Article

# Loops of Violence(s) Within Europe's Governance of Migration in Libya, Italy, Greece, and Belgium

Giacomo Orsini [1,2,*], Marina Rota [1,2], Océane Uzureau [1,2], Malte Behrendt [1,2], Sarah Adeyinka [1,2], Ine Lietaert [1,2], and Ilse Derluyn [1,2]

[1] Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, Ghent University, Belgium
[2] Centre for the Social Study of Migration and Refugees, Ghent University, Belgium

* Corresponding author (giacomo.orsini@ugent.be)

**Abstract**
Studies have reported alarmingly high rates of traumatic experiences for refugee populations. While nearly all refugees experienced trauma in their country of origin, a vast majority of those seeking protection abroad also face (extreme) violence during their journeys and once in the country of destination. By concentrating on the migratory experiences of about 300 unaccompanied minors that we approached in Libya, Italy, Greece, and Belgium, this article analyses how different forms of violence are inflicted on these young migrants while moving to Europe. By concentrating on personal accounts of (recurrent) interactions with the EU migration and border management tools, we reveal the structural violence within the day-to-day governance of migration. Often framed as unintended or accidental, the article discusses how violence is instead ubiquitous, as it is systematically inflicted on migrants—including unaccompanied minors—in the form of repeated series of violent events or "loops of violence." Importantly, such manifestations of violence are perpetrated by key institutional and non-institutional actors in the "migration industry" who are (in)directly involved in managing migration both inside and outside of the EU. Conceptually, we rely on K. E. Dempsey's political geography of the different typologies of violence within Europe's governance of migration and asylum and use it to concentrate on key transitional phases/fractures in migratory trajectories—i.e., as unaccompanied young migrants (try to) cross international borders and legal boundaries.

## 1. Introduction

Since migration became a top security issue, EU authorities have introduced countless policies to curb and control the arrival of unwanted migrant populations. Today, a variety of policy tools target migrants and asylum-seekers inside and outside of Europe, as well as along the external frontiers of the EU (Burridge et al., 2017). Since the late 1990s, European policymakers and the governments of individual member states have signed a variety of international agreements with countries such as Turkey, Libya,

Tunisia, and Morocco to externalize migration and border management (Spijkerboer, 2018). Concurrently, other tactics have also been deployed to increase authorities' ability to detect, detain, and deport those who have already reached Europe (Orsini, 2018). In key spots of the external frontiers of the EU—e.g., the Italian border island of Lampedusa (Orsini, 2016)—surveillance capabilities were enhanced, but several detention and reception facilities were also built to confine migrants and asylum-seekers while processing their identification and/or applications for international protection (Mountz et al., 2012).

The use of these control and management tools has been combined with several other practices, including pushbacks at the external and internal frontiers of the EU (Bourbeau, 2017) and the introduction of increasingly complex administrative procedures required to settle down in a European country. Importantly, such a complex array of formal and informal migration management and control strategies operates alongside the entire spatial and temporal trajectories of unwanted migrants and asylum-seekers, from the moment they decide to leave their country of residence until they eventually become EU citizens (Alpes & Spire, 2014).

In this article, we focus on the lived experiences of a specific mobile population to provide a bottom-up view of the functioning of this composite governance apparatus. The article builds on interviews and questionnaires we collected with about 300 unaccompanied minors (UMs) that we approached in Libya, Italy, Greece, and Belgium. As we were collecting these main data sets, we also gathered further information through observations that we conducted in key loci of Europe's governance of migration and asylum—e.g., in Greek and Belgian reception facilities, in shelters for victims of human trafficking in Italy, and in the informal camps of Ventimiglia and Calais.

By developing our analysis from this ground-level perspective, our overarching goal is to expose how the use of violence on UMs attempting to enter and settle in Europe is structural to Europe's migration and asylum governance. As they moved along their migratory trajectories, all of the research participants went through what we define as "loops of violence": repeated series of violent events that are perpetuated by a variety of institutional and non-institutional actors who are in/directly involved in the everyday management of migration and asylum.

The article starts with a brief discussion of the research project from which data were generated and how we dealt with the key ethical challenges to developing our study. We then provide an overview of the literature of the core academic debates concerned with the nexus of violence-migration. Next, by building on Dempsey's (2020) typologies of violence within Europe's governance of migration and asylum, in the main body of the text, we present two specific loops of violence frequently described by the research participants: the crossing of international borders both outside and inside of Europe, and the multiple forms of violence UMs suffer in order to (try to) regularize their legal status within the EU. Finally, the article ends with a reflection on the structural nature of violence within Europe's governance of migration and asylum.

