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Enduring Solidarities.

Spaces, Practices, and Relations of Migrant Support along the Balkan Routes.

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Abstract.

This thesis examines grassroots solidarity practices along the Balkan migration routes in the context of increasingly restrictive European border regimes. Focusing on Greece, Bulgaria, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the study investigates how bordering processes shape migrants' trajectories and lived experiences, and how diverse forms of solidarity emerge in response to border violence, institutional abandonment, and everyday precarity. Since the so-called "long summer of migration" of 2015, the Balkan region has become a key site for the experimentation and consolidation of European migration control policies. Borders in this context extend far beyond official checkpoints, permeating forests, urban spaces, detention facilities, and informal camps, and operating through a combination of physical violence, bureaucratic obstruction, legal uncertainty, and temporal exhaustion. At the same time, these borders are continuously negotiated and contested through everyday practices of care, support, and collective action enacted by migrants, activists, volunteers, and local communities. The thesis is grounded in a multi-sited ethnography conducted between October 2023 and November 2024 across the three research sites. The empirical material is based on prolonged participant observation and 56 semi-structured interviews with a heterogeneous range of actors engaged in grassroots solidarity initiatives, including activists, volunteers, local residents, and people on the move. The research is also informed by the author's direct involvement in solidarity practices, which enables a reflexive engagement with the field while maintaining analytical distance. Methodologically, the study emphasizes ethnography as a key tool for capturing the relational, affective, and situational dimensions of both migration experiences and solidaristic practices.

Analytically, the thesis explores grassroots solidarity through three interrelated dimensions: spaces, practices, and relations. First, it examines the creation and transformation of collective and community spaces in both border zones and urban settings. In contexts characterized by organized institutional abandonment, grassroots actors respond by building informal and semi-formal infrastructures of reception, care, and exchange. These spaces - including community centers, informal shelters, kitchens, and meeting points - function not only as sites of material support, but also as social infrastructures where alternative forms of belonging, recognition, and political imagination are tentatively enacted. Second, the thesis analyzes the practices that unfold within these spaces, ranging from the distribution of food and basic necessities to legal and medical support, educational activities, and mutual aid networks. While many of these practices are not explicitly framed as political by those who enact them, the analysis highlights their political and transformative potential. By addressing immediate needs neglected or actively produced by border regimes, such practices challenge criminalizing and dehumanizing logics and disrupt dominant narratives that portray migrants solely as victims or threats. At the same time, the study critically examines the ambivalences of these practices, showing how they may reproduce hierarchies, dependencies, or assistentialist dynamics even as they contest structural violence. Third, the thesis foregrounds the relational dynamics that constitute and sustain solidarity over time. It investigates how relationships among migrants, volunteers, activists, and local actors are formed, negotiated, and sometimes fractured within the constraints imposed by border regimes. Particular attention is paid to power asymmetries, internal conflicts, emotional labour, and the tensions between humanitarian and political orientations. These relations are conceptualized as forms of "odd

kinship”: provisional, fragile, and often asymmetrical alliances that nonetheless create openings for alternative ways of caring, belonging, and acting together. Rather than romanticizing solidarity, the thesis emphasizes its precarious and contested nature, highlighting how solidaristic relations are continuously reshaped by exhaustion, legal risks, institutional pressures, and changing migration policies.

By examining solidarity as a fluid and adaptive process, the thesis contributes to ongoing debates on the criminalization of solidarity, the limits and strengths of practical help, and the political significance of everyday practices of care. It shows how grassroots initiatives operate within, against, and beyond institutional frameworks, navigating legal ambiguity and surveillance while sustaining networks of support across local, national, and transnational scales. In doing so, the study challenges rigid distinctions between humanitarian aid and political action, legality and illegality, and between those who provide support and those who receive it. Overall, the thesis argues that grassroots solidarity along the Balkan routes constitutes a crucial site for understanding contemporary border regimes and their contestation. While solidaristic practices cannot undo the structural violence of borders, they expose its everyday workings and generate fragile yet meaningful spaces of resistance, recognition, and collective survival. By centering relationality, situated practices, and lived experience, the study offers a nuanced account of solidarity as an imperfect, negotiated, and deeply human response to the bordering processes that shape mobility in contemporary Europe.

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Introduction.

“Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places.” With this invitation, Donna Haraway in her book *“Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene”* (Haraway, 2021) urges us to inhabit the tensions of the present: to remain with difficulty, to resist the desire for clean solutions, and to cultivate forms of care capable of transforming damaged worlds. In *“Staying with the Trouble”*, she further reminds us that *“staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplac, entangled and worldly. Alone, in our separate kinds of expertise and experience, we know both too much and too little, and so we succumb to despair or to hope, and neither is a sensible attitude.”* Haraway’s reflections speak of interspecies alliances, of multi-species entanglements as sources of survival and resistance in the ruins of capitalism. Yet her conceptual vocabulary resonates far beyond the ecological terrain from which it emerges. What she names “oddkin”, those unlikely alliances forged across differences, can illuminate the forms of relation and co-presence that sustain practices of solidarity in contexts of bordering processes and migration. If Haraway builds the concept in relation to cross-species kin-making, its force lies in emphasizing the necessity of relationality itself: the creation of ties, bonds, and shared worlds among actors who may appear distant, unequal, or radically different. In this sense, “becoming-with” speaks directly to the mundane yet transformative encounters that constitute political action at Europe’s margins.

This insight became particularly vivid to me while traveling and conducting fieldwork along the Balkan routes. Among the books I carried in my backpack, *“Staying with the Trouble”* was perhaps the most unexpected companion. Yet it quickly became a conceptual mirror, reflecting back what I was observing and experiencing within solidarity initiatives, those fragile, improvised, sometimes contradictory collectives, groups, and small organizations that form around the needs of migrants. The connections, alliances, and chance encounters I witnessed in forests, informal shelters, safe houses, squats, and community centers were not simply background elements: they were the very conditions through which solidarity took shape. And yet, these relational dimensions often remain underspoken or undervalued in academic analyses of solidarity, overshadowed by institutional frameworks, humanitarian discourses, or security dynamics.

Haraway’s claim that neither hope nor despair alone is sufficient is analytically useful for understanding the Balkan borderscapes, where binary narratives of success or failure obscure the complex and uneven configurations that shape everyday experiences on the ground. These borderlands are sites of simultaneous violence and care, of mobility and containment, where migrants, local populations, activists, and volunteers are enmeshed in asymmetrical power relations. To “stay with the trouble” in this context requires attending to these entanglements, acknowledging the coexistence of vulnerability and agency, and analyzing how borders are both materially enforced and socially negotiated through everyday interactions. Therefore, any attempt to “stay with the trouble” of the Balkan routes requires attentiveness to thick co-presence: to the shared and unequal vulnerabilities of migrants, local residents, activists, and volunteers; to the entanglement of care and repression; to the ways that borders are both enforced and quietly contested through everyday relations. Political transformation, she suggests, does

not arise from purity, separation, or heroic individuality. Rather, it emerges from situated encounters, from the difficult, imperfect, sometimes uncomfortable alliances that hold open small cracks in the border regime.

This thesis grows out of my own involvement in such solidarity initiatives over the years. It stems from a personal necessity: to understand more deeply the processes, entanglements, and tensions that shape solidarity practices today, in a landscape dramatically transformed since the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015. In the past decade, borders in the Balkans have multiplied in form and practice; they extend into forests, detention centers, villages, and city streets; they operate through violence but also through bureaucratic exhaustion, asylum processes, and everyday uncertainty. At the same time, these borders are constantly negotiated, softened, circumvented, or momentarily suspended through relational practices, through care, companionship, shared risk, and the fragile bonds formed in transit.

What does it mean to practice solidarity today, in contexts where crisis and emergency are no longer theatrically staged but have instead been normalized in subtler, more structural ways? How do relations, alliances, and encounters shape the practices and effects of solidarity? And how does solidarity itself shift as volunteers, activists, and migrants navigate ever more restrictive environments? These questions guide the pages that follow. They call for an analysis attentive not only to structures and policies, but also to the forms of “odd kinship” that emerge in border spaces, relations that resist, however partially and precariously, the destructive logics of the border and migration regimes.

At the same time, reflecting on these encounters also requires resisting any temptation to romanticize solidarity or to frame it through utopian lenses. The alliances and forms of “odd kinship” that emerge in border spaces are meaningful, but they are also extremely fragile, shaped by exhaustion, asymmetries of power, misunderstandings, and emotional strain. Solidarity is not a harmonious or idyllic space of resistance; it is marked by tensions, frustrations, and contradictions. Relations formed under the pressures of border violence and displacement can be supportive yet unstable, generous yet limited, politically charged yet intertwined with assistentialist forms of support. To acknowledge these complexities is not to diminish the value of solidarity, but to recognize its imperfect and often precarious nature, one that demands constant negotiation rather than idealization. To stay with the trouble of the Balkan routes is to recognize that solidarity can’t be framed as a stable identity or a moral stance; it is a practice, shaped by the frictions, collaborations, misunderstandings, and shared efforts of those who momentarily inhabit the same troubled world. It is in these entanglements, these tentative, messy, fragile, and human alliances, that possibilities for alternative ways of caring, belonging, and contesting migration and border regimes emerge.

Therefore, this work has been conceived and developed along multiple lines and analytical scales, with the aim of capturing the nuances I was able to observe and experience in the field. It stems from a desire to understand the bordering processes unfolding at the margins of Europe, those peripheral spaces where externalization and internalization practices take shape, and to explore how these processes are negotiated, contested, and resisted by those who transit, inhabit, cross, experience, and enact solidarity within these peripheries.

1. Borders and Solidarities. An Analytical Framework.

The so-called Balkan routes have long constituted sites of tension, movement, and encounter, a complex geography where human journeys collide with political boundaries, state apparatuses, and European Union migration regimes. Over time, they have solidified into spaces of uncertainty and risk,

marked by sudden displacements and fragile settlements, where mobility is simultaneously pursued, curtailed, and policed. It is within these contested terrains that the present research situates itself, seeking to understand how borders function not merely as instruments of control, but as stages upon which diverse practices of solidarity are enacted. The study centers on the local and international actors (volunteers, activists, residents, and community members) who engage in acts of support for people on the move, tracing how their efforts are shaped, constrained, and transformed by the very structures they seek to navigate.

This research draws on debates surrounding humanitarianism and solidarity, categories that have frequently been cast in opposition. Humanitarianism tends to be portrayed as bureaucratic, depoliticized, and ostensibly neutral, while solidarity is depicted as oppositional, radical, and ethically driven. Yet the lived realities encountered along the Balkan routes resist such tidy distinctions. Practices of support are far from uniform: they are heterogeneous, contextually embedded, and deeply entangled with both moral and political imperatives. Volunteers and activists navigate the tension between care and risk, ethical commitment and pragmatic decision-making, political engagement and the immediate demands of survival. Solidarity, in this context, is neither a static principle nor an abstract ideal, but a set of situated, relational practices that take shape in dialogue with uncertainty, danger, and the materialities of movement. It is through these everyday acts of support, care, negotiation, and inclusion, that solidarity becomes tangible, exposing both its multiplicity and its contradictions.

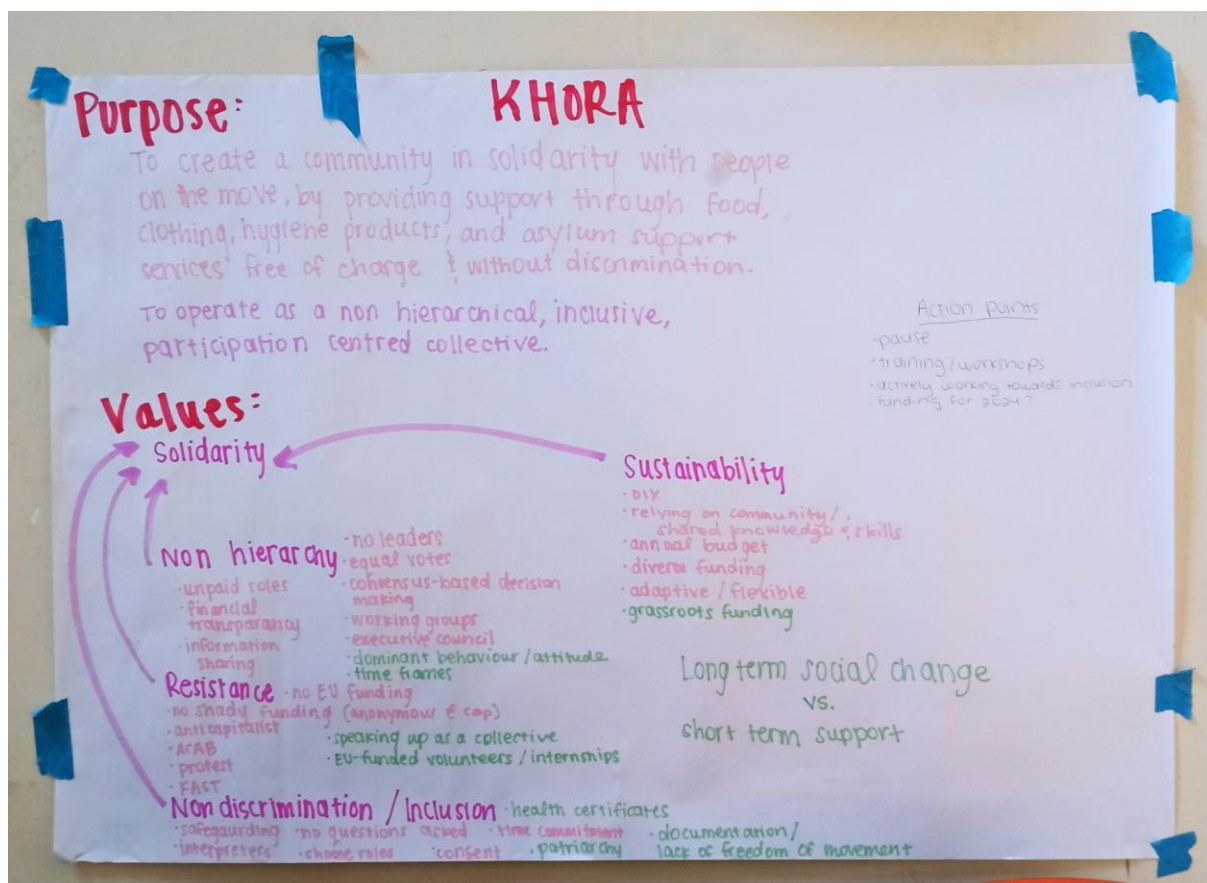


Fig. 1. An informative poster at one solidarity space in Athens, that reflects on the different layers inherent in the practices and initiatives organized. Source: the author.



Fig. 2. A banner put after a protest in Victoria Square, Athens, organized in solidarity to people on the move and against border violence. Source: the author.

To fully grasp these dynamics, solidarity must be situated within the broader socio-political and historical processes of bordering. Practices of support are inseparable from the structures they engage: they emerge in direct response to the enforcement and proliferation of borders. The expansion of the EU's external frontier, the securitization of migration, and the legacies of historical mobility and containment across the Balkans collectively shape the conditions under which solidarity arises. Borders, in this sense, are not inert lines but complex assemblages of laws, infrastructures, technologies, and everyday practices that regulate movement, produce vulnerability, and exercise power. From border fences and surveillance towers to informal checkpoints, urban policing, racial profiling, and forested crossings, borders materialize in both the visible and the invisible, through acts of control and abandonment alike, structuring the movement of people and their experiences while simultaneously generating the spaces in which care and support become urgent and necessary.



Fig. 3. The fences along the Bulgarian Turkish border. Source: Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche.



Fig. 4. A sweeping operation in Athens. Source: the author.

Drawing on the insights of critical border studies, this research conceptualizes borders not as fixed or neutral demarcations, but as dynamic sites of negotiation, contestation, and interaction. From this perspective, solidarity is understood not as a series of discrete or spontaneous gestures, but as a relational and political phenomenon deeply embedded within specific spatial, temporal, and social contexts. The study examines the experiences of those engaged in providing support, their motivations, the practices they enact, the spaces in which these actions unfold, and the encounters, often fraught, that occur among a diversity of actors. It further considers the structural forces (legal, political, and institutional) that simultaneously enable, constrain, and shape these engagements. In doing so, it illuminates the ways in which acts of care, practical intervention, and varying degrees of explicit contestation are produced within, and continuously informed by, the material and political realities of contemporary bordering in the Balkans.

This analytical framework aims to articulate a nuanced understanding of solidarity as a multifaceted phenomenon: ethically motivated, relationally constituted, and inseparable from the structures of power, control, and domination against which it operates. As it will be highlighted throughout the thesis, it is through everyday practices - whether distributing food, providing shelter, advocating for rights, negotiating with authorities, creating community spaces, or conducting search-and-rescue operations in forested borderlands - that both the human stakes of borders and their political dimensions are made tangible. These practices reveal the possibilities for care, resistance, and ethical engagement, even under conditions of heightened precarity, hostility, and state-imposed constraints. By tracing these intersections, the study illuminates the complex, often contradictory ways in which solidarity persists, adapts, and asserts itself within the shifting landscapes of European border regimes, demonstrating that acts of support are simultaneously humanitarian, political, and relational in their significance.

1. An Ethnography from Within.

This research emerges from a position deeply entwined with the practices and networks at the center of my study. My engagement with solidarity initiatives, both before and during the fieldwork, was not merely observational, but participatory: sharing spaces, meals, and conversations with volunteers, activists, and migrants shaped my understanding of everyday realities at the borders. Being present in these networks allowed me to witness moments of care and conflict, improvisation and fatigue, hope and frustration, dimensions of solidarity that are often invisible in official reports or statistical accounts. These experiences provided me with a perspective that is neither fully external nor fully internal: I was part of the communities I studied, yet constantly attentive to my role as a researcher, navigating the delicate balance between involvement and reflection.

This dual positionality brought with it both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, active participation opened access to forms of informal knowledge that would have otherwise remained opaque: I observed how decisions were taken in everyday practice, how volunteers and activists collectively negotiated risks and uncertainties, and how acts of care were organized, communicated, and at times contested. Engaging in solidarity work was also a way of giving back to the field and of positioning myself not through a top-down approach, but rather as a “peer”, someone already involved in these networks of support, who continued to contribute while simultaneously carrying an analytical perspective. On the other hand, this role demanded continuous reflexivity. I had to remain attentive to how my presence might shape interactions, influence the narratives shared with me, or subtly affect the dynamics of solidarity work itself. This required an ongoing consideration of power relations, ethical responsibilities, and the potential tensions between participation and observation.

Overall, this ethnography “from within” has proven to be both a methodological approach and an analytical lens. It had enabled a nuanced understanding of solidarity, highlighting its ethical tensions, improvisational logic, and the affective labor it entails. At the same time, it underscored the inseparability of knowledge and experience: the research cannot be divorced from my own engagement, which shaped not only what I observed but also how I interpreted it. Recognizing this entanglement is central to the analysis presented here, situating the findings within broader discussions of migration, borders, and solidarity, while foregrounding the relational and affective dimensions of doing research “from the inside.”

2. Notes on Terminology.

As will be further detailed in other sections and across the different chapters of this thesis, it is important to clarify from the outset how certain concepts and word families are used throughout this work. In particular, this applies to the terms *migrant*, *refugee*, *asylum seeker*, *people on the move*, as well as to expressions referring to *solidarity and humanitarian actors*. The theoretical, methodological, and analytical chapters will elaborate more in depth on these categories and on the ways they are used, sometimes interchangeably, both in academic debates and in the contexts examined.

- *Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Migrants, “People on the move”*

Throughout this research, the term *migrant* is employed in a broad and inclusive sense to denote individuals who have left their country of origin in search of improved living conditions. Generally, I refrain from using more specific legal categories such as *refugee* or *asylum seeker*, as the people supported by the solidarity initiatives at the center of this study are not consistently or formally classified within these terms. Moreover, the distinctions between different “types” of migrants (and the policy frameworks ostensibly designed to govern them) have become increasingly blurred. Yet financial capital remains a significant axis of differentiation: those with resources are more readily accepted, while those without continue to face marginalization, reflecting a persistent socioeconomic stratification. As widely noted, the drivers of mobility, including conflict, political instability, economic precarity, and environmental crises, are deeply intertwined (Castles, de Haas & Miller, 2019). Simultaneously, restrictive migration policies have curtailed safe and legal pathways, compelling people with diverse backgrounds, trajectories, and protection needs to move along the same precarious and often dangerous routes. Furthermore, despite the formal separation between immigration and international protection policies, the migrant/refugee distinction often functions more as a moral and political categorization than a reflection of lived experience. Labeling individuals as “refugees” or “migrants” frames them as “deserving” or “undeserving” of assistance (Clark et al., 2024; Paynter, 2022), influencing public discourse and policy in ways that can be deeply exclusionary.

For the very specificity of the contexts analysed, I also sometimes adopt the term “people on the move” to describe those I encountered along the Balkan route, whether in transit or stranded in the countries where I conducted fieldwork. The expression emerged within solidarity networks operating along migration routes and reflects a bottom-up, critical vocabulary that challenges state-driven classifications. Its use aims to shift attention away from legal status and toward shared experiences of mobility, capturing the convergence of refugees and migrants as they navigate similar forms of exclusion, marginalization, and criminalization. As Pijnenburg & Rijken (2021) explain:

“Although ‘people on the move’ is a broad term without a legal definition, it offers two advantages. First, it transcends the problematic dichotomy between refugees and migrants [...]

In particular, it avoids any negative connotations that may be associated with the terms ‘refugee’ and especially ‘migrant’ in public discourse [...] [and] which can be used wrongly to suggest that only refugees have rights while migrants have no rights at all. Second, the term ‘people on the move’ makes it easier to reconceptualize their rights... By shifting the focus away from the distinction between refugees and migrants and towards their common humanity, it becomes easier to adopt a human rights perspective” (Pijnenburg & Rijken, 2021, p. 283).

Given that this thesis centers on solidarity practices and bordering processes rather than narrowly on asylum governance, I use *migrant* as the primary term and employ *people on the move* solely when engaging with the discourses and narratives of solidarity actors who make use of it. This decision reflects not only analytical considerations but also, and crucially, the vocabulary used by those working and organizing on the ground, as well as by the people navigating the Balkan route themselves. By adopting the terms that circulate in these contexts, I aim to stay close to the lived realities and the ways in which mobility is described and understood by the actors directly involved.

- *NGOs, Grassroots Organizations, Volunteers, Activists, “Solidarians”*

Similar attention is required regarding the terminology used to describe those engaged in forms of support and resistance along the Balkan routes. The ecosystem of solidarity is heterogeneous, spanning institutional NGOs, grassroots collectives, informal networks, volunteers, activists, and what many participants themselves call *solidarians*. These categories are neither fixed nor mutually exclusive; rather, they reflect different positionalities, organizational cultures, and political commitments that shape how solidarity is practiced and experienced.

In institutional terms, *NGOs* refer to formally registered organizations with stable structures, funding streams, and professional staff. Their work is often guided by project-based frameworks and humanitarian mandates, which, as noted in the literature, can at times intersect, with varying degrees of intention, with the broader humanitarian–securitarian arrangements at Europe’s borders. *Grassroots organizations*, by contrast, tend to be locally embedded, collectively organized, and politically situated. They operate with flexible structures, rely on mutuality and private donations, rather than institutional funding, and sometimes adopt explicitly no-borders or abolitionist frameworks.

The terms *volunteer* and *activist* capture different orientations within these spaces: while volunteers may approach solidarity primarily through humanitarian or ethical motivations, activists place greater emphasis on political struggle, rights claims, and contestation of bordering practices. However, ethnographic observations and studies on solidarity (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2022) show that in practice these categories frequently overlap. Individuals frequently shift between these roles, at times identifying with one and at times with the other, revealing how closely intertwined and mutually constitutive these dimensions are in everyday practice.

A concept of particular relevance, extensively employed and elaborated within scholarship on solidarity in the aftermath of 2015, is the one of the “solidarian.” This term has been used extensively by people involved in solidarity, especially in the Greek context, but also in other borderscapes. Drawing on Rozakou’s (2017) discussion of the blurred boundaries between solidarity and humanitarianism, the figure of the *solidarian* have emerged as an alternative that rejects hierarchical and paternalistic logics that frame migrants as passive recipients of care. In Rozakou’s analysis, the *solidarian* embodies a mode of participation grounded in co-presence, shared vulnerability, and an explicit positioning against bordering practices. The use of this term among grassroots networks signals an attempt to articulate

solidarity as a political practice, rather than a one-directional act of giving. In the present work I chose to employ *solidarian* contextually to recognize how actors on the ground conceptualize their own involvement and how these roles are continuously negotiated, contested, and reshaped within shifting landscapes of mobility and border control.

3. Outline of the Thesis.

Turning more concretely to the substance of this work, the thesis investigates the entanglements between European border regimes and grassroots solidarity practices along the Balkan migration routes, with a particular focus on Greece, Bulgaria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. It seeks to understand how bordering processes shape the trajectories and lived experiences of migrants, and how heterogeneous forms of solidarity emerge in response to the violence, uncertainty, and institutional abandonment generated by contemporary migration governance. Bringing together theoretical reflection, ethnographic fieldwork, and contextual analysis, the study offers a multidimensional exploration that attends both to structural dynamics and to the situated, relational practices of solidarity from below. The research is organized into six chapters, each contributing a distinct layer to the broader analytical framework and collectively building a nuanced understanding of the complexities at stake.

The first chapter lays the conceptual foundation of the thesis by engaging with the literature on borders, migration governance, and solidarity. It situates these debates within broader scholarly and political discussions on social movements, humanitarianism, and the regulation of mobility, highlighting the tensions and overlaps between bordering processes and acts of solidarity. This chapter provides a critical engagement with the theoretical and epistemological lenses that inform the research, drawing on insights from critical migration studies, political sociology, critical border studies, and social movement theory. By reflecting on existing frameworks, it establishes the analytical tools used throughout the thesis and clarifies how concepts such as solidarity, care, bordering, and de-bordering are operationalized in the study.

The second chapter presents the methodological approach, emphasizing the importance of ethnography and qualitative inquiry in capturing the lived realities of those affected by border regimes. Being physically present in field sites allows for the observation of interactions, emotional expressions, social relations, and subtle forms of meaning-making that escape formal accounts. Ethnographic methods are particularly suited to understanding the dynamic interplay between individuals and social structures, revealing the power relations, negotiations, and everyday practices that shape both migration experiences and solidaristic responses. This chapter also details the specific methodological tools employed, the research sites, and the ethical and practical considerations guiding fieldwork in contexts marked by mobility, precarity, and institutional scrutiny.

Chapter three situates the research within the broader structural and historical context of the Balkan migration routes and European migration governance. It traces the evolution of the so-called Balkan Route, examining its historical significance, its relationship with EU externalization policies, and its integration into contemporary migration management systems. The chapter highlights the asymmetries of power that underpin migration governance, focusing on the institutionalization of border control at national and supranational levels, the policy narratives that legitimize these practices, and the diverse range of actors involved, including states, international organizations, and non-state entities. By mapping these structures, the chapter illuminates the conditions within which both migratory journeys and solidaristic practices unfold, emphasizing the structural constraints that shape everyday experiences at the borders.

The fourth chapter provides a detailed account of the three primary research sites (Greece, Bulgaria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina) situating them within their specific socio-political, historical, and geographic contexts. It examines their role in the European border regime and in shaping the dynamics of migration along the Balkan routes. By analyzing local conditions alongside broader structural forces, the chapter highlights both the particularities and the systemic factors that influence the lived experiences of migrants and the responses of local communities and international actors. This contextual grounding is essential for understanding the empirical complexity of solidarity practices and the ways they navigate uneven and often violent bordering processes.

Chapter five investigates the heterogeneous landscape of grassroots solidarity initiatives. It explores the actors, spaces, and modalities of support that emerge in response to the precarity and violence produced by European border regimes, highlighting the diversity of forms, motivations, and organizational structures. This includes both long-standing activist collectives with anti-racist, feminist, or anarchist orientations, and more spontaneous initiatives that arise in response to acute crises, such as the formalization and closure of the Balkan corridor in 2015–2016. The chapter examines how these initiatives operate across urban centers, transit zones, and border areas, negotiating legal ambiguity, institutional neglect, and the criminalization of solidarity. Through this analysis, it traces the ways in which grassroots practices reflect, contest, and adapt to evolving migration governance, highlighting the resilience and limitations of civil society engagement under constrained conditions.

The sixth chapter focuses on the relational and interactive dimensions of grassroots solidarity. Drawing on the analytical framework of border deconstruction and “de-bordering” (Ambrosini, 2024), it investigates how social relationships among volunteers, activists, and migrants shape the practice, meaning, and sustainability of solidarity. The chapter explores questions such as: How do internal dynamics within collectives influence collective action? How do interactions between actors and migrants negotiate hierarchies and power asymmetries produced by border regimes? By centering relationality as both a social process and an analytical lens, the chapter illuminates the ways solidarity is actively constituted, reproduced, and sometimes constrained within the structural and institutional conditions of the border.

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Chapter 1.

On Borders and Solidarities.

Theoretical Perspectives and Debates.

This chapter undertakes a comprehensive review of the literature on solidarity and borders, situating these concepts within broader scholarly and political debates on migration, governance, and social movements. The aim is to provide the theoretical scaffolding for the research, critically engaging with existing frameworks while highlighting the intersections and tensions between bordering processes and solidarity practices. In this chapter, I will focus on the studies and theoretical lenses that have informed my research, highlighting the key theoretical and epistemological insights applied to analyze the phenomenon under study.

While grounding my work in the main sociological traditions of migration studies and social theory, I have extended my theoretical scope to include perspectives from other disciplines such as anthropology, critical geography, and political science. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a more nuanced and multifaceted analysis of a complex phenomenon, integrating diverse viewpoints to enrich the overall understanding. The primary bodies of literature I engage with include studies on migration, social movements and solidarity, and critical border studies. The convergence of these fields provides the foundation for the theoretical objectives of my research, namely, to illuminate the tensions between structural forces and individual or collective agency through a processual perspective. This approach emphasizes the dynamic and socially constructed nature of reality, shaped by power relations and social processes. Throughout this chapter, I will critically examine these theoretical frameworks, assessing their contributions and limitations in relation to both contemporary debates and empirical studies. By doing so, I aim to demonstrate how these perspectives can support the central arguments of my work while addressing the broader implications of the interdisciplinary methodologies employed.

1. Borders.

1.1 Theorizing Borders and the European Border Regime.

Before delving into the development of border studies in Europe, it is crucial to establish a conceptual foundation for understanding the border itself. Since the 1990s, scholarship has moved beyond the classical geographic perspective, which regarded borders as static, linear demarcations in space. This paradigm shift emphasizes the relational and dynamic nature of borders, considering them not merely as territorial markers but as socio-political constructs rooted in power relations.

Borders are now understood as acts of division that not only delineate space but also imbue it with meaning, legitimizing specific norms and establishing sovereign orders. Historically, this act of bordering has been intertwined with the exercise of power; for instance, in ancient Rome, tracing a border was seen as redrawing cosmic order on earth, thereby granting the authority to create and enforce laws (Zanini, 2000). The interconnection between space, borders, and power has been extensively theorized within political philosophy and social theory, particularly in relation to the production and maintenance of socio-political structures such as nation-states (Foucault, 1984). Moreover, borders have also been studied as relational constructs that reinforce processes of “othering” by creating categories

of inclusion and exclusion. This relationality highlights how borders are not only material but also social and symbolic, shaping identities and defining who belongs and who is considered “the other” (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). Thus, the border is not merely a physical artifact but a dynamic, power-laden phenomenon that operates through spatial, social, and political relations. This conceptual framework have provided the foundation for contemporary border studies, which have moved beyond viewing borders as fixed lines to understanding them as dynamic processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Therefore, contemporary scholarship has moved beyond the simplistic metaphor of borders as rigid “walls” to highlight their complex and dynamic nature. In the past decades, borders have been increasingly conceptualized as filters (De Genova, 2013), firewalls (Walters, 2002), or asymmetric membranes (Hedetoft, 2003) that selectively regulate mobility and produce stratified forms of inclusion. Mezzadra and Neilson have framed borders as complex social institutions that generate regimes of differential inclusion through the allocation of hierarchically organized legal statuses (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). These processes are not only central to the functioning of borders but also crucial to their role in shaping systems of exclusion and inclusion.

Furthermore, another key concept at the center of critical border studies is the one of “border regime”. In critical border studies, the notion of the border regime draws on a broader sociological understanding of regimes as relational and dynamic configurations of power, through which norms, practices, and institutions are stabilized and contested over time. Rather than a fixed or centralized apparatus, a regime denotes a mode of governance, an ensemble of heterogeneous actors, technologies, and rationalities that produce and reproduce specific social orders (Foucault, 2009). Within this framework, the border regime refers to the constellation of political, legal, material, and discursive elements that together shape the governance of human mobility and the production of belonging and exclusion. As Hess and Kasparek (2017b) argue, it should be understood as a social and political field of conflict rather than as a coherent system of control, one in which state and non-state actors, including migrants themselves, interact and negotiate the limits and meanings of mobility. Drawing on governmentality studies, this perspective highlights how power within the border regime operates not merely through repression, but through the regulation, classification, and differentiation of mobile subjects, producing hierarchies of inclusion and forms of precarious membership (Fassin, 2012 ; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013).

When examining and analyzing the construction of border regimes, Europe provides a significant case study. The Schengen Agreement, the Dublin Convention, and the process of EU enlargement have been structured around a rhetoric that frames “illegal” migration and asylum-seeking as central challenges. This rhetoric persists despite the stated objective of dismantling internal borders for European citizens. As already stated, however, borders no longer merely delineate the spatial boundaries of the political community, nor do they simply distinguish the polis from its external environment. Instead, they have become dynamic entities that decompose, reconstitute, and project themselves both within the political center and beyond its territorial boundaries. As Friese and Mezzadra (2010) suggest, “border zones” are no longer marginal spaces but are central to the constitution of the political and public sphere. Scholarship on the European Union has been particularly engaged in rethinking the spatial nature of borders, moving beyond the traditional notion of borders as clear-cut divisions between national spaces. This shift in perspective has historical roots in Europe, largely influenced by the integration of the Schengen zone. The Schengen framework has drawn scholarly attention to how borders function both within and beyond the geographic area they ostensibly delineate (Andrijasevic, 2010; Balibar, 2002; Rigo, 2005). The Schengen Convention abolished fixed internal border controls among member states while reinforcing policing and surveillance at the EU’s external boundaries. However, this removal of formal border checkpoints did not eliminate internal borders within Schengen. Rather, these borders

have been reconfigured: instead of existing as stable territorial markers, they have become more diffuse and dispersed. For instance, internal border checks now occur randomly throughout the Schengen zone, particularly during transport. Walters describes this as “*a more diffuse, networked control apparatus that is no longer territorially fixed and delimited*” (Walters, 2002). This transformation is further reflected in the everyday practices through which individuals are continuously required to prove their identity—to rent a hotel room, open a bank account, access employment, or enroll in education. As Torpey (Torpey, 1997) argues, the modern state has sought to “*monopolize the legitimate means of movement*,” incorporating border control mechanisms into the fabric of daily life. Borders, therefore, are no longer confined to the geopolitical edges of the state but are multiplied and diffused within the national space itself, materializing through bureaucratic and documentary practices that regulate access, belonging, and mobility.

At the same time, border enforcement has also been displaced externally, a process often referred to as the “externalization” of EU borders (Karakayali & Rigo, 2010). Under Schengen, the EU has not only reinforced its external boundaries but has also extended its border control mechanisms beyond its own territory. This externalization includes readmission agreements with third countries, the designation of certain states as “safe third countries” for asylum seekers, and the establishment of migrant transit-processing centers outside the EU (Andrijasevic, 2010; Karakayali & Rigo, 2010; Walters, 2002). In effect, European border enforcement operates in spaces that are geographically removed from Europe itself.

These shifts - both the internal dispersion of policing and the externalization of border controls - have led some scholars to conceptualize Europe’s borders in terms of “deterritorialization” (Andrijasevic, 2010; Rigo, 2005; Walters, 2002). The deterritorialization of borders refers to the way border functions are increasingly exercised in locations that are both external to the EU and within its internal space. This concept highlights the fragmentation of border control, which no longer takes place solely at national frontiers but is instead enacted through dispersed mechanisms, such as identity checks by police within EU territory and carrier liability laws that hold transport companies accountable for the people they carry (Andrijasevic & Anderson, 2009). Referring to borders as “deterritorialized” rather than simply “externalized” challenges the assumption of a clear-cut division between EU and non-EU space (Andrijasevic, 2010). This perspective reveals a transformed understanding of borders, which are no longer seen as static lines but rather as dynamic and multi-sited structures. Scholars describe EU borders using new metaphors: they are “mobile and dispersed” (Rumford, 2006), “discontinuous and porous” (Andrijasevic, 2010), “networked” (Walters, 2006), “ephemeral and/or palpable” (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009), and biopolitical (Walters, 2002). These interpretations emphasize a shift away from viewing borders as fixed territorial markers toward seeing them as the spaces where border control is actively performed.

Therefore, according to the studies and analyses previously mentioned, the contemporary border regime can be understood as a dynamic mechanism for selection and the reproduction of social hierarchies, reflecting its flexible and adaptive nature. Rather than operating solely as an apparatus of exclusion or as a rigid “fortress,” it governs differentiated forms of inclusion (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). This regime is inherently hybrid, as the exercise of sovereignty is dispersed across a multiplicity of actors, such as nation-states, supranational institutions such as the European Union, and international organizations including the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Andrijasevic & Walters, 2010). The increasing involvement of political, economic, and security actors in border governance has led to the proliferation

and diversification of bordering practices, characterized by processes of decentralization and multi-level governance.

Within this framework, several scholars have emphasized that contemporary borders should not be conceived merely as instruments of exclusion, but also as regulatory devices that condition the modalities of migrants' incorporation into social and economic structures (De Genova, 2013). The process of "illegalization," as described by De Genova, does not simply produce exclusion but rather generates precarious legal conditions that circumscribe migrants' access to rights and protections. These dynamics contribute to shaping differentiated and often temporary forms of inclusion that mirror broader social and economic stratifications (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). In this sense, the border regime participates in the governance of mobility through the regulation of migrants' legal and socio-economic positions, rather than through their absolute exclusion. In her contribution *Border and Rule*, Harsha Walia (2021) further situates contemporary bordering practices within wider global and historical processes, illustrating how imperial, colonial, capitalist, and racial relations materialize in the governance of mobility. She identifies four interrelated strategies of border governance (exclusion, territorial diffusion, commodified inclusion, and discursive control) demonstrating how states across diverse contexts employ these mechanisms to manage and stratify mobility. Such strategies not only regulate the movement of people but also reproduce global inequalities by positioning migrants within hierarchies of legality, desirability, and belonging. In this sense, borders act as sites where economic, political, and racialized forms of differentiation intersect.

Building on these theoretical premises, this research examines how the European border regime operates along the Balkan routes not merely as an instrument of territorial exclusion but as a mechanism that structures mobility, access to rights, and political subjectivity. The deterritorialized and dynamic nature of borders in this region, manifested through practices of externalized enforcement, diffuse policing, and selective inclusion, shapes the lived experiences of people trying to reach and establish within its territories. These processes do not only determine who is permitted to cross or remain but also regulate the degree of access to protection, social entitlements, and economic opportunities, thereby contributing to the production of stratified and conditional forms of membership within Europe's broader migration regime.

1.2 "Borders are Everywhere". Conceptualizing Bordering Processes.

When Étienne Balibar famously commented on the transformation of bordering technologies in Europe at the start of the 2000s, he highlighted the shift of border checkpoints from state territorial peripheries to a wide array of locations within urban centres. He wrote: "*The borders... are dispersed a little everywhere*" (Balibar, 2009). These included train stations, sweatshops, and restaurants, anywhere border enforcement agencies believed there was an opportunity to apprehend "irregular" or "undocumented" migrants.

As outlined earlier, the focus of border studies has evolved over the past years, with a rising emphasis on understanding borders as contingent, processual phenomena shaped by multiple actors and practices. For example, Casas-Cortes et al. (2014) have highlighted that borders are no longer solely tied to the territorial enforcement of state boundaries but are increasingly linked to management practices targeting "*where the migrant is*." This shift underscores the transformation of borders from static, geographical lines to dynamic and dispersed mechanisms of governance. Borders today are enforced through a wide array of practices and technologies that regulate mobility across multiple scales, local, regional, and global. Visa regimes, carrier sanctions, detention centres, and biometric surveillance extend border control far beyond physical frontiers, transforming them into diffuse and dynamic systems of regulation.

According to different scholars, (Klatt et al., 2017); Casas-Cortes et al., 2014), borders are also continuously produced and reconfigured through the actions of various actors, including states, supranational organizations, private corporations, and migrants themselves, all engaging in complex interactions, shaping how borders function and for whom.

Following the shift from the concept of the border to that of “bordering”, central to the processual turn in border studies, I will critically analyze borders as dynamic social and political processes and practices of spatial differentiation. This conceptual transformation highlights the diffusion and multiplication of borders, emphasizing their role in shaping territorial, political, and socio-cultural transformations beyond the traditional dividing lines of nation-state sovereignties. However, this is not merely a matter of dislocating and relocating borders; it also requires a critical reflection on the diversification of their forms, functions, and practices (Brambilla, 2015). Through their expansion and proliferation across various social and political domains, borders increasingly move from the periphery to the core of the political sphere.

According to Yuval Davis (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019) “*bordering is continuously happening*.” In her work and studies, she shows how bordering processes operate across various dimensions and scales, linking seemingly unrelated social, political, economic, and ecological phenomena, ranging from the regulation of international trade and responses to climate change to the criminalization of specific populations and the perpetuation of social and economic inequalities both within and between states. Similarly, Nash and Reid (2010) argue that state bordering processes carry a dual significance: they pertain not only to the demarcation of territorial boundaries but also to the construction of symbolic social and cultural divisions of inclusion and exclusion. These divisions are both material and imagined, encompassing physical and cultural dimensions.

These conceptualizations align also with what Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy (Yuval-Davis et al., 2017) define as “everyday bordering,” a concept that highlights how border controls have permeated daily life, shaping the experiences of ordinary people in increasingly pervasive ways. They demonstrate how everyday bordering embodies these broader bordering processes by embedding border enforcement into the social fabric of everyday life. Everyday bordering describes how migration control is increasingly enacted through mundane, routine practices, turning citizens and institutions into unwitting border guards. Rather than being confined to checkpoints or border zones, bordering practices increasingly take place in workplaces, housing markets, schools, and public services, effectively dispersing border enforcement across society. In this sense, bordering is not only a state-driven project but one in which private actors, local institutions, and even individuals become implicated in migration control. In this perspective, just as non-EU states are increasingly responsible for preventing migration to Europe, so too are European landlords, employers, and service providers tasked with enforcing immigration restrictions. The obligation to check residency permits, verify work eligibility, or deny services to undocumented individuals effectively transforms citizens into agents of the border (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019).

The spatial dispersion of border enforcement further illustrates how bordering processes do not disappear but are instead reconfigured, especially if we look back again at the Schengen area. While the abolition of internal borders was framed as a key achievement of European integration, migration control has not been eliminated; it has been displaced. The racialized policing of movement within Europe, for instance, means that border checks now take place in trains, buses, and urban spaces rather than at fixed border posts. This reflects what Walters (2006) describes as a “*networked and diffuse*” border apparatus, where control is enacted not at a single territorial threshold but through a web of institutional and social practices.

Therefore, bordering processes represent an organizing mechanism aimed at constructing, maintaining, and controlling social and political order. This mechanism involves determining not only who is and who is not entitled to enter a country but also whether those who do are allowed to stay, work, and acquire civil, political, and social rights. Borders, in this sense, function as mechanisms of social sorting that regulate mobility, access and belonging, as regulatory frameworks that go beyond physical demarcations, shaping access to resources, rights, and recognition while reinforcing systems of inclusion and exclusion.

In this research, I have employed these theoretical frameworks as analytical lenses to examine the dynamics at play in my study context. Specifically, I have focused on the pervasive bordering mechanisms and processes operating in the Balkan region, analyzing how they shape mobility, governance, and control. This approach has allowed me to explore the roles and interactions of various actors, including state institutions, international organizations, NGOs, people on the move, and their allies, shedding light on the ways in which border enforcement, resistance, and solidarity unfold in this contested space.

1.3 Borders as “Generative Spaces” and “Battlegrounds”.

Borders and bordering processes can be approached through a generative lens, as highlighted by an expanding body of scholarship. Rather than being understood solely as sites of exclusion, surveillance, and control, borders can be conceptualized as dynamic spaces that produce new possibilities, relationships, and forms of contestation. This perspective emphasizes their role as negotiated and continuously shaped terrains, where social, political, and cultural interactions unfold. Following Hess and Kasparek’s (2017) conceptualization of the border “*as conflict*,” it becomes apparent that borders are arenas of continuous contestation among multiple actors, including states, supranational institutions, humanitarian organizations, solidarity networks, and migrants themselves. Within this framework, borders are produced and reproduced through ongoing struggles over mobility, rights, and access, rendering instability and negotiation central features of their operation. Conflicts emerge not only in moments of acute crisis, such as mass arrivals or border closures, but also in everyday practices, through the enactment of legal regimes, the deployment of enforcement technologies, and informal strategies of movement and resistance.

