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## Living in the *barzaj*: the tensions of the ghosts of glocalization. The *atrezzo* that accompanies lone young migrants on the stage of Fortress Europe

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If this text were a play, the protagonists would be the young people who have migrated to Catalonia alone in recent years. The setting would be a context defined by the limits of a Fortress Europe at odds with the protagonists who quietly appear, both in the border areas and in the municipalities. The supporting cast and *atrezzo* would be the society in the country of origin and the host society, the media, governments and political parties, who would at the same time effectively be co-creators of this production. These pages will take the reader-observer below the surface of this performance in which it is not clear whether the protagonists are free agents or simply puppets in a constant struggle to shake off the invisible strings that bind them.

### 1. Build or burn: the perverse threshold of youth

The passion for “burning up life or the passion for building it” are, according to Alain Badiou (2016), quoting Aristotle, two passions that are at the same time intrinsic to, and enemies of, youth. The first is a state marked by immediacy, ephemeral but intense, influenced by longing and play, experimentation, pleasure, adventure and constant danger. The passion to burn life is characterised by an ongoing instability that makes it impossible to build a viable future. It is a life devoid of meaning, a drive for death that inhabits, secretly but entirely, the drive for life (Badiou, 2016). The passion to build life, on the other hand, lies in the desire to acquire success and wealth within established frameworks. It is a clearly defined path where one succumbs to the established social order. In the words of the author, it is a “conservative cult of existing powers” (Badiou, 2016). However, neither the passion to burn life nor to build it can endure, both must be experienced by the young.

These are passions that run through the lives of all young people, but in this text we will look at their impact on lone young migrants. Through success stories, the media has shown life paths that make it possible to “build” a life within established frameworks despite circumstances that may not always be favourable. Other stories, however, have shown the other side of the coin: young people who live a life that “burns”. The latter, far from being the majority, have also made headline news and formed part of political discourse. The building-burning dichotomy has often been constructed as if there were only two paths to choose from. This polarity has helped to reduce the complexity of the migration and integration processes for lone young migrants.

This text is an initial approach to the context that comes along with it, to the structure underpinning it, and the tensions that these young people face. The following pages present an analysis of the current situation. It is a situation marked by a crisis in the (de)institutionalisation of the young people and by attacks directed at the apartments supposedly turned into squats by young people identified as *Menors No Acompanyats (Menas)* [unaccompanied minors], *exmenas* [former unaccompanied minors] and *extutelats* [young people who have spent a certain part of their childhood in a centre for young migrants].

Therefore, this text is a sample of the *atrezzo* that every lone young migrant finds when stepping onto a stage that pushes the boundaries of this Fortress Europe that aspires to be both universal and selective at the same time. For over twenty years, children and young people have been emigrating alone, flouting these limits, appearing on the border as shadows or mirages, and in the municipalities as foreigners. Thus they become ghosts of glocalization, reminding us that although the world is hyper-connected and distance is constantly shrinking, inequality keeps on growing.

## **2. The context: policies and measures aimed at lone migrant children<sup>1</sup> and young people. Governmentality and the lack of control over security.**

For over 20 years, migrant children and young people have undertaken journeys to Europe, travelling alone. In Spain, the first were recorded in 1993, two years after the Schengen treaty was signed, which for the first time obliged Moroccan citizens to get a visa in order to enter Spain. According to Jimenez (2014), Spain's entry into the group of Schengen countries led to an increase in the number of makeshift boats that washed up illegally on the Spanish coastline. In order to put a stop to this, in that same year steps were taken to roll out the SIVE system (Integrated External Surveillance System), managed by the Civil Guard.

The first minors to arrive in Spain were, on the whole, children and young people with few or no family links who hid under trucks in Tangier with the aim of making their way to Spain. In the mid-90s, reports of the harsh living conditions for these minors began to appear in the press, with headlines drawing attention to the situation in Spain, Catalonia and Morocco (Jiménez 2014). According to Monteros (2019), this media attention and the impact within the public sphere led to an increase in police pressure at Moroccan ports. From then on, new groups of minors tried to get to Spain via the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. Hoping for the chance to enter by land, for the first time groups of children and young people gathered in the neighbouring cities of Nador and Castillejos.

In 1996, two legislative changes in Spain affected the migration of these children and young people, as they were both foreigners and minors. On the one hand, legislation was brought in regarding the rights and freedoms of foreigners (Organic Law 7/1985, of 1 July, on the Rights and Freedoms of Foreigners). In Section 19 of the legislation the term *menor en situació de desemparament* [minors without the support of a parent or guardian] used to refer to a foreign minor appeared for the first time. And on the other, the Spanish state introduced relevant child protection legislation as a result of Spain's ratification of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991. Thus, Organic Law 1//1996, of 15 January on the Legal Protection of Minors recognised the right to protection of any person under the age of 18 across Spain, regardless of their nationality (Jimenez, 2014; Monteros, 2019).

