

SEASONALITY AS AN ANALYTICAL LENS: NAVIGATING THE “SEASONS” OF MIGRATION IN TRIESTE THROUGH AN ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLAGE

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This paper explores the notion of seasonality as a conceptual and methodological lens to analyze the intersections between migration, environment, and governance in the Italian border town of Trieste. The article investigates how temporal and environmental factors shape the governance of migration along the Balkan route. Building on three ethnographic fieldworks conducted by the authors between 2021 and 2023, it offers a composite, multi-sited account of how changing weather patterns, shifting political contexts, and evolving institutional responses co-produce the dynamics of asylum and mobility in the city. By linking natural and political “seasons”, the article shows how local authorities instrumentalize environmental conditions to regulate migrant presence and visibility, while solidarity groups and migrants continuously adapt their practices to these shifts. The paper situates these processes within broader European migration governance transformations, revealing how time, environment, and control converge in local border management. Ultimately, Trieste emerges as a paradigmatic site where the temporalities of nature, policy, and human mobility intertwine, exposing the inherent fragility of contemporary migration regimes.

Keywords: Trieste, seasonality, Balkan route, migration governance, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

“Non ci sono più le mezze stagioni” is a common Italian saying referring to the extreme transformation of seasonal patterns and the slow disappearance of gradual seasonal change. Metaphorically, it is used to say that things are not the way they used to be. From the expression “long summer of migration” (Kasperek and Speer 2015; Hameršak 2023) to the employment and instrumentalization of water metaphors, such as “flows” (Porto 2022; Johnson et al. 2024), migratory phenomena are often identified with specific seasons or represented through natural imaginaries. Borrowing from this popular saying, in this paper we analyze how seasons intertwine with migration governance in the border town of Trieste, located on the Italian–Slovenian border.¹ By relying on a novel methodological approach, bridging – in hindsight – the ethnographic work of three researchers, we provide a grounded and deep-rooted overview of how asylum and migration governance have changed in Trieste between 2021 and 2023, in relation to the transformations of European migration and border governance along the so-called Balkan route.

Critical migration scholars have shown that time plays a key role in shaping migrants’ experiences and control under border regimes. Migrants navigate “disrupted and uneven temporalities” (Pascucci 2016) imposed by policies and infrastructures that limit their futures and mobility. These temporal controls, rooted in colonial and racial hierarchies, fragment migrant lives and restrict visibility and resistance, even as migrants continue to negotiate and contest them (Tazzioli 2024; Zehfuss and Vaughan-Williams 2024).

Mobility is hence not only situated within a temporality that is made political, but one that works towards the governance of migrants’ very possibility of a present and a future. Migration temporality also combines seasonal and environmental elements. A natural hazard can trigger migratory movement, while an arid desert, a tropical forest, or an endless sea necessarily shapes the opportunities and constraints of mobility. Departing from a focus on the environmental context of migration, a growing body of scholarship has moved towards a more relational understanding of mobility to examine the entanglement of human and natural factors in migration and asylum governance (Sundberg 2011; Squire 2014; De León 2015; Schindel 2020; Hameršak and Pleše 2021; Pallister-Wilkins 2022; Schindel 2022; Davies et al. 2024; Benghellab et al. 2025). These works shed light on how authorities tend to discursively naturalize phenomena that are, nonetheless, deeply intertwined with political strategies of control and resistance. From this viewpoint, weather, landscapes and even environmental discourses are not neutral elements but can be used for the reinforcement of border and institutional governance, but also to resist it.

¹ By “seasons”, we refer to the four-season model, as we are localized in Western Europe and our field research was conducted in Trieste. We are nonetheless aware and recognize that this model is rooted in a Eurocentric understanding of temporality, and that in many regions, seasons are experienced and named through distinct ecological and cultural rhythms.

But how is exposure to environmental factors connected to migration governance? And how can we investigate the effects of weather on the rules and practices governing movement in border areas? Building on literature that focuses on the entanglement between the environment and governance, we propose the notion of “seasonality” to critically explore how environmental seasons and unexpected events intersect and interact within the “making of migration” (Tazzioli 2020b) at the local level. The notion of seasonality offers insight into local migration governance, a term that embeds the interactions among different actors – institutions, solidarity groups, migrant communities – who not only respond to but also influence the environments in which they operate (Geddes 2022: 312).

The case of Trieste constitutes both the field where the concept of seasonality inductively emerged from the authors’ reflections and conversations and a paradigmatic case to investigate how interdependencies with natural and climatic factors impact border cities within migratory corridors. Trieste is especially relevant since the governance of migrant time intertwines with the “historicity” of mobility and displacement that permeates this border region (Altin and Degli Uberti 2022).

