoke languages unknown to most, and few spoke English. Moreover, their transit was normally characterized by an extremely short period spent in Italy, sometimes few days, accompanied by some disorientation with respect to where they were and their mobility strategies. As well, if for Africans France was mainly the final destination, for Asians it represented a step during their journeys towards other countries, such as Germany or Belgium. Finally, even if most of Asian people had great experience of the mountain unlike Africans, the presence of children increased the solidarity actors' concerns.

²⁷² SR_DP_ZI_20210501

²⁷³ SV_GS_ZI_20210411

As described in the vignette, these aspects had a significant impact on the *border experience* of those supporting people in transit. The most challenging peculiarity of the third phase of “transit migration” in the Upper Susa Valley was that of dealing with families instead of single man only. This dimension was experienced by the shelters’ paid staff also. Notes from the field diary²⁷⁴ report of a challenging relationship with Asian families, especially in the workload related to the cleaning of their reserved rooms, in their being demanding, in accumulating unnecessary clothes.

In conclusion, the ethnography uncovered the impact of the profile of transit migrants on the everyday “humanitarian borderwork” in the Upper Susa Valley. It showed that solidarity agents’ everyday *border experience* was exposed to global processes governing transit migrations, as are representatives of local authorities and ordinary citizens, as discussed above. In contrast to these, solidarity actors have to deal more closely with the specific characteristics of the various profiles of migrants in transit that have come to the Upper Susa Valley scenario, and with their vulnerabilities exposed in the militarized Alpine environment.

8.3.2. Local dwellers: *border experience* and the “care and control” strategy

A last focus of this Chapter on the *border experience* in the Upper Susa Valley, concerns the impact of the “humanitarian borderscape” on the everyday reality of the local community.

Me: So in fact it is not enough to live close to the border to be involved in certain dynamics?

Daniela: No, you have to choose it. You have to want it. And here, a lot of people don’t give a shit. [...] ²⁷⁵

With these few, direct words Daniela described the impact of “secondary movements” in the Upper Susa Valley in the light of the structuring of an “humanitarian borderscape” managed according to a “care and control” logic²⁷⁶.

This strategy in managing “secondary movements” in the *borderland* consisted in providing a welcoming place for transit migrants, with the double aim of assisting them and concealing them from the public eye. Further empirical observations uncovered that its efficacy was demonstrated by the limited impact that “secondary movements” had on the daily life of the Upper Susa Valley community. The local administrator Vittorio explained:

²⁷⁴ Field diary: June 10, 2021.

²⁷⁵ LD_E_PI_20210723

²⁷⁶ Please refer to Chapter 7, “Geographies of humanitarian borderwork in the Upper Susa Valley”.

The village never perceived the presence of the migrants. (pause) But because they were not seen, not because they were invisible, but because there was a place dedicated to them.²⁷⁷

As far as the local community is concerned, the containment of the humanitarian emergency fostered a generalized tolerant attitude. To this significantly contributed the emergency-based and “keeping the transit fluid” strategies, implemented as key practices to ensure the sustainability of the “humanitarian borderwork” in the *borderland*. On this regard, Marco explained:

The local population understands that these are people who do not want to stay here, that they are in transit, that there are situations that are really desperate for help and rescue. I mean, the moment they understand that these are not people who will stay here, that’s the key. These are people who will certainly not stay here. Even talking to the *hardest* heads (emphasis), in the dumbest bar chats, you realise that there is empathy for them, and they say, “If they come, they ask for hospitality for a night, a hot meal for a night”, knowing that tomorrow they will leave again, “of course I’ll give it to them, and gladly!” Everyone, everyone. And that is a good thing.²⁷⁸

Further empirical data showed that the low-impact of “secondary movements” granted by the “care and control” management allowed the stratification of the local communities around the “humanitarian borderwork” initiatives according to a scheme of concentric circles. Sandro explained that few people joined the activities of the Massi shelter, while a more consistent part of the population granted sporadic help.

[Around the Massi shelter] I think there is a form of... of consensus, then there can be participatory consensus and there can be passive consensus. But if I had to say, I do think that the territory has a type of consensus with respect to this experience. Logically, you always have to be very careful because any error then moves the needle of the scales, it takes nothing to end up with a contrast instead [...] Now I feel I can say this, that there is a tacit consensus on one side, an involved consensus on the other. Then there may be the voice, the person who [...] does not fully agree, who is critical, but I would say that on average (emphasis) I would say that there is a consensus.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁷ SR_DP_ZI_20210501

²⁷⁸ SR_TA_PI_20210608

²⁷⁹ NS_CL_ZI_20210915

The sporadic support especially increased in specific moments of high media coverage due to local or international events. This note from the field diary has been taken around August 15, 2021, when the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan.

The news from Afghanistan is heavily affecting my mood, emotionally. The images of women throwing their children at British soldiers over the barbed wire are dramatic. This context has also drawn attention to the shelter. Yesterday afternoon, a family from Sauze handed me €40 from the gate, and a distinguished lady handed me a women's ski suit, *demodé* but of great value: electric blue, with gold ornaments, and fur on the hood. Yesterday morning some journalists filmed a report that was aired on the regional news, while there is also a reportage on the Turin chronicle of La Stampa. Gianna also told me that the interview given by [...] moved some contacts to collect clothes.

(Field diary: August 19, 2021)

Nevertheless, as suggested by Daniela, the biggest part of the population was put into the conditions of disregard or ignore “secondary movements”, the “humanitarian borderwork”, the militarization of the territory. Those represented the most external circle of the assumed social scheme. The activist Elena explained:

The local population in my opinion has not understood the scale of the phenomenon. Maybe they do know, they generally ignore it anyway, or they see it as something external to community life, and they don't really know how many people have passed through, the figures they give are really low when you ask them. “How many people have passed through here?” “Boh, 100, 200” Actually within 3, 4 years, at least 10 thousand people have passed through, if not more. And anyway, these are municipalities of 2,000, 3,000 inhabitants, paradoxically more undocumented people have crossed the border than those who actually live here. But this perception is completely distorted among the citizen, the typical inhabitant of these parts here. [...] The issue is never addressed, sometimes it is more the tourists who ask you what is going on than the natives, because maybe they read about it in the newspapers, they know that this is the place where they go on holiday [...] And in any case, there is no particular attention from the community to the problem, except from a few individuals.²⁸⁰

As we can see, ethnographic results clearly demonstrate that the “care and control” strategy had a twofold outcome on the local community of the Upper Susa Valley, and therefore on its *border*

²⁸⁰ NB_MA_PI_20211208

experience. On the one hand, it limited the effects on the everyday life of ordinary citizens. Accordingly, it favoured the structuring of the local community around the “humanitarian borderwork” according to concentric circles, whose outermost and most numerous was represented by those to whom the strategy allowed them to ignore the problem. This in turn stratified the *border experience* of ordinary dwellers, mostly leaving to their decision the dealing with “secondary movements” and the solidarity scenario.

8.3.3. Local dwellers: experiencing a fragmented “humanitarian borderscape”

If “secondary movements” were observed as having a limited impact on the *border experience* of local communities in the Upper Susa Valley thanks to the “care and control” strategy implemented, the ethnography revealed that the fragmentation that it generated at the level of its “humanitarian borderscape” played instead a key role in shaping it.

Ethnographic results discussed in Chapter 7 showed that the “geography of humanitarian borderwork” in the Upper Susa Valley is fractured along several invisible but meaningful boundaries. These concerned the *bordering* of the geographical and the political space within solidarity practices were tolerated and supported; the demarcation between those lying inside the “care and control” spectrum and those contesting it; the division between managing “secondary movements” according to an emergency-based rationale and the politicization of the phenomenon; the boundary between legality and illegality.

On this regard, as the ethnography revealed, the *bordering*-related factor that most impacted on the *border experience* of those who inhabit the Upper Susa Valley were the presence and practices of the most radical actors operating within the “humanitarian borderscape”.

