Article

Unaccompanied Adolescent Minors' Experiences of Exception and Abandonment in the Ventimiglia Border Space

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Abstract

This article explores unaccompanied adolescent minors' (UAMs) experiences of deterrent practices at internal EU borders while being on the move. Previous studies have acknowledged the securitisation of external borders through gatekeeping and fencing practices; however, there is a recent and continued renationalisation of internal EU borders by the member states. Like other migrants who are travelling irregularly, UAMs also often face harsh living conditions and repeated rights violations in border areas, regardless of their specific rights to protection and psychological needs. Research has called for a renewed focus on migrant children's experiences as active agents at the borders, but until now studies exploring UAMs' experiences at internal EU borders remain scarce. Drawing on Agamben's notion of "legal exception," we seek to explore how deterrent practices are confusingly intertwined and affect UAMs' psychological wellbeing and subjectivities in the Ventimiglia border space. Participant observations and in-depth interviews conducted with UAMs at the French-Italian border provide unique insights into how these bordering practices affect migrant children's legal and psychological safety and reshape their subjectivities. This contribution highlights UAMs' conflicting needs and feelings of institutional "abandonment" when left without institutional welfare protection in the border space, on the one hand, and feeling pressured to act responsibly towards their relatives, on the other.

1. Introduction

This article explores unaccompanied adolescent minors' (UAMs) experiences of securitarian practices at internal EU borders while being on the move. Internalisation of border policies towards undocumented migrants in destination and transit settings typically refers to control policies practiced within the borders of the state, such as police deterrence, exclusion from labour markets, detention, incarceration, and deportation (Broeders & Engbersen, 2007), including bordering through social welfare destitution (Davies et al., 2017; Loughnan, 2019; Persdotter et al., 2021). Within the European space, the interdependence of external and internal borders is a prerequisite for the establishment of the free movement area (Donadio, 2021). Consequently, internal border spaces are characterised by intense economic activities and human mobilities regulated by overlapping (if not conflicting) European and national policies (Donadio, 2021; McClure, 2012). Additionally, since 2015,

EU member states have regularly reintroduced controls at their national borders (Donadio, 2021). These measures are often justified by a generalised suspicion over certain mobilities, framed as potential security threats, such as terrorist threats and secondary migration movements (Bojadžijev & Mezzadra, 2015; Léonard, 2015). More recently, the management of the Covid-19 pandemic introduced additional mobility restrictions which shifted the aim of border controls from one (migration) crisis to another (pandemic) and consequently broadened and normalised security approaches at the EU level (Montaldo, 2020).

Similarly, post-2015 political discourses framing migration as a crisis were deeply rooted in a security rhetoric. Identification measures applied through the hotspot approach and the Dublin Regulation became central cogs in the EU bordering mechanism and offered additional warranty in controlling undocumented migrants' secondary movements within the EU. However, the re-nationalisation of border governance reflects the symptomatic tensions related to the free movement of goods and persons within the Schengen space (Bojadžijev & Mezzadra, 2015).

Despite the inevitable interconnection between external and internal EU borders, bordering practices at internal borders remain relatively unexplored in migration literature (Amigoni et al., 2021). We consider the border as a specific place of governance that offers conceptual tools to grasp shifting social realities of power struggles over rights and (non)belonging (Grundy-Warr & Rajaram, 2007). In this sense, the Ventimiglia border space, analysed here, is another stage in which the establishment of "'a permanent state of exception' or 'of emergency' justif[ies] the introduction of tough measures in many realms beyond the management of political violence and especially with relation to asylum-seekers and migrants" (Bigo, 2008, p. 33). Among undocumented migrants traveling in search of safety, UAMs are also confronted with harsh living conditions and rights violations, regardless of their specific entitlement to protection and well-documented extensive psychological needs (Arsenijević et al., 2017; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). Migrant children's active and/or forced involvement in irregular migration trajectories (Derluyn & Broekaert, 2005; Strasser & Tibet, 2020) call for a renewed focus on their multidimensional experiences of boundaries and borders (Lems et al., 2020).

