



# VENTIMIGLIA : Freedom of Movement or Freedom to Wait?

17 December 2025

Duru Karadiş

## Solidarity, more like Sovereignty

Since 2015, Ventimiglia has witnessed the reintroduction of a hard Franco-Italian border that exposed cracks in the EU's governance policies.

Ventimiglia is a seaside Italian town located close to the Franco-Italian border. For many, this town may seem like just a small dot on the map. However, over the last decade, Ventimiglia has become not only a touristic destination but also an example of the gap between the European Union's commitments and their implementation.

Here, the idea of a borderless Europe has turned into a myth for many. Asylum seekers who arrive in this town with hopes of continuing their journey north face repeated pushbacks and a lack of support from local authorities.

Initially planned as a transit point, it has turned into a deadlock where migrants become trapped. With "no permission to move forward," this hotspot has now been transformed into Europe's waiting room.



*Migrants waiting near the Italian-French border in Ventimiglia. Source: Transnational Social Strike Platform*

## 'We want the freedom to pass'

### Schengen for Some, Restrictions for Others

*Values challenged at Ventimiglia.*

The European Union was formed as a normative power, thus grounded in solidarity and cooperation that established rules and rights. These principles evolved into shared values through the process of integration and were institutionalized within the EU's legal framework.

One of the most unique and important attributes of the Union is the Schengen Agreement, which became an EU norm with the Maastricht Treaty in 1997.

With Schengen, Europe became 'borderless', granting freedom of movement across the member states.

In addition to this, the EU established the protocols for asylum procedures under the Dublin Regulation. This meant that the first EU country of entry is responsible for processing an asylum application.

According to the Dublin Regulation, once an application is accepted, the applicant should be able to move freely. Therefore, in theory, Schengen promises open borders.

But, in practice, the case of Ventimiglia illustrates the deep tensions between the normative framework and its application.



*Migrants routes to Ventimiglia (by Chiara Molinero and Michele Zatelli)*

*Source: The Value of Information. Mobility and Border Knowledge Battlegrounds in the Ventimiglia Region*

Following the Arab Spring in 2011, thousands of people crossed the sea to seek asylum in the EU. However, the reception they received rarely reflected the Union's proclaimed values of solidarity.

# Visas, then Pushbacks

In the beginning, Italy's first official action was to grant temporary visas to Tunisians. However, this move angered France, which is located only 8.6 km away across the border. France feared that a high number of these individuals would later attempt to cross into its own territory and accused Italy of abusing Europe's visa-free border agreement.

“France said it does not want a 'wave' of migrants coming into the country and will repatriate them if they do not have valid identity papers and sufficient funds to support themselves.”

In mid-April 2011, France augmented border checks and train inspections in Menton, which is the first stop after the border. The “Train of Dignity” carrying asylum-seekers and activists, was blocked by the police. Then they were forced off the train, sending them back to Ventimiglia.

These similar actions raised important legal and normative questions, especially regarding the interpretation of the principle of ‘non-refoulement’. Balancing a state's own security concerns shows strains with its humanitarian obligations, requiring careful judgement.

Although this single event did not immediately create new clauses, it contributed to the shifting ideas of securitization within EU's policies.



Geographical location of Menton and Ventimiglia on the French-Italian border.

Source: *L'Express*, “Menton-Vintimille : migrants, touristes et cols bleus”