As widely explored in Chapter 7, a part of solidarity practices aimed to contest the state “care and control” strategy. They matched humanitarian activities with the political fight against borders, carried out occupations in the proximities of the borderline and claimed for support practices orientated to the horizontality and the pure support of transit migrants’ agency. Their discourses were characterized by a clear anti-state rhetoric, as well as by denounces against those solidarity actors acting in the realm of state-backed initiatives in support of transit migrants. The state *bordered* radical practices and took them off the borderline. Finally, these were implemented by a transnational group of activists, joined by individuals coming in most cases from outside the communities, or in any case pushed towards the Upper Susa Valley by the “up-the-valley” movement that led to the structuring of solidarity networks based on those gravitating around the No TAV movement.

According to the empirical data collected, the transnational group's discourse resulted to be predominantly alien to the cultural and social references prevalent in local communities. The local administrator Marco explained:

They say “we do it for the migrants” (emphasis) and then with a No Border ideology, which I have never understood, they say “borders don't exist”. States don't exist, Nations don't exist... oh God, from a purely theoretical point of view I can understand it, but their message has never taken root here. Never. They have never managed to be accepted (emphasis) by the population. They have been tolerated (emphasis) for a long time, but it is a message that has never taken root. That is, writing ACAB, nobody understands it. Me being 36 years old, it took me a year to understand what ACAB meant. [...] At the beginning, they also did various propaganda activities, they tried leafleting, shows to raise awareness among the population... but they were a terrifying flop. Even with a population that tolerated them, that's the interesting thing.²⁸¹

Empirical data showed as well that this radicalism characterized also transnational groups' cohabitation with locals, affecting their relationship. Gianna explained that this brought to the paradox that in a sparsely populated and tourist area, involved in a highly politicized issue as “secondary movements”, the public attention targeted a part of the solidarity actors.

And so, you would find people telling you “We don't have it with the migrants” even though we are in a right-wing area here, eh? This, I think, is an important point, people would tell you “We don't have it with the migrants, but with the people who are there”. Because when these people went to the shops and said “This is proletarian expropriation”, to me on the one hand it made me laugh, on the other hand I felt like smacking them. Once, another anecdote I can tell you [...] I go to the [local supermarket] and I met one of these guys, whom I had already met a few days before. [...] Even there it was proletarian expropriation, so after 10 minutes, I had arrived home and a person from the village called me and said, “Ah but, Gianna, but you know the person you were talking to earlier... he stole! And they've already been caught in the toilets stealing toilet paper anyway!”²⁸²

As Elena explains, the local population experienced radical practices carried out by transnational group as external factors to their communities. This was partially due to the same isolation strategy that they put in place.

²⁸¹ SR_TA_PI_20210608

²⁸² SV_PE_ZI_20210411

I think that the main objective of those who occupied the *Casetta* was not to build a relationship with the local social fabric. So [...] there was a bit of an attempt not to disturb too much, but also a lot of indifference to common thought, let's say. [...] The *Casetta* was seen in a lot of strange ways. There were people who claimed it was a brothel (we laugh), there were people who told you "It's full of niggers" and there wasn't a single black person there because they were all Persian [...] There were people complaining that the *Casetta* occupants don't want to work and it's full of dogs that break your balls. [...] So the perception of the population was not positive in my opinion. Either there was an ignoring of that kind of reality, so "Boh, they are there, let them do what they want", very few and mostly in a hidden way supported it, maybe they gave you the wood, or make you a sandwich [...] After it was cleared [...] I had happened to talk to a girl who has the house right next door, and she had said "But a lot of Chinese people are coming!" And I "Ehh" quite shocked, because they have slanted eyes, "Maybe they are Afghans" "Yes yes anyway there are a lot of people, I was afraid that they would come into my house, that militants would come into my house too", that is, the rancour was more on the militants than on the people in transit. In the end the people in transit are a bit... how shall I say (she thinks) viewed with pity, and so they are almost identified in the poor innocent person who has a shitty life and should not be picked on. Whereas instead the activist is the daddy's son-of-a-bitch, who doesn't work, the tick [...] ²⁸³

Finally, as the ethnography uncovered, the boundary between legality and illegality played also a role in *bordering* transnational groups' practices from the local community. According to Marco, local dwellers' complaints regarding the occupation in Oulx was about the illegal stay, rather than the support activities carried out:

I mean, never has anyone, not even the country's hottest, blackest head, ever said "I don't feel like giving assistance to migrants". Never. They said, "You want to give assistance to migrants? Do it in the legal way, i.e. pay the electricity, do it well, not abusively". The criticism levelled at the *Casa Cantoniera* was this. The illegality. Not of the action, of the way in which the help to migrants was being given. ²⁸⁴

The *border experience* of local communities was greatly impacted by the fragmented and polarized "humanitarian borderscape" organized around and against the "care and control" strategy backed by state actors. On this regard, empirical data showed a kind of resistance of the local community to the

²⁸³ NB_MA_PI_20211208

²⁸⁴ SR_TA_PI_20210608

politicization of the management of “secondary movements”, allowed and promoted by the same formal humanitarian practices that overwhelmingly absorbed it.

8.5 Conclusion: the polysemic nature of the Upper Susa Valley

The ethnographic approach to the investigation of the border experience of those who inhabit the Upper Susa Valley revealed that the dimension of the everyday life in the *borderland* is highly impacted by the internal European *re-bordering* process, the “secondary movements” and the “humanitarian borderwork”.

First, it showed that transit migrations globalized the daily experience in the *borderland*. When it comes to the local management of “secondary movement”, local authorities’ representatives experienced a process of estrangement from the state authority, shedding light on a significant dimension in the state-periphery relation. The experience of local dwellers uncovered instead that the return of internal borders enabled encounters with transit migrants at the daily level. This contributed to change their perception of the state border, but limited to *borderlanders* engaged in solidarity activities and according to their age.

Then, the ethnographic analysis unpacked the “frontier effect” (Donnan & Wilson, 1998) in the Upper Susa Valley, uncovering the polysemic nature of the Alpine Italian-French border (Bachellet, 2020). First, it compared the *border experience* of transit migrants and local dwellers. This unveiled that if the re-bordered state boundary matters only at the level perception and not for everyone in the case of the latter, for the former it is synonymous of violence, uncertainty, precarity and the need to be supported. Then, it showed that the COVID-19 put the border back in the everyday life of European citizens. Thus, it has been described as a *re-bordering* factor able to reveal the polysemy of contemporary borders to European citizens in overlapping mobility regimes.

Furthermore, this analysis focused on the “humanitarian borderscape” dominated by the “care and control” state strategy. On the one hand, it revealed that solidarity actors made a peculiar daily experience of a global process, introjecting the risks faced by transit migrants when crossing a militarized Alpine border. This influenced their solidarity activities, that embodied their concerns and priorities. As well, it impacted on their *border experience*, to the extent that the global dynamics that generate migratory flows spill over into the local, marking its phases, times, and seasonality. Finally, the Chapter revealed that the “care and control” strategy informing the “humanitarian borderscape” in the Upper Susa Valley impacted also on the local community. It framed its *border experience* insofar as it allowed a large part of the population to ignore the “secondary movements” across the

borderland. At the same time, it generated a polarization in the solidarity scenario, of which the most radical part has attracted the mostly negative attention of the local community.

Moving from different *re-bordering tales*, the examination of the *border experience* of *borderlanders* and transit migrants in times of internal *re-bordering* framed a picture characterized by a multiple understanding of the *borderland*. This thesis proposes the category “polysemy of the *borderland*” to grasp this scenario. The focus on the point of view of those who inhabit the *borderland* expanded the “frontier effect”, showing that not only the border, but the *borderland* itself is differently experienced according to the legal and social category to which the individual belongs. Accordingly, the Upper Susa Valley can be experienced as space of violence and vulnerability, but also solidarity and support. It can also take the meaning of a political space, where different “secondary movements” management prerogatives converge, clash, polarize. As well, it can be experienced as a re-bordered space of humanitarian emergency, where the effort of securitizing vulnerable people in a dangerous environment can assume different perspectives, embodied by diverse humanitarian practices and political claims.