Trieste has witnessed a significant increment in migrant arrivals from the Balkan route since 2016, with a steep increase in 2018 (Comunità di San Martino al Campo et al. 2023). The responses adopted by institutional local actors appear to have abandoned half-measures, polarizing instead into pro- and anti-migrants, at times violently escalating, fueling a sense of unpredictability around asylum governance at the city level (Fortarezza 2024). During the initial years of the so-called “migration crisis” (2015–2017), the city of Trieste was characterized by an apparent regular pattern of migration, with an increase of arrivals in the summer and a decrease in the winter. Since 2018, this somewhat predictable trend has become more blurred. This was caused by developments in migrant movements and containment strategies deployed by European and national institutions in the Western Balkans, presenting sudden and drastic changes, shifting of governmental responsibilities, as well as a feeling of exceptionality juxtaposed with the exhausting return of the same (Bergesio and Bialasiewicz 2023).

At the same time, beyond the natural and political seasons – and their alteration – in the field, we experienced their impact on us and our research, underscoring both comparable moments and phases of the academic process, and substantial discontinuities. Each of us carried out ethnographic fieldwork in the city, as part of our doctoral research, rooted in various academic disciplines and methods, as we explain in the next section. Each of us experienced different periods of the year and changing local politics, European governance, and periods characterized by particular volatility (such as the Covid-19 pandemic, for example). We all observed isolated, yet decisive, events that altered the course of things to come, fundamentally changing the “normal” course of time.

The novelty of the article is that of constructing a collage of three embedded ethnographic experiences, providing long-term and deep-rooted insights into the changes,

shifts, and the everyday facets of how environmental seasons and conditions impacted on and were, simultaneously, instrumentalized against, both transit migrants and asylum seekers arriving in Trieste from the Balkan route. We approach the concept of seasonality from a methodological perspective, seeking to stitch together into an unfinished, evolving mosaic the data collected over the span of nearly four years, often separately, sometimes coinciding in the field, and at times collaborating in data collection.

We start by providing contextual background to the border town of Trieste and explaining our methodological approach. We then review existing literature and introduce our theoretical framework based on the notion of seasonality. Building on these premises, we use this lens to analyze how environmental, social and institutional dimensions interact and conflict in the field. The empirical sections are thus structured around two relational issues involving environmental and political dynamics. First, we explore how local institutions instrumentalize weather and seasons in Trieste, leading to abrupt, unforeseen, and occasionally counterintuitive outcomes. Second, we examine the implications of weather and natural factors on how migrants' and solidarity actors' strategies change over time.

“SEASONAL” ETHNOGRAPHY: THREE EXPERIENCES OF FIELDWORK IN CONVERSATION

Time-space interactions greatly relate to the research journey (González 2000), where ethnography can be read through the cycle of various stages metaphorized as seasons. This implies both the recognition of how natural seasons affected our participation in the life of the border and the capacity to weave together our data, disciplinary perspectives, and sensitivities to provide a somewhat comprehensive and nuanced picture of migration-related processes in Trieste.

To understand how political seasons interact in the governance of migration in Trieste, we must first point out that Trieste has a history of solidarity towards asylum seekers and refugees. In the 1990s, refugees fleeing the wars in Yugoslavia found a haven in the city. The reception of these individuals was largely organized by civil society and the third sector, with the Italian Consortium of Solidarity (ICS) playing a key role in normalizing their presence and facilitating their integration into the social and urban fabric.

Following the implementation of the EU–Turkey agreement in 2016 and the subsequent formal closure of the Balkan corridor (Hameršak et al. 2020), Trieste has once again become a crucial hub for migrants seeking protection and opportunities within the EU. Situating Trieste within the Balkan route means bearing in mind the city's long, layered border history, and how this shapes its current role in European migration dynamics (Altin 2024). Since 2022, Trieste has become a key juncture where multiple routes and migrant experiences intersect. This followed an intensification of migration along the Balkan

route, combined with geopolitical shifts along the corridor, for instance, Croatia's entry into Schengen in 2023.² In this context, local and national authorities have increasingly pursued securitized approaches, from informal readmissions into Slovenia to debates over new border controls and detention infrastructures, while delegitimizing and cutting the public resources available for asylum seekers' and refugees' reception (Comunità di San Martino al Campo et al. 2023). This trend has been particularly pronounced in Trieste, where, over the last few decades, the city's government has been almost uninterruptedly in the hands of the right-wing party Forza Italia, which maintains a strong anti-migration stance.

As the three of us lived through these changes, we often found ourselves taken aback by how much weather and environmental conditions impacted and became part of the progressive securitization of asylum and migration in Trieste. Therefore, we do not take the weather as an object of research, but rather we align with the idea of research *in* weather, which “reflexively examines the processes and outcomes of a research project as an experience and practice immersed in a specific weatherworld” (Vannini and Vannini 2021: 23). During our fieldwork, we witnessed how “weather conditions alter the ways in which humans are intertwined with the world” (Edensor et al. 2021: 1) through our interlocutors' experiences and our own as researchers. Concurrently, the weather impacted our fieldwork: which places we went to, how long we could stay outside, and how many people would share our field sites.