Since 2015, the "migration crisis" rhetoric has contributed to a binary depiction of adolescent migrants as either innocent refugee victims (Malkki, 2010) or deceitful adult migrants (Lems et al., 2020). In border areas, childhood serves as a mechanism for control and social order (Pérez, 2014). Confronted with securitarian border policies, UAMs on the move are strongly dependent on migration and welfare officials (Menjívar & Perreira, 2019; Strasser & Tibet, 2020) and often silence their complex needs to maintain the façade of innocence and humanitarian deservingness (McLaughlin,

2018). Alternatively, they adopt strategies of invisibility and irregularity to avoid controlled forms of care and pursue their migration goals (Hameršak & Pleše, 2021; Lønning, 2020). Simultaneously, humanitarian actors and migration authorities struggle to implement adequate protective interventions for UAMs on the move (Bhabha, 2019), leaving them exposed to punitive practices when strategically engaging in unauthorised border crossings (Refugee Rights Europe, 2021). Kohli (2011, p. 314) rightfully noted that until arrival "children and young people stand at the borders of legal, practical and psychological safety." Therefore, we postulate that in the border space, UAMs' practical and legal safety (having a safe place and knowing one's rights) and related emotional safety are shattered by the practices of the "state of exception" (Agamben, 1998). Given UAMs' exposure to violence during migration, in this article, we address a significant gap in the literature related to migrant children's confrontations with border regimes at EU internal borders. Building on McLaughlin's claim that borders conceal migrant children's political subjectivity (2018), we aim to explore the profound impact of internal border practices on UAMs' experiences and wellbeing.

In the subsequent section, we explain the relevance of the concept of "legal exception" (Agamben, 1998) to analyse the impact of deterrent and humanitarian measures on UAMs' emotional wellbeing in the Ventimiglia border space. After explaining the study methodology and data analysis, we analyse adolescents' reported experiences of border control devices (e.g., fingerprinting and identification requirements, "*refus d'entrée*" at the physical border, police sweeps, and internal deportation). Next, we further analyse how these "practices of exception" were associated with feelings of fear, unsafety, and confusion about their rights as minors in the border space and produced physical and emotional distress. Finally, we examine UAMs' conflicting feelings of institutional "abandonment" on the one hand and the pressure to act responsibly on the other, by exploring their contradictory needs and priorities in the border space.

2. The Ventimiglia Border Space as a Space of Exception

Located at the northwest Italian border before a historic path across the Alps, the Ventimiglia border space is a strategic point along European migratory routes (Bonnin, 2021). It is estimated that 29,422 adults and 10,462 unaccompanied minors were refused entry by the French border police between January and August 2017 (Contrôleur Général des Lieux de Privation de Liberté, 2018). Yet, these figures need to be interpreted with caution given that many migrants succeed in crossing undetected and others are repeatedly intercepted under different identities. Ventimiglia is part of a constellation of humanitarian borders connected through migrants' journeys in which these groups face an entanglement of complex deterrent

policies of care and control (Williams, 2015). To understand the impact of specific border control devices at the Italian-French border, we rely on Agamben's conceptualisation of "legal exception" (1998, p. 17) by which the state "suspends the validity of the law," to create an alternative and confusing legal order in which "right" and "fact" have no clear boundaries. At the border, the legal exception is implemented through biopolitical technologies of government (Nguyen, 2015, as cited in Davies et al., 2017), such as biometric identification, humanitarian management, and politics of removal (Tazzioli, 2020). In the Ventimiglia border space, it is produced at different levels. After the 2011 migration arrivals and the 2015 terrorist attacks, the French government rehabilitated border control measures at its territorial borders and declared a "state of emergency" (Barbero & Donadio, 2019). First, on the French side, the violations of the Schengen Code with the reinstatement of border controls and the violations of procedural rights by French border guards (UN Human Rights Council, 2021) suspended the applicable law. Second, on the Italian side, the local police in Ventimiglia practiced daily identification controls targeting racialised migrants and resulting in arbitrary removal towards the Sicilian hotspot of Taranto. Finally, the former Roya governmental transit camp (established between July 2016 and August 2020), rooted in an extra-legal status, offered controlled care and produced a deterrent humanitarian environment (Menghi, 2021).

