

III Report on the Humanitarian Situation of Migrants in Transit along the North-West Alpine Border



Migrants waiting inside the Fraternità-Massi shelter. May 2021, photo by Piero Gorza.

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Medici per i Diritti Umani (MEDU) is a non-profit humanitarian and international solidarity organisation, independent of political, trade union, religious and ethnic affiliations. MEDU aims to providing health assistance to the most vulnerable populations in crisis situations in Italy and abroad, and to develop democratic and participatory spaces within civil society for the promotion of the right to health and other human rights. The action of Medici per i Diritti Umani is based on the militancy of civil society, on the professional and voluntary commitment of doctors and other health workers, as well as citizens and professionals from other disciplines.

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The state of art¹

In the first five months of 2021 (January-May) the city of Oulx, located on the Italian-French border in the Upper Susa Valley, continued to represent - as already described in the previous MEDU reports² - an important crossroads of two different migratory flows. Those who come from the Balkan route stop in Oulx with the plan to cross Montgenèvre Hill on foot, whereas the flow of migrants with more varied origins and often with longer stay times in Italy, tries to cross the Frejus using Flixbus as a means of transport wishing the expatriation documents they own are adequate. From spring 2020 until the 23rd of March 2021, the former found hospitality mainly in *ChezJesOulx*, an old roadhouse occupied by anarchists with the aim of providing assistance to people in transit, while the latter landed at the *Fraternità Massi* shelter, managed by the *Talità Kum Budrola Onlus Foundation*, after being rejected at the border and having suffered forced relocation. Following an established practice, all those rejected at Frejus and Montgenèvre were immediately relocated to the *Fraternità Massi* shelter, in the first case by the police, in the second also by the Red Cross.

On the 23rd of March, in the early hours of the morning, the police evicted the *ChezJesOulx* roadhouse, where 53 migrants, including 20 children and 13 activists, were present at the time. These numbers represent the demographic situation at the border.

In the last few months of last year, more than 4,700 people³ passed through Oulx, and in the first months of 2021 there were around 1,000 people per month, split between the two refuges. In the month of February 2021, more than 700 people found temporary shelter at the *ChezJesOulx* roadhouse, and in the first 20 days of March around 800. The *Fraternità Massi* shelter hosted 490 people in February. After the eviction of the roadhouse, the flows, although intermittent, continued, but were concentrated in one shelter, with inevitable situations of overcrowding. In April and May, the 1,000 mark was exceeded, and the situation worsened again in June, when 560 people were present at *Fraternità Massi* in just 13 days, including 29 families, totalling 110 people. Several times, therefore, the presences in Oulx, summing the people arriving from the Eastern border to those rejected at Montgenèvre and Frejus, exceeded the threshold of 100 daily presences. As in 2020, also in 2021 the main countries of origin of those arriving in Oulx are Afghanistan and Iran, followed by Algeria and a small percentage of Western sub-Saharan African countries through the central Mediterranean route. To complete the picture, around 900 people managed to cross the Montgenèvre border in the first three months of 2021, including around 90 minors under the age of 13 and 60 women. Despite the policy of returning migrants adopted at the eastern border (Trieste and Gorizia) and the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, the number of people who managed to cross the border increased from 248 in January to 268 in February and 494 in March.

The Susa Valley, a stop on the Balkan route

¹ The present report was written by Piero Gorza, but it is the result of a team effort together with Rita Moschella and Anna Manzon, and of a field work that in the past months was realized thanks to the many actors of the solidarity world in the Susa Valley.

² <https://mediciperidirittiumani.org/rapporto-sulla-situazione-umanitaria-dei-migranti-in-transito-lungo-la-frontiera-nord-ovest-tra-italia-e-francia/> and <https://mediciperidirittiumani.org/ancora-critica-la-situazione-dei-migranti-sulla-rotta-nord-ovest-delle-alpi/>

³ Cfr: <https://mediciperidirittiumani.org/rapporto-sulla-situazione-umanitaria-dei-migranti-in-transito-lungo-la-frontiera-nord-ovest-tra-italia-e-francia/>

For migrants, the Susa Valley is only a transit point on their journey after crossing the Balkan route. This migratory flow concerns people who do not intend to integrate into the local socio-economic

context, but who only have the urgent need to cross the border as quickly as possible, even at the price of very high risks and human costs.



