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Bénédicte Michalon. ‘We’re not the police, but we have to stop them from walking on the tracks.’ Railroad workers and migratory controls in the Basque Country (France). *Critical Studies on Security*, 2026, pp.1-24. <10.1080/21624887.2026.2648424>. <hal-05577236>

HAL Id: hal-05577236

<https://hal.science/hal-05577236v1>

Submitted on 2 Apr 2026

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‘We’re not the police, but we have to stop them from walking on the tracks.’ Railroad workers and migratory controls in the Basque Country (France)

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To cite this article: Bénédicte Michalon (26 Mar 2026): ‘We’re not the police, but we have to stop them from walking on the tracks.’ Railroad workers and migratory controls in the Basque Country (France), *Critical Studies on Security*, DOI: [10.1080/21624887.2026.2648424](https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2026.2648424)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2026.2648424>

Abstract

Migrants have always used railroad spaces, but the tightening of controls along French borders since the mid-2010s has brought the railroads and their professionals face-to-face with migration issues. How do railroad workers position themselves relative to the policing of migration? Based on fieldwork and interviews conducted with railroad workers at three train stations close to the Franco-Spanish border, I show that migration policing in the rail transport sector occurs mostly through the day-to-day activities of railroad workers. It relies, in particular, on employees at the bottom of the hierarchy. Their independent judgment and discretionary power are mobilized to decide whether or not to let migrants through. I begin by discussing the emergence of the migration issue in this sector due to the French government’s heightened controls on migratory routes. I then document the ways that the securitization of the border finds concrete expression in the daily tasks and professional spaces of railroad workers. They face a multiplication of issues formulated in terms of “security”—those specific to the railroad notably now being confronted with those relating to migration. Finally, I explore the moral dilemma railroad workers now face: whether or not to collaborate with the police. Broadly, I show how the pluralization of policing can spread across different players in the public sector, and as a matter of their own free will as opposed to part of a structured and definite policy.

Keywords

Policing of migration; transport; railroad workers; law enforcement; migration routes; Basque Country

Introduction

In south-west France, four people were hit by a train at the entrance to the Saint-Jean-de-Luz station in the early hours of 12 October 2021. One was seriously injured, while the other three died. They were immediately identified as ‘exiles’ or ‘refugees’. A few weeks earlier a Bangladeshi had been electrocuted by the overhead

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wires on the roof of a train he had boarded in Italy, in the hope of entering France. On 30 September 2023, a migrant was hit by a train while walking along the tracks between Dunkirk and Calais, a route many refugees use to reach encampments. The recent history of migration across France's borders is marked by railroad accidents. Such tragedies have, of course, occurred elsewhere. The crossing of the Balkans by hundreds of thousands of migrants in 2014–2015 was fraught with mishaps resulting in deaths, both on the trains and on the tracks (Hess and Kasparek 2021). The link between rail transport and migration has a long history. Indeed, migrants have always travelled by public transport, including trains (Lin et al. 2017), and railroads have been used by governments to receive particular categories of foreigners (Héraud 2021) or, conversely, to carry out checks and expel them (Blue 2021). The strengthening of migratory controls in Europe in the mid-2010s, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in 2022 have increasingly brought the railroads and their professionals face-to-face with the issue of international migration and its control. Yet, the concern of these social actors (railroad workers) and the socio-technical tools they work with daily (trains and railroad infrastructure) is not border security. Their professional practices and rationales are therefore confronted with an issue that is outside their remit, traditionally dealt with by the forces of law and order. These dynamics form part of broader contemporary developments at the intersection between migratory controls and transport sectors, defined by Walter, Heller, and Pezzani as 'viapolitics' (Walters, Heller, and Pezzani 2022). They use this term to capture the interconnections between migrants, the transport means they use, the infrastructures that enable these movements, and the geographical environments through which they travel. The authors also use the term viapolitics to refer to 'those situations when the space-time of travel and the vehicles enabling it become objects of contention and transformation, simultaneously a means through which people seek to move and a means through which their movement is governed' (8). Attentive to the power relations and conflicts inherent in migration controls, their work is an interesting complement to the philosopher Thomas Nail's ideas about kinopolitics. Nail takes into account the movements of both humans and non-humans, placing social motion at the core of social theory. pay close attention to the power relations and conflicts inherent in migration controls. This enables him to conceptualise borders as dynamics that organise and circulate movement (Nail 2016).

The concepts of viapolitics and kinopolitics draw attention to the possibility of governing mobility infrastructure. They are closely linked to what scientific research calls the 'securitization of migration', understood as 'the result of mobilization of the work of political discourses and of practices of security agencies based on the argument of danger and emergency' (Bigo 2002, 72) and as 'the result and not the cause of the development of technologies of control and surveillance' (Bigo 2022, 73). The securitisation of migration is based on a view of migrants as a 'risk' (*Ibid.*, 65). This interpretation contributes to the deployment of a security treatment and approach to flows, people, goods, information, etc. (Amicelle et al. 2017). The perception of migrants as 'risk' is also related to research on humanitarian border policing, that has shown that the adoption of humanitarian principles in border control policies introduces a rhetoric of saving lives. It increases the spatial and temporal scope of controls (Pallister-Wilkins 2022; Williams 2016).

Studies on viapolitics, kinopolitics and the humanitarian policing of flows and borders converge in the observation of a pluralisation of the actors involved in migration control beyond the state. While the role of the rail sector in these controls in earlier periods has received scholarly attention, much less is known about its place in contemporary dynamics. I contribute to filling this gap by examining how the railroad is today confronted with matters relating to the securitisation of migration. In doing so, I situate my analysis within the ‘security/mobility nexus’ perspective developed by Leese and Wittendorp (2017), for whom ‘security and mobility should be understood analytically as mutually constitutive phenomena’ (Leese and Wittendorp 2022, 21). I seek to understand whether the security approach to migration is spreading in the rail sector, and whether it has led to changes in the actions of its professionals. I explore what they do – or don’t do – to integrate migration checks into their activities. In this, I view security as a practice (Côté-Boucher, Infantino, and Salter 2014) and as a way of dealing with social problems (Zedner 2003). No less importantly, ‘security’ is also an emic category, used by railroad actors to talk about standards and measures meant to prevent accidents involving vehicles and people in their infrastructure, so as to ensure smooth circulation. It is, in addition, clearly a category of meaning and practice for law enforcement, whom authorities entrust with the task of preserving ‘the rights of individuals, the conservation of their lives and property, the territorial integrity of a country, the stability of the government and public order’ (Gros 2012, 12). The coexistence of these multiple security ‘regimes’ in the railroad world allows us to understand how they guide the actions of railroad workers, faced with the (externally imposed) problematisation of migration as a security issue.