Within the "state of exception," migrants' political and social existence is ignored by the power of law and its sovereign protection, therefore the effects of "bare life" deeply affect their daily circumstances. Abandoned without formal assistance, migrants face a suspension of social and related welfare rights and are exposed to harm and destitution (Darling, 2009). Moreover, Davies et al. (2017) correctly note how the territorial limitations for lodging a request for international protection established under the Dublin Regulation (e.g., the obligation to apply in the country of first entry) also produced bare life for the migrant "Dublinees" of the Calais Jungle. Similarly, in the Ventimiglia border space, migrants who do not formally register for international protection or temporary refuge in governmental transit facilities in Italy are left exposed to natural risks (harsh weather, dangerous crossings) and manufactured risks produced by the deterrent practices in the space of exception (Agamben, 1998). The multiplication of risks strategically produces suffering, which steers desperate migrants toward controlled forms of assistance, such as the Roya Camp in Ventimiglia (Davitti, 2019; Minca, 2015). Acknowledging the limitations of Agamben's political philosophy when applied to contemporary migrants' spatialities inside and outside the camp (Sigona, 2015), it remains effective in bringing to light the contemporary mechanisms of sovereign exclusion (Martin et al., 2020) and reveals precarious migrants' social and political reactions to such mechanisms (Darling, 2009).

Within the border space, UAMs are also subjected to biopolitics. Given that childhood governance promotes lifesaving, wellbeing, and development, and has been implemented under a legal framework of children's rights (Holzscheiter et al., 2019; Wells, 2011), delimiting these rights consequently meant excluding children who differed from dominant images of childhood (Reynaert et al., 2012). Often, biological markers (including age, gender, and race), cultural and behavioural assumptions regarding their innocence/ignorance (McLaughlin, 2018; Ticktin, 2016), immaturity and dependency draw the lines of (non)belonging in accordance with Western standards of childhood (Wells, 2011). UAMs are legally categorized under both welfare and migration/asylum legislative frameworks (Bhabha, 2019). As underage, non-EU citizens traveling alone and outside their country of origin, UAMs are considered in particular need of institutional protection (Derluyn, 2018). Such protection is granted upon the recognition of their protection needs by welfare or migration institutions under socio-legal categories of welfare recipients. However, through tactics of non-recognition of the child's political and biological identity, duty bearers can avoid their mandate to protect. Arguments such as biological and behavioural standards (Bailleul & Senovilla Hernández, 2016; Musso, 2020), problematic resilience (Derluyn, 2018), discriminatory classifications (Paté, 2021), or involvement in risky behaviours such as criminalised migration (Doering-White, 2018; Heidbrink, 2021), frame this population's non-belonging and ultimately their (dis)ability to integrate into host societies (Migliarini, 2018). As noted by Bhabha (2019, p. 371), because they are "caught between adult-centered migration laws and citizen-centered child welfare structures, adolescent migrants under 18 years are routinely left outside the reach of effective child rights structures, even when their claims to protection have substantial merit." Hameršak and Pleše (2021) pointed out how UAMs transiting through the Balkan corridor escaped visibility or were made legally invisible by aid and youth workers and exposed to border violence. Additionally, UAMs' protection needs in transit spaces are often coupled with repressive or deterrent measures, such as detention (Doering-White, 2018; Lønning, 2018). We argue that the institutional abandonment produced through the denial of social rights legally attributed to migrant children (Senovilla Hernández et al., 2013) also occurs in transient contexts, such as border spaces (McLaughlin, 2018). We, therefore, aim to analyse how adolescent migrants' subjectivities and access to welfare support are reshaped by bordering practices in the Ventimiglia border space.