Trieste served as the sole case study for Noemi Bergesio's research, positioned within Political Geography debates. She periodically visited the city between August 2022 and August 2023. For the other two authors, fieldwork in Trieste formed a segment of their broader multi-sited ethnographies. Ophelia Nicole-Berva conducted fieldwork with solidarity activists at four cross-border areas along the Italian northern border and spent approximately two months in Trieste, through multiple visits between November 2022 and April 2023. Francesca Fortarezza developed her sociological investigation of asylum governance along the Balkan route in different border zones. Her primary case study was Trieste, where she spent a total of six and a half months conducting recurring research periods between February 2021 and June 2024. Despite the disciplinary, temporal, and geographical diversity of our research, the three of us prioritized ethnographic approaches. In practice, data were collected via participant observation, qualitative interviews, and document analysis, and then juxtaposed, collaged, and layered (Hall 2010). These encompassed medium- to long-term periods of participant observation in the locations that constitute Trieste's migrant geographies, including the city streets, reception centers, and the

² This article draws on scholarship that interprets migratory routes as political and cartographic constructs shaped by EU border governance. Maribel Casas-Cortes and Sebastian Cobarrubias (2019) argue that such routes reflect “concentric circles of uneven mobilities”, channeling movement from origins to destinations in ways that reproduce inequality. They describe “routes” as state-managed corridors of control, and this is what we mean when we use this term.

Karst³ trails that cross the border. This often involved participating in solidarity initiatives operating in Piazza della Libertà – that we also refer to as the Square – which has become a gathering point for migrants and solidarity activists since 2019 (Filippi et al. 2023). Essential were qualitative interviews and countless informal conversations with various actors involved in these processes, including migrants, activists and volunteers, social and humanitarian workers, public officials and politicians, and lawyers and journalists.

Working through the divergences of our disciplines, we incorporated and “stretched” the practice of “longitudinal ethnography” (Burawoy 2003) by combining our (re)visits to Trieste, both those in which one of us initiated her research in a place where another had previously conducted her study, and those in which we returned to the same field site, together or at separate moments. Additionally, we built upon Nyiri Pál’s (2013) argument that ethnographers should maintain remote contact with informants even when they are not in the field by applying this principle to our own research project. This provided the critical advantage of sharing information seamlessly among us, even when some were absent from the field. Having a perspective that looked back toward the Balkan region and forward toward the Alpine borderland allowed us to frame the events in Trieste within a broader spatial framework.

Along these lines, we have also tried to overcome the limitations of self-reflexivity itself, that is, the risk of engaging in a self-referential and “stale” exercise. We hence aimed to amplify and test our self-reflexivity through and within a collective process of self and reciprocal reflexivity. Methodologically, this entailed recognizing the situated, discontinuous, and unfinished nature of both data collection and the writing process (Lancione and Rosa 2017). This “trialogue” led us to the concept of seasonality, which, in turn, challenged us to deploy it as an analytical lens to revisit our individual works. That is, we use seasonality as a methodological lens through which to unpack and reassemble our ethnographic fieldworks in Trieste, both on our own and together, over the course of the years 2021–2023.

This article draws primarily on extracts of ethnographic fieldwork since the reflection on seasonality emerged only after we all terminated our main fieldwork experiences. This reflects on how our perceptions on the ground pieced together forming a multi-faceted jigsaw puzzle, highlighting how weather and environmental factors related to the passing of time are related to migrants’ experiences and local reactions.

This type of investigation was possible thanks to our mobility privileges as white women with European passports, enrolled in doctoral programs in Italy, which allowed us to move across borders without particular difficulties, even during the pandemic. At the same time, we acknowledge the overwhelming fatigue that can come with conducting prolonged and immersive periods of ethnographic fieldwork, particularly in contexts characterized

³ The Karst (it, *carso*) is a historical region, a rocky limestone plateau that extends across Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Slovenia, and Croatia.

by everyday violations of human rights. Staying in the field “alone”, uninterruptedly, while managing diverse research tasks – which overlap with one’s “personal life” across different locations – requires considerable physical, intellectual, and emotional effort. Leveraging these methodological challenges into analytical strengths, our deliberate practices of co-research and co-writing produced a patchwork of data (Hall 2010), or a multi-faceted ethnography that “weaves in” our distinct voices to identify “common and uncommon threads” (Iengo et al. 2023).

THINKING THROUGH AND WITH SEASONALITY

Scholars have aptly shown how the environment is co-opted by state authorities to naturalize, justify and invisibilize violence against migrants. As such, natural landscapes, climatic conditions and environmental discourses (of sustainability, for instance) are mobilized as tools to deflect political responsibility for harm and death. Different spaces, such as deserts (Sundberg 2011; De León 2015; Squire 2015), forests (Altin 2021; Hameršak and Pleše 2021; Zocchi 2023), mountains (Pallister-Wilkins 2022; Torre 2024), the sea (Squire 2020; Finiguerra 2023; Heller et al. 2023), and even newly established natural reserves (Davies et al. 2024) can be invoked as an excuse for the suffering and deaths of the migrants traversing them, while minimizing human and political accountability.