The maritime and air transport sectors have been particularly affected by the pluralisation of policing due to the multiplication of social issues formulated in terms of security and exponential growth in the movement of people and goods. In contrast to what happens in these transport sectors, obliged to participate in the migration controls of States and sometimes of economic actors, I show that the penetration of migration policing in the railroad transport sector occurred primarily through the day-to-day activities of railroad workers. It relied, in particular, on the actions of railroad workers at the very bottom of the hierarchical ladder. In carrying out their work, they exercised a certain room for manoeuvre to decide whether to let migrants through or, on the contrary, prevent them from circulating. The pluralisation of policing in this sector is thus less the product of obligations imposed by company management than of railroad workers’ daily encounters with two populations external to the railroad: law enforcement and migrants.

I begin by situating this study within the literature on the relationship between mobility and security, and explaining how discourses, practices and materiality play into the formulation of migration as a security issue in the transport sector. I then describe how the deployment of a reading of migration routes and ‘transit’ as a security issue has intensified migration controls at the border between France and Spain. Focusing on what happened at this border between 2018 and 2022, I subsequently examine the different ways in which railroad workers, in the plurality of their professions, saw the migration issue emerge in their daily work. I then discuss the different security ‘regimes’ that railway workers dealt with: the securitisation of

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migration collides with conceptions of security and safety specific to the railroad world. Finally, I explore relations between railroad workers and law enforcement, similarly established in the course of their day-to-day work.

The railroad as a window onto the relationship between security and mobility

Research on the interactions between security and mobility has developed at the crossroads of critical security studies and work on mobility. The ‘security/mobility nexus’ aims to shed light on links between mobility practices to security practices (Leese and Wittendorp 2018). Analysis of the politics of movement is thus the main focus, where the hypothesis is that the techniques, practices, and infrastructures regulating movement form ‘a politics of movement that lies at the heart of the production of security’ (Beauchamps et al. 2017, 2). Mobility and security are, in this view, conceived as intertwined, but in a dynamic entanglement that is constantly redefined.

Transport has been a subject of particular interest in critical security studies, notably because airports and merchant marine ports, constitute a network of ports of entry that materialise borders between States (Salter 2004). They are also international hubs (Nøkleberg 2021, 1), vital to the globalised economy. As such, they have been the focus of heightened attention in terms of security for several decades, providing insight into the ‘how’ and ‘how much’ of the production of plural policing (Nøkleberg 2020).

These are also sectors in which various security issues have been formulated since the mid-twentieth century, both by governments and by airline or shipping companies (Salter 2007). From the outset, migration was included in this approach to security, and transcribed into national and international regulations. Aviation and the merchant marine were also affected by an early logic of privatisation, a testament of the hold of liberal philosophy on their governance (Cowen 2010). The aviation industry was asked to carry out checks on passenger identity papers and travel documents as early as 1944 (Walters, Lecadet, and Parizot 2022). The merchant marine first addressed the issue of so-called ‘stowaways’ in 1957. In 2004, the International Ship and Port Facility Code (ISPS) ratified the transformation of the so-called ‘stowaway’ into a ‘risk’ to be prevented (Pickering 2014; Walters 2008). For both aviation and maritime transport, identity checks of travellers by carriers when crossing an international border became mandatory in the late 1980s (Le Bourhis 2001; Torpey 1998). At certain borders, including those of France, road transport also came under this obligation. The railroad was comparatively less affected than other sectors by the extension of migration controls. Indeed, it remained partly outside this dynamic, as it was extremely difficult to monitor a train throughout the entirety of its journey. In addition, transport law placed responsibility on the sender, making it virtually impossible to hold a railroad company liable other than the one that loaded the train (Perrod, Bourgeois, and Murret-Labarthe 2000).

This questions the motives underlying the inclusion of rail transport in the strength-
ening of the policing of migration: are these related to the control of borders in a sovereign perspective, or to concerns specific to the rail sector? The configuration studied at the Franco-Spanish border is unique in that it brings

together professional actors that all fall under the jurisdiction of the State. France remains, in fact, a country where migration controls are the prerogative of national and public law enforcement. Meanwhile, the opening up of rail transport has yet to lead to any real competition with the main railway company, a State enterprise. The pluralisation of policing is therefore examined here in the context of public action.

Research on the delegation of border controls to transporters has examined its effects on the organisation and professional practices of transport enterprises. Security force personnel may be seconded or recruited to help staff with their new duties. Similarly, private security companies might be commissioned to carry out some checks (Guiraudon 2002).

Moreover, the implementation of migrant control measures is more the prerogative of certain professions than others. For example, pilots-in-command have the last word on whether to accept or refuse certain passengers on aircraft, and this on the grounds of health, good order, and safety on board (Lecadet and Hamant 2019). On ships, captains decide how to monitor persons found aboard and transfer them to the authorities, according to their perception of the degree of risk generated by the presence of a clandestine passenger (Pickering 2014). Workers in the transport sector may themselves be the target of such controls. Take, for example, the merchant marine, whose employees are subject to measures arguably infringing on civil rights and labour protections (Cowen 2007). Such studies beg further reflection on the organisational effects of the policing of migration, the professions concerned, and the impact of the intrusion of law enforcement officers into professional spaces on workers' actions.

Scholars highlight the uneven formalisation of migration control delegation procedures. In the cases of aviation and the merchant marine, these are clearly codified and governed by normative texts. Some tools have been developed to help transporters implement security measures specific to the handling of migrants (see e.g. Côté-Boucher 2020; Guenebeaud 2019). Walters (2008, 17) uses the term 'normalization' to refer to procedures that seek to achieve 'a certain kind of tolerance of dangers by translating them into calculable risks'. According to him, the involvement of insurance companies in the search for marine stowaways is emblematic of this logic of normalisation. Though, delegation procedures are sometimes much more informal, guided by local arrangements or by mutual agreement, as is the case, for example, in the road transport of people (Lendaro and Philippe 2024). How does the pluralisation of the policing of migration unfold? What are the rationales and action logics that guide it?

These studies all highlight the fact that the pluralisation of actors in the transport sector has led to a multiplication of security concepts that are deployed therein. These notably bring into conflict security notions linked to the protection of State borders and those related to the protection of global trade (Cowen 2014), just as the ones linked to the biopolitical approach that underlies humanitarian border policing (Perkowski 2018). Have other conceptions of security emerged as a result of the involvement of the railroad sector in the policing of migration?

