Border town authorities and the multilevel politics of the 'transit migrant' emergency

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Title:

"We Apparently Succeeded in Disappointing Everybody". Town Authorities and the Multi-Level Politics of the 'Transit Migrant' Emergency in Ventimiglia

Abstract:

The article takes the approach of multi-level politics to analyse the way the presence of illegalized 'transit migrants' is dealt with within the urban space of Ventimiglia – a medium-sized city located south of the French-Italian border – by the town government and its mayor after heightened French border controls. It focuses on the period running from 2015 to 2019. Within the unneutral and criminalizing framing of 'transit migration', border towns have narrow room for political manoeuvre and yet they can be seen as the contentious scene of migration policies and politics. Presented and justified as a pragmatic compromise between the migrants' humanitarian needs and the inhabitants' claims for security and decorum, Ventimiglia's municipal policy of encampment was built on co-operation, conflict and contestation with both higher tier authorities and grassroots civil society, thus showing an intricate system of multi-level politics. Followed by widespread discontent which partially translated into electoral disavowal, the town government's actions eventually reinforced the framing of 'transit migration' policies as emergency measures and strengthened the migrants' invisibility and precariousness in the urban space. This ethnography-based case study thus provides greater understanding of the particularities of local and multi-level migration politics in border towns and how these contribute to shape and enhance the exclusionary border regime.

Key-words: Transit-migration, border-town, multi-level politics, local government, encampment.

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Introduction

Summer 2020: in the midst of the Covid-19 sanitary crisis, and after more than two months of Italian and French lockdown, Ventimiglia's local newspapers titled *"Migrants are Back in Town"*. After the 'long summer of migration' in 2015, the presence of 'transit migrants' in this medium-sized border town, located at the southernmost point of the border between Italy and France, cyclically recaptured media and political attention. This article focuses on the period running from 2015 to 2019. Grounded on an ethnographic case-study, it analyses the way the town government and its mayor dealt with the arrival of an increasing number of 'transit' migrants along with the local consequences of heightened French border controls. To fully understand the local government's action, I will consider it as an attempt to synthesize different and divergent civil society demands while exercising an influence on other and higher levels of governance.

From a theoretical point of view, I will depart from a normative and depoliticized understanding of multi-level governance to adopt a more descriptive approach and make room for different kinds of actors – including non-governmental ones – and for different forms of misalignment, decoupling (Scholten 2013), conflict and opposition. Thus, in this article I will refer to the concept of multi-level politics rather than multi-level governance,

> "since in this perspective the attention focuses on mobilisation processes either from below (local authorities and different non-governmental actors) or from above (supra-national institutions or non-public actors organised on a transnational basis), with the goal of challenging hierarchical and state-centred modes of government" (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018).

We will also refer to the concept of 'local migration policy arena', defined as a policymaking field (including policy formulation and implementation) structured around specific issue areas or dimensions of migration policy (Caponio 2010). While acknowledging the existence of multiple forms of cooperation, delegation, circulation and mutual influence between institutional and non-institutional actors – which could be synthesized in the idea of policy network (Thatcher 1998) – the concept of arena reveals and takes into account conflicts and confrontations inherent to local policymaking and particularly to border areas. Within this approach, far from being 'policy takers' at the bottom of the governmental hierarchy, municipalities – and especially the mayors who govern them – stand at the crossroad between different scales of government and the levers of local politics.

Against this background, I will argue that, while trying to synthesize divergent local interests and to influence higher tier authorities, the town government's actions between 2015 and 2019 eventually reinforced the sense of emergency and the exclusionary character of migration policies in Ventimiglia.

This article presents the results of an in-depth case study (Yin 2003) based on four years of ethnographic research (2015-2019), including participant and non-participant observations (in camps,

shelters, NGO meetings, city council meetings, etc.), semi-structured interviews with more than fifty respondents (mayor and deputies, town councillors, Red Cross and other NGO coordinators, neighbourhood committee spokespersons and active members, other local residents, volunteers, activists, prefecture civil servants), media coverage analyses and content analyses of institutional and non-institutional documents (council resolutions, mayor decrees, meeting minutes, etc.). Access to the field was openly negotiated with respondents, as I decided not to be an incognito ethnographer. While I always mentioned my institutional affiliation and clearly described the main topics of my project, my social identity was my own and could be perceived by respondents in different ways depending on their sociological (in terms of age, sex and socio-economic background) and political (in terms of solidarity or hostility towards migrants) position. All the interviews were held in Italian: excerpts in the article were translated into English by the author.

Literature. Tools and gaps in the analysis of local migration politics in border towns

Even though the literature provides some effective tools to analyse how the presence of transit migrants has been politically framed and governed in Ventimiglia, it leaves us partially unequipped to fully understand the unique features of multi-level migration politics in a medium-sized European border town. Thus, our analysis aims to bridge a few gaps in the literature, while calling for a deeper interdisciplinary dialogue .

The 'local turn' in migration policy studies

In social sciences, the literature on migration is split into two main strands: one focusing on mobility control, security and/or humanitarian government and criminalization (border studies), the other focusing on inclusion, (post)national citizenship and transnationalism (citizenship studies). The latter has been more deeply affected by the 'local turn' in migration research (Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017) to the extent that a corpus of literature on the local dimension of migration policy and policy-making has emerged (Caponio and Borkert 2010; Filomeno 2017) mainly focusing on integration approaches and measures targeting resident migrants (Penninx 2004; Williamson 2018). The literature has pointed out that, while national governments bear the primary responsibility for immigration policy, local governments are generally in charge of providing social and administrative services and have shown considerable local variations in this respect (Caponio and Campomori 2014). Several studies have confirmed the general tendency of local authorities to adopt more pragmatic approaches to migrant incorporation than national institutions (Borkert and Bosswick 2007; Jørgensen 2012; Schiller 2015). Since they are faced more directly with migrant needs than national institutions and are willing to build cohesive communities, local governments generally seem to be more open to migrants and to their cultural expression and political participation than nation-states. Nev-

ertheless, other studies have pointed out how local authorities may restrict permanent migrant access to social rights and participation and have nuanced the notion of urban citizenship (Gebhardt 2016).