## 2. A Multi-Sited and Longitudinal Study of UMs' Psychological Wellbeing on the Move

The data discussed in this article was generated from the European-Research-Council-funded project CHILDMOVE, a longitudinal study of UMs' migratory trajectories and the evolutions of their psychosocial wellbeing in relation to their pre-, peri-, and post-migration experiences. A research team conducted interviews and provided questionnaires at multiple points in time with about 300 UMs—83% boys and 17% girls—who were approached in four different European and non-European countries: Belgium, Italy, Greece, and Libya. Importantly, given the longitudinal design of the study, most research participants were followed over time and also as they moved, possibly to other countries.

The Libyan study was cross-sectional in design, as the participating UMs in Libya were interviewed only once. Between April and July 2018, three researchers collected data in four detention centers, located in and around Tripoli, which were managed by the Government of National Accord on behalf of the EU. In these facilities, we spoke with 99 UMs, 93 of which were boys. Access to the centers was possible after obtaining official permission from the Government of National Accord and thanks to the support of the EU delegation in Libya.

In Europe, the data was generated from three longitudinal studies conducted between 2017 and 2021. In Italy, data were gathered in multiple locations, including formal and informal reception facilities in Palermo, Rome, and Ventimiglia, as well as shelters for victims of human trafficking and sexual violence in Sicily, Campania, and Piedmont. In Belgium and Greece, researchers gathered data mainly in formal and informal reception (and detention) facilities, including hotspots. Notably, data have been collected over three different measurement moments during a two-year period, in order to follow the trajectories of UMs and developments in their psychological wellbeing.

All measurement moments included semi-structured interviews and self-reported questionnaires about participants' demographic background, their journey, current living situation, stressful life events, and overall wellbeing. Although questionnaires were translated into multiple languages, researchers often relied on the support of interpreters during the interviews. Additionally, we conducted several observations in and around those places where we collected interviews and questionnaires.

Due to the minor age of the migrant population involved in this study and the settings where we approached them, we faced a variety of ethical challenges throughout the research. This was especially the case in Libya, where UMs were interviewed in detention, but also during the European field studies. In order to mitigate risks, we selected those research participants who self-declared to be older than 14, as we considered them old enough to give their informed consent. However, regardless of this selection, working with these young migrants raised ethical challenges, as most of them were in extremely precarious situations and without a guardian or a legal representative.

This explains why, in between the different measurement moments, we conducted distance follow-up using communication tools such as emails, Facebook,

and phone cards given to participants. This allowed us to better understand the living conditions UMs were experiencing and help them with their most immediate needs where and when necessary while keeping the attrition of participants as low as possible. It was also due to ethical concerns that we chose to conduct only a cross-sectional study in Libya, in order to avoid incentivizing UMs to attempt the journey to Europe across the extremely dangerous and deadly Sicilian Channel.

Before starting the project, we received ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at Ghent University, Belgium; the Committee of Ethics in Research at the University of West Attica, Greece; the Hellenic Data Protection Authority; and the Commission for Ethics in Research and Bioethics in Italy. In addition, we obtained relevant permission for the study from governmental bodies, such as the First Reception Service and Hellenic Police in Greece, and the federal agency for the reception of asylum applicants in Belgium.

## 3. Structural Violence in (the Governance of) Migration: An Understudied Field of Enquiry

Academic works focusing on the migration-violence nexus remain relatively scarce. This becomes even more apparent if we consider the enormity of scholarship in the broader field of migration studies (Bank et al., 2017). Most of the existing work in this area concentrates on violence as the main trigger of forced migration. From this perspective, migration is seen as a strategy to escape multiple forms of violence.

Studies concerned with the North American context highlight how migrating to the US or Canada allows migrants and asylum-seekers to flee the extreme violence of criminal gangs (e.g., Dudley, 2012; Paley, 2014). As for Europe, academic work focuses on the role of several forms of (extreme) state violence in explaining unauthorized migration to the EU (e.g., Crawley et al., 2017; McMahon & Sigona, 2018).