This study is based on ethnographic work conducted in 2021–2022 among railroad workers at three Basque Country stations in France located near the Franco-Spanish border (Bayonne, Saint-Jean-de-Luz, and Hendaye).¹ Although buses and bus stations were already subject to significant police surveillance, migration controls were for a few years, until 2022–2023 concentrated on trains, stations, and

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railways. I observed the stations, their surroundings and tracks, as well as some of the railroad lines. The twenty-one railroad workers interviewed are all employees of the French state-owned rail company, which remains a major player in the sector despite an opening up to competition. I contacted these workers through a trade union that is well-represented in the company. This methodological entry point influenced the type of discourse collected. Unionised railroad workers generally take a pro-migrant stance, though possible censorship and normalisation of discourse might also discourage the expression of pro-control of migration views. Snowball sampling allowed to go beyond the network of unionised railroad workers and meet women, who are well-represented in certain rail professions. I mainly interacted with ‘sedentary’ staff (signalmen, passenger sales and advisory staff, freight agents) and ticket inspectors. The processes I worked on lost their importance in the years following my investigation. Two complementary trends have redirected migration patterns, which now place less demand on rail infrastructure than at the time of my fieldwork. On the one hand, migration controls have become more irregular in terms of time and space, which has made it easier to cross borders and has reduced the use of the most dangerous routes, particularly those involving railways. On the other hand, the continued heavy police surveillance around certain train stations, particularly Hendaye, has prompted migrants to abandon trains in favour of buses. Migration controls now affect buses more than rail infrastructure.

Migration routes transformed into a security issue

The incursion of migration issues into the work of railroad staff – and later into the work of bus drivers – is the result of a strengthening of controls at the border between France and Spain since 2018 – the year also cited by all the people I spoke to as a turning point. This shift is particularly emblematic of the securitisation of migration. It reflects the transformation into a security issue of the supposed trajectories of migrants, and not just of migrants. Casa Cortes and Cobarrubias propose the expression ‘routes thinking’ to describe ‘a spreading common sense – an emergent episteme – on border management among policy makers, border agents, and international organizations. Within this framework, bordering practices and border-like spaces are reproduced along hypothetical migrants’ itineraries’ (2021, 153). They examine the impact of representations of migration – and more specifically of itineraries – on the policing of flows.

Routes thinking is not new in Europe and is well ingrained across the continent. It largely guided migration reforms in countries emerging from Communism in the 1990s. It is at work on the border between Spain and France, including the western section under study here. As in the Balkans in the mid-2010s (Hess and Kasperek 2021), transport actors in this border region are particularly affected by the transformation of migratory itineraries into an issue of control. At the Franco-Spanish border, route thinking and viapolitics are closely intertwined, providing an empirical translation of the kinopolitic’s idea of a border in motion (Nail 2016).

The Basque Country stretches across the western part of the border between France and Spain. The existence of this border and its legitimacy are disputed by many Basques, who call it ‘northern Basque Country’ (for the part located in France) and ‘southern Basque Country’ (for the part located in Spain).² Since 2018, the French government has pursued a policy of tightened immigration

controls in this cultural region, thus re-defining ('re-bordering', Paassi 2021; Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002) this locally disputed demarcation line. This stance is presented as a response to greater migration flows through the western Mediterranean and then Spain – this increases itself the result of heightened checks in the central Mediterranean. The presence of migrants has meanwhile been made visible by local and national media as well as by the growing mobilisation of residents in support of migrants, the development of solidarity networks, and their increasing criminalisation. Particular attention is paid to their presence in rail and train stations, as well as in bus networks and stations, stemming from the assumption that these migrants are planning to travel to other cities in France or other countries and are merely 'passing through' the northern Basque Country. Controls have accordingly not only been reinforced along the border but also between the border and Bayonne; that is, an area that includes both the other stations in northern Basque Country and the main road and rail routes. In practice, despite existing controls, most migrants manage to cross the border relatively quickly and move on to Bayonne. The term 'transit' has been defined 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' (Collyer, Düvell, and de Haaas 2012, 411). This labelling process affects both territories and individuals: people categorised as 'in transit' have become one of the targets of migration policies in the European Union, especially in its peripheral areas (Hess 2012). The tightening of migration controls at the Franco-Spanish border is the result of the translation of these representations in the policies of the French State. The police presence and the criminalisation of both migrants and activists create a heavy atmosphere, which weighs on the daily work of railway workers.

These representations are also performative on the part of those who mobilise in favour of migration. A local network of migrant support activists and volunteers has developed around helping people cross the border and reach their intended destination. Because of the lack of local reception facilities, the city of Bayonne has become a place where migration, mobilisation, and media coverage all intersect. Representations according to which migrants are in 'transit' through the Basque Country, as well as the explicit desire of most migrants to continue their journey, guide the actions of national and local actors, whether they intervene in controls or passages. As Lin et al. (2017) observe, transport infrastructures play a role in the categorisation of migrants (2017), in this case by differentiating 'in transit' migrants from other categories of migrants.

In early 2021, French President Macron announced the closure of the border with Spain and tighter controls on people entering France, citing as motives the fight against terrorism and the pandemic. A large number of border crossing points were physically closed; those remaining open have enforced stricter controls. The government has also stepped-up checks across all transport infrastructure, including roads, highways, and railroads. This approach continues despite its illegality³ and has translated into a strong police presence in the region. Various law enforcement has been deployed (national police, border police, gendarmerie, army), all of whom participate in the policing of migration.

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Their presence was for some years concentrated at border crossing points – bridges between France and Spain, but also at train and train stations. They are now concentrated on bus stations, bus stops, and highway entrances – as well as certain major transport arteries considered important in the ‘transit’ of migrants. These places and the people who work there thus find themselves confronted with the policy of border closure. The effects of this policy are evident. France and Spain signed a readmission agreement in 2002. This⁴ agreement allows for the immediate readmission of foreign nationals from third countries if they are arrested within four hours of crossing the border and after a personal interview with border police or customs officials. Beyond this time frame, the authorities of the arresting country must respect a 48-hour time limit before sending the foreign national back to the other country. However, the tightening of border controls has meant that many people are turned back to Spain by French law enforcement without compliance with these legal restrictions, nor any examination of the individual situation of the people stopped, information on the procedure, or their rights (Anafé and CAFI 2023). Bus stations, as train stations and their parvis have thus become prime locations for police stops, particularly in Hendaye: the bridge by which foreign nationals are turned back is just a few hundred metres away.

I am at the Hendaye station in the middle of the day in February 2022. As usual, a national police car is parked in front of the station. The officers have gotten out of the vehicle and are talking outside the front door. Inside, two of their colleagues, accompanied by two Border Police officers, surround a young man. One of them announces loudly, so as to be heard by passersby: ‘Eh, yes sir, you’re going back to Spain!’ The group sets off, the young man forced to follow. The same officer then announces: ‘And what’s more, the French police are kind, we’re taking you back in this nice car!’ and makes the man get in. The car starts. A train agent passes by, greets the officers and exchanges a few words with them before setting off again. (Extract from the author’s field notebook)

As at other borders, this led migrants to take ever more dangerous routes. They tried to swim across the river (Bidassoa) that separates the two countries or walk along railroad tracks to escape law enforcement. Since 2021, nine people have died in these attempts. However, the tightening of controls varies according to events other than migratory flows, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The presence of law enforcement in transport networks and hubs is therefore shaped by police priorities and strategies, but also migrants’ strategies to pass through despite everything.