Research on policies pertaining to asylum seekers and undocumented migrants has 'turned local' to a more limited extent (Ramakrishnan & Wong 2010; Doomernik and Glorius 2016; Spencer 2018; Babels 2018). A few studies have been published on the local implementation of national dispersal policies, on asylum seeker reception policies and on local policies affecting undocumented immigrants, showing how and why different localities have reacted differently to similar challenges (Lidén & Nyhlén 2015; Hinger et al. 2016; Kos et al. 2016). This strand of the literature has focused on different kinds of dispersal policies and has brought to light different variables explaining local variations in implementing redistribution plans. These studies have largely uncovered the processes of privatization of public services involved in asylum seeker reception and care, and the implicit or explicit devolution of responsibility from public authorities to nongovernmental organizations (de Graauw 2016; Mayblin & James 2018). A range of work has explored how cities translate migration control policies and measures imposed by the nation-state into specific modes of local border control (Lebuhn 2013) thus becoming sites of bordering (Darling 2017). While among local government agencies a general attitude has been observed of 'turning a blind eye' to the presence of undocumented migrants and delegating responsibility to the third sector, two opposite tendencies have been identified with respect to local versus national policies. Some local authorities have shown more tolerance and even supported undocumented migrants (Varsanyi 2006; de Graauw 2016; Bazurli 2019; Kaufmann 2019), others have introduced measures that reinforce the exclusionary nature of national policies (Gilbert 2009; Chand and Schreckhise 2014; Gargiulo 2017; Marchetti 2020) via a range of local tools of power such as municipal acts imposing fines on landlords who rent to undocumented migrants, municipal powers to remove licences from businesses hiring undocumented workers and ordinances restricting and removing non-citizens. In this respect, Varsanyi notes a trend in policing immigration 'through the back door' (2008).

Room and conditions for municipal involvement in 'transit' migration policy

The literature summarized above provides evidence and analytical tools to understand the behaviour of local authorities towards documented and undocumented migrants, which only partially apply to 'migrants in transit' through border areas. If the 'transit' category is sociologically and legally blurry and politically unneutral (Düvell 2012), it remains pertinent in three ways to describe the specific case studied here.

Firstly, migrants who find themselves in Ventimiglia after attempting to enter France and being rejected by French authorities do not fit within the documented/undocumented oppositional categories

nor within the corresponding European and national legal frameworks and public policies. Rather, their legal status largely varies: a consistent part of them are asylum seekers leaving the reception and dispersion systems of Italy or other countries. Some have decided to flee reception facilities – thus losing their right to reception and have abandoned their asylum procedure before its evaluation – others have been denied asylum. Some of them, especially those coming via the 'Balkan route', have avoided arrival formalities (fingerprints) and have not been registered at their first entry in a European country. Some are documented migrants entitled to different kinds of permits, but who want to settle in another country in which they do not have the right to enter or to work. Others, the 'dublined', have had their application for asylum in another EU member state rejected and are re-admitted to Italy following a take-back procedure. The presence of all of them in places of transit such as Ventimiglia results from a multitude of factors determined by the global map of mobilities, by multiple constraints and to a certain degree by the migrants' autonomy and self-determination. This highlights the tension between the current rationale behind reception and asylum, which is the obligation to stay in one country, and the actual condition and 'choice' of many migrants to move across Europe. Since transit migration is illegalized and criminalized, an increasing number of temporary migrants settling in border cities are exposed to the risk of forced mobilities (Tazzioli 2020), deportation and police violence (Marconi 2019).

Secondly, beside the fact that Italy operates practically and is defined politically as a gateway to Northern Europe, there is no European nor national legal framework or reception system to deal with migrants who transit through the country and especially through its border areas. The law is even more blurry because a transit border place, such as Ventimiglia, is not considered a hotspot on the EU's external border and therefore does not have the framework, resources and facilities for 'first reception' and triage.

As the right to reception is limited to those who apply for international protection, the most obvious consequence is that the only option remaining for migrants in transit is squatting and sheltering in informal settlements and camps, which have multiplied on all the European and Italian 'transit routes', from Lesbos to Calais, from Lampedusa and Trieste to Ventimiglia, Como and Brenner (Babels 2017). The visible presence of transit migrants within the public space is therefore the main issue local authorities must deal with. It can be seen as a problem and a nuisance, on the one hand, but also as a political demand and a political resource on the other, thus leading to politicization and conflict (Darling 2017).

Besides, the prerogatives of local authorities with respect to transit migrants are not well established nor clearly defined. This can contribute to legitimize their non-intervention and denial of migration and diversity (Marconi 2019) but can also leave room for back-door policing policies justified by their local responsibility towards childhood protection, security, hygiene and decorum[i]. When the

legal framework is blurry, the room for manoeuvre and arbitrariness is wider, but so is the space for contesting, innovating and tinkering.