Therefore, as also Parker and Vaughan-Williams (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009) argue, borders are not simply physical demarcations but are performative and relational spaces that produce diverse and often unexpected forms of interaction. Brambilla (2015) adds to this discussion by framing borders as generative spaces where creativity and transformation emerge. She highlights that borders are not merely sites of division but are constantly “becoming” through the interactions, negotiations, and contestations of those who traverse and inhabit them. For Brambilla, borders are spaces of assemblage, where power relations, cultural identities, and social dynamics are actively reconfigured. By introducing the concept of the “borderscape,” she emphasizes the spatial dimension of borders as paradoxical structures, simultaneously functioning as markers of belonging (serving as instruments for enforcing and maintaining the exclusive political and juridical order of the modern Western nation-state) and as spaces of becoming (arenas shaped by resistance and struggle). This perspective enables a deeper understanding of the ambiguous and dynamic nature of violence and conflict, revealing both their restrictive and generative dimensions. According to Brambilla and Jones (Brambilla & Jones, 2020), the borderscapes framework foregrounds the fluid, contested, and multi-vocal nature of contemporary bordering processes (Novak, 2017; Yuval-Davis, 2011). It provides a lens through which borders can be understood as sites of tension and negotiation between hegemonic, non-hegemonic, and counter-hegemonic imaginaries and practices (Gaibazzi, 2017). This approach moves beyond a narrow focus on

state sovereignty and its claim to exclusive control, instead emphasizing the discursive and performative dimensions of bordering. It reveals how violence and conflict are not only imposed but also contested, opening space for agency and transformation. In this sense, "borderscaping" highlights the fluid and contested character of borders, which are continually shaped, adjusted, and reconfigured through complex socio-spatial processes of b/ordering. These dynamics challenge the state-centric geopolitical order and disrupt the notion of borders as fixed, essentialized, and uncontested constructs (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007).

Rather than treating borders as stable, linear, and fixed demarcations, the concept of borderscaping highlights their multiplicity and internal tensions, framing them as sites of claims, counterclaims, and ongoing negotiation, shaped by diverse actors, historically contingent interests, and shifting power relations. These processes complicate monolithic understandings of border regimes by incorporating the varied and sometimes conflicting perspectives of both borderlanders and those who cross borders. Attending to their situated experiences and viewpoints allows for a more nuanced appreciation of contemporary borders as spaces where conflict, negotiation, and transformation occur (Cassidy et al., 2018: 171; Brambilla & Jones, 2020).

In a similar vein, Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) with the concept of "*borders as method*," highlight how borders, far from being static, are active sites of production where power relations are negotiated, and new subjectivities emerge. These generative dimensions of borders become particularly evident in contexts where local communities, migrants, and transnational actors engage in practices that challenge or reconfigure the meanings and functions of borders. Walters (2011), for instance, explores how the politics of solidarity and resistance at borders contribute to the creation of alternative imaginaries that resist the hegemonic logic of state-centric border regimes, but also open spaces for new forms of political subjectivity and solidarity, as actors engage in practices that both contest and reconfigure traditional notions of borders and sovereignty.

Ambrosini (2021) further enriches this debate by conceptualizing borders, asylum and migration policies as "battlegrounds," where competing interests, policies, and actors converge, resulting in spaces of intense conflict and negotiation. The concept of battleground extends beyond the issues of "border struggles" in regard to migrants' movements and protests (De Genova, 2015;) or to humanitarian mobilisations (Squire, 2014), since it encompasses the diverse actors, actions, and interactions that influence migration and asylum governance. These dynamics unfold not just at national borders or during entry, and not solely through migrants' movements; they also occur across various locations and involve a range of actors who play a role in the inclusion of migrants within receiving societies. According to Ambrosini, this framework can in fact be applied on different dimensions: at the international level, including examples such as NGO boats that rescue individuals despite opposition from governments and judicial systems (Stierl, 2016); in the context of "cities of refuge" forming Transnational Municipal Networks to influence national and international policies (Oomen, 2019); among activists and volunteers assisting asylum seekers in crossing national borders despite police enforcement and legal actions (Giliberti & Queirolo Palmas, 2020). The metaphor of the "battleground" effectively conveys the contested nature of bordering processes, where state authorities, civil society actors, and migrants actively influence and redefine border practices and meanings. Borders thus become dynamic arenas where agency, resistance, and solidarity are continuously negotiated and expressed.

Furthermore, this conceptualization also underscores how the migration management is shaped by the engagement of a wide range of actors - each with distinct interests, beliefs, and values - at international, national, and local levels (de Haas et al., 2022). Across these levels, a complex process of borderwork

unfolds (Rumford, 2006), involving not only state authorities but also international humanitarian agencies, NGOs, civic organizations, local administrations, and private citizens (Fontanari & Borri, 2018, p. 33). These actors contribute to the negotiation and contestation of migration policies, often in ways that challenge official border enforcement strategies. The context of the Balkan routes effectively exemplifies the “efficacy gap” (Czaika & de Haas, 2013) between the formal policies aimed at reinforcing borders and excluding migrants, and the realities of migration governance on the ground. In these spaces, mobility is not solely determined by restrictive policies but is actively shaped by a diverse set of actors, including migrants themselves and those who support them along their journeys. Over the years, various forms of collective action and solidarity have emerged in response to these conditions, revealing how migration governance is not simply imposed from above but is continuously negotiated through everyday struggles and interactions.

Moreover, borders can serve as sites of creativity and solidarity, where individuals and groups, often operating under conditions of precarity, develop strategies for survival and mutual care. This perspective aligns with Balibar's (2002) notion of the polysemic nature of borders: not merely spaces of division, but also of encounter and exchange. In this sense, borders emerge as battlegrounds where multiple actors negotiate, resist, and reimagine the terms of mobility and belonging. Rather than reproducing reductive dichotomies of inclusion/exclusion or mobility/immobility, this approach foregrounds the contested and generative dimensions of bordering processes, revealing the new forms of sociality and politics that emerge within them. Such a framework is essential for engaging critically with the lived realities of borders, and for envisioning alternatives grounded in human dignity and justice.

2. Solidarity.

2.1 Conceptualizing Solidarity in Support of Migrants.

Another key analytical framework employed in this research is that of solidarity. The concept of solidarity has a long-standing presence in sociological thought, dating back to classical theorists such as Durkheim. However, despite this historical attention, it has often been marginal in empirical research within sociology, social anthropology, and political science, typically treated in abstract or descriptive terms with limited investigation into its concrete manifestations (Komter, 2004). In critical migration studies, solidarity has been more frequently invoked (Ataç et al., 2016), but its conceptual richness is often overlooked, with the term applied interchangeably to political advocacy for marginalized groups, volunteering and practical assistance, or as a broad label for activism. Recent scholarship, particularly within social movement studies, has sought to move beyond this superficial usage, offering more nuanced analyses of the ways solidarity emerges, operates, and transforms in specific social and political contexts (Zamponi, 2017; della Porta, 2018; Squire, 2018; Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Bauder & Juffs, 2020). Especially in the aftermath of the so-called “long summer of migration” of 2015 (Hess & Kasparek, 2017a), the debate on solidarity has gained renewed prominence, with scholars increasingly questioning its ambivalences: is solidarity a contentious and transformative force, or does it risk reinforcing existing power asymmetries and maintaining the status quo? Does it carry an intrinsic political meaning, or does it remain confined to depoliticized humanitarian volunteering (Fassin, 2012)? This growing scholarly engagement reflects the intensification of solidarity initiatives across Europe, where grassroots groups, NGOs, and institutional actors have expanded their activities to support people on the move (Agustín & Jørgensen 2018; Della Porta 2018; Milan, 2018; Milan, 2024).

This dynamic and ongoing shift reflects a broader recognition that solidarity is not a fixed or monolithic category but a dynamic and contested process shaped by political, social, and spatial conditions. As

Agustín and Jørgensen (2019) highlight, solidarity assumes multiple forms - namely, autonomous, civic, and institutional - yet these configurations are neither internally homogeneous nor mutually exclusive. Instead, they co-exist, overlap, and evolve through everyday interactions, negotiations, and conflicts. In a similar vein, Schwiertz and Schwenken (2020) argue for a non-essentialist perspective that foregrounds the performative dimensions of solidarity, how it is enacted, transformed, and reconfigured through specific practices. Rather than viewing solidarity as a predefined moral or political stance, this approach emphasizes its fluidity, showing how it materializes in networks of care, resistance, and cooperation that transcend conventional divisions between humanitarianism and activism, assistance and contestation.

By adopting such lenses, research on migration and borders has begun to explore the hybrid and relational nature of solidarity, moving beyond static typologies to examine how different actors and initiatives interact within complex political and institutional landscapes. Various studies have documented how grassroots collectives, NGOs, and state-affiliated organizations simultaneously engage in assistance work and political advocacy, challenging rigid distinctions between “humanitarian” and “political” solidarity (Fleischmann, 2020; Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Vandevoordt & Fleischmann, 2021). Solidarity in border areas, in particular, emerges as a field of tension and convergence, where volunteers, activists, and institutional actors navigate shifting constraints and opportunities, often developing unexpected collaborations. The increasing hybridization of solidarity practices (Kousis et al., 2021; Sandri, 2018; Schwiertz & Steinhilper 2020; Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019) have revealed in many studies a growing communion of intentions and ideals, in which diverse actors - despite their different positions, strategies, and motivations - contribute to reshaping the social and political landscape of migration governance.

However, while solidarity is often framed as a force for social transformation, scholars have also increasingly highlighted its ambivalences, questioning whether it truly disrupts existing power structures or, instead, risks reinforcing them. For example, Tazzioli and Walters (2019) caution against the ambiguity of solidarity discourse, arguing that it can obscure the very power relations it seeks to challenge, ultimately reinforcing social distinctions rather than dismantling them. Similarly, Monforte and Steinhilper (2023) point to the risks embedded in humanitarian spaces such as refugee camps, where the immediate provision of relief, rather than fostering collective agency, can deepen divisions among refugees based on externally defined hierarchies of need. This selective recognition of suffering not only perpetuates distinctions between “deserving” and “undeserving” recipients but also risks diverting energy away from long-term political struggles for structural change. The reproduction of hierarchies within solidarity practices extends beyond institutional and grassroots humanitarianism to the intimate sphere. Farahani (2021) explores how the act of hosting refugees in private homes, while framed as a gesture of care and inclusion, can create new forms of dependence and obligation. In this setting, the relational dynamics between host and guest risk mirroring broader structures of inequality, where the expectation of gratitude from refugees subtly reinforces power asymmetries. Instead of challenging exclusionary systems, such forms of solidarity can inadvertently replicate historical patterns of racial, gendered, and class-based subordination. Yet, acknowledging these contradictions should not lead to a wholesale rejection of solidarity as a political and analytical framework. Rather, these critiques underscore the need to approach solidarity as a situated, contested, and relational practice, one that is constantly shaped by power asymmetries and therefore requires ongoing reflexivity. From this perspective, the value of solidarity lies not in its presumed purity or emancipatory essence, but in its capacity to open spaces for negotiation, conflict, and reconfiguration of social relations, even when such efforts remain partial, fragile, and internally contradictory.

These critiques underscore the necessity of a more reflexive and processual conception of solidarity, one that recognizes its ambivalent potential to both challenge and reinforce existing social hierarchies. It is therefore essential to examine the conditions under which solidarity emerges, the forms of social relations it produces, and the unintended effects it may generate. Solidarity should not be understood as inherently emancipatory; many practices, while oriented toward assistance or care, do not in themselves subvert dominant social structures. Rather, it is through the relational and practical dimensions of solidarity - through acts of support, cooperation, and mutual aid - that individuals may gain autonomy and create the conditions for meaningful self-determination. Attending to these dynamics allows solidarity to move beyond paternalistic or hierarchical logics of care and opens the possibility for genuinely transformative collective action.

The theoretical perspective guiding this research challenges the notion of solidarity as a stable or coherent force. Instead, it emphasizes how solidarity is continuously negotiated, contested, and reconfigured through everyday encounters and struggles. As highlighted in several studies, the widespread and compelling impulse to express empathy and support toward people on the move has given rise to new subjectivities and alliances, generating innovative forms of engagement that reshape the relationships between individuals, institutions, and political imaginaries (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Lahusen et al., 2021). By moving beyond binary frameworks that separate humanitarianism from activism, institutional from grassroots initiatives, or assistance from resistance, an understanding of solidarity as dynamic and relational has been developing, one that captures its transformative potential in shaping migration societies and in redefining the very meaning of political action across and beyond national borders.

Building on these premises, the subsequent sections will explore key theories and studies that examine the tensions between solidarity and humanitarianism, while also considering the concept of de-bordering solidarities and their potential for transformation and political impact. Furthermore, I will analyze theoretical approaches that focus on the relational dynamics and spaces within solidarity practices, exploring how they can both foster new alliances and opportunities and, at the same time, reproduce existing hierarchies and power relations.

2.2 Humanitarianism vs Solidarity.

In recent decades, the intersection of humanitarianism and solidarity has sparked an ongoing debate within sociology and anthropology, especially as Europe has emerged as a focal point for these critical discussions. The critique centers on both international humanitarian aid and the various grassroots efforts to support refugees, illuminating the complexities and contradictions inherent in these responses.

The conceptual framework of “humanitarian reason” (Fassin, 2012) provides an essential starting point for understanding the limitations of humanitarian interventions. Humanitarianism, often treated as a monolithic framework, is increasingly understood as a mechanism that risks depoliticizing and oversimplifying the complex, politically charged realities of refugee experiences (Malkki, 1996). This framework underscores how humanitarian action, despite its ostensibly altruistic intentions, can perpetuate structural inequalities by failing to interrogate the broader historical and political contexts within which refugee movements occur. In this sense, humanitarian reason can align with the interests of states, contributing to the normalization of exclusionary migration policies and practices. The notion of humanitarianism as a neutral, apolitical force becomes problematic when examined through the lens of scholars like Agier (2011), who argues that humanitarian actors, often unwittingly, may become complicit in the very systems they aim to alleviate, reinforcing the status quo of migrant control and border enforcement.

Along the years and among different scholars, this critique have expanded into the realm of neoliberalism and global mobility. Particularly, authors like Pallister-Wilkins (2021) have explored how the neoliberal order is deeply intertwined with humanitarianism, with local initiatives and international organizations often playing roles that reinforce the uneven distribution of mobility across the globe. According to these authors, humanitarian practices, even when grounded in solidarity, may contribute to the reproduction of unequal access to resources, protection, and freedom of movement, often participating in a broader system of governance that shapes who is deemed worthy of protection and who is left outside the bounds of care.

On the other hand, in recent scholarship, especially when analyzing grassroots mobilizations and various forms of support from below to migrants, the concept of solidarity has emerged as carrier of a political dimension that distinguishes it from concepts like “humanitarianism,” or “charity” (Della Porta, 2018; Vandevoordt, 2019). For example, Dadusc and Mudu (2020) recently characterized humanitarianism as “*filling the gaps*,” whereas solidarity aims to “*create cracks in the system*” while, at times, simultaneously enacting alternative visions and practices of migration and mobility. This distinction becomes particularly salient in empirical observation. Large humanitarian organizations that avoid publicly contesting European migration regimes tend to experience a comparatively lower risk of criminalization, as their activities remain largely aligned with state-sanctioned frameworks. By contrast, practices of solidarity, even when not explicitly confrontational, operate in ways that facilitate migrants’ evasion of state control, for instance, through the provision of shelter, guidance, or other forms of assistance that circumvent official channels (Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Picozza, 2021). Such practices can be understood as producing “cracks” within the colonial and bureaucratic architectures of asylum and citizenship, revealing the limits of state authority and challenging the normative hierarchies embedded in contemporary migration governance.

Still, it is important to highlight how solidarity is a concept highly complex and resistant to a singular, monolithic definition. Scholars have sought to capture this complexity by proposing diverse frameworks that highlight different sources and expressions of solidarity. For example, Oosterlynck et al. (2016) identify four key sources of solidarity: interdependence, shared norms and values, struggle, and encounter. This conceptualization underscores the variety of ways in which solidarity can manifest, ranging from mutual support rooted in shared struggles to solidarity born from encounters between individuals or groups with differing experiences and perspectives. Similarly, Agustín and Jørgensen (2018) distinguish between different forms of solidarity - autonomous, civic, and institutional -, that differ in their organization, relationship to the state, and political implications. Autonomous solidarity emerges in self-organized, often urban spaces, grounded in horizontal participation and practices of equality that explicitly reject cooperation with the state and NGOs’ depoliticized humanitarianism. Civic solidarity encompasses a wide range of civil society initiatives, such as NGOs, local groups, and individuals, aimed at inclusion and rights expansion. It fosters a sense of collective belonging (“*w-ness*”) and collaboration among diverse social groups, while remaining partly open to institutional engagement. Institutional solidarity, by contrast, refers to the formalization of solidarity relations through established frameworks, such as welfare systems or policy mechanisms, where support is mediated by rights, obligations, and institutional norms. Yet, this formalization often generates a tension between solidarity’s transformative potential and its normalization within bureaucratic structures. These distinctions draw attention to the diverse ways solidarity is both enacted and institutionalized, emphasizing how these forms can coexist, overlap, or conflict in various contexts.

Other scholars, such as Gaztambide-Fernández (2012), have described solidarity as relational, transformative, and creative. This approach frames solidarity as a process that is not merely about

providing aid or offering support but is instead an active, ongoing engagement that creates new forms of relationships and connections between people. Through this lens, solidarity becomes a transformative force, one that challenges the status quo and fosters the creation of new social bonds, often leading to long-lasting change. Similarly, Fleischmann (2020) argues that solidarity is shaped by contested social imaginaries, embodying ideals for a better society. It is a form of collective action that goes beyond immediate needs, envisioning alternative futures and embodying values that challenge existing inequalities. In line with these transformative perspectives, some scholars have framed solidarity also as an inclusive form of citizenship aimed at renegotiating societal structures and overcoming exclusion. For example, Schwiertz and Schwenken (2020) emphasize how solidarity can bridge divides between different social, cultural, and political groups, fostering connections among people from diverse backgrounds. This approach underscores solidarity's potential not only as a tool for immediate relief but also as a means of creating more inclusive societies by questioning the very frameworks that sustain social exclusion and marginalization. In addition, also the concept of “subversive humanitarianism” as framed by Vandervoordt (Vandervoordt, 2019) encapsulates the tensions and overlaps between humanitarian practices and political activism. Vandervoordt posits that certain forms of humanitarianism, particularly those originating from grassroots and activist groups, possess a subversive quality, even if they are not explicitly contentious, by challenging state policies, questioning entrenched power dynamics, and advocating for systemic change rather than merely addressing immediate needs

Building on this, Ambrosini’s conceptualization of “de-bordering solidarities” (Ambrosini, 2024) further challenges the constraints of institutionalized humanitarianism, critically engaging with the tension between state-imposed bordering practices and the grassroots, informal networks that challenge them. This theoretical framework underscores how civil society actors, local communities, and non-state organizations often enact forms of solidarity that transcend the exclusionary logic of national borders. These practices, which Ambrosini describes as potentially “invisible” or “undeclared,” operate in the interstices of formal migration governance, providing support and inclusion to migrants despite restrictive state policies, and often without being openly contentious. Ambrosini however positions these acts of solidarity as inherently political, as they contest the hegemonic narratives and policies that criminalize or marginalize migrant populations.

While a clear-cut distinction between humanitarianism and solidarity can provide a sense of (normative) orientation, the growing body of scholarship just mentioned highlights the ‘hybrid’ nature of many solidarity practices (Rozakou, 2017; Sandri, 2018; Steinhilper & Fleischmann, 2017; Stierl, 2018; Feischmidt & Zakariás, 2018; Vandervoordt, 2019; Vandervoordt & Fleischmann, 2021; della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021; Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2021). For example, while examining the political dimensions of various search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean, Stierl (2018) urges both researchers and activists to consider “*the possibility for political dissent to be formulated and enacted within humanitarian reason*”. At the same time, in moments of overlapping crises, radical actors may find themselves prioritizing immediate social action over explicitly political engagement (Rozakou, 2017; Vandervoordt & Fleischmann, 2021).

Therefore, whether understood in its ideal-typical form or through a hybrid lens that creates a connection with humanitarianism, solidarity has largely been conceptualized with a political and collective dimension. From this perspective, even seemingly mundane acts of support can be seen as prefiguring a more egalitarian society, while encounters between individuals with diverse positionalities may serve as catalysts for new social movements (Murru, et al., 2024). In the context of responses to

violent migration regimes, solidarity signifies not only an immediate intervention but also the potential to transform social relations and reimagine political subjectivities.

2.3 Solidarity Practices as Care Practices. Toward New Theoretical Frameworks.

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on forms of solidarity that, although not always articulated through explicit political claims, hold significant transformative potential (Zamponi, 2017; Artero, 2019). These practices encompass a wide range of activities, from the distribution of food and non-food items (NFIs) to the provision of medical and legal assistance, the organization of recreational and educational initiatives, and the activation of grassroots aid networks. While such actions may not overtly aim to effect institutional change or directly confront dominant political structures (Fleischmann, 2020; Zamponi, 2017), they have been conceptualized as “direct social actions” (Zamponi, 2017): practices of concrete help and care that, through their very enactment, engender alternative social relations and challenge established hierarchies of power. Drawing on Scott’s (1986) theorization of “everyday resistance”, these practices can be interpreted as everyday subtle yet potent forms of disruption that undermine the exclusionary and violent logics underpinning contemporary border regimes. In contexts where migration governance is organized around the criminalization of mobility and the active production of precarity and disposability, such acts of support acquire political significance. They not only provide immediate relief but also contribute to reshaping the socio-political landscape by cultivating spaces of inclusion, recognition, and collective belonging.

In recent years, another analytical framework has situated these practices of solidarity within the paradigm of “care work”, aligning them with the feminist tradition of the “ethics of care” (Montes & Paris Pombo, 2019; Milan & Martini, 2024). Scholars have observed that during the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015, the notion of “hospitality” “was gradually displaced by “solidarity” as the dominant mode of engagement with migrants and refugees (Papataxiarchis, 2016). Since then, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, grassroots solidarity groups have increasingly come to define their activities in terms of “care work.” Care, in this context, extends beyond individual acts of compassion or charity: it is a collective, politically charged practice that confronts structural and intersectional inequalities. Rather than seeking to erase the asymmetries that shape relationships of support, care-oriented solidarity strives to reconfigure them by prefiguring alternative ways of being together, grounded in interdependence, reciprocity, and community. This perspective resonates with analyses developed in the context of the US–Mexico border, where Medel (2017) has advanced the notion of “abolitionist care.” As both a theoretical and practical framework, abolitionist care positions care as a form of direct action that contests the structural violence of borders, the criminalization of marginalized populations, and the systemic devaluation of life. By creating spaces of protection, dignity, and mutual support, abolitionist care not only mitigates harm but also gestures toward the abolition of oppressive systems themselves, prefiguring social relations that transcend exclusion and exploitation.

Building on these insights, I approach solidarity practices along the Balkan Routes through an analytical lens that centers care and mutual aid as transformative and inherently political. In contrast to institutionalized forms of humanitarian aid, often framed as depoliticized moral interventions that reproduce the “savior–victim” dichotomy (Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2011), grassroots practices of solidarity and care emerge as situated, collective, and relational responses that challenge state-driven logics of control, exclusion, and isolation (Vandevoordt, 2019; Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; della Porta, 2018). These initiatives frequently operate beyond the confines of state-run reception infrastructures, enacting what might be described as “autonomous infrastructures of care.” Drawing on

Gutiérrez Sánchez's (2023) notion of "infrastructuring care", these practices materialize care through everyday acts of maintenance, coordination, and repair that sustain life where institutional systems withdraw. Rather than merely filling gaps left by the state, they generate alternative circuits of support and relationality, reconfiguring care as a collective, infrastructural politics.

Furthermore, the feminist theorization of care provides a crucial framework for understanding the political dimensions of these practices. Fisher and Tronto (1990) famously defined care as "*a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible,*" encompassing our bodies, ourselves, and our environment. Tronto (Tronto, 2013) further distinguished between "*caring for*" (hands-on, material support), "*caring about*" (emotional investment), and "*caring with*" (the political mobilization of care to transform collective conditions). Since the early 2000s, feminist movements have re-signified care, reclaiming it from the privatized, feminized, and thus devalued domain of the household (Glenn, 2000), and reasserting it as a collective political responsibility. In this sense, care entails relationships of interdependence (Glenn, 2000) and demands to be "*defamiliarized*", that is, removed from its individualized framing and reimagined as a public, communal, and political concern. From this perspective, an ethics of care is not confined to the moral sphere but constitutes a broader political project encompassing the totality of social relations. The "*politicization of care*" (Tronto, 2020) emphasizes that care is a fundamental dimension of democratic life, essential to the maintenance of collective bonds and the pursuit of social justice. When enacted as a collective practice, care becomes a means of building coalitions and inclusive communities that address structural inequalities. This theoretical reorientation aligns with feminist critiques of neoliberalism, which highlight how the privatization and commodification of care have fragmented social relations and eroded collective responsibility. By reclaiming care as a political practice, solidarity movements actively contest these dynamics, asserting interdependence as both a social condition and a foundation for resistance and transformation.

Nonetheless, a growing body of scholarship cautions against romanticizing care. Scholars have pointed out that care practices are entangled in ethical and emotional complexities (Farahani, 2021), often shaped by ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradictory emotions (Monforte et al., 2021). Informal care initiatives may inadvertently reproduce hierarchies and modes of governance that mirror state logics (Cabot, 2016), reinforce categories of vulnerability and deservingness (Ticktin, 2011), or generate new forms of differentiation among recipients of aid (Drotbohm & Dilger, 2024). Such critiques underscore the necessity of a reflexive approach that situates care not as an unambiguous moral good, but as a contested and situated practice, one that oscillates between reproduction and resistance, complicity and transformation.

Finally, in order to further grasp and deepen the political aspect of solidarity (and care) practices, I will refer also to Rancière's view on politics (2008) arguing that the political can be seen as an expression of disagreement and aim to change an existing order in society. As he argues: "*Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part.*" According to Rancière in fact the processes and systems that legitimize the social contract do not constitute politics; rather, they mark its termination. These procedures function as mechanisms of governance aimed at regulating bodies, a process he refers to as policing. For example, when the state incorporates refugees into a state-controlled asylum and border regime, it is not an act of politics but the consolidation of an existing order that neutralizes political subjectivity. In contrast, true politics, in Rancière's sense, emerges in moments of rupture, interruption, and resistance, acts that expose and challenge the exclusions inherent in the system. Solidarity practices can exemplify such political acts.

They disrupt the established order by asserting the presence and agency of those whom the system seeks to render invisible.

In synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, solidarity practices as care practices emerge as a vital site of political imagination and action. They reveal how care and solidarity are intertwined in the struggle against systemic inequalities, offering new possibilities for recognition, inclusion, and systemic change. By integrating insights from feminist ethics of care, abolitionist theory, and theories of everyday resistance, this framework provides a nuanced understanding of the political and transformative potential of solidarity as care. It underscores that such practices, though not always overtly political, are deeply subversive, as they challenge the dehumanizing logic of borders, criminalization, and exclusion while fostering alternative forms of sociality and belonging.

2.4 The Relational Dimension of Solidarity.

To gain a deeper understanding of how the transformative and political aspects of solidarity in support of migrants emerge and unfold, this research will take a critical approach to the relational dynamics between the various actors involved in solidarity networks. It will focus on how these actors - whether grassroots organizations, NGOs, or state institutions - interact, collaborate, and sometimes clash, and how their practices engage with and address intersectional inequalities within these relationships. As existing scholarship has demonstrated, relationships and interactions are not merely by-products of solidarity practices but constitute a central element in shaping their political significance (Fleischmann, 2020). Solidarity does not operate in a vacuum; rather, it is embedded in relational processes that influence and, in turn, are influenced by broader structures of power, agency, and subject formation. In this sense, solidarity is not simply an act of assistance or moral commitment but a site of political contestation and negotiation through which actors redefine their positionalities and relations of power (Bauder, 2021).

A growing body of literature has underscored the importance of viewing solidarity as a dynamic and processual phenomenon, shaped by both material and discursive struggles. Specifically, Agustín and Jørgensen (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2021) highlight how forms of intersectional and transversal solidarity have the potential to generate new political imaginaries and establish a common ground that resists exclusionary logics. According to them, transversal solidarity moves away from the pursuit of unity and universality, focusing instead on embracing differences and fostering commonalities, a crucial principle in challenging exclusionary politics, as it acknowledges the evolving socio-spatial bonds formed by a diverse range of activists within civil society, including migrants. This perspective closely aligns with Yuval-Davis' (Yuval-Davis, 1999) concept of "transversal politics". The significance of transversal politics lies in its ability to embrace difference while upholding equality. Discussing transversal feminist political movements, in fact, Yuval-Davis asserts:

"The participants, while being engaged with 'others' belonging to different collectivities across borders and boundaries, act not as representatives of identity categories or groupings but rather as advocates, how they are reflectively engaged in 'rooting' and 'shifting' and how their strength lies in the construction of common epistemological understandings of particular political situations rather than of common political action." (2011)

By focusing on the relational dimensions and nuanced dynamics of solidarity, this analytical lens emphasizes openness that extends beyond clearly defined groups or individual actors, thereby challenging pre-existing collective identities. Yet, such encounters and dialogues do not necessarily culminate in the emergence of a new, unified collective identity. Rather, transversal politics - and solidarity understood through this framework - facilitate social configurations that transcend rigid in-

group/out-group boundaries. They make it possible for distinct identities to coexist without erasure, while simultaneously affirming relations of equality, fostering mutual recognition, and creating spaces of shared understanding and common purpose. On this line, also Ataç and Rygiel affirm that alliances, rather than being based on fixed identities or homogeneous interests, can emerge through practices of negotiation and mutual recognition that challenge dominant forms of citizenship and belonging (Ataç et al., 2021). Similarly, Montagna (2018) argues that solidarity practices can disrupt traditional dichotomies of subordination and domination, fostering alternative modes of political engagement that transcend hierarchical structures.

However, while solidarity is frequently conceptualized as a progressive and emancipatory practice, critical scholarship has highlighted the ways in which it may also reproduce, rather than dismantle, existing hierarchies of power. As Tazzioli and Walters (2019) argue, the discourse of solidarity often functions as a depoliticizing device, concealing relations of dependency, paternalism, and privilege that structure encounters between citizens and migrants. In this sense, solidarity can obscure the asymmetries embedded in the very practices that claim to challenge domination, reaffirming the authority of those positioned as “helpers” and the passivity of those rendered as “helped.” This tension is further developed by Siim and Meret (2021), who draw attention to the contradictions and internal frictions within pro-migrant and pro-refugee movements. They note that solidarity initiatives can be co-opted by institutional and state actors, thereby losing their transformative potential, or can become sites of internal contestation marked by unequal participation, representational struggles, and exclusionary dynamics. These critiques underscore that solidarity, far from being a neutral or inherently virtuous practice, is a field of power in which inequalities are negotiated, reproduced, or resisted.

In practice, those offering support to migrants, whether activists, volunteers, or social workers, often occupy positions of structural privilege. They typically possess greater linguistic and cultural capital, institutional legitimacy, and secure access to public space, resources largely inaccessible to people with irregular legal status. As a result, relations of solidarity are traversed by asymmetries that can simultaneously enable and constrain collective action. While irregular migrants may benefit from this “power by proxy,” as citizens mobilize their privileged positions to challenge exclusionary policies, such dynamics also risk reinforcing dependency and undermining migrant agency. With this regards, Tarsia (2018) illustrates how these power imbalances manifest in everyday interactions between migrants and social workers in reception centres, often generating tensions and conflicts. Similarly, Nicholls and Uitermark (2015) conceptualize these dynamics through what they term the “powerful allies dilemma,” wherein those with social and symbolic capital may dominate decision-making processes, and the “power of representation dilemma,” whereby actors with stronger representational skills unintentionally marginalize less visible members of the movement. Taken together, these critical perspectives invite a more reflexive and intersectional understanding of solidarity, one that recognizes its ambivalent nature and foregrounds the need to constantly interrogate how it is practiced. Rather than assuming solidarity as inherently emancipatory, scholars and practitioners are urged to consider how it might be reconfigured as a relational and transformative process aimed at dismantling, rather than reproducing, entrenched hierarchies and exclusions.

To engage with these complexities, this research will then draw on Jodi Dean’s (Dean, 1996) concept of “reflective solidarity.” Dean’s framework shifts the focus from an essentialist or moralistic understanding of solidarity towards one that recognizes the productive role of difference, disagreement, and even conflict in fostering meaningful political engagement. Unlike conceptions of solidarity that presuppose a shared identity or unity, reflective solidarity is premised on the idea that actors can recognize and work through their differences in ways that generate communicative action and mutual

understanding. In this sense, solidarity is a dynamic and contested process that holds the potential to challenge existing power structures while remaining attuned to its own limitations and contradictions.

These perspectives align with the concept of “encounter” as framed by Gill Valentine. Valentine (Valentine, 2008) challenges the assumption that proximity or contact between different social groups automatically leads to greater understanding and social cohesion. Instead, she argues that encounters are inherently shaped by power relations, historical inequalities, and the broader social and political contexts in which they take place. Encounters are not neutral spaces of exchange but are mediated by existing structures of privilege and exclusion, which influence whether interactions lead to genuine recognition or reinforce existing hierarchies. Rather than assuming that solidarity emerges naturally from shared experiences, Valentine’s framework suggests that meaningful encounters require a politics of negotiation—an ongoing process in which individuals and groups confront their differences, challenge prejudices, and work through tensions. In this sense, solidarity, much like encounter, is not about the erasure of difference but about the capacity to engage with it productively.

Therefore, while solidarity, when viewed through a Marxian-Hegelian lens, can be understood as a social practice that unites individuals in similar conditions to form a cohesive subject, such as the working class, other perspectives have demonstrated that solidarity begins with the recognition of differences between the self and the other (Kelz, 2015). However, it subsequently forges connections among individuals who acknowledge their social, political, economic, or cultural distinctions. This means that solidarity is capable of linking people who may appear to have little in common: exploited workers and affluent consumers, racialized individuals and those who are not, non-status people and formal citizens, or people on the move and local populations. These relations do not presuppose symmetry; indeed, practices of solidarity frequently unfold across, and sometimes in explicit tension with, established social, political, and economic hierarchies. Rather than being grounded in equivalence or reciprocity, solidarity often emerges through contingent encounters and shared struggles that cut across positional inequalities. As Featherstone (2012) argues, solidarity involves “*constructing relations between places, activists, and diverse social groups.*” While such relations may at times contribute to the reinforcement of existing identities and power configurations, they are equally, and perhaps more characteristically, oriented toward the active creation of alternative modes of relating. In this sense, solidarity possesses a generative capacity: it can give rise to “*new configurations of political relations, political subjectivities, and spaces*” (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2021), enabling forms of collective action that would otherwise remain unavailable. Conceived in these terms, solidarity becomes a deeply political and imaginative practice - what Featherstone (2012) aptly describes as a “world-making process” - through which actors experiment with and enact different visions of social and political life, potentially unsettling dominant orders and opening up new horizons for agency and belonging.

A key aspect of this world-making process is the presence of different actors on a shared political stage (Butler, 2012). If solidarity is not aimed at forging a uniform and homogeneous subject, then its objective may be to cultivate bonds that empower those facing oppression, marginalization, and exploitation to express themselves, take action, and assert their belonging. Agustín and Jørgensen (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2016) argue that the critical question regarding alliances of solidarity “*is not an identitarian one but rather it is about how different political actors converge in ongoing social struggles in order to undo the political closure*” while maintaining the plurality among them. This dialectical process forms a shared political subject without reducing it to a homogeneous entity. Solidarity remains an ongoing practice that resists political closure and upholds plurality, while acknowledging the intricate, fragmented, and multifaceted relationships among people in diverse circumstances.

Similarly, Featherstone (2012) emphasizes that:

“thinking solidarities in relational terms allows an engagement with the diverse relations and connections shaped through solidarities. This asserts a radical openness regarding the terms on which solidarities are shaped. They are unfinished and in process. This is important as it allows solidarities and the political communities they build to be articulated in different ways. This openness asserts that there are to be no guarantees about the end point to which solidarities work. Rather, it suggests that different political futures and relations can be produced through solidaristic practices.” (2012)

This perspective is particularly valuable in understanding how solidarities form and evolve in response to shifting political landscapes. Rather than being predefined or static, they emerge through ongoing struggles, negotiations, and encounters, often shaped by unexpected alliances. This openness to multiple political futures underscores the transformative potential of solidaristic practices, allowing them to adapt to new challenges and resist co-optation into rigid or exclusionary frameworks.

Drawing on these premises, this research places the relational dimension of solidarity at the centre of the analysis, treating solidarity not as a fixed orientation or a shared moral position, but as something that is produced through relationships. What is at stake, therefore, is not whether solidarity exists as an abstract principle, but how it is enacted, negotiated, and contested through concrete interactions between differently positioned actors. Solidarity emerges in and through relations that are historically and structurally uneven, shaped by legal status, citizenship, race, gender, class, and differential access to resources. These relations are not secondary to solidaristic practices; rather, they constitute the very terrain on which their political meaning is forged.

Focusing on solidarity as a relational process makes it possible to examine how power circulates within solidaristic networks, how alliances are built and strained, and how responsibilities, authority, and voice are unevenly distributed. Solidaristic relations are marked by proximity and distance, care and control, empowerment and dependency, often simultaneously. Attending to these relational dynamics allows the analysis to move beyond a binary distinction between “emancipatory” and “problematic” solidarity, instead highlighting how solidaristic practices are continuously shaped by negotiations over legitimacy, representation, and agency. In this sense, solidarity is not something that precedes relationships, but something that is constituted through them, and that can shift as relationships evolve, fracture, or are reconfigured.

2.5 Solidarity and the Politics of Space.

Studies on solidarity have consistently shown that solidarity practices refuse to remain “neatly contained within a nation-state” (Featherstone, 2012), instead forging connections between places with distinct social, economic, cultural, and political characteristics (Massey, 2005). According to Bauder (2020), understanding solidarity through the lens of mobility challenges static, nation-bound conceptions of political alliances and highlights the dynamic, networked nature of contemporary struggles, particularly in contexts where state-imposed borders seek to fragment and contain them. In his work on the “politics of space” he highlights the crucial role of migration in shaping solidarity across different locations, showing how mobility fosters connections that transcend territorial and social divisions. In similar terms, Kelliher (Kelliher, 2018), in a historical review of solidarity, observes that “questions of mobility have been crucial in thinking about the formation of diverse solidarities across geographical and social boundaries”. Throughout history, various forms of human mobility, including that of migrant workers, political exiles, and traveling activists, have contributed, often unintentionally,

to connecting struggles and experiences across different regions. These movements have facilitated exchanges of ideas, practices, and solidarities that occasionally intersect with broader processes of labor organization, anti-colonial resistance, or social transformation. In this sense, mobility does not necessarily originate from deliberate political intent, yet it can nonetheless challenge, in practice, the fixity of borders and the organization of the world into discrete nation-states.

Contemporary migration continues to generate solidarity in ways that challenge territorialized notions of belonging and space. Rygiel (2011) argues that border camps, often sites of exclusion and control, paradoxically become “spaces of solidarity”, where migrants and activists assert rights and contest the national order (Ataç et al., 2016). Significantly, these forms of solidarity do not always require direct physical encounters. Stierl (2016), drawing on Butler (2004; 2003) and Rancière (1992), introduces the concept of “grief-activism” to describe solidarity expressed in response to migrant deaths in the Mediterranean. Even when activists have never met those who perished, their solidarity is articulated through a rejection of the European border regime and a critical reflection on their own positionality (Ambrosini, 2024). Similarly, initiatives like Watch the Med Alarm Phone, a hotline operated by volunteers to assist migrants in distress, exemplify “migratory solidarity” that is built on digital and remote connections rather than direct physical contact (Stierl, 2018).

Nevertheless, while solidarity can emerge at a distance, proximity remains a key condition for political action and subject formation in many cases. As Butler (2012) and Isin (2002) argue, direct encounters, particularly those facilitated by international migration, enable new solidarities by bringing together people who were previously separated by national borders. These encounters disrupt the fixity of place, making visible the political dimensions of migration and creating new opportunities for collective action.

The idea that solidarity is shaped by spatial and relational dynamics also aligns with Oosterlynck et al.'s (Oosterlynck et al., 2016) assertion that *“innovative forms of solidarity are not primarily nurtured in the spatio-temporal register of the territorialized nation-state, but... the growing ethnic-cultural diversity of the population makes it necessary to look for innovative forms of solidarity elsewhere, namely in the here and now of actual practices in particular places.”* This perspective shifts the focus from a nation-centered understanding of solidarity to what Bauder (Bauder, 2020) and Featherstone (Featherstone, 2012) call “place-based politics”, political engagements that emerge in response to the local presence of migrants while also being shaped by transnational and global interconnections. In this sense, solidarity is both situated and expansive, embedded in specific locales but also linked to broader political struggles that transcend national borders. Massey (Massey et al., 2009) captures this dual nature in her concept of the “politics of place beyond place,” emphasizing that place is not a static container but a site of ongoing relational and political transformation.

For this research, it will be essential to use also the analytical framework of the “politics of place”, especially in examining the dynamics of solidarity along the Balkan Route. Moving across different countries, locations, and grassroots initiatives, this perspective has helped illuminate the political and transformative dimensions of the solidarity practices observed, the national and transnational alliances and connection that arise, and the role of places and spaces. As Cantat et al. (2019) observe, *“solidarity means different things to different actors, taking on various forms in different contexts.”* This variability does not simply reflect diverse interpretations of a shared notion; rather, it points to the ways solidarity is actively constituted through the historical trajectories, social relations, and political tensions that characterize specific sites. The particular configurations of border governance, legal regimes, and local power dynamics shape not only the practices that emerge but also the meanings attached to them. In this sense, solidarity cannot be approached as a stable or universal category. Instead, this research treats

it as a contingent and relational process, one that materializes differently across spaces and moments, and that is continually reworked through encounters, constraints, and shifting horizons of political action.

3. Grassroots Solidarities as Border Abolitionism?

As outlined in the previous sections, a critical examination of contemporary border regimes entails moving beyond an understanding of borders as fixed territorial lines. Borders increasingly operate across a multiplicity of sites, technologies, and practices, reflecting what Balibar (2002) conceptualizes as their heterogeneity and ubiquity, a condition in which bordering processes no longer coincide neatly with national frontiers (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). In the European context, borders materialize within digital infrastructures, in databases accessible on the laptops of border officers (Tsianos & Karakayali, 2010), in the bureaucratic routines of consulates assessing visa applications, and in biometric systems that inscribe mechanisms of mobility control directly onto bodies. These dispositifs distribute rights, regulate labour mobility, and shape access to protection in uneven and contingent ways.

This heterogeneous configuration of bordering processes is central to Martina Tazzioli's articulation of border abolitionism, a perspective situated at the intersection of abolitionist theory and the autonomy of migration approach (Tazzioli, 2023). Her engagement with these traditions foregrounds their shared attention to exploitation, mobility, and the multiple understandings of freedom that inform them. While abolitionist frameworks have historically emphasized struggles for liberation, the autonomy of migration highlights the “right to escape” and the capacity of migrants to enact mobility despite dispositifs of control. Within this analytical framing, migrants are situated within a broader genealogy of dispossessed and fugitive figures, resonating with what has been described as a “global history of runaways” (Rediker et al., 2019) whose movements have persistently unsettled systems of racialised domination, ghettoisation, policing, and labour extraction. Placing contemporary mobility struggles within this lineage allows freedom of movement to be examined as one terrain among others through which transnational and subaltern forms of political articulation may emerge.

In Tazzioli's account, these forms of mobility may contribute to processes she conceptualises as “communing” or the production of a “mobile common,” insofar as they foreground relational and collective practices that exceed individualised rights-based frameworks. From this perspective, border abolitionism is analytically distinct from liberal formulations of open borders or freedom of movement conceived in isolation. Instead, it resonates with W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of “abolition democracy,” which understands the dismantling of racialised structures as inseparable from the creation of new institutional and socio-political arrangements. Border abolitionism thus directs attention to the material and political conditions that enable the proliferation and persistence of borders, and to the ways these conditions organise hierarchies of exploitation and subordination across different migration regimes. It also shifts analytical focus away from the nation-state as the sole locus of migration control. While state violence remains a central component of bordering processes, border regimes are approached as hybrid and transnational assemblages shaped by a range of actors, technologies, and sites. This emphasis on dispersed and mobile forms of power distinguishes border abolitionism from strands of prison abolitionism that centre carcerality primarily as a state-building project, while also foregrounding the tensions and ambiguities involved in applying an abolitionist lens to transversal and shifting terrains of struggle.

Within this framework, border abolitionism is conceptualised not solely in terms of dismantling existing structures, but also in relation to practices of institutional and social reconfiguration (Tazzioli, 2023; Davis, 2005). As Tazzioli argues, border abolitionism encompasses processes of critique and deconstruction alongside practices that generate new socio-political spaces and institutional arrangements. This understanding echoes Angela Davis's formulation of abolition as involving both "tearing down" and "building up" (Davis, 2005). Extending the analytical scope of border abolitionism beyond the removal of national frontiers thus reflects empirical attention to the diverse practices through which bordering mechanisms are contested or reworked. Across different contexts, forms of border activism and transversal alliances have taken shape through legal advocacy, initiatives aimed at preventing migrant deaths, the creation of safe spaces along migration routes, counter-mapping projects, and practices of border monitoring. As border violence intensifies and state policies increasingly rely on spatial, legal, and administrative strategies to obstruct access to asylum and territory, this abolitionist perspective draws attention to struggles and collective mobilisations that engage with racialised bordering mechanisms and with the production of alternative spaces of livability, whether in the present or in earlier configurations (Tazzioli, 2023).