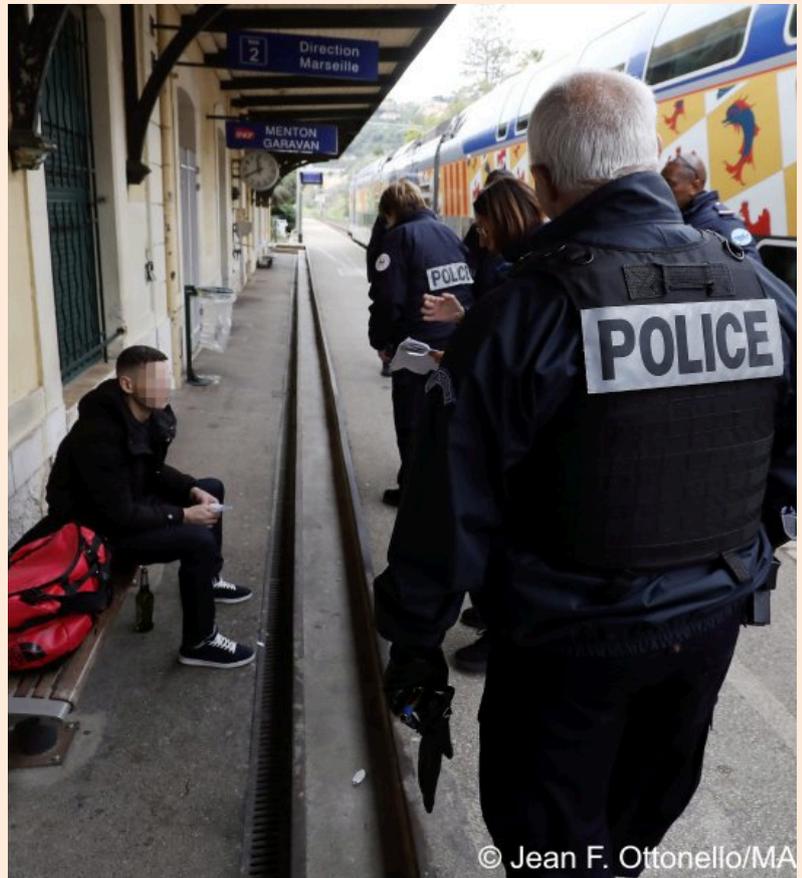
## Re-imagined Schengen

These events cannot be singled out as the sole reason for EU's policies. However, France and Italy had the same concerns, as they lobbied for the ‘2016 revision of the Schengen Borders Code’. This allows Member States to reinstate internal border controls under “exceptional circumstances”. These circumstances being the migratory pressure...

This legal flexibility does not solve the structural problems and erodes the Union's own values.

It actively highlights the conflict between solidarity and sovereignty. Therefore, the re-emergence of borders can be seen as framing migration as a security issue.

For asylum seekers in Ventimiglia, this meant prolonged immobility and inability to start their legal procedures. Resulting in further containment...



Controls on trains from Ventimiglia /Italy at Menton Garavan station by French national police.

Source: *InfoMigrants*, “Suspected migrant found dead on roof of train arriving in France,”

According to Doctors Without Borders, a man from Mali stated:

**“They caught me on the train in Menton and forced us to get off, telling us that we had no right to be in France. I was handcuffed without reason. When I asked for an explanation, a police officer pushed me and later hit me in the face. I spent the night in a container with other people, including women and children, without food or water. Before releasing us, the police signed the *refus d'entrée* in my place”**

MSF, “Denied Passage: The Continuous Struggle of People on the Move Pushed Back and Stranded at the Italian-French Border”

*Migration crises as ‘Annus Horribilus’—for Europe. But in truth, it is political fragmentation.*

Taking into account the Dublin Regulation, many asylum seekers did not want to register in Italy because of limited job opportunities. At the same time, Italy was unwilling to bear the financial burden of asylum processing. As a result, Italy was said to be allowing them to move north to avoid these costs, while France refused entry. Then in 2015, France introduced systematic border controls. Unlike in 2011, these were much more comprehensive and long-term. From this point onward, the border closure wasn't an emergency measure but a sustained policy.

Repeated closures by France left many people stranded on the Balzi Rossi cliff. This led to the emergence of a makeshift camp, the only possible course of action asylum seekers could have taken. This was the ‘No Borders Camp,’ a form of grassroots solidarity, though it was dismantled by the police in September 2015.

*"They have to move, I'm not sure at the moment where they'll be taken... but this situation could not go on. We understand why they are protesting but the camp was illegal," The mayor said to the media.*

Later, to keep people “out of public view” or more specifically, out of sight of tourists, Camp Roya was opened for men in 2016 on the periphery of Ventimiglia, far from the city center. And in 2017, its capacity was enlarged to host women and children. This camp operated for four years and was managed by the Red Cross.

The justification for Camp Roya was to take sanitary measures and to offer better living conditions than those in the informal places that had emerged. The camp normalized the creation of an exclusive space for migrants while simultaneously limiting their visibility in public spaces. Thus, it was born as the result of political actions.

**“All politics is local politics.”**

Photo: UNICEF/Ash Gilbertson VII

This camp and other actions taken represent ad-hoc fixes rather than sustainable treatment. They legalize exclusion and zones of containment rather than integration.

Camps such as Roya emphasize that they are not neutral places but are actually political instruments.

Encampment ( M. Agier) of Ventimiglia case can be defined as “the policy of placing people in camps, people for whom other solutions would have been possible.”



*Migrants wait at a border crossing between Italy and France, near the city of Ventimiglia.  
Photograph: Jean-Christophe Magnenet/AFP/Getty Images  
Source: The Guardian*

Decisions taken within the EU-level legal frameworks in Brussels transform when they reach the border. Whether a border exists or not, it's not fixed. They are negotiated locally. “All politics is local politics.”

Ventimiglia shows that the promises of a ‘Borderless Europe’ can shrink or harden. While freedom of movement exists as a norm, on the ground it is rather selective, negotiable, and fragile.

*This blog post was written by Duru Karadiş, a final-year student of International Relations at Galatasaray University.*



**miGoSur**

**Jean Monnet Chair of Migration Governance for Sustainability and Resilience**