Thirdly, in addition to the formal and legal dimension, the issue of migrant presence in Ventimiglia is politicized within what can be defined as a 'transit migration framework' (Semprebon and Pelacani 2020) and this is not without major consequences. Transit countries and areas are largely considered responsible for transit migration and openly accused of condoning it, and therefore asked or induced to cooperate in controlling, filtering and limiting undesirable mobilities (Düvell et al. 2014). This places an additional pressure on the shoulders of the local authorities of border areas, as the countries, regions or cities they govern are usually highly dependent on their cross-border neighbours, at least from an economic point of view. The position of border towns and cities such as Ventimiglia that rely on specialized border economies, is not very dissimilar, with due proportion, to the one of transit countries between global south and global north economies. This unique position exacerbates the political imperative of avoiding solutions that could be accused of 'attracting' transit migrants, since the 'magnet effect' theory is constantly applied to situations of illegalized migrant reception.

Besides, transit areas are also the place where a variety of actors and resources emerge and come together to offer services to illegalized transit migrants and allow them to stay and to continue their journey (McMahon 2019). Alternative facilities emerge in transit areas, such as self-run camps or shelters, in which basic goods can be produced and shared (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). Solidarity networks facilitating border crossing also form in these areas, as do new underground railroad stations (Della Porta 2018, Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2020). Thus, local authorities must interact with and try to govern these very different actors, by encouraging or, more often, discouraging their action in order to maintain control over the presence of migrants and to avoid being accused of having a 'magnet effect'.

Borders as filters and battlegrounds

Critical border studies and recent research on migration control policies have also demonstrated a renewed interest for spatial and local dimensions, providing some fieldwork-grounded perspectives on borderization processes (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012). Some contributions to this literature can be useful when analysing the local and multi-level politics of transit migration in Ventimiglia.

Firstly, critical border studies highlight the spatial transformation of migration control and the progressive dissociation between the borderline and the places in which controls take place. This causes an extension and dispersion of borders beyond the borderline, within and beyond the nation-

states they are supposed to protect and encircle. In this context, border towns are strategically located.

Secondly, the literature on border transformations has emphasized how migration control and border enhancement do not develop on a *tabula rasa*, but in territories with their own sociological, economic and political features. Far from being a material object such as a gate in a wall, that could be entirely and unilaterally opened or closed, the border is an intricate geographically located social system. As Simmel points out, it is a social fact taking a spatial shape rather than a spatial datum having social effects (1908: 467). More than preventing mobilities, one of the border's main functions is to filter, select and separate 'desirable' human mobilities from the 'undesirable' ones, and then to trace, control and discourage the latter. As a complex system of differentials (in salaries, taxes and prices), the border provides specific economic opportunities and economy-related circulation and is therefore crossed by a wide range of different human flows, whose representation of interests, cohabitation and effects are at stake in local and cross-border government and politics (Hamman 2013).

Thirdly, studies have shown that multiple actors participate in demanding, implementing and enhancing the border with their 'borderwork' (Rumford 2013). Also, the literature has proved the high level of delegation of services related to border control from national authorities to supranational agencies and private actors, and the intertwined security and humanitarian logics (Cuttitta 2015; Pallister-Wilkin 2017). Therefore, not only does the border have an impact on the territories it surrounds, but it is also shaped and developed in part by local institutional and non-institutional actors.

Lastly, this strand of the literature underlines how border areas are exposed to media and political attention. Controls, barriers and measures against border trespassing are spectacularized and contribute to the ostentation of state power (Cuttitta 2012; De Genova 2012). Borders thus also become symbolic scenes for non-public figures and especially for movements and actors that seek to denounce border violence and to contest border legitimacy or, on the contrary, call for more severe controls and national protectionism. No-border and pro-fence or anti-migrant mobilizations are thus particularly strong in border areas (Monforte 2015; Simonneau and Castelli Gattinara 2019) and are one of the border-related issues that local governments must address. In this respect, borders are the scenes on which alternative visions of the national community and its boundaries are played out and compete, but they are also battlegrounds

> "in which different actors take part according to diverse economic interests, social bonds, moral values and political beliefs. The local governance of immigration is influenced by these different interests and visions" (Ambrosini 2020: 197)

Beside these prominent contributions, studies on borderization processes have mainly focused on rural areas such as the US-Mexican desert or on Mediterranean islands such as Lampedusa or Lesbos (Pillant & Tassin 2015; Bassi 2019), while few provide insights on border towns and cities (Guenebeaud 2015; Marconi 2019). While Ventimiglia has experienced the different dynamics highlighted by researchers in other emblematic border places such as Lampedusa – the rise of camps and detention centres, the intertwining of security and humanitarian rationales, the spectacularization of the border – the medium-sized city still has some unique features that are not present in rural or insular areas.

Ventimiglia: Particularities of a medium-sized border town within the Schengen area

Ventimiglia is a town of around 25,000 people, covering a large territory (including thirteen neighbourhoods and twenty hamlets) that reaches to the French border on both its western and northern side. This research focuses on the town government from 2015 to 2018. The mayor at the time was Enrico Ioculano. Born in 1985, he holds a bachelor's degree in political science and this was his first political experience with the centre-left Democratic Party. Ventimiglia's particularities come from the fact that it is a medium-sized border town within the Schengen area.