A growing strand of literature has analyzed – and denounced – the violations of human rights that take place along the Balkan route, as other articles in this special issue demonstrate. Within this debate, scholars have focused on unveiling the use of natural elements or the environment in justifying violent practices against migrants. Notably, Marijana Hameršak and Iva Pleše show that the forest areas through Croatia – commonly associated with natural beauty and hiking activities – are not innocent landscapes but rather “active factors for the creation and maintenance of border control regimes” (Hameršak and Pleše 2021: 205). Here, the forest itself becomes entangled within the border control infrastructure. Not only do authorities use existing landscapes to naturalize harm, but they also turn spaces into natural reserves to expel migrants altogether. Using the lens of “ecocoloniality”, Thom Davies et al. (2024) explain how the jungle of Calais was turned into a nature reserve, relying on conservation discourses to justify the exclusion of undesirable bodies. The previous camp became a nature reserve, rendering any attempt to inhabit this space not only illegal but also an anti-environmental act (Davies et al. 2024). This precisely shows how environmental discourse may be used by anti-immigrant actors to implement politics of exclusion (Turner and Bailey 2022).

Further, Polly Pallister-Wilkins’ (2022) analysis of the Alpine border space – a complex layering of border patrols, migrants and sporty tourists – depicts the differentiated border controls according to the seasons. Importantly, the author makes explicit the direct link between the political and the natural landscape. As a result, when the mountain path is

covered in snow and ice, border crossings evidently become riskier, illustrating the role played by “more-than-human entanglements” in reproducing borders (Pallister-Wilkins 2022). Similarly, Karolina Benghellab et al. (2025) conducted an empirical analysis to demonstrate how the European border regime weaponizes seasons, leading to the active use of the environmental conditions to deter migration, a form of “weather outsourcing”. Through ethnographic research at internal and external EU borders, the authors show that border guards “commonly use natural sites to inflict further violence – pushing migrants from hills or into rivers” (Benghellab et al. 2025). This increase in risks generates difficulties for those on the move, whose potential death or disappearance remains without direct state authorship or responsibility precisely because they are associated with the natural environment or harsh conditions (Schindel 2020).

This further denotes the relational nature of everyday practices and seasons, as an “awareness of weather conditions initiates anticipation, planning and practice” (Edensor et al. 2021: 2) that characterizes how people inhabit different spaces. This mouse and cat game between migrants and patrols exposes the seasonal choreography at play at borders: border guards exploit the extreme weather conditions and natural elements (rivers, mountain paths, forests) to fortify borders, while migrants adapt their strategy and paths too, with increased risks. Indeed, while authorities are aware of how climatic conditions affect mobilities and the roughness of the journey, it should also be noted that migrants too understand these seasonal shifts and can, in turn, mobilize them during their journey (Benghellab et al. 2025).

The way authorities delegate responsibility to the environment constitutes what Estela Schindel (2022: 430) calls the “political production of exposure to the elements”. When risk, harm, violence, and death are naturalized, the authorities actively deprive migrants of any protection and “border enforcement is outsourced and displaced to environmental and topographic ‘non-human’ agents” (Schindel 2022: 436), thereby evading accountability and responsibility towards migrants.

Following other scholars, we deem it important to challenge the discourse which makes seasons (Benghellab et al. 2025), extreme weather conditions (Sundberg 2011; Schindel 2020, 2022), or the environment (Hameršak and Pleše 2021; Benghellab et al. 2025) responsible for violence against people on the move. Therefore, the contribution of this paper consists of expanding and making more complex the above-cited analytical perspectives by adopting a relational approach that encompasses migrants, state authorities, and solidarity actors. In this way, this article does not just align itself with the emerging debate on seasonal politics and environmental instrumentalization but rather reconfigures it to include the perspective of other actors and dynamics equally involved in the processes at hand, and specifically the work of grassroots solidarity groups.

The notion of season also brings with it a certain stability, a phenomenon that comes back over and over, in which risks and consequences are essentialized (for instance, that summer months are favorable to crossing or that winter is riskier). While we do not deny

that these observations are relevant, we find that they limit our analysis to the idea of cyclicity – a concept which does not allow us to appreciate migrants' experiences, but also those of local inhabitants or authorities. Inspired by our field experiences, we propose the lens of seasonality as a sensitivity to how seasonal cycles, as well as unexpected events, actively interact with local politics – both institutional and grassroots.

The local weather conditions are not simply a contextual background but condition how actors are connected to the world (Edensor et al. 2021: 1) and space. Precisely for this reason, we put emphasis on processes rather than on the fixity of the terms, as well as emphasize how seasons are connected to social, political and institutional processes – through both cycles and ruptures.

USING THE WEATHER: THE POLITICS OF EMERGENCY

During the years 2019–2021, the number of arrivals in Trieste exhibited a fluctuating yet regular pattern: they were nearly minimal during the winter months, then steadily increasing from spring through late summer (Comunità di San Martino al Campo et al. 2023). A first dimension of the relationship between season and migration governance is thus straightforward: weather has implications on migration journeys, but also on the local governance and, as a consequence, on the reception system.