Migrants waiting. Winter 2021. Picture by Piero Gorza.

Compared to the period 2017-2019, when the migratory flow from the Sub-Saharan area still travelled along the central Mediterranean route, over the last few years political instability in the Middle East and the Libyan conflict have progressively diverted the flows towards the Balkan route, reducing the previous paths. From Afghanistan, Iran (mostly Kurdish), Pakistan, Syria and

Iraq, the overland route is the more accessible one. From Maghreb itself, particularly from Algeria, the longer route becomes an option chosen by many. Turkey therefore becomes a strategic and compulsory junction, followed by the passage to Greece, from which there are two routes: on one side Patras, and on the other the overland struggle, mostly to be accomplished walking through Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, and finally Italy.

The characteristic of the flows from the Balkan route, as MEDU has already pointed out in previous reports, is the presence of many families, which are often large, of unaccompanied minors and of elderly people. Almost every day in Oulx families with children born during the journey arrive, as well as pregnant women who are a constant presence. The journey behind them is full of difficulties and violence and it can last from 2 to 6 years up to 10 even 30 years. The length of the journey depends on the money available, the size of the family, luck and vulnerabilities. While male and single travellers have on their side a greater facility to adapt to unforeseen situations, for families this versatility is much reduced.

Every border crossing is a danger to the safety of travellers, including children and unaccompanied minors. Crossing the Croatian border, for example, can involve almost 15 days of walking through thickets known as "jungles" and can include repeated rejections and harassment, now certified by many accredited international bodies and confirmed by testimonies gathered on the ground. For all that, it seems reductive and distorting to think of a border as a place where people just want to pass, without examining the sequence of lands, borders crossed and violence suffered on the journey.

Security and border control policies

On the French side of Montgenèvre, the control of the territory is systematic and the phenomenon of migratory flows in transit is tackled with the presence of a large number of gendarmes who patrol the territory day and night, stakeouts in strategic locations and the systematic use of sophisticated

technologies: infrared binoculars, thermal cameras, drones, snowmobiles and vehicles suitable for the control of paths.

Deterrence is also implemented through illegal practices. At the headquarters of the PAF (*Police Aux Frontières*), it is common to refuse entry using pre-printed sheets that the persons concerned are obliged to sign without knowing their contents. The aim is to prevent unaccompanied minors from benefiting from the protection granted by the international law, and to prevent people from applying for asylum⁴. Similarly, people in need of urgent medical assistance and whose vulnerability is obvious have been repeatedly turned back.

In February 2021, a pregnant woman in her ninth month with contractions was detained overnight, rejected and then delivered at the Rivoli hospital the following morning, even though, from the border point, the nearest hospital is in Briançon, which is 15 kilometres away, while the Rivoli hospital is more than 80 kilometres away. This is not the first time this has happened. And again: the case of a 12-year-old Afghan girl who was admitted to the *Regina Margherita* hospital in Turin in a state of shock after being turned back at the border by French police together with her family and 49 other people, including 20 children, shows how human rights violations against vulnerable people and minors are anything but rare.

Finally, it should be noted that the militarisation of the border actually favours illegal profit-making networks at the expense of migrants (e.g. smugglers). At the same time, the criminalisation of solidarity uses intimidation practices and legal proceedings that often end in "no case" or in proceedings that do not stand up to the various degrees of trial.

The forgotten Winter



Migrants attempting to cross the border using public transports. Spring 2021. Picture by Piero Gorza.

A painful but necessary chapter to address is the behaviour of the institutions. A deafening silence characterised the year 2020 and lasted until the spring of 2021.