A medium-sized diverse but declining city

Ventimiglia can represent a unique case study from the point of view of its scale. Local migration policy studies tend to focus on either big superdiverse cities (de Graauw 2016; Bazurli 2019) or small rural and marginal villages (Glorius 2017; Dematteis et al. 2018) in which reception shelters are often installed. Ventimiglia shares some important features with both contexts and studying it can help to fill some gaps in knowledge about medium-sized towns. As a spokesperson for retailers expressed in our interview (July 18, 2017): *"Ventimiglia is a small village with the problems of a big city."*

As in rural areas, the issue of the arrival of migrants occurred in a 'pre-existing problem field' unrelated in this case to a protracted rural crisis (Whyte et al. 2019) but to a protracted border-economy crisis. When the Schengen agreements entered into force in 1997, and the shared European currency was introduced in 2002, work opportunities connected to customs and money exchange were reduced. This decline in the border economy was then intensified by the global financial and economic crisis of the late 2000s with its impact on trade and retail. The presence of transit migrants in town thus arose in a context of both effective and perceived long-lasting economic decline and fragility, and this was not without consequences on the way the 'migrants-in-town' issue was framed. Besides, border area citizens often share the feeling of being 'abandoned' or neglected by their central state authorities and 'distant capitals' (Simonneau 2016). A perception that is sharpened here by

the comparison with Ventimiglia's healthier cross-border twin town, Menton (Hily and Rinaudo 2003). Similarly to small communities, policy networks in Ventimiglia are more modest than in large cities and highly personalized, especially as regards the mayor (Balbo 2015). Also, as is usual in small communities (Glorius et al. 2019), Ventimiglia's mayor is expected to play a strong mediating role between higher-ranked authorities and local citizens.

Due to its urban structure and its unique position and history, Ventimiglia also appears as a diverse city. In addition to being the home of permanent foreign immigrants, Ventimiglia has also experienced a consistent internal migration from Southern Italy in the aftermath of the second world war. A city is a complex system of neighbourhoods ranked according to different systems, depending on class origin and circulation. The presence of migrants occurs within this system. A city also has its unique history when it comes to hospitality and attitudes towards foreigners and migrants (Furri 2017), which nourish current practices and narratives of inclusion and exclusion. Finally, the urban public space and the image of the city are constantly challenged by the methods of filtering people for security and economic reasons and the multiple struggles they cause. The visible presence of migrants occurs within this framework. Thus, it is not without reason nor consequence that several formal or informal camps and shelters in Ventimiglia were settled or planned within low-income or fringe neighbourhoods rather than in the town's trading centre.

A border town within the Schengen area

Ventimiglia's history is intimately bound to that of the French-Italian southern border. The town has not only always been a hub for all kinds of legal and illegal activities related to human mobility and border crossing but its entire economy, and consequently, its socio-demography and its local politics, are deeply shaped by the border.

Thousands of workers and buyers cross the border on a daily or weekly basis, the first from Italy to France and Monaco, the latter in the other direction. Retailers and cross-border workers are therefore the most important socio-economic groups amongst Ventimiglia's population. Both have created their trade unions or associations and have developed specific ties with town councillors in order to participate in local government and influence the town's public action. They share common interests with respect to the border: they both want it to remain effective in terms of its differentials, but porous in terms of circulation: therefore, they also want relations between Italy and France to remain peaceful and cooperative at different levels. This is not without consequences in the way migration issues are politicized locally, as the deputy mayor explained in our interview (May 22, 2017):

> *"For me, to close the border unilaterally is something unacceptable from a legal, political and human point of view. But I don't think that the town sees things this way, probably because so many people think that 'since I work on the other side, I don't dare criticize what they do be-*

cause at the end of the month they are paying my salary' (...). Instead of admitting that the problem is right there in front of them and that it's the border, they look backwards and say: we must close the shelters; they should not arrive here from southern Italy; they should not arrive on Italian coasts…"

As far as less 'desirable' mobilities are concerned, the border has never ceased to fulfil its functions. Migration controls by French border police on the various traffic routes, and particularly on the railway network have never really stopped following the implementation of the Schengen agreements in 1997. As regards the law, the framework for post-Schengen controls was defined by the bilateral agreements signed on October 3, 1997 in Chambéry. As regards common practice, controls reflect a continuity rather than a rupture and the situations labelled 'migration crises' have only sharpened and intensified well established routines (Casella Colombeau 2019).

Controls and rejections increased and were strengthened in the aftermath of the Arab spring in 2010-2011 and the 'Tunisian crisis' (see Carrera et al. 2011). They later officially became systematic in May 2015, then legally defined as 'exterior border controls' when the Schengen agreements were suspended in the aftermath of the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris.

If all borders are over-determined to the extent that different scales of power contribute to define them (Balibar 1997), this is particularly true when it comes to the issue of transit migration inside the Schengen borders. Firstly, the conditions of Ventimiglia's latest 'migrants-in-town crisis' can be found on a European scale and namely in the European migration and asylum system. Secondly, they are based on French and Italian decisions. While France confirmed and reinforced its practice of controlling and rejecting unwanted migration on its southern Italian border, the attitude of the successive Italian governments from 2015 until the blockade imposed by France sharply contrasted with the policy adopted in 2011. At that time, a temporary EU-permit was delivered by Italian authorities to all Tunisian citizens arriving in Italy. After 2015, the general national policies adopted were more intent on preventing arrivals that on facilitating transit within the Schengen space.

Responding to the 'migrants-in-town issue': a short chronology

The number of people crossing the peninsula and passing through Ventimiglia with the hope of reaching France and other European countries increased during the years 2013 and 2014. During this period their visibility in the city was still limited: most of them managed to cross the border by train after spending one night in the railway station hall.