The French government’s securitisation efforts follow migrants’ real or supposed itineraries within the country, well beyond border localities *stricto sensu*. The space-time of the crossing becomes ‘governable’. Everyday spaces such as stations, trains, buses, and bus stops are in this way included in what is also a ‘political spectacle’ (Cuttitta 2015, 206). The transit paradigm is thus placed at the centre of controls, and transport professionals found themselves directly confronted with this conception of migration and its policing.

When migration and its controllers enter the daily lives of railroad workers

The policy of controlling the border between France and Spain spills over into professions other than law enforcement: railroad work being one of them. Railroad workers in particular found themselves facing the securitisation of the border as a consequence of the incursion of the migration issue into their daily activities and professional spaces. This manifested in the presence of two social groups from outside the railroad: migrants and law enforcement.

'They're just passing through': a presence interpreted as transit

The interviewed railroad workers reported that the migrant presence emerged in different ways in their professional activities.

For some, this discovery occurred primarily through the senses. This was the case for signalmen and those working with passenger or freight cars. Contact could be purely auditory. When I asked a signalman how he knew that the people passing on the tracks were migrants, he replied: 'You can recognize them by the noise, they get their feet caught in the cables'. Recognition was most often visual; many of my interlocutors said that they were confronted with the problem of migration because 'we see them go by':

The day before they were killed,⁵ I was working the night shift and we saw, I think, about ten of them, I don't know exactly, running down the middle of the tracks because they'd managed to get over the railroad bridge. (. . .)

-It's a place where nobody's supposed to go, apart from you?

-Yes, that's right, it's forbidden to the public. The night I was telling you about, they were running there, it's the passenger yard [passenger train marshaling area] (. . .). [He describes the path taken on a map]. That evening, the day before the accident, a colleague had called me because he'd seen people in the passenger yard, and we were working on moving the railroad cars. He called us on the radio to tell us that there were people on the tracks and that we had to be careful not to run over one of them . . . So, I called the shunting team to tell them they were over here, but it was another yard so it wasn't too dangerous. Then we saw them go by, they got in and then, here, they left. They set off running, we saw them go by and then I didn't see them anymore. (freight railroad worker, October 2021)

When migrants passed through railway infrastructures that are off-limits to the public, interactions with railroad workers were infrequent, impromptu, and fleeting. They mainly aimed to make migrants aware of the dangers they faced in these spaces, where railroad cars and engines are moved or trains pass by:

When we see the migrants - we all do it, we've consulted each other - when we see them passing in front of Post 1, we tell them 'Get out of there, go by road', we get them to cross, and we tell them to get out. We don't have to, but we tell them to go walk along that way. They either listen or they don't, but at least we try. (. . .)

-Do you ever have longer exchanges?

-No, they don't linger. They're not supposed to be there anyway. You can tell

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that they're lost . . . (signalman, November 2021)

These encounters, whether auditory or visual, mainly occurred at night on unlit stretches of railroad infrastructure. It was their passage that served as an identifier for the railroad workers. When I asked a group of signalmen how they could distinguish migrants from other people on the tracks despite the ban on the public being there, the criterion was mobility: migrants are 'just passing through', whereas others (graffiti artists or drug dealers) take up more permanent positions in the nooks and crannies of the infrastructure. Here, the migrant is not categorised in terms of a national, ethnic, or racial group. Railroad workers use the transit paradigm to identify people present in the railway infrastructure.

Categorisation of otherness more marked in professions dealing with the public

Workers who dealt with passengers were more immediately confronted with the presence of migrants and their control. This was the case for ticket agents and station agents. The latter are present in stations and on platforms, providing passengers with information and checking that trains are boarded and disembarked smoothly. Interactions are often linked to ticket sales. Tickets for high-speed trains are now issued in the name of the traveller. The provision of an associated identity card made railroad staff aware of migration issues, as explained by a ticket counter clerk interviewed in the fall of 2021:

It really bothers me now because these days all tickets are nominative and I feel kind of like a police officer. Because they get scared. I never ask for passports or identity cards, I ask them to write down their last name, first name and date of birth. Because I don't want to make them feel uncomfortable about it and I especially don't want to be associated with a police officer or someone who might be checking identity papers. I don't want that at all, because that's not what I'm here for. (ticket counter clerk, October 2021)

Another commercial change in the railroad enterprise has also led to encounters between migrants and railroad workers. In more and more stations, ticket offices are closed on the weekends and passengers must buy their tickets from automatic machines, which accept payment only by bank card. Migrants generally do not have this means of payment and are forced to turn to station agents and ticket inspectors to buy a ticket on board:

It's sort of courage out of desperation because it's a gamble, which I think anyone would take in this sort of situation. But yes, they do investigate a bit. They often start by asking how much a train ticket to Paris costs and after the controls, is it going to work. Basically, the question I hear is 'Should we try our luck or not?' (station agent, October 2021)

Discussions with my interlocutors revealed that the railroad's commercial policy, designed and implemented for the general public, necessarily leads to interactions between migrants and certain categories of railroad workers. This station agent was also saying that there was a border-crossing 'gaming' at work in these interactions: they were a way for migrants to assess the risk of arrest they took when boarding the

train. This gaming left material traces: clothes abandoned along the tracks were interpreted by some railroad workers, particularly those employed in infrastructure maintenance, as evidence that migrants had passed through.

While the discourse of railroad workers about the ways they were confronted with migration above all evoked the idea of transit, ethno-racial identifications were not absent. Many of them categorised migrants as ‘Africans’, ‘Blacks’, ‘North African’ or ‘Maghrebi’. Though, these labels were never used alone and were always associated with age and gender categories – railway workers identify them primarily as young men – or with behaviour interpreted and presented as characteristic of migrants on the move. The railroad workers associated them with groups of two or three people, and with suspicious behaviour:

We often see them early in the morning, they’re easily recognizable because they’re often blacks, and on top of that, they’re always chilled to the bone and attentive to everything that’s happening. So, they’re on a bench on the side where the trains pass by, on the platform.

-When you say, ‘They’re attentive to everything that’s happening’, what exactly do you mean?

-Clearly of our behavior, of all the passerby. They’re looking for the police, of course, so they can quickly flee. Like an alert cat, watching everything that happens in an unknown place. There’s definitely that side to it. Though, generally, they usually relax a bit when you say hello to them. They see that it’s OK, we’re not enemies (. . .) They’re so easy to spot by their behavior that you can’t help but pick them out. (station agent, October 2021)

In sum, railroad workers tended to associate migrants with particular clientele categories. The transit paradigm persists among these workers, though it is infused by a certain construction of otherness that enabled them to distinguish migrants from other customers and passengers.

Increased police presence in and around railroad spaces

In their missions in stations, one of the objectives of the national police and border police in France has always been to control or arrest undocumented foreigners (Ribeill 1996). The policing of migrations means an increased law enforcement presence around train stations, within them, and on the trains themselves. Railroad workers are therefore in more or less direct contact with the checks carried out by officers.