As Benghellab et al. (2025) have observed in other regions along the Balkan route, spring and summer months tend to facilitate transit, not only due to more favorable weather conditions but also because of longer daylight hours, allowing migrants to sleep outdoors with less risk of exposure-related harm and to walk longer distances. When Francesca started her fieldwork in 2021, there was indeed a seasonal pattern of migration, as she recalls in her fieldnotes:

Throughout the years, volunteers have come to notice a circular dynamic of arrivals, which tend to stop during the winter months, where transit in previous segments of the Route is slowed down due to large amounts of snow and prohibitive temperatures. The arrivals then progressively increase up until the summer, up to 80 people per day. (Fieldnotes, Francesca Fortarezza, October 2021)

Still, higher temperatures do not necessarily equate to fewer impediments. As a direct consequence of climate change, summers in Trieste have become significantly hotter than they used to be. Heatwaves caused huge wildfires, greatly impacting the Karst region in July 2022. During those months, around 4,000 acres of forest located at the border between Italy and Slovenia burnt down (Corpo Nazionale dei Vigili del Fuoco 2023). Transportation was blocked during those times, and the forest, used by migrants to walk the last section of the route, became more hostile than ever, also due to the increase in the presence of the police and the army involved in managing the wildfires. Conversely, winter months entailed cold, mud, and snow along mountain and forest paths. These

circumstances not only complicate and slow down migratory journeys but can also lead to injuries and fatalities (Wallis 2023).⁴

A clear example of this emerges from Francesca's field diaries: upon her arrival in Trieste in February 2021, she found an empty Square. In addition to climatic factors, the solidarity actors in the Square offered various explanations for this situation. Particularly, some suggested that heightened controls along the Italian–Slovenian border were diverting migrants to alternative crossings or prompting them to traverse the city as quickly and discreetly as possible. Notably, from May 2020 to January 2021, the Italian border police had been carrying out so-called “informal readmissions” of migrants, including asylum seekers, to Slovenia (Astuti et al. 2022). These readmissions constituted the slightly less violent equivalent of the now-infamous pushbacks perpetrated in different border zones across the Balkan route, which encompassed a wide range of violent acts used to prevent people from accessing a state's territory and systems of protection (Tondo 2020). Often, migrants readmitted from Italy into Slovenia would be involved in so-called “chain pushbacks” into Serbia and Bosnia – practices that involved the instrumental and violent exposure of migrants to the cold.

To avoid apprehension, mistreatment, and forced return, migrants were compelled to alter their trajectory, even if it necessitated navigating longer and more difficult paths or waiting until the end of the long Bosnian winter. This also impacted movements in and around Trieste, following what Roberta Altin has compared to Karstic waters, hiding themselves only to resurface elsewhere (Altin 2021). In this respect, an activist interviewed by Francesca explained the implications of violent border controls on both migrant arrivals and solidarity activities:

At a certain point, the movements changed. At first, almost everyone passed through Ferneti [the former official border crossing closest to Trieste]. Then, to avoid being tracked down, they started to enter the entire Karst area, up to Gorizia, up to the territory of Udine. So, the border was completely frayed, becoming untenable. Many people in the “taxi game” didn't even stop in Trieste; they went straight to Venice once they crossed the border. It's normal; it's action–reaction: the route shifts to avoid blockages. With the implementation of “readmissions” we saw a collapse in arrivals. We had a collective identity crisis because we didn't know what to do. We continued receiving donations and didn't know how to use them. (Vito, interview with Francesca Fortarezza, October 2021)

This excerpt reveals that stricter border control often results in the fragmentation and dispersion of movement, paradoxically multiplying and making it harder for state actors to control the geographies of mobility. In fact, policy changes in one country along the

⁴ For more details about death along the Balkan route, see the *ERIM Map of Border Deaths* created within the ERIM research project (<https://e-erim.ief.hr/pojam/p-karta-smrti-na-granici-p?locale=en>), based on ethnographic and archival research and uploaded on the *4D Database – Deceased, Disappeared, Detained: Documenting Migrant Trail in the Balkans* (<https://4dtrail.wordpress.com/>), another useful resource on this matter.

route affect migratory patterns in the others. This clearly resonates with what Marcello, an activist from Trieste, told Noemi, referring to how changing policies and climatic conditions in other countries along the Balkan route can “interfere” with the “seasonal” patterns of migration:

We were used to a decrease in arrivals in the winter. Instead, with the change in the political attitude of Croatia, above all [...] Croats were the ones doing the dirty job and pushing people back into Bosnia. Now, we don't know what game Croatia is playing. Slovenia is doing pretty much the same. So now they get to Italy without too many problems. And this is also why they keep arriving despite the cold. (Marcello, interview with Noemi Bergesio, January 2023)

Croatia's accession to the EU largely hinged on its government's ability to effectively “defend” the Union's borders from irregular migration (Augustova et al. 2023). Arrivals and departures were thus significantly influenced by the authorities' stances in different segments of the Balkan route, as well as by political trends in countries of origin, with the notable example of the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021.