According to various researchers (Giménez y Suárez, 2000; Adroher, 1998 cited by Monteros, 2019), the convergence of these legal, economic, social and political factors led to the emergence of a group of people that would come to be known as "unaccompanied foreign minors" (or "*menas*"). However, this legal term has been widely criticised, and has been subject to modification over the years, both within third sector organisations and academic circles.

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1. Without attempting to make the female migration of girls and young people invisible, this text focuses on the migration of boys and young men of the male gender. For this reason, the generic "child" will be used throughout the text.

In the 2000s, Spain and Morocco entered into diplomatic conflict over fishing rights in the Kingdom's waters (Remiro, 2012). During trade talks, there were also negotiations regarding the relative status of migration controls. It was from then on that migration became more a question of exchange, of dispute and negotiation between the two countries (De Lucas, 2002, Hernando de Larramendi, 2004, Nair, 1998; cited by Monteros, 2019). Since the signing of the Bilateral Agreements between Spain and Morocco, police pressure has grown, and a security-based view adopted with regard to migration management. Police presence was increased at ports and in the enclaves and, for the first time, minors setting out on their migratory journey by sea began to be observed.

With migratory flows a feature on the negotiating table and the increase in the visibility of the harsh living conditions of children and young people who emigrated alone, in 2003 the forced deportation of minors to Morocco began (Jiménez, 2014). According to SOS Racisme (2004), there were 111 repatriations of unaccompanied minors in 2003, that were, according to complaints made, in contravention of the Law on the Protection of Minors and the Aliens Act. A series of agreements and laws were drafted to strengthen this legislation, and at the same time international cooperation was used as a means to dissuade minors from migrating. Then the term "potential child migrant" in development programmes was coined (UNICEF, 2005; Jiménez, 2014). That same year, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) was created, and the Integrated External Surveillance System (SIVE) was improved. It was from then on, according to Monteros (2019), that migrant children and young people began to be used as a bargaining chip at a negotiating table where migration was already on the agenda.

The deterrent effect of the policies was exacerbated by obstacles to the procedures for document regularisation for children and young people in care, as well as those under guardianship. In regions with the greatest numbers of young migrants, violations of the terms of the Aliens Act began to take place (Monteros, 2007). All these measures favoured the migration of young people beyond Spanish borders. Between 2000 and 2005, children and young people, the majority of whom were Moroccans, began to be observed in Italy and France. From 2005 onwards in Belgium, the United Kingdom, Germany, Greece and Austria. 2010 saw the first applications for asylum in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. One of the effects of all this was an extension of the migratory routes of children and young people and therefore, greater exposure to the associated risks.

Neither forced repatriations, nor international cooperation, nor the lengthening of regularisation processes were able to prevent what was called the "Cayuco crisis" of 2007; in 2008 there was a record number of 8,080 arrivals. In order to mitigate the crisis, the Africa Plan was launched, which involved the signing of cooperation pacts and agreements on repatriations with Senegal and Mauritania. It was from this plan that the first FRONTEX maritime operation was born. Arrivals in Spain decreased until 2013 (2,632), and then kept increasing until 2018, when a total of 7,026 were counted (Attorney General's Office, 2019). That same year, the Policia Nacional and FRONTEX worked together to launch the "Minerva" operation at the ports of Algeciras, Ceuta and Tarifa to stop irregular migration and for the first time, the "terrorist threat".

This timeline shows how politicians, programmes and actions undertaken in relation to the migration of lone children and young people have always been torn between two seemingly contradictory approaches. As minors, lone young migrants are protected, and as foreigners they are subject to control. Living on this borderline affects, and often determines, the trajectories, decisions and destinations of children and young people, and allows us to glimpse a way that they might be managed, within the Foucauldian perspective of "governmentality", Foucault (1999). This "governmentality" is exercised by directing destinies and individuals by hindering or facilitating, limiting or expanding, whether or not to use violence either explicitly or implicitly, ultimately making migration, regularisation and the integration of these young migrants in European countries less or more likely (Foucault, 1999).

From the outset, the twists and turns in this governmentality of young people were to a large extent preceded by a media focus that showed both alarming living conditions and the impact on the public sphere. Thus, in order to bring about certain changes in policy, the media coverage of the phenomenon became a *sine qua non*. As shown, some policies have tended to be more restrictive, in the belief that more control in itself brings more collective security. But this has not always been the case. Greater control, whether through border security, development programmes or repatriation, has had a deterrent effect in the short term, but not in the longer term. This is evidenced by the “Cayuco crisis” in 2007, and the increase in arrivals in 2018.