Building on these debates, this research approaches grassroots solidarity practices as situated sites where counter-geographies, practices of commoning, and transversal forms of solidarity may, under certain conditions, intermittently emerge. Yet this remains an empirical question rather than a theoretical given. It cannot be assumed that those engaged in solidarity work on the ground share a coherent abolitionist horizon, nor that their practices necessarily align with, or consciously draw upon, the theoretical frameworks outlined above. The relationship between grassroots solidarity practices and abolitionist frameworks in fact cannot be assumed in advance. Whether those engaged in solidarity work on the ground articulate their commitment in abolitionist terms, whether such a theoretical lens illuminates or distorts the meanings they attribute to their own actions, and whether practices can be read as abolitionist even when volunteers and activists do not explicitly position themselves as such - all of this remains open, and constitutes one of the questions this research sets out to explore. Rather than framing these initiatives as inherently abolitionist, the analysis therefore focuses on how they engage with, negotiate, and at times unsettle bordering regimes and their everyday operations, remaining attentive to the divergences, ambivalences, and contradictions that may emerge between theoretical frameworks and lived experience on the ground. Attention is directed to the spatial configurations, quotidian practices, and relational dynamics through which grassroots solidarity takes shape, examining how these elements may temporarily generate spaces of livability or alternative modes of cohabitation and belonging within highly constrained environments. These processes are understood as inherently fragile and contingent: they are marked by tensions, asymmetries, and ongoing negotiations, and they do not necessarily culminate in stable or lasting transformations. Nevertheless, they offer valuable analytical insights into how solidarities are forged across difference, how practices of mobility can give rise to collective forms of life, and how struggles around borders may, or may not, intersect with broader projects of social and racial justice. Crucially, such possibilities are always situated and partial, shaped by specific geographic, political, and historical conditions, rather than unfolding as abstract or universally transferable models.

4. Conclusions: De-Bordering Through Spaces, Practices and Relations.

The theoretical perspectives outlined in this chapter converge on a shared recognition: that both bordering and solidarity are dynamic, relational, and spatially constituted phenomena. This section articulates the analytical contribution this research seeks to make by bringing these two fields of scholarship into closer dialogue, and by advancing a framework attentive to the ways in which the

spatial and relational conditions produced by border regimes actively shape the character, durability, and political potential of solidarity practices themselves. Space and relations, in this framework, are not treated as separate analytical dimensions but as mutually constitutive: spatial configurations are always relationally produced, and relations are always spatially situated. It is this double lens - attending simultaneously to where solidarity takes shape and to the relational dynamics through which it is enacted - that distinguishes the analytical approach developed here and that orients the research as a whole.

A central stance of this thesis is that solidarity does not manifest uniformly across space, but is constituted differently depending on the spatial and institutional environments in which it emerges, the actors operating within them, and the relational configurations that those environments enable or foreclose. This claim builds on, and seeks to advance, the existing literature in two interconnected directions: first, by contributing to studies of bordering and de-bordering processes; and second, by developing a more spatially and relationally grounded understanding of grassroots solidarity in migration contexts. These two lines of inquiry are not parallel but intertwined: it is precisely because bordering operates through both spatial dispersal and relational differentiation, producing uneven terrains of control, precarity, and access, that solidarity assumes such varied and politically ambivalent configurations across the sites where it takes shape.

With regard to bordering processes, the scholarly landscape has expanded considerably since the 1990s, with a growing body of work demonstrating that borders are no longer (if they ever were) confined to the geographical edges of national territories. As the earlier sections of this chapter have shown, borders are increasingly understood as dispersed, deterritorialized, and multi-sited, operating through a heterogeneous ensemble of technologies, practices, and institutions that extend both within and beyond the formal boundaries of states (Balibar, 2002; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Walters, 2002; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). This spatial dispersal of bordering, however, is inseparable from a relational dimension: borders do not simply occupy space but produce and reproduce social relations - relations of inclusion and exclusion, of legal status and its absence, of mobility and immobility, of recognition and invisibility. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) have argued, borders function as mechanisms of “differential inclusion”, allocating hierarchically organized legal statuses that position differently categorized subjects in unequal relations to one another and to the institutions that govern them. The border regime, in this sense, is not only a spatial apparatus but a relational one, continuously producing and managing the social distinctions through which populations are sorted, stratified, and governed.

This body of literature has produced rich accounts of how bordering mechanisms are reproduced, intensified, and contested across a range of sites. What remains comparatively underdeveloped, however, is a sustained theorization of “de-bordering” as a processual dynamic that is simultaneously spatial and relational: the ways in which bordering mechanisms are not only contested in principle but partially disrupted, eroded, or circumvented in practice, through the everyday acts of migrants, through the activities of solidarity actors who inhabit the same spaces that bordering seeks to govern, and who forge relations that cut across the divisions bordering seeks to maintain. Where de-bordering has been theorized, it has tended to be approached either at the macro-level of policy transformation and legal challenge, or through the lens of migrant autonomy and acts of unauthorized crossing (Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Picozza, 2021). Both of these perspectives offer essential insights, but they leave an analytical gap at the meso-level of organized solidarity practice - the networks of activists, volunteers, NGOs, and local communities whose everyday activities create, maintain, and sometimes withdraw spaces of support that partially circumvent the exclusionary effects of border regimes, and whose relations with

people on the move constitute one of the primary terrains on which the meanings and effects of bordering are negotiated in practice.

This research argues that such practices constitute a significant, if fragile and uneven, site of what might be called “de-bordering from below”, and that attending to their spatial and relational dimensions simultaneously allows for a more precise account of both the possibilities and the limits of such work. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to an emerging analytical agenda that treats de-bordering not as the binary reversal of bordering, but as a processual, contested, and spatially and relationally variable set of practices that coexist with, and are continuously shaped by, the bordering regimes they engage. Bordering and de-bordering, on this account, are not sequential or opposing logics but coexisting and mutually constitutive dynamics, a formulation that refines the conceptualization of the border regime as a “field of conflict” (Hess & Kasparek, 2017b) and a “battleground” (Ambrosini, 2021) by specifying the spatial and relational registers through which conflict, accommodation, and partial disruption unfold.

More concretely, this research directs analytical attention to a dynamic that existing accounts of bordering have tended to undertheorize: the way in which the spatial dispersal and deterritorialization of border controls (Walters, 2002; Andrijasevic, 2010) simultaneously produces new sites of solidaristic engagement and new relational tensions within that engagement. As bordering mechanisms extend into urban spaces, administrative procedures, and documentary practices, they encounter, and are partially contested by, solidarity actors who inhabit these same spaces and intervene in these same procedures. The everyday bordering analyzed by Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) thus has a shadow: an everyday de-bordering enacted through the provision of shelter outside official channels, the accompaniment of people through bureaucratic processes, the sharing of knowledge about rights and routes, and the maintenance of spaces of recognition and care within the interstices of a system organized around exclusion. Crucially, however, this everyday de-bordering is not simply a spatial achievement - the opening up of physical spaces of protection and support - but also a relational one. It involves the active production of new kinds of relationships between people differently positioned within the border regime: relationships that must navigate the asymmetries of legal status, social capital, institutional authority, and cultural recognition that bordering itself generates and maintains. Naming and theorizing this everyday de-bordering in both its spatial and relational dimensions is one of the contributions this research seeks to make, not in order to celebrate it as inherently transformative, but to render analytically visible a set of practices whose political significance has been insufficiently theorized in relation to the spatial and relational logics of bordering itself.

De-bordering, as conceptualized here, is therefore always doubly situated: it occurs somewhere, within specific relational configurations, under particular structural conditions, and it produces effects that are localized, uneven, and reversible. This processual understanding engages with Ambrosini's (2024) concept of “de-bordering solidarities”, which highlights the ways in which civil society actors and informal networks challenge the exclusionary logic of national borders, often without direct confrontation, through practices that operate in the interstices of formal migration governance. This thesis builds on this insight while insisting that both spatial differentiation and relational dynamics are key variables in understanding how such solidarities take shape, what forms they assume, and what political work they are capable of performing. The de-bordering potential of solidarity is not evenly distributed across the terrain of migration governance but is differentially configured according to the spatial conditions and relational geometries characteristic of particular sites: the degree of exposure to state control, the density of institutional connections, the temporal rhythms structuring encounters, and the kinds of relationships that these conditions make possible or foreclose.

This brings the analysis to its a closely related contribution that will emerge in the empirical section of this thesis: the development of what this research proposes to call “spatially differentiated configurations of grassroots solidarity”. While existing scholarship has richly documented the diversity of solidarity practices in migration contexts - distinguishing, for instance, between autonomous, civic, and institutional forms (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2018), or between humanitarian and more explicitly political orientations (Vandevoordt, 2019; Della Porta, 2018) - it has paid comparatively less attention to how spatial and relational conditions structure these differences from within. Cantat et al. (2019) observe that solidarity “*means different things to different actors, taking on various forms in different contexts,*” but the mechanisms through which context differentially shapes solidarity have remained underspecified. This research argues that the spatial configurations produced by border regimes and the relational arrangements those configurations enable or constrain, are among the most important of these mechanisms, and that attending to both dimensions simultaneously allows for a more analytically precise and empirically grounded account of solidarity's variability. To theorize these dimensions, this research draws on Massey's (2005) understanding of place as a relational and open achievement, constituted through the intersection of multiple trajectories and power-laden connections rather than as a fixed or bounded container. Understood in these terms, the places in which solidarity takes shape along migration routes are not merely geographical settings but relational configurations that actively condition the practices unfolding within them. Space and relations, here, are not background conditions but constitutive elements of solidarity itself, shaping not only what solidarity does but what it is, its temporal rhythms, its internal power dynamics, its capacity for political articulation, and its potential to generate, however partially and contingently, what Gutiérrez Sánchez (2023) describes as alternative circuits of support and relationality that reconfigure the social meaning of places structured by exclusion.

Therefore, in synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, this thesis proposes an analytical framework that holds together the spatial and relational dimensions of both bordering and solidarity, treating them as mutually constitutive rather than parallel or sequential. Bordering produces differentiated spatial and relational conditions; solidarity practices are shaped by and respond to those conditions; and the de-bordering potential of solidarity, its capacity to challenge, erode, or partially circumvent bordering mechanisms, depends on the specific spatial configurations and relational geometries within which it operates. This framework does not seek to offer a general theory of solidarity or de-bordering, but rather an analytical tool adequate to the complexity and variability of the phenomena under examination, one that is capable of grasping both the transformative potential and the structural constraints of grassroots solidarity, without reducing either to the other.

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Chapter 2

Methodological Framework. An Ethnography across Borders.

This chapter is dedicated to the methodology and methodological tools I used to carry out this research. To truly grasp the lived experiences of those affected by bordering processes, one must be physically present where these experiences unfold. Being there allows for the observation of people's interactions, emotions, relations, and of all the nuances that convey meaning beyond words. Qualitative methods, and ethnographic approaches in particular, are thus uniquely suited to capturing this rich, contextual understanding, since they allow to capture the dynamic interaction between individuals and social structures, providing insights into the power relations at play.

The first time I was involved in supporting people on the move was in 2019, in Greece, as part of a solidarity project near a refugee camp in the outskirts of Thessaloniki. During that initial month, I began to glimpse the layered complexities of the situation, the entanglement of humanitarian aid, state policies, and individual struggles. Yet, it quickly became evident that truly understanding these dynamics would require more than just a brief presence. That first experience, and all those that followed, shaped the way I approached these contexts, not as static realities to be grasped in a single moment, but as continuously shifting, evolving terrains that demanded ongoing engagement and reflection. Over time, my perspective has been shaped not by fixed conclusions but through a continuous process of learning, observing, questioning, and analyzing. Each encounter and experience have deepened my understanding, revealing the shifting and fluid nature of migration, borders, and solidarity. Rather than a definitive endpoint, understanding emerges as an ongoing journey, one that evolves through sustained engagement, critical reflection, and the ever-changing realities of the field. Therefore, being able to grasp the routes, borders dynamics, and the overall governance of migration across the Western Balkans has always been a deeply intricate challenge, given the profound complexities of the countries involved. These places are not only geographically significant as transit points but also deeply shaped by unique historical, political, and socio-economic conditions, presenting layers of complexity that cannot be easily unraveled through surface-level analysis. Grappling with these dynamics requires more than theoretical knowledge or secondhand accounts; it demands immersion in the lived realities of the contexts under study. Engaging directly with the local landscapes, communities, and diverse array of actors involved, offers invaluable insights into the nuanced challenges and transformations occurring in these territories.

Therefore, the present research is based on an engaged (Helms, 2023) and relational (Desmond, 2014) ethnography, shaped by a multi-sited approach (Marcus, 1995). Between October 2023 and November 2024, I actively collaborated with grassroots organizations, informal groups, and collectives providing practical support to people on the move in Greece (Athens and Thessaloniki), Bulgaria (Sofia and Harmanli), and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Sarajevo and Bihać). By immersing myself deeply in the operations of solidarity initiatives, I gained valuable insights into the lived realities of migration and borders management and the responses to it. Through this engagement, I was able to observe how

solidarity actors navigate the complexities of border zones, responding to the institutional barriers and systemic inequalities that shape migrants' experiences.

In the following pages, I will critically examine the rationale behind my choice to adopt this methodology, outlining the specific tools and techniques employed. Particular attention will be given to the methodological advantages and challenges encountered throughout the research process.

1. Following People, Networks and Routes. A Multi-sited, Engaged and Relational Ethnography.

The European border regime can be understood as a social and conflictual process of negotiation, where various actors actively participate in redefining borders. Rather than representing a centralized authority with a singular logic, migration control and management in Europe can be understood as a dynamic field of negotiation, shaped by diverse and often competing practices and actors. Multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) offers a valuable approach for exploring these dynamics, combining analyses across different countries, social contexts, and local settings. This method sheds light on the power relations embedded in the system and uncovers how differentiated "border zones" are produced and contested.

Drawing on these premises, I conducted a multi-sited ethnography informed by a relational approach (Desmond, 2014), which emphasizes the connections and interactions shaping the contexts under analysis. This perspective allowed me to go beyond individual experiences, examining how they are embedded within broader social, political, and structural dynamics. Moreover, given my longstanding involvement in grassroots activism, even prior to this research, I adopted an engaged approach, following Tazzioli and Garelli's (Tazzioli & Garelli, 2019) understanding of ethnography as a method that emphasizes close, attentive involvement with migrants and activists, treating them as co-producers of knowledge and carefully observing practices that reveal and respond to the often-overlooked forms of harm and control within border governance. This methodological choice not only positioned me within solidarity networks but also shaped the way I navigated and interpreted the field.

More specifically, to develop the methodology of my research, I've taken into consideration Desmond's conceptualization of relational ethnography, that "*gives ontological primacy, not to groups or places, but to configurations of relations*" (Desmond, 2014). Relational ethnography provides a nuanced analytical framework for examining migration and solidarity movements, emphasizing the interactions and connections that shape social realities. Rather than treating these phenomena as static or geographically bounded, it captures their fluidity, illustrating how identities, practices, and structures of inequality are continuously produced, negotiated, and contested through social relations. As Desmond emphasises, "*the point of fieldwork becomes to describe a system of relations, to show how things hang together in a web of mutual influence or support or interdependence or what have you, to describe the connections between the specifics the ethnographer knows by virtue of being there*" (Becker, 1996; Desmond, 2014). This methodology is particularly suited to studying phenomena like solidarity movements along the Balkan routes, where the dynamics of migration, activism, and state control are deeply interconnected. By focusing on relationships rather than fixed entities, relational ethnography reveals how different actors - migrants, activists, border authorities, and NGOs - interact within and across specific sites such as border zones, detention centres, and transit camps. It offers a critical framework for analyzing how power operates within and through social relationships, revealing the tensions that emerge between local and international solidarity actors or between migrants and those providing aid. These interactions are not isolated but are shaped by broader structural forces, including EU policies and geopolitical pressures. Moreover, this approach captures the fluid and contested nature

of solidarity itself. Along the Balkan routes, solidarity movements are in constant flux, compelled to adapt to shifting border regimes, the criminalization of humanitarian aid, and evolving migration patterns. By tracing how these adaptations are co-produced through interactions among various actors, relational ethnography illuminates both the possibilities and constraints of transnational solidarity. Ultimately, this perspective underscores the interconnectedness of social practices, emphasizing that solidarity cannot be understood in isolation but must be examined through the relationships and power dynamics that shape it.





Fig. 5 and 6. Two moments of fieldwork, one in a social kitchen in Athens and one during a UNO card game in Bulgaria with people living in the Banya camp near the border. Source: the author.

Recent scholarship has underlined the increasing significance of volunteering both as a social practice and as a research method, highlighting its distinctive characteristics and broader societal implications, including its potential to foster solidarity, social cohesion, and democratic engagement (Hustinx et al., 2001). Over the past decades, sociologists and political scientists have increasingly recognized volunteering not only as a subject of study but also as a methodological approach with its own specific principles and guidelines. At the same time, volunteering remains a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that resists a single, unambiguous definition, encompassing a wide array of activities, organizations, and sectors. The diversity of conceptualizations and approaches in the literature underscores both the richness of volunteering as a field of inquiry and its analytical value for understanding contemporary social dynamics. In contrast, militant ethnography seeks to transcend the limitations of traditional, objectivist research by requiring researchers to immerse themselves in the practices they study (Juris, 2007). This approach entails active participation in organizing events, facilitating meetings, contributing to strategic discussions, and engaging in direct actions, effectively blending ethnographic observation with practical involvement. Militant ethnography shares affinities with action-research, in which researchers work collaboratively with participants as co-subjects rather than objects of study, aiming not only to generate knowledge but also to support incremental social change (Queirolo Palmas & Stagi, 2015). Drawing on these approaches, I adopted a research stance that combined direct involvement in the solidarity initiatives central to this study with a reflective analytical distance. This enabled me to engage meaningfully with the practices under investigation while maintaining a critical perspective, allowing for systematic observation and rigorous analysis of the social and organizational dynamics at play.

Overall, engagement with solidarity actors has proven to be an effective means of generating and disseminating analysis and reflection. By breaking down the traditional divide between participant and observer, this method challenges conventional academic approaches to the production and circulation of knowledge. In an era of qualitative social research characterized by growing self-criticism and reflexivity (Fine, 1993), such approaches enhance the relevance and practical value of research. They also reshape the relationships among researchers, participants, and other stakeholders in the field (Becker, 1998). This is often achieved through the collaborative creation of images, languages, practices, and activities. As Juris (2007) notes, politically engaged ethnography allows researchers to maintain their status as active political subjects while producing more meaningful interpretations and analyses. This approach is particularly well-suited to research fields characterized by vulnerability, violence, legal uncertainty, criminalization, and surveillance, as it enables researchers to navigate these risks more effectively. Engaged fieldwork, as advocated by Garelli and Tazzioli (2013), therefore emphasizes the need for personal involvement in solidarity actions to ethically approach the field and address potential power imbalances between researchers and participants. By actively participating in solidarity initiatives, it gives the possibility to build trust and gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of migrants, activists, and volunteers. This involvement not only challenges traditional researcher-participant dynamics but also offers a more nuanced and ethical understanding of the field. In line with such stances, Picozza's concept of "solidarity as method" captures a broader shift in migration studies, where researchers increasingly intertwine their academic inquiry with political and social commitments. She underscores what she terms the "imperative mutual necessity of research and direct solidarity" (Picozza, 2021), arguing that the production of knowledge on migration cannot be disentangled from the ethical and political relations that sustain it. In this sense, solidarity becomes not only a moral or political orientation but also a methodological and epistemological stance that shapes how research is conceived, conducted, and situated.

Within this framework, I understand my own position as a researcher who works in close relation and is involved with grassroots solidarity networks and practices. Drawing on Rozakou's (Rozakou, 2017) reflection on the Greek notion of "allileggyos", the figure of the solidararian offers a valuable lens to understand the kinds of relationships and commitments that can emerge through ethnographic engagement in contexts of migration and border struggle. Rather than describing a fixed identity, this notion points to a mode of being in the field grounded in shared practices, care, and mutual learning. It provides a framework through which to reflect on how my own participation in solidarity contexts has shaped access, understanding, and interpretation throughout the research process. In this sense, I have not approached interlocutors as mere sources of data, but have sought to cultivate relationships based on long-term processes of understanding, trust, and reciprocity, however temporary or fragile these may be within the contingencies of fieldwork. Such an approach challenges conventional hierarchies between researcher and researched and situates knowledge production within networks of ethical and political accountability.

In the context of this research, engagement was concretely shaped by my personal involvement in several solidarity initiatives that form part of the analysis. Between October 2023 and November 2024, I conducted immersive fieldwork in various transit zones and border areas where informal groups and autonomous organizations provide mutual aid and support to people crossing or stranded along the Balkan routes. Specifically, I've been in Athens and Thessaloniki in Greece, Harmanli (south-east Bulgaria) and Sofia in Bulgaria, Sarajevo and Una-Sana Canton in Bosnia-Herzegovina, engaging with different initiatives, groups and grassroots organizations, namely: Meraki (Athens), Victoria Community Center (Athens), Khora (Athens), Wave (Thessaloniki), No Name Kitchen (Harmanli,

Bihac), Kompass 071 (Sarajevo), Collective Aid (Sarajevo), Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche (Harmanli). These groups, collectives and organizations formed the core of my ethnographic engagement and constitute the primary focus of my analysis. Alongside them, I also established contact with other solidarity actors, often smaller, more radical groups, who preferred to remain anonymous, and with other groups and organizations, more structured and often more focused on specialized services, such as legal protection or medical assistance. Through these interactions and sustained involvement in everyday activities, I was able to observe and analyze the diverse practices, relational dynamics, and organizational logics that characterize solidarity work across these territories. This immersion enabled me to trace the transnational connections, affective ties, and political tensions that shape the forms of care, resistance, and cooperation emerging along the Balkan route.

Gaining access to certain groups and collectives engaged in supporting migrants in these territories often presents significant challenges. In particular, movements oriented toward direct action may be reluctant to permit the presence or participation of researchers in their activities. This hesitation frequently stems from concerns regarding security, trust, and the potential instrumentalization of their work. Consequently, researchers without prior activist or militant experience - and who may not be familiar with a collective's position on research or its broader political stance - often encounter considerable difficulties in convincing assemblies of solidarians to allow their involvement in organizational practices or field activities. Conversely, other collectives and organizations, particularly those more inclined toward consensus-building and public engagement, may demonstrate a markedly different attitude. These groups are sometimes eager to involve researchers and emerging academics, perceiving their participation as an opportunity to expand the visibility and legitimacy of their claims. By fostering connections with the academic sphere, such actors hope that their demands and perspectives will gain resonance within scholarly and public debates, thereby reinforcing their broader political objectives.

Thanks to a personal previous engagement with some grassroots organizations active in the support of migrants in the above-mentioned areas, the access to the research fields and to the network of actors active within solidarity practices was deeply facilitated, as well as the knowledge, the challenges and possible difficulties of those territories. Moreover, this connection allowed for the integration of my own biographical experience, a characteristic feature of ethnographic research. Entering the field with prior awareness of the ethical dilemmas and risks associated with working in such sensitive contexts enabled a more reflexive and responsible research approach. By establishing relationships with key gatekeepers and reference points within various organizations, I was able to navigate potential challenges more effectively, ensuring both the feasibility of the research and the ethical integrity of my position as a researcher.

Given a deeply engaged role as both activist-solidarian and researcher, the intertwined issues of positionality, power dynamics, privilege, and bias were critical to every analysis, decision, and reflection made on the field. Navigating the field from this hybrid position meant confronting the complexities of being simultaneously an insider and an outsider, with my shifting positionality influencing interactions, relationships, and the production of knowledge. While my insider status facilitated access and trust within certain networks, it also required sustained reflexivity to critically assess how proximity to the field shaped my interpretations. This entailed a continuous effort to balance the advantages of embeddedness with the necessity of maintaining analytical distance, ensuring that my engagement did not obscure a rigorous and critical examination of the dynamics under study. As discussed by numerous studies, the distinction between insider and outsider in research is not clear-cut, as it often shifts during the process, influenced by interactions with other actors and the changing

dynamics of the field (Hodkinson, 2005; Sherif, 2001). Scholars argue that adopting a participatory role that is “culturally definable” within a research community is essential, as it can reduce the “*stigma associated with an outsider's status*” and encourage access to a community's subtle norms and interactions (Johnson et al., 2006; McMorran, 2012). Navigating the insider-outsider spectrum (Breen 2007; Sherif, 2001) I was able to strategically leverage my proximity to grassroots networks to build trust and gain access to key spaces of solidarity and activism. At the same time, I remained critically aware of potential challenges, such as emotional involvement or the risk of romanticizing solidarity work. This approach not only facilitated deeper engagement with those directly involved but also intentionally challenged top-down research models. By embracing an ethical and participatory framework, the research sought to center the voices and experiences of those most affected, fostering a more reciprocal and reflexive mode of knowledge production (Dona, 2007; Krause, 2017).

2. Along the Balkan Routes: Fields and Contexts of Research.

The selection of my research sites was deeply influenced by my prior engagement in these contexts, where I had been involved in activism and volunteering since 2019. My experiences, particularly in Greece and Bosnia-Herzegovina, provided critical insights and facilitated access to key networks essential for conducting fieldwork. This familiarity not only enabled me to navigate these settings with an established foundation of trust but also offered a nuanced understanding of the socio-political dynamics shaping the field, thereby enhancing the depth and reflexivity of my research approach.

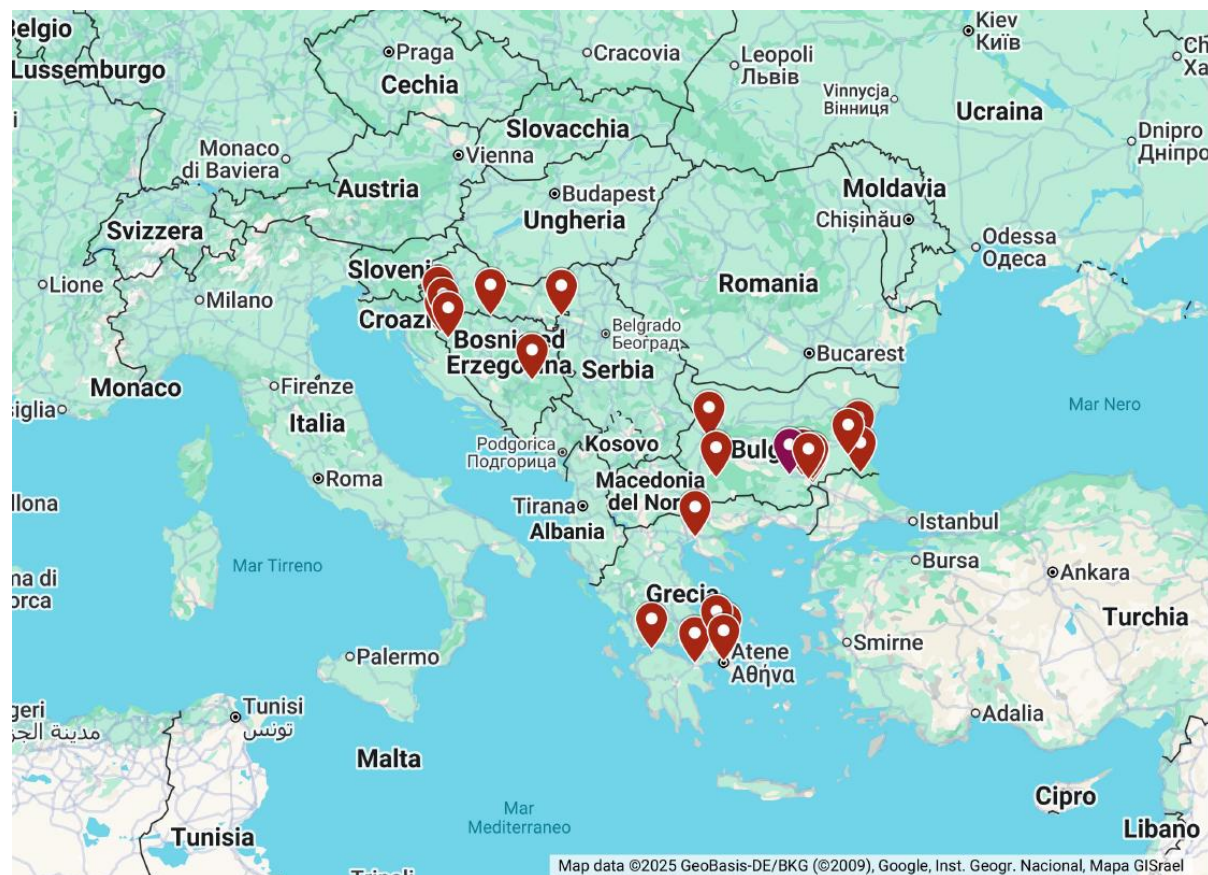


Fig. 7. Map of research and fieldwork locations (2022-2025). Source: the author.

Guided by the routes of people crossing the Western Balkans, I began my fieldwork in Greece, a key point of entry and transit for migrants. I spent several months between Athens and Thessaloniki,

concentrating my efforts and collection of data on the situations and dynamics at play in the mainland. These two cities play distinct yet interconnected roles in the country's migration landscape. Athens, as the political and administrative center, hosts a dense network of institutions, international organizations, and grassroots solidarity initiatives, making it a key site for understanding both state-led migration governance and bottom-up support structures. Thessaloniki, on the other hand, serves as a strategic transit hub due to its proximity to northern borders, where many migrants attempt to continue their journeys toward Central and Western Europe. My initial plan was then to follow the migration routes northward, focusing next on Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which until 2022–2023 had been among the most frequented transit zones. These regions were also home to numerous groups, organizations, and initiatives that emerged in response to the “long summer of migration” of 2015 (Hess & Kasperek, 2017), making them particularly relevant for studying solidarity practices.

However, migration routes and their associated dynamics are inherently fluid, unpredictable, and constantly evolving, and, during 2023, heightened state repression in Serbia led to a significant decrease in transit flows, resulting in the closure of many solidarity projects. Meanwhile, Bulgaria emerged as a central focus of discussion and action within solidarity networks, drawing increased attention as the situation on its borders intensified. In the last years, the country witnessed the growth of an expanding network of solidarity actors, and its geopolitical context gained significance, particularly as Bulgaria prepared to join the Schengen Area. The bordering processes occurring at the Bulgaria-Turkey border, marked by heightened securitization and shifting migration policies, presented compelling new dimensions to explore. Recognizing the importance of these developments, I adjusted my research plan, replacing Serbia with Bulgaria as a key field site. In Bulgaria, I chose to center my research on the region near the Turkish border, where numerous solidarity initiatives are concentrated and where the realities of border enforcement and resistance are most visible. This area, marked by intense surveillance and frequent human rights violations, also serves as a crucial hub for grassroots support networks assisting people on the move. In addition to my time at the border, I spent a period in Sofia, where I engaged with organizations and activists working in the capital. Despite the geographical distance, these actors maintain strong connections with groups operating in border areas, often collaborating to navigate the shifting political landscape. This dual focus allowed me to trace the interplay between frontline solidarity efforts and more centralized presence of solidarity actors.

In addition to Greece and Bulgaria, both positioned on the periphery of the EU but within its borders, I then conducted fieldwork in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a non-EU country that plays a crucial role along the Balkan routes, in the processes of externalization and deterritorialization of the European border regime. Specifically, my research focused on Sarajevo, the country's capital and a key transit hub, as well as the Una-Sana Canton, a border region adjacent to Croatia. Since 2017, this area has become a bottleneck where large numbers of people find themselves blocked or stranded, often for prolonged periods. As a result, it has also become a focal point for evolving solidarity initiatives that seek to address the humanitarian and political dimensions of migration. Bosnia-Herzegovina remains a critical juncture for those attempting to navigate the perilous journey into the European Union, making it an essential site for examining the intersections of migration, border enforcement, and grassroots support. Studying these dynamics within the context of a non-EU state further sheds light on the externalization of European border policies and the ways in which they shape mobility, containment, and resistance along the Balkan Route.

As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, the three countries examined in this research share notable similarities, yet also reveal crucial structural differences, both in their roles within the broader architecture of migration governance and in their respective socio-political contexts. While these

commonalities might have suggested a comparative approach based on “similar cases,” adopting a rigid comparative framework would have risked oversimplifying the specificities and complexities of each site. Instead, following Bryman’s view that comparison can serve as a “springboard for theoretical reflection” (Bryman, 2012)), this study draws on insights from all three contexts to examine the dynamics of grassroots solidarity and its entanglements with bordering and de-bordering processes. The analysis adopts a flexible comparative perspective that does not seek to establish direct equivalences between cases but rather to trace patterns, contrasts, and continuities across different geographical and political settings. Comparison here is used as an analytical tool to identify how similar processes, such as the criminalization of solidarity, the negotiation of humanitarian practices, or the everyday reproduction of borders, manifest differently depending on local configurations of power, institutional frameworks, and socio-political histories. This approach allows for an understanding of how bordering mechanisms operate both at the margins of the European Union, in border areas adjacent to state frontiers, and within national territories, particularly in urban spaces where migrants settle, organize, or receive support.

Overall, all contexts have emerged as emblematic sites for examining both bordering processes and solidarity practices, offering a rich framework to explore how these dynamics unfold, intersect, and evolve over time. Each setting presents distinct yet interconnected manifestations of border control and resistance, shaped by historical legacies, geopolitical positioning, and local socio-political conditions. By analyzing these spaces, it has been possible to trace the multiple ways in which bordering is enacted and contested, while also accounting for the stratified complexities unique to each location. This perspective and approaches have allowed for a deeper understanding of how structural forces, local actors, and transnational influences shape both exclusionary mechanisms and forms of solidarity on the ground

3. Methodological Tools.

The qualitative research employed a diverse array of tools, including participant observation (Semi & Bolzoni, 2022), an ethnographic diary, open and semi-structured interviews (La Mendola, 2009), document analysis, and visual tools such as photographs and videos. This combination of methods allowed for a multifaceted exploration of the contexts studied, capturing the complexity of border zones and the experiences of those navigating them.

The primary method of data collection for this research was participant observation. Immersing myself in the analyzed contexts through active involvement in various solidarity initiatives allowed me to spend significant time, often several hours each day, in settings central to the focus of this study. This consistent presence enabled me to closely observe the dynamics, interactions, and practices shaping these environments. By engaging directly with the participants and their activities, I gained valuable insights into the everyday realities, challenges, and relationships that define these contexts, providing a rich and nuanced foundation for the research. For the whole research process, I maintained comprehensive field notes, either immediately during the interactions (when feasible) or as soon as I left the sites, spaces, and participants. When explaining the role of the ethnographic diary, Bryman (Bryman, 2018) outlines several types of field notes: “mental notes,” used when it is inappropriate for the researcher to be seen writing; “jotted notes,” consisting of brief reminders recorded on paper or in a notebook, which are later expanded into more detailed notes; “full field notes,” which provide detailed accounts written immediately after observations and conversations; and “methodological notes,” which document reflections on methodological decisions and fieldwork experiences. While my primary aim was to produce full field notes whenever possible, there were situations where this was impractical,

difficult, if not impossible, due to the precarity and complexity of the contexts. To address these challenges, I adapted my approach, using various types of field notes based on the context. For instance, during relaxed moments like coffee or cigarette breaks, I relied on mental notes to avoid drawing attention or to discrete notes taken with my phone. I also carried a small notebook to jot down key phrases, quotes, and significant events, which I later expanded upon. When it was not possible to pause and take even brief notes, I used a recording device to capture field notes in real-time, as audio messages. At the end of each day, I transcribed these recordings into my research diary, ensuring that I could capture the nuances of my observations and reflections. Additionally, I kept methodological notes, documenting the challenges, barriers, and decisions encountered in the field. My field notes encompassed observations, in-depth discussions, and personal reflections, including my emotions and thoughts, following an approach aimed to capture the “thick description” of research experiences. Maintaining detailed field notes was particularly valuable during interviews and unstructured conversation with the many actors involved, allowing me to document and analyze subtle but significant moments (such as gestures, gazes, body language, and unexpected incidents) that could not be captured by an audio recorder. Through this process, I was able to interpret and give meaning to complex and often awkward interactions within the field.

During the fieldwork, I managed to conduct 55 in-depth interviews with a variety of actors involved in solidarity initiatives and the broader dynamics of border environments. These interviews provided a rich source of data and were complemented by invaluable insights gathered through informal interactions. Casual conversations, exchanges, shared messages, and everyday moments during volunteer activities added depth and nuance to the research and the information collected. These interactions were meticulously recorded in my field diary, which forms a central component of the empirical material, as also explained previously. Notably, informal modes of communication were particularly effective when engaging with migrants, in transit or blocked in one of the contexts of analysis. These exchanges often yielded more genuine and fluid narratives, as they unfolded naturally within the rhythm of daily life rather than under the formal structure of an interview.

For the in-depth interviews, I adopted a “dialogical” approach (La Mendola, 2009), grounded in a semi-structured guide crafted during the preparatory phase of the research. This guide was organized chronologically to ensure that all key themes were addressed while allowing for flexibility to adapt to the specific context, circumstances, and individual being interviewed. Initial questions focused on participants’ biographies and experiences within the local environment. Gradually, the discussion shifted toward the central research themes, delving into contextual and relational dimensions. To encourage detailed reflections, participants were invited to share episodes and anecdotes that served as entry points for deeper analysis. In some occasions, I shared my personal experiences with the interviewees, recognizing that this approach fostered rapport and trust. As Karen O’Reilly observes, “*conversations encourage reflexivity on both parts, enable the time it takes for participants to explore their own beliefs, and to express contradictory opinions, doubts, fears, hopes, and dreams*” (O’Reilly, 2009). Each interview was conducted in a single session, lasting between one and one and a half hours.

Throughout my research, alongside participant observation and interviews, I continuously gathered a wide range of secondary data, such as reports, newspaper articles, social media posts, and writings from websites and blogs. These materials were not just supplementary but became an essential part of my analysis, helping to contextualize the actions, initiatives, and networks I was studying (Macionis & Plummer, 2012). Some of these sources surfaced organically during fieldwork: documents discovered in shared spaces, reports and statements sent to me by respondents, or posts that circulated on social media and were later discussed in conversations. Others were found through media analysis, reflecting

broader narratives and discourses around migration and solidarity. By engaging with these different forms of data, I was able to capture both the immediate realities on the ground and the ways in which they were represented, debated, and contested across various platforms.

Connected to this, another significant dimension of data collection and analysis involved visual materials, which played a crucial role in capturing and interpreting the dynamics at stake. These visual data were primarily obtained through the examination of documentary sources and social media content, as well as through direct engagement in the field, where I took photographs, recorded videos, and collected audio materials. This multi-modal approach not only provided additional layers of context but also allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how border violence, resistance, and everyday acts of solidarity are visually represented, mediated, and circulated. In incorporating visual tools, such as photographs and videos, I was acutely mindful of the ethical considerations these methods entail (Nikielska-Sekula, 2021). The use of visual media was carefully calibrated to respect the privacy, dignity, and agency of those involved, ensuring that their representation was aligned with their consent and context. These tools provided an additional layer of analysis, capturing elements of the research environment and the lived experiences of participants in ways that complemented the textual and oral data.

This comprehensive and adaptable methodological framework not only facilitated a thorough exploration of the research questions but also foregrounded the voices and agency of participants, prioritizing their narratives and perspectives within the broader analysis of border dynamics.

3.1 Sampling Strategy.

As mentioned before, the research draws on 55 semi-structured interviews conducted between December 2023 and December 2024 across three Balkan country contexts: Greece, Bulgaria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The uneven distribution of interviews across the three sites - with the majority conducted in Greece (30), followed by Bulgaria (16) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (9) - reflects not a methodological inconsistency but rather an empirical reality of the field: Greece, and Athens in particular, hosts a significantly higher number of organizations and collectives active in solidarity work, producing a denser and more varied landscape of actors to engage with. Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina, while presenting fewer organizations, offered distinct and analytically valuable perspectives on how solidarity practices take shape in contexts with different histories, infrastructures, and relationships to migration and humanitarianism.

Interviewees ranged in age from their early twenties to seventy, reflecting a diversity of life experiences and generational relationships to solidarity activism. The sample encompasses both long-term volunteers and activists embedded in the local contexts and shorter-term volunteers passing through, as well as individuals affiliated with organizations beyond those at the core of the fieldwork, who were included to provide broader contextual perspectives, relational mappings, and analytical counterpoints. While the majority of participants hold European nationalities - spanning Western, Southern, and Northern Europe, including Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK, and Switzerland among others - the sample also incorporates voices of people with migratory backgrounds, including participants from Afghanistan, Iran, and Syria, as well as local actors from Greece, Bulgaria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. This mix was deliberate: by including both expatriate volunteers and people with direct experience of migration and displacement, the research sought to capture the relational and sometimes asymmetrical dynamics that structure solidarity spaces.

Participant recruitment combined purposeful sampling, whereby interviewees were consciously selected according to criteria relevant to the research questions, with chain referral methods (both snowball and respondent-driven sampling) to access a wide range of perspectives, including those from harder-to-reach populations (Bernard, 2006). Purposive sampling was particularly important in the early stages of fieldwork, enabling the identification of key informants (experienced activists, coordinators, and long-term volunteers) whose positional knowledge and organizational embeddedness could anchor the analysis. Chain referral methods then allowed the sample to expand organically through participant networks, surfacing actors and perspectives that would have been difficult to access through institutional gatekeeping alone. This combination proved especially productive for reaching individuals operating in informal or loosely structured collectives, who are often underrepresented in research on civil society and humanitarian response. Together, these strategies produced a sample that is neither exhaustive nor strictly representative in a statistical sense, but is instead theoretically informed and deliberately heterogeneous, suited to the interpretive and qualitative ambitions of the study (Patton, 2002).

4. Advantages, Struggles and Dilemmas.

One of the first things I noticed in my dual role as activist/solidarian-researcher was the opportunity to gain legitimacy, which allowed me to mitigate any suspicion, fear, or sense of foreignness that often accompanies an outsider with no defined role in a community. Resentment towards non-contributing visitors (such as journalists or researchers who “parachute” into a community for brief periods without fully engaging with the context) is a recurring sentiment in the environments I studied (Jordan & Moser, 2020). Many of the people I interacted with, both migrants and solidarity actors, expressed concerns and mistrust based on previous encounters with individuals who were solely interested in collecting information or data with an extractive approach. As many told me, these experiences often disrupted the delicate social balances and sometimes jeopardized the fragile safety of those living in vulnerable and informal conditions. However, volunteering in the various contexts central to my analysis, as Jordan and Moser (2020) note, positioned me as an active participant within solidarity practices, distinguishing me from those who might be categorized as passive, non-productive visitors (Jordan and Moser, 2020). My participation went beyond just showing up; it was an emotional and social investment. I spent a lot of unstructured time in informal spaces (parks, cafes, and bars) where I could connect more naturally with others, share stories, meals, and exchange information. These interactions not only deepened my understanding of the initiatives but also strengthened my bonds with those involved, making my presence much more than observational.

Beyond gaining legitimacy, my dual role also granted me privileged access to knowledge, spaces, and information. Insider researchers benefit from a unique position, as they possess additional resources and an “empirical literacy” shaped by their prior experiences (Hodkinson, 2005). This allowed me to access more intimate settings and participants, as insiders can communicate more effectively and understand the nuances of their interactions (Taylor, 2011). In the complex contexts central to my research, being embedded within these environments was crucial for understanding the subtle dynamics at play.

However, this insider position also brought with it a range of struggles and dilemmas, particularly regarding the ethical complexities of maintaining professional conduct, ensuring accountability, and managing the risk of data distortion. As a volunteer-activist conducting research, I faced the challenge of balancing my commitment to the solidarity work with the demands of qualitative research. The participants were not just subjects of my research; they were individuals I interacted with daily,

organizing activities together, sharing meals, and at times, even living in close proximity. While building trust is essential in qualitative research (Bono, 2019; Glesne, 1989), the familiarity between researcher and participant can sometimes blur the line between professional objectivity and personal involvement. This closeness can encourage openness and trust, but it also raises concerns about the integrity of the research process and the potential for ethical dilemmas, such as participants inadvertently omitting important information they assume I already know (Berger, 2013; Papineau, 2024). On the other hand, there was always the possibility that participants might share intimate details without fully understanding that their conversations could be recorded and published, which could lead to reputational risks. As Taylor (2011) suggests, balancing insider status with ethical conduct is complex, and at times, selective omission might be necessary to maintain both ethical standards and the natural dynamics of the field. Throughout my fieldwork, I addressed these challenges by intentionally scheduling time away from the contexts I was immersed in. This allowed me to distance myself from the ongoing dynamics, offering space to refresh my perspective. As Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) points out, such distancing is crucial for bringing clarity to the research process, allowing the researcher to regain emotional and intellectual equilibrium and approach the field with renewed insight (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984). This balance between immersion and detachment proved essential in maintaining both critical distance and a deeper understanding of the contexts I was studying.

Recent scholarships have drawn attention to the power dynamics inherent in research, emphasizing that power must be actively negotiated throughout the research process. Feminist and decolonial scholars, in particular, focus on amplifying the voices of women and marginalized groups, ensuring that relationships between researchers and participants are equitable, and transforming the research process into one that is empowering for all involved (Cotterill, 1992; Reinharz & Oxford, 1992). This concern for equity and empowerment has been central to my project. In my capacity as both researcher and volunteer, I engaged in the activities of various organizations from a position that could be described as that of a peer, alongside other volunteers and solidarity workers. Unlike research contexts in which participants are migrants or so-called beneficiaries of aid - where relationships are often shaped by structural inequalities and paternalistic dynamics - the participants in this study were themselves solidarians and volunteers. This configuration partially redefined the relational field, as it allowed for interactions grounded in shared practices, responsibilities, and commitments rather than hierarchical or top-down forms of engagement. Volunteering thus became a form of participatory research, through which I could contribute actively to collective efforts while simultaneously observing and reflecting on the organizational and relational dimensions of solidarity work. Such a position made it possible to navigate power dynamics in a different way, fostering more horizontal, collaborative, and reciprocal relationships with participants who were, like myself, involved in the practices at the center of the research (Donà, 2007). Through my engagement, I was thus able to contribute knowledge on topics relevant to the initiatives, offering insights and perspectives that were meaningful to the group. Beyond distributing food, clothing, and other necessities, I participated in the development of solidarity networks within the communities I was working in. This included collaborating in the drafting of new volunteer guidelines, and taking part in writing reports related to advocacy efforts.

This involvement and the contributions I was able to give allowed me to build a deeper, more ethical rapport with the people involved in solidarity work. The ongoing engagement in both research and practical actions created an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. In various contexts, individuals frequently expressed their appreciation for my involvement in the group's activities, underscoring the importance of my participation not only as a researcher but also as an active member of the solidarity

community. This helped to foster an ethical and reciprocal relationship with research subjects, transforming the research process into a collaborative and empowering experience.