In this context, border and reception policies are closely intertwined, and their scope and effect can either align or diverge. During the summer months of 2021, with the seasonal increase in arrivals, Trieste's local administration fueled alarmist rhetoric, claiming that the number of people intercepted by the police along the border and then forcibly taken to reception centers was excessive and unmanageable. Notably, Trieste's local administration and several local media outlets repeatedly claimed the reception system was saturated. The large number of people visible in Piazza della Libertà helped fuel this narrative, leading to public discomfort, frustration, and hostility towards migrants. However, the dominant narrative made it seem like the higher number of transits was causing the emergency, while, instead, it was the intensified border control combined with the lack of sufficient public services (Schiavone 2024).

Within the next year, the reception system for asylum seekers in Trieste effectively collapsed. Adding to previous years' policies that reduced reception and integration capacities, the system of transfers of asylum seekers to other Italian regions coordinated by the Prefecture operated slowly and irregularly. Consequently, hundreds of people were forced to sleep outdoors, typically in the abandoned buildings adjacent to the station, showing how exposure to harsh conditions was a direct consequence of the withdrawal from institutional responsibility. Highlighting the incidental, yet substantial, influence of seasonal patterns on these processes, the report *Vite Abbandonate* denounced:

During the warmer months of the year, living in the open is degrading, but not life-threatening. In winter, however, this same situation exposes people to unspeakable suffering and the real risk of death. (Comunità di San Martino al Campo et al. 2023)

These people had to wait months for a place in a reception facility, despite having already applied for international protection and thus being legally entitled to one.

As Thom Tyerman (2021) accurately describes in the context of Calais, border areas become a “hostile environment” in ways that cannot be naturalized or attributed to seasons but should be read as part of a broader politics of exclusion. As such, the intersection between the weather and border policies points to the instrumentalization of the environment and extreme weather conditions in the management of migrants’ lives (Davies et al. 2024). This resonates in the following excerpt from Francesca’s field diary, reporting a conversation with an activist in Piazza della Libertà:

Today, we heard that over seventy people crossing the border were intercepted by the police. We find it paradoxical that in the face of all this control, those who wish to move forward [those who do not want to ask for asylum in Trieste] are being intercepted [and then taken to preventative Covid-19 isolation facilities], thereby saturating these facilities. In the meantime, people willing to ask for international protection are forced to endure long waits before entering the overcrowded reception system, compelled to live in precarious conditions for extended periods and exposed to the influence of smugglers. It almost seems like they’re doing it on purpose, to then declare a state of emergency. (Fieldnotes, Francesca Fortarezza, July 2021)

Throughout this section, we have shown that seasons have multiple facets and play a different role according to different actors. We have shown that institutional actors, on the one hand, use weather conditions to further their political agendas, for example by playing on the hyper-visibility of migrants, or, conversely, invisibilizing them in public space. On the other hand, we also highlighted that, while the weather and environmental factors can influence migratory experiences, they are not the primary determinants for those on the move. In other words, weather conditions do not imply certain behaviors *a priori*, but count as a potentially strategic element among others. It is hence necessary to critically analyze these environmental factors within their political context to reveal how they are navigated by several actors to achieve different political ends.

REACTING TO THE WEATHER: TRIESTE’S SOLIDARITY PRACTICES

As others have rightly noted (Pallister-Wilkins 2022; Benghellab et al. 2025), weather conditions and the practicability of the terrain are important factors in migratory journeys. However, these conditions are not decisive. Migrants may assess meteorological risks in relation to the likelihood of border controls, sometimes opting for more dangerous trajectories or darker, colder nights to minimize the risk of interception. The interconnections and intersections between mobility and environmental factors are key to understanding how solidarity practices are negotiated in Trieste.

When Ophelia went for her first field visit in November 2022 to study solidarity activism in the Square, she was told that she could not expect to see much during the winter. In January 2023, it was a different story, as every night, people were indeed gathering in the Square. Noemi, in fact, experienced a further breaking point in the summer of 2023, when the reception and solidarity system collapsed, marking the beginning of a winter that was characterized by unusual peaks in arrivals.

Every day, people kept arriving, defying patterns of the previous years. Several migrants who arrived in Piazza della Libertà explained how travelling during winter is considerably more difficult and perilous, but this was not necessarily a motive for immobility. As such, the seasonal patterns did not seem to determine movement as they had previously. The disappearance of certain seasonal patterns in migrant arrivals prompted a re-organization of local solidarity. Indeed, the difficulties of seasonal weather were not only related to the transit but also to the conditions in Trieste. For migrants, the difficulty of staying in Trieste was marked by a shortage of accommodation – either in official camps or shelters, leading them to the makeshift camp in the Silos – a bureaucratically insidious asylum process and the constant running from one place to another for food, shower, electricity, Italian classes or, simply, rest. The lack of response from local institutions left migrants exposed to the cold and windy environment, compounded by extremely precarious life conditions.