The flows from the Balkan route reached the mountains of the North-West as early as the first months of the pandemic and during the lockdown of March-April 2020 the pace of arrivals decreased but did not cease. The only one in charge of managing the humanitarian crisis is the occupied *ChezJesOulx* house. Even in Bardonecchia, the station shelter is closed on the grounds of a lack of

adequate space for social distancing. Then the summer and autumn passed with the reception system already described: an occupied roadhouse, which welcomed those arriving, and the *Fraternità Massi*

⁴ https://tousmigrants.weebly.com/uploads/7/3/4/6/73468541/2021-02-13_accueil_d%C3%A9fense_des_droits_des_exil%C3%A9s_dans_le_brian%C3%A7onnais.pdf

shelter, which received those rejected. The flows increased, the Prefecture received repeated requests to evacuate *ChezJesOulx*, but in fact no action was taken to accommodate people in an obviously vulnerable situation. Oulx became the only junction of the Balkan route that continued towards Montgenèvre, making the small mountain village bear the full weight of the now substantial flows. Meanwhile Bardonecchia and Claviere didn't provide any contribution of solidarity.

In Winter 2020, when arctic temperatures and snow fell over the mountains, the occupied roadhouse was the only centre able to meet the needs of families with children. From spring 2020 onwards, then during summer and finally with the arrival of the cold weather again, a plural and submerged solidarity was put in place by civil society, dictated by the observation that to avoid new tragedies it was necessary to help the roadman's house. *Médecins du Monde* (MdM), *Rainbow for Africa* and various associations, regardless of ideological distance, contributed by providing medicines, food and clothes.

The persistent institutional silence is therefore counterbalanced by transnational solidarity. It was only thanks to this generous effort that the border did not have to be stained by further deaths. As it has repeatedly been pointed out, although in different ways, the mountain rescue services, the MdM and *Tous Migrants* volunteers, the latter with daily *maraudes* (mountain rescue missions), have played a valuable and indispensable life-saving role.

It is only in January 2021 that, in agreement with the Prefecture, the *Talità Kum Foundation*, *Rainbow for Africa*, the *Italian Red Cross*, *Recosol*, the *Bardonecchia Beehive*, and the *Mons. Rosaz Institute of Sisters in Susa* started an articulated project involving the border municipalities for a period of 4 months.

Unfortunately, on the 23rd of March 2021, a military operation put an end to the *ChezJesOulx* solidarity occupation experience and, in fact, started another season of legal actions, in addition to those of June 2020. From the first day after the eviction, the emergency is evident: overcrowding and economic, operational and health difficulties make it difficult to cope with the increasing number of arrivals, which are increasingly hard to manage. In April 2021, the first step of the project expires and the local actors and solidarity associations present the Prefecture with a financing plan to deal with a situation in which only one centre now hosts all the people on their way. In April and May, as it was to be expected, the *Fraternità Massi* found itself facing an extreme emergency situation, that was manageable only thanks to the exhausting shifts its few employees took and the volunteers' support.

Reception and criticality of mountain transit

The eviction of the *ChezJesOulx* roadhouse, which has left only one centre to cope with the continuous arrival of people from the Balkan route, could not have produced different results: overcrowding and daily emergency. The structure of *Fraternità Massi* was not designed to receive people with obvious vulnerabilities and to provide shelter and help 24 hours a day. In fact, only in the first few days after the evacuation was hospitality provided both during the day and at night, then the new daytime closure of the centre left entire households stranded, without the possibility of shelter or sanitation. As early as 31st of March, some families turned to the local police to ask for food, and then, on 1st of April, 13 people, including a pregnant woman and children, were left on the streets. The lockdown and the classification of Italy as a red zone required the closure of all activities. What

is really worrying is that no public authority was concerned about the fact that people on the road have the same physiological needs as any other human being. The unbearable situation led to people being housed in private homes and the extraordinary intervention of several volunteers. Only the public denunciation of this situation led to adjustments and interventions to remedy the situation, which was shameful to say the least. While the *Fraternità Massi* shelter has finally, albeit selectively, remained open 24 hours a day, the problem for men travelling alone has not been solved. Only the station's "shelter", a container of just over fifteen square metres, has been made available as a shelter for men and unaccompanied minors, repeatedly accommodating gatherings of dozens of people inside. On rainy days, the cramped space housed, for a shameful number of times, more than 30 people, at the same time as the government, the media and the health authorities demanded a proper social distancing.