5. Ethical Considerations.

The present research underwent ethical review and received approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Milan.¹ The Committee examined the research design, data collection protocols, informed consent procedures for participants, data protection and storage measures, as well as the draft interview guide.

Given the precarious and constantly shifting circumstances faced by people on the move along the Balkan Route, I made a conscious decision to avoid organizing structured, in-depth interviews with them during fieldwork. This was not only to protect their vulnerable position and reduce the risk of re-traumatization, but also because the fluidity and unpredictability of their situations meant that any formalized interaction could inadvertently expose them to additional risks. The instability of their conditions - often shaped by unpredictable border policies, changing routes, and the constant threat of detention or deportation - necessitated a more flexible, adaptive approach to data collection.

By opting for informal conversations instead of structured interviews, and incorporating these exchanges into my field notes, I sought to foster a safer and more open environment where participants could share their experiences on their own terms. This approach minimized pressure, allowing for interactions that were more organic and participant-driven while reducing potential risks associated with formal data collection. It is important to emphasize that acknowledging vulnerability is not the same as denying agency: people on the move are not passive subjects, but active navigators of deeply complex and often hostile systems. Their voices and perspectives remain central to this research, and are present throughout the diary entries and conversations reported in the findings.

The interviews conducted during the fieldwork period were therefore mainly addressed to solidarity actors, among whom were people with migratory backgrounds who had become involved in solidarity initiatives, and who were interviewed in stable and safe situations. This allowed for a more in-depth exchange and reflection on the experiences of being on the move that would not have been possible in the precarious conditions of the route itself. Placing the dignity, security, and agency of all those involved at the core of the research process guided every methodological choice made throughout the fieldwork.

Aware of the risks that also these subjects may face, I then prioritized transparency and informed consent, ensuring that all participants fully understood why they were approached, how their involvement would contribute to the research, and what participation entailed. Throughout the process, I maintained an open and honest stance regarding my own positionality, fostering trust and mitigating potential power imbalances. To safeguard participants' privacy and security, I upheld strict confidentiality measures. Interview content was kept confidential, and all participants remained anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. Informed consent was obtained either orally or in writing, following protocols approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Milan.

Additionally, in transcribing, analyzing, and presenting data, I took extensive precautions to prevent individuals or organizations from being identified, particularly given the ongoing criminalization and repression of both solidarity initiatives and migratory movements. As Bryman (2016) emphasizes,

¹ The approval was granted during the session of January 16th 2024.

ensuring that findings do not inadvertently reveal the identities of participants is essential in ethically responsible research. In research involving potentially vulnerable participants, the researcher bears an increased responsibility for their safety and well-being. This principle underscores two key considerations. First, grassroots activists, particularly those operating on the frontlines, must be recognized as high-risk individuals, necessitating research methodologies that are carefully tailored to their specific vulnerabilities. Second, ethical research requires more than just good intentions; effective risk management strategies are essential. This includes a deep understanding of the boundaries and security practices of the groups and people involved, ensuring that informed consent is not merely procedural but embedded within a framework that prioritizes participants' safety and well-being (Papineau, 2024). Accordingly, throughout my analysis and presentation of results, I deliberately avoided any specific references to the names of organizations, groups or individuals participating, recognizing the potential risks they face in these hostile environments.

6. Analysis and Writing Phase.

In ethnographic research, the researcher's sustained immersion in the field renders data collection a profoundly embodied and situated experience, rather than a mere act of gathering information. The field is not simply a site from which data are extracted, but a space where meanings are co-constructed through interaction, presence, and affective engagement. As a result, the processes of data collection and analysis are not discrete, sequential phases but are instead deeply entangled and mutually constitutive. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) observe, analysis in ethnography is not confined to a distinct stage following data collection; rather, it unfolds continuously throughout the research process, shaping the very ways in which data are produced, interpreted, and recorded. Analytical reflection thus operates on multiple levels: formally, through analytic notes, memos, and coding practices, and informally, through the researcher's evolving insights, embodied intuitions, and dialogic encounters in the field. In line with this perspective, in the present research the phases of data collection, fieldwork, analysis, and writing cannot be neatly separated. Each informed and reshaped the other in an ongoing, iterative process, where interpretation began in the field and continued through successive layers of reflection and writing. The boundaries between doing, observing, and analysing were therefore fluid, reflecting the epistemological premise that ethnographic knowledge emerges through the lived and reflexive engagement of the researcher with the field itself.

Throughout the entire period of fieldwork, I systematically took fieldnotes that combined detailed descriptions of observed situations with preliminary analytical reflections on the processes unfolding before me. After each interview, I also wrote down immediate impressions, thoughts, and tentative interpretations that could inform subsequent stages of analysis. Visual materials collected in the field (photographs, videos, or other media) were similarly archived and accompanied by contextual annotations and initial reflections on the dynamics, interactions, and spatial configurations represented.

However, the deeper understanding of the field and of my research subjects did not stem solely from these written or visual records. Rather, it emerged gradually through the lived experience of fieldwork itself, through the daily encounters, the shared routines, and the progressive access to the life worlds and meaning-making processes of the people involved. Fieldnotes can be understood as traces of this evolving comprehension, as partial and situated records of an ongoing interpretive process. They inevitably capture only fragments of reality, filtered through the researcher's perspective and temporal position. For this reason, I consider the process of sense-making that occurs during fieldwork, not only as an outcome but as an integral component of the analytical endeavour itself.

Throughout the fieldwork period, I maintained a continuous engagement with relevant academic literature and theoretical perspectives that could enrich or challenge my emerging interpretations. This dialogic movement between empirical material and theoretical frameworks allowed for an iterative and reflexive analytical process. Preliminary analytical ideas often took shape while still in the field, as I compared lived experiences and observations with existing scholarship. Such constant back-and-forth between empirical encounters and conceptual insights enabled a dynamic form of theorizing, where established frameworks were both tested and reinterpreted in light of the fieldwork.

For the in-depth analysis, I transcribed and systematically coded all interviews as well as the entries of my ethnographic diary. The initial phase of coding was intentionally open and broad, encompassing categories such as “practices”, “spaces”, “relations”, “asymmetries”, “motivations”, “criminalization”. These preliminary codes served as exploratory devices to organize the material and to identify recurrent patterns and emerging themes. In subsequent phases, I refined these categories into more specific analytical concepts, adding interpretive layers and identifying the multiple dimensions at play within the field. My sustained participation in some of the solidarity initiatives under study, as well as prior personal involvement in similar contexts, facilitated a fluid movement between observation and analysis. This positionality allowed me to engage in informal discussions with participants, test emerging hypotheses, and verify the plausibility and resonance of my interpretations within the field itself. Moments of hanging out, conversation, and shared practice thus became crucial analytical occasions, enabling a continuous process of validation and re-elaboration of insights throughout the ethnographic experience.

In approaching the writing phase, I sought to acknowledge and emphasize its centrality within the research process. Writing is not a neutral or secondary stage that merely reports the outcomes of fieldwork; rather, it constitutes a fundamental moment of knowledge production. As Semi (2022) reminds us, the act of writing, and the very words and concepts through which we articulate our findings, are integral to the process of doing research. It is through writing that field experiences and understandings are transformed into texts, entities that acquire their own autonomous and interpretive life.

From this perspective, ethnographic writing does more than communicate results: it actively participates in shaping and defining the very content of research. The process of translating lived experience into text entails an interpretive operation that constructs particular versions of reality, while silencing or privileging others. As researchers, we therefore carry an epistemic and ethical responsibility in producing knowledge and discourses that circulate within academia and beyond, influencing public debate and shaping social understandings. Michel Foucault’s reflections on the productive power of discourse are particularly relevant here: scientific and institutional discourses not only describe the world but also participate in its construction, defining subjects, categories, and hierarchies through which power circulates. This awareness calls for a critical and reflexive engagement with our own writing practices. Particularly in the field of migration studies, where categories and narratives are often instrumentalized for political purposes, writing can become a space for resistance, a means of producing counter-narratives that challenge dominant frames and reductive representations.

Throughout the analytical and writing process, I have thus aimed to reconstitute the complexity of the contexts at the heart of this research. I am fully aware of the impossibility of capturing the full depth, multiplicity, and nuances of all the situations encountered during fieldwork. Nevertheless, I have sought to foreground the layered nature of these contexts, devoting sustained reflection to their historical, social, and political dimensions, as well as to the ways in which these scales intersect and shape one

another. My intention has been to highlight the entanglements and sedimented histories that inform the present realities of the territories explored.

Particular attention was also given to the act of naming and categorization. Terminological choices are never neutral; they carry epistemological, moral, and political implications. In discussing people with migratory backgrounds (those in transit, stranded, or temporarily immobilized along the Balkan routes) I was attentive to how institutional categories such as “illegal migrants,” “refugees,” or “asylum seekers” are socially and politically constructed, and how they reproduce hierarchies of legitimacy and belonging (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). These labels carry normative power: they entail laws, policies, and moral judgments that shape the lives of those they describe. Given the heterogeneity of the trajectories, aspirations, and agencies of the individuals encountered, rigid classificatory frameworks risk reinforcing exclusion and selection. Consequently, throughout this work, I use the term “migrant(s)” as a general, descriptive expression that exceeds normative or institutional definitions, at times alternating it with other terms depending on context. The phrase “people on the move” is also employed, as it is widely adopted by solidarity actors on the ground to emphasize movement and agency rather than legal status. In many instances, I simply refer to “people”, supplemented by contextual information, to underscore individuality and relationality over categorization.

7. Positionality.

In addition to the reflections discussed in the previous sections regarding my position as both insider and outsider in the field, shaped by my previous engagements as researcher, volunteer, and activist, I would like to emphasize another dimension that has been central to my methodological approach: my positionality. Entering the field as a young, white, educated woman, with the privilege of mobility and the possibility to leave whenever I wished, my access, interactions, and interpretations were inevitably influenced by these conditions. The social, cultural, and material resources that I carried, deriving from my background, education, and networks, affected how I was perceived, what I could observe, and how I could make sense of it.

Being socialized as a woman² allowed me to notice and experience specific gendered dynamics that shaped everyday interactions and solidarity practices. My experience as a female researcher, volunteer, and activist made visible how gender influenced relations of care, trust, and authority within the field. I approached this awareness through the feminist ethics of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) which conceives ethnographic knowledge not as objective or neutral but as partial, embodied, and produced through emotional and social involvement. My account, therefore, should be read as a situated interpretation emerging from my participation and the relationships I formed in the field.

Throughout the research process, I continuously negotiated gender relations, both in how I was perceived and in how I related to others. My methodological choice not to conduct formal interviews with people on the move, but instead to engage in informal conversations during participant observation, was part of this negotiation. It allowed me to approach encounters in a more reciprocal way, while also avoiding potentially uncomfortable situations where gendered expectations could arise. On some

² The term “*socialized as women*” is used to denote forms of gendered positioning rather than biological sex or self-identified gender. It encompasses women as well as non-binary and gender-diverse people who were raised within social contexts that attributed to them norms conventionally associated with femininity - such as care, emotional labor, and relational responsibility. I chose this phrasing both to avoid assuming any specific gender identity of the actors involved and to acknowledge the presence of many non-binary individuals among the volunteers and activists I encountered.

occasions, misunderstandings about intentions occurred, but they were quickly clarified through dialogue and contextual trust. These experiences reminded me that ethnographic fieldwork is always an embodied practice, requiring constant attention to the ethical and emotional dimensions of interaction. In my work with solidarity actors, who were the main interlocutors of the research, my positionality often overlapped with that of many participants. In all the contexts I studied, the majority of solidarity actors were women or non-binary people, and this common ground fostered relationships based on mutual recognition and shared experiences of care, exhaustion, and responsibility. Many of these women described how their involvement in solidarity work was inseparable from their personal histories and affective commitments, and how gender shaped the ways they approached and were approached by migrants. Without reproducing binary understandings of gender, these reflections underline how doing solidarity as a person socialized as a woman often entails specific forms of risk, exposure, and emotional labor, but also unique capacities for connection and trust.

These insights suggest that gender should not be treated as an additional category of analysis but as a constitutive dimension of solidarity practices themselves, one that shapes who acts, how care is organized, and what forms of responsibility emerge at the borders. In this sense, reflexivity about positionality does not only concern the researcher's standpoint, but also provides an entry point into understanding how social hierarchies, affective bonds, and political commitments are produced and reproduced within the field.

8. Conclusion: Methodology as a Situated and Ethical Practice.

The methodological framework outlined in this chapter reflects a broader epistemological commitment: that research on migration, borders, and solidarity cannot be conducted from a position of detachment or neutrality. Every choice made throughout this research, where to go, with whom to engage, how to record what was seen and heard, what to name and what to leave unnamed, was itself a situated act, shaped by relationships, responsibilities, and the ongoing negotiation of positionality in the field.

The multi-sited, engaged, and relational ethnography adopted here was not simply a technical solution to a methodological problem. Rather, it emerged as the approach most capable of honouring the complexity of the contexts under study. Following routes, people, and networks across Greece, Bulgaria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina demanded flexibility, attentiveness, and a willingness to revise initial assumptions as the field itself shifted. The decision to replace Serbia with Bulgaria as a key research site exemplifies this responsiveness: far from representing a departure from the original design, it reflected the kind of methodological openness that ethnographic research demands when it takes seriously the fluidity of the phenomena it seeks to understand.

Throughout the fieldwork, the various tools employed (participant observation, semi-structured and informal interviews, field notes, visual materials, and document analysis) were not deployed as a fixed protocol but as a repertoire to be drawn upon selectively and reflectively depending on the situation. Their combined use enabled a layered engagement with the research questions, allowing for movement between the immediate and the structural, the individual and the collective, the visible and the concealed. The fifty-five interviews conducted across three countries provided essential analytical material, while the countless informal conversations, shared meals, and everyday moments of solidarity offered dimensions of meaning that no formal interview could have captured alone.

Equally central to this chapter has been the effort to be transparent about the difficulties, tensions, and dilemmas encountered along the way. The dual position of researcher and volunteer-solidarian opened valuable doors, but it also brought with it risks of over-identification, emotional entanglement, and the blurring of ethical boundaries. Managing these tensions required constant reflexivity, the willingness to step back, reassess, and hold one's own interpretations to account. It also required acknowledging that no methodology, however carefully designed, can fully resolve the power asymmetries and ethical complexities inherent in research conducted in contexts of vulnerability, precarity, and political contestation.

Finally, the reflections on positionality offered in the closing section of this chapter are not intended as a personal aside, but as an analytical contribution in their own right. The recognition that gender, mobility, education, and privilege shape what a researcher can access, observe, and understand is not simply a matter of disclosure, it is constitutive of the knowledge produced. Situated knowledge, as Haraway reminds us, is not weaker for being partial; it is more honest, and potentially more accountable, than claims to universality that obscure the conditions of their own production.

The chapters that follow are therefore the result of this entire process: not simply data collected and findings reported, but a form of knowledge built through engagement, reflection, and sustained attention to the lives, practices, and struggles of those who inhabit the borders, and who, in different ways, seek to contest them.

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Chapter 3.

Bordering the Balkan Route(s).

Historical Contexts and Contemporary Migration Governance.

The Western Balkans have long been a crossroads of major migratory movements and significant geopolitical transformations that have shaped the broader European landscape. Despite being undeniably part of Europe, the region has historically been cast as its troubling “other.” As Maria Todorova famously argued in “Imagining the Balkans” (1997a), the Balkans occupied an ambivalent position: European, but not fully so; “*white, but not quite*,” as Baker later phrased it in 2018. This enduring spatial imaginary positions the Western Balkans as Europe’s closest, most precarious frontier, a liminal space marked by instability. However, the nature of this perceived threat has evolved. At the time of Todorova’s writing, the region was imagined primarily as dangerous to itself: a site of war, ethnic conflict, and internal fragmentation. Today, the dominant narrative has shifted. The Balkans are no longer seen only as a zone of internal turmoil, but as a source of insecurity for the European Union itself. This shift is crystallized in the contemporary framing of the so-called “Balkan Route”, a term that now marks the region as a corridor of irregular migration, a space through which perceived threats are funneled toward the EU’s external borders. In this narrative, the Western Balkans are recast not only as unstable, but as a conduit for instability, reinforcing their role as a securitized buffer between “Fortress Europe” and the rest of the world (Bergesio & Bialasiewicz, 2023).

Within this framework, and with careful attention to the specific dynamics and perspectives at play, my analysis will focus on the “construction of the Balkan route” as a key geopolitical and socio-spatial formation where border regimes have been implemented, contested, and gradually consolidated over time. By examining this region, I seek to highlight how migration policies, security practices, and geopolitical interests intersect to shape both the lived experiences of migrants and the broader architecture of European border governance.

In seeking to unpack the interrelations between human mobility, regulatory practices, and discursive formations, shaped by a multiplicity of interests and motivations (Rass & Wolff, 2018), I will draw upon the concept of the “border and migration regime”, in this chapter and throughout the thesis. As highlighted in the theoretical chapter, such regimes are not fixed or monolithic structures but are actively negotiated and contested by a range of actors (Hess & Kasperek, 2017b). The concept accounts for the involvement of both state and non-state actors in mobility governance within a broader context of “postliberal and postconstitutional sovereignty,” marked by “zones of exception” where human rights are suspended or unevenly applied (Papadopoulos et al., 2008). The concept of the European border regime anchors these dynamics within geopolitical and historical processes, particularly in relation to the externalization of EU border control. This refers to the delegation of migration management beyond

EU territorial boundaries, often financially and operationally supported by EU institutions and member states.³

In this chapter, I examine the broader structural frameworks that shape the field in which my research project has developed. Drawing on relevant studies and secondary literature, I first trace the historical evolution of the so-called Balkan Route and its entanglement with contemporary European systems of migration control and management. This analysis highlights the power relations and structural asymmetries that underpin these systems. In particular, I focus on the governance of migration at and across the EU's external and internal borders, showing how migration control has been progressively institutionalized and reinforced at both national and supranational levels. I also critically assess the policy narratives that legitimize these governance mechanisms, as well as the heterogeneous actors - including state authorities, international organizations, and non-state entities - that contribute to shaping and sustaining them.

I begin by addressing the conceptual and historical construction of the term “Balkans”, examining its geopolitical implications and the ways in which it has been mobilized to categorize and govern mobility. This requires a reflection on the routes and territories central to my research, approached not as neutral transit spaces but as historically and politically situated places whose pasts continue to inform their present role within European migration dynamics. I then turn to the transformations that unfolded after the so-called “long summer of migration” of 2015 (Hess & Kasperek, 2017), a pivotal moment that reshaped both border management practices and the visibility of migration across the continent. This period marked a significant reconfiguration in the governance of the Balkan Route, with new strategies of containment, deterrence, and externalization gaining prominence. Finally, I analyse the dynamics of internal bordering, demonstrating that contemporary migration governance operates not only at the external frontiers of nation-states but increasingly within their territories. Through a complex interplay of regulatory intervention and strategic neglect, these mechanisms shape migrants' everyday experiences, influencing their access to legal protections, social services, and economic opportunities (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019).

1. Understanding the Balkan Routes. A Conceptual, Historical and Geopolitical Analysis.

1.1 The Balkan Routes as Complex Narrative Device.

As Jelena Stojić Mitrović argues⁴, the term “Balkan route” does far more than describe a geographic pathway between Southwest Asia and Europe; it functions as a conceptual container, filled with different meanings depending on who invokes it and why. In some contexts, it denotes technical and spatial dimensions, directions, flows, and the circulation of people, goods, knowledge, or capital. In others, it takes on a political weight, highlighting the dynamics between Balkan states and larger entities like the European Union. It is also framed through a criminological gaze, as a hotspot for policing strategies and security apparatuses, and through cultural narratives that often reproduce stereotypical and orientalist images of the Balkans. These multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory framings result in representations of the route that are frequently simplified, dehistoricized, and stripped of context, yet are continually mobilized in policy, media, and public discourse.

³ Reference here: <https://e-erim.ief.hr/?locale=en>

⁴ Reference here <https://e-erim.ief.hr/?locale=en>

Although contemporary discourse often associates the Balkan route with unidirectional migration movements, - from Turkey and Greece through the Western Balkans toward Austria and Italy - its historical and geographic scope is far more complex. The term itself originated in security and law enforcement circles, where it initially described the bidirectional trafficking of narcotics and weapons (UNODC 2008). However, by the 1990s, migration began to rival illicit trade as a dominant movement along the route, as people fleeing conflict and economic instability, particularly from the former Yugoslavia and Iraq, sought refuge in EU states. This shift prompted the securitization of European migration policies (Hess & Kasperek, 2021) and the reconceptualization of the Balkan route as both a target and an instrument of migration control (Hess & Kasperek, 2017; Hameršak et al., 2020). During this period, the route was increasingly framed in unidirectional terms, with Balkan states cast as either points of origin or transit for asylum seekers. Yet the term remained largely confined to institutional discourses, among police, security agencies, policymakers, and humanitarian organizations, until 2015, when the so-called “long summer of migration” propelled it into broader public consciousness. The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (then Frontex) formally identified the Western Balkan route as a primary migratory pathway into Western and Central Europe, cementing its place in both policy and popular imagination.

Another crucial aspect to consider when using the term, is that the securitized and criminological lens through which the Balkan route is frequently viewed is deeply intertwined with broader representations of the Balkans as a fractured and unruly space, marked by porous borders, political instability, and ethnonational tensions (Aleksić et al., 2021). These representations reflect the hierarchical and antagonistic relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans. The very term “Balkans” is itself a historically contingent discursive construction. As Maria Todorova (1997) demonstrates in *Imagining the Balkans*, the region is not merely a geographic entity but a discursive product of Western narratives that have long positioned it as Europe’s “semi-other.” The late 19th-century emergence of the term coincided with its stigmatization, reinforcing tropes of political fragmentation and perpetual conflict. This binary, contrasting Balkan “disorder” with Western European “civility”, was revitalized during the 1990s, as the dissolution of Yugoslavia and its ensuing wars were interpreted through essentialist 19th-century frameworks. By externalizing responsibility for these conflicts, Europe reaffirmed the Balkans’ status as a space of otherness: simultaneously part of, yet never fully assimilated into, the European project (Todorova, 1997b). This narrative cast the region as inherently violent and irrational, even as Western Europe celebrated its own supposed transcendence of borders and ethnic divisions. However, since 2015, this ideological dichotomy has begun to unravel, as the resurgence of border fortifications across Europe exposes the historical contingency of these civilizational distinctions.

Therefore, the portrayal of the Western Balkans as a lawless frontier - a criminalized “badlands” (Bird et al., 2021) perpetually requiring surveillance - keeps playing a pivotal role in shaping geographic imaginaries of the Balkan route. As Rexhepi (Rexhepi, 2023) observes, the region is frequently depicted as a “zone of vulnerability requiring constant policing.” Such framings not only reinforce perceptions of inherent danger but also justify the containment strategies deployed to regulate irregular migration before it reaches EU borders. The representation of the route as an informal, ever-shifting “underground” corridor, a trope pervasive in both EU policy and media, has further entrenched racialized associations between the Balkans and criminality (Bird et al. 2021). Discourses of exception and lawlessness legitimize the violent bordering practices employed along the route while facilitating a strategic disavowal of responsibility for migrant welfare, both beyond and within EU borders. According to these dynamics, the Balkan Route can be understood as a critical node within the broader Mediterranean border regime, where the defense of EU territorial integrity relies on multi-scalar

violence - both direct and structural, proximate and outsourced (Davies & Isakjee, 2019; Jeandesboz & Pallister-Wilkins, 2016).

As it has been underlined many times, the Balkan routes resist a singular definition: the constantly shifting nature of these routes is mirrored in the migration trajectories themselves, which over the years have resisted fixed descriptions, oscillating between visibility and invisibility in response to changing political landscapes and border policies. Rather than a fixed pathway, these movements constitute a fragmented and evolving network, shaped by heterogeneous national regulations. Increasingly, border enforcement has splintered routes, forcing migrants onto more perilous trajectories marked by prolonged transit, repeated crossings, and circular displacement, as it will be explained in the next paragraphs. In light of these dynamics, some scholars have adopted the term “Balkan circuit” to capture the route’s securitized and unstable nature (Hameršak et al., 2020). This concept does not only concern the movement of migrants, but also encompasses the circulation of various other actors involved in migration processes (such as police forces, humanitarian organizations, and activists) who move in response to shifting migratory dynamics and political interventions. Alongside people, the Balkan circuit is traversed by flows of knowledge, solidarity practices, surveillance technologies and control mechanisms, reception protocols, and competing narratives, as well as economic dimensions linked to mobility, including transnational labor markets and the incentives and constraints introduced by the accession of some states to the European Union. These circulations collectively shape the complex and multilayered borderscape of the Western Balkans (Mitrović & Vilenica, 2019).

Therefore, it can be said that the term “Balkan route” conveys more than a mere spatial trajectory; it exposes the intricate entanglements of mobility, security, and geopolitics, both in discourse and in practice. Its meanings are not fixed but contingent, shaped by historical legacies, political interests, and unequal power relations between the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans (Hess & Kasparek, 2021). Acknowledging the complexity of this discursive construction has been central to the analytical lens adopted throughout my research and the writing of this thesis. Over time, the “Balkan route” has evolved into a powerful narrative device through which Europe articulates its anxieties around migration, sovereignty, and identity, while simultaneously displacing accountability for violence and exclusion onto its peripheries (Baker, 2018; Bergesio & Bialasiewicz, 2023). This framing, however, obscures the lived experiences of migrants, whose trajectories often defy linear cartographies and rigid policy categories. As border regimes multiply and migration paths become increasingly fragmented and hazardous, the route no longer functions as a coherent corridor but emerges instead as a dispersed and volatile geography, marked by waiting, uncertainty, and forms of everyday resistance.

In the following paragraphs, and throughout this work, I deliberately employ the term “Balkan route” (or routes), notwithstanding the criticalities and ambiguities previously discussed. This terminological choice is primarily motivated by the intention to remain faithful to the language used by the actors involved in the migratory dynamics and socio-political contexts under analysis. At the same time, the term is employed with critical reflexivity and an awareness of its conceptual and political implications. Far from being a neutral descriptor, “Balkan route” evokes a set of historically and geopolitically situated representations, which contribute to the construction of specific narratives around mobility, illegality, and border control. Its use, therefore, is always situated within a framework that seeks to interrogate the production of space, the externalization of European borders, and the governmental rationalities that shape these territories as zones of transit, containment, and exception.

1.2. *The Balkan Route as Entangled Histories of Movements, Pathways and Routes.*

For European publics, as well as for activists and scholars examining contemporary migration to Europe, the Balkan Routes have become almost synonymous with the events commonly termed the “long summer of migration” (Hess & Kasperek, 2017a). This period, marked by unprecedented movement in 2015, saw nearly one million refugees and migrants arrive on Europe’s Greek shores, traverse the Balkan Peninsula, and ultimately reach destinations such as Germany, Austria, and Sweden. However, academic research on the region highlights the deep and multifaceted histories of migration, mobility, and displacement in the Balkans, extending as far back as the Habsburg and Ottoman eras. Baker (2018), building on Pratt’s (2008) conceptualization, describes the Western Balkans as a “global contact zone,” emphasizing that migration in the region cannot be understood in isolation but must instead be situated within broader historical legacies. This region’s history in fact reveals how migration have served as both a catalyst for social change and a tool of political control, where movements of people have continuously redrawn the boundaries of belonging while exposing the artificial nature of ethnic and national categories (Baker, 2018).

Over the past centuries, migration across the Balkans has been shaped by the legacies of Ottoman rule, the formation of new nation-states in the early 20th century, and the geopolitical realities of the Cold War. From the Ottoman period onward, forced and voluntary migrations created complex layers of social stratification that continue to influence contemporary power dynamics. Under Ottoman dominion (14th–19th centuries), the Western Balkans witnessed complex migration processes that reconfigured the region’s demographic, cultural, and political landscape. These movements were not merely demographic shifts but were deeply embedded in imperial policies, religious transformations, economic imperatives, and broader geopolitical struggle (Baker, 2018). As described by Baker in her book “Race and the Yugoslav region, Post-socialist, Post-conflict, Postcolonial” (2018), the Ottoman Empire transformed migration into a central instrument of governance. Through the practice of *sürgün* (the forced relocation of entire communities) it sought to pacify rebellious regions and secure its territorial control. Simultaneously, the *devşirme* system forcibly recruited Christian boys from the Balkans, converting them into Janissaries, the elite corps of the imperial military. In doing so, the empire erased their familial and religious identities even as it elevated them to positions of considerable power. Yet, alongside these coercive strategies, the Ottoman system also cultivated spaces of unexpected cosmopolitanism. Sephardic Jews, expelled from Spain, found refuge and prosperity in cities like Sarajevo and Salonica; Roma, Armenians, and Greek merchants established diasporic networks that often transcended religious and cultural boundaries. The empire thus did more than govern the Balkans; it reshaped its human geography, producing a legacy of multiethnic urban centers and intertwined histories, which would later be targeted by nationalist efforts at homogenization (Baker, 2018).

In contrast to the integrative logics of the Ottomans, the Habsburg Empire employed migration as a tool of division. Its establishment of the Military Frontier functioned as a colonial project within Europe, creating a militarized buffer zone along the Ottoman border. Orthodox Serbs were incentivized with land to settle in this frontier, deliberately positioned as a defensive bulwark against Ottoman incursions. This engineered demography would later serve as a rationale for ethnic violence: the very Serbs once recruited as protectors were recast as “foreign settlers” by Croat nationalists. Moreover, the Habsburgs’ rigorous ethnographic mapping laid the conceptual groundwork for future projects of ethnic cleansing. The collapse of the empire in 1918 did not dismantle this logic; rather, it was inherited by emergent nation-states, each asserting their legitimacy through claims to demographic purity (Baker, 2018, Aleksić et al., 2021).

Later on, the early 20th century saw mass displacement following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, as new national borders were drawn and population exchanges ensued. The transition from imperial to national regimes transformed migration from an administrative tool into an instrument of ethnic homogenization. This period saw the emergence of migration as performative nationalism, with states actively reshaping their populations to match territorial claims, creating self-fulfilling prophecies of ethnic division that would impact the region for generations (Baker, 2018). Among the most significant displacements was the 1923 Greco-Turkish population exchange, which forcibly relocated approximately 1.5 million people, primarily Greek Orthodox Christians from Turkey and Muslims from Greece. The interwar period (1918–1939) was also marked by the movement of ethnic minorities within and beyond the Balkans, as well as migration driven by economic precarity and political instability. Rural populations increasingly migrated to urban centers or sought opportunities in Western Europe, with France, Germany, and the United States emerging as key destinations.

The post-World War II era saw the establishment of socialist regimes across much of the region, including Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Albania. These governments implemented migration policies that were both restrictive and facilitative. In Yugoslavia, for instance, temporary labor migration to Western Europe, particularly Germany and Austria, was encouraged through bilateral agreements, leading to significant outflows in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these workers eventually settled permanently in their host countries. Bulgaria and Romania exhibited similar patterns, though Cold War restrictions limited mobility more severely. Albania, under its isolationist communist regime, tightly controlled emigration, yet many risked clandestine journeys to Greece and Italy. The 1970s also saw increasing migration from Kosovo and the Sandžak region, where ethnic Albanians, under Serbian rule, sought economic opportunities in Western Europe.

These early movements later evolved into politically driven migration in the 1980-1990s, as tensions within Yugoslavia escalated. These years witnessed profound shifts in Balkan migration, driven by political upheaval, economic transformation, and violent conflict. The collapse of socialist regimes in the late 1980s and the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s precipitated one of Europe's largest refugee crises since World War II. Millions were displaced by the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, with many seeking asylum in neighboring states, Western Europe, and North America. Meanwhile, Albania experienced mass emigration following the fall of its communist regime in 1991, as thousands fled economic collapse. Bulgaria and Romania, undergoing their own transitions, saw significant outflows to Turkey, Greece, and Western Europe. By the 1990s, the Balkan region and its routes had become a critical transit pathway not only for regional migrants but also for those from the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa, anticipating the large-scale movements of the 21st century. The area of the Western Balkans thus functioned simultaneously as a receiving area for migrants from post-Soviet states, a transit passage and as a sending region (Baker, 2018).

In the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars, migration from the Balkans assumed increasing prominence within European political and public discourse, largely as a consequence of the large-scale displacement triggered by these conflicts. The Bosnian War alone resulted in the forced displacement of over two million individuals (Pastore, 2019). During this period, EU–Western Balkans relations became increasingly shaped by a dual framework of humanitarianism and security, a trend that intensified following the Kosovo War in 1999 (Pastore, 2019). This framing contributed to the emergence of a paradoxical narrative in the context of visa liberalization negotiations: while the region was portrayed as “safe” and culturally compatible with Europe, this same discourse served to undermine the legitimacy of asylum claims submitted by Balkan citizens (Pastore, 2019). At the same time, the Western Balkans

continued to be imagined as a liminal and unstable periphery - neither fully integrated into the European policy nor entirely external to it - a perception amplified by the wars' perceived threat to European security (Woodward, 1995).

The historical dynamics outlined thus far underscore the Balkans as a site of enduring mobility, shifting policy narratives, and contested political imaginaries. As Bergesio and Bialasiewicz (2018) argue, comprehending the current dynamics of mobility in the region necessitates situating contemporary migratory patterns within a broader historical trajectory of movement, shifting pathways, and the interplay of mobilities and immobilities. This approach requires grounding the analysis not only within the current geopolitical framework of the European Union but also within the historical contexts of post-conflict, post-socialist, and, as Baker (2018) highlights, post-colonial conditions that continue to influence migratory flows in the former Yugoslav territories. Drawing on the work of Balibar, El-Shaarawi and Razsa (2019) I emphasize the region's ambiguous positioning within the European project, as it is simultaneously constructed as both internal to and separate from "Europeanness." As also outlined in the previous section, the term "Balkan" itself carries with it a long-standing history of cultural and political othering. Post-Yugoslav conflicts were frequently interpreted through a "Balkanist" lens (Todorova, 1997b), which reproduced orientalist tropes of primitivism, irrationality, and endemic violence, implicitly juxtaposed against an imagined, rational, and "civilized" European core.

1.3 The Balkan Route as a Construct of EU Border Politics.

To understand the forging of the so-called Balkan Route before the events of 2015, it is also crucial to situate it within the geopolitical landscape shaped by the dynamics regarding EU accession and the broader governance of external EU borders (Hameršak et al., 2020). The role of these dynamics is particularly significant in explaining the unique positioning of the Western Balkan countries within broader Mediterranean migratory circuits. While the Balkan Route should be understood as part of a wider Mediterranean border continuum, one that stretches across both maritime and terrestrial spaces, the fact that most countries in the region are either EU member states or engaged in accession negotiations places them in a markedly different position compared to states in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood (Bergesio & Bialasiewicz, 2023). The latter may be tied to the Union through "mobility partnerships," but without the prospect of membership, they remain structurally excluded from the EU's inner political space. This differential positioning means that Western Balkan states are subject to specific pressures and incentives, as they are drawn into the EU's migration management dynamics not merely as neighbors, but as candidate states whose progress depends on alignment with EU standards.

By analyzing these processes, as Hess and Kasperek demonstrate (Hess & Kasperek, 2021), the Balkan Route emerges not simply a geographical passage for migratory flows but a historically contingent construct of European border politics, one that crystallized in the late 1990s and early 2000s as both a target and an instrument of EU migration governance. Emerging alongside the consolidation of "Schengenland," this route reflects a broader reconfiguration of mobility control, where the EU's internal freedom of movement necessitated ever more rigid external bordering. This dialectic transformed the Balkans from a peripheral war-torn region in the 1990s into a strategic corridor for policing migration, long before the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015–2016 brought it to global attention.

Diverse ethnographic insights from the early 2000s already point to the emergence of the Balkan Route as a corridor shaped by both human movement and border control strategies (Hameršak et al., 2020). For instance, academic accounts of crossings from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos noted: "*When*

the transport service began in the late 1980s it was very small and personal; then, in the middle of the 1990s, the Kurds began to show up – and now people arrive from just about everywhere” (Tsianos & Karakayali, 2010). A 1997 Council of the EU document echoed these observations, identifying the Balkans as a major transit route toward core EU countries like Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden (Council of Europe, 1997 as in Hess & Kasparek, 2021). Throughout the 2000s, EU migration policy consolidated around two main goals: preventing unauthorized arrivals and externalizing migration control beyond EU territory. This approach was formalized in documents such as the 2002 EU Action Plan on Illegal Immigration⁵ and the 2005 Global Approach to Migration⁶, which promoted cooperation with third countries, showing clearly the EU’s twin political projects of “enlargement” and “externalization“, which together produced a regime of selective inclusion, stratified sovereignty, and delegated border enforcement.

In line with the twofold dimensions of EU border and migration governance (securitization and externalization) it becomes evident how the Western Balkans were progressively integrated into the architecture of remote control well before the events of 2015. Initiatives such as the Budapest Process (launched in 1993) and the Prague Process (initiated in 2009) laid the groundwork for a strategy aimed at shifting the EU’s border management beyond its formal territorial boundaries. Through these frameworks, the EU established a dense web of partnerships with international organizations such as the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and later Frontex, fostering the diffusion of migration control practices into the territories of non-EU states. Through these processes, the Western Balkans were transformed into a zone of containment, where EU-driven migration management strategies were implemented, including border surveillance technologies, biometric registration systems, and readmission agreements. These measures often operated within legal and procedural gray zones, facilitating the filtering, detention, or readmission of migrants. Thus, prior to 2015, the Western Balkans had already become a laboratory for the EU’s externalized migration governance, reflecting a strategic shift in managing mobility at a distance while maintaining the EU’s internal security and policy objectives.

On the other side, the eastward expansion of the EU - marked by the accession of Slovenia (2004), Bulgaria and Romania (2007), and Croatia (2013) - reconfigured the Balkan Peninsula into a zone where the Union’s external borders were progressively pushed outward. Yet, rather than dissolving divisions, this process entrenched new hierarchies. New member states were required to adopt stringent border controls as a condition of entry, yet were often denied full participation in Schengen, leaving them in a liminal space of semi-inclusion. Meanwhile, non-EU states in the Western Balkans - such as Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina - were drawn into a web of EU migration management through a combination of incentives (visa liberalization, development aid) and coercive measures (readmission agreements, border security funding) (Liperi, 2019). The result was a graduated border regime, where states at different stages of EU integration became layered filters for migration control, each enforcing restrictions on behalf of the core while themselves subjected to mobility constraints.

⁵ Reference here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2002:0564:FIN:EN:PDF>

⁶ Reference here: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15744-2005-INIT/en/pdf>

European Union Members and Candidate Countries

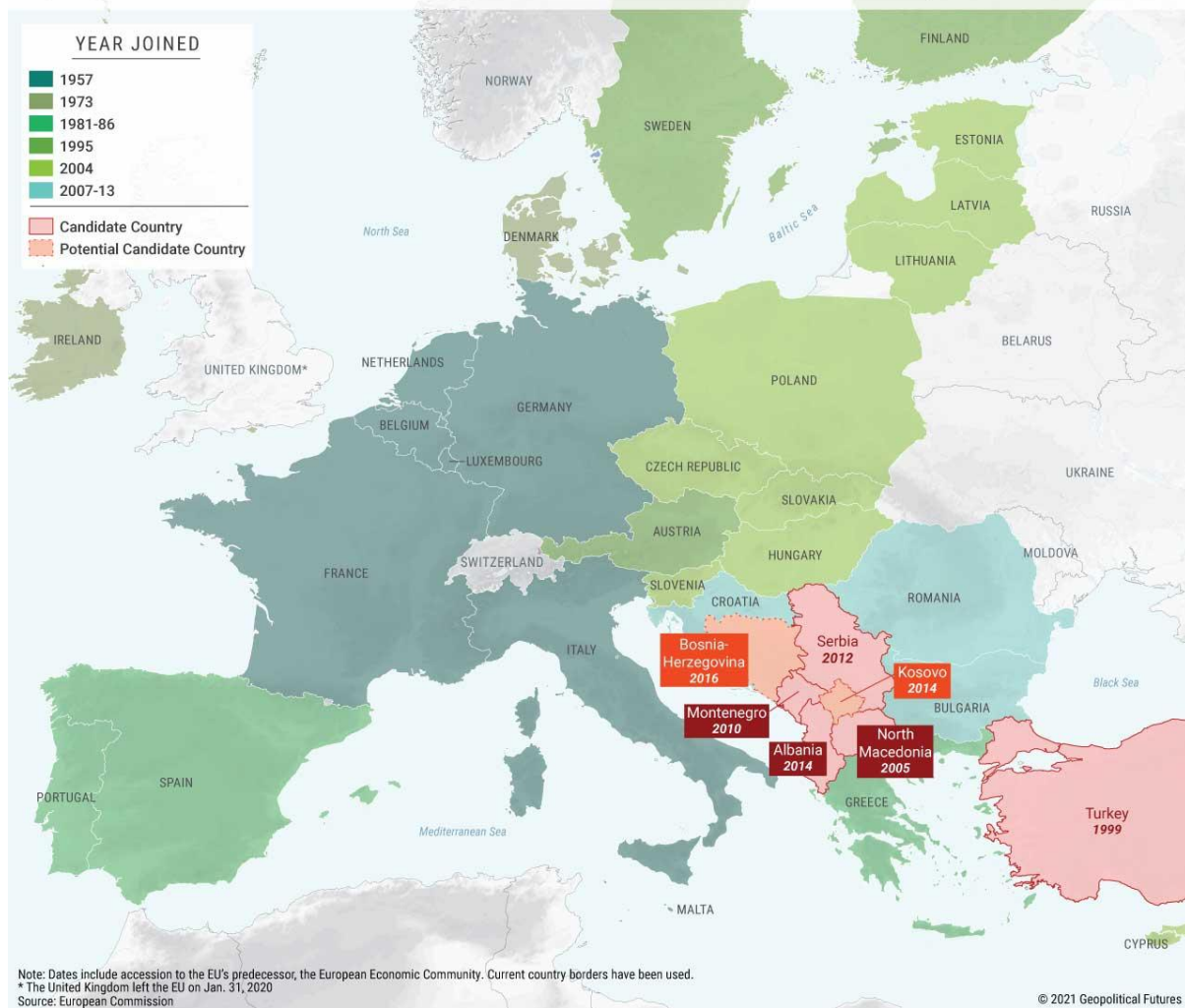


Fig. 8. Map of European Union member and candidate countries, showing the Balkan states that are in a pending or ongoing process of EU admission. Source: European Commission

From the outset, the inclusion of the Western Balkan states in the EU border regime has been framed as a condition for eventual accession. Yet this inclusion has been highly asymmetrical. While these states are expected to conform to EU directives, they have little formal influence over the shaping of migration policy. Nonetheless, they have found ways to assert agency, not only by positioning themselves as capable guardians of “European borders” (thus attracting EU funding), but also by selectively resisting and reinterpreting EU requirements. A striking example of such creative disobedience is the so-called 72-hour papers introduced in Serbia in 2007 and later in North Macedonia in 2015. Originally intended to support the asylum process, these papers functioned in practice as short-term transit visas, facilitating the movement of hundreds of thousands of people through the region.

At the same time, these approaches on migration governance also coincided with the formation of the “Western Balkans”, not just as a geographical pinpoint, but also as a political category. Launched as part of the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) in 1999⁷, the term was used to refer to the ex-Yugoslav states (excluding Slovenia) and Albania. It aimed to sidestep ethnic designations while promoting regional stability and integration through trade liberalization and institutional harmonization.

⁷ Reference here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legisum:r18003>

The Thessaloniki Summit of 2003⁸ further institutionalized this framework by linking EU accession with the implementation of EU-style border and migration controls, albeit often under the guise of broader governance reforms. As Petrovic stated, it reaffirmed the use of the term Western Balkans as a category shaped by both political compromise and colonial imaginaries (Petrovic, 2012). The summit decisively established the Western Balkans as a distinct political construct, one defined entirely in relation to the European Union and its project of Europeanisation. Crucially, it reinforced a geopolitical imagination of the region as an unstable periphery in need of EU guidance, marked by a violent nationalist past, economic underdevelopment, and an alleged deficiency in the rule of law uncivilised, “the dark side within,” “the alter ego,” or the “black hole” of Europe (Petrovic, 2012) Todorova, 1997; (Stojić Mitrović & Vilenica, 2019)

Equally significant, therefore, was the discursive construction of the Balkan Route as an object of governance. Through EU policy documents, risk assessments, and intergovernmental dialogues, the region was not represented as a space of refuge or transit shaped by individual agency and structural conditions, but rather as a “migration route” to be stabilized, surveilled, and intercepted. This framing rendered invisible the fact that the so-called Route was not a naturally occurring phenomenon, but rather a contingent outcome of European migration policies. Migratory trajectories were channelled into irregular and dangerous pathways precisely because safer, legal avenues were systematically obstructed. The so-called “crisis” of 2015–2016, then, did not give rise to the Balkan Route; instead, it revealed the internal contradictions of a border regime that had long been in the making.

2. From 2015’s “Long Summer of Migration” to the Present: Development and Reinforcement of the Border Regime.

As mentioned above, since the beginning of the Europeanization processes in Southeastern Europe, the role of these states has been instrumental in developing a migration control regime on the EU's external borders. The so-called “European path” they undertake is based on the implementation of legislation and infrastructure necessary to control and select human mobility towards Europe, and is defined by the following characteristics: the externalization of migration control to non-“European” states, such as Turkey; the containment and immobilization of people in the southern part of the European Union, particularly in Greece; and the continuous and growing inclusion of Balkan states in border control and securitization practices, especially through EU and Schengen accession processes. It is no coincidence that most states along the Balkan routes, following the so called “refugee crisis” and its consequences, have adopted new legislative frameworks and measures that have drastically restricted the right to asylum and protection for those seeking it, while criminalizing transit migrants and those who assist them. Transit migration movements have thus become a pretext for militarizing border zones, forming new police and military units dedicated to their control and monitoring, and increasing surveillance not only at actual borders but also within states themselves (Mitrović et al., 2020) .

