

## The French Hautes-Alpes: community solidarity locks horns with a security ideology

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In Vauban's old fortress-building stomping ground, and more specifically at the frontier with Italy, the French State is struggling to secure its borders. In the middle of the mountains, volunteers respond by creating humanitarian corridors and providing aid to migrants in transit. A heart-rending account of a local solution to a global problem.

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“ Mr Prefect, the government has long been striving to purge France, and especially Paris, of the many foreigners, beggars and vagabonds who come to exploit public charity at the expense of our own poverty-stricken citizens, or even to engage in other, more criminal activities. Every day, many of these foreigners are deported, but the evil necessarily recurs given the ease with which they can enter our territory...” (editor's translation). This excerpt from a letter dated 23 April 1850, from the Minister of the Interior to the Prefect of the Hautes-Alpes, speaks volumes about the permanence of certain representations and ideologies.

Stretching over 1,200 kilometres from Slovenia to the hinterland of Nice, the Alps appear to be an impassable barrier to anyone observing them from a distance. On closer inspection, however, they are morphologically perfectly passable. Numerous valleys lead to the passes in the central chain thereby increasing the possible routes connecting the Mediterranean region to the German-speaking region. Between Italy and France, five major passes have provided access across the terrain, namely Tende (1,871 m), Larche (1,997 m), Montgenèvre (1,850 m), Mont-Cenis (2,085 m) and Petit-Saint-Bernard (2,188 m). Until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no clearly defined distinction between internal and international migration. These Alpine passes have been places of exchange between local populations, which can still be seen today with commercial mule tracks, transhumance or summer paths and the itineraries of pilgrims, artists or seasonal migrants who criss-cross them.

### **The border at Briançon: a history shaped by economics and politics**

Due to Briançon's geography, meetings and activities there have always been dictated by the seasons. The long winter months prompted people to travel and trade with the lower valleys and more distant regions (Piedmont, Provence), thereby promoting economic and cultural exchanges. The mixed population of Briançon is an "open" one, even if its identity, which is difficult to describe, always seems to be changing. Foremost Alpine people, farmers in the summer, teachers or traders in the winter, the "farmer teachers" and peddlers reflected the versatility, mobility and adaptability of the Hautes-Alpes and possessed a high level of education<sup>1</sup>. However, the economic situation (a commercial crossroads at the intersection of five valleys), geographical position (surrounded by mountains) and political context (a border territory) have over time imposed a new profile on the region and its city, Briançon.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne-Marie Granet-Abisset, « Entre autodidaxie et scolarisation : les Alpes briançonnaises », *Histoire de l'éducation*, n° 70, mai 1996, p. 111-141, [http://ife.ens-lyon.fr/publications/edition-electronique/histoire-education/INRP\\_RH070\\_5.pdf](http://ife.ens-lyon.fr/publications/edition-electronique/histoire-education/INRP_RH070_5.pdf)

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Nation-State manufactured the national identity and its antonym, the foreigner, and limited displacements. The geographical boundary became a political boundary: the military occupied the spaces and the cities. Diplomatic powers clashed or cooperated according to national, and sometimes nationalist, issues. In 1927, dreaming of a “Greater Italy”, Mussolini locked the crossing points between his country and France and suppressed all forms of emigration<sup>2</sup>. The fascist militia did not hesitate to shoot at fellow countrymen who were attempting to leave the country. A few years later, France resorted to evictions and expulsions to “protect domestic labour”. In 1938, Édouard Daladier, president of the French Council, presented his decree that made provisions for the imprisonment of “foreign undesirables”.

After 1945, deeply affected by years of conflict, the European continent was again the stage for large-scale population movements. Heterogeneous crowds made up of stateless people, Jews freed from concentration camps in Germany and other “displaced persons” from Central Europe swept across the French-Italian border and through the Alpine passes by their own means. Then the economic situation deteriorated: trans-Alpine populations emigrated spontaneously using these same passes until 1960<sup>3</sup>. Despite the intensification of reception policies in France since the 1980s, refugees and survivors of the Balkan war, and subsequently the Iraq war, the Arab Spring and the Syrian conflict, continued to use these paths. The French-Italian border can be seen as a barometric sensor of the political, economic and social crises in Europe, Asia and the Mediterranean. This territory crystallises the tensions that arise in the spaces that host migratory movements of varying intensities.