3. Methods

The article draws on data collected within the CHILDMOVE project, which applied a mixed-methods and a longitudinal design to investigate unaccompanied

minors' wellbeing upon arrival in Europe. The research received ethical clearance from the Italian Research Ethics and Bioethics Committee CNR and the Ethical Commission of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University (Belgium). Data collection took place between November and December 2017 and February and March 2018, combining participant observation and in-depth interviews conducted with UAMs encountered in urban areas, migrants' settlements, and official transit camps. Participants progressively agreed to engage with the research after oral explanations of the project and daily talks and walks with the field researcher. Information on the research and confidentiality were provided and minors' consent was sought for participation. Minors were selected based on their self-declared age and those older than 14 years old were considered old enough to give consent. This raised ethical challenges, as most minors encountered were traveling in precarious situations and without the presence of a guardian or a legal representative. Twenty males and four females between 14 and 17.5 years old participated in the study. They originated from West and East African countries (i.e., Ivory Coast, Guinea, Sudan,

Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea). The majority had entered Italy less than six months ago (19 out of 24), some arrived in early 2017 (4 out of 24), and one experienced deportation to Italy after travelling further north. Participants' accommodations were spatially dispersed and diverse, ranging from homelessness and transit camps to more permanent housing arrangements (reception centres for minors seeking protection). Power imbalance intruded in every aspect of the researcher–participant relationship due to legal and economic inequalities (Chase et al., 2020) as well as minors' needs for a safe and sympathetic adult presence. The field researcher worked closely with a referral network of professional NGOs to adequately support both adolescent and adult migrants encountered in the border area. The interviews were conducted in French and English by the first author and with the support of interpreters for Amharic, Tigrinya, and Arabic speaking participants (21 out of 24 interviews). Upon UAMs' consent, the conversations were audio-recorded or otherwise handwritten. Respondents were asked about their migratory trajectory, past trauma, current living conditions, perceived wellbeing, reactions to stress, and ways of coping in the Ventimiglia border

Table 1. Resources for UAMs in Ventimiglia.

Name	Location and Resources Provided	Management
Roya Camp	• Remote location • Accommodation, food, shower, toilets, and healthcare • Family tracing, psychological support, and legal support from NGOs • Language classes and sports activities	Prefettura of Imperia and the Italian Red Cross Daily presence of NGOs
Local Italian Red Cross Unit Centre for adult asylum applicants	• In the city centre, near mobility resources (e.g., ATM, train station) • Small unit for 8–10 UAMs asylum applicants within the centre for adult asylum applicants • Accommodation, food, shower, toilets, social and legal support from the Red Cross staff and social services	Local Italian Red Cross
Infopoint Eufemia	• In the city centre, near the Bridge settlement and mobility resources (e.g., ATM, train station) • Shoes, tents, hiking materials, internet access, phone charging, and a safe space for women and children on Wednesdays • Legal support from NGOs	Local solidarity organisations and Progetto 20K, NGOs
Caritas Intermelia	• In the city centre, near the Bridge settlement • Mobility resources • Food distribution (morning) and shower service for women and babies • Legal support and emergency healthcare	Caritas Imperia, NGOs, and local solidarity organisations
The Bridge settlement	• In the city centre, near the Bridge settlement • Mobility resources	Migrants and local solidarity organisations
Parking near the bridge	• Food distribution (evening), games, and sports activities	Kesha Neya and local solidarity organisations

Sources: Table information based on field observations, interviews, and a report by Intersos (2017).

space. The interview questions and minors' repeated references to border practices revealed its significance for them, calling on us to analyse the following questions on a deeper level: What were the bordering experiences that UAMs experienced/witnessed? How did it affect their sense of safety? How did UAMs respond to the abandonment they experienced in the border space? We applied thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to search ethnographic field notes and interviews for (a) bordering and deterrent practices, (b) minors' emotional reactions to these liminal practices, and (c) feelings of abandonment and pressure to act responsibly.

4. Results

At the time of the interviews, the participants had been in Ventimiglia for a few days to up to two months and they had had various experiences of bordering practices. In their narratives, UAMs referred to mandatory identification and fingerprinting in governmental transit camps, police sweeps and internal deportations to Sicily, "*refus d'entrée*" in trains or at the border, and the ubiquitous presence of police patrols in the city.