Thus, the category of “polysemy of the *borderland*” suggests that the ethnographic approach to the study of the contemporary *re-bordering* process in Europe expanded its multi-dimensional nature and meaning in the time/space scale of the border area, fragmenting it according to multiple boundary regimes and thus differentiating and stratifying the everyday experience of those who inhabit or cross the *borderland*.

“Look... how beautiful the mountains are, they got snowed in.”

“Yes...it depends on whose eyes are looking at them.”

(Field diary: October 31, 2021)

Chapter 9

Conclusion: Daily building and living the internal borders

This thesis has put at the centre of the analysis the *border experience* (Wille & Nienaber, 2020) of those who inhabit the inner European *borderlands* (Donnan & Wilson, 1998), with the aim of exploring the impact of the return of identity border checks on their everyday personal, professional, social lives.

The assumption that identity checks at European internal borders are *back to stay* represented the background of this research. This validated the relevance of the ethnographic approach to the study of the internal European *re-bordering* process, and the emphasis on its impact on the day-to-day lives of "border people" (Martinez, 1994).

The thesis has accounted for the *border experience* in the scenario of the European internal *re-bordering* process, through the ethnographic work conducted at the frontier area at the northwest most of Italy: the Upper Susa Valley. Since 2017, selective identity checks have been implemented at its Alpine Italian-French border, aimed to contain "secondary movements" (Del Biaggio 2020, Tazzioli 2020a, 2020b). The Upper Susa Valley *borderlanders* witnessed a "border change" (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999) that followed a securitized approach, which characterized the European scenario since the 90s (Huysmans, 2000) and that has recently favoured the *re-bordering* process at internal borders (Casella Colombeau, 2020; Gülzau 2023). In the Upper Susa Valley, this strategy brought to the establishment of a mechanism of push-backs of transit migrants, mainly asylum seekers, implemented in an Alpine environment. This favoured the emersion of a solidarity scenario in the *borderland*, orientated to address the relevant humanitarian concerns and promote the safety of transit migrants (Laszczkowski, 2018a, 2018b; Tazzioli & Walters, 2019; Petrozzi, 2020; Tazzioli, 2020a, 2020b; Manzon, 2022; Ferroni, 2022).

This scenario was empirically analysed, to provide a bottom-up perspective of how these changes were participated and experienced by local communities of the Upper Susa Valley. The research relied on both traditional and digital ethnographic methods, with a focus on participant observation, to embrace the theoretical challenge of exploring the contemporary nature of European borders with the innovative tools provided by Critical Border Studies, and specifically the *bordering* approach (Van Houtum & Van Naersser, 2002). This concerns the exploration of modern frontiers as both tangible and intangible processes and institutions (Paasi 1998, 2001) and deriving from social

practices that are produced, reproduced and contested by a variety of state and non-state actors (Rumford, 2007). In this sense, the *bordering* framework inspired the investigation of contemporary borders adopting a “people approach”, i.e. looking at human production and reproduction of boundaries and their meaning (Van Houtum, 2000). Based on this, the investigation has zoomed in everyday *bordering* practices put in place by state and non-state actors. As well, it moved from their *re-bordering tales* to build a multi-dimensional framework able to account for the multi-perspectival reality of the *border experience* in times of European internal *re-bordering*. Finally, it shed light on the multiple, tangible and intangible boundaries that the internal *re-bordering* process has triggered in the Upper Susa Valley, fragmenting and stratifying its political and social reality.

Ground-breaking and original research results stemmed from the ethnographic investigation, as far as the everyday *border experience* in the Upper Susa Valley is concerned. These provided meaningful research outputs to understand the everyday life of European citizens, facing the internal *re-bordering* processes in the wake of unprecedented global dynamics such as “secondary movements” and the COVID-19 pandemics. In addition, the focus on the *border experience* provided significant bottom-up perspectives on the contemporary nature of internal European borders and on the reality of the *re-bordering* policy in the migration and border management.

9.1 *Border experience*, “secondary movements” and the *re-bordering* process in the Upper Susa Valley

9.1.1. “Mannering” the Alpine Italian-French border zone

A first specific objective of the research indicated the unpacking of the transformation of the Alpine Italian-French border according to the *re-bordering process*, as pivotal in the investigation of the *border experience* in the Upper Susa Valley.

Building on the Critical Border studies’ “people approach” perspective, this research investigated the Alpine Italian-French border by focusing on everyday *bordering* practices put in place by multiple border agents in the Upper Susa Valley. This was inspired by the work of Reeves (2011, 2014), who provided an anthropological framework for the study of contemporary borders as state sovereignty devices from the perspective of a process, embodied in territorialized everyday practices of state actors at the border. She called this perspective “mannering the border” (2014). This thesis expanded her theoretical perspective, including in the ethnographic investigation both state and non-state actors to understand the ontology and functioning of contemporary borders.

This bottom-up, localized and territorialized approach showed that the *re-bordering* process at the Alpine Italian-French border is shaped by the interplay between the everyday practices put in place by *bordering* agents holding opposite interests. On the side of state actors, that of protecting the border from illegal crossings. On the side of transit migrants, that of transgressing the border device and continue in their migratory project. Furthermore, this has been interpreted according to a structure/agency paradigm (Brunet-Jailly, 2005).

The *agency* dimension in “secondary movements” across Europe has been widely explored throughout the thesis. These have been illustrated as coping strategies put in place by transit migrants and asylum seekers to overcome the obstacles that hinder their infra-European mobility, mainly represented by the Dublin regulation (Kasperek, 2017) and the internal *re-bordering* process stemming from the massive increase of “secondary movements” after the “long Summer of migrations” in 2015 (Kasperek & Speer, 2015).

In the ethnography, transit migrants’ *agency* emerged as key feature to understand the nature and functioning of the Alpine Italian-French border. On the one hand, as pointed out in Chapter 5, the inclusion of the Upper Susa Valley within the scenario of international transit migration routes in form of “secondary movements” occurred according to a structure/agency process. Transit migrants showed up in the Upper Susa Valley as they partially re-routed from the highly militarized and violent Ventimiglia-Menton border dyad, and chose the Alpine Italian-French border as a potential gate to France due to the relative crossability of its border passes and the Susa Valley’s historically-rooted infrastructural accessibility by public transport from major infrastructure hubs, such as Turin.

On the other hand, as highlighted in Chapter 6, the role of migrants’ *agency* emerged as pivotal in opening and consolidating transit routes towards, across and beyond the Upper Susa Valley. This concerned the adaptation of mobility strategies to permanent factors hindering them, such as the border device characterizing the Alpine frontier landscape; their diversification to hide from the French police and successfully pass through the identity check border zone, averting the risk of push-backs; the adaptation to contingent variables, such as the disruption of the local bus service used to shorten their distance with the borderline in October 2021.

Ethnographic observations offered a bottom-up perspective on “secondary movements” as coping strategies, shaped by endogenous and exogenous, permanent and contingent, local and non-local variables, and aiming to successfully deal with the militarization of the Alpine Italian-French border zone.

Furthermore, as shown specifically in Chapter 6, the thesis also foregrounded the unfolding of a reinforced military presence by French authorities at the border crossings between the Upper Susa

Valley and the *Savoie* and *Hautes Alpes* departments (Bachelierie, 2020) as a key element in the interaction between transit migrants' *agency* and the European states' policies. On this regard, the dissertation demonstrated that this occurred under the securitized approach to migrations, in order to contain "secondary movements" coming from the Balkan and the Central Mediterranean routes.