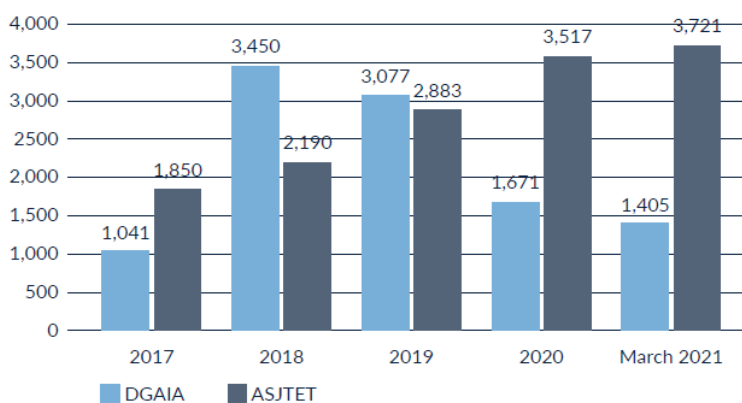
The increase in migratory control in these cases studied has ended up driving the migration of the most vulnerable and/ or dependent (children and young people), and the use of forms of transport (makeshift boats) and routes that are less secure, as well as lengthening the migratory journey, and time spent on the streets with all its consequent risks. This has also had an impact on public space.

Therefore these circumstances have not achieved the aim of increasing security - either for young migrants themselves, or for the rest of the population living with the consequences. In fact quite the opposite. To put it another way, an increase in security has tended towards a loss of control in the long term, as far as juvenile migratory processes and their impact on the public sphere are concerned.

### 3. The data on lone migrant children and young people to Spain and Catalonia and the wormhole effect of reception centres

The official count of lone children and young people who emigrated to Spain, the RMENA (Register of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors) of the Attorney General's Office, quadrupled in three years. It was 3,997 in 2016, 6,414 in 2017, 13,012 in 2018 and 12,417 in 2019. The majority of these children and young people were registered in Andalusia (4,617), Catalonia (1,977), Melilla (1,398) and the Basque Country (777). Simultaneously, according to the General Directorate of Care for Children and Adolescents of Catalonia (DGAIA), there were 1,489 new admissions in 2017, 3,742 in 2018, 2,202 in 2019, 810 in 2020, and 162 up to the end of March 2021. Thus, between January 2016 and March 2021, almost 9,000 children and young people accessed the protection systems of the DGAIA.

**Graph 1. Number of lone migrant children and young people supported by the DGAIA, and young people (both Spanish nationals and foreign born) linked to ASJTET**



ASJTET data in absolute terms, including lone young migrants and Spanish nationals

Source: Original research based on the monthly reports of the DGAIA and the statistical report.

As most of those who arrive are between 16 and 18 years old, this has meant an almost immediate increase in the number of young migrants who, at the time of coming of age, either leave the child protection programmes, or are referred to other resources for adults, such as ASJTET, the

organisation that provides support for young people who are or were on guardianship programmes created by the Generalitat de Catalunya. Numbers here have doubled in three years. ASJTET dealt with 1,850 cases in 2017, 2,194 in 2018, 2,883 in 2019 and 3,517 up to December 2020.

Despite the increase in young people supported by the ASJTET, in March 2021 there were still 1,405 lone young migrants over the age of 18 (58.1% of the total number of children and young people admitted) in extended care, i.e. still being dealt with as minors awaiting emancipation resources. 26% of children in care will turn 18 in 2021. Only 3.1% are female. 71.1% come from Morocco, 19.8% from sub-Saharan Africa and 5.5% from North Africa (DGAIA, 2021).

Although they are often grouped under the “*mena*” label, and are supported by the same reception policies, there are many differences between them. In Catalonia, it is estimated that 59.9% have emigrated due to lack of opportunities in their countries of origin, followed by 54.7% fleeing poverty, and 51% doing so for work reasons (DGAIA, 2019). Family consent when agreeing on a migration project is as diverse as the socio-economic situation of the household or the geographical origin of the family (if any). However, expectations at destination are not so diverse: 89.5% expect to find work, 52.6% to receive training, especially with a view to entering the labour market, and 42.9% to regularise their situation. All these circumstances reveal the heterogeneity and diversity within the group itself.

**Table 1. Reasons for migration and expectations at destination**

Why do they migrate?		What are their expectations?	
Lack of opportunities in countries of origin	59.90%	Find work	89.50%
Escape poverty	54.70%	Education	52.60%
Work expectations	51%	To regularise their situation	42.90%

Source: Original data from DGAIA (2019). The young people were allowed to select more than one option.

The first waves of migration of children and young people studied in the 1990s revealed severe exclusion and neglect of young migrants in Spain. Today, as the main reason for migration is the lack of opportunities in the country of origin, a qualitative shift can be observed. Although lack of opportunity is not so distant from a desire to escape poverty, it suggests that at present the primary motivation driving migration is not solely the lack of material resources. Migration is also a response to a feeling of hopelessness experienced in the country of origin and a desire to move and to seek out opportunities - the ambition to follow dreams of a better future.

