

The brutal side of the French Riviera

Rights violations, detentions and pushbacks: a daily reality for migrants' at the French-Italian border, where Europe's weaknesses weigh heavily on people's lives

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The reportage "The brutal side of the Côte d'Azur" is online now! The on-the-ground research was carried out on the Southern Italian-French border, a militarized area inside the European Union where France still pushes back thousands of migrants, in violation of human rights and international agreements.

"If you oppose no resistance, cops will take your data and let you go. Otherwise, they'll insult you and beat you up". With these words a Sudanese man describes the reality that migrants face in the area between the border towns Ventimiglia and Menton. While people around enjoy the sea and hilly landscape, the French police carries out a lot of illegal practices: racial profiling, violence, thefts, detentions. All with the goal of pushing migrants back to Italy while they try to enter France.

Many backgrounds, same situation

Every day the French police push back around 40 migrants: a total of more than 15,000 people in 2019. Nowadays, many of these people come from sub-Saharan Africa, passing through the Mediterranean Sea, landing in Southern Italy and then traveling all along the country: the majority of them are Sudanese citizens, mostly minors.

Many, especially those coming from Guinea Conakry, Gambia, Mali, Senegal, have spent years in Italy, but despite having legal status they have not managed to achieve economic autonomy and social inclusion, because of a failing reception system, the absence of integration pathways and the lack of employment. The situation has been further worsened by the approval of the so-called Security Decree in December 2018.

A lot of people – mostly Kurd, Afghan and Pakistani citizens, many of whom are minors – also come from the Balkan route. All of them try to cross the border by any possible means: by train, hidden in cars and vans, passing through the mountains.

One border, many violations

On the border, the rights of minors are constantly violated as "the French police rejects them" explains the Diaconia Valdese, conducting an on-site monitoring project.

People are forced to spend the nights in containers "undignified, dirty, with no place to lie down. Food or water are provided at the officers' discretion" denounces the Contrôleur général des lieux de privation de liberté.

Many migrants, even the ones who already live in France, report theft of property and personal documents. "The police often tear up the documents of those who already have a French residence permit or have applied for asylum in France," explains an activist of Kesha Niya, a grassroots international movement at the border providing support to the migrants who are pushed-back.

The French Human Rights Commission has classified what happens as "inhumane practices".

Political propaganda instead of institutional responsibility

"They try to scare us. The more they accuse us, the stronger our activism becomes" the Amnesty International activist Martin Landry says, under trial for having helped two minors from Gambia just pushed-back. Many people involved in associations and grass-roots movements are charged for "aiding illegal immigration".

Apart from the criminalization of solidarity, institutions are not visible. In Ventimiglia there is no reception system. The only place to stay legally is the Roya camp, run by the Italian Red Cross: a container-camp, isolated from the city, where around 200 people live in extremely precarious conditions.

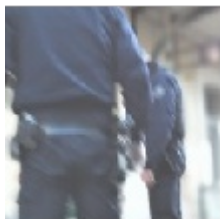
This situation have been denounced for years. Nevertheless, violations still continue. What happens right in the heart of Europe clearly shows the lack of solidarity and shared responsibility of European countries over the issue of migration. A situation which contributes to the spread of criminal activities, from smugglers to human trafficking.

About the authors

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