It is above all seeing police officers in places where they are not normally present that attracted the attention of railroad workers. Many said that it was with the permanent presence of the gendarmerie, border police, and national police in front of the station or the surrounding area of the tracks – i.e. outside the railroad enclosure *sensu stricto* – that they began to wonder about migration controls:

Since November 2020 we’ve noticed that there’s been a lot of people crossing the border (. . .) and there were people going past, walking, and more and more you’d find people walking even though that’s completely unusual, no one comes to walk on the tracks. (. . .) It was really quite strange to see this population going by. I wondered what they were doing, but it never really

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occurred to me that this was actual, organized, migration, that these were migrants – oh no, far from it. And then we realized the obvious when we had the police, the border police who came, and the national police who came and parked there [he points to a space near the signal box] (. . .) and stayed permanently to monitor the crossings. With their arrival, we understood. (signalman, October 2021)

The greater presence of law enforcement in the public space was noticed as much by railroad workers as by local residents. That said, the policy of securitisation of the border increased the presence of law enforcement in railroad spaces strictly speaking. The railway workers interviewed were not the ones that negotiated this presence. They were, however, often spectators of the actions of the police in train stations and aboard cars. Railroad professionals clearly identified their presence – they could all state precisely at what times, in which places of the railroad infrastructure, and on what trains they saw law enforcement.

Interrogations in professional spaces were often described as triggering an awareness of tighter immigration controls:

That one was really young. He was waiting in line with a slightly older African and it was almost his turn, and I saw the police arriving. (. . .) I see a female cop, who I know by sight, coming straight at him. Now, I thought to myself, poor kid. He was with me at the counter, he felt my gaze, he turned round, he saw the policewoman coming towards him. I was in the back of the ticket office, and you see, the glass door to it is locked, you have to press a button to open it. It allows us to come back in. That is, we have to press it internally so that people can come back in. And he looked at me, he turned round, he looked at me, I thought he was going to cry, and he said, 'Please madam, let me in'. There was the policewoman, some people who were a bit annoyed, telling me to 'Hurry up', you know? And the kid, who pushed himself up against the office, up against the glass door, and kept pushing and pushing. It seemed as if he thought it would open and that he would be able to get away. Then the policewoman came up behind him and said, "You're coming with me". He started crying, "No, madam, I don't want to, leave me alone, I want to go". And she said, "You're coming, that's it! This is the second time, do you want me to handcuff you to get you out of here?" Talking about it, I still feel like crying. And there was this guy in line saying, "I've got my train to catch!" I wanted to go out and tell them "who do you think you are?!" And the kid said "No madam, don't handcuff me, I'll go with you". And he left with her. It was a difficult few minutes, really. Well, I had to get on with my job, other people were waiting (female ticket counter clerk, April 2022)

Other railroad workers were directly approached by police officers looking for migrants. To avoid being accused of discrimination, officers used generic formulas such as 'Are there any here?' the 'any' referring to migrants.

These events made railroad workers realise the greater presence of law enforcement in and around railroad areas. Their spaces became those of a daily police presence; they no longer belonged solely to railroad professionals.

Railroad workers reported an emergence of migratory controls in their day-to-day work, and not via directives from their superiors. It was through both the presence of migrants and law enforcement throughout railroad facilities and their surroundings (stations, machine parking areas, tracks) that these professionals were

confronted with the policing of migration. However, they interpreted these presences in two distinct ways. They mobilised the transit paradigm is when it came to migrants: railroad workers thus participated in the route thinking at work on border. They saw the police presence as a penetration of outside professionals into their own space, which forced them to position themselves relative to this group.

Railroad security and migration control under negotiation

The incursion of migration controls in the daily activities of railroad workers has led them to take a wide variety of actions when it came to migrants: warning them of dangers, evacuating them from a given place, issuing a ticket, providing information, checking tickets and identities where necessary, and handing over offending passengers to the police. Through these actions, railroad workers positioned themselves in the policing of migration. But their stances varied, ranging from support for tighter immigration controls to resistance to them, where strategies of indifference, adaptation, or circumvention might be adopted (Michalon and Sommer Houdeville 2024). However, many of these actions involved problems formulated in the professional world of railroad workers in terms of ‘security’. Indeed, while railroad work is meant to ensure the smooth circulation of trains, passengers, and goods, it is itself a field in which specific security policies and practices are deployed, dedicated to guaranteeing ‘the prevention of accidents’ (Hamelin 2010, 46). Does the securitisation of borders interfere with security as it is understood and formalised in this transport sector? International migration and its controls have seemingly multiplied the issues formulated in terms of ‘security’. Railroad workers consequently had to arbitrate between different ‘security’ logics, some guided by the need to provide a service – ensure the smooth running of the railway – others responding to the need to act when it came to migrants.

Ensuring railroad security: ‘there is danger, but it has to be assessed’.

The tightening of controls at the French-Spanish border led in the early 2020s to an increasing number of migrants crossing through railway areas that are closed to the public and subject to extremely strict security measures designed to prevent accidents involving people or collisions between trains. Among other things, these measures require all traffic to be stopped for several hours and are thus extremely detrimental to train circulation. They also oblige a reporting to the railway police, the *Sûreté ferroviaire* (SUGE), a ‘hybrid’ security service made up of ‘agents employed by a public transport company, legally falling under the field of private security activities, but with strictly police attributes such as firearms and authorization to issue fines’ (Malochet 2021, 7).⁶ The increase in passage through these zones means that certain workers (signalmen, building and infrastructure maintenance staff, and freight personnel) need to be extra vigilant. But contrary to what one might expect, management has not given any instruction on the need to scrupulously implement security measures. Furthermore, the increase in passages has not necessarily translated into a greater application of these measures. Those interviewed all said that they were flexible in their approach to security measures,

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even if central to their activities, on the grounds that migrants ‘are just passing through’. An assumption of migrants in transit led them to consider that the risk of an accident was lower than in the case of other people, who were thought to be more likely to remain in the infrastructure:

It’s different because it’s just inopportune, we could say – it is people passing in and out of the railroad, well why not, it can happen, but when it’s frequent like that, normally you stop all circulation, you warn the station upstream, you say ‘we’re stopping everything’ and we do a reconnaissance, you call the police so that they come. Though, I have to admit that to my knowledge, no one has ever done it on such a short route because we had visual on some people. (signalman, October 2021)

Representations of migration had a direct impact on the non-application of internal security rules. This consideration was further shaped by other parameters. Some railroad workers took an anti-border-control stance, which led them to not implement security measures. Because of frequent deportations by French law enforcement agencies to Spain, these professionals also knew that raising the alarm because of migrants on the tracks exposed the latter to police intervention, to their arrest and expulsion at the border:

Ethically, it bothers me, so I don’t do it. Yes, because I think they are already being checked enough as it is, so there’s no need to have the railroad police on the site every day. (. . .) I’ve reported broken windows in the parking lot, things like that, when something has actually happened, something broken or stolen, that yes. (. . .) For graffiti and things like that, but not for people walking. (freight agent, October 2021)

However, most justified their actions more in terms of cumbersome procedures to be followed than by political convictions: ‘If we did it every time, it would never end’, summed up one of the interviewed signalmen. Indeed, stopping circulation has a cascading effect and causes major disruptions in stations and all the lines concerned. The assessment of the risk run by migrants on the tracks was therefore shaped by various considerations, though they all converged towards a lesser application of security measures.

