

THE MISSING TRAVELLER

ABSENT PRESENCE AT THE BORDER

Every year, thousands of people disappear while trying to reach Europe. These disappearances are not accidents—they are the result of border policies that push migrants onto dangerous routes. Many travel without identity papers or state protection. When they go missing, families face an agonizing silence. Governments rarely help and sometimes even block efforts to find the missing. In this void, families, activists, and humanitarian groups step in, creating their own networks of search and solidarity.

What this project does

The Missing Traveller investigates how families and civil society organize searches when official systems fail. Through ethnographic research and historical analysis, it explores the tools, technologies, and strategies they use—from improvised identification methods to transnational networks of care. While key to families, these practices do more than locate the missing loved ones: they challenge border violence, state-centric protocols of search and identification, and redefine ideas of justice and responsibility.

Key questions

- How do families and activists search for missing migrants when states refuse to help?
- What technologies and methods enable or obstruct these searches?
- What new forms of kinship and solidarity emerge across borders?
- How do these efforts reshape notions of justice and accountability?

Why it matters

This project reveals the violent consequences of border regimes that reach far beyond physical frontiers and into the lives of families and relatives. At the same time, the project highlights how people resist this violence by organising, improvising and forging new relationships. Acts of searching turn grief into political action, raising urgent questions about the limit of medico-legal identification, the importance of social networks, and the meaning of rights, responsibility, and human life in the condition of disappearance.

About the project

The Missing Traveller is led by Mahmoud Keshavarz, Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Uppsala University, Sweden in collaboration with [Border Forensics](#), a research agency mobilising innovative methods of spatial and visual analysis to investigate practices of border violence. The research is part of the ERC-funded project [OUTOFSIGHT: Exploring Social \(Im\)perceptibility](#), (Grant No. 521230660, 2025–2030) and has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Ref. 2025-03974-01).

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