In here we must consider once more that Critical Border Studies shed light on the rationale of "securitization of migrations" (Huysmans, 2000; Bigo, 2002) that stands behind both the complementary processes of *de-bordering* and *re-bordering* at the European level. The thesis illustrated, respectively at a theoretical and policy level that, since the signature of the Schengen agreement, the European management of borders and migrations promoted a two-fold mobility regime. To the increased freedom of circulation for European citizens corresponded a multiplication of legal and material obstacles to the access of non-Europeans in the EU (Kasperek, 2016). This triggered transit migrations (Collyer & de Haas, 2012; Düvell, 2014), that the policy discourse pictured as threat and thus justified the external *re-bordering* process (Collyer, Düvell & de Haas, 2012).

Within this policy spectrum, the ethnographic analysis documented that the French police deployed in the Montgenèvre frontier zone a dense and technological border device. While carrying out selective identity checks and readmitting in Italy those migrants crossing the border outside of the legal framework provided by the Dublin regulation, they unfolded a "human chase" (Bachelierie, 2020) as a tactic to hinder irregular border crossings in an Alpine landscape. French law enforcement agents used technological devices, a combination of fixed and mobile checkpoints, as well as a high manpower level to intercept people "looking" and "behaving" as non-Europeans, i.e. those avoiding main roads and taking mountain paths to cross the border as lacking the necessary documents and requirements to cross the border, with the intention of refusing them admission into France.

Further grounded observations revealed that, in spite of the considerable human and technological endowment allocated, French police regularly intercepted and rejected only a part of "secondary movements", filtering them through a cherry-picking random selection. French state agents' *bordering* practices unfolded with the aim of publicly *show* the potential of the exercise of state sovereignty at the border within the spectrum of the "securitization of migrations". A "scenography of the *re-bordering*" was put in place, that in spite of a highly mannered and technological border device, randomly contained rather than massively hinder "secondary movements".

Finally, the cherry-picking filtering strategy adopted by French law enforcement agents in containing "secondary movements" showed the relevance of *subjectivity* in the state power exercise at border. On this regard, the ethnographic approach revealed the high-degree impact of personal choices in influencing and determining the interplay between "secondary movements", their time/space

development, and the *re-bordering* process seen as embodied exercise of state sovereign power at and beyond the political frontier. Moreover, the relevance of the subjective level has been demonstrated also in other contexts, i.e. with regard to the role played by personalities in the state apparatus in defying the distance between its central and local authorities, or even in the capability of the behaviour of the drivers of the bus service to impact on the mobility strategies of migrants in transit. This dimension could not have been observed if not from the “bottom-up” perspective offered by the ethnographic analysis. Therefore, it represents one of the most relevant empirical results of the research, that unpacked the daily reality of “secondary movements” and state *bordering* practices at and beyond the Alpine Italian-French border, by “mannerings” the borderline and the *borderland*.

9.1.2. Where is the Alpine Italian- French border? Upper Susa Valley as “*bordering* laboratory”

As we noted, the theoretical framework provided by the *bordering* approach also contributed to discuss the Upper Susa Valley as a “*bordering* laboratory” (Scott, 2012b). In this regard, placing the focus on the dimensions of *where*, *when* and *how bordering* practices take place at the EU's external border (Chapter 2), helped to grasp its securitized, externalized, technologized, disseminated and polysemic nature. Moreover, this theoretical framework has also been particularly useful to explore of the internal *re-bordering* process at the Alpine Italian-French border. A multiple understanding of the concept of *border* guided the investigation according to key questions regarding *where*, *how*, *when* has the return of internal boundaries taken place, as well as *who* implements it and *for whom* is it carried out.

On these lines, the thesis showed how, and illustrated through ethnographic results, that the Alpine Italian-French frontier functions as a securitized border, as it undertook a militarization process with the aim of managing the risk of “secondary movements”, portrayed as a threat to France’s security. The *re-bordering* policy put in place by French authorities at the border with Italy mirrored that implemented at the European edges, that implied the use of police practices to identify and reject those who irregularly attempt to enter the sovereign territory. In addition, it worked as an externalized border, as though the push-back practice France demands to Italy a protection duty that the international law grants to all asylum seekers, regardless of the irregularity of their status and cross-border mobility. Furthermore, it was a technologized border, as the patrolling activity is complemented with appropriate tools to enhance human capabilities. Finally, the thesis has revealed that it worked as a diffused border, in a two-fold sense. On the one hand, it materialized beyond the borderline, in the area covered by the border device put in place by French police, combined with the subjective exercise of power of French border agents. On the other hand, it straddled the borderline,

embodied in the French territory by *bordering* practices carried out in the mountain paths of the Montgenèvre and by French police agents and their technological devices, and in the Italian territory, as the border check-point at the entrance of the Fréjus tunnel witnesses.

As Chapter 2 explained, in order to grasp the nature of contemporary boundaries Rumford (2012) proposed the theoretical perspective of “seeing like a border”. He claimed that this helped to highlight that, in considering international migrants as *bordering* agents, the effects of modern state borders can be felt far from their physical presence, “wherever selective controls are to be found” (pp. 897-898). This is the case of the case of the Alpine Italian-French border. “Mannering the border” helped to localize *where*, *when* and *why* this tightened frontier took shape, i.e. at the crossroads between the irregular transit trajectories of migrants wishing to cross the militarized Alps to reach France, and those drawn in the woods by the French police with the aim of diverting them.

9.1.3. “Seeing like a border”: unpacking the polysemic nature of the Alpine border(land)

Rumford’s invite to “see like a border” also assumed that the ontology of the modern boundary can be seized only through the inclusion in the research spectrum of multiple points of view, not limited to that of subalterns or those more exposed to its sovereign power. This thesis welcomed this invitation, indicating as further specific objective of the research the exploration of the impact of the *re-bordering* process on the whole arena of the Upper Susa Valley *borderlanders*. To fulfil this, it “humanized the border” (Brambilla 2015), i.e. it put the daily *border experience* of frontier actors at the centre of the ethnographic investigation to understand the impact of state policies, in this case the *(re)bordering* practices at the Italian-French border, on their everyday life. This revealed the polysemic nature of the Alpine Italian-French *borderland*.

The thesis illustrated that by exploring contemporary borders as processes participated by multiple actors that produce, reproduce and contest them, the *bordering* approach assumes their multiple points of view to investigate their functioning and meaning (Newman, 2006a). In this literature, the polysemy of contemporary borders lies in the extent to which they are differently experienced according to the subjectivity of those encountering them, moving from the theoretical debate regarding the encounter between international migrants and the European border regime (Balibar, 2002). This sheds light on the ontology of modern boundaries: when considered beyond their mere geopolitical dimension, they do not exist *per se*, but stem from *bordering* practices (Sohn, 2015).

As far as the Alpine Italian-French border is concerned, since 2017 the *re-bordering* process exclusively concerned the interception and push-back of non-European migrants in transit that

produced cross-border mobility outside the legal framework of the Dublin regulation. Ethnographic vignettes illustrated how the transit migrants' experience of the Alpine Italian-French border is characterized by a high level of vulnerability, physical danger, the risk of being pushed-back at the border, and a low yet present risk of death.

More interestingly, the thesis put forward a comparison of this with the experience of local dwellers, whose European citizenship and appearance make the border disappear from their daily experience of the frontier. This illustrates that the border as process does not exist for local dwellers and tourists enjoying the dense entertainment and sport trans-border infrastructures characterizing the border area. Hence, the securitized border entailed a diversification of the *border experience* spectrum in the Upper Susa Valley, as revealed by putting together the point of view of transit migrants and that of local dwellers on the same border. This contributed to the acknowledgment of a "frontier effect" (Donnan & Wilson, 1998) in the Upper Susa Valley, showing the extent to which the sovereign power diversely interacts with the individual, according to his/her status. As Donnan and Wilson (2010) pointed out, sometimes state borders matter, sometimes they do not.