In 2014, at the instigation of residents and members of local charitable associations, the recently appointed centre-left municipal administration commissioned the local Caritas association – with which it had a long lasting agreement regarding assistance to homeless people in town – to hand out blankets and hot drinks at the station. In April 2015, the same administration informed the prefecture of an important increase in the number of people staying overnight in and around the railway

station and asked the railway company to open the corridors adjacent to the station hall in order to unclog it. In June, an emergency reception centre was opened nearby under the mandate of the prefecture and in agreement with the town government and the railway company. Run by the regional committee of the Italian Red Cross, it closed at the beginning of May 2016.

At the end of May 2016, a new shelter was opened, this time by the local bishop in a peripheral church and was variably tolerated for more than a year by the prefecture and the municipality as a temporary facility especially for the most vulnerable. Confronted with the hostility of its neighbours and threatened of being dismantled for sanitary and security reasons, the diocesan reception centre closed in August 2017.

In July 2016, the prefecture opened a transit camp in a fringe situation removed from the town centre, again run by the Italian Red Cross regional committee. It experienced different periods of tension due to equipment access restrictions or for allegedly sanitary reasons and was definitely closed on 31 July 2020, amidst NGO concerns and activist protests.

During this entire period, informal camps were cyclically dismantled, while autonomous solidarity actions and collectives were restrained and criminalized: food delivery outside authorized areas and structures was temporarily forbidden and several dozen activists were banned from the municipal territory by the prefecture police, on the ground of threats to public order (Trucco 2021).

Migrant encampment as multi-level politics

Management of the migrants-in-town issue can be synthesized as a policy of encampment, i.e.

> "the policy of putting into camps persons for whom other solutions would have also been possible (…) the fact for whatever kind of authority (local, national or international), to place people into any form of camp, or to force them to put themselves into it, for a variable duration" (Agier 2013).

On the one hand, this policy was part of a complex system of relations with higher tier authorities; on the other hand, it defined the relationship between the town government and the local civil society. Presented and justified as a pragmatic compromise, the mayoral policy was nevertheless largely built on conflict and contestation, and it encouraged widespread discontent which partially translated into electoral disavowal.

Vertical venue-shopping and relations with higher tier authorities

The town government acted as a pressure group, defining and representing the interests of its population in the eyes of higher tier authorities: the Italian central government, and to a lesser extent French and European institutions. Three main channels were used to reach this goal: the institutional channel, the party networks, and different forms of indirect political pressure applied by seeking the support of the media, public opinion and prominent institutional and non-institutional actors.

The institutional track: mediation, cooperation and opposition with the prefecture

The prefecture is the local representation, in every department of the country, of the Italian central government. It has wide prerogatives, especially in fields related to the Ministry of the Interior, such as public order, immigration and citizenship. The prefecture is also the pivotal actor in charge of implementing the reception and dispersion of national asylum seekers. Its range of action is particularly consistent within the 'emergency reception system': it can impose the settlement of an emergency reception centre (CAS) on a municipality, for instance. In the unique situation of Ventimiglia, the prefecture's competencies are much more unclear and limited as migrants in transit 'escape' the bureaucracy of the asylum seeker reception system but are not all nor entirely subject to administrative detention or deportation. The prefecture thus intervened in the Ventimiglia 'migrants-in-town' issue based on two broad prerogatives: crisis management as part of the civil protection system and the prevention of social conflicts as part of its responsibility for public order. A civil servant I interviewed (May 27, 2017) explained:

> *"It was a situation of emergency and civil protection, in a wider sense, since there were people in a critical situation, and faced with that situation, the prefecture decided to open up a camp to find a temporary solution, an emergency solution, because we are not qualified to find structural solutions but only to face emergency situations."*

In the context of the 'migrants-in-town crisis' relations between the town government and the prefecture are a mixture of cooperation, pressure and opposition, always within the institutional channels and with rare open disavowals of one side or the other. As the mayor summed it up in our interview (May 22, 2017):

> *"We sometimes have vivid discussions with the prefecture, especially in moments of pressure. This is normal within an institutional relationship. We don't eat pizza with the prefecture, sometimes there are clashes, but then we cooperate."*

Three main attitudes can be found in the town government's relationship with the prefecture: the first is pressure and call for action, the second is support and cooperation while pushing for minor modifications in implementing the prefecture's decisions, and the third is contrast and opposition to the prefecture's decisions resulting in blocking their implementation. Three different sequences can illustrate these main attitudes linked to three different reception solutions: the closing down of the emergency reception centre run by the Red Cross near the railway station (June 2015-May 2016), the opening up of the Roya transit camp (July 2016) and the failure to open up a reception centre for unaccompanied minors (August 2017).

The first institutional centre soon showed its limits as it did not provide suitable shelter for all the people in transit and drew the population's discontent. The centre's capacity was insufficient and access to it was progressively limited to migrants who accepted to submit an asylum request. Its

location in the very centre of town between the train station and private housing was criticized by retailers and neighbours. The municipal council and the mayor quickly responded to their demands and at the end of October 2015 voted a motion during a crowded session of the city council attended by several dozen local residents. The voted text showed a clear line shared by both majority and minority councillors: the town cannot be provided with a permanent reception structure, and responsibility for finding a solution should not rest on the shoulders of the town government but on those of the prefecture.

> "*It's only thanks to the citizens' (the shelter's neighbours) tolerance that everything has gone well up to now,"* explained the mayor to the public via the local press at the end of the session. *"And I fully understand that some of them are angry today. This is not the first time that we are asking the authorities in charge to close the centre and provide real solutions. I don't understand why an international and national problem should entirely fall on our shoulders. We need strong and determined action from the competent authorities."* [ii]

Demands were renewed and the shelter was eventually closed in May 2016 as had been announced by the Interior Minister while visiting Ventimiglia a few weeks earlier.