That said, risk was still assessed by railroad workers, according to the size of the group. One signalman told he activated the procedure when he realised that fifteen or so people were on the tracks: the risk of a fatal accident was too high. An accident involving people is still what these railroad workers fear most (Lendaro 2024). All those interviewed spoke of the accident that happened in the region in the fall of 2021 and the moral dilemma they necessarily face:

At some point, you come up against dramatic accidents like that thinking that you want to offer them freedom, you don’t offer them anything at all, I just close my eyes to their passage and from another standpoint, you offer them death. (signalman, October 2021)

Risk assessment is among the prerogatives of railroad workers. However, in the absence of clear guidance from their superiors on what to decide in the context of increasing numbers of people on the tracks, they found themselves taking on a great

responsibility.

A wide range of views on safety aboard trains

Railroad workers' obligations include security and safety. In the normative texts and practices specific to the railroad, safety issues concern 'acts of delinquency and malintent that affect people (users and operator personnel) but also infrastructure and rolling stock' (Hamelin 2010, 46). Ticket inspectors are the railroad workers who deal most with safety issues. Their duty is to ensure the safety of passengers and staff within trains; they are there to intervene in situations of mediation, prevention, control, and emergency. They are also responsible for ensuring revenue safety by checking passenger tickets, discounts, and transit passes. While the views expressed by other railroad professionals coincide fairly closely, particularly those who are confronted with pedestrian passages on the tracks, the positions and actions of ticket inspectors are more varied.

Ticket inspectors can prevent certain passengers from boarding the train if they do not have tickets or if their behaviour seems problematic for the smooth running of the trip. Access to the train is, therefore, a crucial step, which led many migrants to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible on the platforms and to try to board far from the ticket inspectors. It was easy, however, for the personnel monitoring the platforms to spot them and point them out to the ticket inspectors:

We started to regularly have people, whether from North Africa or sub-Saharan Africa, trying to get on the trains (. . .) right when the doors were closing. We'd see them coming, they'd try to hop in, and we'd block the train - well, it delayed everything (. . .) I'd tell the ticket inspector that I'd seen some guys getting on. Because as the doors are closing, you stand next to the ticket inspector, and I'd say: There, there are two of them who got on over there at the time of departure, though in general, he'd also have seen them. So, he'd go and do the check and when things didn't go well, regularly when they wouldn't get off the train, we'd call the police. (. . .) Yes, they were the ones arguing. I was there with the ticket inspector so he wasn't left on his own, and then we called the police when things got out of hand. (station agent, May 2022)

This job is subject to a policy of target figures and an injunction to carry out controls, which facilitate career progression. In this context, migrants, like other travellers (especially tourists), are an easy target for agents anxious to improve their professional performance.

At the opposite end of things, deliberate actions in favour of migrant circulation by rail seemed to rely heavily on this same job. Station agents who wanted to help migrants took the risk of letting them on only if they know which ticket inspector would be aboard and where he or she stood on the matter. Familiarity among railroad workers thus played a decisive role in these actions. Some ticket inspectors chose not to apply the rules – particularly regarding ticket inspection – when faced with passengers they categorised as migrants.

For others who fell between these two extremes, the complexity of the procedures to be followed in the event of missing tickets and identification encouraged a *laissez-faire* approach. Some ticket inspectors decided to turn a blind eye so as not to disrupt train circulation or because the procedures for checking and sanctioning

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ticketless passengers are too cumbersome.

Securitising rail infrastructure against migrants

In many places, the delegation of migratory controls to transporters manifests in the construction of defensive infrastructures, notably at airports, ports, or train stations considered to be at high migratory 'risk'. In France, the port of Calais, the Calais-Frethun and Eurotunnel stations are emblematic of this policy of defence against migration through physical barriers. Road haulage companies sometimes do the same in regions where border controls have been tightened by, for example, securing their warehouses. But this materialisation of the delegation of migration policing can take more diffuse forms. In the Calais region, freeway service areas have been closed to prevent migrants from boarding trucks, forcing drivers to relocate their rest points (Guenebeaud 2019). In the French Alps, some bus lines considered to be heavily used by migrants have seen their routes modified to make it harder for migrants to board (Lendaro and Philippe 2024).

While no instructions have been issued by railroad management as to the security measures to be adopted in the face of increasing passages of people on the tracks, more attention is being paid to securing infrastructure at the French-Spanish border. The railroad enclosure closest to the border, linked to Spain by two railway bridges, is the most concerned. 'Anti-intrusion' measures have been discussed, although they remain light compared to those that exist in other stations. An agent explained that closure of the area has been requested since the tightening of migratory controls:

It's complicated because it's right on the banks of the Bidasoa, which separates France from Spain, and we do have wire fencing all around. And there, there was even talk of putting up barbed wire. This is a simple wire fence that is sometimes broken through, but not necessarily by migrants. Anyone can get through. (. . .) It's mainly people who aren't doing any harm; we have a game of cat and mouse. (. . .) But you can't really secure it. It's impossible. I've been hearing about putting up barbed wire ever since there have been migrants, but I tell them, 'What do you want to do, there are miles of fences, it's impossible!'. (maintenance worker, October 2021)

The French authorities have requested that the railway company makes it easier for the police to monitor the bridges: clear the land leading up to the bridges of undergrowth, instal video surveillance on the buildings, and powerful lighting on the railroad bridges. The personnel in charge of maintenance, who openly expressed an anti-control stance on migration, met these requests with some resistance. They used various strategies to slow the securitisation of the railroad enclosure:

I was asked to put cameras on the buildings. Well, I did everything I could to slow things down and then finally, they told me 'It's not worth it'. That's just fine. (maintenance worker, October 2021)

Different conceptions of security ran up against each other in discussions over this materialisation of border controls. While the aim is sometimes to make it impossible or at least more complicated for migrants to access railroad spaces, it is also clear that the company seeks to strengthen security from a legal standpoint, in order to be unassailable in the event of an accident.

At the time of my fieldwork, railroad infrastructure seemed to attract more attention from higher levels of management than the risk of accidents involving people.