In this context, solidarity actors had to adapt to a situation they were not used to and keep on with daily presence in the Square. During the winter months, solidarity networks struggled to provide jackets and thermal blankets to migrants and replace sleeping bags daily as humidity would strongly deteriorate their effectiveness. In the Square, solidararians⁵ would go around with large thermos flasks of tea and warm cooked meals to help warm up after the long journey. A small wood-burning heating system was also distributed and installed in the makeshift camp, but this required careful management of resources, which were not always available in sufficient quantities. Further, seasonal illnesses, lung diseases, and even cases of tuberculosis were caused or exacerbated by exposure to the damp and cold environments. In sum, solidarity groups were adapting to the needs in ensuring a daily presence in the Square with more volunteers, collecting winter items and donations. This, however, put a serious strain on how solidarity was organized in Trieste, due to the stress and fatigue that solidararians were subject to.

Beyond the actual activities of solidarity networks, the change of seasons also changes the geographies of solidarity. The dynamics of the Square – in terms of the presence of volunteers and types of activities in focus – also has a visible impact on the urban space. As Tim Edensor et al. put it, “the relationship between architectural features and weather [shows how] particular materialities become distinctively weathered” (Edensor et al. 2021: 10). In the colder months, for instance, solidararians moved from the visibility of the Square

⁵ The term “solidarian” is used here interchangeably with “solidarity actors”. For a discussion of the term, its emergence, and its conceptual relevance, see Theodossopoulos 2016 and Rozakou 2017.

to its underpass to reduce exposure to wind, rain, or cold; at the same time, migrants tried to seek shelter in the train station. As Noemi wrote:

Today it's freezing cold, and we moved to the underpass. One of the activists asks me and another person to go into the station and tell people [migrants] where they can find us [solidarians] because we are not visible from the outside. We get into the station, and we see people waiting. Some might have been waiting for their trains, and some were just seeking shelter. We see the police check every person's ticket. We see the police asking those who do not have a ticket to leave the station and go outside. (Fieldnotes, Noemi Bergesio, December 2022)

This example is one of the many where migrant bodies were pushed out into the cold: the lack of warm places to sleep and the repeated evictions from spaces sheltered from the wind and rain. Social workers found themselves having to make choices when allocating dormitory beds, implementing rotations among those already identified as the most vulnerable. However, those measures seemed minimal compared to the actual needs. Thereby, institutional violence in Trieste became *weathered* inasmuch as migrants were not only exposed to the elements, but also actively prevented from seeking shelter and forced to move from one place to another in search of a safe place.

In winter, the presence of migrants and solidarity actors in the Square was usually limited due to prohibitive atmospheric conditions. This reduced visibility mitigated negative reactions from those segments of the citizenry with hostile sentiments or fears concerning migration. Conversely, with the arrival of warmer weather, the number of people in the Square and the amount of time migrants and solidarians spent on these public sites tended to increase. While this facilitated the creation of social moments between solidarity actors and migrants, often manifesting in volleyball games, spontaneous concerts, and other convivial activities, it simultaneously created greater tensions. The visual impact exacerbated situations of degradation: food waste, rats, old or dirty clothes on the ground, and the absence of public restrooms generated more dirt and unpleasant odors.

Summer was marked by a constant movement in Piazza della Libertà, where regular activists and social workers mixed with new seasonal volunteers or groups of scouts. On the other hand, regular volunteers or students would leave the Square for some time during the summer break. This usually provided new energy to the Square, which left time to rest for those who had mobilized throughout the year, and those seasonal volunteers coming for a set period of time. For example, it was quite common for groups of high school students or scouts to spend several weeks of their summer holidays supporting these solidarity efforts.

This constant modification of the local context affected the organization of some activities, for instance, that of Italian classes at the Day Centre. As Martina, a volunteer of the Italian school, said to Noemi:

Within a few months of launching the Italian classes at the Day Centre, we managed to organize sessions several times per week. Until June, we could more or less count on the same people – both students and teachers – returning every week and we could therefore structure classes accordingly. However, since June, some of us have gone back home for the holidays, and we delegated the school to “seasonal” volunteers – such as scout groups. They were of huge help – without them, we would have had to close the school for the summer. But this created a continuous change in volunteers. (Martina, interview with Noemi Bergesio, July 2023)

This excerpt shows how solidarity activities were inserted into volunteers' daily lives in Trieste, where summer months were synonymous with holidays away from the city. While specific tasks were also regularly delegated to such groups – such as sorting through clothes to donate, doing the inventory, cleaning spaces, and organizing activities, others were of a competence level more suited to more experienced activists.