The Alpine Italian-French border mattered again to European citizens, even if for a limited time, when cross-border mobility restrictions aimed to limit the spread of COVID-19 were introduced in 2020. In this sense, the differentiated functioning and meaning of the Alpine militarized border revealed to those who inhabit it in a context of overlapping mobility regimes: a first one, filtering crossing activities based on the juridical status of those facing it; the other, depending on the COVID-19 pandemic and representing a filter based on the holding of certifications and negative tests.

As the ethnography showed, the sanitary *re-bordering* did not hinder the cross-border mobility of those who inhabit the Upper Susa Valley, as frontier dwellers residing within a territorial range of 30 kilometres could cross the border freely. Nevertheless, the request of proper documentation at the borderline operated by the French police meant the projection of the *re-bordering* process into the daily life of European citizens. On this regard, the ethnography confirmed the potential of the COVID-19 as *re-bordering* factor (Montaldo, 2020; Opilowska, 2020), as it revealed its capability of boosting the polysemic nature of re-bordered internal European state boundaries.

Furthermore, as far as the *border experience* of the Upper Susa Valley *borderlanders* is concerned, the stratified polysemy of the Alpine militarized frontier impacted on their *border perception* and meaning-building. This contributed to explore the second research objective.

As Chapter 2 illustrated, facing the ontological heterogeneity of contemporary borders, the *border perception* has been debated depending on their polysemic nature. Therefore, a comprehensive

understanding of how modern borders function and are experienced from below depends on people-approached studies aiming to collect *border narratives* from various actors, and juxtapose them (Newman, 2006a). This thesis embraced this grounded approach, building a multi-perspectival picture of the *border perception* of those who inhabit the *borderland* moving from their *re-bordering tales*, i.e. border narratives giving account for the people's perception of the return of identity checks. On this regard, as Chapter 8 illustrated, two factors impacted on the perception of the *re-bordering* process at the Alpine Italian-French border: the age of participants and their engagement in the solidarity scenario. For the older people, the return of identity checks process meant the perception of a restricted freedom after the liberalization of cross-border mobility granted by the Schengen reform. For the youngest, the focus went on the militarization and the perception of privilege in cross-border mobility, compared to people same age but born outside of EU territory. As well, the border was back in the imaginary of those who engage in the solidarity practices, while the frontier was still a fluid dimension for those who do not interact with transit migrants.

Bringing together in a multi-dimensional framework the *re-bordering tales* collected through the ethnographic activity revealed the polysemic nature of the French-Italian Alpine border, in which the diverse *border experience* of the border actors who variously deal with the French-Italian Alpine border was mirrored. In addition, *re-bordering tales* revealed the multi-perspectival meaning attached to state border, which also frames a heterogeneous scenario in terms of how the state border is experienced by those who inhabit the Upper Susa Valley.

9.2 Border experience and the “geographies of humanitarian borderwork” in the Upper Susa Valley

A third specific research question that this thesis addressed was about the impact of the “humanitarian borderwork” implemented in the Upper Susa Valley on the *border experience* of those who inhabit it. On this regard, the ethnographic focus on the violence of the *re-bordering* process in the Alpine landscape and the vulnerability of transit migrants crossing the Upper Susa Valley, brought at the centre of the empirical observation the solidarity scenario in the militarized Alpine border zone.

In terms of *bordering* approach, as Chapter 7 showed, this is critical in terms of “humanitarian borderscape”, i.e. a special environment characterized by territorialized forms of care carried out by a complexity of state and non-state actors performing “humanitarian borderwork” in favour of transit migrants in frontier scenarios characterized by *re-bordering* processes (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017b). In this sense, critically, the thesis revealed that the “humanitarian borderscape” highly impacted on the *border experience* of those who inhabit the Upper Susa Valley, insofar as formal and informal

humanitarian practices and the state response that both supported and repressed them, favoured the emersion of fragmented and stratified “geographies of humanitarian borderwork”.

9.2.1. Managing risk in an Alpine militarized *borderland*: “Don’t end up like Ventimiglia”

The structuring of an “humanitarian borderscape” in the Upper Susa Valley was backed by a “care and control” strategy that took the shape of state initiatives joined by both state and non-state actors and aimed to locally manage “secondary movements”.

On this regard, Pallister-Wilkins (2015), claimed that this is orientated to a management of migrations in frontier contexts that combines the protection of borders with that of human life, addressing a two-fold risk: that looking at “secondary movements” as *a* risk for European borders, and that of transit migrants being *at* risk in militarized border landscapes. The ethnographic lens of this thesis expanded this framework, showing that the state “care and control” strategy in the Upper Susa Valley seek to prevent instead a *threefold* risk, linked to the specific Alpine militarized environment characterizing the *borderland*. State-backed humanitarian projects aimed to contain “secondary movements” as *a* risk for internal European borders; to protect transit migrants as people *at* risk; to prevent them to become a potential risk for the local industry.

As shown, this strategy was put in place through the combination of different *bordering* practices implemented throughout the *borderland* by different border agents. In general, transit migrants have been discouraged to cross the border irregularly, to contain the risk for their safety *and* the border. They have been offered for-free welcoming facilities to protect them, with the parallel purpose of concentrating them and hide their presence at the public eye. Finally, the observation of solidarity practices uncovered a general orientation to “keep the transit fluid”, limiting the permanence of transit migrants in the *borderland* to its minimum possible. This, in order to grant the local sustainability of humanitarian facilities, and to limit the impact of “secondary movements” and the output of the French *re-bordering* process on local communities and the touristic economy.

Carrying out fieldwork in the Upper Susa Valley offered the opportunity to observe how a “care and control” strategy unravels in a re-bordered frontier as a risk-management plan, adapted to the specificities of the frontier environment, in this case the Alps and a *borderland* devoted to the tourism industry. In addition, by bringing into dialogue the *re-bordering tales* collected from various and different border actors, it showed that a unique watchword subsumed the whole “secondary movements” management strategy in the Upper Susa Valley: “Do not end up like Ventimiglia”.

As explored in Chapter 5, at the Ventimiglia-Menton dyad the heavy militarization to hinder the irregular transit of migrants combined with their substantial abandonment. State intervention offered

insufficient places of shelter and assistance, and only for a limited period. It also suppressed all solidarity initiatives, whether politically motivated or purely humanitarian, that sought to fill the assistance void. This turned the border area into a place of violence, exploitation and degradation, with strong consequences on local communities, who reacted with protests and demonstrations of intolerance.

On the opposite, the implementation of a “care and control” strategy in the Upper Susa Valley through the opening of the *Spazio Calmo* in Bardonecchia and the Massi shelter in Oulx, but also the long-lasting tolerance towards the occupation of the *Casa Cantoniera* in the same village, gave account of an effort by the state to act proactively in the humanitarian, not only repressive, management of “secondary movements”, with a clear consideration of the possible local implications of global processes. As further illustrated in section 9.2.3. “Experiencing a complex border architecture: Upper Susa Valley as a polysemic *borderland*”, the ethnography revealed that this resulted in a very limited impact of secondary movements on local populations, which allowed the majority of ordinary citizens to ignore the problem, and even left them with concerns regarding more radical solidarity practices.

9.2.2. A fragmented “humanitarian borderscape”: Upper Susa Valley as a “land of borders”

As argued and demonstrated in Chapter 7, the “care and control” strategy represented the backbone of the “humanitarian borderscape” in the Upper Susa Valley. Its territorial framework and its range of activities resulted from the interplay between the state plan for managing “secondary movements” and the everyday solidarity practices put in place at a daily level by a diversified range of non-state actors.