Other scholars move their focus somehow "forward" along migrants' trajectories, concentrating on the experience and occurrence of violence after departure, that is, during peri- and post-migration. Most of the Anglophone literature is centered on the US, the UK, and the EU, with a smaller stream of other works that deal instead with Canada and Australia. This scholarship exposes mainly the violence that traffickers and smugglers, gangs, or militias, and also state officials charged with migration control inflict on migrants and asylum-seekers (e.g., Bensman, 2016; Shelley, 2014).

Of note here is that most of these works present violence as somehow unrelated or exceptional to the everyday governance of migration (e.g., Gordon & Larsen, 2021; Heyman, 2018). This is no surprise, however; for Isakjee et al. (2020), this lack of analytical interest in the structural nature of violence within Europe's governance of migration is consequent to the identification

with liberal democratic values. A core assumption relative to (the absence of) state-sponsored violence within liberal democracies requires that structural forms of violence are removed from public and academic debates— They must remain almost invisible to the public eye.

However, a relatively recent body of work has taken up the debate surrounding the systemic use of violence as inherent to the everyday functioning of securitized migration governance systems. Davies et al. (2017) present inaction as a core strategy that authorities use to deprive migrants and asylum-seekers of access to their most basic needs. This lack of support impacts the individual's ability to survive and produces a form "of subjugation of life to the power of death"—i.e., necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003, p. 39). Others have concentrated instead on the extreme violence exercised upon migrants and asylum-seekers when they try to cross the external frontiers of the EU (e.g., Jones, 2016; Schindel, 2019), or as they interact with externalized migration management tools operating in so-called "transit countries" (e.g., McConnell et al., 2017). Similarly, an increasing number of works now focus on the violence that migrants and asylum-seekers encounter after they have entered Europe. While some scholars have concentrated on the functioning of detention and reception regimes (e.g., Keygnaert et al., 2012; Vervliet et al., 2014), others have focused on heavily policed internal frontiers of the EU (e.g., de Vries & Guild, 2019; Tazzioli, 2021).

This article engages mainly with this last stream of literature, as we intend to expose how Europe's governance of migration and asylum is inherently violent. By relying on Galtung's (1969, p. 171) notion of structural violence as a form of "violence [which] is built into the structure," we show how multiple forms of violence are used systematically on UMs moving into Europe. As a discriminated population (Gupta, 2013), the "harm or damage [suffered by UMs generates from an] unequal distribution of power" (Weigert, 2010, p. 126) which is (re)produced by "social structures or institutions" (Grauer & Buikstra, 2019, p. 26)—i.e., EU governance of migration and asylum.

As noted by Dempsey (2020, p. 1), "bordering processes, exclusionary securitization of migration, and asylum policies create spaces in which violence against migrants is provoked, committed, condoned, or protracted." Consequent to the introduction of increasingly restrictive policy frameworks, so-called "irregular migrants" today experience increased precariousness and vulnerability. This population's (in)ability to reach the EU and move freely within it depends upon the interactions with a constellation of (non-)institutional actors (in)directly involved in governing migration (De Giorgi, 2010). While Europe's securitized migration policies primarily concern adult migrants, these policies also impact (unaccompanied) minors. This is regardless of the protection systems they are subjected to in EU or member states' legislations and to an even greater degree when unaccompanied (Iusmen, 2020).

Today the migration of minors in Europe is governed through the (re)production of precariousness (Heidbrink, 2021): "A politically induced precariousness…which results in…real or symbolic violence…and a failure to afford adequate protections" (Barn et al., 2021, p. 3). Dempsey (2020, pp. 1–3) built a spatial model for untangling the typologies of violence which are systematically experienced by migrants and asylum-seekers arriving in Europe:

[Violence can be] (1) physical, (2) verbal, (3) psychological, (4) sexual, (5) and non-linear (disrupted potential for a life with some stability and growth/life integrity), [and operate] across three geopolitical spaces: (A) source/origin state, (B) transit/transitional state(s), and (C) EU host state.

While Dempsey highlights the actual and multiple interconnections and overlaps that exist among these five typologies of violence—e.g., sexual violence as a form of physical but also psychological and often verbal violence (Campbell, 2013)—for analytical purposes she describes them as distinct from one another. Dempsey also concentrates on the occurrence of such forms of violence somehow in compartments, across three distinct geopolitical spaces.