Hence, reception centres would not be a merely places of refuge. They would also be a way, often the only way, to fulfil their expectations: work, education, regularisation. An analogy could easily be drawn with the worm that, in order to get from one side to the other of an apple, enters at one side and exits from another, shortening the distance between the two. The same happens with a wormhole that links two universes. Institutionalisation, in this case reception centres, would be a window of opportunity to shorten the time required to achieve regularisation in a similar way, entering as a child or young person in an irregular situation with the hope of leaving at 18 with a work and residence permit. But as will become apparent, neither arrival nor departure has necessarily turned out as expected.

#### **4. Structure: The shortcomings of (de)institutionalisation**

There was a clear increase in arrivals in 2018, and this was reflected on newspaper front pages showing children and young people sleeping at government offices and police stations. During that same year, images appeared of overcrowded reception centres across the country, especially in the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. This increase in migration by young people travelling to Spain alone brought with it a twofold problem that is still evident today. On the one hand, there was a

crisis in the reception of migrants that created a social arena marked by a sense of emergency. On the other, as will be seen at the end of this article, there were various attacks on reception centres and later on apartments thought to house lone young migrants (who may or may not have passed through the support system). This shows that there was an increase in hate speech and racist attacks against this social group (Arnal and Garcés, 2021).

In Catalonia, the increase in the numbers of children and young people arriving alone led to the rapid and urgent opening of additional reception centres. This often took place without coordination with municipalities, in spaces that had not been adapted for educational needs, and with a lack of the necessary psychosocial counselling. According to the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2019), limited reception capacity brings with it difficulties in protecting fundamental rights. These include: overcrowding, lack of privacy, inadequate hygiene, risk of criminal victimisation, sexual and gender violence, lack of consideration of vulnerabilities, and social isolation. These challenges with regard to the protection of fundamental rights, often experienced in emergency centres despite administrative efforts, meant that some young people were exposed to shortcomings within the system throughout the time they spent in institutions.

If in 2018 the lack of resources was evident within the support system, it is now to be found at the end. Thus, in March 2021, 58.1% of all the young people received by the DGAIA were still being housed in accommodation intended for minors, despite being of legal age. And, although status as a minor implies that the person cannot be deported, confers the right to have a legal guardian, to housing (a priori and if possible, with a family), the recognition of social rights (to education, health care, etc.) and procedural guarantees for asylum claims and other administrative procedures, all this changes on turning 18. Once young migrants come of age, depending on their legal status, they may be at risk of refoulement, deportation, and loss of unconditional access to housing, as well as all the rights and guarantees to which they are entitled as minors.

Thus, the shortcomings of institutionalisation resulting from the emergency of 2018 have continued into 2020 and 2021, and in some cases, there have also been ongoing issues with the process of de-institutionalisation. Gimeno (2013) provides an illustration of this using the metaphor of a revolving door. He argues that minors who enter protection-control centres through the juvenile door are increasingly being pushed out through the same revolving door as newly arrived undocumented adults. This lack of support during the de-institutionalisation process also leads young people to seek out networks of compatriots who can help them when the support system does not cover their needs. This is the resource that they look to in the case that the centre or system fails them (López, 2018). In Catalonia, the lack of support experienced by young people leaving the system is compounded by additional migratory flows, such as young people who have arrived as minors, young people who have moved through the reception system outside Catalonia, and young asylum seekers, etc. (Arnal and Garcés, 2021). However, this multiplicity of migratory flows has not prevented the start of demonstrations or attempts by local residents to evict people from flats being used as squats where the occupants have been explicitly identified as “*menas*” or “*ex-menas*”.

Given the context and structure, what follows are some of the tensions that lone young migrants experience.

## 5. Subjected to tensions: living in the *barzaj*

“I was in limbo, I lived in the Strait; I was no longer from here and I wasn’t yet from there, forever on the starting line in the *barzaj* between life and death ”.

Mathias Enard, *La calle de los ladrones*, 2013.

For Muslims, the *barzaj*, according to Mohammed, is the moment in which the body and the soul separate before the final judgement. The *barzaj* is a state of uncertainty, doubt, tension and

change. It is an invisible, uncoordinated space between two, intrinsically distanced and differentiated points, which never come together and never meet. It is a threshold, a liminal space. On a daily basis lone migrant children and young people experience and embody a range of tensions; some of these are specific, and others are common to their stage of life. These are generated and influenced by multiple factors. As we will see, the majority of these are linked to ideals that are never achieved, or to spaces and moments in time that fall between something that has been left behind, and something else that appears always to be out of reach. These tensions between two seemingly irreconcilable points sometimes become entrenched, and one of them can take on an overly central role. Although they are often born and reproduced in a transnational field, i.e. simultaneously here, there, and in cyberspace, the consequences of living with these tensions often erupt within the local sphere. It is then that, as the Hellenistic philosopher said, it would seem that these “ghosts of glocalization” have only two paths to choose between: one, to build a life by succumbing to the established order, the other, to burn life as a form of protest.