Building from the theoretical framework of the *bordering* approach, and especially its multi-dimensional understanding of borders, ethnographic results have been interpreted under the lenses of overlapping, fragmented “geographies of humanitarian borderwork”. On the one hand, a highly territorialized and mannered landscape, scenario of diversified *bordering* and solidarity practices. On the other hand, a political space characterized by multiple, both concrete and intangible, *bordering*, *re-bordering* and *de-bordering* tensions.

A first “geography of humanitarian borderwork” emerged in terms of a range of diverse humanitarian activities, primarily determined by the heterogeneity of the solidarity scenario. The various actors comprising it - formal social organisations such as the local Red Cross and the foundation running the Massi shelter, local voluntary groups and networks, up to transnational radical groups - variously positioned themselves in relation to state-driven “secondary movement” management initiatives.

The biggest part of the solidarity scenario espoused its purely emergency and humanitarian approach to transit migration, that aimed to address the basic needs of migrants in a vulnerable condition due to the militarization of the border and ignoring its political causes. Nevertheless, diversified solidarity practices within the public-private humanitarian context were observed. These referred in particular to the relationship of solidarity actors with the *agency* of transit migrants, variously discouraged or supported. In addition, the different meanings attached to the “keep the transit fluid” prerogatives were diversely embedded in support practices carried out within the same Massi shelter. A part of the solidarity agents prioritized the safety of transit migrants, others the sustainability of the project. On the other side were those who instead contested the public-private humanitarian mechanism, both promoting horizontal solidarity practices and putting the political struggle against borders at the centre of their humanitarian action.

The territorial scope of this first “geography of humanitarian borderwork” was then determined by the consolidation of the first pioneering grassroots solidarity initiatives promoted by ordinary people and informal groups, as well as by already solid social networks from the Lower Susa Valley. This called into question the No TAV movement, which by means of an “up-the-valley” movement extended in the Upper Susa Valley its highly-territorialized and ingrained social network. This dimension also relates to the identity of the Susa Valley as “land of transit”: as explored in Chapter 5, for its strategic position it has been targeted with high territorial impact projects to further increase the infrastructure network for commercial purposes, which local groups in the Lower Valley have strenuously opposed. The need to organize the first pioneering support for transit migrants in the Upper Susa Valley favoured the transfer of their communitarian practices towards the border area, as well as the contamination of its traditionally less active communities with their political effervescence. Formal and informal groups fielded transnational solidarity activities, which represented significant practices of *de-bordering* in a re-bordered space and extended the “humanitarian borderscape” across the political border. Similar to transit migrants, that with their incessant crossing of the frontier establish continuities between the two sides of the political borders, the structuring of transnational solidarity practices qualified volunteers and activists as *(de)bordering* agents, for their capability to construct and highlight tensions between *de-bordering* and *re-bordering* processes ongoing in the Upper Susa Valley, and expanding its understanding as “bordering laboratory”.

Moreover, as the ethnography showed, both the activity range and the territorial scope of the humanitarian scenario were defined by *bordering* practices put in place by state actors, in particular law enforcement agents. They targeted non-formal initiatives that favoured the “irruption of the

politics” into the management of “secondary movements”, matching tangible solidarity activities with a political fight against the border. *Bordering* practices aimed to take the struggle away from the borderline and to settle welcoming facilities far from it, according to a “down-the-valley” movement. As well, they aimed to contain and discourage with police interventions most of the politically charged solidarity initiatives. In this sense, a second “geography of humanitarian borderwork” emerged, shaped by the interplay between *bordering* and humanitarian practices that delimited the contours of the political space within which the solidarity actors of the Upper Susa Valley moved. State agents tolerated and even supported those that stuck to the “care and control” vision, that aimed to manage “secondary movements” as a humanitarian issue within the emergency spectrum. As revealed throughout the thesis, this system was challenged by groups that contested it, claiming the political value of the acts of those who transgress the border and, consequently, of those who support their *agency*. On this regard, the political landscape of the Upper Susa Valley has long been characterized by a paradox according to which those contesting the state vision finally contributed to it, as their tangible solidarity practices filled a gap left by the state. Despite this, state *bordering* practices punished these initiatives, marking the boundary between the legal and the illegal, what can be tolerated and what has to be removed.

Under the lenses of the *bordering* approach, and in particular its understanding of boundaries as processes and institutions (Paasi, 1998, 2001), the ethnographic analysis of the “humanitarian borderscape” of the Upper Susa Valley and its overlapping “geographies of humanitarian borderwork” reflected a scenario strongly influenced by the process of state *re-bordering*. This in turn favoured the emersion of multiple boundaries that criss-crossed the everyday reality of the Upper Susa Valley. The latter concerned those *bordering* the geographical and the political space, within which some solidarity practices were tolerated and supported, and other were contained and repressed; the demarcation between those lying inside the “care and control” spectrum and those contesting it; the division between managing “secondary movements” according to an emergency-based rationale and the politicization of the phenomenon; the boundary between legality and illegality.

In this terms, the *bordering* approach exposed the nature of the Upper Susa Valley as a *borderland*, in the double sense provided by Balibar: as a “land with borders” and a “land of borders”. As discussed in Chapter 5, this dimension stemmed from the historical background of the *borderland*, whose developments in terms of the definition of its political and cultural borders highly impacted on its communities’ identity and its relationship with the “other side of the border”. This research further revealed the complexity of the border architecture in the Upper Susa Valley. As well, it helped to

understand the internal *re-bordering* process capability of enhancing the influence of the transformation of the state border on the local dynamics, and to favour the building of new social and political boundaries that significantly impacted on the *border experience* of those who inhabit the *borderland*.

9.2.3. Experiencing a complex border architecture: Upper Susa Valley as a polysemic *borderland*

The complex boundary architecture characterizing the “humanitarian borderscape” of the Upper Susa Valley highly impacted on its *border experience* dimension. In general terms, “secondary movements” both globalized and re-bordered it, depending on the role that different categories of participants embedded in the *borderland*, especially in relation to the “care and control” strategy promoted by the state. Chapter 8 illuminated this dimension and satisfied a fourth specific research question.

When it comes to local authorities’ representatives, the involvement of the Upper Susa Valley within international transit migration routes meant the challenge of locally governing a global dynamic. Sticking to the state “care and control” vision signified combining the prerogatives of protecting local communities from the risk of a negative impact of “secondary movements”, and the safety of migrants in transit. To pursue this, they showed a strong commitment in seeking alliances with the social and no-profit sectors. When it comes to their *border experience*, ethnographic results revealed a great distance as far as the local management of such a key topic of political agendas is concerned. Their *re-bordering tales* uncovered feelings of abandonment and estrangement, mitigated only by phases in which the emergence of certain personalities among the territorial state officials partially reduced the centre-periphery distance.

This further highlighted the relevance of the ethnographic approach as far as the local management of “secondary movements” is concerned, due to its capability of revealing the significance of the subjective level of analysis. As well, it contributed to shed light on the importance of unravelling the state-periphery relationship according to a “bottom-up” perspective. As explored in Chapter 2, *borderlands* represent “unique human environments” (Martinez, 1994) characterized by a special relationship between the individual and the state exercise of its residual sovereign power through national borders. In the case study taken as a point of reference, it was seen that the state strengthened its presence in the context of a *re-bordering* process, but that this was not matched by a rapprochement with local authorities. These felt in most cases isolated in the management of a phenomenon that they perceived to be out of their reach and not within their competence.

When it comes to ordinary citizens, “secondary movements” further projected the *border experience* of local communities into global processes. On this regard, the description of the Susa Valley offered in Chapter 5 as traditionally a “land of transit” is fundamental. This shows that the presence of viable mountain passes to overcome the natural obstacles represented by the Alps historically favoured the creation of a rich trans-Alpine infrastructure network, that provided the Susa Valley with a strategic position along the main commercial and religious routes between the Italian peninsula and the continent. For these reasons, historians such as Vernetto claimed that the Valley has always breath with two lungs, one local and one international (2011).