To discuss the loops of violence operating on UMs moving into Europe, we operationalize Dempsey's (2020) analytical model but with some modifications. In fact, it is our intention to show how the five typologies of violence de facto cumulate in key transitory physical, but also intangible in-between, spaces; that is, (a) at the crossing of international borders (both within and outside of the EU), and (b) when UMs try to access international protection and/or obtain legal status in Europe.

UMs must navigate through these liminal spaces if they want to achieve their migratory aspirations—e.g., moving from a temporary and precarious residence permit to one more permanent and secure. For our scholarship, it is in these fractures (de Vries & Guild, 2019, p. 2157) that the intrinsically violent nature of the everyday functioning of Europe's governance of migration and asylum becomes more visible and relevant.

## 4. The Loops of Violence in Europe's Governance of Migration

According to the World Health Organization, violence is "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that…results in…injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation" (Krug et al., 2002, p. 172). Moving from this definition, Dempsey (2020) constructed five typologies of violence in the context of migration.

If physical violence refers to any act which can result in pain or physical injury, verbal violence in the context of migration may involve, for instance, the everyday experiences of racism and other derogatory ways in which individuals might be addressed. Clearly, both forms of violence also often produce psychological harm, such as symptoms of anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorders—i.e., psychological violence. Sexual violence often implies physical, psychological, and also verbal violence, as it consists of "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic…directed against a person's sexuality using coercion" (Krug et al., 2002, p. 149). Finally, non-linear violence concerns "disrupted potential for a life with some stability and growth/life integrity" (Dempsey, 2020, p. 3) and it takes place when personal aspirations are frustrated or made simply impossible to achieve.

In the next pages, we highlight manifestations of these overlapping forms of violence to untangle the multiple ways in which structural violence operates within Europe's governance of migration and asylum. In particular, we concentrate on key transitory spaces of migration and asylum governance and a series of "archetypal" actors of the "migration industry" operating there (Andersson, 2014; Schapendonk, 2018). Practically speaking, we account for the frequent interactions between UMs and border or coast guards, as well as other law enforcement officials and reception and detention facility personnel, but also their encounters with smugglers and traffickers. Aside from other migration industry agents—e.g., members of civil society and international organizations, guardians, or volunteers, which we do not have space to consider here—these were the actors that our UM participants indicated as meeting most frequently and as being the most violent.

### 4.1. Loops of Violence Across International Borders

Approaching the countries that are most heavily involved in managing migration and asylum on behalf of the EU—e.g., Libya, Morocco, or Turkey—young migrants have often already been exposed to several forms of violence. According to most of the UMs who talked to us, such violence is normally perpetuated by smugglers and traffickers, as well as border guards and other local law enforcement officials. This is the account of a 16-year-old boy we met in Ventimiglia, an Italian border town where migrants wait in makeshift camps before they try to cross the border with France:

We spent 10 days in the Sahara with the traffickers when we were in Sudan: We didn't have food, just boiled pasta and water, but it wasn't enough. [We] were around 106 persons in one lorry in the Sahara. The lorry was crowded, small children and babies were there. The heat and the lack of food were very difficult [to deal with]. On the way to Libya, we did not have food anymore, we had to drink water mixed with diesel, oil. I saw the human traffickers take some girls and ladies to sleep with them…but if you try to stop them, they beat you with a plastic stick.

As UMs move closer to the external frontiers of the EU, they are often forced into prolonged stops, hiding in isolated buildings (Tazzioli & De Genova, 2020). Many told us that they felt scared as if they had been kidnapped, and that they also experienced and witnessed (extreme) physical violence during these periods of waiting:

> From [the Libyan city of] Sabratha we kept changing cars. From one small car to…another….When we arrived in Sabratha [the smugglers] put us in a small room. [After they took us to the sea the] boat started sinking….They took us back to the same room and started beating us.

A girl we interviewed in Italy told us that, while forced to stay in one of these so-called "safe-houses," smugglers tried to rape her; as she fought back, she was stabbed.

When caught by law enforcement during attempts to cross the external frontiers of the EU, many of our interviewees were systematically pushed back—clearly, a form of non-linear violence. Similar to the arbitrary detentions experienced at the hands of smugglers/traffickers, these pushbacks also entailed (extreme) physical and verbal violence which, in turn, increased minors' psychological suffering. This is the experience of the so-called Balkan Route that a 15-year-old boy we interviewed in Belgium shared with us:

> We tried a lot to cross the border of Bulgaria. [Then] we tried a lot to cross the border [with Croatia], but always when we were trying, they were catching us. [The police] beat you…and they leave the dog to you [so] that the dog will bite you…and then they will send you back, they will just [make you] cross the border back….If they catch you in Bulgaria, then they will send you to Turkey; if they catch you in Hungary, then they will send you to Serbia.