The incursion of migratory controls into the professional world of the railroad has had contrasting effects on security and safety issues. The defensive uses of railroad materiality observed and reported by railroad workers remained very measured in the Basque Country compared to what is implemented at the Franco-British border or Franco-Italian border. The policing of migration also had mixed repercussions on the control of migrant passengers, taking very different forms depending on the ticket inspectors. Other areas of the application of rail security saw more flexible practices. The prevention of accidents involving people was re-evaluated in light of the transit paradigm, leading some railroad workers to apply security measures selectively so as not to hinder the passage of migrants. Everything ultimately depended on how professionals understood the various safety and security issues with which they had to deal, and how they perceived their involvement in migration controls.

Whatever their position on migratory controls, all the railroad workers interviewed mentioned a new way of deploying the security register, referred to as the ‘securitization of the route’. In light of the problems posed by border controls, many defended the principle of a right to travel from the border to Bayonne for migrants, thanks to specific transport tickets. This principle, which is also advocated by local political actors and solidarity networks, enjoys a certain consensus: here, route thinking is remobilised in a project that, under the motto of migrant ‘reception’, aims above all to help them leave the Basque Country.

To cooperate or not with the police: professional boundaries at stake

The securitisation of the border has brought with it for some years at the beginning of the 2020’s an increased presence of law enforcement in and around stations, as well as aboard trains, buses and bus stations. Police officers thus intervened in the professional spaces of railroad workers, who had to navigate this co-presence in many everyday situations. In this context of numerous paradoxes, railroad workers had therefore to position themselves and act in relation to law enforcement.

Different positions on law enforcement

Potential collaboration with national law enforcement was central in the different positionings of railroad workers relative to the policing of foreigners. The railway sector moreover has the particularity of having its own police force (the SUGE, described above), whose officers are employed by the railroad company but wear a uniform that makes them visible and facilitates their association with law enforcement. Indeed, the missions they carry out are not fundamentally different from those of the national police force (Malochet 2021). Their main prerogative in migration controls is to check the identity of certain travellers who they can also turn over to the police. SUGE agents can also lend support to other railroad workers when solicited. But, they are not generally held in high esteem by railroad workers, who often refer to them as ‘failed police officers’ and don’t seem to behave any differently towards them than they would the national

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police force. Belonging to the same employment sector is thus not enough to create solidarity among all railroad workers.

In 2016, on the border between France and Italy, railroad workers received explicit instructions from their superiors to facilitate the work of law enforcement in their checks of migrants (Lendaro 2024). In the Basque Country, the railroad workers said that they had not received any guidance from management on how they should deal with the police. The relationship they established with law enforcement seemed to be entirely at their discretion. However, the police presence always drew a reaction from railroad workers; none said they were indifferent to it. This relationship took different forms.

The first stance, true for the majority of my interlocutors, was not to call the police except in cases of extreme necessity when the smooth running of rail operations was obstructed by the presence of migrants. While, as discussed above, security measures were not always applied by railroad workers, the safety of trains and people was nevertheless the main reason given by staff who have called the police, mainly when they consider the risk of injury or death to be high. One agent reflected on the limits of a laissez-faire approach: 'We're not going to allow someone to ride hanging off the back of the train'. In these situations, railroad workers position themselves as *reluctant partners* of law enforcement (Favarel-Garrigues, Godefroy, and Lascoumes 2011).

Railroad workers who said they avoided calling the police argued that the procedures were not effective. Few indeed could contact the police directly and they had to go through intermediaries. A shortage of police personnel, and sometimes their poor reactivity, were also mentioned more than once, despite the net increase in police staffing levels in the region. However, interventions were sometimes urgent, forcing railroad workers to choose between calling in the police and slowing the smooth running of rail operations, or turning a blind eye in anticipation of their low availability. Such considerations applied to incidents that occur both in stations and on trains. The below ticket inspector explained how a logic of control clashes with one of efficiency:

We call a platform where our colleagues carry out the necessary procedure to do an identity check, to take down first and last names. But this has to be done by the police; we're sworn agents, but we can't check identities. We don't do that, and fortunately so! (. . .) The time it takes to discuss with the person, pick up the phone, call the platform, and for the platform to relay to the police, takes at least 15 minutes. (maintenance worker, October 2021)

Other railroad workers called on law enforcement out of conviction and, in rare cases, social proximity to police officers. One station agent, married to a police officer and the daughter of a police officer, said that she has a close working relationship with the railroad police officers, who she considered to be her colleagues – whereas others said they kept their distance from them. She applied the control procedures she was supposed to and called on the railroad police or general police without hesitation.

Finally, some agents deliberately obstructed the migration control work of law enforcement. One station agent recounted that when police officers asked him if he has seen migrants on the platform or boarding the train, he systematically answered

in the negative; he made a point of not providing them with any information: ‘I’m not a policeman’. A ticket counter clerk told how she alerted people she identified as migrants when police officers were in the station; she explained to them how to discreetly leave the premises without needing to pass in front of them. Two people told of how, with other colleagues, they had organised to get the ticket inspector’s agreement to let two minors board a train without tickets, as they had lost theirs due to a previous police check. The ticket inspector then arranged for these minors not to be subject to any police controls. For some of these railroad workers, opposition to the policy of immigration control guided this type of action. Others were instead ideologically opposed to the work of law enforcement and refused to collaborate with them. This anti-police discourse begs further exploration, as much of it came from railroad workers who support Basque Country independence, and for whom opposition to law enforcement – including rail- road police – was an opposition to the French State.

Micro-geographical boundaries that set professional boundaries

The policing of border also rose the question of the presence of law enforcement in railroad workers’ professional spaces. This was not a matter of course for many rail professionals, who felt uncomfortable with a presence they ‘put up with’. They explained how maintaining certain geographical boundaries, at the micro-local of a station and the rail infrastructure around it, allowed them to set professional and moral boundaries.

The national police are only authorised to circulate and intervene in the public spaces of stations and infrastructure. They require special authorisation to enter other areas. Railroad police, in contrast, can go anywhere, including staff break rooms and offices. Greater policing of migration therefore poses issues of access to railroad spaces for national law enforcement. Though the railroad workers interviewed did not seem to know the precise rules that govern this police presence. Their use of these spaces seemed left to the discretion of local agents but was also subject to power struggles that arose between railroad workers and police officers:

It all started during COVID because we had to confront them . . . because only one or two of us were supposed to be in the refectory, and they were taking up all the space, so we couldn’t go. At a certain point, we had to tell them they had no business being on the premises. There are restrictions for them too, you can’t stop us from having our own break room. It was a bit of struggle (. . .). I don’t think the management knew about it, so we had to tell them. They had asked for a space, and there was always someone who could open it for them and tell them where they could go, we had to regulate it. (ticket counter clerk, May 2022)

This lack of knowledge about the rules governing the police presence in rail spaces also existed when police officers boarded trains. Their dominant way of doing things shaped the balance of power:

I think they can board, I’ve never really asked myself that question. They just tell me they’re going to get on to have a look. (. . .) I haven’t received any instructions saying, “They’re not allowed to board” or “Let them board”. But

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then, I think they kind of have all the right to do so, we don't really know what they're allowed to do, in fact. (female ticket inspector, May 2022)

Yet, the police presence was negotiated locally. Some railroad workers did not hesitate to oppose this presence when they were confronted too head-on with the reality of migratory controls, and when their personal convictions and professional *ethos* were tested. A station agent, with whom I discussed police practices once they have stopped migrants, explained how law enforcement asked railroad staff for access to premises within the station to conduct interrogations:

They've already asked us, but since we just have our break rooms, we don't let them in, that's not what they're meant for. (. . .)