On the French side, the *Refuge Solidaire* in Briançon experienced similar situations, with days in which the number of available places was far exceeded.



A group of migrants tries to cross the mountains by foot. Spring 2021. Picture by Piero Gorza.

Pathologies and medical care

People on the road arrive in Oulx often exhausted with sufferings and pathologies resulting from the long journeys and the harassment and violence they have experienced.

In recent months, sprains, injuries of the lower limbs, necrosis of the toes, burns due to violence, fractures and bruises due to beatings by the Croatian police have been diagnosed. Several times people arrived with crutches. There were cases of scabies and parasitosis (tick infestation). The extreme temperatures of the mountain environment also led to hypothermia and frostbites, which in one case resulted in the amputation of four fingers.

However, the most critical situations refer to the new composition of the flows, characterised by a significant presence of women and children, with recurrent paediatric and gynaecological pathologies. On the other hand, the arrival of families with women in a state of advanced pregnancy is not an exception but a daily constant.

There were also several cases of people with previous serious pathologies: a woman with a pacemaker; a teenager in need of a lung transplant, with scoliosis and a heart condition, that forced him to travel for years on his father's shoulders; a little girl who had undergone three heart operations and was repeatedly rejected at the border; a person with shrapnel in his body from a Taliban attack; a boy who arrived in Oulx with obvious psychic-neurological problems, who fell in a 15-metre accident and remained in a coma for three months; a man without a leg.

There was no shortage of psychological suffering (depression, intolerance of noise, panic at bright lights or in the dark) which in some cases was manifested violently. As confirmed by the testimonies collected, post-traumatic syndromes did not spare children either. Beyond cultural differences, there is no doubt that a number of contingent and structural reasons contribute decisively to the creation of a potentially violent climate among migrants: the overcrowding in the only open centre with consequent competition in accessing services; the exhausting workload and stress of all those working there (even 24-hour shifts); the departures of excessively large groups and the consequent, frequent and often repeated rejections; the addition of previous and contingent tensions; the growing presence of vulnerable people with less chance of success in the *games* (attempts to cross the border).

Covid-19 also did not spare these transit areas. At least 11 people between the canton house and *Fraternità Massi* were found to have contracted the disease, one Afghan family was found to be positive upon arrival in France. Both promiscuity and unavoidable crowding were certainly important risk factors. In the container at the station, the same situation arose again, without a solution being found.

Finally, there is a final critical issue concerning health and human rights: the risks involved in crossing the border. In order to reach France without being checked, migrants walk at night along mountain paths that are difficult even for experienced mountaineers, putting their safety at risk, even more so in the case of the most vulnerable.

Final recommendations

In view of the situation described above, characterised by a daily emergency currently concentrated in a sole reception centre (the *Fraternità Massi* shelter) and by a distance from the institutions that has lasted over time, MEDU asks

- An assumption of responsibility by the institutions in response to the worrying ongoing humanitarian crisis and the needs of people in transit.
- The strengthening and extension of low-threshold reception facilities and the opening of the *Fraternità Massi-Talità Kum* shelter in Oulx 24 hours a day.
- The setting up of a medical centre accessible to all migrants, regardless of their legal status, providing basic care but also, considering the composition of the flows, gynaecological and paediatric care.
- The search for humanitarian solutions for the most vulnerable people who find themselves crossing the border in high risk conditions, in an attempt to evade border control devices.