At the time of the interview, more than half of the UMs that we approached in the Libyan detention centers had already tried to cross the Sicilian Channel at least once; after being caught by authorities, they often ended up in detention. This, at least, is the case in Libya, a country where smugglers often work in coordination with law enforcement officials:

> We were caught three hours after we went to sea. [It wasn't the police because] they were the traffickers themselves. [Then] they sent us back, [and] they started to beat us in the room [where they hid us]. Then the police heard the sounds and they [went to free us] from the traffickers. [And then] they brought us to [another center where I was detained for] a month and a year.

According to young migrants' experiences, these imprisonments, which can last for an indefinite amount of time, constitute forms of extreme non-linear violence. While in detention, UMs told us that they had also suffered numerous types of physical, psychological, and verbal abuses. A girl we interviewed in Italy recalled her experience of discrimination in Libyan detention centers:

> Yeah, in Libya [I felt I was treated differently because I am Nigerian]!…It's normal, they said, we are black, we are Africans. There is what they say in Arab: [that] Nigerians are bad….So, that is how they treated us….They treat us different…they beat us in Libya.

Being forced to wait in dangerous environments is not only frustrating but threatening and frightening. Asked about whether he felt in danger when he was in Libya, one research participant we approached near Tripoli told us that he did not fear being killed, what really scared him was being tortured. Once detained or kidnapped, the only option for UMs is to rely on smugglers to start moving again.

If this is the case for those trying to cross into the EU through the Mediterranean, the situation is equally difficult across many of the EU internal borders. We interviewed a young boy in Germany, who had finally left Italy after crossing Switzerland, a trajectory he had attempted a number of times before finally succeeding:

> [I was] on the bus at the border with Switzerland, they stopped the bus for checks…for control, you know?…And then…they caught [me] and they sent [me] back to Italy [where I had to stay] in an informal camp in Como.

As forms of non-linear violence, these pushbacks and the prolonged waits in informal camps produce psychological strain. As reported by Uzureau et al. (2022), while waiting for the next attempt to cross the border, UMs felt increasing anxiety, fear, and the inability to get any clear view of their future. In these informal camps, UMs often experience other forms of violence, which may be inflicted on them by law enforcement officials. We visited the so-called "Jungle" of Calais to assess the living conditions in the area; many of the research participants—especially but not exclusively those we met in Belgium—were planning to go there or had already been as they waited to try crossing into the UK via the English Channel (Tyerman, 2021):

> [I] was injured in [my] eyes and nose…because the French police caused an accident. [At] that time [I] was in a place where all the migrants were sleeping, [we] were all together, [and] the police came to take [our] clothes…tents, all [our] stuff. [I] left with [my] friends but a policeman shot [me] in the eye and in the nose with…flash balls.

When crossing the external or the internal borders of the EU, the UMs we interviewed were exposed to—and often experienced—most if not all the typologies

of violence outlined by Dempsey (2020). These manifestations of structural violence accumulate to form sequences that UMs must experience repeatedly in order to move further on along their planned journeys. Similar loops of violence operate as UMs (try to) deal with the countless administrative procedures necessary for them to settle in Europe.

## 4.2. Loops of Violence Across Legal Statuses

Among the vast array of strategies developed to control and hinder the arrival and stay of unwanted migrants and asylum-seekers in Europe, authorities today also depend on interlinked legal and administrative procedures whose function is to slow down, divert, or even revert migration. As highlighted by several scholars, one key purpose of Europe's governance of migration and asylum is to control the temporalities of migrants and asylum-seekers' (im)mobility into the EU (e.g., Griffiths, 2021; Stel, 2021).

Thus, migration today is disciplined also through never-ending bureaucratic processes (Haas, 2017; Mountz, 2011). By stripping foreigners of control over the temporality of their lives, legal and administrative procedures are part of the so-called "politics of exhaustion," a form of violence impeding migrants' achievement of their migratory plans and aspirations (Vandevoordt, 2021; Welander, 2021). As they wait for the resolution of lengthy, complex, and uncertain procedures, migrants and asylum-seekers often enter/exist within several formal and informal detention and reception systems.