4.1. Minors' Encounters With the State of Exception: Reported Deterrent Practices

Some participants refused to seek refuge in the governmental Roya Camp and preferred to "sleep under the bridge in a tent" and "didn't want to go to the Roya Camp because of the fingerprints taken at the entrance by the police there" (Amanuel, Eritrean boy). The data collected from migrants was then processed and compared with the automatic fingerprint identification system to search for criminal records (Menghi, 2021). However, most migrants feared the use of their fingerprints later on in destination countries, because comparing those fingerprints with those registered in the EURODAC database upon arrival could lead to their deportation to Italy through the Dublin Regulation mechanism. Therefore, staying in the makeshift camps was for both children and adult migrants a way to resist state control and unwanted legal visibility (Minca, 2015). In terms of everyday life, the fingerprinting requirement had serious consequences in restricting minors' access to child welfare and health services in the border area:

> When I meet with Ibrahim…he's feverish, his cheeks are coloured red, and his breathing is short. He has a paper that states that he must go to the Roya Camp to visit the doctor there, but he doesn't want to go…because he will be fingerprinted to get in. (First author's fieldwork notes, November 2017)

Based on such perceptions, fingerprinting requirement was a bordering practice that reshaped the geography of the border space for minors on the move. It effectively restricted access to institutional protection

and governmental relief services in the city (such as healthcare, accommodation, and food). Additionally, our participants explained how the official camp's remote location and dangerous access point near the highway worked as soft containment by isolating migrants from border crossing resources (e.g., local smugglers, ATMs, internet access, and proximity to the train station). Conditioning humanitarian assistance on mandatory identification had limited protective effects and strengthened migrants' distrust. During an unprecedented snowfall in February 2018, local migration authorities announced the suspension of fingerprint registration requirements to access the Roya Camp, so NGOs and volunteers tried to convince migrants staying in the informal camp under the bridge to instead seek shelter there. However, migrant participants explained to the researcher that even women with babies considered this news to be a deceitful rumour intended to lure them to the Roya Camp and feared being forcibly registered or deported to the Taranto hotspot as a result. This episode demonstrates how tactics of humanitarian care and control ultimately undermined transit migrants' trust in relief organisations (IMREF, 2021) and, as a result, increased their precarity.

Second, the physical confrontation with police officers and border guards during border crossing attempts by UAMs constituted another encounter with securitarian practices in the Ventimiglia border:

> I tried to cross the border with France three times since I arrived in Ventimiglia, but each time the police stopped me on the train and sent me back to Italy. Once when I said my age, "17," the policeman wrote "19" and told me to return on foot. It took me one hour to get back to Ventimiglia. (Ibrahim, Ethiopian boy)

> When the French police stopped me, there was no cultural mediator, and I didn't receive information. I gave a fake name and a fake country because Ethiopia is a safe country [not at war]. Because I was a minor, I came back [to Italy] by train. (Noham, Ethiopian boy)

Several participants recounted how they were denied entrance and were returned to the Italian side of the border by French border guards. For the participants, returning by train or foot was interpreted as yet another discriminatory filter between those minors who were "real" (train) and "fake" (foot). This situation was extremely confusing and frustrating to the UAMs and lead to uncertainty about their status and rights as minors. Our younger respondents complained about being bullied or called "*bambino*" and talked to like a "baby" (Sudanese boy) by other adult migrants, whereas the French border guards refused to address their protection needs as minors. Others asked if "it [was] legal what the police [was] doing at the border" (Amanuel, Eritrean boy). Questions regarding UAMs' rights as minors in France or in Italy were common during interviews, despite

information provided to them by child protection officers. In the interviewees' narratives, the police ultimately embodied the border, one noting that "the police is the first problem here" (Birhane, Eritrean boy).

Finally, our respondents described identification checks performed during local police interventions targeting undocumented migrants:

> Yesterday [I] escaped from the police. [It was] after eating [at Caritas and while trying] to go back to the bridge with three persons [on] Tenda Street. Three [police] cars arrived, but [we] managed to escape. (Birhane, Eritrean boy)