### **A grim tightrope between security and solidarity**

Over the course of history, stories of people crossing the Col de l'Échelle, less high at 1,762 m although more vertiginous than the other passes, were rare. It had only occasionally been crossed by people who had come from elsewhere. This story changed in the winter of 2016. That year, a few exiled people, mostly young men travelling alone, crossed it wearing trainers on their feet. Prevented from continuing on their way by nightfall and caught in fresh snow up to their waist, one of them had his feet frozen and later amputated. Another suffered the same fate with his hands. That winter, these few men seemed to have opened a path beset by dangers. From thereon in, the people of the Hautes-Alpes mobilised, deciding to walk the mountain each week and protect these poorly-equipped exiles who were exposed to frostbite, high-risk childbirth, cardiac or respiratory deficiencies, hypothermia, disappearance or death. Professionals (mountain guides, trail runners, rescuers), on hiking skis or in snowshoes, traced the possible crossing points, from valley to passe, establishing a protective system governed by a single motto: “No death in our mountains!”

Warmly dressed, equipped with headlamps, they made their rounds, whilst at the border post of the Col de Montgenèvre police reinforcements arrived. Using special technology to track down people trying to pass through, the idea was to drive those who were apprehended as “undesirables” back to Italy. No right of entry was granted to minors or asylum seekers. All this was done in violation of the conventions signed by the State<sup>4</sup>, which forbids the repression or return of any person arriving on French soil prior to

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<sup>2</sup> Philippe Hanus, « “Par les sentiers de la montagne enneigée...” Perspectives historiques sur les parcours migratoires à travers la frontière franco-italienne (1945-1960) », *Journal of alpine research / Revue de géographie alpine*, n° 108-2, 2020, <http://journals.openedition.org/rga/7037>

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>4</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva Conventions, <https://www.icrc.org/en/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions> and United Nations High Commissioner United with Human Rights, International Convention on the Rights of the Child signed by France in 1990, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>

examining their potential asylum application and the obligation for any person who declared themselves to be a minor to benefit from State protection upon entering the country.

The Col de Montgenèvre epitomises the emergence of our societies under control. In February 2021, from the Border Police post installed there as part of the fight against terrorism, one can observe cars returning from Turin where their passengers had been relaxing between the luxury shops and an outdoor skating rink, lulled by background music that easily covers the silence of the abandoned millionaires' chalets. Everything is suspended, just as if Covid-19 had locked down the rich skiers. It is hard to imagine that at every moment, here, in the shadow of this improvised ballet in the wake of the pandemic, there is yet another battle raging between "cats and dogs", sometimes in the middle of the night and in minus 15°C. Stealthy shadows in the mountains twist and turn, as the lights watch over the silence.

These migrants are forced to move about in the middle of the mountains, avoiding avalanche corridors and keeping on the surface of a metre of powder snow that has fallen the same day while at the same time trying not to lose their children, their shoes, their life. The police are equipped with polar suits, snowmobiles, thermal binoculars and drones. The people in exile wear clothes donated by Italian and French citizens who quickly followed in the footsteps of the mountain professionals. Citizens in solidarity and outdoor technicians then carried out their rounds together.

The exiles crouch behind tree trunks, sheltered by the rocks. They try to cross the border, at the bottom of the valleys below. The focus on surviving. The police are positioned at the top of the lookout points. The guides<sup>5</sup> watch for furtive shadows and try to reinvent a humanitarian corridor every day, equipped with flasks of hot water, dry socks, comfort, a social bond. From all over of France, the actors of "alternative solidarity" arrive. They come to affirm that, in a society where one can no longer take a step without being traced, the simplest changes must necessarily pass under the radar. To honour their oath, doctors, accompanied by guides, soon switch off their headlamps and organise themselves using weak signals. They will blend into the crowd of passers-by in snowshoes, trying to stay on the surface of this chaos, to track paths and shelters between the torrents of humans and non-humans.

### **Danger of death and the criminalisation of solidarity**

Since the winter of 2016, many people (the actual number is difficult to estimate) have been declared missing. What is certain is that five people died, frozen or drowned in the mountain rivers, and that several hundred others are suffering from after-effects (trauma, amputations, broken bones) after having fled or evaded law enforcement agents adverse to international law and national protection. Five hundred minors were turned away in 2017 while nearly 1,500 adults have been turned away every year up to date.

As for the guides, the interrogations have rained down. Media attention is increasingly focused on the local situation and the dangers encountered by the exiles. Solidarity must be broken down and criminalised in the eyes of public opinion before people mobilise and take the side of these solidarity actions against the recent political orientations gathered under the euphemistic formula "protection and asylum". Rather than dispensing justice, these trials are intended to establish the directives of the State, to exhaust and weaken citizens in solidarity, to discredit their actions, to intimidate, and to discourage potential new actors.