The globalization of local communities’ *border experience* was revealed by empirical findings in a two-fold shape. On the one hand, in the opportunity of daily encounters with transit migrants, favoured by the slowdown that the *re-bordering* produced on “secondary movements”. On the other hand, in the possibility of engaging in solidarity activities to limit the concerning effects of irregular cross-border activities in the Alpine militarized landscape.

As well, as mentioned before, the ethnography also uncovered that the impact of “secondary movements” and the *re-bordering* process on the *border experience* of local dwellers highly depended on the “care and control” strategy implemented to manage the passage of transit migrants across the *borderland*. The prerogatives of offering them accessible welcoming facilities, hiding them from the public view while promoting their safety, favoured a scenario in which the effects of global dynamics on the local environment was relatively limited. Based on this, the majority of ordinary dwellers ignored, or could ignore, the involvement of the *borderland* within international transit migration routes, the militarization of the border zone and the creation of a formal and informal support network. Accordingly, a community stratification mirroring scheme of concentric circles has been described. The innermost one represents those local people who directly engaged in humanitarian practices. The middle part is constituted by those locals who have been aware of, and sensitive to, the migratory phenomenon and the relative solidarity activities by randomly contributing to its functioning. Empirical data showed that their number increased in occasion of media coverage of international events related to wars or the migratory phenomenon. Also to note, the most external circle represents those who ignored or disregarded the inclusion of the Upper Susa Valley within international transit migration routes.

A further critical aspect revealed by the ethnography concerned the impact of the fragmented “humanitarian borderscape” on the ordinary citizens’ daily experience. Its complex boundary architecture polarized the humanitarian scenario along the line of the legality of solidarity practices. This promoted the isolation of transnational groups carrying out radical initiatives such as the occupation of public buildings, that attracted most of the grievances of the local communities. Put in

a position to overlook the management of “secondary movements” as it was absorbed by state initiatives, they focused their attention on the illegality of certain practices employed by transnational groups. As largely documented by the ethnographic material collected, this was amplified by the predominant alienation of “No Border” practices and discourses from the cultural and political identity of the Upper Susa Valley. Given the high politicization and media coverage of transit migrations and “secondary movements” in Italy and Europe, this entailed a meaningful paradox that the observation of the daily reality of the Upper Susa Valley allowed to grasp.

Finally, when it comes to solidarity actors, as the fieldwork revealed, we can identify a situation where the *re-bordering* process at the state frontier impacted on their daily life in terms of an assumption of awareness and responsibility towards the transit-migrants *border experience*. As discussed in depth in Chapter 8, this emerged in the shape of ethical concerns, especially related to seasonality in an Alpine militarized landscape. As well, global dynamics that govern transit migrations impacted on their everyday experience of the *borderland*, insofar as the profile of transit migrants that stem from them resulted to have a significant impact on their daily humanitarian work. In this regard, solidarity actors’ *re-bordering tales* drew a picture of “secondary movements” in the Upper Susa Valley, whose chronology depended on their daily *border experience* facing them and changing accordingly to the different profile of transit migrants that choose the *borderland* to pursue their infra-state mobility plans.

In this context of fragmented and re-bordered “geographies of humanitarian borderwork”, the fieldwork revealed that solidarity actors make a daily experience of its multiple of boundaries, material and immaterial, impacting on their daily life as *borderlanders*. In particular, they experience the multiple polarizations that characterized the “humanitarian scenario”, especially those marked by different attitudes towards the cross-border mobility of transit migrants, aimed at discourage, support or secure it, and that dividing those facing “secondary movements” as a humanitarian emergency or a political issue.

Lastly, we must refer to how local authorities’ representatives, law enforcement agents, solidarity agents, and ordinary citizens have been diversely exposed to “secondary movements”, to the selective internal identity checks and to the fragmented “humanitarian borderscape”, according to their role and positioning in the *borderland*. On this regard, the ethnographic analysis unpacked the multi-dimensionality of the local *border experience* of a global phenomenon and its related multiple *re-bordering* processes. As debated in Chapter 8, this dimension denoted the *polysemic borderland* nature of the Upper Susa Valley. The *bordering* approach revealed the complex architecture of the border regime in the Upper Susa Valley that stemmed from the return of identity checks at the Alpine

Italian-French border. The ethnography moved from the *re-bordering tales* collected of its border agents to observe that multiple, territorialized and overlapping, tangible and intangible *re-bordering* processes diversified the *border(land) experience* of those who inhabit the Upper Susa Valley.

9.2.4. The European internal *re-bordering* process seen “from below”: Upper Susa Valley as an “interdependent *borderland*”

Along with significant results in terms of how the internal European *re-bordering* process impacted on the *border experience* of frontier communities, the ethnographic approach to the investigation also offered meaningful insights on the everyday reality of a policy that is assumed to be part of the future European political landscape.

The findings showed significant differences in the *bordering* practices that Italian and French law enforcement agents implemented at the Alpine frontier. As described earlier in the “Mannering the border” section, the French *re-bordering* strategy responded to an almost pure “control” prerogative aimed to contain “secondary movements”. In contrast, Italian law enforcement agents’ *bordering* practices responded to a more multi-faceted logic. As illustrated in Chapter 6, they embodied the “care and control” strategy promoted by the Italian state. The prevention of the risk for the border represented by the illegal crossing of transit migrants was addressed with practices aimed to discourage and temporarily hinder their mobility plans towards the borderline. Empirical observations also revealed their low-impact and random nature, disorganized in their time/space unfolding. This was combined with practices aimed to secure pushed-back transit migrants in the dedicated official welcoming facilities, thus recognizing their condition of people *at risk* and the hazard embedded in the Alpine militarized environment. Noteworthy, no effective practice aimed to prevent migrants from taking again their way towards the Alpine border gates was observed.

On the whole, Italian state and non-state agents implemented *bordering* practices aiming to “keep the transit fluid”, debated in the ethnographic analysis as underlying the Italian plan for locally managing transit migrations leaving the national territory. Furthermore, as shown, the objective was primarily to limit to its minimum the permanence of migrants, in order to prevent “secondary movements” from negatively impacting on the local community and touristic industry. In the humanitarian scenario of the Massi shelter of Oulx this was translated into the “two-days-rule”, i.e. “guests” were asked to stay at the shelter for a maximum of two nights. Therefore, migrants were frequently put in the conditions to expedite the planning and execution of irregular “secondary movements”. In the Italian police’s *bordering* practices, the “keep the transit fluid” prerogative was shaped by the low-impact practices described at the beginning of this same section, that could be synthesized in a “let them go” formula.

This highlighted the different meanings of “security” embedded in the *bordering* practices of French and Italian law enforcement agents. The first addressed the prevention of risks for the border only. The second combined the take in charge of the risks for the frontier, transit migrants and the *borderland*. The latter also includes the efforts of the Italian police to crack down on illegal activities related to supporting migrants in transit, to contain the risk of the over-exposition of the issue.

Even more significantly, Italian and French *bordering* practices embodied by their respective law enforcement agents showed diverging national interests, as far as the management of “secondary movements” within Europe is concerned. On the one hand, France set up a border regime aimed to show the intention of containing them at every cost, including the violation of the international law on asylum and being sentences for misinterpreting the Schengen Border Code by European courts, as illustrated in Chapter 5. On the other hand, Italy decided for the multi-level prioritization of a quick exit from the national territory, and the securing of transit migrants against the dangers of the militarized Alpine context.

Along these lines, ethnography has shown significant glimpses of the day-to-day reality of what has been described in the literature as the “resurgent intergovernmentalism” (Biermann et al. 2019) that undergirds the *re-bordering* process, and qualifies it as a unilateral policy that marks the “new normal” in the management of “secondary movements” in the Schengen space (Somer, 2020; Gülzau, 2023). In an infra-state context characterized by smooth diplomatic relations and joined programs to prevent the irregular crossing of the common borders, as illustrated in Chapter 5, the national unilaterality in defining and implementing the priorities in the border and migration management that emerged at the Alpine Italian-French border represents a meaningful paradox that deserve to be further explored.