These customary practices have been defined by Ventimiglia's chief of police, Franco Gabrielli, as "decompression of the border," consisting in taking people (understood to be migrants) and transferring them elsewhere (Mazzuco, 2016). Police patrols maintained the fear of deportability by targeting safe and migrant-welcoming places; in one instance, an undercover police operation occurred during one of the first author's interviews at a migrant-friendly location. Those migrants with identification cards from the Roya Camp or with asylum applicant status were protected during these ID checks, while migrants without identification documents faced deportation to Sicily. This happened to Yonas, an underage Eritrean participant who, upon his arrival in Italy, declared that he was 19 years old in order to escape the control experienced in minors' reception centres. Despite his declared minority at the time of the police operation, Yonas' release from the police station was refused, based on the argument that despite previous police apprehensions, he had not administratively corrected his age (authors' fieldnotes, March 2018). Less than a week later, Yonas contacted one of his friends, asking for a bus connection in Taranto, and ultimately returned to Ventimiglia. Yonas' story highlights minors' hidden experiences of forced removal when confronted with adult-centred practices. Interestingly, some participants also avoided the "*campo for minors here*" because "they [the social workers] will transfer [them] somewhere" (Moudou, Ivorian male). In the border space, minors confused coercive practices of forced removal targeting undocumented adult migrants with child protective mechanisms discouraging onward mobility (Hameršak & Pleše, 2021; Tibet, 2017). The dissolution of UAMs' legal and practical safety (receiving adequate care as a minor) shaped their illegal status by un-categorizing them as minors, and their pervasive fear of deportation (Genova, 2002) affected their wellbeing and ways of being in the border space (Willen, 2007).

4.2. Emotional Responses to Institutional "Abandonment": Fear, Unsafety, and Confusion

The observations and interviews made clear that the bordering practices triggered negative feelings of fear, unsafety, and confusion in UAMs. Our interviewees significantly related their perceptions of (un)safety to specific places, experiences, and people in the border space, commenting in particular on the insecurity experienced in (un)official camps. One male participant explained how people were "ha[ving] a lot of arguments under the bridge [settlement]. People are drinking a lot and creating problems. They say bad things to argue with people" (Yoni, Eritrean boy). Another added that "he feel[s he should] go and separate them, but [he is] a bit afraid" (Aboudramane, Sudanese boy). Interestingly, the presence of the police in the Roya Camp triggered different perspectives on (un)safety; while Aboudramane explained that "sometimes, there are some fights in the camp, but because the police are also here, I feel safe." Others like Janet, a female Eritrean minor, felt visibly subjected to control, stating that she did not "feel safe in the Roya Camp, because of the fingerprints and the police."

Experiences of unsafety also varied due to gender, as migrant women and female UAMs are often exposed to abuse during migration (Save the Children Italy, 2017). Despite its protective mission, our young female respondents reported that they were exposed to adult migrants' presence in the Roya Camp and did not feel safe there:

> I am not protected here; I don't feel safe here. In the Roya Camp, I am afraid that someone comes into my house and does something to me, even if nothing happened until now….Caritas, the Bridge area, and walking along the road [connecting the Roya Camp to the city centre] is not safe. The Roya Camp is better secured than the Bridge but still, I don't feel 100% safe there. (Semhar, Eritrean female)

The identification requirements at the Roya Camp created a border space fragmented into different levels of (un)safety. The participants compared grass-root support places and the camp under the bridge by stating that "there is no security at the bridge. In Caritas and InfoPoint, I feel good, it is safe" (Mubarak, Sudanese boy). However, drawing on young Yonas' deportation to Taranto, safe and welcoming places became increasingly targeted by border police to locate irregular migrants.

Our respondents often expressed feelings of fear, anxiety, and confusion to describe their situation and the future outcome of their journey. While repeatedly repelled by border guards, Idriss, a boy from Guinea, experienced the border space as confusing and unreal: "I can't think about my future, because I don't feel this is the real world for me. I feel like I am not in this world, but in another world." Expression of fear related to the openness of the border was omnipresent in the narratives highlighting the UAMs' determination to continue their journey. Additionally, physical injuries would cast further doubts on one's ability to cross the border:

> I am concerned about my health. It is important for me. I can't breathe properly, and I have pain in

my legs. If I am healthy, I can do everything....I feel trapped between two options, two ideas: to go to France as soon as possible or to stay here until my sickness is fixed. (Ibrahim, Ethiopian male)

In particular, the field researcher's position as a young female of mixed heritage allowed young female migrants to safely share their fears over absent menses and unwanted pregnancies resulting from past abuse. Uncertainty and risk were embodied experiences for them. A female Eritrean minor confided during the interview: "[I] don't know if [I] am pregnant, [I] don't know [who] the father [is] and [I] don't want to keep the baby" (Janet, Eritrean female). As pregnant women feared being unable to undertake the difficult crossing from Italy with a newborn baby, they also felt compelled to engage in further risk-taking. Governing through deterrent and illegal practices heightened risks for migrants with physical and psychological vulnerabilities and left them without protection. It produced further risk-taking and traumatising border crossings, leading to injuries (e.g., one participant who, after being chased by the police in the mountains at night, ended up in a French hospital) and regular deaths of migrants.