The so-called “long summer of migration” or “European refugee crisis” of 2015 marked a turning point for EU migration policies. Between 2015 and 2017, a widespread narrative depicting an uncontrolled invasion of people fleeing conflict, combined with increasingly amplified fears of an Islamist-rooted

⁸ Reference here: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/pres_03_163

terrorist threat and rising Islamophobic and xenophobic sentiments, led the EU and its member states to develop a system of more controlled, securitized, and extended borders.

A proper understanding of the EU's process of border securitization requires beginning with the establishment of the Schengen Area. While this framework is often celebrated for facilitating the free movement of people, goods, and services within member states, it simultaneously hinges on the premise of a reinforced external border. This externalization is not merely a matter of territorial demarcation, but a political and legal project aimed primarily at governing human mobility. What many scholars describe as the European border regime has taken shape through a dense web of legal instruments and institutional mechanisms that operationalize the logic of containment and external control. Key among these are the Dublin Convention (and subsequent Dublin III Regulation), the principle of the “safe third country,” and a proliferation of bilateral and multilateral agreements with non-EU states situated along key migratory routes. These tools have progressively redefined asylum and migration governance by displacing responsibility to countries at or beyond the EU’s geopolitical margins. The creation of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) further institutionalized this shift, extending the EU’s capacity to monitor, intercept, and manage mobility well beyond its formal borders. The increasing deployment of surveillance technologies, ranging from biometric databases to aerial drones, has contributed to the construction of what Saskia Sassen (1999) famously described as “Fortress Europe,” a metaphor evoking a sealed, militarized space closed off to unwanted mobility. However, this imagery, while powerful, risks oversimplifying the nature of European border governance. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) argue, the European border regime is not defined by absolute exclusion, but by “differential inclusion”, a system that selectively incorporates migrants into legal, economic, and social hierarchies. The apparent solidity of European borders is thus constantly undermined by the persistence of human mobility and the strategic porosity of the system itself, which manages not only who is excluded, but under what terms individuals may be included.

Looking specifically at the Balkans, it is easy to observe the progressive intensification of border controls, violence, and rights violations beginning in late 2015. During what was subsequently framed as the “European migration crisis,” the Balkans emerged as a central transit zone for individuals attempting to reach Western and Northern Europe via the Eastern Mediterranean route, crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands and onward by land. The escalation of the Syrian conflict, which displaced nearly 60 million people globally, played a significant role in this shift: in 2015 alone, more than 900,000 people undertook this route in hopes of reaching countries such as Germany, Austria, Belgium, and the Scandinavian states. These migratory trajectories began in Turkey - which at the time hosted over three million Syrian refugees - with crossings either by sea to islands like Lesbos, Chios, Samos, and Kos, or by land through the Evros border region. From Greece, people continued northward through North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, depending on the specific route chosen, eventually attempting to enter the Schengen Area via Slovenia and other EU countries. The activation of this route fundamentally challenged the established logic of EU border governance, which had long been predicated on outsourcing and managing mobility at a distance from the European core (Euskirchen et al., 2007; Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). In response to the growing numbers of migrants arriving, European states constructed what has often been described as a “formalized and legalized corridor”, a loosely coordinated chain of state-managed passages that facilitated movement across multiple national borders (Hameršak et al., 2020).

This moment marked a profound rupture in the European border regime. The temporary permeability of borders and the partial suspension of enforcement mechanisms exposed both the contradictions and the limits of the EU’s externalized governance model. At the same time, it set the stage for the

subsequent re-securitization of the region and the intensification of containment strategies that would come to define the Western Balkans in the years that followed.

2.1 Opening and Closure of the Balkan Corridor.

Between the summer of 2015 and March 2016, the so-called “formalised corridor” (Beznec et al., 2016) briefly institutionalised transit migration along the Balkan Route. During this period, approximately one million individuals were able to move swiftly from the Greek–Macedonian border through Serbia and into Central and Northern Europe - initially via Hungary, and subsequently through Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria -reaching destinations such as Germany and other EU member states.

Often portrayed in public discourse and media narratives as a humanitarian initiative led by states to facilitate refugee movement, the corridor in fact embodied a deeply securitised and multidirectional form of governance (Mitrović et al., 2020). The formalisation of the route into a controlled and monitored passageway enabled participating states to reassert authority over migration flows and, progressively, to reverse them (Bužinkić et al., 2017). As numerous scholars have shown (Petrović, 2016; Beznec & Kurnik, 2020), the corridor was not merely a space of protection and passage, but a paradigmatic site of humanitarian-securitarian entanglement. Humanitarian and security logics did not operate in opposition but were mutually constitutive, often substituting for or reinforcing one another (Petrović, 2016; Hameršak & Pleše, 2016; Beznec et al., 2016; Beznec and Kurnik, 2020). Through overlapping discourses and practices, these regimes contributed to the exclusion of migrants and the withdrawal of access to territories, rights, and forms of legal recognition. These dynamics reflect a broader tendency within contemporary migration management: the convergence of “care and control” mechanisms that simultaneously depoliticise migrant subjectivities and enact restrictive measures (Pallister-Wilkins, 2016). Through this framework, migrants are rendered as passive recipients of aid, reduced to bare life, while being subjected to increasingly exclusionary border regimes.

A turning point occurred in October 2015, when, under the auspices of then-European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, a high-level meeting convened in Brussels. Representatives from UNHCR, Frontex, and the heads of state from Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, North Macedonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia gathered to coordinate the management of migration along the Balkan Route. Mobilising the rhetoric of crisis and emergency (De Genova et al., 2016) European leaders claimed the need to “protect” refugees from criminal smuggling networks, which were blamed for the rising death toll along the borders. However, this purportedly protective strategy ultimately intensified border fortification, expanded militarisation and securitisation (De Genova et al., 2016; Fassin, 2011), and deepened humanitarian intervention, particularly in Greece and on the Aegean islands (Howdenl & Fotiadis, 2017).

These developments aligned with broader EU migration policies, centred on a hybrid humanitarian-security framework. Border reinforcement and the creation of a coordinated “hotspot” system emerged as the cornerstone of this new governance model. As a result, the corridor - which had momentarily functioned as a militarised but de facto legalised transit route, marked by refugee camps, ad hoc train stations, and distribution hubs - was progressively dismantled. Beginning at the Greek–North Macedonian border and extending northward, access became increasingly restricted, particularly for those unable to prove Syrian or Afghan nationality. At Idomeni, near Gevgelija, what came to be known as the “camp of camps” emerged, an emblem of EU failure and a manifestation of its political choices. According to UNHCR, by the end of 2015, 911,000 people had arrived in Greece, including half a million Syrians, 210,000 Afghans, and 90,000 Iraqis.

The corridor's implementation also entailed the introduction of new administrative procedures, such as North Macedonia's "72-hour paper," and the establishment of institutional mechanisms like Serbia's Working Group on Mixed Migration Flows. States opened one-stop centres and temporary shelters, constructing a transnational infrastructure of transit and communication. Media coverage often depicted scenes of people boarding trains or buses, queuing for registration, and receiving assistance at centres where police, humanitarian organisations, and volunteers collaborated to regulate movement. These representations contributed to a dominant narrative of the corridor as a humanitarian pathway managed by states for the benefit of refugees.

Yet such depictions obscure the underlying logics of control and exclusion that structured the corridor. While it appeared as a linear and facilitated route, in practice it was a highly regulated and securitised space. Its formalisation served not only to enable mobility but also to limit and ultimately suspend it. As Bužinkić and Hameršak (2017) argue, the corridor functioned as a mechanism through which states reclaimed control over migration and laid the groundwork for its reversal.

Over time, access to the corridor became increasingly contingent on nationality-based profiling and other filtering practices. The emergence of mobile detention strategies and internal containment zones contributed to what might be termed a "reverse corridor": one defined by expulsions, prolonged immobilisation, and the proliferation of closed or semi-visible detention spaces. The formal termination of the corridor was marked by the signing of the EU–Turkey Statement in March 2016. As will be discussed in the following section, this agreement reasserted and deepened the European Union's strategy of externalising border control, effectively outsourcing the management of migration to third countries beyond EU territory. Its implementation forced migration back into irregular and clandestine routes, thereby reinstating the very conditions of precarity, violence, and invisibility that the corridor, albeit with significant limitations, had temporarily interrupted.

Rather than signalling a definitive end to mobility, the closure of the corridor inaugurated a new phase of containment, characterised by an intensification of border fortifications, systematic pushbacks, and delegated deterrence practices, dynamics that not only persist but have progressively worsened. The dismantling of formalised transit routes did not put an end to migratory trajectories; rather, it rendered them increasingly hazardous, fragmented, and opaque. At the same time, it allowed the EU to obscure its direct responsibility for the violence inflicted upon people on the move, now further displaced into externalised zones of control and abandonment. In this sense, the EU–Turkey Statement did not merely mark the end of a particular phase of mobility; it reconfigured the governance of migration across the Balkans, institutionalising a regime of managed illegality and permanent emergency that continues to shape contemporary European migration policy.

2.2 The EU–Turkey Deal and the Closure of the Balkan Route: Securitization through Externalization and Border Infrastructure.

As stated above, the EU–Turkey Statement of March 2016 marked a critical moment in the governance of migration at the European Union's external borders. Framed as a response to the "refugee crisis," the statement aimed to reduce irregular migration from Turkey to Greece by returning new arrivals from Greece to Turkey and implementing a resettlement scheme for Syrian refugees. In exchange, the EU promised financial support, accelerated visa liberalization, and commitments to improve humanitarian conditions in Syria. Importantly, the statement is not a formal international agreement, meaning it does not create legally binding obligations but carries primarily political force. It has been heavily criticized on legal grounds, particularly regarding the return of asylum seekers to

Turkey. Critics argue that Turkey cannot be considered a safe country or a first country of asylum under EU law and international refugee law, as the principle of non-refoulement - prohibiting returns to a place where individuals face persecution or serious harm - may be violated. Concerns include the risk that refugees returned to Turkey could subsequently be sent to Syria, the limited protection available to all categories of migrants in Turkey, and the absence of effective individual procedures to assess protection needs. While framed as a pragmatic solution to chaotic border crossings, the deal has been widely criticized for its questionable legality, particularly in light of the right to seek asylum under international law (Peers & Roman, 2016).

In practice, the agreement formalised the closure of the Balkan Route, which had, for a brief period, enabled the regulated transit of people from Greece to Central and Northern Europe. Following its implementation, EU member states and neighbouring countries began to enforce increasingly restrictive border regimes, marking a clear transition from temporary humanitarian facilitation to a more enduring strategy of containment and control. The corridor that had emerged in 2015 was swiftly dismantled and supplanted by a fragmented and securitised landscape, characterised by a proliferation of physical barriers, legal obstacles, and selective mobility regimes. The closure of the route was not merely symbolic or diplomatic; it was materially inscribed in the geography of the region through the widespread construction of fences, walls, and other forms of border infrastructure. Hungary played a pioneering role in this process, erecting a 175-kilometer fence along its border with Serbia in the summer of 2015. Initially composed of razor wire, the barrier was later upgraded to include a second, more fortified line equipped with surveillance technologies, motion sensors, and loudspeakers (Beznec et al., 2016). Hungary also extended its border fortifications to the Croatian frontier, aiming to fully seal off its southern borders from unauthorized crossings.

Other countries along the route quickly followed suit. In November 2015, North Macedonia began the construction of a fence at the Gevgelija crossing point on its border with Greece. This fence was later reinforced with a second layer in early 2016, as the country began limiting entry only to nationals of Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, further institutionalizing a regime of profiling and exclusion. Slovenia, facing increased cross-border movements from Croatia, installed technical barriers along strategic points of its southern border in late 2015. By March 2016, it had officially closed its borders to all migrants except those who intended to seek asylum in Slovenia or who presented “clear humanitarian needs” (Kallius et al., 2016).

Croatia, too, began to take preventive measures. While initially reluctant to engage in physical deterrence, in June 2016 it erected a fence at the Batina crossing point on the Serbian border, citing the need to combat smuggling and “illegal migration” (Balkan Insight, 2016). In parallel, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other Western Balkan states increased cooperation with Frontex and the EU through border management agreements, joint patrols, and funding for surveillance infrastructure. These developments contributed to the emergence of the Balkans as a “buffer zone” for the EU, a space where people on the move could be contained, delayed, and filtered before ever reaching the EU’s legal and territorial space (Beznec et al., 2020).



Fig.9. Map of physical barriers along the Balkan Route. Source: Border Violence Monitoring Network, 2019

The proliferation of fences and border controls across the Balkans has been (and is) emblematic of a broader trend in European border governance. The securitization of migration did not only manifest through militarized enforcement or aggressive rhetoric, but through a gradual reconfiguration of legal, administrative, and infrastructural frameworks designed to manage mobility as a threat. The so-called “closure” of the Balkan Route thus represented not the cessation of movement, but its redirection into increasingly precarious and invisible pathways. As documented by the Border Violence Monitoring Network and others, this has led to a sharp increase in pushbacks, arbitrary detention, and violence against people on the move, often in violation of EU and international law.⁹

Yet, the closure of the route and the fortification of borders did not result in the end of movement. Rather, they forced people to take increasingly dangerous paths, often through forests, mountains, and rivers, thereby heightening the risk of violence, exploitation, and death (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2017). In these contexts, the practice of pushbacks has become one of the most entrenched and systematically implemented forms of border control, intensifying a tactic already in place and further institutionalised, particularly between 2020 and 2021. Along almost every border of the Balkan routes, pushbacks have evolved into a routine mechanism through which migrants and asylum seekers are forcibly expelled, denied access to asylum procedures, and deprived of any possibility for legal recourse. Far from constituting isolated or exceptional incidents, these practices have become structurally embedded in border governance, often involving not only national border authorities but also, in some instances, the support or tacit complicity of EU agencies such as Frontex, as denounced by several investigations like the one of Lighthouse Report¹⁰. Pushback operations are frequently

⁹ At this link <https://borderviolence.eu/reports> all the reports Border Violence Monitoring Network published along the years.

¹⁰ Reference here: <https://www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/frontex-the-eu-pushback-agency/>

accompanied by degrading and violent treatment: individuals are beaten, stripped of their clothing, robbed of personal belongings and mobile phones, and subjected to threats, abuse by dogs, batons, and in some cases electric shocks. As extensively documented by the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN), Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch, these practices constitute clear violations of multiple legal frameworks, but, despite their illegality, they continue to occur with near-total impunity, illustrating the erosion of legal norms at the EU's external borders and the normalization of extralegal violence in the name of migration control (BVMN, 2022; HRW, 2020; Amnesty International, 2021).¹¹

The widespread and repeated use of pushbacks across countries - Greece, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Hungary - suggests not a series of anomalies but a structural feature of the EU's external border regime. This systematization stands in direct violation of several laws, including Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (prohibition of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment), the principle of non-refoulement enshrined in Article 33 of the 1951 Refugee Convention, and EU law under the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Articles 4 and 18). The most prominent one is the principle of non-refoulement, enshrined in the 1951 Geneva Convention, which prohibits states from returning individuals to territories where their life or freedom would be at risk. As a peremptory norm (*jus cogens*) of international law, non-refoulement admits no derogation. The right to seek asylum, guaranteed both by the Convention and by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, should be the foundation of any response to people seeking protection. Instead, what has been consolidated since 2016 is a regime in which legal norms are routinely overridden by the imperatives of deterrence, and in which violence becomes a normalized tool of governance.

In addition, processes of border enforcement and securitization in Europe have not only intensified but become increasingly institutionalized. As reported by Statewatch, the infrastructure, technologies, expertise, and personnel that underpin the EU's border regime have been systematically developed and sustained over the past three decades through vast amounts of public funding¹². During the current Multiannual Financial Framework (2021–2027), the total EU budget allocated to border and migration control has nearly doubled, rising by 94% compared to the previous cycle (2014–2020), from €58.5 billion to €113 billion. While not all of this funding is exclusively earmarked for border enforcement, a study commissioned by the European Commission in 2022 estimated that more than €7.7 billion was spent between 2015 and 2020 specifically on “the management of European borders,” with the vast majority of this funding sourced directly from EU-level financial instruments.

These funds not only support operational border control measures but also significantly contribute to the militarization and technological upgrading of Europe's borders. According to data released by the European Commission, Mediterranean states have been among the primary beneficiaries of these increased allocations. Greece, for instance, saw its share surge from €303 million in the 2014–2020 cycle to over €1 billion for 2021–2027, a staggering 248% increase, despite well-documented human rights violations at its external borders (European Commission, 2023). Similarly, France will receive nearly €207 million (an increase of almost 200%), Croatia's allocation has nearly doubled to €155 million, and Spain's funding has risen by 34% to approximately €325 million. An additional funding package announced in 2023 allocated €259 million for migration-related expenditures, including €141

¹¹ References here <https://borderviolence.eu/reports>
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/16/greece-investigate-pushbacks-collective-expulsions>
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior40/3669/2021/en/>

¹² Reference here: <https://www.statewatch.org/outourcing-borders-monitoring-eu-externalisation-policy/bulletin-2/a-bottomless-pit-billions-more-euros-for-externalised-border-controls/>

million dedicated to “electronic surveillance systems at external land borders” in countries such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Lithuania, and Hungary, many of which have poor records regarding their treatment of migrants and refugees.¹³

Beyond direct investments in physical border infrastructure and operations, EU funding also fuels the research and development of advanced surveillance and control technologies. Through its Civil Security for Society program, formerly part of the broader security research agenda, the EU has invested in projects that include automated border control gates, predictive analytics systems to anticipate migration movements, drone swarms for aerial monitoring, and even automated lie detectors to be used at crossing points. These technologies, often developed in collaboration with private security firms and academic institutions, reflect an ongoing shift toward the digitalization and automation of border regimes, where biometric data, algorithmic risk assessments, and artificial intelligence tools play an increasingly central role (Oliveira Martins et al., 2022; Bigo, 2022).

All these entrenched and stratified dynamics have had a direct impact on the evolution of migratory pathways through Southeast Europe. As border fortification strategies have become more sophisticated and better resourced, the routes used by people have continuously adapted. Shaped by the interplay of national legislation, political shifts, and differing levels of repression, migrations through the Balkans have fluctuated over time—they increase, decrease, divert, but never disappear. The result is a landscape of mobility that is constantly reshaped by the changing configurations of enforcement and evasion, where people are forced to navigate increasingly perilous and circuitous paths.

Given the irregular and often clandestine nature of these transits, frequently occurring outside formal reception systems and beyond national registries, accurately quantifying the number of individuals on the move remains exceedingly difficult. Many entries and exits are not recorded, and temporary stays are often informal and undocumented. Nevertheless, organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) attempt to provide approximate estimates based on outreach operations and available border data. These estimates, while necessarily partial, remain essential for mapping the scale and direction of mobility across the region, and for understanding the consequences of Europe’s intensifying border regime.

2. 3 Shifting Routes: The Evolving Geography of Migration Trajectories in the Balkans.

The evolution of border enforcement mechanisms across the Balkan region has had a significant and lasting impact on the spatial and temporal dynamics of migratory movements toward Western Europe. As securitization strategies have intensified - through legal, infrastructural, and technological means - migrants and refugees have been compelled to continually reconfigure their trajectories in response to increasingly fortified and hostile border regimes.

In the aftermath of the “long summer of migration” of 2015 and the formation of the Balkan corridor explained before, in January 2016, the German government announced that its reception capacities had been exhausted and that it would begin to limit the daily number of new arrivals. This declaration triggered a so-called “domino effect” across the Balkan route, as countries along the corridor successively imposed entry restrictions, ultimately leading to the effective closure of the route. By March 2016, the region entered a period of intensified securitisation, culminating in the signing of the EU-Turkey Statement on March 18th, previously mentioned. This agreement marked a pivotal moment:

¹³ Reference here: <https://www.statewatch.org/outourcing-borders-monitoring-eu-externalisation-policy/bulletin-2/a-bottomless-pit-billions-more-euros-for-externalised-border-controls/>

borders along the Balkan route became effectively sealed, rendering legal crossings virtually impossible. In the weeks that followed, Macedonia, Croatia, and Slovenia officially closed their frontiers to people in transit. As a result, approximately 60,000 individuals were left stranded in transit countries, unable to move forward or return. This development signaled the consolidation of a broader European strategy of externalising migration management, characterised by the outsourcing of border control to non-EU states, the adoption of increasingly restrictive internal measures by EU Member States, and the establishment of bilateral agreements, often lacking adequate safeguards and raising significant concerns under both international and EU human rights law.

By 2017, intensified border controls and systematic violence along the Hungarian and Serbian borders had rendered passage through these countries increasingly unviable for many people on the move. In response, migration routes shifted westward, with Croatia emerging as a prominent alternative corridor. However, this shift was soon met with the replication of violent deterrence strategies. Croatian authorities began implementing pushback practices closely mirroring those of Hungary, entailing physical violence, forced returns, destruction of personal belongings, and psychological intimidation. Numerous reports by civil society organizations have documented these abuses, including the Border Violence Monitoring Network¹⁴ and Amnesty International¹⁵, which describe a pattern of unlawful returns and systematic rights violations. This continuity reflects the consolidation of a regional deterrence paradigm, characterized by the normalization and institutionalization of violence as a core technique of border governance. The recurrence of similar coercive practices across national contexts points to a broader logic of externalized and tiered control, whereby sovereign states along the Balkan route adopt convergent strategies to obstruct, contain, and expel unwanted mobility (Bužinkić et al., 2017).¹⁶

Between 2017 and 2018, amid the escalating violence at the Serbia-Croatia and Serbia-Hungary borders, a growing number of people began redirecting their journeys through Bosnia and Herzegovina. The area around Bihać, near the Croatian border, emerged as a critical “bottleneck” within the region’s shifting geography of transit. Despite persistent and escalating forms of violence (including illegal pushbacks, police raids, and forced evictions) Bosnia and Herzegovina has remained a key transit zone (BVMN, 2020; Médecins Sans Frontières, 2020)¹⁷. This underscores both the repressive resilience of border regimes and the adaptive agency of migrants navigating an increasingly fragmented and hostile border landscape.

Testimonies collected by different organizations during this period document a systematic pattern of abuse, including physical assaults, threats, confiscation of personal belongings, and forced returns without access to asylum procedures. According to some reports¹⁸, over 3,200 migrants were illegally pushed back from Croatia to Serbia in 2017. In 2018, the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) documented at least 150 distinct pushback incidents along the Bosnian–Croatian border. A subset of these cases was recorded on video; one such video, from late 2018, documented 54 group expulsions near Lohovo, involving approximately 350 individuals, including women and children. Reported abuses in these pushbacks included beatings, forced collective expulsions, destruction or

¹⁴ Reference here: <https://borderviolence.eu/publications/black-book-of-pushbacks-2020-vol-2>

¹⁵ Reference here: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur05/9964/2019/en/>

¹⁶ Reference here: https://bordermonitoring.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Formation_and_Disintegration_of_the_Balkan_Refugee_Corridor-2018.pdf

¹⁷ Reference here: <https://www.msf.org/game-violence-against-migrants-bosnia-and-herzegovina>

¹⁸ Reference here: https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/7850/croatia-illegally-pushed-back-over-3200-migrants-in-2017?utm_source=chatgpt.com

confiscation of personal belongings (particularly mobile phones) and coerced returns without any opportunity to access asylum procedures.

In 2020 and 2021, a notable intensification of people transiting was observed in Romania and Albania, both of which began to occupy more central roles in the regional mobility map. Romania's geographical position along the Balkan route, combined with its proximity to the Schengen area, rendered it a critical point of passage. Despite not being a Schengen member at the time, Romanian authorities, often in coordination with Frontex, implemented increasingly restrictive measures, including surveillance expansion, patrol reinforcements, and the practice of informal pushbacks at the borders with Serbia and Hungary. These dynamics reflect broader European trends toward the militarization and externalization of border control, whereby countries at the EU's periphery adopt restrictive measures in alignment with European migration governance frameworks.

In parallel, Albania emerged also as a growing transit zone, particularly due to its land border with Montenegro and the subsequent access to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Albanian government's cooperation with the EU, cemented through agreements aimed at harmonizing border management practices with EU standards, effectively positioned the country as an outsourced border zone. While overt physical violence has been less systematically documented in the Albanian case, administrative deterrence techniques, such as swift deportations and the use of detention, have nonetheless contributed to an overall environment of securitization and control. As in other cases, these measures have not halted mobility but have instead pushed people toward increasingly dangerous paths through mountainous regions and remote terrain.

Focusing on more recent years, since 2022, Bulgaria has also acquired heightened significance within the European border regime, particularly in light of its partial accession to the Schengen area in 2024. The country's border with Turkey, long a key site of entry for migrants, has become a focal point of EU-funded security initiatives. The deployment of Frontex personnel and investment in surveillance technologies, border fences, and police capacity are emblematic of the EU's strategic prioritization of this frontier. Yet Bulgaria has simultaneously become notorious for the extreme violence perpetrated against people trying to cross. Numerous investigations and NGO reports have documented systematic pushbacks, physical abuse, and multiple deaths resulting from attempts to cross the border¹⁹. The forests that straddle the Turkey-Bulgaria border have been described by solidarity actors as "one of the largest open-air cemeteries no one cares about", a stark illustration of the lethal consequences of contemporary European border practices.

Taken together, the cases of Romania, Albania, and Bulgaria can exemplify the shifting and adaptive nature of migratory routes in response to changing configurations of border governance. They also expose the extent to which EU migration policy relies not on the provision of safe and legal pathways, but on an increasingly diffuse regime of deterrence, externalization, and militarized control. In this context, mobility is not halted but rather displaced into more precarious and less visible channels, producing what can be described as a shifting geography of danger. The risks associated with migration are not eliminated, but redistributed across space and time, exacerbating the vulnerabilities and precarity experienced by those on the move.

¹⁹ References here: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/26/bulgaria-migrants-brutally-pushed-back-turkish-border>
<https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/51197/bulgaria-migrant-pushbacks-whats-behind-the-rise-in-violence-at-the-bulgarian-turkish-border-14>

2.4 A Shifting Landscape: The New EU Pact and Its Implications for the Balkan Routes.

After years of negotiations that began in 2020, the European Parliament approved the New Pact on Migration and Asylum on April 10, 2024, followed by its formal adoption by the Council of the European Union on May 14 of the same year. The Pact introduces a comprehensive set of ten legislative reforms aimed at reshaping the EU's migration and asylum policies, presenting itself as a "European solution" to migration management. It is described as "a set of regulations and policies to create a fairer, more efficient, and more sustainable migration and asylum process for the European Union," designed to "manage and normalize migration for the long term, providing certainty, clarity and decent conditions for people arriving in the EU. It also establishes a common approach to migration and asylum that is based on solidarity, responsibility, and respect for human rights" (European Commission, 2024)²⁰.

At its core, the Pact mandates a pre-entry screening procedure for anyone entering the EU irregularly or disembarked following a search and rescue operation. This screening would also apply to people already within the EU if they entered irregularly and includes identity and security checks. While health assessments and vulnerability screenings are mentioned, they are not mandatory, raising concerns about the capacity to identify people with specific protection needs. Crucially, the screening process involves automatic detention for all individuals, without judicial oversight or access to legal assistance. This means that people (including children and families) can be detained without any case-by-case evaluation of whether such detention is necessary or proportionate. Children over the age of 12 accompanied by family members, and even younger children under vague "national security" grounds, would also be subject to the same border procedures. In parallel, the Pact introduces mandatory border asylum and return procedures, which could last up to 24 weeks, and up to 40 weeks during officially declared crises. During this period, many people will likely be held in detention-like facilities. The combination of lengthy procedures and restricted liberty, particularly without adequate procedural guarantees, has been heavily criticized by civil society organizations.

To distribute responsibilities among member states, the Commission proposes a solidarity mechanism to be negotiated and renewed annually. States could choose to either relocate asylum seekers within their territory or finance the deportation of individuals, particularly from countries with which they have bilateral agreements. This system effectively monetizes deportation and may incentivize selective enforcement based on nationality, raising serious legal and ethical concerns. In addition, the new framework also eliminates regularization pathways outside the asylum process. People whose asylum claims are rejected would receive an immediate return decision, with no opportunity to apply for other types of residence permits. This approach also applies to children, without any requirement to assess whether their return is in their best interest, as required under international law.

Numerous NGOs and human rights organizations have long voiced concerns about the contents of the Pact. In an open letter dated December 18, 2023, they wrote: *"If adopted, it will normalise the arbitrary use of immigration detention, including for children and families, increase racial profiling, use 'crisis' procedures to enable pushbacks, and return individuals to so-called 'safe third countries' where they are at risk of violence, torture, and arbitrary imprisonment."*⁶

Similarly, others have warned of the potentially violent and deadly outcomes:

²⁰ Reference here: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en

“The EU institutions have decided to actively gut the rights of those seeking protection, legalising the violations of EU asylum law by the member states. The New Pact will restrict access to protection in Europe by introducing fast-track asylum procedures at the border to speed up returns. The failed Dublin system will be retained, and no genuine solidarity mechanism will be introduced to support EU Member States at external borders. There is not a single solution presented to sustainably organise secondary migration within the EU. Instead, the proposal will isolate refugees from the rest of society, detain them in remote camps and prevent any form of integration. There are no safe and legal routes established to seek protection in the EU. Instead, the aim is to declare various third countries as safe, even if these countries persecute their own nationals or do not even grant legal status to refugees.”⁷

Beyond the numerous violations likely to result from the Pact, a crucial, albeit implicit, aspect is the role assigned to the Balkan region. While the text does not explicitly reference the Balkans, statements from high-ranking EU officials such as Josep Borrell, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs, and former Commissioner Ylva Johansson have underscored the expectation that Balkan states align their migration policies with those of the EU as a prerequisite for future accession. Under this framework, Balkan countries will be (and some already are) increasingly tasked with carrying out digital and systematic pre-screening of all migrants transiting through their territories. This process effectively places third-country nationals in de facto detention while they undergo health checks, identity verification, and an initial assessment of their potential eligibility for international protection. With the implementation of the Pact, Croatia and Greece will become central hubs for these procedures, effectively functioning as detention sites, while the rest of the Balkan region will serve as a pre-selection and filtering zone.

This growing political pressure, combined with the increasing militarization of borders, has led to the Balkans being described as the “guardian” of Europe’s fortified migration regime. As highlighted by Milica Švabić of Klikaktiv and Aigul Hakimova of InfoKolpa, this shift risks entrenching transnational repression against migrants in southeastern Europe. Their concerns are echoed in the Refugee Rights Europe report “New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Perspectives from the ‘Other Side’ of EU Borders”⁸, which warns that the EU’s approach could exacerbate social and economic instability in the region. The report also emphasizes that by reinforcing external border procedures and accelerating returns, the Pact deepens the EU’s reliance on bordering third countries - such as Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina - where protection standards are weak and accountability mechanisms scarce. This externalization strategy shifts responsibility outward, compounding vulnerabilities for migrants in the Balkans.

The Center for Peace Studies (CMS) in Zagreb has also raised alarms²¹ about the broader implications of the Pact. While presented as a fresh approach, the policies it enshrines largely reinforce and legitimize existing practices that violate human rights. Instead of promoting fair responsibility-sharing among EU member states, the Pact risks disproportionately burdening countries at the EU’s external frontiers while undermining international legal protections for asylum seekers. One of the most concerning aspects is the introduction of pre-screening centers, which, under the new framework, assess asylum applications primarily based on the applicant’s country of origin rather than through an individualized review—a practice that contravenes core international standards.

²¹ Reference here: <https://www.cms.hr/en/the-eu-migration-pact-a-dangerous-regime-of-migrant-surveillance/>

Moreover, it can be argued that the New Pact on Migration and Asylum institutionalizes and expands upon a set of practices that have long been trialed and operationalized along the EU's external borders, particularly within the Balkan region. Countries such as Greece, Bulgaria, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have, over the past decade, become de facto laboratories for the European Union's evolving migration governance. Through a combination of containment strategies, technological surveillance, expedited procedures, and systematic rights violations - often justified in the name of crisis management - these states have pioneered many of the mechanisms now embedded in the Pact. The widespread use of pre-entry screening, the normalization of detention-like facilities at borders, and the externalization of asylum responsibilities to third countries with limited protection standards have all been piloted in these borderlands. Far from representing a rupture, the Pact codifies a set of spatially differentiated governance practices that reinforce the position of the Balkans as a "buffer zone" for controlling mobility before it reaches the European core (Bergesio & Bialasiewicz, 2023). Moreover, the Pact's emphasis on interoperability of databases, biometric control, and rapid return mechanisms deepens the infrastructural and political entanglement of Balkan countries within the EU's security apparatus, often without the corresponding legal or institutional safeguards. In this sense, the region is not merely peripheral in geographic terms, but structurally central to the EU's restrictive border regime. The implication is a growing asymmetry in the distribution of responsibilities, risks, and rights: while Western and Northern European states retain the benefits of controlled access to labor and security, countries at the EU's margins are tasked with enforcement and containment, often at the cost of human rights and social stability. As such, the Pact consolidates a vision of migration governance that is deeply territorialized, stratified, and exclusionary, one that entrenches existing inequalities and reaffirms the centrality of the Balkans as a geopolitical frontier of European migration control.

3. Borders within State Borders.

3.1 Dismantling Protection: The Erosion of Asylum Across the Balkan Route.

Over the past decade, the Balkan region has undergone a dramatic shift in its approach to asylum. This space has been transformed into a complex border regime designed to block, deter, and exclude. From Greece to Bulgaria, Serbia to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the right to seek asylum has been progressively hollowed out through a combination of pushbacks, inaccessibilities, fast-track rejections, legal loopholes, and structural violence. What is unfolding is not a patchwork of national failings, but a coherent strategy of deterrence and exclusion at the European Union's periphery, outsourced, normalized, and underwritten by EU policy and funding.

One of the central mechanisms through which ongoing processes of exclusion and marginalization are operationalized by the state, and through which they materially shape the lives of migrants, is the asylum system. While its specific configurations vary across national contexts, depending on factors such as a country's EU membership status, its integration into the Schengen area, or its position as an EU candidate state, what emerges is a shared structural tendency: rather than functioning primarily as a system for granting international protection, asylum increasingly operates as a mechanism for the production of precarity and differential inclusion (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). This shift reflects broader logics of migration governance in which protection is subordinated to control, deterrence, and the stratification of rights (Ambrosini, 2021). The cases of Greece (a member of both the EU and the Schengen area), Bulgaria (an EU member state that only fully entered Schengen in 2025), and Bosnia-Herzegovina (currently an EU candidate country) exemplify these dynamics. Across these contexts, empirical evidence points to the asylum system's systemic dysfunction and its failure to ensure effective access to rights and protection. Rather than constituting a safeguard for those in need, asylum

increasingly functions as a selective and exclusionary dispositif, contributing to legal uncertainty, institutional abandonment, and the normalization of unprotected mobility.

At Bulgaria's southeastern border with Turkey, this strategy is particularly visible. The frontier has become one of the most violent entry points into the EU. Reports by the AIDA network and the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN)²² document widespread pushbacks characterized by beatings, theft, humiliation, and even deaths in the forested areas between Edirne and Harmanli. In 2023, the National Monitoring Mechanism recorded 9,897 pushback incidents affecting 174,588 individuals, more than double the number registered in 2022. These practices persist despite being de facto illegal, as they violate both the right to seek asylum and the Principle of Non-Refoulement enshrined in the 1951 Geneva Convention. According to international and EU law, states are prohibited from returning individuals to countries where they may face serious harm, yet these expulsions are routinely carried out without access to asylum procedures or individual assessments.

Despite these trends, Bulgaria also saw a record number of asylum applications in 2023 since the establishment of its national asylum system in 1993. A total of 22,518 individuals applied for asylum, primarily from Syria (55%) and Afghanistan (26%). While this number is not particularly high in absolute terms, it represents a substantial increase compared to 3,525 applications in 2020 and 11,000 in 2021 (AIDA). However, nearly half of the applicants - 48% (16,211 out of 33,703) - abandoned their procedures and absconded, a slight increase from 46% in 2022. Factors contributing to this high absconding rate include lengthy procedures, low protection rates for some nationalities, and poor reception conditions (AIDA Asylum Information Database, 2024). It is worth noting that refugee status was granted in only 1% of cases, while 65% of applicants received subsidiary protection. This pattern reflects a broader institutional strategy aimed at systematically limiting access to the more robust rights and long-term stability associated with full refugee status. The disproportionate reliance on subsidiary protection, despite many applicants meeting the criteria for refugee status, suggests a deliberate erosion of rights. In addition to this, reception conditions across most centers continue to decline. Various reports and testimonies, both of asylum seekers and social workers working these centers, keep denouncing inadequate infrastructure, poor hygiene, lack of access to clean water and functional utilities, and insufficient medical care remained serious concerns. Despite the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) requests, no additional funding was granted for refurbishment, leaving the accommodation capacity stagnant at 3,592 places. Unaccompanied children were often housed with adults in mixed facilities, lacking appropriate care and protection and exposing them to diverse forms of violence and abuse. Moreover, 2023 marked the tenth consecutive year of Bulgaria's "zero integration" policy (AIDA Asylum Information Database, 2024). No integration measures were planned, financed, or implemented, and only a limited number of beneficiaries received any support. However, SAR continued efforts to find alternative accommodations for unaccompanied children, with 43 eventually placed in specialized childcare centers. Additionally, SAR ended its previous unlawful practice of revoking international protection due to the expiration of Bulgarian identity documents.

A similar, though distinct, logic of exclusion, driven by the EU's ongoing erosion of the right to asylum, extends northward into countries such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although not part of the European Union, these states have effectively become holding areas for individuals denied entry into the EU, further externalizing the Union's border regime and shifting the responsibility of migration management beyond its territorial limits. These countries are not merely points of transit; they function

²² Reference to AIDA's reports here: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/bulgaria/>
Reference to BVMN's reports here: <https://borderviolence.eu/reports>

as “buffer zones” or “dumping grounds” (Mitrović et al., 2020), absorbing the consequences of violent pushbacks from Croatia, Hungary, and Romania. Between 2020 and 2024, Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) documented over 1,500 cases of collective expulsions into Serbia and Bosnia, often involving severe police violence, destruction of personal belongings, and illegal detention²³. Migrants routinely report being beaten, bitten by dogs, strip-searched, and dumped in remote areas, sometimes injured and barefoot, with no access to medical or legal support. Inside these countries, asylum systems remain fragile and largely inaccessible. In Serbia, despite tens of thousands of people transiting annually, fewer than 1,000 individuals lodged asylum applications in 2023. Many are unaware of the procedure or fear identification will lead to detention or deportation. In Bosnia, access to asylum is tied to accommodation in official camps, yet many people avoid them due to police harassment or the presence of EU-supported security personnel. The result is an invisible population stuck in legal limbo, without status, rights, or access to protection. Although Bosnia and Herzegovina has formally established an asylum system aligned with international and EU standards, in practice it remains largely ineffective and symbolic. In both 2023 and the early months of 2024, the number of people expressing an intention to seek asylum remained high (over 30,000 in 2023 alone) but only a negligible proportion went on to submit a formal application.²⁴ The number of granted protection statuses was extremely low: just a handful of individuals received refugee status or subsidiary protection, while the vast majority either withdrew their claims or left the country before a decision could be reached. This reflects the broader reality that BiH functions as a transit country rather than a place of durable protection. The asylum system is chronically under-resourced, with limited administrative capacity and minimal legal aid provision, and it struggles to offer meaningful access to protection. This is further compounded by the conditions in the reception facilities, which range from overcrowded to outright inadequate. Camps such as Blažuj and Ušivak near Sarajevo, managed largely with support from international organizations like IOM, are frequently described as semi-carceral spaces with limited privacy, poor hygiene, and insufficient psychosocial support. While basic needs such as food and shelter are met, the lack of long-term perspectives, legal information, and integration measures renders life in these facilities precarious and temporary by design.²⁵

Further south, Greece provides a more formalized version of the same bordering regime. Since the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, the Aegean islands have functioned as containment zones, where people are registered, confined, and often ultimately rejected. The International Protection Act of 2020 consolidated this shift by expanding fast-track border procedures, limiting appeal rights, and facilitating large-scale rejections based on the presumption that Turkey is a safe country. These legal reforms were accompanied by the steady degradation of asylum infrastructure: interpretation is scarce, legal aid reaches only a minority of applicants, and procedural deadlines are often too short to allow meaningful defense. The AIDA report, published by the Greek Council for Refugees within the framework of the Asylum Information Database, highlights persistent structural challenges and systemic shortcomings within Greece’s asylum system, despite procedural and policy changes implemented in recent years (AIDA Asylum Information Database, 2023). The 2023 update provides a comprehensive overview of developments in asylum access, reception conditions, detention practices, and procedural safeguards, contextualizing them within broader trends of securitization and externalization at the EU’s external borders.

²³ Reference here: <https://borderviolence.eu/reports?category=monthly-report>

²⁴ Reference here: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/southeasterneurope>

²⁵ Reference here: <https://www.collectiveaidngo.org/blog/2025/2/21/bosnia-and-herzegovina-saw-10000-fewer-people-on-the-move-in-2024-what-changed>

One of the report's central concerns is the continued difficulty in accessing the asylum procedure on the Greek mainland. The report highlights that, although new mechanisms such as the online platform for booking registration appointments have been introduced, they have often proven unreliable: in 2023, the platform was inoperative for several months, effectively suspending access to the procedure. Furthermore, applicants are often required to undergo *de facto* detention in remote Reception and Identification Centres (RICs), such as those in Malakasa and Diavata, as part of the registration process, raising concerns about the normalization of restrictions on liberty and the shrinking space for dignified reception (AIDA Asylum Information Database, 2023).

A further critical dimension in the broader erosion of the asylum system is the deteriorating state of Greece's reception infrastructure. Since the termination of the ESTIA accommodation programme in late 2022, asylum seekers have primarily been housed in large-scale facilities, notably the newly constructed Closed Controlled Access Centres (CCACs). According to the AIDA report, these centres raise significant concerns due to their remote locations, securitised nature, and lack of adequate services. By the end of 2023, more than 32,000 individuals were accommodated in such facilities, many of them on the Aegean islands. This shift towards containment and surveillance in reception policy exemplifies a wider European trend in which control is increasingly prioritised over protection. Detention practices in Greece are also the subject of serious critique. The AIDA report notes that over 19,000 third-country nationals were detained in 2023, including several hundred unaccompanied minors. Many individuals were held for periods exceeding six months, often without a realistic prospect of return, particularly to Türkiye, with which readmission arrangements have been suspended since 2020. The report argues that detention is frequently imposed in an arbitrary and disproportionate manner, compounded by the absence of individualised assessments and limited judicial oversight. Equally problematic is access to legal aid, which remains severely constrained. As highlighted in the report, state-funded legal assistance is unavailable at first instance and only partially accessible during the appeals process. Even where theoretically provided, legal support is often undermined by practical barriers, including the digitalisation of procedures, lack of accessible information, and limited capacity of NGOs operating in this field. These systemic shortcomings contribute to significant inequalities in asylum seekers' ability to assert their rights and navigate an increasingly complex and restrictive asylum framework.

Crucially, this regional erosion of asylum rights is not merely a byproduct of institutional weakness or crisis mismanagement, but rather the deliberate result of a broader European strategy, one rooted in the ongoing processes of border externalization and internalization (Bobić & Šantić, 2020; Liperi, 2019). Through financial support, diplomatic agreements, and the deployment of agencies like Frontex, the EU has empowered Balkan states to serve as containment spaces, outsourcing migration control while shielding the EU's core from legal responsibility. Bulgaria, for instance, has received substantial EU funding for surveillance technology, infrastructure, and personnel, including 600 additional Frontex officers stationed at the border in 2024. Similar arrangements support returns, deportations, and "voluntary" repatriations in Greece and the Western Balkans. Together, these developments form a coherent architecture of bordering that reaches far beyond individual borders. Legal access is blocked at the frontier, claims are rejected *en masse* through fast-tracked procedures, and people are violently expelled across multiple state lines. Whether stranded in the forests of Evros or Strandja Park²⁶, the informal squats of Belgrade, or the abandoned buildings of Bihać, people migrating are not simply neglected, they are actively prevented from accessing protection by a system built to deny them, in an ongoing production of illegality (De Genova & Roy, 2020). The Balkan route today is a corridor of

²⁶ Reference here: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/1/6/at-the-eus-external-border-in-bulgaria-the-refugee-horror-story-continues>

exclusion, where the promise of asylum has been stripped of meaning, and the rights of displaced people have been traded for political expediency.

3.2 Containment, Displacement and Segregation.

As outlined until now, the governance of migration in the Balkans has become a paradigmatic example of how contemporary European border regimes operate. These territories, historically shaped by forced displacement and shifting borders, has been reconfigured into a layered frontier zone where the externalization of EU asylum responsibilities is enacted with particular violence and precision. Through infrastructures of confinement, delegated border violence, and legal exclusion, the Balkans now function as an extension of the EU's external border, what Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) conceptualize as “border externalization through internalization”: a diffusion of bordering practices beyond the territorial boundaries of the EU and into its surrounding geopolitical space. This reconfiguration is not a product of crisis mismanagement or institutional breakdown. On the contrary, it represents the intended outcome of a regionalized strategy of control, wherein the logics of security, deterrence, and expulsion take precedence over protection. The result is a system structured around three interlocking techniques: containment, displacement, and segregation.