Moreover, in terms of cross-border relations, a last remark regards the identification of the Upper Susa Valley as an “interdependent borderland”, with reference to the theoretical framework offered by Martinez (1994) and explored in Chapter 2.

The ethnography described a frontier context characterized by a common history and culture, inherited from the Middle Ages and the events related to the *Dauphines* and their horizontal administration, deeply marked the identity of the communities to the present day, as exposed in Chapter 5. It was seen how integrated tourism systems play a key role in the local economy, and how local authorities have promoted significant transnational social programs, for example in the field of health. The political boundary has always been a fluid space, even in times of pandemic.

Following Martinez (1994) categorization, this might configure the Alpine frontier zone as integrated, i.e. a *borderland* marked by the absence of boundaries and limits to people and goods circulation. Nevertheless, the bottom-up perspective offered by the ethnographic analysis of internal *re-bordering*

process at the Alpine Italian-French *borderland*, qualified it as a merely interdependent borderland, due to the same existence of an ongoing *re-bordering* process. As the ethnography showed, the border is present, experienced and perceived, not only by law enforcement agents and transit migrants, but by local communities as well.

This emphasises the significance of the ethnographic approach in investigating the internal European *re-bordering* process. This not only allowed observations regarding how the re-bordered frontier is constructed, reproduced in tangible and intangible processes throughout the *borderland*, participated and experienced. It also provided interesting outcomes regarding how this key policy unravel in the everyday dimension, responding to different national interests in the exercise of sovereign power, embodied in daily practices of state and non-state actors populating the territorial, political and social space of the Upper Susa Valley.

9.2.5. Unpacking the multi-dimensionality of the COVID-19 as *re-bordering* factor

It is also important for these concluding remarks to include a reference to the multifaceted impact on the COVID-19 on the re-bordered Upper Susa Valley, which was also object of the analysis in this thesis. The pandemic represented an unexpected factor that, while littering the conduct of research with challenges, provided significant outputs in theoretical, methodological and empirical terms.

First, the dissertation illustrated that in 2020 the pandemic reduced “secondary movements” to almost zero. In line with the literature overview illustrated in Chapter 2, this confirmed that the COVID-19 operated as *re-bordering* factor, as it hindered the transit migrants’ mobility, as well as it further increased their vulnerability. Furthermore, the pandemic impacted on the structure/agency interplay observed in the mobility practices put in place by transit migrants in the *borderland*. On this regard, As Chapter 6 showed, it represented a further obstacle to cope with, in the shape of police requests of vaccine or negativity certifications at the border; or, in the disruption of the bus service to the borderline when Italian authorities asked all drivers to hold the *green certificate* at workplace. Through increased overlapping and discriminatory controls at the borderline, a jeopardized bus service and the consequent adaptation of transit migrants’ mobility plans, the COVID-19 further exposed “secondary movements” as coping strategies according to a structure/agency paradigm.

As far as the “humanitarian borderscape” is concerned, the COVID-19 impacted on both its overlapping “geographies of humanitarian borderwork”. Furthermore, the pandemic jeopardized the local network infrastructure, as Chapter 7 discussed, expanding the range of humanitarian activities as well as its territorial scope. As well, solidarity activities filled a further gap left by the state humanitarian intervention, adding a meaningful element at the political environment in which state

and non-state actors operated in terms of “secondary movements” management. Moreover, as Chapter 8 showed, the restrictions to the cross-border mobility at the Alpine Italian-French frontier put in place in 2020, brought the border back in the daily experience of local dwellers of the Upper Susa Valley, revealing to Europeans its polysemic nature.

Finally, as discussed in Chapter 4, the COVID-19 deeply impacted on the methodology of the research. On the one hand, it *re-bordered* the time/space development of fieldwork, imposing part of its conduction far from the field. Accordingly, it determined the combination of mixed digital and traditional methods in the data collection. This represented both a challenge and opportunity: on the one hand, it added a variable of unpredictability to the planning and conduct of research. On the other hand, it expanded my research competences giving me the chance to compare digital and classic tools of investigation, and to develop an investigation in a context of uncertainty that required a high level of flexibility. Furthermore, it enhanced the research with ethical reflections regarding the conduct of fieldwork away from the field itself; the difficulties in building trusting relationships with participants mediated by a technological medium; participants’ distorted perceptions of the researcher, and the management of the risk of sharing sensitive information.

9.3. Further research perspectives

The ethnographic approach to the study of the internal European *re-bordering* process, combined with the *bordering* approach theoretical framework, disclosed research perspectives that deserve further investigation.

Anthropological investigations targeting transit migrants across European *borderlands* as key research participants might illuminate more precisely the dimension of the exercise of their *agency*. First-hand empirical data regarding their plans, expectations and mobility strategies would shed light on their point of view in interfacing with the complex frontier structure that characterizes contemporary Europe. A critical aspect to be taken into primary consideration would be the difficulty of weaving lasting researcher-participant bonds with individuals whose biography is characterised by a high degree of mobility and vulnerability, and sometimes an irregular profile.

In addition, the point of view of enforcement agents involved in contexts of *re-bordering* deserves further research. Arguably, the presence on the ground would need a different approach, one that brands a clear distance of the researcher from the environments of volunteerism and activism. Nevertheless, the law enforcement agents’ point of view would offer ground-breaking insights on the *bordering* practices that they carry out in the Alpine Italian-French frontier; on the rationale they follow; on the relationship between the two national polices.

Furthermore, an interesting research area which I would aim to explore, would focus on the use of technological devices by both transit migrants and police representatives in their respective *re-bordering* and *de-bordering* practices. The thesis has highlighted the controversial role of technology in the Alpine Italian-French border: it is used to both detect and protect transit migrants, as well as to both hinder and boost “secondary movements” across the *borderland* and the borderline. Moreover, it has been shown that it can put at risk transit migrants in an Alpine environment characterized by a process of “oplopoiesis” (Del Biaggio, 2020), but also allows rescue operations. Therefore, a research with a focus on technology and its interaction with the *re-bordering* process would certainly yield interesting results.

When it comes to the “humanitarian borderwork”, further investigation should be undertaken around the impact of the time/space of “secondary movements”. In this regard, this thesis has revealed how different *bordering* practices adopted in the Upper Susa Valley different attitudes towards transit migrants’ mobility across the *borderland* – discouragement, support, securitization in both political and humanitarian terms. Thus, an in-depth focus might reveal further values and motivations behind these practices, as well as potential bias in the understanding of migrants’ expectations and plans.

Finally, future research might read comparatively, in both a temporal and spatial sense, the *re-bordering* process that marked the Upper Susa Valley between 2017 and 2021. On the one hand, the evolution of the impact on frontier communities of the return of internal identity checks might be investigated in light of further developments of the policy in the case study. As well, taking into account its expansion in terms of involved countries and durability, comparative studies could be carried out to grasp and contrast local and national peculiarities. Different meanings of “security” might emerge, as well as the existence of diverse interests at stake at various scales of governance, as far as the *re-bordering* policies and processes facing “secondary movements” across Europe are concerned.

As widely discussed throughout the thesis, the internal European *re-bordering* process represents a significant policy, which is likely to extend both in terms of time and geography within the European scenario. Its ethnographic analysis in the context of Upper Susa Valley uncovered its everyday reality, and thus contributed to the understanding of its scope. In particular, by shedding light on the participated building of the Alpine Italian-French border as a multi-dimensional process, as well as on the multi-perspectival effects that it deploys in frontier communities, the thesis demonstrated that its importance goes far beyond the realm of border and migration management. For its capability to potentially closely affects everyone's daily life, regardless of the citizenship and legal status, it deserves further multi-disciplinary research and investigation.

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