4.3. Conflicting Feelings of Abandonment and Self-Reliance

Many participants—especially those living outside protective facilities—felt neglected due to the inadequate reception conditions and the lack of institutional concern for their state of destitution. These UAMs lived without welfare provisions and instead relied on volunteers to meet their most fundamental needs (food, clothing, and emergency healthcare). This situation was not accidental but produced by the restriction of welfare provisions to minors requesting international protection and by refusing minors without status the protection they are entitled to under the Italian legislation (i.e., safe accommodation, healthcare, information, and legal representation; Cornice & Rizzo, 2019). Despite existing protection mechanisms, such as child welfare and international protection systems, UAMs' absence of legal status drew an invisible border with respect to their ability to access institutional assistance. The European asylum acquis establishes reception and care entitlements for this population but with a restrictive scope for those migrant children applying for international protection (Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013, 2013). Similarly, those minors who do not apply for asylum should be entitled to child protection in Italy as children "at risk" (Autorità Garante per l'Infanzia et l'Adolescenza, 2019); however, local and youth care authorities did not offer any protective intervention to those over the age of 14 or to those refusing to stay in Italy (Intersos, 2017). The political and citizen obstruction of possible protective interventions, such as transit centres without compulsory registration (Trucco,

2018), left child protection officers with limited options, despite their heartfelt will to respond to these beneficiaries' needs and priorities (Rongé, 2012). Left without status, it became unclear whose national or local authority was responsible for them (Iusmen, 2020). Despite the obvious consequences for UAMs, it is questionable whether this institutional abandonment was intentional or a general consequence of the punitive treatment applied to all migrant groups in the border space. Instead of moving toward UAMs, local authorities moved away from this group of marginalised youth and from their protective mandate by indifferently exposing to harm and abuse in the border space (Agamben, 1998). The physical and emotional suffering produced by the absence of care (Loughnan, 2019; Welander, 2020) supposedly deterred UAMs from crossing the border and instead led them to enter the reception system in Italy. Some entered the local child protection system temporarily to rest. Others, like Idriss, recovered from severe mental health issues, but ultimately left to cross the border:

> There, I received the advice not to leave Italy: If I leave Italy, there is no security, the social worker can't help you then...but can help to find a camp...if I stay. If you leave, you are not a serious person. (Idriss, Guinean boy)

According to Idriss' understanding, those UAMs resisting humanitarian and child protection interventions were dismissed as "not serious" or "irresponsible." The denial of reason and maturity is usually advanced in a paternalistic paradigm to acknowledge children's lack of autonomy and enforce protection needs (Nakata, 2015); here, though, the paternalistic perspective on autonomy and maturity further denies care and protection to children expressing problematic agency. However, most participants actively responded to this abandonment (Aru, 2021) and relied on alternative support strategies offered by local volunteers, crossed the border with local smugglers or, helped by lawyers, they challenged the *refus d'entrée* given at the French border. Interestingly, UAMs did not perceive themselves as reckless or oblivious of their situation; on the contrary, during their interviews, many shared their pressing need for adult support while they actively struggled with extreme responsibilisation.

In addition to deeply missing their parents, UAMs abandoned in the border space felt constrained to perform adult roles and suffered from the lack of guidance while on the move:

> I don't have [a] father, I don't have [a] mother....I am thinking like a mother and like a father....I have nobody who's responsible for me. I can't avoid mistakes because I am a minor. [When you are a minor] you need someone to give you moral [support], to guide you to become a good adult. (Noham, Ethiopian boy)