When the prefecture opened the Roya transit camp in July 2016, the mayor upheld this decision as the only solution that could guarantee both respectable housing conditions for migrants and some limits to their messy, unruly presence in the town:

> *"The Roya camp is a good solution; we need a structured and decent place, otherwise the alternative is a 'do it yourself' solution. It's a jungle in the woods, on the beaches, on the riverbeds... and also, the camp takes some of the pressure off the town centre and those neighbourhoods (the ones next to the river and the church),"*

explained the mayor in our interview (May 22, 2017). The town government thus cooperated with the prefecture by providing all the technical and logistical support needed to equip the camp within its territory and install it on land belonging to the railway company. The town government also seized the occasion to make the camp more acceptable for a part of the local civil society:

> *"When the prefecture opened up the Roya camp, we insisted on the fact that we wanted the associations to have free access to the camp and to be directly involved in the camp, to humanize it a little bit,"*

explained the deputy mayor in our interview (May 22, 2017).

Considering the specific situation of unaccompanied minors between the ages of 14 and 18, excluded from shelters since the Roya camp was limited to adults and the church gave priority to children under fourteen, in August 2017, the prefecture announced that a reception centre for them would open in the low-income neighbourhood of the harbour. The local media reported tense exchanges between the two authorities, with the prefect pointing out that:

> *"It is a duty to welcome these people. Mayors should cooperate and not create obstacles,"*

and the mayor answering:

> *"I am tired. I offered all my cooperation, but I have not received the same thing from the prefecture. On the contrary, I see a huge disorganization."*[iii]

On the same day that construction work was to begin on the future reception centre, some hundred neighbours, mainly families, marched towards the city hall. The mayor received two of their spokespersons in his office before speaking directly to the demonstrators and the local media. In front of them, he made the commitment to prevent the prefecture from opening the centre and confirmed that his policy was to accept the existence of the Roya Camp if it helped to manage the presence of migrants in town, while refusing that any other reception facility be opened. He obtained a meeting with the prefect the next day, which he attended with a few spokespersons for the demonstrators. The decision to suspend the opening of the centre for minors thus became official.

The partisan track: opportunities and limits of political concordance between scales

The second main way the town government tried to call for the action and influence of the central institutions is the partisan one. The town council majority, elected in 2014, was entirely affiliated with the Democratic Party (PD), whose former national secretary, was leading the government as President of the Council of Ministers from February 2014 to December 2016, in a coalition with the centre-right party, New Centre Right, whose leader was appointed Interior Minister. Despite the auspicious circumstance of sharing the same political colours, relations with the central government and its majority have not always been easy. Since the beginning of the 'migrant-in-town crisis' attempts had been made to escalate the issue to higher levels of governance within the Party organisation and through the locally elected PD parliament members. At first, the mayor considered the response quick and appropriate: in June 2015, a meeting was held at the Ventimiglia town hall between members of the local government and the national government undersecretary for migration, joined by the local prefect and the local PD senator. At this occasion, the mayor declared himself "*fully satisfied*" and added that

> "*the local administration strongly (felt) the presence of the national government*".[iv]

Difficulties arose in the following months, after the reception centre at the railway station was closed. Even though the Interior Minister had promised that migrants would be prevented from arriving in Ventimiglia, at the end of May 2016, some 150-300 persons were estimated to be camping on the pebbly riverbed and the beaches. To protest against this situation, the mayor and all eleven councillors of the majority decided to suspend their membership in the Party.

> *"We noticed the total absence of the party at the national and regional level. Absolute silence. Despite our insistence, nobody took a position on the issue of migrants in Ventimiglia,"* explained the town party secretary, denouncing *"the lack of political action from (...) the national*

government to solve the issue of migrants in Ventimiglia. (...) We were expecting a different attitude from a friendly (same party) government."[v]

In his declarations to the local press, the mayor added that

"Ventimiglia needs a serious action and a stable presence of the State to handle the migrant emergency". [vi]

If the opening of the Roya camp marked a reconciliation with the central government, the rapprochement with the national Democratic Party was effective after the Italian-Libyan agreements were signed in February 2017 and showed their effects in decreasing the number of new arrivals in Ventimiglia during the following summer. The mayor declared his satisfaction and his gratitude, affirming that his town's voice had finally been heard[vii].

The indirect pressure track: trying to enlist the public opinion and other institutions

The mayoral action to influence higher tier authorities also passed through other channels, and namely an important presence in the national and international media during a few critical periods with the purpose of garnering the support of the public opinion and other institutions. The mayor looked for support among the mayoral community, for instance by participating in the Network of European Welcoming Mayors. During one of the network's meeting in December 2016, in the presence of the Pope, the mayor asked for humanitarian corridors to cross the Mediterranean but also to reach different European destinations, adding that *"We as mayors are experiencing first-hand the hypocrisy of Europe".*[viii] Despite their divergent political affiliation, the mayor also tried to seek the support of the Regional government, calling on the Regional President and the government to put pressure on the national government.

A border fatality in Ventimiglia gave the mayor one of the rare occasions to address cutting remarks to the French authorities: in the autumn of 2016, after the death of a young girl run over by a truck on the highway, he declared to a local newspaper:

"This girl is on the conscience of all of us. At least Italy is trying to assist (migrants) but other countries that continue to turn their back should be ashamed. The way the European System is designed makes it unable to deal with the current migratory wave and this death is a chilling result."[ix]

Apart from this kind of declaration, the unique position of Ventimiglia discouraged an open clash with French authorities or municipalities nearby. *"Our relations with the French have not really changed,"* explained the mayor in our interview (May 22, 2017).