### 5.1. First point of tension: between the *haraga* and the *mena*

“There’s no way out, no hope, please, tell me,  
How can I escape this? When will I get out?  
I’ll leave as a *haraga*, whatever happens”.

Mourad Guerbas and Samir Saadaoui, *Haraga*, 2018.

When you work with young lone migrants, the word *haraga* soon becomes familiar. It is in the songs they listen to, they use the word amongst themselves, sometimes with pride, sometimes as an insult. It also appears on social networks. The word *haraga* has as its root the term HRQ in classical Arabic, which means to burn or to catch fire. Cortés’s dictionary of modern colloquial Arabic defines it as a person who lights up (Quiroga 2003). In a metaphorical sense, it refers to someone who risks or burns their life in order to be able to migrate, and is used to refer to those who travel illegally and without papers. It refers also to those who burn their documentation prior to starting their journey so as not to be identified and thus avoid the risk of being deported. The term generally is used in the pejorative sense, and although it can sometimes be used as a synonym for brave, it is a word that young people prefer to avoid using. The *haraga* speaks to us of the illegality of the migratory process and a passion for life, like Aristotle’s, that *burns*. It is a life that transgresses, that takes place on the *outside*, and one that even defies the control and the institutions of the state.

Once arrived in Spain and taken to a reception centre, the *haraga* enters into direct contradiction with the “*mena*”. If the *haraga* seeks to circumvent the regulations and the boundaries, the “*mena*” knows that he has to accept them. If the *haraga* travels illegally, anonymously, so as not to be recognised and to elude the control of the state, the “*mena*” needs to be visible, to hold documentation that proves that he exists, and subject himself to state control in order to be able to *build*, to work towards achieving his goal. The only way to leave the *haraga* behind is by entering the wormhole, i.e. the reception centres from which he hopes to emerge with a work and residency permit, and not to fall back into an irregular situation. The fine line between the *haraga* and the “*mena*” is the one that separates illegality from legality, and lone young migrants constantly shift between the two sides of the border.

### 5.2. Second point of tension: between children and adults

“I steal. No begging, I’m 16 years old. My mate Sebtawi was right: begging is for kids and old people. It’s shameful for a kid to beg when they can steal”.

Mohamed Chukri, *El pan a secas*, 2012.

Lone young migrants, in terms of their life process, live in a constant state of ageist schizophrenia. In their home countries they are considered adults capable of fulfilling certain responsibilities, a fact that is reaffirmed when they cross the Straits of Gibraltar. This crossing is interpreted as a “right of

passage” where the “child” leaves home to become an adult who is expected to build their own life. They are also expected to contribute to the family economy (since in many cases the family has invested money in them), and they are now the ones who should, from a distance, take care of the family (and the sooner the better). At destination however, this assumption of responsibility clashes directly with the fact that in the host country they are seen as children who are justifiably - in need of protection. There is a clash for several reasons, but two in particular stand out: firstly, the fact that centres and apartments tend to have clear schedules and rules that, although very necessary, can be difficult to live with after being considered an adult in the country of origin, and/ or after days, or even months, of survival during the migratory process. Secondly, because in most cases centres and apartments cannot provide what young people are looking for in order to feel empowered, responsible and able to “take care” of the family: paid work.

Mohamed Chukri (2012), based on his own experience, equates living in a state of dependence to childhood. The author relates how, after months of misery, receiving beatings and abuse while trying to make a living, turning to crime was for him a form of empowerment. In fact it was like crossing a line into adulthood, leaving behind the dependence of the child or adult who begs.

Origin and destination intertwine with the ideas held on opposite sides of the Strait regarding age and the responsibilities that come with it, which often clash. At destination, they are seen as children in need of protection from an adulthood pressed upon them at too young an age in their countries of origin. In their countries of origin, it is often the other way round: young migrants are only adults who become children again when they arrive at their destination.

### 5.3. Third point of tension: between offline and online

“Bleti, Bleti [wait, wait], don't start eating.  
Photo for your aunt..., photo for your grandma...  
So they see that we eat in Spain too!”

@Hamzazaidi97, *Quando comes fuera con tus padres  
España vs Marruecos*, 2018.

The role of social media runs through the lives of young people, with greater or lesser intensity, for several reasons. Firstly, because social media influences the decision to migrate as it generates imaginaries of the host country and what life might be like there. Within this imaginary, the destination is often presented as the place that will it possible to make their aspirations as global young people a reality. (Gimeno, 2014). Secondly, once they have emigrated images of the success of the migratory journey are common, and materialise in various ways: in emblematic spaces around the city, with branded clothing, with girls, with money, with cars or luxury motorcycles, showing off muscles etc. In short, with everything that fits with the imaginaries of hegemonic masculinity. This shows how that place where consumption in accordance with the dictates of global consumer society was not possible has been left behind.