Many of the UMs we interviewed after they had successfully crossed the EU external frontiers in Italy or Greece had to spend time jailed in a hotspot. These closed centers were established by the EU in 2015 in "so-called frontline…member states [such as Greece and Italy, to process the] registration, identification, and removal of apprehended migrants [or] asylum claims" (Papoutsi et al., 2019, pp. 2201–2202) under the supervision of EU officials. While this imposed immobility constitutes in itself a quintessential form of non-linear violence, it often produces severe psychological strain on detainees. We interviewed this 17-year-old boy in the Lesvos' Reception and Identification Centre, better known as the "Moria hotspot":

> All of…[the] guys [here have] like psychological problems. All of them. Like they stand, they sit, they cut themselves, one took too much pills to kill himself, one is jumping…the fence, one put in the window to cut his head.

In these hotspots, UMs often find themselves sharing overcrowded living spaces with adults and are further exposed to violence. Living conditions, in general, are very poor, as confirmed by this 16-year-old boy:

> One day in Samos, people came and told us that [they were] from UNHCR….We told them that where we are staying the situation is really bad, in the container…there was no light, there was no bathroom. When it was raining the roof was dripping, the wind was going through the tent, no window, no light.

Another 17-year-old boy we interviewed in the same camp stated that the container he had to live in had "no door, no windows. In the night, drunk men are coming to the minors' section, and they hit the containers with sticks to scare us. I'm always afraid to sleep."

When violence does not come from the other inmates, it is often perpetuated by the police. In the words of this 17-year-old boy interviewed in Moria:

> The police hit me here [in the camp.] The same thing happened in Syria, they hit me. I haven't seen any difference….I was hit many times by the police when I was in the container or in the line for food.

To access protection and leave the hotspots, UMs must first have their minor status recognized. Yet, due to the general climate of suspicion concerning fraudulent age declarations (Netz, 2020), these procedures are often extremely long and unsuccessful.

If and once UMs are officially recognized as minors, they are generally moved to other centers as they enter dedicated protection programs. However, due to the generalized lack of proper guardianship schemes and the complexity of the related bureaucratic procedures, in reality, entering protection takes months if not years. This is the case, for example, in asylum or family reunification procedures as shown in the case of a 16-year-old boy who talked to us in Moria:

> We were told back in Mitilini that, in order to apply for family reunification, you need to spend at least six months at the camp. That camp was in such bad condition that I did not want to stay there. When I went to the asylum services, I spoke to the translator, and he told me that the process [for family reunification] would take six to seven months. That is why I did not [apply for] it.

Facing these frustrating and painful waits, a significant number of the UMs who talked to us decided to renounce to their rights, give up on any legal procedures, and avoid protection schemes and reception centers. Since they found themselves traveling alone or with other UMs or adult migrants and asylum-seekers, they often ended up spending more time in informal camps. There, they were exposed again to a variety of abuses, including physical, verbal, psychological, and sexual violence.

A Nigerian girl trafficked to Italy told us that until she could obtain her residence permit, she had to work as a prostitute. After she got pregnant and moved

into a shelter, she suffered sexual, but also physical and verbal, abuse—i.e., racism—from the staff working there. Status-less and racialized migrants, especially minors, find themselves at the intersection of several and extreme vulnerabilities (Cleton, 2021; De Graeve & Bex, 2017): Their multiple precarities expose them to all forms of violence and abuse (Maioli et al., 2021; Phillimore et al., 2021).

It is important to stress that demands for accessing family reunification or international protection frequently fail, as we saw for many of our research participants, which produces further psychological strain on young migrants. The excerpt comes from an interview with a young migrant girl we approached in a Belgian reception facility:

> Our case has been dismissed for a third time by the asylum committee, and we are about to go to court. I don't know why it keeps happening. I've been living here for more than two years now and I'm still invisible. I'm tired of waiting, we only wait.

When they appeal negative decisions, UMs are forced into other prolonged and uncertain waits, during which they find themselves navigating several formal and informal reception facilities. Before UMs can eventually access a safe (and permanent) legal status, they often find themselves exposed to repeated loops of violence. As they move along these loops, UMs experience non-linear but also physical, psychological, verbal, and sexual violence.