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<sup>5</sup> In French, a *maraude* is the action of going through the streets or settlements of large cities to provide assistance to people living there. People doing this are called "*maraudeurs*".

2021 was particularly prone to avalanches... of police and judicial prosecutions. Law enforcement has been tracking down guides as if they were offenders. As soon as they approach the border, they are subject to numerous checks (identity, status, and vehicle documents). Fines and detentions abound, leading to legal proceedings. Sometimes the exchanges are heated, the chimeras fight and clash: anti-terrorists armed against activist utopians, hostility against hospitality, gyroscope against stethoscope, thermal binoculars and firearms against heaters and blood pressure monitors. The inequality is striking, the illegality is fabricated. People in exile are becoming *de facto* illegal on French territory, in contravention of their words, their demand. From humanist rescuers, guides become militant offenders. From relievers of suffering, they become liable to penalties: fined, repressed, convicted. Criminal cases are brought before the courts.

To stigmatise and criminalise solidarity, what could be simpler than making justice take responsibility for convicting mountain guides as smugglers? The State actively brandishes the scarecrow of fear in the name of the protection and security of the country, assimilating guide and smuggler, exile and terrorism, asylum and profit. Yet the State itself transgresses all morality and all law, national and international. Sentenced on twelve occasions since 2012 by the European Court of Human Rights<sup>6</sup> for failing to fulfil its obligations and leaving “asylum seekers in inhuman and degrading conditions of existence, forced to live on the streets and deprived of livelihoods”, France has indicted twenty-four citizen-guides to date. Five will be definitively convicted for assisting illegal entry into the territory, with sentences ranging from two months in prison with a suspended sentence to a few hundred euros in fines, and two fines for contempt. Eight will be released on appeal on the grounds that the investigation did not provide evidence of the offence of aiding entry, or even that there had been “inaccuracies” in the reports submitted by law enforcement. Pierre Mumber is one of them: images filmed by journalists present at the time of the so-called crime showed the citizen’s benevolence towards the exiled persons who were being rescued and proved that he did not interfere in any way with the police arrests. On the contrary, these images revealed the lies formulated in the police report. Neither the proof nor the gravity of these false statements can be denied. Yet the perpetrators will not be convicted or even charged.

### **A refuge in the heart of the fortified city**

Despite these harassments, committed citizens are gaining in solidarity and organising themselves. Until 2017, newcomers were welcomed in a small house which had been made available for a long time by the municipality of Briançon. Faced with the ever-increasing number of uprooted people arriving in conditions of extreme deprivation and exhaustion, the citizens united. In the continuity of the guides’ rescue actions, supported by some communities, local associations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), they negotiated tirelessly with the community of communes of the Briançonnais to get a bigger space, more conducive to connecting, meeting, and sharing experiences and resources: the *Refuge Solidaire* (RS). Others created a support committee for the accused in April 2018. They use their skills (legal, medical, etc.) to provide real expertise in defence of the rights and health of foreigners. They also develop their knowledge in response to the abuses of power they are subjected to.

As for the guides’ rounds, the emergence of new, less perilous paths has allowed less expert and less well-equipped people to help. Coming from France and Europe, they contributed to the creation of a collective of guides in 2018-2019. In 2021, French and European MPs and senators took part in these

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<sup>6</sup> *Le Monde* avec AFP, « La CEDH condamne la France pour les “conditions d’existence inhumaines” de demandeurs d’asile », 2 juillet 2020, *Le Monde*, [https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/07/02/la-cedh-condamne-la-france-pour-les-conditions-d-existence-inhumaines-de-demandeurs-d-asile\\_6044928\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/07/02/la-cedh-condamne-la-france-pour-les-conditions-d-existence-inhumaines-de-demandeurs-d-asile_6044928_3224.html)

winter rounds. Their testimonials were devastating<sup>7</sup>. The subject was raised at the French National Assembly, then disappeared.

Since the winter of 2016, more than 20,000 women, men and children from around the world have found a few days of respite in a clean bed. They were informed of their rights, of the risks and opportunities inherent in continuing their perilous journeys. More than a hundred volunteers coordinate and manage the shelter on a daily basis: administration, reception, meal preparation, cleaning and bedding, medical and health monitoring, individualised support, guidance. Clothing, shoes, food, smiles or warmth: the donations increase as people arrive.