For Gimeno (2014), the images of sports icons, leisure, and consumer goods position young people within the sexual market, reflect an apparent social status, and are at the same time indicators of integration within Western teenage society. Thus, the ascription of identity to certain symbols evokes the success of the migration project, at least in accordance with capitalist consumer standards or, as Belguendouz (2009) puts it, in accordance with access to the “European supermarket”.

However, this apparent success hides contradictions. On the one hand, because the products worn are frequently imitations that may well have been produced in the place of origin - that place from which they have fled. On the other hand, because the visibility of such content at the destination conditions its existence online, but not offline (Gimeno, 2014). Thus, the images are a projection that often has little to do with the real world.



Yet cyberspace, within a context of transnational relations, provides the opportunity to create and display an *alter ego* rooted in the virtual. As an a-territorial space, it is also a place that makes belonging possible for young migrants who live between here, there, everywhere, and nowhere.

#### 5.4. Fourth point of tension: between two different vulnerabilities: to becoming the victims of crime, or the perpetrators of crime

“But, why didn’t you want to be at the reception centre?”

“Because they treat you like a kid, and at the same time they look at you like a criminal, that’s the problem”.

Morad, *Centre Educatiu de Justícia Juvenil*.

Morad expressed the tension experienced by some lone young migrants on becoming institutionalised at reception centres: being treated like children while being viewed as criminals. He says that reception centres do not provide what he was looking for, a safe space, and a place that would enable him to regularise his situation. He felt they were turning him back into the child he had left behind when he crossed the Strait. For these reasons, like other children and young people, he preferred to “go it alone”. Years later, with hindsight he recognised that this was an idea that was impossible without involving some sort of abuse of his freedom or his vulnerability, or of both at the same time.

Exposure to life on the street or in an emergency reception centre can stretch over a long time, and it can involve exposure to certain risks, both victimological and criminological. Researchers from the PREMECE project (OCSPI, 2020), working in Ceuta with the aim of reducing situations of vulnerability amongst young people living on the street and their impact on public space, have studied this. The project managed to significantly reduce the judicial measures imposed on minors. The results confirm that despite a much-heightened feeling of insecurity among city residents stemming from young people living on the street, few actually resort to committing crimes in the city, and if they do, most of their offences are minor ones. According to the researchers the problem lies in the fact that young offenders living on the street end up not complying with their probation orders, which leads to their internment in closed centres for minor offences. The same researchers affirm that minors do not usually go to the police when they are victims of theft, physical aggression or abuse, and, therefore incidents in which they are the victims are generally not recorded. Furthermore, although they have the right to receive medical attention, they do not access it when they need it.

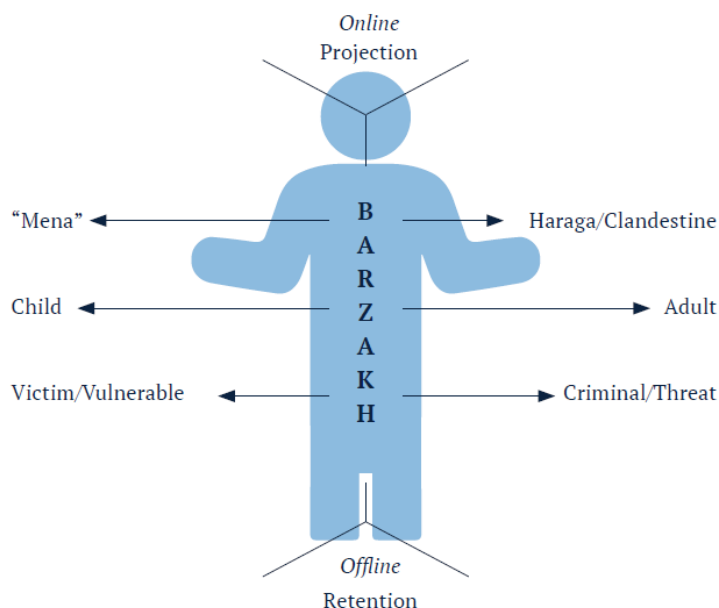
In the face of this situation, public opinion often swings between compassion and rejection and fear. This is something that is also (re)created through political discourse. Such as the case, for example, of the video by Teresa Rodríguez, general coordinator for Podemos Andalucía, in which she declared “they are children - they’re called *menas* because they want us to forget this”. She made this statement in response to the visit of the president of VOX Madrid, Rocio Monasterio, to the La Macarena district of Seville to denounce supposed “packs of *menas*”. “Vulnerable children” or “young criminals”: it would seem that there are only two ways to interpret this migration within the perspective of political discourse. These two very different imaginaries (re)produce polarisation because they minimise nuance, and therefore also the complexity of the phenomenon.

The following illustrates what has been said so far. While it is understood that there are three points of tension that affect children and young migrants only horizontally (because they tend to be specific to, or are amplified in this particular group), one of them is vertical (because it tends to be common in young people of the same age).