## 5. Conclusions

The EU's securitized governance of migration and asylum aims to reduce and control so-called "irregular migration" into Europe. As such, it intrinsically functions as a form of non-linear violence. When migrants and asylum-seekers decide to emigrate to Europe they are confronted with a variety of both physical and intangible barriers, such as barbed wire border fences, complex visa applications, or extremely tough police controls. These barriers form a series of obstacles whose aim is to halt or slow down and complicate this population's migratory plans and aspirations (Triandafyllidou & Dimitriadi, 2014).

Yet, as we have demonstrated in this article, non-linear violence rarely exists on its own. It often implicates psychological suffering and is likely to generate conditions that increase migrants' and asylum-seekers' precarious situations, which in turn exposes them to other forms of violence (Likić-Brborić, 2018). Many of the UMs we interviewed did have a family but had decided to emigrate to the EU alone, facing a long and dangerous journey otherwise impossible—e.g., with a valid travel permit and using a much cheaper and safer flight to reach relatives or friends residing in Europe.

The UMs we spoke with had no other choice but to rely on smugglers and traffickers if they wanted to access safety and the protection they are entitled to in Europe. As such, these young migrants became commodities (Vogt, 2013) used by a variety of actors of the "migration industry" (Andersson, 2018), including law enforcement, in order to extract capital (Achtnich, 2022) in the form of ransom, indentured labor, or sex work.

Importantly, if in order to move "forward" along their migratory trajectories UMs had to endure several forms of (extreme) violence, the same requirement applied when they tried to access rights and obtain legal status inside of Europe. Using the concept of "slow violence," Schindel (2019) and others (e.g., Grace et al., 2018; Mayblin et al., 2020) have pointed out the everyday frustrations, fears, and overall uncertainty that complex and often unsuccessful administrative and bureaucratic procedures—and the threat of deportation—generate for migrants and asylum-seekers.

As we have shown, while waiting to access safety and permanent legal status in Europe, UMs are exposed to violence and abuse. In general, securitized migration policies induce a form of hyper-precariousness (Lewis et al., 2015) on UMs, hindering their protection by making them more vulnerable to violence, particularly the case when they have to interact with actors of the so-called "migration industry" in key "borderzones" (Topak, 2020).

By incorporating Dempsey's (2020) typologies of violence into our loops of violence model, we have shown how physical, psychological, sexual, verbal, and non-linear forms of violence combine and accumulate in the main transitory spaces of (the governance of) migration. Additionally, we have also outlined the sequential and repeated nature of the abuses inflicted on UMs, as young migrants suffer specific typologies of violence again and again as well as in sequence—that is, one after the other.

Such violence, we have noted, is structural because it emerges "from inequality built into structures" (Phillimore et al., 2021, p. 6). Yet, unlike other theorizations of structural violence, here we have named a series of actors, including law enforcement officials, reception and detention facility personnel, and smugglers and traffickers, who are responsible for these abuses. The day-to-day (arbitrary) decisions of these actors often translate into the systematic use of violence on UMs (Gupta, 2013).

As we discuss in another article (Derluyn et al., in press), UMs in Libya experience almost three times as many traumatic events compared to what they have experienced in their country of origin or during their journeys to Libya. Such figures are even more concerning if we consider that most of the UMs we interviewed arrived in Libya after fleeing war and deprivation at home. In general, about 80% of our research participants had experienced or witnessed physical violence since they emigrated and a very similar portion spent time in detention both in peri- and post-migration—i.e., during their journey to the EU as well as after arrival.

Notably, about 30% of our interviewees also stated that they had suffered some form of sexual abuse while

on the move. Such figures are already significant, but they were likely under-recorded in our sample, especially due to the gender distribution (Wekerle & Kerig, 2017). In general, our data show that the loops of violence did not apply equally to all UMs, and several factors could impact their ability to avoid violence. For instance, in Libya the availability of (more) financial resources allowed some UMs to free themselves from kidnapping and detention faster than others, thus reducing the probability of suffering other forms of violence, such as rape, while they were jailed.

Experiencing extreme psychological, physical, sexual, or verbal abuse was so frequent that it was almost normalized by many of the UMs who talked to us, as pointed out by this 16-year-old boy we interviewed in Belgium:

> [In Libya] there was no food, there was punishment….I didn't have money. They didn't believe me…so they…kick me a lot…and [there was no] food….But it's normal…it's normal life in Libya.