In this sense, while the presence of seasonal volunteers was concentrated in time and could sometimes generate confusion, their support appeared essential to the year-round logistics of local solidarity. It is hence also important to integrate the seasonality of volunteering to capture the political dynamics of solidarity. This underlines that weather conditions are beyond the contextual background, but that they condition how humans organize their time individually and collectively (Edensor et al. 2021). This adaptation happened in a specific institutional context, where solidarity actors in the Square had to struggle to establish their vision of welcoming those on the move, disruptively and materially resisting the instrumentalization of seasons and weather by institutional actors.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how environmental and seasonal factors intersect with migration governance in Trieste, a key node along the Balkan route. By combining insights from three fieldworks, we have shown how migrant communities, institutions, and solidarity networks all act within – and actively reshape – both their political and natural environments. In this view, weather and climate are not mere backdrops to human action but condition how actors relate to space, time, and to each other (Edensor et al. 2021).

Through the lens of seasonality, we have sought to capture the entanglements between weather and politics, rather than treating environmental conditions as deterministic. This perspective reveals the layered complexity of migration governance – shaped not only by environmental and climatic elements but also by institutional practices, individual choices, shifting border controls, solidarity dynamics, and trans-Balkan processes.

While acknowledging the usage of environmental factors by governmental actors in migration control, this article aims to underscore how governance processes are intrinsically

embedded in, and constructors of, uncertainty and unpredictability. While rooted in local processes, migratory movements are also, in fact, embedded in transnational, inter-scalar, and entangled geographies. Inspired by Martina Tazzioli's (2020a) concept of "disjointed knowledges", we contend that border management unfolds through uneven and contingent practices, where the natural environment becomes entangled in both the exercise of power and the tactics of endurance and resistance.

Importantly, we have demonstrated that neither migrants' movements nor institutional or civil society responses can be reduced to environmental triggers. Migrants' decisions to move or stay, institutional capacities, and solidaristic mobilization each follow their own temporalities, sometimes overlapping, sometimes diverging. Civil society organizations, for instance, adapt their activities and rhythms to the changing seasons, filling the gaps left by institutional neglect (Fortarezza 2023).

In the article, we emphasized two dimensions that extend beyond the empirical case. First, environmental and climatic conditions are often invoked to obscure human and institutional responsibility for migrants' suffering – as if exposure to the elements were inevitable rather than politically produced. We argue instead that seasonal hardships must be understood *within* their structural and political contexts. Second, adopting seasonality as an analytical framework allows us to move beyond the false dichotomy between "natural" and "political" seasons, highlighting the dynamic interplay of environmental, social, and institutional processes.

Seasonality, finally, is also a methodological proposition. The temporal arc employed to "stitch" our ethnographies together has allowed us to illuminate and discuss certain dis/similarities among our experiences, despite our different stages of the research, academic background, research focus, and approach. This collaboration has complemented and complexified our respective projects, enabling us to fill temporal and thematic blind spots within our individual research and providing us with a more granular understanding of our shared field site.

These results invite researchers to reflect on how weather and environmental conditions shape not only the realities we study but also our capacity to research them (Barry et al. 2021). What forms of knowledge are seasonal? What experiences, places, or actors become invisible at certain times of the year? Acknowledging these "in-between moments" opens new avenues for multi-layered, situated analyses that integrate macro-political events with the mundane rhythms of everyday life. In doing so, we uncover the paradoxical "suspension of time" that emerges in the ethnographic experience of border spaces – an invitation for deeper collective reflection within our epistemic communities.

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SEZONALNOST KAO ANALITIČKO OČIŠTE: SNALAŽENJE U MIJENAMA "GODIŠNJIH DOBA" MIGRACIJA – ETNOGRAFSKI KOLAŽ IZ TRSTA

Članak promatra pojam sezonalnosti kao konceptualno i metodološko očiste za razumijevanje susretnosti migracija, okoliša i upravljanja u Trstu. Istražuje kako vremenski i okolišni čimbenici oblikuju upravljanje migracijama duž balkanske rute. Na temelju tri etnografska terenska istraživanja (2021–2023) nudi se složeni, multilokalni prikaz međudnosa klimatskih obrazaca, političkog konteksta i reakcija institucija, koji proizvodi politike i prakse mobilnosti i azila u gradu. Povezujući prirodna i politička "godišnja doba", članak prikazuje načine na koje lokalne vlasti instrumentaliziraju okolišne uvjete kako bi regulirale prisutnost i vidljivost migranata, dok solidarne grupe i migranti svoje prakse kontinuirano prilagođavaju tim promjenama. Navedeni procesi smještaju se unutar širih europskih transformacija upravljanja migracijama, otkrivajući kako se vrijeme, okoliš i

kontrola prepliću u lokalnom upravljanju granicama. Naposljetku, Trst se pokazuje kao paradigmatično mjesto gdje se preslojavaju temporalnosti prirode, politike i mobilnosti ljudi, otkrivajući suštinsku krhkost suvremenih migracijskih režima.

Ključne riječi: Trst, sezonalnost, balkanska ruta, upravljanje migracijama, etnografija