What I managed to observe through the analysis of reports and my presence in specific countries, across the Balkan region, containment is enacted through a growing network of closed camps, screening centres, and remote reception facilities, which function as actual instruments of immobilisation. In Greece, the 2023 AIDA report documents the transformation of the asylum system into a highly centralised and exclusionary process (AIDA Asylum Information Database, 2023). The introduction of mandatory screening for applicants without Greek-issued ID - confined to just two Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) in Malakasa and Diavata - has created geographical and procedural bottlenecks that operate as de facto detention. Applicants are often confined for up to 25 days, undergoing screening, police interviews, and medical checks under surveillance, while lacking access to legal aid or basic services. This model echoes similar dynamics across Bulgaria, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where reception infrastructures are increasingly designed to contain, rather than accommodate. The Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) has documented cases where reception facilities serve both as holding sites and staging grounds for pushbacks, suggesting that the distinction between humanitarian protection and enforcement is increasingly blurred.²⁷

If containment is the logic of spatial fixation, displacement is its kinetic counterpart. Displacement in the Balkan border regime occurs through systematic pushbacks, arbitrary transfers, and legal non-recognition. These acts force people on the move into perpetual transit, preventing them from stabilising, claiming rights, or securing protection. Numerous investigations and reports by Lighthouse Reports, the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN), and Human Rights Watch have consistently documented the violent and unlawful pushbacks and deportations of migrants and asylum seekers—from Greece to Turkey, from Bulgaria to Turkey, and from Croatia to Bosnia. These acts of forced return, which violate both European and international law, including the Geneva Convention, have in recent years become normalized as de facto border management practices. With the implementation of the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, there is a growing risk that such practices will be further institutionalized or indirectly legitimized, despite their clear incompatibility with fundamental rights. These pushbacks often involve physical abuse, theft, psychological violence,

²⁷ Reference here: <https://borderviolence.eu/uploads/document/file/465/Violence-Within-State-Borders-Greece-1.pdf>

and humiliation. Crucially, they are not isolated or exceptional events but rather form part of a broader deterrence architecture, in which violence functions as a routine and systematic instrument of border governance. People subjected to these practices frequently find themselves trapped in cycles of repeated displacement, pushed back and deported across multiple borders in an ongoing and exhausting effort to seek safety and stability. This circular logic of exclusion produces a condition of permanent transit and mobility, where individuals are denied the possibility of asylum and reduced to a state of precarity and invisibility.

Moreover, internal displacement - manifested through repeated relocations, evictions, and the prolonged denial of legal status - sustains a condition of procedural limbo even for those who have managed to remain within the territory of a given state. Migrants and asylum seekers are not only pushed across national borders but are also displaced within countries, caught between institutions, shifting policies, and bureaucratic voids where rights are formally guaranteed but structurally out of reach. In Greece, for example, many recognized refugees are evicted from reception facilities shortly after receiving protection status, without being offered adequate alternatives for housing or integration support. Frequent policy changes and a fragmented reception system often result in asylum seekers being relocated from one facility to another, often with little notice and no clear pathway to regularization. In Bulgaria, individuals may be moved between detention-like reception centers and left without access to legal assistance, while in Bosnia, many are periodically evicted from informal settlements and squats near border areas without being granted access to proper asylum procedures. Across all these contexts, people are continuously shuttled between asylum offices, reception centers, and administrative hurdles in an arbitrary and often opaque manner. This constant state of uncertainty - where decisions are delayed, appeals are pending, and procedures are inconsistently applied - produces a form of everyday precarity that prevents individuals from achieving stability, safety, or the ability to rebuild their lives. Rather than offering protection, the system often reinforces marginalization through institutional inaction and procedural fragmentation (Troy-Donovan et al., 2023).

Furthermore, across all Balkan countries, recognized refugees and asylum seekers face enduring spatial and socio-economic marginalization. As documented in the Asylum Information Database (AIDA) reports, even individuals who are granted international protection often find themselves homeless, destitute, or locked in cycles of dependency due to structural neglect. The dismantling of crucial support mechanisms (such as Greece's ESTIA housing program, the scaling back of interpretation and legal aid services, and limited access to employment, healthcare, and education) has left many without the means to rebuild their lives (AIDA Asylum Information Database, 2023).

This exclusion is exacerbated by the spatial reconfiguration of reception infrastructures. Across the region, reception centers are increasingly situated in remote and peripheral areas. In Greece, all camps located in or near urban centers - such as those in Eleonas (Athens) and in Thessaloniki - have been closed or forcibly evacuated in recent years, replaced by larger, prison-like facilities in isolated zones, such as Serres or Malakasa. The Lipa camp in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Una-Sana Canton, located in an uninhabited mountainous area over 27 kilometers from the nearest town, Bihac, with no transport connection, exemplifies this trend. Similarly, in Bulgaria and Serbia, asylum reception centers are frequently located on the outskirts of cities, reinforcing both physical isolation and symbolic exclusion. The consequences are severe: people are forced to live in locations where access to legal representation, medical care, education, and job opportunities is scarce or entirely absent. This forced isolation exacerbates mental health struggles, undermines integration prospects, and leaves individuals in prolonged states of legal and existential limbo, as denounced several times by many organizations on the field. Within these spaces, surveillance and control measures (such as regular police checks, ID

requirements, curfews, and restricted mobility) further criminalize and stigmatize everyday life. Refugees and asylum seekers are thus subjected to both hyper-visibility by state authorities and invisibility within the broader society.

Segregation, however, does not only function through spatial practices. It is also reproduced symbolically, through dominant media, political, and institutional discourses that frame people on the move as dangerous, deceitful, or culturally incompatible. Migrants are persistently framed as threats to national identity, public security, and cultural cohesion. Politicians across the political spectrum draw on these discourses to legitimize restrictive migration policies and intensified border enforcement. Mainstream media outlets often reproduce these framings, depicting migrants as invaders, criminals, or vectors of disease, particularly during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Such narratives work to dehumanize refugees and asylum seekers, stripping them of individual stories, needs, and rights, and reproducing those hostile environments that have also been framed as “shrinking spaces” (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2022). This symbolic exclusion has real-world consequences: it fosters public indifference or hostility, legitimizes institutional violence, and sustains the political conditions necessary for policies of deterrence, containment, and expulsion. It also serves a disciplinary function, communicating to migrants that even if they are not forcibly returned, they will remain unwelcome, confined, and without a viable future. In this sense, symbolic segregation is not simply a matter of discourse; it is a key mechanism of governance that upholds and normalizes the broader regime of exclusion.

The configuration of the Balkan region as a space of containment, displacement, and segregation reflects the consolidation of a deterrence-based paradigm of migration governance, one that is not incidental or reactive, but systematic and intentional. Rather than arising from institutional fragility or the exigencies of crisis management, this regime represents the spatial and bureaucratic materialisation of the EU’s long-standing externalisation strategies (Hess & Kasparek, 2017). As border enforcement practices are delegated to and dispersed across non-EU states, the Balkans have emerged as a key laboratory for what Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) describe as the “proliferation of borders”: a condition in which sovereignty is enacted not through fixed territorial boundaries, but through differentiated and mobile modalities of control.

Building on Tazzioli’s (2023) notion of the “confinement continuum,” these sites and practices should not be viewed as isolated or exceptional. Rather, they form part of a broader assemblage of mobility governance technologies that operate through layered and shifting mechanisms of capture—ranging from spatial enclosure to bureaucratic entrapment and temporal deferral. Confinement, in this sense, refers to “interlocking modes and sites of containment not limited to spaces of detention” (Tazzioli, 2023), and extends beyond physical restriction to encompass administrative and legal obstacles that systematically delay or deny access to asylum, transforming procedures into instruments of deterrence and disciplinary control. This continuum of containment intersects with what Gilmore (2007) conceptualises as “organized and strategic abandonment”: the state’s strategic withdrawal of care and support, which produces zones of neglect where vulnerability is not merely overlooked but weaponised. Migrants in these spaces are not only confined but effectively abandoned, managed through their exclusion and maintained in liminal conditions where their presence is administratively processed but politically unacknowledged.

What emerges, then, is a multilayered dispositif of exclusion, operating through spatial remoteness, procedural opacity, and legal ambiguity. It is a regime of “governance through control and abandonment” (Pinelli, 2018; Aru, 2021) in which practices of violence and neglect are not aberrations

but foundational tools of rule. Within this system, the migrant subject becomes simultaneously hyper-visible, as an object of surveillance and suspicion, and stripped of political and legal recognition. The Balkan region thus functions as a strategic node in Europe's migration architecture, where the denial of mobility and protection is not a deviation from legal norms but a defining feature of contemporary border governance.

3.3 Criminalization of Migration and Solidarity.

In recent years, alongside the ongoing production of migrant illegality, precarity, and marginalization, another intensifying development has emerged across both European and non-European contexts: the criminalization of solidarity with people seeking international protection within the EU. As documented by organizations such as PICUM and the Border Violence Monitoring Network²⁸, there has been a notable and sustained increase in the criminalization of solidarity actions towards migrants and individuals crossing borders irregularly throughout Europe. This shift not only narrows civic space and undermines the rule of law within the EU, but also disproportionately affects migrants themselves. The criminalization of solidarity is closely linked to the broader criminalization of migration, driven by a broader agenda that targets the mobility of racialized individuals, framing it as inherently suspect or unlawful. Moreover, this phenomenon reflects the growing judicialization of direct activism and grassroots movements, where acts of care, resistance, and political dissent are increasingly subjected to legal scrutiny and repression. Together, these dynamics reinforce exclusionary state logics and further shrink the space for civic engagement and political dissent (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2022).

Criminalization operates through both formal and informal modalities. Formally, it manifests via legal mechanisms such as arbitrary arrests, prosecutions, administrative sanctions, and legislative reforms targeting both migrants and those offering assistance. Informally, it includes extrajudicial forms of repression: surveillance, intimidation, harassment, excessive identity checks, and the obstruction of solidarity infrastructures. As it is underlined in the report published by Border Violence Monitoring Network, despite lacking judicial oversight, these practices are equally harmful and contribute to the normalization of state violence that extends beyond borders²⁹. Migrants endure systematic detention, unfair trials, deportations, and pervasive policing, while solidarity actors face criminal investigations, defamation, and operational restrictions. These dynamics are not isolated state responses but are sanctioned and amplified at the EU level, where migration governance is framed predominantly through securitization and criminality. Instruments like the revised Facilitation Directive⁹, under the pretext of countering "migrant smuggling", institutionalize the criminalization of both displacement and support.

In the following chapter, I will offer an in-depth account of the specific dynamics I observed in the three contexts under analysis, particularly concerning the criminalization of both mobility and solidarity. However, consistent with findings from organizations such as PICUM and BVMN, a recurring pattern is evident across numerous sites along the Balkan routes: the systematic deployment of formal criminal charges against migrants, often under accusations of facilitation or smuggling. These charges are frequently grounded in tenuous or circumstantial evidence and adjudicated through procedures that fail to meet standards of fairness, disproportionately targeting individuals whose primary intent is to seek safety and protection. Alongside these formal mechanisms, a continuum of indirect and informal

²⁸ References here: <https://borderviolence.eu/app/uploads/Criminalisation-report-2022-2023.pdf>
<https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Criminalisation-of-migration-and-solidarity-in-the-EU-2024-report.pdf>

²⁹ Reference here: <https://borderviolence.eu/app/uploads/Criminalisation-report-2022-2023.pdf>

violence persists within national borders. These include police harassment, arbitrary detention, the forced closure or defunding of reception centers, restrictions on access to basic services such as healthcare and legal aid, and the intensification of surveillance and identity controls. These measures operate not only as deterrents to mobility but also as tools of marginalization and exclusion.

This repressive framework further extends into the realm of civil society. A growing number of legal reforms - though not always explicitly directed at NGOs or solidarity actors - are formulated with sufficient ambiguity to allow their use against human rights defenders. Vaguely defined notions such as “threats to public order” or “national security” are strategically mobilized to legitimize the criminalization of humanitarian and advocacy work. This legal repression is compounded by a suite of administrative and financial barriers, including onerous registration procedures, restrictive ID policies, limitations on funding streams, and burdensome bureaucratic requirements. Collectively, these mechanisms function to curtail spaces of dissent, undermine accountability, and erode the capacity of civil society to contest state violence and support people trying to reach the EU through these routes.

4. Bordering through Control and Abandonment.

In the preceding sections of this chapter, I have examined how the European border regime operates through a dynamic interplay between internal and external bordering practices (Andrijasevic & Walters, 2010; Walia, 2021). These processes are neither isolated nor sequential; rather, they function in constant communication, producing a multilayered and stratified system of control (Walters, 2006). This entanglement gives rise to complex and often contradictory outcomes - simultaneously shaping spaces of mobility and immobility, inclusion and exclusion - demonstrating that borders are ongoing and relational processes of governance.

Drawing on data collected and the analysis of different researches and secondary literature, this chapter has shown how the border, in the contexts under study, manifests through two seemingly opposing yet deeply interconnected and complementary logics: on the one hand, through increasingly pervasive and technologically mediated control practices; on the other, through forms of strategic, deliberate, and institutionalized abandonment, which produce effects of exclusion, marginalization and both spatial and legal precaritisation.

The first logic is expressed through the intensification and sophistication of surveillance and containment mechanisms. Technologies such as drones, thermal sensors, radar, body scanners, and biometric databases - alongside the reinforcement of border police and the construction of walls - exemplify the growing materialization of the border as a visible and militarized infrastructure capable of exercising selective and disciplinary functions (Andersson, 2016; Walters, 2006). This type of bordering produces hierarchies of access and regimes of visibility, governing mobility through advanced forms of control and categorization (Balibar, 2009; De Genova, 2013). Across the various case studies that I will explore in the next chapter, the proliferation and progressive strengthening of border control mechanisms emerge clearly, articulated through a multiplicity of forms: from the ubiquitous presence of walls and barbed wire along the Balkan routes, to the normalization of illegal pushbacks, to the increasingly systematic use of surveillance technologies to monitor border zones, and the growing deployment of border control personnel.

In addition to this highly visible dimension, a second, more implicit yet equally pervasive logic takes shape: the act of bordering through “organized and strategic abandonment” (Gilmore, 2007). This modality operates through omission and withdrawal rather than direct intervention. The failure to

provide rescue, the suspension of essential services in camps and reception centers, and the creation of legally ambiguous waiting spaces or “non-places” along migration routes all function as tools of exclusion and deterrence (Agier, 2011). In this sense, abandonment is not a collateral effect but an active governmental dispositive, one that exposes people to vulnerability, death, and invisibility.

As a mode of governance, abandonment operates as a tactical withdrawal of the state that functions as a mechanism of control and exclusion (Leshem, 2017). In the European context, it is evident through increasingly restrictive migration policies, bureaucratic barriers, and the defunding of welfare provisions and NGO infrastructures, all of which contribute to the “irregularisation” of migrants and their expulsion from protection systems (Eule et al., 2019; Kalir & Wissink, 2016). Following Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2017), this can be understood as an organized form of abandonment, as already mentioned above—the state’s calculated decision to withdraw resources, protections, and services from populations deemed disposable. Far from passive neglect, abandonment is productive for the state: it generates an exploitable surplus population while also creating political scapegoats his withdrawal pre-empts the potential for empowerment and resistance, entrenching necropolitical governance that exposes migrants to systemic vulnerability, exhaustion, and death (Mbembe, 2019).

By focusing on this less visible, yet equally violent, form of border power, it becomes apparent that abandonment manifests in concrete and lethal ways, shaped by the specific context. In border zones, it takes the form of the systematic omission of rescue operations, denial of basic humanitarian aid, and structural exclusion from assistance. These omissions, far from being signs of disorganization or negligence, are actively orchestrated exclusionary practices, creating spaces of extreme vulnerability and exposing people on the move to the real risk of death. In this framework, border violence is not only found in the coercive and repressive actions of the state but also in selective forms of abandonment. The management of mobility, in this sense, involves the creation of lives that are rendered disposable, invisible, and abandonable. Migrants are often denied access to essential services such as shelter, food, or medical care, while simultaneously facing constant threats of detention, deportation, and physical violence. In some cases, they are abandoned in remote forests, left to die from exposure, hunger, or injuries sustained during their journey.

However, as my ethnographic research demonstrates, these processes are not confined solely to border areas but extend well beyond them, infiltrating the urban and institutional fabric of nation-states. Strategic abandonment (Gilmore, 2007) also operates within internal spaces, taking on less visible but equally effective forms of exclusion: the systematic denial of essential services, the bureaucratic inaccessibility of asylum procedures, and the imposition of structural barriers that prevent migrants from establishing independent means of subsistence. These barriers, often institutionalized and normalized, create a state of suspension for individuals, devoid of recognition or stability, relegating them to a liminal social space defined by invisibility and precarity. In this way, abandonment is not a passive absence but a deliberate and organized mode of governance and control, sustaining permanent exclusion within the host society.

These dynamics demonstrate how the border can be understood as a diffuse and ongoing process that shapes lives across spatial and temporal dimensions. By acting through inaction, the state reproduces hierarchies of belonging and exclusion, constructing migrants as physically present but politically absent subjects, excluded from the protections and rights that should be guaranteed both nationally and internationally. Far from being in opposition or mutually exclusive, control and abandonment operate in synergy, as complementary manifestations of a single governmental rationality. Where the apparatus of control does not reach, or chooses not to reach, abandonment steps in as a form of “negative control,”

rendering the migratory experience more dangerous, protracted, and uncertain. The border thus extends far beyond the territorial threshold, taking shape in a multiplicity of intermediary spaces and dispersed mechanisms that follow moving bodies and shape their trajectories (De Genova, 2017; Squire, 2018)). From this perspective, the contemporary border is not only what is seen (walls, fences, uniforms) but also what is strategically allowed to happen.

5. Conclusion: The Balkans as a Laboratory of European Border Regime.

What the analysis developed throughout this chapter ultimately reveals is that the Western Balkans are rarely understood as a marginal or accidental player in European border politics, on the contrary, the region has been deliberately invested with a crucial role as a frontier guard for the EU's migration architecture. What tends to be overlooked, however, are the deeper implications of this delegation: the outsourcing of what might be called the “dirty work” of border enforcement, and the ways in which this arrangement reproduces and entrenches structural inequalities between the region and the European core. Far from a neutral administrative arrangement, this delegation is inseparable from the *longue durée* of imperial rule, nationalist violence, post-socialist transition, and the asymmetric power relations that have historically defined the terms of European integration itself. To understand borders and bordering pordering in the Balkans today is, necessarily, to read it as a layered and cumulative process, one in which each successive political conjuncture has deposited new instruments, imaginaries, and infrastructures of control upon those that came before.

This temporal depth is analytically crucial. As Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) argue, bordering is a continuous and ongoing process rather than a stable condition, it happens across time as much as across space, linking seemingly disparate phenomena into coherent regimes of governance. The Ottoman practice of forced resettlement, the Habsburg engineering of militarised frontiers, the Cold War management of labour mobility, the post-Yugoslav refugee crisis, and the post-2015 consolidation of EU externalization strategies are not simply historical background to the present; they are constitutive layers of it, sediments of power that continue to shape which bodies move freely, which are detained, and which are expelled. Each historical moment has not merely replaced the previous border configuration but has added to it, producing a palimpsest of control in which older logics of demographic engineering, racialised ordering, and territorial containment remain legible beneath contemporary practices of pushback, fast-track procedure, and digital surveillance.

Bordering, in this sense, is never only spatial. It is also deeply temporal: it operates through the deferral of rights, the prolongation of procedures, and the indefinite suspension of legal recognition, what De Genova (2013) identifies as the production of “illegality” not as a fixed status but as an ongoing governmental technique that disciplines mobility across time. The migrants suspended in procedural limbo, pushed back across a border and forced to begin again, is not simply spatially contained; they are temporally captured, held in a condition of enforced waiting that is itself a form of bordering. Drawing on Tazzioli's (2023) notion of the “confinement continuum,” this temporal dimension becomes analytically central: containment extends beyond physical enclosure to encompass the administrative and legal mechanisms that stretch precarity across months and years, transforming time itself into an instrument of deterrence and governance.

This temporal and spatial complexity calls for an understanding of the border regime not as a unified apparatus but as what Hess and Kasperek (2017) describe as a “field of conflict”, a heterogeneous and contested ensemble of actors, rationalities, technologies, and practices that is never fully stabilised. What the history traced in this chapter demonstrates is precisely this unstable and layered quality: the

border regime along the Balkan routes has been assembled gradually, through successive and overlapping interventions (legal, infrastructural, diplomatic, and discursive) each responding to and reshaping the conditions produced by the previous one. The graduated incorporation of Western Balkan states into EU migration governance, through enlargement conditionality, readmission agreements, Frontex cooperation, and development funding, exemplifies what Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) conceptualise as “differential inclusion”: a regime that does not simply exclude but stratifies, incorporating states and individuals into hierarchies of mobility and belonging on unequal and contingent terms. In this regime, as Walia (2021) argues, exclusion, territorial diffusion, commodified inclusion, and discursive control operate not as separate strategies but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single governmental rationality, one that is deeply racialised and historically rooted.

Equally significant is the discursive dimension of this bordering process. As the chapter has shown, the construction of the Balkans as Europe's unstable and ungovernable periphery - what Todorova (1997) identified as a long-standing imaginary of othering - has not remained merely symbolic. It has been continuously mobilised to legitimise successive waves of border enforcement, externalisation, and delegated control, rendering the region's incorporation into EU security architecture appear natural and necessary rather than politically constructed and historically contingent. The border regime, in this sense, is held in place not only by walls, fences, and legal instruments but by the persistence of geopolitical imaginaries that position certain territories and populations as inherently in need of governance and containment. As Balibar (2002) argued, borders are polysemic: they carry multiple and overlapping meanings, and it is precisely this multiplicity that makes them such effective and durable instruments of power.

What emerges from this analysis, then, is a picture of bordering as a simultaneously spatial, temporal, institutional, and discursive process, one that cannot be reduced to any single moment, mechanism, or actor, but must be grasped in its full historical thickness and political complexity. The Balkans do not simply illustrate the European border regime; they reveal its internal logic: the ways in which control and abandonment, visibility and invisibility, inclusion and exclusion are not opposites but mutually constitutive dimensions of a single, if deeply uneven and contested, formation of power.

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Chapter 4.

From the Center to the Periphery.

Enduring Solidarities in Hostile Environments.

This chapter offers a detailed analysis of the case studies that constitute the empirical backbone of my fieldwork and broader theoretical inquiry. It begins by situating the three primary sites of research - Greece, Bulgaria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina - within their specific socio-political and historical contexts, with particular attention to their role in the European border regime and the dynamics of migration across the Balkan routes. By grounding the analysis in these context-specific settings, I aim to highlight both the particularities and the structural conditions that shape the lived experiences of migrants, as well as the responses of local societies.

Building on this contextual foundation, the chapter then turns to an in-depth examination of the emergence and development of grassroots solidarities in these regions, in the aftermath of the so called “long summer of migration” (Hess & Kasparek, 2017) of 2015. In the next pages I will investigate how solidarity “from below” has been articulated in different ways across these spaces - sometimes through loosely connected informal networks, other times through more structured grassroots collectives - responding to and navigating the shifting landscape of European migration policies, border violence, and asylum regime.

The analysis draws upon extensive ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with a range of actors involved in these practices, including activists, volunteers, social workers, and members of informal solidarity structures. These individuals and collectives are not merely auxiliary to state or NGO interventions, but are central to the alternative infrastructures of care, resistance, and support that have emerged in the interstices of formal reception systems and securitized border regimes.

By juxtaposing these case studies, the chapter aims to establish a comparative lens through which to understand how local contexts mediate the forms and meanings of solidarity, while also tracing the transnational connections, shared imaginaries, and circulations of knowledge and practice that link these experiences across borders. This framework will serve as a foundation for the subsequent analytical chapters, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of the political, ethical, and spatial dimensions of grassroots solidarity in both urban environments and border areas.

The chapter begins with an examination of Greece, a European Union member state that has played a pivotal role as a primary country of arrival for individuals seeking to enter Europe via the Eastern Mediterranean route. Drawing on this context, I explore the emergence and transformation of solidarity practices in the wake of 2015 (Hess & Kasparek, 2017). This analysis situates these dynamics within their wider socio-economic and political context, examining the impact of prolonged austerity, historical migration trajectories, and the evolving relationship between state policies and support practices. Within this framework, solidarity has often emerged as a response to state neglect and as a form of resistance to the dominant logic of border control; at the same time, many scholars have

highlighted how solidarity can also become complementary to, and functional within, institutional frameworks and regimes of repression.

The discussion then turns to Bulgaria, whose position at the EU's southeastern periphery has rendered it an increasingly central actor in the governance of migration and border enforcement. Here, I analyse the country's evolving role within the European border regime, particularly in light of its partial integration into the Schengen area and its function as a frontline state in EU externalization policies. At the same time, I consider the enduring influence of the post-socialist transition, especially in terms of civil society disengagement and institutional distrust. These legacies, I argue, have contributed to a context in which grassroots solidarity has developed in fragmented and often marginal forms, shaped by a prevailing sense of indifference or even hostility within the broader public sphere.

Finally, the chapter focuses on Bosnia and Herzegovina, a non-EU state whose geopolitical and socio-political complexity presents distinct challenges for both migration governance and solidarity practices. Once primarily a country of transit, Bosnia and Herzegovina has increasingly come to function as a site of involuntary containment, a consequence of EU externalization policies and shifting regional dynamics. In this context, I situate the analysis within the country's fragmented institutional architecture, the legacies of the Dayton Agreement, and ongoing ethno-political tensions. These factors collectively produce a precarious environment in which grassroots solidarity must navigate institutional opacity, political volatility, and limited material resources. Moreover, I explore how actors engaged in solidarity work in this setting to confront the dual pressures of international humanitarian frameworks and local participation, making their efforts both deeply necessary and persistently constrained.

Taken together, these three case studies offer a comparative perspective on the situated emergence and development of solidarity "from below" along the Balkan routes. They provide a lens through which to examine how local histories, political economies, and border regimes shape the forms, trajectories, and contradictions of grassroots responses to migration at Europe's margins.

1. Greece.

1.1 "Every Year is Worse": The Evolution of Greek Asylum and Reception Policies.

Greece is one of the European countries most directly affected by contemporary migratory phenomena and, since the 1990s, has constituted one of the principal entry points into the European Union. This is due to its geographic location, which places it at the junction of two major migration routes: the maritime path across the Aegean Sea and the land route through the Evros region on the border with Turkey, routes that together constitute the so-called Eastern Mediterranean corridor. In the wake of the Syrian war and the 2015 so-called "long summer of migration" (Hess & Kasperek, 2017), arrivals surged dramatically, prompting a series of legal and institutional transformations, both at the national and EU levels, aimed at controlling, slowing, and obstructing human mobility. These transformations have had a profound and lasting impact on Greece's asylum and reception system, reshaping the country into a crucial node of European migration governance.

To fully understand the socio-political dynamics that have unfolded in Greece since 2015, it is essential to grasp its role as a country of transit rather than destination. Situated at the entry point of the Balkan routes that lead toward northern and western Europe, Greece is rarely perceived as a desirable place to stay, despite being in the Schengen area and a EU member. This perception is shaped not only by migrants' aspirations - many of whom aim to reach countries such as Germany, France, or the Netherlands, seen as offering better prospects - but also by the structural conditions that hinder long-

term integration. The country's economic precarity, underdeveloped welfare infrastructure, administrative dysfunctions, and restrictive migration laws converge to make residence in Greece difficult and undesirable. Asylum seekers and refugees often express this sentiment starkly, with phrases like "*Greece is not Europe*" capturing the symbolic and material marginality they experience.

This transitory character is not merely the result of individual intentions but is embedded in and reproduced by European migration policies and national bureaucracies. Greece thus becomes what Hess (Hess, 2012) has described as a "precarious zone of transit", a space where people are immobilized and subjected to indefinite waiting. They are caught with a "immanent strangeness" (McNevin, 2006), a condition of exclusion-inclusion in which they are neither fully inside nor outside the domain of citizenship and legal recognition (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). One of the primary mechanisms that structures this condition is the asylum system, which, both in Greece and elsewhere in Europe, functions as the only legal pathway for obtaining a recognized status, yet increasingly operates as a tool of deterrence, containment, and exclusion.

The contemporary Greek asylum system is anchored in two major legislative instruments. The first is Law 4375/2016, adopted under the Tsipras administration and shaped in the context of the EU-Turkey Statement, which introduced the so-called "fast-track border procedure" for arrivals on the Aegean islands. This procedure, intended as an emergency response to increased arrivals, remains in place today and has become the norm rather than the exception. It enables accelerated processing but undermines applicants' rights and procedural guarantees. The second legislative shift occurred under the current government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis, with Law 4636/2019 (amended by Law 4686/2020 and modified by others), known as the International Protection Act (IPA). This legal framework has intensified coercive measures, curtailed procedural safeguards, and further criminalized solidarity actors, framing once again migration policies under a narrative regarding protection and security (AIDA, 2024b).

According to the Asylum Information Database (AIDA, 2024), these legislative changes have resulted in a highly fragmented, opaque, and often arbitrary asylum process. As of the end of 2023, the Greek asylum system continues to operate with considerable delays and systemic dysfunctions. While new asylum applications in 2023 (16,392) represented a slight decrease from previous years, the total caseload remained high, with 27,968 pending applications by the end of the year. Notably, 35% of these had been pending for over six months (AIDA, 2024). These delays are not an anomaly but a structural feature of the system, affecting not only the islands, where the EU-Turkey deal remains the basis for "fast-track" processing, but also the mainland, where applicants face prolonged waiting times and inadequate access to legal assistance.

In June 2021, the Greek government further entrenched the deterrence regime by designating Turkey as a "safe third country" for applicants from Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Despite the lack of adequate protection in Turkey - where refugee status is limited to Europeans and conditions are characterized by exploitation, arbitrary detention, and deportation - this designation has allowed Greek authorities to summarily dismiss asylum claims as inadmissible. Between 2021 and 2023, over 10,000 applications were rejected on these grounds. Yet deportations to Turkey remain suspended, leaving individuals in a legal limbo without access to protection or services. Greece's continued application of the Safe Third Country concept to Turkey, despite the latter's suspension of readmissions since March 2020, has rendered asylum procedures largely fictitious for nationals of countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In thousands of cases, applications are dismissed as inadmissible without substantive examination, leaving individuals in legal limbo without access to international protection or effective remedies. This practice has been repeatedly

denounced by legal observers and NGOs as incompatible with both EU law and the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights. Appeals procedures, nominally available, are often inaccessible in practice due to linguistic barriers, lack of information, insufficient legal aid, and tight procedural deadlines. The adjudication process frequently relies on template reasoning, demonstrating a form of bureaucratic automation that undermines individual case assessment and entrenches structural arbitrariness.

Meanwhile, the expansion of border technologies and containment infrastructure has led to what Iliadou (Iliadou, 2019) calls the “precariousness trap.” This dynamic is clearly visible in the transformation of reception centers into surveillance-heavy, quasi-carceral spaces. On both the islands and the mainland, open accommodation structures have been replaced with “closed and controlled access centers,” supported and financed by the European Commission. Projects like Centaur, launched in 2021, have equipped these facilities with CCTV systems, biometric access gates, and 24/7 monitoring technologies. Camps in Ritsona, Diavata, and Malakasa have been enclosed with 3-meter-high concrete walls, and movement restrictions are rigorously enforced. In the Aegean islands, this logic has culminated in the construction of five new multi-purpose reception and identification centers (MPRICs) in Samos, Lesbos, Leros, Kos, and Chios, at a cost of €276 million. These sites combine reception, detention, and deportation functions within militarized zones. Surveillance measures include metal detectors, drones, and biometric checks, while residents’ movements are heavily restricted. These camps are presented by Greek authorities as model facilities, yet are widely criticized by NGOs for replicating prison-like conditions and institutionalizing exclusion.

Concurrently, reception conditions remain inadequate, fragmented, and governed by a policy of managed neglect. While Greek authorities have claimed improvements in infrastructure and a shift toward “controlled” reception, reports confirm that material conditions in Reception and Identification Centres (RICs) and other facilities continue to fall short of international standards. The formal closure of open urban accommodation schemes, particularly the EU-funded ESTIA II program in 2023, has led to increased homelessness and destitution among both asylum seekers and recognized refugees. Those accommodated in the newer Closed Controlled Access Centres (CCACs) - which reflect a broader European tendency toward camp securitization - face restricted movement, spatial isolation, and inadequate services. The concentration of asylum seekers in remote, surveilled, and tightly managed sites furthers their marginalization, transforming the reception system into an extension of border enforcement rather than a space for protection and integration. This logic of containment is further exemplified by the continued use of camp infrastructure as a tool of deterrence, reinforcing the message that arrival in Europe will not entail access to safety or dignity. As I observed in my fieldnotes, this landscape makes visible a shift in which camp infrastructures and reception practices are progressively taking on the contours of detention.

“Yesterday, M. and I went to a few camps on the outskirts of Athens. Some local organizations occasionally bring food or set up small medical points there, because the camps are really far from the city and public services, let alone transport, are either inadequate or completely missing. All the camps in Athens are located outside the city, often an hour or two away by car, and some are served by a bus that might come just once a day. Over the past few years, some camps have been fitted with turnstiles to monitor who comes and goes; others have built walls around the entire perimeter. The message is clear: what happens inside is not for outsiders to see or know. It’s obvious enough. Very few organizations in Greece are allowed access; you have to be registered through a process that is costly, time-consuming, and often practically impossible to navigate. M. explained that a lot of people end up living on the streets of Athens

because they'd rather do that than stay in these camps, which increasingly feel more and more like prisons.” (fieldnotes, 12-03-2024, Athens, Greece)

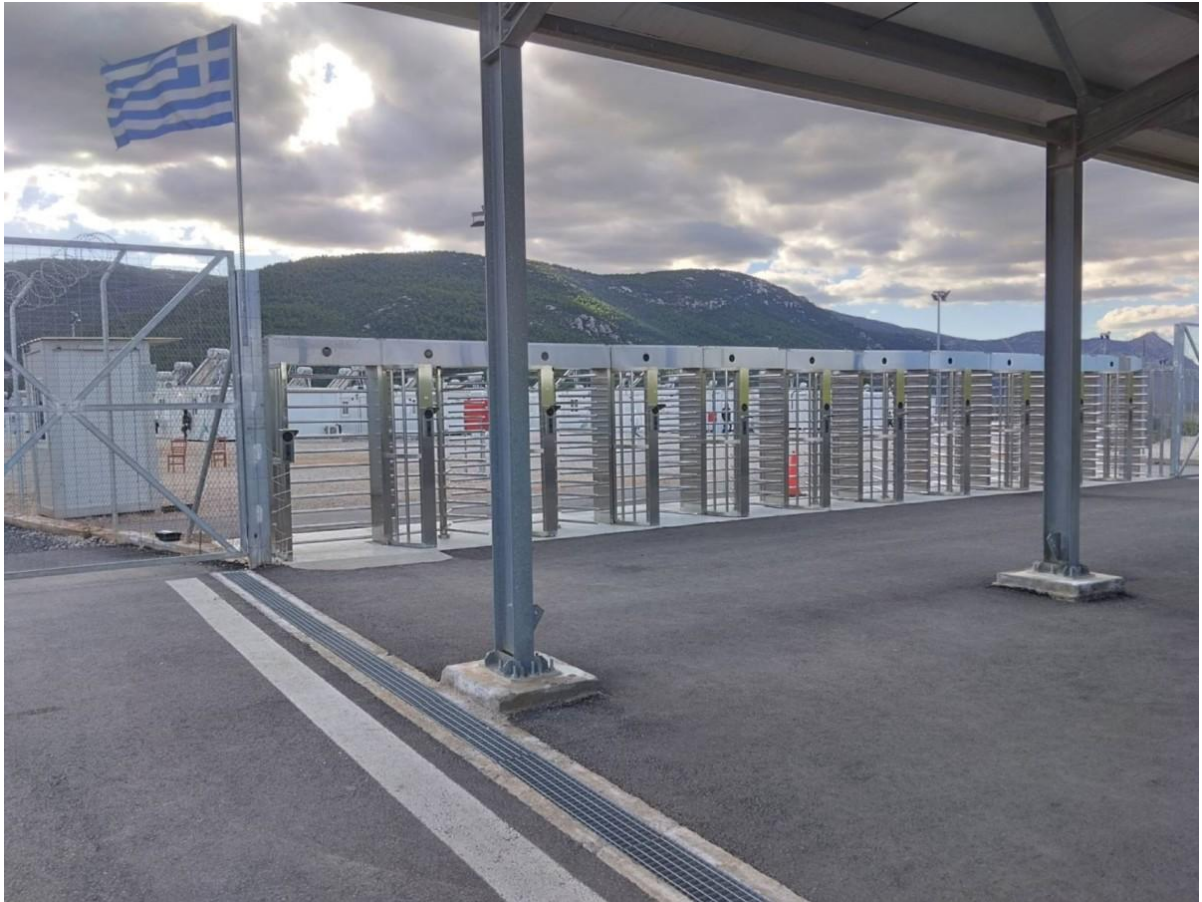


Fig. 10 Turnstiles at the entrance of Malakasa RIC (Reception and Identification Facility). Source: Ministry of Migration and Asylum migration.gov.gr

Testimonies gathered during fieldwork underscore the profound impact of this restrictive system on those directly affected by it. Individuals engaged in volunteer work and employed by small solidarity organizations have, on numerous occasions, shared with me their perspectives on the evolving situation. They emphasize the increasingly difficult conditions under which they operate, and, more critically, the consequences these constraints have on the lives of people in transit or those stranded within the country. For instance, M., who has been active in Greece for over seven years, offers a clear-eyed yet deeply critical account of the current landscape, shaped by her long-standing engagement on the ground.

“Every year is worse. Since I began working in Greece I saw how policies and laws have become more and more oppressive towards refugees and people who are helping them... and it seems like this tendency has no end. (...) The consequences of this system is to deter people from entering and to make people wanting to leave... it's not important if in the legal way or in the illegal way.” (M_2416 28-02-24 GR)

The violent nature of this regime is most starkly revealed in the Greek state's border practices. Pushbacks, long documented by civil society actors and international organizations, have become a normalized modality of governance in the Aegean Sea and the Evros land border. Individuals are routinely intercepted, subjected to inhumane and degrading treatment, stripped of their belongings, and forcibly returned across the border without any form of legal procedure. These practices are perpetrated

with impunity by both official state actors and unofficial, often masked individuals operating in coordination with law enforcement. The Greek government consistently denies these allegations, dismissing documented testimonies, video evidence, and forensic investigations. Yet the evidence is overwhelming: from testimonies collected by Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) and Refugee Support Aegean (RSA) to reports by UN Special Rapporteurs and investigative journalists, a consistent picture emerges of an orchestrated, systematic regime of violent deterrence. Crucially, this violence is not confined to border zones. The BVMN's 2024 report highlights that individuals intercepted or apprehended far inside the Greek mainland, including Thessaloniki and Athens are often subjected to "chain pushbacks", involving informal detention in unregistered facilities, beatings, and subsequent illegal expulsions toward Turkey. This reveals a spatial expansion of border violence beyond the margins of the national territory, signaling a shift whereby the entirety of the state becomes a potential zone of expulsion. Despite growing evidence, including from the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, Greek authorities continue to deny any wrongdoing, and the EU remains complicit through its continued support and funding.³⁰

Underlying this entire apparatus is a structure of European complicity. The EU, while occasionally voicing concern about rights violations, has continued to finance, legitimize, and co-manage Greek border operations through agencies such as Frontex and funding instruments like the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and Internal Security Fund (ISF). The operational presence of Frontex in both maritime and land borders has persisted despite documented involvement in illegal pushbacks, further entrenching the externalized and securitized nature of European migration governance. Rather than imposing accountability, the European Commission has rewarded Greece with increased funding and political support, reinforcing its role as a gatekeeper tasked with preventing mobility from reaching the European core. In this sense, the Greek case cannot be understood in isolation but must be read as emblematic of a broader EU policy that instrumentalizes peripheral states while insulating the political center from the consequences of border violence.

1.2 Building Solidarity Amid Austerity and Overlapping Crises.

To fully grasp how solidarity practices and various forms of humanitarian aid have developed and proliferated across Greece, it is crucial to situate these dynamics within the broader social and political context of a country deeply affected by austerity measures and enduring economic hardship. The rise of solidarity initiatives cannot be disentangled from the multifaceted crisis that has gripped Greece in recent years: a prolonged recession, the dismantling of welfare structures, rising unemployment, and widespread social precarity. These conditions have not only strained public institutions but have also galvanized grassroots responses, fostering networks of mutual aid and care. In this sense, solidarity in Greece has emerged not merely as a reaction to migration, but as a broader political and social response to intersecting forms of marginalization and systemic neglect.

Greece has come to represent a paradigmatic case of the protracted and overlapping crises that characterize the contemporary global conjuncture. Over the past decade and a half, the country has endured successive disruptions that have profoundly reshaped its political, economic, and social landscape. The 2008 global financial crash triggered a severe sovereign debt crisis, culminating in the signing of the first Memorandum of Understanding in 2010. Under this agreement, the Greek

³⁰ Reference here:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738191/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)738191_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738191/EPRS_BRI(2022)738191_EN.pdf)

government implemented sweeping structural adjustment measures mandated by international creditors. These austerity policies unleashed far-reaching processes of dispossession and social exclusion, particularly pronounced in urban environments. In cities like Athens and Thessaloniki, for example, municipal budgets for essential urban services, public transportation, and cultural and recreational infrastructure were drastically reduced. The deterioration of public spaces and urban infrastructure was paralleled by the privatization and commodification of public lands, buildings, parks, and commercial assets. These transformations occurred amid a rise in racially motivated violence, perpetrated both by police forces and far-right groups, alongside intensified repression of political activism and restrictions on the right to protest (Boano & Gyftopoulou, 2016; Vaiou & Kalandides, 2017; Koutrolikou, 2016).

At the same time, large segments of the population experienced unemployment, loss of income and housing, and widespread exclusion from the formal economy. Within this context of social disintegration and institutional retreat, many individuals turned to each other for support. From the outset of the austerity crisis, activists affiliated with various factions of the Greek left and the anarchist/anti-authoritarian movement mobilized to establish self-organized networks that offered medical care, housing, and other essential forms of assistance (Arampatzi, 2017; Cabot, 2016; Rakopoulos, 2015). A proliferation of solidarity economy initiatives - including barter systems, time banks, community-supported agriculture, ethical banking schemes, degrowth collectives, transition towns, and alternative currency networks - emerged across the country. These initiatives sought to create socio-economic alternatives grounded in non-capitalist, non-monetary models of exchange and mutual aid. By aligning the use and exchange value of goods and balancing supply and demand within local circuits, these practices not only addressed material needs but also reinforced community ties.

While these networks flourished in diverse geographic settings, they were particularly concentrated in Greece's two largest urban centers, Athens and Thessaloniki (Margariti & Travlou, 2018). The vitality of these grassroots responses during the austerity years laid the foundation for a more expansive and adaptable solidarity infrastructure that would later respond to the arrival of refugees and migrants. Numerous studies have in fact demonstrated that the solidarity practices which emerged in response to the so-called "long summer of migration" of 2015 were closely intertwined with the broader mobilization of the Greek population in solidarity initiatives that had already taken shape in the context of the preceding austerity measures and economic crisis (Trimikliniotis et al., 2015; Squire, 2018).

As it has been reported by several studies and reports, in 2015 the so-called "refugee crisis" further compounded the austerity regime (Sanchez, 2023). As large numbers of asylum seekers arrived in the country, the European Union responded with a new migration management framework - mainly, the EU-Turkey Statement - which effectively immobilized many migrants in Greece under conditions of legal and administrative limbo. The Greek government established a reception system largely based on camp infrastructures situated outside urban centers. From its inception, this system has entailed a marked restriction of fundamental rights, particularly regarding mobility, privacy, safety, housing, and healthcare (Lafazani, 2021).

Right after 2015, the convergence of austerity and the so-called "refugee crisis" in Greece catalyzed the formation of a heterogeneous solidarity infrastructure, mobilized by both local and transnational actors. This emergent network, composed of long-standing activist collectives, newly politicized citizens, and international volunteers, responded to the absence or failure of formal state provisions by constructing infrastructures of care oriented primarily towards migrants (Dalakoglou & Angelopoulos, 2018). During the summer of 2015, as tens of thousands of asylum seekers transited through Greece, -

particularly via Athens en route to the northern border with North Macedonia (Evangelinidis, 2016) - spontaneous grassroots efforts were launched to provide food, medical assistance, and shelter to those sleeping rough in urban spaces (Cabot, 2019b).

On a urban scale, one of the most emblematic responses was the occupation of abandoned buildings, including the City Plaza Hotel and a derelict public office building in central Athens, both transformed into refugee housing squats in September 2015 (Agustin & Jørgensen, 2019; Raimondi, 2019). These initiatives became part of a broader constellation of solidarity-based projects: social clinics, collective kitchens, intercultural schools, language courses, free shops, legal aid and translation services (Zaman, 2020), which were, in many cases, direct continuations or reconfigurations of the social mobilizations and infrastructures developed during the years of anti-austerity struggles. As one of the people who were involved in those initiatives and I managed to interview emphasized, during those early years, *“solidarity was everywhere.”*

Reflecting on that period, she offered a reading that held two tensions at once, describing it as something positive, yet also as something that carried real problems:

“Just thinking about Athens... In few weeks and months we went from the occupation of places like Victoria or Pediou Tou Areo, to the occupation of buildings. Many many locals were active in helping, providing food, basic necessities, but also building a political stance to that. And then many many organizations but also activists arrived from Europe... and sometimes it was not a positive thing. Of course many hands were needed, but many people didn't know how to work, how to use properly the funds. Activists were like doing this thing we call 'activist tourism', coming to Exarchia from Berlin, just because it was like the place to come if you are an anarchist... but there was a lot of superficiality in all this. And it affected the local environment a lot...” (B_2453 17-11-24 GR)

Besides groups and individuals active with a specific political stance, the main tensions raised between grassroots groups and big humanitarian organizations, often connected with state programmes or collaborating with institutions. In fact, while the solidarity-based ecosystem emphasized horizontal practices, mutual aid, and political engagement, it developed alongside and often in tension with the expanding presence of humanitarian NGOs. The proliferation of international NGOs - often better funded, institutionally embedded, and technocratically oriented - introduced competing frameworks of aid delivery. This led to significant friction between grassroots actors promoting solidarity as a transformative political praxis and humanitarian actors operating under depoliticized, managerial logics (Cabot, 2019a). Whereas solidarity initiatives foregrounded the agency of refugees and sought to challenge the structural conditions producing displacement and marginalization, mainstream humanitarianism frequently reinforced hierarchical relations between providers and recipients, and often aligned with state or EU border control agendas. The Greek case thus provides a salient lens through which to examine the broader tensions between solidarity and humanitarianism, and the contested terrains of care, governance, and resistance in contemporary Europe.