"For instance, there are no problems with the agreements between France and Italy on shared water reservoirs. We are also working on a European project for sustainable mobility (...) and everything is going smoothly. But the issue (of migrants) is almost a taboo. When we meet our French colleagues, they tend not to talk about it, or they just say, 'Italy is doing a great job' or

'the issue should be discussed more frequently at a European level'… but it's like saying 'thanks, but teneteveli voi'*, 'keep them on your side'. And they are very good at elegantly side-stepping issues…"*

The local migration policy arena and relations with the 'local' civil society

Non-state actors played a leading role in politicizing the border issue, helping to make it visible by making their demands heard, by bringing them into the local political sphere, and by shaping local public action. Two different groups of actors came into play and competed: on one hand, collectives, associations and non-governmental organizations – with the local catholic church playing a pivotal role – providing assistance and protection to people in transit and defending their rights; on the other hand, local councillors, trade unions and neighbourhood committees seeking to represent the residents of Ventimiglia who opposed the visible and ungoverned presence of migrants squatting the urban space. The first group deplored the living conditions of migrants camping near the train station or in the pebbly Roya riverbed, insisting on the most vulnerable ones. The second group denounced the nuisance and the detrimental effect of the migrants' visible presence on the town's economy. While the first group demanded more sustainable and lasting solutions for people in transit, the second group denounced the magnet effect of providing facilities for migrants and asked for the 'problem' to be solved upstream. Different actors thus participated in turning the presence of migrants in town into an urgent local public issue and called for contradictory public action: taking care of migrants while removing them from the urban space. These apparently divergent demands converged in providing legitimacy to the migrant encampment policy embodied in the creation of the transit camp and in actions discouraging their presence outside the camp.

Dialogue, cooperation and delegation

The local government sought and found dialogue and cooperation with selected actors of both groups while delegitimizing or criminalizing others. While on the one hand, the mayor and the municipal majority expressed some of the same demands and used the same language register as the neighbourhood committees and other spokespersons for the local residents, on the other they praised the solidarity and cooperated with the Red Cross, cultural and humanitarian associations, and other NGOs.

Several meetings were held and various forms of agreement were found with actors of both groups, all of them favouring a migrant encampment. For instance, Caritas accepted, during the summer of 2017, to stop supplying the lunch meal in order to encourage migrants to leave the riverbed and to join the Red Cross camp on the periphery. Other associations and collectives accepted to distribute food only in prescribed areas and at set hours. Yet, the mayor also actively worked for the closure of the railway centre and later of the church shelter, as requested by the resident committee.

Generalized discontent and conflict

In spite of these efforts to cooperate, at least with a selected range of civil society actors, allegedly aimed at finding a compromise between solidarity and order and between reception and exclusion, the main reaction to the town government's policy towards the 'migrants-in-town' issue was generalized discontent.

In our interview (May 25, 2017), a resident volunteering at the St Anthony church considered that

> "*(the mayor) wanted to satisfy everybody and thus could not satisfy anyone. He lost my vote. For me a left-wing mayor must openly work to welcome migrants, because people who are against migrants would have complained anyway, and in any case, they would not have voted for him anymore after this situation, so he had nothing to lose, but in doing what he did he just lost the vote of people like me".*

On the field of solidarity, the main criticism raised against the mayor was linked to the measures taken to prevent migrants from gathering in town and camping on the riverbed. These included his constant refusal to install clean water points for the people camping on the riverbed, as requested by several NGOs, and his highly controversial ordinance forbidding food delivered outside the authorized centres, adopted in August 2016 and suspended in April 2017. Also, his contribution to the criminalization of solidarity and especially his open hostility towards 'No Border' activists, at least from August 2015 onwards, were considered as mainly responsible, rather than migrants themselves, for making the situation more inconvenient for residents and broadening the gap between the centre-left mayor and grassroots solidarity movements.

On the opposite side, exasperated local residents and their spokespersons accused the mayor of passive submission to the central state and prefecture's orders. Also, they often stressed his incapacity to handle the situation, comparing it to what they considered a more 'virile' attitude shown by his predecessor during the 'Tunisian crisis' (interviews June 21, July 27, and September 9, 2017).

Despite his allegedly balanced, pragmatical and non-ideological position, the mayor was alternately described as 'pro-migrant' or as 'anti-migrant' by his critics. Two eloquent though somewhat extreme examples may illustrate this paradoxical position. For his "welcoming policy" the mayor received hate mail and death threats, one of which stated: *"The one who transforms Italy into a giant refugee camp welcoming the worst scum from all over the world is guilty of high treason and deserves to be shot: to the wall."*[x] To illustrate the extent to which he was considered by the demonstrators as a proponent of an exclusionary policy, during a No Border demonstration (July 2018), he was portrayed on the banner opening the parade as kissing far-right anti-migrant leader Matteo Salvini.

Describing himself as limited in prerogatives and means, and in a tough position between a rock and a hard place, the mayor was somehow aware of having chosen the hard way of compromise

without gaining additional support for his position: *"We apparently succeeded in disappointing everybody: a hard challenge, but we managed,"* he admitted ironically in our interview (May 22, 2017).

The mayor's electoral defeat: a disavowal of the local migration policy?

In the spring of 2019, the incumbent mayor obtained 33% of the vote, while his opponent and former mayor (2007-2012) won the election with 52% of the vote, including 20% for the list presented by the anti-migrant party, The League. Did generalized discontent towards the mayor's migration policy eventually translate into electoral defeat? This electoral correlation should not be overestimated.