The distribution is an open-ended illustration of the above explanation, it is not finite and is constantly changing in accordance with the same cited governmentality. Lone young migrants are

suspended in this constantly shifting *barzaj* or limbo, being seen and treated as lone, vulnerable children who are victims and/ or as clandestine adults against whom protection is needed.

**Iconography 1. The tensions experienced by lone young migrants**



Source: Own elaboration.

## 6. The current situation: demonstrations and attacks on reception centres and flats used as squats, a self-fulfilling prophecy?

As stated, the increase in arrivals of young migrants has generated two issues: the first, already mentioned in the previous pages, has been the crisis at the reception phase; the second, an increase in xenophobic and racist discourse against them as a group. For Arnal and Garcés (2021), the two issues have brought local administrations into the picture. These, despite not having responsibilities in terms of child protection, are the first authorities to be held responsible (or to experience the consequences first-hand) when their municipalities are home to groups in a situation of extreme social exclusion.

Through SOS Racisme (2020) and different media sources, a series of events and situations that occurred between 2019 and 2021 have been drawn together for analysis. Among these, the following stand out:

- 5 violent attacks on youth centres in Castelldefels, Masnou, Canet de Mar (2019), Badalona (2020) and Torredembarra (2021).
- 4 attacks on flats allegedly used as squats by young people of North African origin in Barcelona-Trinitat Vella, Premià de Mar, Llançà (2020) and Torredembarra (2021).
- 2 demonstrations and the creation of 2 citizens' platforms opposing the opening of reception centres in Rubí and Barcelona-Besòs (2019).
- 8 demonstrations to protest against public insecurity, 5 of which ended in, or were related to, violent attacks on reception centres or squats.

The first violent attacks on reception centres and demonstrations against these occurred over the course of 2019, a year after the increase in arrivals. Many of them were focused on emergency centres (already in existence or planned) with a high number of places. These were: Canet de Mar

(50 places), Castelldefels (60), Rubí (70 planned), Masnou (50) and Barcelona-Besòs (50 planned). All of those already established are managed by the same cooperative.

With regard to the demonstrations, the first one was in Canet de Mar (2019) where a group of local residents demonstrated against insecurity within the municipality. Several young people were passing by the place where the demonstration was taking place, and some local residents verbally abused them, while others recorded the events. A few days later, a man entered the town's reception centre armed with a machete, and threatened to kill the centre director and residents. In Barcelona-Poble Sec (2019) a demonstration (also against insecurity) was organised by the district's Neighbourhood Association. The flyer states that there is a direct link between heightened insecurity and a group *menas* who live in Montjuïc, outside protection systems. Also, in Barcelona-Trinitat Vella (2020) there was an attempt to set fire to a house being used as a squat the day before a demonstration organised by local residents. Squatters were identified as the main source of insecurity in the neighbourhood. The demonstration ended with an attempt by the demonstrators to evict them from the building. In Mataró (2020), demonstrations took place outside various flats being used as squats in the municipality. There was no attempt to clear the building, but the creation of neighbourhood patrols was reported for the first time. Days later, in Premià de Mar (2020) there was a demonstration outside a flat occupied by squatters, and an attempted attack by local residents aimed at evicting them. Two weeks later, in Llançà (2020), the same thing happened. After a demonstration, local residents tried to evict those living in a flat being used as a squat. During a protest against insecurity in Pineda de Mar (2020), direct links were made between *menas* as a group and squatting and delinquency. Finally, in Torredembarra (2020) an attempt to evict people from a house that was being used as a squat (unsuccessful, because the young people were not there) was for the first (and only) time combined with a subsequent attack on a reception centre.

These demonstrations, while mostly legitimate, were often accompanied by lies circulated on social networks. In Canet de Mar, a video was passed around of a brutal attack on a woman in a public space. In it the attacker was identified as a *mena*. It was later revealed that the events filmed had taken place in China. In the Besòs neighbourhood of Barcelona, WhatsApp messages claimed that in 48 hours 50 temporary shelters would be set up on a plot of land to act as an emergency centre for minors. Although a centre had indeed been planned for the site, it was not going to be built in the next 48 hours. The messages called for local residents to mobilise to defend "your children's safety". In Badalona, via Twitter, the mayor took pride in having managed to stop the establishment of a reception centre in the city. Shortly afterwards, it became known that the decision not to do so was taken by the DGAIA, and not by the mayor. The assault on a flat used as a squat in Premià de Mar was justified by the alleged rape of a local girl by one of the young people. The police (Mossos d'Esquadra), some days later, said that this was not true. In Torredembarra, before the attack, videos circulated showing young migrants, some of them threatening. Shortly afterwards, it was shown that none of the young people in the videos were resident at the reception centre that had been attacked. A number of incidents have, however, been proven and brought to trial. For example there was an accusation of attempted rape in Masnou, which effectively ended with the internment of a young man (who had been in a reception centre) in a closed centre. There was also the case of the young man who had been in a reception centre, and who was guilty of committing six rapes in Barcelona, some in the area of Montjuïc. This was used by local residents to back up their claims of feeling increasingly insecure.