1.3 The End of the Spectacle and Growing Hostilities: Who's Left?

“In 2016, all the European media and humanitarians were in Lesbos. Now, there is none.” With these few words, F., a Greek solidarity activist based in Athens, precisely captures the profound shift that has taken place over the past several years in the visibility, attention, and collective engagement surrounding migration and solidarity efforts in Greece. Her reflection points not only to

the declining presence of international actors on the ground, but also to the broader erosion of public and institutional interest in the conditions faced by migrants. This shift marks a crucial transformation in the landscape of solidarity, from a moment of heightened international attention in 2015–2016 to a present characterized by normalization, marginalization, and increased hostility toward both migrants and those supporting them.

In the years following the mediatized spectacle of 2015, Greece witnessed a gradual but systematic dismantling of both grassroots solidarity infrastructures and more institutionalized support systems for migrants and asylum seekers. As international attention faded and the EU externalization agenda hardened, solidarity networks found themselves increasingly isolated, criminalized, and deprived of resources. Many of the spaces that had once embodied alternative forms of care and cohabitation (such as refugee housing squats, social clinics, and free cultural or legal support centers) were evicted, defunded, or forced to shut down under growing pressure from state and municipal authorities. This repression was often justified under the guise of “restoring public order” or “integrating migrants into formal systems,” while in practice it served to discipline both the displaced and those who acted in solidarity with them. The eviction of the City Plaza squat in 2019, one of the most emblematic experiments in autonomous refugee housing and horizontal cohabitation, marked a symbolic and material closure of a cycle. In the years that followed, a wave of evictions, arrests, surveillance operations, and defamation campaigns - backed by legal reforms aimed at limiting NGO activities (e.g., mandatory registration and opaque vetting processes) - further narrowed the space for both grassroots and humanitarian actors to operate. This criminalization of solidarity mirrored broader trends across Europe, but proved particularly acute in the Greek context, where migration control and domestic political agendas had become deeply intertwined.



Fig. 11. The entrance of the City Plaza Hotel, photographed in February 2024, showing its state of complete abandonment. Source: the author.

Even well-established NGOs and service providers began to struggle operating within a hostile environment shaped by restrictive legal frameworks, bureaucratic obstruction, and shrinking international funding. Since the change in government in 2019, it has become progressively more difficult to provide services and reach individuals in need. This is largely due to legislative measures aimed at narrowing the operational space available to NGOs, solidarity groups, and civil society organizations. As highlighted in multiple reports³¹, the current legal framework governing NGOs and civil society actors in Greece appears designed to hinder their ability to operate effectively on the ground. The increasingly restrictive environment requires organizations engaged in migration, asylum, and social inclusion work to register with the Ministry of Migration and Asylum through the Registry of Greek and Foreign Non-Governmental Organizations. This registration requirement, imposed on a specific segment of civil society, comes with onerous conditions and grants significant discretionary power to the competent authorities to deny applications. These provisions violate Greece's obligations under international human rights law and have been widely criticized as discriminatory. Notably, there have been documented cases where groups explicitly stating their intent to assist undocumented migrants were denied registration on these grounds. Without formal registration, organizations are barred from accessing reception facilities and providing services to those in need, including individuals in particularly vulnerable situations. This legal and administrative environment has severely constrained the activities of many small organizations, collectives, and solidarity groups, further marginalizing vulnerable populations and exacerbating their exclusion from essential support and protection mechanisms.

Therefore, the reconfiguration of EU asylum governance, coupled with Greece's alignment with restrictive legislations, deterrence policies, and systematic pushbacks, has led to a landscape in which few actors are able to offer sustained support. Those who persist, whether grassroots collectives or more formalized organizations, face relentless challenges: legal intimidation, surveillance, logistical precarity, and a widespread climate of fear and fatigue. Each year, an increasing number of organizations and grassroots groups are compelled to cease their activities, primarily due to financial constraints. These funding difficulties are closely tied to the growing, yet often understated, hostility that permeates the broader political and institutional context in which they operate.

Many of the people I spoke with and interviewed described the increasing difficulties and challenges they have faced over the years in supporting migrants, difficulties that have become particularly acute in recent times. While talking about the problems their organization was facing, one of my interviewees emphasized,

“when it gets more and more difficult to do practical things, to rent a space to do distributions, to afford basic necessities, to access places, if you don't have enough money, then it gets impossible. The costs for everything, for doing basic things, have grown so much. And the funds are less and less. So it is normal that at some point you are unable to keep operating”. (M_2410 20-02-24 GR)

³¹ References here: <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/under-pressure-how-greece-closing-civil-society-organisations-working-refugees-engr>
[https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20240612_ACAPS_Greece - Eastern Mediterranean mixed migration route.pdf](https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20240612_ACAPS_Greece_-_Eastern_Mediterranean_mixed_migration_route.pdf)
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5229add1-visit-greece-report-special-rapporteur-situation-human>

And other testimonies confirmed the difficulties:

“Sometimes I can’t even explain how hostile is the Greek, how hostile is the big government towards all these people, towards also who support them. And how difficult and impossible is all the bureaucracy behind every single thing , for everyone. That makes it more difficult to survive in all this chaos...” (B 2409 28-02-24 GR)

“The main issue is capacity. The funds and money we manage to get are less and less and the people who need support are more and more. So we keep finding ourselves in front of these issues... whether continue but limit our capacity or close everything. Until now we are trying very hard to resist somehow...” (B_2406 07-02-24 GR)

As such, what remains is a paradoxical scene: the humanitarian spectacle has receded, but the underlying structures of exclusion, containment, and violence have not only persisted but intensified. Migrants are subjected to a continuum of hostility that ranges from illegal pushbacks at land and sea borders to bureaucratic obstructions in accessing basic services, and from social invisibilization to prolonged destitution. Those who attempt to support them - whether through political action, practical help, medical and legal support or advocacy - do so under increasingly precarious and surveilled conditions. Yet, despite the growing repression, fragments of solidarity endure. In less visible ways, new alliances, informal networks, and acts of care continue to emerge, often at the margins of institutional frameworks.

2. Bulgaria.

2.1 Bulgaria’s Migration Governance Between Legacies and Europeanization Dynamics.

Bulgaria’s approach to migration governance has been deeply shaped by its post-socialist transformation, its trajectory toward European Union (EU) accession, and the increasingly securitized and populist framing of migration in national and European politics. Far from forming a linear process of institutional maturation, Bulgarian migration policy has oscillated between neglect, reactive adaptation to external pressures, and populist instrumentalization.

The collapse of the socialist regime in 1989 marked a pivotal turning point in Bulgaria’s migration history. Under communism, the state maintained strict control over both emigration and immigration, with international mobility largely restricted to politically loyal cadres or those selected for state-mandated missions abroad. This system collapsed almost overnight, unleashing a massive wave of emigration. For many Bulgarians, the newfound ability to leave the country became a symbolic and material expression of personal freedom. As Krasteva (2013) emphasizes, emigration was widely experienced not only as a strategy of economic survival but also as a form of emancipation from the surveillance and coercion of the totalitarian state. However, this sudden liberalization occurred in a context of institutional vacuum. Migration was largely depoliticized, regarded as a private matter rather than a domain requiring state regulation or strategic planning. As a result, Bulgaria entered the 1990s without a coherent migration policy. Emigration was massive and diverse, involving both economically motivated movements and the large-scale exodus of ethnic Turks during the so-called “Revival Process,” which had forcibly assimilated minorities under the late communist regime. The absence of state coordination led to the proliferation of informal migration networks and unregulated labor mobility, particularly toward Southern and Western Europe.

The early 2000s saw the gradual emergence of a more institutionalized migration framework, primarily as a consequence of Bulgaria's EU accession process. Alignment with EU standards required the development of legislation and administrative structures in the areas of asylum, border control, and integration. National strategies on migration and asylum were formulated, and new agencies were created within the Ministry of Interior. Yet, as Otova and Staykova (2021) argue, this institutionalization was largely technocratic and externally driven, lacking both public legitimacy and a coherent national vision of migration's place in society. During this whole phase, Bulgaria primarily remained a country of emigration and transit, not a destination for significant immigration flows. This perception contributed to the marginalization of migration issues in public debate and political agendas. Despite the formal existence of migration strategies and diaspora policies, implementation remained weak, underfunded, and fragmented across various state bodies. The few attempts to engage with the Bulgarian diaspora, often presented in official discourse as a potential resource for development, were undermined by inconsistent outreach and insufficient institutional infrastructure (Krasteva, 2013). Therefore, during this period migration governance mainly followed a dual logic: formally, it embraced EU standards and procedures, yet in practice, it was marked by indifference, or even resistance, toward meaningful integration and proactive policymaking. This produced a hybrid institutional landscape, where legal frameworks were frequently established on paper but rarely implemented in practice.

As in many other countries in the EU and its peripheries, the so-called "migration crisis" of 2013–2015 catalyzed a profound transformation in Bulgaria's migration discourse and policy orientation. While Bulgaria was not a primary destination for asylum seekers, its position on the EU's external border, particularly with Turkey, rendered it a frontline state in the eyes of EU institutions and national authorities. The dominant narrative in political and media discourse increasingly framed migration as a security threat and an existential challenge to national identity. This securitization was not the exclusive domain of far-right actors; rather, it was embraced across the political spectrum. As Otova and Staykova (Otova & Staykova, 2021) demonstrate, migration became a convenient target for populist discourses that depicted migrants as culturally incompatible, economically burdensome, and potentially criminal. Such narratives reinforced a broader culture of fear and mistrust toward "outsiders," feeding into the rise of nationalist parties and the mainstreaming of xenophobic rhetoric.

At the policy level, this shift was reflected in a series of restrictive measures. Bulgaria reinforced its southern border through the construction of a fence and the deployment of additional police and Frontex personnel. Asylum procedures were streamlined for rapid processing and rejection, while access to rights and services for asylum seekers and refugees remained limited. Reception centers were often overcrowded and under-resourced, and integration programs were minimal or absent. Civil society organizations, which had previously played a critical role in service provision and legal assistance, found their access to facilities increasingly constrained by bureaucratic and political obstacles.³²

Importantly, this period also saw the normalization of emergency measures as routine instruments of governance. Policies initially justified as temporary responses to a "crisis" were progressively institutionalized, producing a durable entrenchment of securitarian logics within migration management. Migrants (particularly those from the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa)

³² References here: <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/02/22/in-a-bulgarian-town-syrians-find-tension-and-violence-but-little-hope/>
<https://hyphenonline.com/2023/06/21/bulgaria-harmanli-border-mission-wings-eu-irregular-migration-pushback/>
https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AIDA-BG_2022update.pdf

were increasingly framed as threats to public order rather than as rights-bearing individuals, a discursive and institutional shift that further foreclosed the possibility of alternative, rights-based approaches to migration governance.

As both Krasteva (2013) and Otova and Staykova (2021) observe, migration policy in the Bulgarian context over the past decade has been shaped predominantly by reactive, short-term, and security-oriented frameworks. Meaningful strategies to attract return migration, facilitate legal labor mobility, or promote the integration of third-country nationals have remained largely absent. The populist framing of migration has steadily narrowed the space for substantive policy debate. Even in sectors facing acute labor shortages (such as agriculture, construction, and caregiving) the political will to develop coherent and effective labor migration frameworks has remained weak.

Meanwhile, the integration of those granted protection status has been largely delegated to underfunded municipalities and civil society actors, whose efforts are frequently unsupported or actively undermined by national policy. Bulgaria's migration governance thus remains marked by structural fragmentation, institutional ambivalence, and political instrumentalization, reflecting not only domestic dynamics, but also the broader tensions embedded in the EU's external border regime and its uneven distribution of responsibilities among member states.

2.2 A Fragile Asylum System: Navigating Political Instability and EU Pressures in Bulgaria.

Between 2021 and 2024, Bulgaria's position within the European Union's migration and asylum framework evolved significantly, shaped by its geographic role as an external border state and its political stance on regional solidarity. As migratory pressures along the Balkan route persisted, Bulgaria faced the dual challenge of enforcing stringent border controls while adhering to EU asylum standards. This period was marked by legislative reforms, operational adjustments in border management, and ongoing debates over Bulgaria's compliance with international protection norms.

According to the AIDA Bulgaria report of 2024 (AIDA, 2024a), during this period the Bulgarian government introduced several amendments to its Asylum and Refugees Act (ARA), reflecting both alignment with EU directives and a broader trend toward restrictive migration management. Among the most notable changes was the adoption of accelerated procedures for asylum claims, particularly targeting applicants from countries designated as "safe" or those submitting applications considered manifestly unfounded. These procedures, often conducted at border zones, were intended to streamline processing but raised concerns among human rights advocates regarding limited access to legal representation and effective remedies.

Another significant legislative shift was the expansion of detention powers under the amended ARA, allowing authorities to detain asylum seekers more frequently on grounds such as "risk of absconding" or perceived threats to public order. Reports from monitoring bodies indicated that detention conditions frequently fell short of international standards, with prolonged stays in facilities lacking adequate medical care and legal support.

Moreover, Bulgaria's border enforcement strategies followed a dual trajectory, combining the reinforcement of physical barriers with the intensification of surveillance technologies. The extension of fencing along the Turkish border, together with increased patrols and the deployment of drones, aimed to assert tighter control over the border zone. However, these measures contributed to the displacement of migratory routes toward more remote and hazardous areas, exposing migrants to heightened risks of violence, exploitation, and reliance on smuggling networks. According to data

published by the General Directorate of Border Police, the number of attempted irregular crossings at the Turkish-Bulgarian border rose sharply in 2023, with a 73% increase recorded in June and July compared to the same period in 2022, rising from 27,083 to 46,940. Between 1 January and 7 August 2023, authorities reported preventing 108,954 such attempts, up from 67,846 during the same timeframe the previous year.³³ These so-called "preventions of illegal crossings" illustrate the intensification of border enforcement mechanisms, which have become a core feature of the European Union's migration and border governance architecture. Pushback allegations remained a persistent issue, with numerous reports documenting cases of collective expulsions without due process. While Bulgarian authorities consistently denied systematic violations, findings from international organizations and the AIDA Bulgaria Report 2024 suggested otherwise, pointing to recurring patterns of informal returns and limited accountability. These practices not only raised legal and ethical concerns but also strained Bulgaria's relations with EU institutions and civil society actors advocating for rights-based border policies.



Fig. 12. The entrance of the reception center in Harmanli, Bulgaria. Source: Francesco Cibati

³³ Reference here: <https://www.meltingpot.org/2024/01/torchlight-gettare-luce-sulla-violenta-opacita-del-regime-europeo-dei-confini-2-report/>



Fig. 13. The reception center in Harmanli, Bulgaria, from the outside. Source: Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche

In addition, The capacity and quality of Bulgaria's reception infrastructure have varied markedly across different migrant categories. Beneficiaries of temporary protection from Ukraine generally accessed relatively stable housing and social services, while asylum seekers from other regions frequently encountered overcrowded and poorly resourced facilities. Reception centers such as those in Harmanli and Banya were marked by prolonged stays, inadequate medical care, and minimal integration support, conditions that reinforced cycles of dependency and marginalization rather than enabling any meaningful pathway forward. Integration initiatives remained fragmented, with language instruction and labor market access programs implemented inconsistently and without strategic coordination. The absence of a coherent national integration framework significantly undermined long-term prospects for recognized refugees, many of whom pursued secondary migration to other EU member states in search of better living conditions. Indeed, Bulgaria has long maintained a self-declared policy of “zero integration” for third-country nationals granted international protection, offering no national provisions for housing, language acquisition, or labor market inclusion, a sustained institutional neglect that entrenches structural precarity among both returnees and recognized beneficiaries alike.

Bulgaria's growing prominence within migratory routes traversing the Balkan region, combined with its role as a country of first arrival under the EU asylum framework, has placed increasing expectations on its migration and asylum system from European institutions. Rather than prompting meaningful improvements, however, the policy shifts and operational responses that followed have often deepened the precarity experienced by migrants, affecting both those seeking onward transit toward other European destinations and those compelled, by necessity or lack of alternatives, to seek asylum within the country. The resulting landscape is one of systemic shortcomings: limited access to asylum procedures, substandard reception conditions, and widespread rights violations. These concerns have been consistently documented and raised by local civil society actors, who conveyed to me their alarm at the growing normalization of rights denial, arbitrary border practices, and the erosion of even the most basic guarantees of protection. The picture that emerges from conversations with those working

closest to migrants is one of compounding failures. Both I. and E., employed by the same Bulgarian organization offering social services to migrants alongside other vulnerable groups, described (each in their own way) an environment defined by institutional indifference and a system in steady, deliberate decline:

“About their living conditions, the situation is not acceptable; it's very bad. So the food is not good, the place they live is not good. This is the consequence of being a transit country. Because what I see is that both sides look at themselves and look at refugees here as temporary. So asylum seekers in the camp look at themselves like temporary; they say, okay, we will be here, like, six months—who cares? The agency also says, okay, they will stay here for six months—who cares? The problem should be solved somewhere else; they don't want to stay here. Why should we invest in them when they don't want to stay here? And ultimately, there is no integration plan in Bulgaria. There is something written, but it's not good. Even the written one is not good, but nobody does it. So technically speaking, there is no integration because the nature of the asylum procedure here in Bulgaria is like people will leave. And because statistically it's correct, we should accept it as a fact because I think 99% of people leave. So it makes the situation very hard even for us as refugees who want to stay here. Because we have to deal with so many things that are happening.” (I_2425 07-05-24 BG)

“Sometimes it honestly feels like we're stuck in some kind of twisted game. That's the only way I can describe it. Every week, every day, we wake up and ask ourselves, “Okay, what's the next level?” What new policy? What new rule? What's the next way they'll make life harder for people on the move? It might sound ironic, but I really feel that way. Just when you think things can't get any worse—when you think, this has to be the lowest point—something even more unbelievable happens. The system just keeps getting more violent, more absurd. This is what it's like to live through these migration policies. It's not just about surviving anymore—it's about constantly preparing for the next blow, the next crackdown. It's like they're always inventing new ways to push people down.” (E_2425 24-04-24 BG)

Further compounding the situation, in December 2024, Bulgaria released its national implementation plan for the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, following a discreet preparatory process that notably excluded the involvement of civil society actors. Designed within multiple working groups led by the State Agency for Refugees, the Ministry of Interior, and related bodies, alongside a contemplated overhaul of the national asylum law, the plan nevertheless sidelines civil society entirely, continuing the long-standing pattern of exclusion in policy-making. The core intent is clear: to institute accelerated screening and “Kangaroo” border procedures³⁴ at external entry points; to expand reception capacity through the establishment of new facilities; to tighten procedural rules governing asylum seekers; and to fast-track the processing of return and Dublin cases.

According to a report published by the organization Centre for Legal Aid, based in Sofia, the plan reaffirms Bulgaria's longstanding securitisation stance by criminalizing migrant facilitation, consolidating control-focused rhetoric over any humanitarian or protection-oriented approach. In place of genuine solidarity, it signals willingness to participate in resource-sharing - public funds for screening zones, expansion of screening infrastructures, and intensified surveillance - rather than offering reception or relocation of refugees. The repeated emphasis on administrative coordination

³⁴ Reference here: <https://centerforlegalaaid.com/en/centre-of-legal-aid-voice-in-bulgaria-publishes-part-two-of-the-anatomy-of-the-eu-pact-on-migration-and-asylum-kangaroo-asylum-the-new-regulation-on-the-international-protection-procedure-the-cas/>

across ministries and agencies, without clarification of transparency or accountability measures, further confirms the institutionalization of control over protection.

2.3 At the periphery of Europe: The Southeastern Frontier as a Site of Violence, Opacity and Solidarity Efforts.

In recent years, and as a result of the dynamics outlined above, the Bulgarian-Turkish border area has become one of the most emblematic and violent sites of the European Union's external border regime. Bulgaria's geopolitical position - situated at the EU's southeastern periphery and bordering non-EU states such as Turkey and Serbia - renders it a strategic frontier in the EU's migration containment architecture. This role has intensified in the aftermath of Bulgaria's partial accession to the Schengen area in 2024, reinforcing its designation as a frontline state responsible for shielding the Union's internal space from so-called irregular migration. Yet, far from constituting a neutral site of law enforcement or asylum governance, the border area has transformed into a zone marked by systemic opacity, normalized violence, and legal exceptionality.

The *Torchlight* reports written by Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche,³⁵ an Italian solidarity collective active in the region, and published by Melting Pot Europe (2023, 2024) provide granular documentation of the spatial, institutional, and material dimensions of this border regime. Drawing on field investigations and testimonies collected in southeastern Bulgaria, particularly in regions adjacent to the Turkish border near towns such as Svilengrad and Harmanli, the reports reveal a pattern of systematic and violent pushbacks that have become a constitutive feature of Bulgarian migration management. Individuals attempting to cross the border, often from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, are intercepted by Bulgarian border guards, frequently deep within Bulgarian territory, before being summarily expelled without access to legal procedures, interpretation, or the opportunity to claim asylum. These operations are often carried out by masked agents, sometimes in plain clothes and in unmarked vehicles, blurring the line between state authority and informal repression.

What characterizes these pushbacks is not only their unlawfulness under EU and international law but their brutality. Migrants report being beaten with batons, stripped of their clothes and shoes, attacked by dogs, and robbed of their mobile phones and money. Many are detained for hours or days in makeshift, unofficial sites - such as abandoned buildings, remote containers, or directly in forested areas - before being forced to return to Turkish territory, often across dangerous terrain, including rivers or minefields. These spaces of detention and violence are largely invisible to formal oversight, forming what the reports describe as "infrastructures of disappearance", zones of extralegal governance where violence is not the exception but the organizing logic.

With regard to pushback practices, which have become increasingly normalized by institutions at both national and international levels, I collected numerous testimonies that reflect a deeply concerning and deteriorating situation. These accounts illustrate how practices already documented at other borders, such as those of Croatia and Greece, are now being systematically implemented in yet another country located at the periphery of Europe, pointing to a broader pattern rather than isolated or exceptional occurrences. E., a Bulgarian lawyer from a human rights organization, well explained it:

³⁵ References here: <https://www.meltingpot.org/2023/09/torchlight-gettare-luce-sulla-violenta-opacita-del-regime-europeo-dei-confini/>
<https://www.meltingpot.org/2024/01/torchlight-gettare-luce-sulla-violenta-opacita-del-regime-europeo-dei-confini-2-report/>

“The most concerning issue for us is the pushbacks. But every time you raise the issue of pushbacks, everyone shuts down—even at the European level. Both the national institutions and the European institutions are reluctant to discuss it. It's very disturbing how the European level perceives things: Bulgaria and the other external borders are in a cognitive dissonance. They're told, "You have to keep the border clean," while at the same time, they must respect human rights because Europe doesn't want any outcry. It's very difficult for the external borders, and the Bulgarian border police, for example, are very vocal in the media. The director often appears on TV and states that, last year, the Bulgarian border police prevented 187,000 attempts to illegally enter the country. In Bulgaria, no one talks about "irregular" migration; everything is called "illegal migration." So, what does that mean? And when you raise the question, also at the European level, about how the European Commission perceives this, they say it's a preventive measure. They say it's legal as long as people are on the other side of the border. Imagine the situation: we're on the Turkish-Bulgarian border, and the Bulgarian border police, together with Frontex representatives in mixed patrols, spot a group of people coming from Turkey in the middle of the night. As long as these people do not cross the border line, it's "legal." But what do you do to prevent them from crossing? Do you call the Turkish authorities to pick them up? Do you tell them, "No, no, just don't cross the border?" How does it work? And the answer from the European Commission was, "Our colleagues in Bulgaria say this is a preventive measure and that people do not cross the border." It's absurd. I just wanted to illustrate how everything is working right now. I've been to Greece for many years, and it's similar there—how the border is managed by the border police, the pushbacks, and everything. There's so much evidence of what's happening. But the reaction from Europe is basically, "Yes, it happens; we need this kind of shield." They see these countries as a shield.” (E_2436 17-05-24 BG)

The presence and role of EU agencies such as Frontex exacerbate this violent dynamic. While the official mandate of Frontex in Bulgaria includes support in border surveillance and capacity-building, evidence gathered in the reports suggests that the operational environment fostered by EU support has contributed to a reinforcement of militarized responses rather than a culture of accountability. In 2023 alone, Bulgaria received substantial EU funding for the reinforcement of its border fence and the deployment of advanced surveillance technologies, including thermal cameras and motion detectors. These infrastructural investments, framed in terms of “efficiency” and “interoperability,” in practice enable a high-tech regime of detection and expulsion that marginalizes humanitarian considerations and entrenches a security-first logic.



Fig. 14. A photo from the drone pilot project done by Frontex in Bulgaria, “paving way for smarter EU border surveillance”. Source: Frontex.



Fig. 15. One of the many checkpoints operated by Frontex and the Bulgarian Border Police in the Malko Terno area, in Bulgaria. Source: the author.

This securitization of the border does not end at the fence line, it extends inward, shaping the very infrastructure ostensibly designed for protection. The town of Harmanli, located approximately 50 kilometers from the Turkish border, offers a telling illustration of how reception and repression operate

not as opposites but as interconnected functions of the same border regime. Home to one of the largest reception centers in Bulgaria, Harmanli is formally designated as a site of protection and administrative processing. Yet, as the Torchlight reports indicate, the center frequently functions as a mechanism of containment, surveillance, and control - a spatial extension of border logic rather than a departure from it. Migrants brought to Harmanli after being intercepted or rescued from failed crossings report overcrowded conditions, inadequate medical care, minimal legal assistance, and severe psychological distress. Many pass through only temporarily before attempting another crossing or facing expulsion, highlighting the cyclical and liminal nature of migration in this context. Rather than facilitating durable solutions, the reception infrastructure reinforces precarity, circulating people through a carceral geography of transit, pushback, and re-entry that mirrors, on a smaller scale, the broader dynamics of EU border externalization.

A particularly alarming dimension of the current situation is the growing impunity surrounding abuses at the border. Investigations by journalists and civil society actors are routinely obstructed, and access to border areas is heavily restricted. Legal complaints against border authorities, when filed, often languish without consequence, while victims remain unidentified or untraceable. The Torchlight reports recount multiple incidents in which individuals disappeared following expulsion, or were later found injured or dead in the forests or river areas marking the border zone. The forested terrain of Strandzha, where many of these abuses take place, has been described by local solidarity groups as an “open-air cemetery”, a haunting metaphor that captures both the physical lethality of the border and the political abandonment of those who traverse it.

Crucially, the systemic nature of this violence must be understood not as a breakdown of governance but as an outcome of policy choices and structural arrangements. The EU’s strategy of externalization, outsourcing migration control to peripheral and neighboring states, creates strong incentives for countries like Bulgaria to prioritize deterrence over protection. Compliance with fundamental rights norms is deprioritized in favor of demonstrating border “efficiency” and “security.” Moreover, Bulgaria’s internal political dynamics, marked by weak institutional accountability, a legacy of post-socialist authoritarianism, and a general societal indifference toward migrants, provide fertile ground for the normalization of abuse.

Several interviewees pointed, with particular force, to the absence of political will and institutional accountability as the structural conditions enabling the escalation of both corruption and violence - dynamics that ultimately affect not only those attempting to cross into the country, but also those seeking to support them. Two voices, coming from different but complementary positions within the Bulgarian context, capture this with unusual clarity.

“That's why Bulgaria is important. From the legal point of view, strategic point of view, geographical point of view, it is Greece and Bulgaria. And because they have land borders with European Union, so that's obvious. (...) I cannot speak about Greece, but in the case of Bulgaria, lack of will of Bulgarian politicians to address this situation creates a legal vacuum that enables incredibly huge corruption. There are already several accusations even against the current secretary of the Interior Ministry that is the highest administrative position in the Ministry of Interior that is involved in trafficking of migrants, in maintaining channels of trafficking of migrants. Such accusations are also against the National Security Agency. The money that are involved in this illegal trafficking are huge, immense. People are desperate, so they are ready to pay any kind of amounts just in order to get through and reach to their relatives in Europe or reach to safety. So to be solved there should be political pressure. I don't

see any political will neither from Bulgarian politicians nor from non-European level.”
(Z_2435 14-05-24 BG)

“Somebody should write a book about what's happened here for the last 10 months. A lot of things changed. But still, the locals are not open. Most of them are very aggressive. And the local politics used the migration topic to spread a lot of propaganda, a lot of lies against these people. So there is violence everywhere. At the borders, in the discourses, in the television, in the offices. And there is no will to change things... just to comply with what Europe wants.”
(E_2436 17-05-24 BG)

Within this complex and often hostile environment, recent years have seen the emergence of various forms of solidarity with migrants. Yet these efforts remain fragmented, dispersed, and predominantly informal, shaped by deeper structural and historical currents. Solidarity practices in Bulgaria bear the imprint of the country's limited civic traditions, its peripheral position within EU migration governance, and the relatively recent visibility of migratory routes passing through its territory. Until not long ago, migration dynamics in Bulgaria were largely transitory and obscured from public view, a condition that help explain the absence of any coherent framework for civil society engagement or sustained institutional support for migrants and asylum seekers. What solidarity exists tends to be localized, precarious, and marginal, shaped by the legacies of post-socialist state withdrawal from social provisioning, pervasive institutional mistrust, and a public discourse heavily saturated with securitarian and nationalist narratives. Together, these conditions have constrained the development of coordinated support mechanisms, leaving solidarity efforts both politically vulnerable and operationally limited.

And yet, despite these persistent constraints, recent years have also witnessed a gradual broadening and transnationalization of engagement in support of migrants in Bulgaria, driven, in large part, by the intensification of border enforcement and the growing documentation of violence against those attempting to cross into the country. Between 2021 and 2022, support for migrants remained largely confined to a handful of national NGOs whose work, while crucial, was severely hampered by chronic underfunding, restricted access to institutional mechanisms, and a broader context of political marginalization and widespread societal indifference. Beginning in 2023, however, the landscape began to shift. In response to mounting evidence of systematic pushbacks, physical abuse, and deaths along the border, new international actors (particularly grassroots solidarity networks and volunteers with prior experience in other European border zones) started mobilizing in the Bulgarian-Turkish border region.

Among the solidarity actors I encountered in that context was a small grassroots organization that had previously operated in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. When I asked what prompted their decision to extend their support to people on the move in Bulgaria, they explained:

“In 2023 we decided to start doing some assessments in Bulgaria regarding the situation there. When we were in Bosnia, but also Serbia, a lot of people, they were passing through Bulgaria and they were telling, like, horrific stories or like, really horrible stories. For all of them Bulgaria was the worst place to cross, the worst experiences in terms of violence and repression. Then in 2022, also some human rights organisations started publishing some reports about these violations. So we decided to go there and see what was happening. We met with some local organisations and the situation they told us was worst than imagined. So after that trip we decided to support them and the people passig that border in a more stable way and to start our presence there.” (H_2454 06-12-24 BG)

Beyond their direct operational contributions, these groups have increasingly collaborated with existing local initiatives, helping to expand and consolidate border monitoring activities that might otherwise have remained isolated and under-resourced. Their involvement has not only enhanced the visibility and operational capacity of solidarity efforts on the ground, but has also conferred a degree of institutional legitimacy on the work of Bulgarian actors, whose documentation and testimonies have, as a result, begun to circulate more widely within European advocacy and policy spaces. Perhaps most significantly, this growing international presence has helped to pierce the veil of opacity that has long surrounded the Bulgarian-Turkish border. A frontier that had for years remained peripheral in European public debate is now increasingly recognized as a critical node within the EU's broader architecture of border externalization and deterrence, a place where the consequences of European migration policy are felt with particular acuity, and where the gap between official commitments to fundamental rights and the realities of border enforcement is especially stark.

3. Bosnia-Herzegovina.

3.1 Which Asylum? Which Reception? The Politics of Migration (Non-)Management in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Since the signing of the EU–Turkey Statement in 2016, the configuration of the Balkan migration routes has been marked by continuous transformations in both flows and spatial trajectories, shaped by shifting geopolitical pressures and evolving border regimes. However, these changes have not altered the underlying structural dynamics of the EU's approach to migration management in the region, dynamics defined by deterrence, containment, and externalization. Within this broader architecture, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has assumed an increasingly central role, particularly since 2018, when the closure of formalized channels of entry into the European Union and the intensification of violent pushbacks at the borders of Serbia, Croatia, and Hungary reoriented migratory flows toward Bosnian territory. This development coincided with the collapse of the so-called “waiting list” system at the Serbian-Hungarian border and the growing inaccessibility of other routes, positioning BiH as a *de facto* corridor for people seeking safety and opportunity in the EU, especially individuals fleeing conflict and instability in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Pakistan. While Sarajevo initially functioned as the main entry point, the northwestern towns of Bihać and Velika Kladuša, situated near the Croatian border, soon emerged as strategic locations for onward journeys. These border towns became key sites where migrants gathered, often staying in informal settlements while preparing to cross into EU territory, typically aiming to reach Italy, Austria, or Germany. The journey from these towns to the nearest Schengen border, often undertaken on foot through forested terrain, encapsulates the physical and symbolic violence of Europe's increasingly militarized frontier.

The early responses to this shift revealed a sharp disjuncture between grassroots solidarity and state inaction. Local residents, volunteers, and small civil society groups mobilized spontaneously to provide food, shelter, and medical assistance to those stranded along the route. Yet this solidarity effort took place in the absence of any coherent institutional strategy. The fragmented nature of the Bosnian state - structured along ethno-national lines into the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, and the Brčko District, and further subdivided into cantonal and municipal administrations - rendered unified decision-making virtually impossible. Migration governance, already peripheral to national political agendas, was further complicated by inter-entity disputes, most notably the outright refusal of Republika Srpska authorities to host reception facilities or participate in coordinated responses. In this context of institutional paralysis, international organizations stepped in to fill the vacuum. In mid-2018, operational responsibility for reception was formally transferred to the

International Organization for Migration (IOM), which also became the main channel for disbursing EU emergency funds. This delegation of responsibility reflected a broader pattern within the EU's externalization strategy, whereby governance is outsourced to humanitarian actors who operate without clear accountability mechanisms and often without meaningful engagement with local civil society or oversight by national institutions.

The reception system established under this model was fragmented, opaque, and ultimately inadequate to meet even the most basic needs of the migrant population. By the end of 2018, BiH had recorded nearly 25,000 arrivals (up from just over 1,000 the previous year) and by the end of 2020, this number had grown to over 70,000. Yet reception capacity remained severely limited, never exceeding 8,000 places across all facilities. Temporary reception centers were typically created by repurposing abandoned factories, former hotels, or disused military barracks, often in remote and inaccessible areas. Over time, the number of centers decreased, while those remaining grew in size and isolation, reflecting a shift toward containment rather than reception and assistance. Despite the significant resources allocated (over €88 million in EU funding between 2018 and 2021) living conditions in many centers remained substandard. The Lipa camp, established in 2020 with EU support, became emblematic of this failure. Positioned 30 kilometers from the first town, Bihać, and initially presented as a response to the growing visibility of migrants sleeping in public spaces, Lipa lacked running water, adequate sanitation, electricity, or proper shelter upon opening. Following a devastating fire in December 2020, the camp was rebuilt with a more permanent structure, but also with increased securitization and restrictions on movement, reinforcing a carceral logic within migration governance. This trend toward isolation and confinement not only undermined the dignity and rights of migrants but also sidelined local solidarity initiatives, which had previously offered more humane alternatives.



Fig. 16 Overhead view of Lipa camp in 2024, showing its isolation in the middle of Una-sana canton's forested hills. Source: Altreconomia.

At the same time, Bosnia and Herzegovina's asylum system remained largely symbolic. In 2023, just 147 asylum applications were submitted, of which only four were granted refugee status and 63 subsidiary protection. Although national legislation stipulates that asylum claims should be processed within six months, in practice, this period is often required merely to schedule an initial interview. Delays are systemic, and final decisions may take up to 344 days. During this prolonged legal limbo, asylum seekers face severe restrictions on rights, including the inability to work for the first nine months following registration. The inadequacy of the asylum system contributes to the country's function as a transit zone rather than a place of protection. This is further reinforced by the operations of the readmission system: in 2023 alone, over 4,000 third-country nationals were returned to BiH from EU member states, primarily under bilateral agreements. Of these, 298 were then returned from BiH to Serbia, while another 477 people were returned to their countries of origin, either through IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Program or via Bosnian authorities, most of them Turkish nationals. During the same year, Bosnian authorities issued 683 detention orders and 79 deportation decisions, although it remains unclear how many were actually implemented, reflecting broader issues of opacity and weak legal safeguards.

The structural limitations of both reception and asylum systems have forced many individuals into informal living arrangements, particularly in the Una-Sana Canton, where large numbers have taken shelter in abandoned buildings, forests, or roadside camps. Conditions in these makeshift settlements are consistently deplorable. In 2021, the Associated Press reported that many lived in tents constructed from sticks and plastic tarps, without access to clean water, electricity, or sanitation. The Vučjak camp, opened in 2019 on a former landfill near Bihać, became notorious for the spread of communicable diseases, including scabies and hepatitis, due to unhygienic conditions and overcrowding. Although the camp was eventually dismantled following international criticism, the structural logic it represented - emergency management without long-term planning, humanitarian rhetoric without substantive rights - remains intact. The replacement facility at Lipa, while superficially more "modern," continues to reflect the same principles of exclusion and deterrence, now reinforced through built infrastructure.

Amid this bleak institutional landscape, solidarity have continued along the years to manifest in fragmented yet meaningful ways. In Velika Kladuša, for instance, residents have offered shelter and assistance, while local businesses have provided food and services to migrants. However, such efforts are increasingly marginalized by the consolidation of securitized and remote reception centers, which further disconnect migrants from local communities. At the same time, the EU's role in shaping BiH's migration governance has become increasingly visible, not only through its financial investment but also through its political choices. Rather than supporting the development of an inclusive and rights-based system, EU policies have prioritized border security and externalization, effectively transforming BiH into a buffer zone. This approach, as Human Rights Watch (HRW) has argued, have reduced Bosnia-Herzegovina - as well as other countries situated in the Western Balkans - to a "dumping ground" and a "warehouse"³⁶ for migrants pushed back from EU territory, without providing the necessary institutional support for protection, integration, or legal redress. The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina thus reveals the contradictions at the heart of EU migration governance: while framed in terms of humanitarianism and capacity-building, the prevailing model in practice produces zones of abandonment, legal limbo, and systematic rights violations, sustained by a transnational apparatus that disperses responsibility while consolidating control.

³⁶ Reference here: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/26/bosnia-and-herzegovina-rights-detained-migrants-risk>

3.2 Entangled Efforts: Dynamics of Local and International Solidarity Initiatives.

As underscored in the previous section, since 2018 Bosnia and Herzegovina has increasingly assumed a pivotal role along the so-called Balkan migration route. In consequence, a range of solidarity initiatives, both local and transnational, have proliferated in response to the pressing needs of the thousands of individuals in transit who remain stranded within its territory. The sudden arrival of large numbers of migrants, mostly from Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, and Iraq, generated in 2017-2018 what many institutional actors quickly labelled a “crisis”. Yet before state or international responses were activated, solidarity was already being enacted, primarily by ordinary citizens in BiH, particularly in the north-western region of Una-Sana Canton, and later supplemented and, at times, complicated by the arrival of international volunteers and humanitarian NGOs.

The initial response by local residents in towns like Bihać and Velika Kladuša was marked by a strong sense of empathy, shaped by personal and collective memories of displacement during the 1992–1995 Bosnian War. Many Bosniaks, who constitute a majority in these areas, had themselves experienced exile, refugee camps, and forced migration in the recent past. This shared memory played a fundamental role in generating a form of “solidarity from below” (Feischmidt, 2020), rooted in an intimate understanding of the hardships of forced mobility. Hospitality was extended not merely as charity, but as a moral imperative informed by the values of mutual aid and Islamic ethics, as well as a communal memory of having once relied on the compassion of others. At the same time, this local solidarity unfolded within a broader context of skepticism towards international institutions and formal humanitarian actors. The memory of failed international interventions during the Yugoslav wars - most painfully, the inability of the UN to prevent the genocide at Srebrenica - has left deep scars, fostering a widespread and historically grounded distrust toward organizations perceived as foreign, bureaucratic, or detached from local realities. This skepticism has extended to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which assumed management of migrant reception in BiH from mid-2018, often implementing restrictive and securitized approaches beneath the surface of humanitarian rhetoric. The reception centers funded by the European Union and administered by the IOM were frequently situated in isolated locations, chronically overcrowded, and marked by low standards of care. Far from being experienced as sites of protection, they were regularly denounced by solidarity actors (residents, grassroots groups, and independent volunteers alike) as instruments of European externalization policy: spaces designed less to address the genuine needs of migrants than to manage, contain, and render invisible the human consequences of EU border governance. (Border Violence Monitoring Network, 2021)

Alongside local actors and in response to the deteriorating situation on the ground, a diverse and heterogeneous network of international volunteers, activists, and grassroots organizations - many originating from Central and Western Europe - became increasingly active in BiH, particularly in Bihać and Velika Kladuša. A significant number had prior experience in solidarity work in Greece or Serbia, and brought with them established repertoires of practice, knowledge, and values forged in earlier contexts of activism and volunteering along European border zones. Their involvement was often indispensable: providing food, medical care, legal advice, and crucial documentation of pushbacks and rights violations. Yet it was not (and has not since become) free of tensions. Over time, frictions emerged between international and local actors, rooted in divergent understandings of what solidarity means in practice, unequal power dynamics, and differing relationships with institutions. International actors were at times perceived as occupying a privileged position, setting agendas, controlling resources, and inadvertently reproducing the very hierarchies they claimed to critique. Some initiatives, despite positioning themselves in explicit opposition to formal NGOs and state-led humanitarian

frameworks, arrived in Bosnia without meaningfully engaging with the complex historical, social, and political fabric of the territory in which they were operating - a tension between political intent and situated practice that would prove difficult to resolve. As some scholars have argued, solidarity can risk becoming a form of “neo-humanitarian interventionism” when it fails to acknowledge its positionality and the layered histories of the places in which it intervenes (Tazzioli & Walters, 2019; (Rozakou, 2017). In BiH, this dynamic manifested in situations where international volunteers, motivated by a strong ethical commitment, nonetheless struggled to collaborate with local communities or underestimated the political sensitivities of a post-war society marked by ethnic divisions, economic precarity, and institutional fragmentation.

One of my interviewees, L., a Bosnian woman who has been actively involved in solidarity efforts with migrants, and beyond, since the onset of the so-called “crisis,” offered a particularly insightful account of the dynamics and challenges she has encountered over the years while working alongside various types of international organizations.

While talking L. identified two recurring dynamics that she finds particularly troubling, present not only in large NGOs, whose approach she described as far removed from her own, but at times within grassroots groups as well. The first is what she named the “white savior syndrome”: the implicit assumption, carried by many international actors, that local communities are ill-equipped to respond to the presence of migrants and therefore require external guidance and intervention. For L., this attitude is not merely patronizing but fundamentally disconnected from reality. In her view, Bosnian society responded to the situation with remarkable solidarity, a solidarity that, she insisted, is largely invisible in dominant media narratives. She recalled the aftermath of the Lipa camp fire as a telling example: while international coverage painted a picture of catastrophe and abandonment, she witnessed convoys of ordinary people arriving from Sarajevo, Tuzla, and other cities, their cars loaded with food and clothing. Migrants themselves, she noted, often remarked that they had received more help in Bosnia than anywhere else along the route, a stark contrast to the country's public image.

The second dynamic L. identified concerns the persistent failure of international actors to engage meaningfully with the local context. Bosnia, she emphasized, is not simply another transit country: it is a place with a deeply specific and often dysfunctional political system, shaped by a complex history that even its own inhabitants struggle to fully navigate. Yet international volunteers and organizations frequently arrive with little knowledge of this history or of how institutions (or fail to) function, and proceed to operate in ways they would never contemplate in their home countries. L. framed this as a form of implicit exceptionalism, a tendency to treat Bosnia as a space where normal rules of conduct and accountability do not apply. Her frustration was directed particularly at the pattern of short-term presence: actors who arrive for two or three weeks, intervene without adequate understanding, and depart, leaving local communities to manage the consequences of their actions.

Despite these tensions, the intersection of local and international solidarity also produced meaningful forms of cooperation. In some instances, joint actions and hybrid alliances were forged, blending local knowledge and transnational resources to confront the violence of borders and the failures of institutional responses. Projects such as food distribution networks, emergency shelters, and testimonies' documentation have often relied on this kind of situated collaboration, albeit under difficult conditions and constant pressure from local authorities.

Nevertheless, as migration governance in BiH became increasingly securitized, driven by EU pressure to “manage” the border, the space for solidarity steadily narrowed. Local authorities, particularly in

Una-Sana Canton, began to criminalize both migrants and those assisting them. In the years that followed, and especially in the wake of the Covid-19 period, evictions from squats, restrictions on movement, and police harassment became ever more frequent. Solidarity actors, both local and international, were targeted through surveillance, fines, and smear campaigns that cast them as threats to public order rather than respondents to humanitarian need. The work became increasingly difficult to sustain, particularly for local supporters, who faced not only the same pressures as their international counterparts but also graver institutional consequences within their own country. These developments are hardly isolated: they reflected, and continue to reflect, a broader European trend of criminalizing solidarity and closing down the space for civil society actors engaged in migration support. (Fekete, 2018).

In a context marked by institutional hostility, chronic neglect, and deepening securitization, solidarity efforts in BiH have nonetheless endured, as it will be better highlighted in the next section. Fragmented, under-resourced, and at times traversed by internal tensions, in the past years these practices have continued to provide vital care and support to migrants, adapting over time in scale, form, and modality in response to shifting pressures and closing spaces. What began in many cases as spontaneous acts of hospitality or emergency humanitarian response has, for some actors, evolved into longer-term commitments to documentation, legal accompaniment, and political advocacy, a trajectory that speaks to both the endurance and the transformation of solidarity under duress.