Men and women rich in humanity, of all ages, from all over France (Creuse, Paris, Marseille...) and Europe (Italy, Spain, England, Netherlands...), come to contribute to this share of solidarity and fraternity. But obstacles to this mobilisation keep appearing. The quality of the reception was considered by State representatives as an invitation to the “undesirables”. The community of communes elected in June 2019 decided to close the reception areas. However, the accommodation of newcomers in exile did not come to an end - it transformed. A new system was born: supportive, collective and participatory. The only shadow in the picture: it is private. The *Terrasses de Briançon*, a former sanatorium, was acquired thanks to major donors and a civil real estate company created and supported by numerous citizens. Rehabilitated in record time (three months) by numerous volunteers, including the people sheltered there, *Les Terrasses Solidaires* currently hosts the *Refuge Solidaire*, but also associations whose missions and values are devoted to a growing solidarity ecology, committed to respecting the rights and dignity of individuals, the environment and culture. The *Maison des jeunes et de la culture*, the *Refuge Solidaire*, *Tous Migrants*, *Eko* (ecological association), *Médecins du Monde*, and soon other associations (cultural with the *Decâblés*, social and environmental) will occupy the space. There will also be a Community Health Centre, some of whose caregivers are already engaged with the RS.

### Citizen builders of a solidarity ecology

The 2020 municipal elections marked a local political turning point. The municipality was hostile to the reception, and its policies were full of nationalist accents. Its ideological posture and its pragmatism make it oscillate between tolerance and remonstrance, to the rhythm of current affairs and electoral seasons.

The State, gradually renouncing its duties of protection, seems to be building a security fortress based on laws aimed at increasing social control. The divide between rights and laws is growing. Subsidies are drying up. And yet citizens are not giving up. On the contrary, they are joining forces and trying to provide a welcome for the Other from elsewhere that is respectful of human rights. Beyond the issues of solidarity, these same citizens are defending our social heritage, supported by the national and international solidarity organisations that constantly interact with them. Where borders are closed, solidarity is strengthened. *Les Terrasses Solidaires*, a unique place animated by multiple actors, embodies this collective strength that allows for the emergence of new models of solidarity ecology. By learning to welcome and help injured people from multiple backgrounds to get back on their feet,

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<sup>7</sup> Read the op-ed of deputy Damien Carême and senator Guillaume Contard supported by a collective of signatories: « Migrants à la frontière franco-italienne: “La solidarité n’est pas un délit!” », *Le Monde*, 20 avril 2021, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/04/20/migrants-a-la-frontiere-franco-italienne-la-solidarite-n-est-pas-un-delit\\_6077433\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/04/20/migrants-a-la-frontiere-franco-italienne-la-solidarite-n-est-pas-un-delit_6077433_3232.html)

these solidarity collectives are shaping the resilience of the Briançon territory. They show a form of mutual aid that could spread on a larger scale to meet contemporary and future social challenges.

*Traduit du français par Juliet Powys*

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### Biographies

**Agnès Antoine** • Since 2017, Agnès has been a member of the Board of Directors of *Tous Migrants* (registered as a French association since 2016), the successor of the movement *Pas en notre nom Briançon*, which was born in 2015 to express collective indignation at the political inaction with regard to the humanitarian drama of migrants in Europe, from the Mediterranean to Calais. She also coordinates the Support committee for solidarity actors facing legal proceedings.

**Philippe Hanus** • A doctor in history, Philippe is an associate researcher at the PACTE Université Grenoble-Alpes laboratory. He has made various contributions to the subjects of migration trajectories across the Alps and sociability in border countries throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Ariane Junca** • A hospital anaesthetist and holder of a master's degree in public health focused on health systems and insurance for foreign persons. Involved with *Médecins du Monde* France since 2000, first as coordinator of international projects, then as a member of the board of directors where Ariane devoted herself to the development of the association's strategy on issues of health and rights for exiled persons.

**Guillaume Pégon** • Member of the Board of Directors at *Médecins du Monde* France, Guillaume has been involved in the solidarity sector for twenty years, both in France and abroad. Alternating between different positions as a clinical psychologist, researcher in sociology and anthropology, teacher, and actor of public policy development, he is strongly engaged in areas of inclusive rights-based programmes, with specialisations in mental health, gender and inclusive local development.

**Philippe Wyon** • Co-founder of the *Refuges Solidaires* association and member of its Board of Directors. During the last twenty years of his professional life, he was director of an "environment and solidarity" association developing two integration projects on the themes of the maintenance of mountain areas and re-employment.

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