Other events included a demonstration by minors at a hotel in Sant Just Desvern to denounce coercion, and to demand more resources and the resignation of the director of the centre. Also, two fights broke out between young people in Castelldefels (2019) (prior to the attack on the reception centre) and in Barcelona-Zona Franca (2019).

All these situations have resulted, according to the sources cited, in a total of 25 people being injured: 15 migrant minors or young people, 4 educators, 1 security guard and 5 police officers (Mossos d'Esquadra).

These events have also been accompanied by political discourse. For example, during a demonstration in Rubí in 2019 to protest against the opening of an emergency centre for minors, the mayor of the PSC (Socialist Party of Catalonia), Ana Maria Martinez, spoke out publicly for the first time, in the middle of an election campaign. A party colleague, former mayor of Badalona Álex Pastor, followed her lead, and four months later he posted the aforementioned tweet.

Although neither of the mayors directly accused the minors of criminal acts, their statements certainly had at least two consequences. On the one hand, the normalisation of the use of the crisis in the reception of migrants to dispute political space, and on the other, the legitimisation of the xenophobic discourses - already often based on falsehood - promoted by the far right. The extreme right wing VOX party led by Santiago Abascal has used the legal and much criticised term *mena* to generate a political campaign against lone young migrants in recent years. Deficiencies in emergency reception have been used to present an image of a lack of institutional control, wasted resources, and ultimately of political mismanagement (Cheddadi, 2020). At the same time, the party has sought to establish a causal link between Spain's socio-economic problems (such as youth unemployment, the precariousness of pensions, and insecurity in local neighbourhoods) and this crisis and the “upheavals” “caused” by lone young migrants. Through social media and campaigns seeking to achieve maximum media impact (regardless of whether or not the arguments presented are valid), VOX has sought to set itself up as the only alternative capable of alleviating the institutional neglect of Spanish citizens by the other parties. The aim of all this being to open up the possibility of questioning who should legitimately be able to access certain citizenship rights, and who should be excluded.

Multiple groups have claimed that in the demonstrations against reception centres and squats in places such as Masnou, Premià de Mar or Torredembarra, people from outside the municipality appeared and encouraged xenophobic and racist chants. As has been seen, the attack in Torredembarra in 2021 was, for the first time, an attack where a legitimate demonstration over fears of insecurity among local residents turned into an assault on a squat. When there was no-one to be found there, the protesters went on to attack a reception centre for people who had nothing to do with the squatters. The events in Torredembarra reveal the xenophobic imaginary with regard to the problem to be “eradicated”, and it can be seen that the issue is not the squats. The “root” of the problem, and therefore what needs to be questioned, is the right of vulnerable migrant children and young people to be taken in.

## **7. The right to dream outside ready-made scenarios**

Throughout these pages, it has been possible to perceive how young migrants' power to act is seriously affected by the tensions they experience, by the context in which they find themselves, and by the structure that supports them. A structure that has often tended to be intermittent and exclusionary. Limited in their own ability to act, it seems as if lone young migrants, rather than being subject to the law, are held up by invisible strings that at the same time both support and control them.

Tired of living in a world of constant tensions and contradictions - child/ adult, regularity/ illegality, victim/ threat, in short on the eternal threshold of the *barzaj*, they have often wanted (or have been pushed) to break free, to leave the stage and live in the wings of the theatre. This “exit from the stage” has been reported by the media and used by governments and political parties who have sought to prevent it through control-care mechanisms. But, as has been revealed, in some cases this desired security that has been gained by exercising greater control has often brought with it a decline in respect for the fundamental rights of young people as individuals and as minors. This decline, in addition to the situation of constant uncertainty experienced by many of them from the outset, has contributed to the increase in disenchantment or disengagement of some young people with the system/ theatre. This has once again increased the risk of becoming either a victim or a perpetrator of crime, and the consequences have impacted on the public sphere. Tense situations have, once again, been reported by the media and exploited politically. Lone young migrants,

society, politicians and the media all seem to be actors in a play that goes on and on, and has no happy ending. A situation of constant flux, one that far from being a wormhole, resembles a revolving door; the more media coverage it receives, the more it becomes politicised, the more vulnerability it creates, and then back to the beginning again.

In a world where mobility constitutes a sought-after part of success, young migrants, like this global generation of hyper-connected young people, long only for the right to dream and to imagine their own future beyond ready-made scenarios.

The struggle for the possibility to build a life and not to burn does not rest solely in the hands of young people. It also depends on civic commitment, political will, and journalism ethics. Because it is not only the observance of fundamental rights and obligations of minors and individuals that is at stake here. It is also a question of whether the dripping tap of social issues is turned on or off, that tap that slowly but surely waters the seeds of hatred and fear of the other, which, if not pulled up from the root, will once again flourish.

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