-And have you ever been directly concerned by this kind of request?

-On several occasions. The first time, I couldn't tell them no, because I was so stunned! And it's managed in such a way – it's like the film star Jean-Paul Belmondo taking over a car in the street, he pulls you out of the driver's seat, and there you have it! I'm exaggerating somewhat, but they make it seem as if it were normal, so the first time, I was taken by surprise, and I accepted but since then, no. I just say COVID and that's it. And then, it means you're a witness to an interrogation. You hear everything in the station, even if they're in a separate room. I shouldn't have to be a witness to that. I refused them twice more after that, and since then, they don't ask us anymore.

-You say, 'We hear everything', do they ask them questions? Do they try to find out what they plan to do next?

-Yes, and then they ask them to tell their story. I didn't stay and listen, but I found the situation very unsettling. (station agent, October 2021)

The police presence in railroad spaces brought to the fore the informal and little-regulated nature of the policing of migration in this transport sector. Railroad workers had to make decisions on the spot, without any real knowledge of the rules governing the arrival of law enforcement in their professional spaces. The choices they made in response to police requests allowed them to assert their professional boundaries, as well as their position on migration controls.

Conclusion: a pluralisation of the policing of migration in the hands of railroad workers

This paper explored the ways in which the policing of migration is pluralised, based on the involvement of the railroad sector and railroad workers in border control in the northern Basque Country at the beginning of the 2020s. Contrary to that observed in other transport sectors or even in the rail sector along other French borders, the railroad's participation in viapolitics and kinopolitics at the Franco-Spanish frontier is a question of individual actions on the part of railroad workers and of their room for manoeuvre, and not one of legal obligations imposed by the company or the State. There did not seem to be a clear policy in the northern Basque Country – supported by either official decisions or texts – of involving the railway in migration policies. Discussions with railroad workers revealed an absence of any pertinent written directives from the different levels of management. The few

instructions mentioned by my interlocutors were all given verbally, and were not followed up by controls. None knew whether these limited directives came from the company's management, the prefecture, or the Ministry of the Interior, or even whether they applied to the whole of France or were limited to their sector of work. Moreover, the enlistment of the rail sector seemed to result of the tightening of immigration controls and the increased presence of law enforcement in the networks and hubs of the area under study more than of a real political will of the French government and/or the railroad company. The reasons for this dynamic are beyond the scope of this study, whose explanation would require an investigation of the upper management levels of the railroad company, law enforcement, and local representatives of the French State – all institutions that are difficult for researchers to access.

Actions related to migration control here stemmed from the political stances of railroad workers and their motives for letting migrants pass or not. What's more, confronting the securitisation of migration in this railroad world has not – and this might seem paradoxical – translated into stricter application of safety and security policies. I argue that this can be explained by the multiplication of issues formulated in terms of 'security' that railroad workers must face. Indeed, their own professional ethos aims to deliver a public service equivalent for all passengers, but also to ensure a certain number of tasks formulated in terms of 'security' – of infrastructure and people, and even the company. Like air transport and the merchant marine (Cowen 2014), the logic of protecting circulation, flows and the company bumps up against the logic of protecting the borders of the French State. Flow security and geopolitical security clash.

Furthermore, the configuration studied here adds yet another conception of security. Locally, migrants are commonly viewed as transients who do not wish to remain in the northern Basque Country, and most of them do indeed wish to continue their journey. This shared representation influences practices and active or passive resistance. Conceptualised in the literature as 'route thinking', locally it is formulated in terms of the 'securitization of the migratory route'. This 'securitization' aims to preserve the integrity of the migrant, both physically and agency-wise: it falls entirely under the humanitarian border policing. So, if, on the one hand, the State needs the expertise of transport operators to control migration (Malochet 2021), on the other hand, it must make concessions to representations of security specific to the solicited professional circles and to any local representations of migration. The ways in which the policing of migration was carried out can be explained by these different conceptions of security that railroad workers encountered and arbitrated.

Yet, while the tightening of controls in the Basque Country has indubitably had repercussions for rail professionals, raising important questions and moral dilemmas, the migratory issue remained secondary in a professional world under stress. The major reforms that the sector and the railway company have undergone over the last twenty years in terms of liberalisation, financialization, and profitability are the main concerns of railroad workers. In their view, their positionings relative to migration are inextricably linked to these structural reforms.

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Notes

1. As part of the *Dispow* project, coordinated by Annalisa Lendaro (<https://dispow.hypotheses.org/>). I was unable to conduct research in the southern Basque Country or with Spanish railway company staff because I do not speak Spanish or Basque. This also explains the absence of certain bibliographical references. Similarly, my investigation focused exclusively on railway staff because they were the group most affected by immigration controls at the time of my fieldwork. A comprehensive analysis of transport operators' involvement in migration controls would also require investigating bus drivers and river shuttle pilots connecting Spain and France.
2. My occasional use of these denominations allows to capture the weak social meaning of state borders in the everyday representations and practices of many people living in the Basque Country – who identify with a territory experienced otherwise – and expressed by the railroad workers in this study.
3. In a ruling handed down on April 26, 2022, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) reaffirmed that, under the principle of free movement within the Schengen area, a member State may not re-establish controls at its internal borders for a period exceeding 6 months, unless a new threat, distinct from the previous one, emerges. The French State ignores this rule of European law and has been renewing controls at the country's borders every 6 months since 2015.
4. Decree no. 2004–226 of 9 March 2004 publishing the agreement between the French Republic and the Kingdom of Spain on the readmission of persons whose situation is irregular, signed in Malaga on 26 November 2002, [divhttps://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000000600233/div](https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000000600233/div).
5. The worker referred to the three people hit by a train in the early hours of 12 October 2021 at another station further north in the Basque Country.
6. Its agents also have different rights than those of other railroad workers, notably that of checking identities, regardless of possession of a travel document. In contrast, ticket inspectors can only ask for an identity document if a valid ticket has not been presented.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the French National Research Agency (Agence nationale de la recherche) under Grant [AA-2018-CE41] (PI: Annalisa Lendaro) and by the Migration Convergence Institute (Institut Convergences Migrations) under Grant [17-CONV-0001] (PI: Thomas Lacroix and author). Translation from French to English by Maya Judd.

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