Absence of parental guidance was frustrating, as minors reported feeling deprived of emotional support, which they believed necessary for their individual development. Additionally, their situation outside of institutional care did not entitle them to a guardian, despite their precarious situation. Nevertheless, these young people felt compelled to be brave in order to overcome the challenging border crossings and meet their families' expectations. As explained by Mubarak, from Sudan: "There is the family behind and the goal to [reach] France and then you are in the middle." Some relentlessly pursued their crossing attempts, driven by the need to secure a legal route to their relatives left behind at home and in transit countries:

> My friend is dead, I don't want my family to take the same route. When I arrive in the Netherlands, I will try everything to bring them by plane…first the parents and then the sisters and brothers. (Yonas, Eritrean boy)

This boy refers to a practice negatively portrayed as "anchor child" in which a young migrant traveling alone reaches the country of destination in order to claim international protection and allow, through family reunification procedures, relatives left behind to travel safely through legal routes (Lalander & Herz, 2018). Responsibility also meant UAMs concealing their current precarious situation from their relatives. In other words, withholding information about their situation in order to prevent their families' worries revealed the young people's circumstantial maturity:

> My family worries about me so, I feel responsible for the worries of my family. (Noham, Ethiopian male)

> I think that I create worry for my family. I don't want to open Facebook now. So many people are worried about me and my situation. I don't want to tell them and make them worry. (Semhar, Eritrean female)

> I didn't tell my mom where I am right now [sleeping in the settlement under the bridge]. If she knew, she wouldn't even sleep, I am sure. I say nothing about Ventimiglia. (Bacar, Ivorian male)

In sum, our respondents expressed different perspectives on their self-reliance in the border space. Many did not receive the material assistance and emotional support entitled to them as minors and instead relied on their own networks and individual resources to escape from the destitution they experienced. Despite UAMs' own protection needs, the risks of the journey and their duties towards their relatives worked as powerful impulses to repeatedly challenge the bordering practices. As Hamid from Eritrea explained during the interview: "My only fear is that the border will be closed. I don't say that the border is open, but if you try, it can work." Despite their own exposure to border violence, repeat-

edly "trying chance" allowed them to pursue their individual and collective migration goals.

5. Conclusions

This contribution revealed how bordering practices deeply affect UAMs who are exposed to and driven towards taking further risks. While law reduces risks for some mobile subjects (i.e., EU citizens and residents), in the "state of exception" they are exacerbated for others (Agamben, 1998). These bordering practices produce unsafety and harm by targeting individuals through selective exclusion. In the case of UAMs, the overlapping bordering practices affect the recognition and the primacy of their status and rights as minors (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005; Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Instead, securitarian concerns over migration and border controls frame mobile UAMs as unruly subjects undeserving of assistance. This legal uncertainty threatened our participants' safety with respect to deportability and produced welfare destitution.

Alongside humanitarian and securitarian bordering practices (Williams, 2015), welfare destitution is another policing technique used in various spaces and levels of governance. Here, the figure of the mobile child migrant is framed as deviant due to his/her active involvement in border crossings (if not smuggling) and non-compliance with protective interventions. UAMs depend on welfare institutions to fully meet their rights as children; consequently, they are specifically subjected to migration control when seeking assistance in the border area. They are governed through exceptionality and denied more protective child rights-based statuses and interventions (Aumond, 2017). Moreover, the deterrence approach to child autonomous migration proved inefficient, as all but two of our participants ultimately crossed the border; the remaining two waited to transit on through a Dublin reunification procedure towards Norway and Spain. Even more so, this approach heightens minors' dependence on smugglers and normalises their exposure to risks during repeated crossings attempts (e.g., through the mountains or hidden in trains). The re-nationalisation of border control measures and generalised suspicion over certain mobilities to and within the EU may entail risks such that existing protection gaps for migrant children at the EU borders remain unanswered (Campesi, 2021; PICUM, 2021). Consequently, ensuring the prevalence of children's rights frameworks in times of tightened mobility and border policies implicates further analysis of the mechanisms and practices implemented in zones of extraterritorial or liminal legality (e.g., border areas, detention centres for minors) that affect UAMs' ability to claim their social-legal rights and cultivate their vulnerabilities (Orsini et al., 2022). Based on our findings, it is clear that specific identification and protective interventions tailored to the needs and priorities of UAMs on the move at EU internal and external borders are needed (Marcus et al., 2020).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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