Those UMs who crossed into the EU via the so-called Balkan Route referred to "the game" when talking about their repeated attempts to travel undetected. The functioning of legal and international borders produces "a state of continuous disruption or dislocation [which] can further compound migrants' stress and anxiety, generating feelings of precariousness, fear, loneliness, and hopelessness" (Dempsey, 2020, p. 7).

Studies on the mental health of minor and adult refugees demonstrate the extremely high rate of traumatic experiences these populations must endure as they try to reach international protection abroad (e.g., Blackmore et al., 2019; El Baba & Colucci, 2018). While our sample remains limited, according to our data the experience of such violence becomes particularly intense when UMs (try to) move beyond key barriers imposed on them by authorities. As these barriers are very difficult to cross, most individuals will have to make multiple attempts before succeeding; this means that violence will be repeated in very similar sequences to form what we have referred to as loops of violence.

In addition to the two loops of violence that we have outlined in this article, there are several other sequences of violence that UMs and other migrants and asylum-seekers must face during key ruptures in their migratory trajectories, such as deportation or when minors reach the legal age of majority (de Vries & Guild, 2019).

For these reasons, we suggest using the model proposed by Dempsey (2020) not only to explore the occurrence of violence in the three distinct geopolitical spaces of the country of origin, the countries of transit, and the host European state but also to focus on transitions between one country and another, one's legal status (or the lack of it) and another. It is within these junctures too that migrants and asylum-seekers are made (even) more vulnerable and exposed to violence.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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## About the Authors

**Giacomo Orsini** (PhD in sociology, University of Essex) is a senior researcher at Ghent University and a maître de conferences at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. His studies concentrate on the everyday governance of migration and asylum through the multiplication of physical and non-physical boundaries of (racist) inclusion/exclusion. Besides conducting several field studies along the European external frontiers in the Mediterranean, he recently engaged with untangling the operation of institutional racism within (securitised forms of) migration governance in Belgium.

**Marina Rota** (PhD) is a sociologist with postgraduate studies in criminology, in Greece and Belgium. She holds a PhD in sociology from Athens' Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences and has graduate seminars in social street work. She has been involved in the areas of migration and asylum as a field worker since 1995, mainly with unaccompanied refugee minors and child victims of human trafficking. Since 2017, she has been working at Ghent University as a researcher on the CHILDMOVE project.

**Océane Uzureau** holds a master's in migration studies and is a PhD candidate in social work and welfare studies at Ghent University (CESSMIR). She is also a researcher on the European Research Council CHILDMOVE project. She collaborated with the Observatory of the Migration of Minors (MIGRINTER) in action research projects with unaccompanied minors in France. Her interests focus on unaccompanied minors' migration and mobilities within Europe, social support while on the move, border experiences, and graffiti analysis in transit migration hubs.

**Malte Behrendt** (PhD) is a clinical psychologist who has specialized in the work with minors in situations of extreme violence and displacement. He has accompanied young people disengaged from the armed groups in Colombia and unaccompanied refugee minors in Germany. After an internship at Zentrum Überleben, an NGO specialized in the treatment of victims of torture, Malte Behrendt recently finished his dissertation on the psychological well-being of unaccompanied refugee minors as part of the CHILDMOVE project at Ghent University.

**Sarah Adeyinka** has worked in the field of humanitarian aid for over a decade with a focus on populations in vulnerable situations. She is the founder of the NGO CoCreate VZW and holds an MA with merit in peacebuilding. She recently submitted her PhD dissertation at Ghent University where she is part of the European-Research-Council-funded CHILDMOVE project with a focus on the convoluted experiences of female Nigerian victims of trafficking in Italy.

**Ine Lietaert** holds a PhD in social work (Ghent University). She works as assistant professor at the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies, where she coordinates the Migration and Social Policy cluster, and at the Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy (Ghent University), where she teaches International Social Work. Her research focuses on migration governance, return and reintegration processes, unaccompanied refugee minors, well-being, internal displacement, borders, and social work practices.

**Ilse Derluyn** (PhD) is a full professor at Ghent University (Belgium). Her main research topics concern the well-being of (unaccompanied) young refugees and migrants, war-affected children, victims of trafficking, and child soldiers. She is actively involved in supporting refugees and practitioners, and in policy research. Ilse has over 100 international publications and is holder of the European Research Council Starting Grant CHILDMOVE. She heads the Centre for the Social Study of Migration and Refugees and is co-director of the Centre for Children in Vulnerable Situations.