Firstly, the re-election of the incumbent mayor was highly unlikely regardless of the 'migrants-in-town' issue and his policy towards it. It appears that Ventimiglia is far from being a stronghold of the left. When considering general election results and the local governments that followed each other since the 1980s, a predominance of centre-right parties can be observed which is consistent with the surrounding western Liguria and southern Piedmont. Only a short socialist experience in 1993 and a centre-left coalition from 1994 to 1998 tilted the city government to the left. It is also important to note that the elected municipal council was twice dissolved, in 1994 and from 2012 to 2014, on suspicions of mafia infiltration. The centre-left coalition that governed the town between 2014 and 2019 was thus elected after a judicial dissolution and in a very particular context, since the 2014 municipal elections were also shaken by an investigation into the centre-right candidates' pork-barrel politics that occurred between the two electoral rounds. The former centre-right mayor's name was finally cleared by the Court of Cassation in 2017 and he was thus allowed to be a candidate again in the 2019 local elections.

Secondly, the electoral scores of right and far-right parties in Ventimiglia were not particularly stronger than the national ones. Indeed, in the 2018 national elections, the League far-right party scored 30% of the vote in Ventimiglia, which is more than three times what it had obtained in previous local elections, but pretty much the same score as in the rest of the Northern part of the country.

Thirdly, and surprisingly enough, during the 2019 local electoral campaign the 'migrants-in-town' issue was almost absent. The mayor tried to avoid the subject in every possible way, considering that those who wanted to recognize the municipality's efforts could not deny them, while the others preferred not to see them. During the official presentation of his list, held in the public garden of Ventimiglia, the incumbent mayor said jokingly:

> *"I am glad to be here to present my candidates, in this garden in which I grew up as a child, and in which my bike was once stolen… at that time there were no migrants… and this is the only time you will hear me talking about migrants today."*

Even his opponents did not focus their campaign on the issue, considering that the *"disastrous consequences of the mayor's welcoming policy (were) clear to everybody's eyes"*[xi]. Also, as his predecessor and rival explained in our interview (July 21, 2017):

> "*The situation was difficult and maybe impossible for any local administration to manage. It was very complex, more than the one I managed in 2010 with the Tunisians. Certainly, this administration was not entirely right and was not entirely wrong but was largely passive. They just lived the situation (...) I think a little bit more of (an iron) fist would have been needed to protect the residents' interests and the town's interests."*

Besides, in this trading town, the opposition had always been reluctant to advertise Ventimiglia's problems. As a minority councillor, also a retailer, explained to me:

> *"We cannot come out in the media everyday with this issue. We don't want to create a fuss: when you throw up dust all the time, you end up dirtying your own shoes… We are a trading town. We have to protect the town's image… that's why we try to keep a low profile as the opposition, but the problem is real."*

During the municipal campaign, local actors somehow did not need or were not able to re-politicize an issue that was already highly politicized, and polarized, at a national level.

Lastly, the incumbent mayor's migrant policy managed to convince some of the electorate. Neighbours of the train station and of the church reception centres, for instance, progressively witnessed his resolve to meet their demands. A former policeman and president of the neighbourhood committee that fought to close the church reception centre and some of the committee's members clearly declared their support for the incumbent mayor at the 2019 local elections (interview April 30, 2019). Also, one of its most active members, a parishioner housewife whose apartment is next to the church, accepted the mayor's proposal to be a candidate on one of the lists supporting him at the elections.

A direct correlation is therefore difficult to establish between the municipal policy towards migrants and the incumbent mayor's electoral defeat.

Discussion. How border town politics encourage border filtering and the exclusionary regime

The challenge of governing a medium-sized border town within the Schengen area and densely crossed by more and less 'desirable' human mobilities amidst a situation framed as a 'transit migration crisis' does not open wide leeway for municipal action nor offer a large palette of political options on migration issues.

> "Border cities (are) at the crossroads between sending and destination countries, in a struggle for the definition of who deserves 'to be in' and who has 'to stay out', in which these cities scarcely have a say" (Caponio et al. 2019).

Yet, Ventimiglia's government and mayor did not shy away from taking action regarding migration and were, on the contrary, largely present in the media and in the political space. They maintained relations with the local and trans-national civil society; they actively participated in criminalizing some of its components thus contributing to shape the local arena; they mediated between citizens and higher tier authorities and tried to influence the latter's action.

Defining himself as committed to protecting his citizens' interests and as limited in prerogatives and resources, the mayor refused to openly adopt an inclusionary or exclusionary attitude towards migrants in transit with respect to supranational and national laws and policies.

Nevertheless, this attitude and the subsequent policy of encampment eventually reinforced the issue's framing as an emergency, thus increasing the precarious condition and criminalization of both migrants and those supporting them. The mayor's refusal to install more structured or permanent reception facilities and his aversion towards autonomous and territorially diffused solidarity expressions intensified the migrants' invisibility and exposure to deportation, while maintaining a high level of tension and public attention by supporting the fragile yet "spectacular" solution of a temporary camp. In this respect, inaction can also be considered as a means of migration control (Davies et al. 2017). Politically legitimized by the desire to protect the interests of local residents, this policy was nevertheless steeped in discontent and protest. The degree to which it also contributed to the incumbent mayor's electoral defeat in favour of a right-wing anti-migrant coalition would benefit from further quantitative and qualitative investigation focusing on the formation of local electoral preferences. Stuck between the accusation of being a magnet for transit migration and the need to govern economies based on cross-border relations, border town governments seem to be doomed to contribute to an exclusionary border regime.

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