It can be said that the Bosnian case illuminates, with particular clarity, the complex entanglements that characterize solidarity work more broadly: between humanitarian action and sustained political engagement; between local histories and transnational mobilities; between informal practices of care and the larger regimes of migration governance within which they are embedded and against which they often push. It also lays bare the contradictions and power asymmetries that can emerge within solidarity itself, between international and local actors, between those who pass through and those who remain, between the urgency of immediate needs and the slower work of structural change.

3.3 Shrinking Spaces, Fragile Solidarities. Recent Developments of Bosnia-Herzegovina Borderland.

The fragmented and volatile context of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) illustrates how grassroots forms of solidarity can persist even within a deeply contested environment, shaped by political instability, institutional fragmentation, and the evolving dynamics of EU externalization policies. Despite a significant decrease in media attention and the progressive withdrawal of institutional actors, a range of local and transnational solidarity initiatives continues to provide support to migrants. Their presence not only fills the void left by the retreat of formal humanitarian interventions but also challenges dominant logics of migration management and control.

Overall in the past few years, international organizations such as the IOM and UNHCR have reduced or redirected their interventions, and many NGOs that had initially responded to the so-called “crisis” have ceased operations. This withdrawal has exposed the fragility of project-based humanitarianism and its dependence on media attention and donor visibility. In contrast, the groups and collectives that have remained, whether formally registered or informally organized, are demonstrating a different temporality and approach. Their work is not structured around short-term outcomes and projects or externally imposed metrics but grounded in the everyday realities of life at the margins.

During my months in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I had the opportunity to speak with and interview several local individuals who have been engaged in supporting migrants since 2018. In reflecting on the changes

between the period of 2018–2020 and the present, all of them emphasized the withdrawal of major humanitarian actors and highlighted the growing challenges faced by smaller organizations, both local and international, as they struggle to shoulder an increasingly disproportionate burden of support. Their perspectives reveal a nuanced understanding of the underlying dynamics shaping institutional support, the allocation of European funding, and the current state of things.

“Back in 2018 to 2020, when Bosnia became part of the route, so many organizations came, there was movement, attention. After Lipa burned in 2020, everyone rushed in to help. But many also caused damage because they came without understanding the context, without knowing how to work here. Now that the numbers fluctuate and there are no headlines, everyone has left. It’s just us, Collective Aid, and NNK in Bihać. People are still crossing, still in dangerous situations, still needing support, but barely anyone is here. That tells you something about the logic behind so-called humanitarian organizations.” (L_2441 27-06-24 BiH)

“Basically, after the first period of 2018-2020, that culminated with Lipa burning, everyone was talking about Bosnia and everyone was coming here. There were funds, also for small groups. This has ended... and what you can see now, who you meet as people supporting migrants, it’s just a bunch of groups and small organizations. And I believe that this is very bad, not to have stability, not to have continuity. You are less efficient and effective, also in a political way...” (F_2440 19-06-24 BiH)

Specifically, in Sarajevo, solidarity has been maintained through a constellation of actors whose work has focused on creating safe and welcoming spaces for transit migrants and refugees. Their approach - grounded in mutual trust, and long-term presence - contrasts with the often short-term and depersonalized interventions of larger international organizations. The longevity of such initiatives is partly attributable to their capacity to adapt: to shifts in the number of people transiting, to changes in public discourse, and to new administrative obstacles. These groups operate in a context marked by limited formal access to state support, fluctuating donor priorities, and the continual marginalization of migrant populations from the city’s public and social life.

Further north, in the Una-Sana Canton, particularly in the towns of Bihać and Velika Kladuša, the persistence of solidarity has taken on even more precarious forms. Following the informal closure of other Balkan transit corridors, this region became one of the most intense zones of transit and pushbacks at the EU’s doorstep. The local reception infrastructure quickly proved inadequate, while national authorities oscillated between neglect and securitization. In this context, local and international solidarity actors have played a critical role by maintaining a presence on the ground, distributing food and hygiene items, providing first aid, and systematically collecting testimonies of border violence. Their work often takes place under conditions of extreme limitation: mobility restrictions, surveillance, verbal and physical threats, and attempts to criminalize their presence.

The difficulty in carrying out solidarity activities is in fact closely tied to the ongoing criminalization faced by those engaged in such work. Across the country, individuals involved in supporting migrants routinely report being harassed by the police, threatened with legal consequences, or subjected to stigmatization in public discourse. This repression takes various forms (surveillance, bureaucratic hurdles, targeted raids on informal settlements, and restrictive regulations on when, where, and how assistance can be provided) all of which contribute to a broader strategy of deterrence aimed at weakening grassroots support networks.

These forms of intimidation and violence do not affect all solidarity actors equally. As noted earlier, a stark disparity emerges between local and international activists. Local actors are significantly more exposed to harassment and face far graver consequences for their involvement. As a Bosnian volunteer and activist clearly articulated:

“We live here. If the criminalization hits, it hits harder for us. Legally but also socially. International activist can leave at any time, and because of their passport they are kind of protected, the worst that can happen is a warrant to leave the country. We live here and must face all consequences.” (F_2440 19-06-24 BiH)

This testimony highlights how differences in legal status, mobility, and social embeddedness shape the impact of criminalization, reinforcing existing hierarchies even within solidarity movements. The unequal distribution of risk influences not only the actors' ability to act but also their strategies and responses to repression. Nevertheless, despite these persistent threats, practices of care, presence, and documentation endure, testament to a committed, even if fragile, infrastructure of solidarity that continues to adapt under pressure.

Further complicating the situation in the country are recent developments in migration governance linked to the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum and Bosnia's accession to the EU. In March 2024, nearly a decade after Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) submitted its application, the European Union agreed to begin accession talks with the country. Yet, EU leaders made clear that substantial progress on reforms, particularly in key governance areas, would be required before BiH could advance further in the process. One of the core conditions for launching negotiations was the strengthening of BiH's systems for border control, migration management, and asylum procedures. This requirement underscores how central the externalization of EU migration policy has become in shaping the enlargement process. The situation was well explained by T., a social worker from an organization active in Bosnia-Herzegovina since the post-war period and now actively engaged in providing support to migrants, especially inside the Lipa camp.

“And actually, it all happened pretty quickly. Since last year, the IOM has had to take a step back, and Bosnia and Herzegovina is now expected to take full responsibility for managing migration—kind of like what already happens in Serbia. The funds are still coming from the EU, but they're now supposed to be used directly by the government to handle migration. This shift was actually supposed to happen back in 2018, but it didn't—mostly for political reasons. Now, though, especially with Bosnia finally becoming an official EU candidate, there's more pressure to meet certain standards. And I think migration has kind of become one of the ways the country is trying to show that it's ready. (...)

What's happening now is this so-called “transition phase,” where IOM is handing things over to the Bosnian government. There's a lot of training involved, and quite a bit of money being invested to strengthen the system—not just for migration management inside the country, but also for border control. And that's a big shift, because Bosnia hasn't really been managing its borders, neither on entry nor exit. But if it's going to join the EU one day, it'll have to start doing that. So right now, there's this ongoing process of training and transferring responsibilities.” (T_2442 04-07-24 BiH)

Yet entering accession talks marks only the beginning of a protracted and uncertain journey toward membership, one that typically unfolds over years, if not decades, of demanded reform and conditional

alignment. Throughout this process, the EU retains considerable leverage, deploying the dual promise of eventual integration and access to pre-accession funds to press candidate countries like BiH into conformity with European migration agendas. In the field of migration governance, this produces a particularly asymmetrical dynamic: BiH is encouraged, if not effectively compelled, to function as a buffer state for EU border control, absorbing the human and political costs of containment while the Union itself remains largely insulated from the legal and moral consequences of rights violations occurring at its periphery, including systematic pushbacks and conditions that routinely endanger lives.

This dynamic has drawn sustained critical attention from scholars and observers, some of whom argue that the accession process may operate less as a genuine pathway to integration than as a refined instrument of external governance. From this perspective, countries like BiH risk becoming permanently suspended in a liminal pre-accession status, tasked with implementing EU migration and border enforcement policies in full, yet without the institutional oversight, democratic accountability, or legal protections that formal membership would, at least nominally, entail.³⁷ The result is a form of governance without representation: the responsibilities of the border are outsourced, while the rights and safeguards remain out of reach.

This trajectory is further consolidated by a newly announced agreement between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Frontex, the EU's border agency, which will permit the deployment of Frontex personnel to Bosnia's borders and airports. Framed by the European Commission as an effort to “step up cooperation on border management” with Western Balkan partners and to “prevent irregular border crossings and strengthen regional security,” the agreement signals a significant deepening of the EU's operational footprint in the region. In practice, however, it translates into a further and substantial securitization of Bosnia's borders: expanded patrols, a heightened police presence, and more systematic and technologically sophisticated surveillance infrastructure. These measures are expected to bear heavily not only on the mobility of migrants - rendering crossings even more dangerous and foreclosing routes that people have relied upon - but also on the capacity of solidarity actors to monitor, document, and respond to abuses in border areas that are likely to become increasingly restricted and opaque.

4. Situating Solidarity Along the Balkan Routes: What Remains, Who Endures.

The three cases examined in this chapter (Greece, Bulgaria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina) resist easy synthesis, they are distinct in their historical trajectories, institutional architectures, and political economies. Yet read comparatively, they illuminate something that no single case alone could reveal: the degree to which “grassroots solidarity” or “solidarity from below” is not merely a response to migration governance, but is itself produced, constrained, and sometimes deformed by that governance. The forms solidarity takes - its degree of organization, its spatial reach, its longevity - cannot be disentangled from the specific ways in which each of these countries has been positioned within the EU's border and asylum regime.

The most structurally determining feature across all three contexts is the EU's role as the primary architect of what might be called a graduated geography of containment. This geography is not simply territorial: it is institutional, financial, and legal. Through instruments such as the EU-Turkey Statement, the Dublin Regulation, the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund, and the operational mandates of Frontex, the European Union has constructed a system in which the costs,

³⁷ References here: <https://www.tni.org/files/2023-12/Repackaging%20Imperialism%20Report%202020.pdf>
<https://www.collectiveaidngo.org/blog/2024/7/1/the-new-eu-pact-on-migration-and-eu-border-externalisation-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-part-one>

risks, and moral weight of border enforcement are systematically displaced onto peripheral states and their civil societies. Whether as a formal EU member (Greece), a Schengen accession state (Bulgaria), or an EU candidate country compelled to demonstrate “readiness” through migration compliance (BiH), each of these countries functions as a node within a hierarchically ordered geography of deterrence. European funding has consistently and deliberately flowed toward coercive infrastructure (such as fences, surveillance technologies, biometric systems, detention facilities) rather than toward rights-based reception or integration. In each case, this funding architecture produces solidarity as a structural necessity: grassroots actors are not filling a neutral gap left by absent states, but are compensating for a gap deliberately engineered by a governance system that has chosen deterrence over protection as its organizing principle.

Crucially, this dynamic does not operate through absence or neglect alone. The EU is not simply failing to protect migrants; it is actively co-managing their exclusion. In Greece, the European Commission has continued to fund and politically legitimize border operations despite overwhelming documentation of illegal pushbacks, transforming complicity into policy. Frontex's operational presence - in the Aegean, along the Bulgarian-Turkish border, and increasingly at BiH's borders through the newly announced deployment agreement - places a European institutional actor directly within the machinery of violence, while its accountability mechanisms remain structurally insulated from effective oversight. In Bulgaria, EU financial support for border fencing, surveillance technology, and accelerated processing procedures has reinforced a governance model built on deterrence rather than protection, even as the European Commission nominally monitors rights compliance. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the delegation of reception management to the IOM - financed by EU emergency funds but operating without clear accountability to either Bosnian or European democratic institutions - has produced what might be called governance without responsibility: a model in which the EU shapes outcomes while distributing blame elsewhere. What emerges across all three cases is not a picture of European indifference, but of European investment, an active, financially sustained, institutionally organized investment in the architecture of exclusion.

A second convergence concerns the temporality of solidarity and its vulnerability to the rhythms of media attention and funding cycles, themselves partly shaped by how EU institutions and European governments frame and periodize “crises.” Greece in 2015–2016, Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2018–2020: each context experienced periods of intense international mobilization, followed by abrupt withdrawal as public and institutional interest faded. Yet the conditions that had generated those moments - the violence of pushbacks, the inadequacy of reception, the legal limbo of asylum - did not fade with the headlines. The notion of the “humanitarian spectacle,” which has been mobilized in previous scholarship to interpret precisely these border dynamics, retains its analytical purchase here as a framework for reading the longer arc of these processes: it points to a mechanism of both visibility and abandonment, through which suffering is rendered briefly legible before being restored to invisibility. Revisiting this framework across the three fieldwork sites illuminates how such a logic mirrors that of EU governance itself, which periodically acknowledges rights violations while structurally enabling them. Bulgaria, which has remained largely peripheral to international media coverage throughout, offers the clearest illustration of what solidarity looks like in the absence of this spectacle: thinner, more fragmented, disproportionately dependent on transnational actors who arrive carrying experience from previous “crisis” contexts, and therefore more exposed to the structural abandonment.

A third shared dimension concerns the relationship between historical memory and the forms solidarity takes. In Greece, the austerity crisis generated a pre-existing infrastructure of mutual aid and anti-systemic political mobilization that was subsequently extended toward migrants, with continuities and

tensions. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the memory of the 1992–1995 war constituted a cultural resource for empathy and solidarity, even as it also bred institutional skepticism toward international actors whose presence recalled the failures of earlier humanitarian interventions. In Bulgaria, the legacies of post-socialist authoritarianism, combined with the political instrumentalization of migration as a securitarian threat, have produced a civic landscape in which solidarity remains marginal, politically vulnerable, and largely absent from dominant public discourse. Historical memory is not simply a backdrop to solidarity: it is one of its conditions of possibility, and its absence (or its displacement by fear and nationalism) is one of the structural advantages the EU's deterrence agenda exploits in peripheral states where democratic oversight of border practices is weakest.

Furthermore, these convergences must not obscure the real differences in how criminalization operates across the three contexts, or the stark asymmetry between local and international solidarity actors that runs through each of them. Those with foreign passports face the threat of expulsion; those who live in the territory face the graver consequences of social stigmatization, legal persecution, and institutional marginalization within their own communities. This asymmetry is not incidental: it is reproduced by the same hierarchies of mobility and citizenship that structure the border regime itself, and it complicates any easy celebration of transnational solidarity as a counter-practice to European exclusion. What persists, across these differences and despite these pressures, is a set of practices that refuse reduction to either charitable humanitarianism or heroic resistance. The solidarity that endures along the Balkan routes is, above all, a practice of presence: of showing up, repeatedly, in spaces designed to render migrants invisible, of documenting what is not meant to be seen, of providing care that the state withholds. It is also, frequently, a practice of negotiation and of frictions, between local and international actors, between short-term urgency and long-term political commitment, between the ethical impulse to help and the structural realities that make help insufficient. These tensions are not incidental to solidarity work; they are produced by the very governance choices that set the terms under which solidarity must operate, choices that generate the conditions of precarity, criminalization, and institutional abandonment to which solidarity responds, even as solidarity explicitly positions itself in opposition to them.

5. Conclusion: Solidarity at the Margins of Europe. An Analytics of Endurance and Contestation.

The chapter has traced the emergence, transformation, and contested persistence of grassroots solidarity across three distinct sites along the Balkan migration routes. What emerges from the comparative analysis developed across this chapter resists easy summarization. The picture is neither a narrative of heroic civil society resistance against an oppressive border regime, nor a disenchanted account of solidarity's co-optation and exhaustion. It is something more nuanced, and analytically more productive than either of these framings allows: an account of practices that are genuinely significant in their challenge to border violence, while remaining marked by internal tensions, structural vulnerabilities, and unresolved contradictions.

The first analytical stake concerns the concept of solidarity itself. The practices encountered in Greece, Bulgaria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina resist a unified definition, ranging from spontaneous acts of hospitality rooted in shared memories of displacement, to organized political projects that explicitly challenge the structural conditions producing migrant precarity, to more ambiguous forms of aid that can exist in tension with - or even be absorbed into - the logics of migration management they nominally oppose. This heterogeneity is not a problem to be resolved but a theoretical resource: it demands that solidarity be approached not as a unified moral stance or political identity, but as a field of practice

whose meanings and effects are always situation-dependent, always contested, and always in relation to the power structures that surround and partly constitute it. As the Bosnian case in particular makes clear, solidarity can reproduce the hierarchies it claims to undo. Acknowledging this does not delegitimize solidarity; it demands a more reflective and situated account of what solidarity actually does in specific contexts.

A second set of analytical questions concerns the relationship between solidarity and the multiple, overlapping, often contradictory institutional actors (national governments, EU agencies, international humanitarian organizations, municipal authorities) that together constitute the governance environment within which solidarity operates. Across all three cases, this relationship emerges as neither simply oppositional nor straightforwardly complementary. In Greece, solidarity initiatives originally developed as counter-practices to state neglect, yet over time many were drawn into a degree of functional alignment with the reception system, generating significant political tensions within the solidarity field. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the space vacated by the IOM's gradual withdrawal was partly filled by grassroots actors, raising questions about whether such filling-in ultimately strengthens or normalizes a governance model built on delegation and disinvestment. The boundary between solidarity and governance is, in this sense, not a fixed line but a site of ongoing negotiation and mutual transformation.

A third dimension concerns the material conditions under which solidarity practices become possible, sustainable, or untenable. Consistently across all three contexts, the capacity of solidarity actors to maintain their work is structurally dependent on access to funding, legal recognition, and operational space. The withdrawal of international donors, the closure of legal registration pathways, the securitization of border areas, and the progressive criminalization of assistance all function as material constraints that actively shape what solidarity can be and do. And yet, crucially, these constraints have not succeeded in eliminating solidarity. They have reshaped it: driving it toward informality and invisibility, stripping it of organizational continuity, making it more dependent on individual resilience than on stable collective structures. That solidarity endures and adapts under these conditions is itself a significant finding, one that points to forms of political commitment, relational creativity, and collective care that resist easy suppression and continue to generate meaning and action even in the most adverse circumstances.

Finally, the chapter invites reflection on what solidarity's endurance tells us about the borders themselves. The border regimes documented here (in the Aegean, along the Bulgarian-Turkish frontier, on the approaches to Croatia through Bosnian forests) are not simply lines of territorial demarcation but technologies of differential inclusion and exclusion, producing hierarchically ordered categories of persons whose access to mobility, rights, and recognition is radically unequal. Solidarity practices, in contesting these hierarchies - imperfectly, partially, often at great cost - do not only provide immediate relief to those caught within them. They also make visible what the border regime is designed to render invisible: the violence that sustains it, the lives it endangers, the dignity it denies. The act of documentation, of recording pushbacks, of bearing witness to conditions in reception centers, of circulating testimonies across advocacy networks, is in this sense inseparable from the practice of solidarity itself, and one of its most consequential and enduring forms.

The chapters that follow will pursue these analytical threads into the everyday textures of solidarity work: the spaces in which it is enacted, the practices through which it is sustained, and the relations of trust, alliance, and conflict through which it takes shape. The goal is not to celebrate solidarity's persistence, nor to reduce it to its limitations, but to understand it, and, in doing so, to take seriously both what it already makes possible and what it continues, stubbornly and necessarily, to demand.

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Chapter 5

Inside Grassroots Solidarities. People, Spaces and Practices.

This chapter undertakes an in-depth analysis of grassroots solidarity practices in the contexts previously outlined, with a particular focus on the actors, spaces, and modalities of support that emerge in response to the violent conditions produced by the European border regime. It investigates the heterogeneous landscape of solidarity initiatives operating across different geographical settings - urban centers, transit zones, and border areas - emphasizing the diversity of actors involved and the socio-political dynamics that shape their trajectories. At the center of the analysis are collectives, grassroots organizations, and informal volunteer groups that have mobilized to support migrants, often in conditions of institutional neglect, legal ambiguity, violence and material precarity. These actors differ significantly in terms of their composition, longevity, and political orientation: some are the result of long-term activist engagement rooted in anti-racist, feminist, or anarchist politics; others emerged spontaneously in response to specific moments of intensified mobility or humanitarian crisis, such as the formalization and subsequent closure of the Balkan corridor in 2015–2016. Their development over time reflects broader shifts in migration governance, the securitization of borders, and the criminalization of solidarity, which have increasingly constrained the space for civil society engagement.

The chapter further explores how these initiatives operate differently across urban and border contexts. In urban areas, particularly in cities with long-standing migrant presences, solidarity practices often take shape around physical infrastructures, such as community centers, squats, and day shelters, thanks to the possibilities offered by the urban environment to create and sustain spaces where these activities can take place. These spaces function not only as hubs of material support but also as sites of relationality, where practices of hospitality, conviviality, and political subjectivation are cultivated. In contrast, solidarity practices in border zones - whether at the EU's southeastern frontier or along internal transit routes - tend to be more mobile, provisional, and improvisational. Here, the creation of safe spaces occurs under conditions of heightened surveillance and repression, necessitating inventive strategies to sustain support in hostile environments. Despite these differences, what unites these spaces is their role as forms of response to what has been described as “strategic abandonment”, the systematic withdrawal of state responsibility for migrant lives, often accompanied by direct forms of violence and deterrence. In this context, the reappropriation of space and the enactment of practical help and care assume a deeply political character, which foregrounds the embodied, affective, and relational dimensions of support, that will be explored in the next chapter.

The chapter also interrogates the practices that constitute these solidarities, with particular attention to acts of mutual aid, practical assistance, and everyday forms of care. These practices are shaped by the specific needs of migrants, the material and political constraints of the local context, and the ethical and political commitments of those who provide support. While the activities themselves (ranging from

food distribution and medical aid to legal accompaniment and emotional support) may appear straightforward, they are often imbued with complex and ambivalent meanings. In some cases, actors frame their engagement as explicitly political, positioning their work within broader struggles against borders and structural racism; in others, practices emerge from a more humanitarian or moral imperative, though the experience of repression and criminalization may gradually politicize even the most “apolitical” forms of help. By mapping these practices and the meanings attributed to them across different contexts, this chapter aims to illuminate the contingent, situated, and politically charged nature of grassroots solidarity as both a response to and a challenge against the exclusionary logic of contemporary border regimes.

1. Collectives, Groups, Organizations, People. The Heterogeneity of Solidarity Actors along the Balkan Routes.

Since the so-called “long summer of migration” in 2015 (Hess & Kasparek, 2017), a myriad of solidarity actors has been active in the countries situated along the Balkan Routes. Their presence has been particularly visible in border areas, transit zones, and urban centers where migrants gather temporarily, are left stranded with limited resources or find themselves blocked. The spectrum of actors involved in initiatives of support is extremely diverse, ranging from large humanitarian organizations to small grassroots initiatives, informal collectives, and individual volunteers. This heterogeneity reflects both the fragmented nature of European migration governance and the multiple ways in which civil society has sought to respond to the needs and rights of migrants in contexts often characterized by state neglect or outright hostility.

In the early phases of the corridor, mass mobilizations emerged in response to the sudden arrival of large numbers of people, often organized spontaneously by local communities. On the Greek islands of Lesbos, Chios, and Samos, for instance, local residents, tourists, and international volunteers offered food, clothes, and first aid to newly arrived migrants, often in the absence of formal humanitarian structures (Rozakou, 2016; Papataxiarchis, 2016). Similar dynamics unfolded in mainland Greece, where solidarity networks in Athens created spaces of accommodation and mutual support (Rakopoulos, 2015), and in Serbia, where the Belgrade barracks became a key site of intervention for volunteer groups assisting people stranded in precarious conditions (Davies & Isakjee, 2019). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly in the Una-Sana Canton, local activists and international volunteers attempted to compensate for the chronic insufficiency of state-run reception capacities, creating informal shelters and distributing basic necessities (RiVolti ai Balcani, 2021).

Alongside these grassroots initiatives, large humanitarian organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UNHCR, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and the Red Cross consolidated their role as central providers of services within official reception and assistance systems. Their interventions, often coordinated with national governments and funded by the European Union, have contributed to the institutionalization and professionalization of humanitarian assistance along the routes. According to a number of scholars, institutional humanitarianism has been the object of sustained critique, particularly for its bureaucratic, technocratic, and depoliticizing tendencies, which may dilute political claims and even risk reinforcing the very border regimes it ostensibly seeks to alleviate (Fassin, 2012; Tazzioli & Walters, 2019). Other authors, however, highlight how actors commonly described as “grassroots” articulate a markedly different orientation: one grounded in horizontality, mutual aid, and explicit resistance to border violence, framing their interventions as political engagement rather than as “humanitarian aid” (Picozza, 2017). Yet, as several contributions in the field point out, the divide between humanitarianism and solidarity, or between institutional and

grassroots actors, is far from straightforward. Practices often overlap, intersect, and mutually shape one another, suggesting that the dichotomy frequently invoked in the literature requires careful interrogation rather than being taken for granted.

Over time, the geography and composition of solidarity along the Balkan Routes have shifted in parallel with the changes in migratory paths and policy frameworks. As border regimes hardened and states developed more sophisticated technologies of deterrence and containment, spontaneous mass mobilizations subsided. What remained were more consolidated forms of solidarity, increasingly embedded in local infrastructures of support but also increasingly subject to surveillance and criminalization (Ataç et al., 2016). The current scenario is characterized by the presence of international volunteers and activists who engage with varying degrees of commitment: some long-term residents in border regions, integrating their activism with local political and social struggles, and others short-term participants, who spend a few weeks or months before moving on. These varying temporalities of engagement shape the practices, priorities, and sustainability of solidarity initiatives, producing a dynamic but often fragile ecosystem of support.

At present, grassroots solidarity actors consist mainly of collectives and small organizations, which differ considerably in their structure, resources, and political orientation. Some operate as registered NGOs, providing medical assistance, legal advice, or psychosocial support, thereby navigating a delicate balance between service provision and political critique. Others function as informal collectives, entirely volunteer-driven and reliant on donations, explicitly rejecting hierarchical organization and framing their actions as resistance to the European border regime (Stierl, 2019). Despite their heterogeneity, these actors share the common feature of operating in environments marked by criminalization, resource scarcity, and hostility from both state authorities and segments of the local population. Their resilience and persistence testify to the enduring presence of solidarity in the face of increasingly restrictive migration governance, even as they remain vulnerable to repression, volunteer fatigue, and the volatility of transnational activist networks.

The heterogeneity of solidarity actors along the Balkan Routes thus reflects broader ambivalences in the politics of migration: between humanitarianism and solidarity, between institutionalized assistance and grassroots resistance, between temporary mobilization and long-term commitment. As scholars have argued, solidarity is not merely the “other side” of humanitarianism, but a field of practices and imaginaries that often contests the very categories imposed by migration governance (Rozakou, 2017; Tazzioli and Walters 2019). This fragmented landscape underscores not only the complexity of civil society’s involvement in border struggles but also its central role in shaping the lived realities of migration in Southeast Europe.

1.1 Volunteers, Activists or Solidarians: Juxtapositions and Contaminations.

“Am I an activist? Or am I just a volunteer?” One of my informants asked me during fieldwork. “Because you know, all activists are *de facto* volunteers, but not all volunteers define themselves as activists.” This hesitation is not merely semantic. Rather, it reveals the difficulty of fitting grassroots solidarity practices along the Balkan Routes into stable analytical categories. The distinction between “activism” and “volunteering” is often mobilized by those involved as a way to negotiate visibility, responsibility, and political exposure, rather than to describe fundamentally different forms of engagement. For some, refusing the label of activists is a strategy to distance themselves from overtly political positioning, to avoid criminalization, or to preserve access to humanitarian spaces. For others, embracing activism signals an explicit critique of border regimes and a willingness to confront the

structural violence embedded in migration governance. Yet, in everyday practices, these distinctions tend to collapse. Acts framed as “mere” volunteering - distributing food, providing medical assistance, offering transportation, or sharing information - frequently acquire a political charge simply by taking place in spaces where mobility is illegalized and care itself is contested. Conversely, forms of activism often rely on mundane, repetitive, and affective labor commonly associated with humanitarian volunteering. What emerges, then, is not a clear-cut divide but a continuum of solidarity practices, shaped by legal constraints, moral economies, personal trajectories, and situational risks.

The distinction between these categories has been the object of sustained debate in the anthropological and sociological literature on migration and humanitarianism. In the aftermath of the so-called “long summer of migration” in Greece, Rozakou (2017) described a clear dichotomy between “volunteers” and “solidarians.” The latter term (from the Greek *allilengyos*, deriving from *allilengyi*, solidarity) was used to describe those supporting refugees outside state or NGO structures, in ways conceived as horizontal, reciprocal, and politically charged. Solidarians thus positioned themselves explicitly against institutional humanitarianism and charity, which they considered to reproduce hierarchical relations between “helpers” and “helped.” In contrast, volunteers were often characterized as motivated by humanitarian compassion, philanthropy, or altruism, yet lacking political convictions and reproducing the hierarchical logics of official aid.

This opposition, however, was never entirely stable. As scholars studying solidarity and humanitarianism have noted, these categories are permeable and historically contingent (Ticktin, 2011; Rakopoulos, 2015). Over time, the dichotomy between “volunteers” and “solidarians” has progressively blurred, both in Greece and along other parts of the Balkan Routes. One reason lies in the practical activities that solidarity groups have come to prioritize. Increasingly, their daily work has revolved around the distribution of food, clothing, and medicine, the provision of legal information, and other forms of practical assistance. These activities, while politically framed by many actors, are difficult to distinguish from the functions carried out by more conventional humanitarian organizations. Conversely, many volunteers who initially approached the field from an “apolitical” or charitable perspective found themselves politicized by their encounters with migrants’ lived realities of violence, border controls, and exclusion. As Papataxiarchis (2016) and Stierl (2019) argue, the very practice of being “there”, witnessing and responding to border violence, often transforms the moral orientations and political identities of those involved.

The result is a field of solidarity that is marked not by rigid categories but by juxtapositions and contaminations. Volunteers may adopt activist repertoires, such as engaging in public denunciations of pushbacks or supporting legal campaigns against border violence. Conversely, self-identified activists may find themselves spending most of their time coordinating distributions or administrative tasks that resemble humanitarian relief work. These “contaminations” challenge easy distinctions between humanitarianism and solidarity, between charity and politics. They reveal, as Tazzioli and Walters (2019) suggest, how solidarity practices exist in tension with, but also in proximity to, the logics of humanitarian government.

My fieldwork confirmed this complexity. Some of my interlocutors embodied paradigmatic versions of these positions. One volunteer I interviewed, who had originally come to the region for a few months to “help refugees,” quickly became disillusioned with official humanitarian organizations and began participating in grassroots actions, describing her trajectory as a “radicalizing experience.” Another informant, deeply embedded in activist networks and self-identified as a “solidarian,” nevertheless reflected critically on the fact that much of his daily work resembled “logistics management” rather

than political struggle. These narratives suggest that while the language of “volunteers”, “activist” and “solidarians” persists, the lived practices of individuals often exceed the conceptual clarity these labels imply.

The analytical challenge, therefore, lies not simply in tracing these categories, but in examining how they are enacted, negotiated, and unsettled through everyday practices. What actors do on the ground - organizing distributions, offering legal information, providing shelter, accompanying people on the move - often blurs the very lines that the labels “volunteering” and “solidarity” seem to imply. Rather than a fixed boundary, this distinction emerges as a shifting terrain of tensions, aspirations, and contradictions, shaped by broader dynamics such as the securitization of borders, the humanitarianization of migration management, and the criminalization of grassroots support. In this sense, the question posed by my informant, “*Am I an activist or a volunteer?*”, is not only an expression of personal uncertainty, but a reflection of the unstable terrain of civil society engagement in the context of Europe’s border regime.

1.2 Grassroots Solidarity Groups in Greece, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Bulgaria.

To grasp the complexity of solidarity practices along the Balkan Routes, my research focused primarily on grassroots actors, understood as collectives, associations, and networks that operate outside institutional humanitarian and state structures. As discussed in the previous sections, solidarity is not a monolithic category but rather a heterogeneous field of practices, imaginaries, and organizational forms. This heterogeneity is equally evident within grassroots environments themselves, where groups articulate their roles in diverse ways, ranging from humanitarian relief and social support to explicitly political projects that position solidarity as a counter-practice to the violence of borders.

In Greece, the landscape of grassroots solidarity is particularly rich, shaped by the legacy of the “long summer of migration” in 2015 and the subsequent years of austerity, precarity, and intensified border controls. My ethnographic research in Athens and Thessaloniki - conducted through personal contacts, voluntary involvement, and long-term participant observation - provided insight into the everyday practices and ethical dilemmas of groups and organizations such as One Bridge to Idomeni, Khora Collective, One Happy Family, and Wave Thessaloniki. Alongside these, I also regularly attended other collectives, assemblies, and informal initiatives whose activities were likewise oriented toward supporting people on the move. The initiatives at the center of this analysis operate as social centers, community hubs, or informal service providers, offering food distribution, legal support, language courses, medical assistance, and spaces of everyday conviviality. At the same time, in several cases, they embody a broader political and ethical orientation. Their practices do not merely seek to compensate for the shortcomings of state institutions or large international NGOs; rather, they are articulated through notions of hospitality, reciprocity, and an explicit challenge to the hierarchies that structure both humanitarian governance and dominant regimes of migration control (Rozakou 2016; Papataxiarchis 2016). Fieldwork revealed that many of the people engaged in these initiatives describe their involvement not only as a form of “help” but also as a commitment to shared struggle, a way of “being with” rather than “giving to.” At the same time, the urban context, where visibility and long-term engagement are central, has also pushed many of these initiatives toward a more professionalized mode of operating, with some groups gradually acquiring NGO status, securing stable funding, and standardizing their activities. As one member of an Athens-based collective admitted, “*We had to choose between remaining small and fragile, or professionalizing to survive.*” This process often dilutes explicit political contestation, privileging continuity and service provision over open confrontation with border policies.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, and particularly in the Una-Sana Canton, the conditions of solidarity are marked by a different set of constraints. The closure of borders further north and the entrenchment of the EU's externalization regime have transformed this region into one of the bottlenecks of the Balkan Route, where migrants are frequently subjected to pushbacks, systemic violence, and precarious living conditions in camps or informal settlements (RiVolti ai Balcani, 2021). Groups such as No Name Kitchen, Collective Aid, and Kompass 071 are among the few grassroots actors present in this difficult environment. Through my visits and interviews, I observed how they all oscillate between providing essential humanitarian assistance - food distribution, medical support, clothes - and engaging in practices of documentation and denunciation, particularly of border violence. Their everyday activities reveal the tensions of operating in a context where solidarity is increasingly criminalized, where volunteers are harassed by local authorities, and where the line between care and resistance becomes blurred (Stojić Mitrović & Vilenica, 2019) .

The situation in Bulgaria presents yet another configuration. Here, solidarity initiatives are fewer, more precarious, and more dispersed, reflecting the highly securitized and militarized character of the Bulgarian-Turkish border, one of the deadliest in Europe³⁸. Alongside Mission Wings, a local organization, both No Name Kitchen, the Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche and Medical Volunteers International have been active in sustaining humanitarian practices and bearing witness to the violence of border enforcement. My ethnographic encounters highlighted the fragility but also the resilience of such initiatives, where individuals and small groups, often isolated and under pressure, continue to mobilize resources and networks to provide support in conditions of invisibility.

In contrast to the situations and conditions of urban spaces, in border areas such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria, the conditions of solidarity are marked by a different set of constraints, which make the political nature of grassroots initiatives more evident and unavoidable. The closure of borders and the entrenchment of the EU's externalization regime have transformed regions like the Una-Sana Canton or the Bulgarian-Turkish frontier into bottlenecks of the Balkan Route, where people are frequently subjected to pushbacks, systemic violence, and precarious living conditions in camps or informal settlements (RiVolti ai Balcani 2021). Here, groups such as No Name Kitchen, Collective Aid, Kompass 071, Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche, and Mission Wings simultaneously provide essential support through food distribution, medical care, and clothing, and engage in practices of documentation and denunciation, thereby navigating the space between immediate assistance and political contestation.

This contrast underscores, what I called, the “spatially differentiated configurations of grassroots solidarity”. In urban centers such as Athens or Thessaloniki, solidarity initiatives have gradually moved toward forms of professionalization, often framed in terms of long-term support, integration, and service provision. By contrast, in border areas solidarity acquires a more explicitly political character, not only because the violence and material effects of the border regime are more immediately visible, but also because the criminalization of support itself renders even the most basic humanitarian gestures inherently contentious. In contexts such as Bihać or along the Bulgarian-Turkish border, offering water, food, or temporary shelter cannot be disentangled from resistance to border violence, as the act of care directly contests state strategies of containment, deterrence, and invisibilization of mobility (Tazzioli, 2020; Fassin, 2012). In these spaces, solidarity often articulates overtly anti-border positions, whereas in urban contexts it more frequently negotiates its survival within the logics of service provision and NGO-ization.

³⁸ Reference here: <https://www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/europes-nameless-dead/>

Across these diverse settings, what emerges is a constellation of solidarity formations that refuse to be captured by a single label. Some describe themselves as “non-profit organizations,” others as “political collectives,” while many deliberately situate themselves in the blurred terrain between activism and humanitarianism. Their members bring with them heterogeneous professional skills, political trajectories, and activist commitments, which shape practices that are at once pragmatic and imaginative. This multiplicity is not simply a matter of organizational form; it speaks to the flexibility and creativity that characterize solidarity as a social practice (Fassin, 2012; Tazzioli, 2020). Ethnographic engagement along the Balkan routes reveals that solidarity is not reducible to the provision of assistance but is also about constructing alternative forms of sociality, cultivating practices of resistance, and enacting a political stance grounded in the conviction of being “*against borders*” and “*with the people*.”

In the subsequent sections and chapters, I will undertake a more detailed examination of the spaces, practices, and interactions of the diverse solidarity actors I encountered. I have intentionally refrained from specifying precise actors, roles, or locations, given that many of these initiatives operate under conditions of ongoing criminalization and repression. From both an ethical and political perspective, safeguarding their anonymity is essential in order to prevent forms of exposure that might prove unnecessary or risk being instrumentalized for academic visibility. All photographs included have been shared with the informed consent of the individuals portrayed.

2. De-Bordering Through Spaces.

My fieldwork journey began in Greece, a country that, over the past decade, has stood at the frontline of European migration governance while simultaneously embodying one of the main gateways into the continent. Positioned as both a place of first arrival from Turkey and as an initial step along the so-called Balkan Route, Greece provided a critical vantage point from which to start observing the entanglement of mobility, borders, and solidarity. Within Greece, I decided to focus my observations in two urban contexts: Athens, which functions as a central hub of arrival, departure, and transit for many migrants; and Thessaloniki, a city whose proximity to the northern land border situates it strategically along the continuation of the route through North Macedonia, Serbia, and further into Central Europe. After Greece, I continued my fieldwork in Bulgaria, concentrating on the country’s southeastern region near the Turkish border, a crucial site for observing how externalized European border controls unfold. I later spent several months in Bosnia-Herzegovina, alternating between the capital, Sarajevo, and the border area of the Una Sana Canton, where the dynamics of containment, mobility, and pushbacks at the Croatian border play out most visibly.

As already explained, my fieldwork unfolded through a deep involvement in grassroots solidarity initiatives, where I participated as a volunteer and an activist. This position granted me close access to daily interactions, practices, and negotiations that might otherwise remain invisible. Through these engagements, I was able not only to collect empirical data but also to immerse myself in the relational fabric of solidarity networks, witnessing firsthand the frictions, contradictions, and creative strategies that emerge in contexts marked by precarity and exclusion.

Across all the contexts I explored, as already outlined in the previous chapters, the conditions endured by migrants in recent years have become increasingly challenging, exclusionary, and hostile. This hostility manifests itself in multiple and often subtle ways, one of which relates to space and spatial arrangements. Whether on the streets of Athens or in the forests of the Bosnian-Croatian borderlands, safe and dignified spaces for migrants are progressively shrinking. Public and institutional

environments tend to frame migrants not as individuals endowed with humanity and rights, but as security threats, administrative cases, or mere numbers within bureaucratic procedures. Through conversations, observations, and shared experiences, it became evident to me how these “spatialities of exclusion and hostility” pervade everyday life: they shape gestures, regulate movements, and inscribe borders into the most ordinary interactions. These bordering mechanisms not only produce material exclusion and precarity but also contribute to the reproduction of regimes of surveillance and control. In this sense, bordering is not only a matter of fences or checkpoints but, as Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013) remind us, a heterogeneous assemblage of practices that permeate the social fabric and continuously reconfigure the conditions of inclusion and exclusion. Such bordering mechanisms both materialize and reproduce precariousness, transforming urban and border landscapes into sites of surveillance and control.

What I found particularly significant across the diverse contexts at the center of my study, however, was the presence of counter-responses emerging from grassroots solidarity actors. Despite the heterogeneity of each local setting, a recurring pattern was the collective effort to carve out spaces that resist exclusion and hostility. Diverse groups, ranging from neighborhood initiatives in Athens to volunteer collectives in Bosnia-Herzegovina, sought to establish communal environments that are deliberately inclusive, egalitarian, and accessible. These spaces are not merely shelters or meeting points; they represent attempts to counteract the logics of inequality structuring border regimes. In doing so, they embody what Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1974) theorized as the capacity of space to be reinterpreted, reappropriated, and transformed into a locus of alternative social realities. They illustrate how, even in environments heavily saturated by exclusionary policies, spatial practices of solidarity can generate openings for dignity, recognition, and the imagination of different futures.

2.1 Solidarity Spaces in Urban Areas.

Focusing on urban contexts, it emerges that grassroots organizations tend to concentrate their activities around self-managed community spaces, sustained through the active participation of all those involved in their upkeep and everyday functioning. In contrast to the more visible and extensively documented cases of spatial reappropriation and occupation that have characterized migrant rights struggles - particularly in Greece (Cantat, 2021; Papatzani & Knappers, 2020) - these community centers are not framed as explicitly political projects. Rather, they operate primarily as venues for everyday activities and service provision. Yet, their political significance lies precisely in their capacity to cultivate spaces of encounter, exchange, and conviviality, where individuals can experience safety, recognition, and belonging. As Yuval-Davis (2006) reminds us, such practices of everyday interaction hold deep political resonance by fostering transversal engagement, mutual respect, and solidarity across difference.

Whether in Athens, Thessaloniki, or Sarajevo, my own research and solidarity work were closely intertwined with these community spaces. Referred to by volunteers and activists simply as “community centers,” they host a wide range of activities, including the distribution of food and basic necessities, language courses, cooking classes, and thematic workshops. In addition, they often provide legal assistance and healthcare support. While these practices do not explicitly articulate a critique of the structural violence shaping migrants’ lives in Greece and the Balkans, they embody a quiet yet profound form of resistance: the proposition of an alternative sociality and vision of community. By forging new alliances, enabling connections, and nurturing relationships, these spaces exemplify the latent transformative potential embedded in everyday solidaristic practices.

This becomes particularly evident in the dynamics underpinning the functioning of the community centers and social kitchens I encountered in Greece. As S., the coordinator of one Athens-based project, explained: *“We aim to create a safe space where everyone feels welcomed.”* Their space operates simultaneously as a hub for information, helping people navigate the city’s fragmented welfare and service landscape, and as a meeting ground for diverse organizations and informal groups. In doing so, it enhances not only the accessibility and efficiency of aid provision but also the strength and resilience of activist and volunteer networks. For others, the space simply offers warmth in winter, a place to drink hot tea, recharge a phone, or spend time in the company of others. Depending on participants’ interests, the space may also host informal language lessons, sewing or cooking workshops, IT labs, or recreational activities, thereby offering opportunities for creativity and personal expression.

The heterogeneity of these activities and their embeddedness in the everyday rhythms of urban life are captured well in the reflections of a volunteer I interviewed in Athens, who emphasized that the essence of these spaces lies less in the specific services they provide than in the forms of relationality they enable.

“I think the very beneficial part of the community center is that it combine so many different activities, so many different things, you know, that people can just come there and basically solve a lot of problems just under one roof.... like they can get aid with law, they can get aid with social problems with housing, with translation. They could have language courses and stuff like that and they could also eat and drink stuff and just hang out.” (M_2404 20-01-24 GR)

What emerges most distinctly from these accounts is that the significance of community centers extends far beyond the material assistance they provide. Their defining feature lies not in the distribution of food, clothing, or other essentials, but in the atmosphere of recognition and relationality that volunteers and participants collectively create. As one person volunteering in one of these spaces in Athens explained:

“It’s not just about the food, or the coffee, or the tea, or the clothes. It’s about the welcoming space, the personal greetings, the good relationships, and the respect we try to foster for everyone”. (B_2409 15-02-24 GR)

In this sense, the centers function not merely as sites of aid, but as spaces of sociability and belonging. Another volunteer emphasized how they serve as crucial meeting points in contexts marked by isolation and precarity:

“At the same time, it’s a place where people can meet others. Some people feel really lonely, so the community center becomes a social space where they can interact. Many don’t have that many people to talk to, so they can come and connect with others.” (M_2410 20-02-24 GR)

Also, in conversations with the people who use these spaces, it became clear that the value of the initiatives goes far beyond the material support provided. While food, clothing, or other necessities were undoubtedly important, many emphasized that the most meaningful aspect was the chance to simply be somewhere safe and calm, surrounded by others without the constant pressure of uncertainty. One person put it simply: *“I come here for the help they keep giving me, of course... but also here I met so many good people, I can stay quiet and calm, I can relax and have a chai.”* Moments like these, fleeting as they may be, offered a rare sense of normality and respite in a context otherwise defined by precarity,

violence, and waiting. The ability to sit, share a cup of tea, and just exist without immediate danger or bureaucratic pressure was described as deeply restorative, allowing people to reclaim a small measure of agency, dignity, and social connection amidst disorienting and often hostile environments.



Fig. 17 and 18. People playing UNO and chess in two of the community centers/social kitchens in Athens. Source: the author.

Beyond their everyday functions, community centers also acquire meaning as symbolic counter-spaces, positioned against the increasingly hostile climate surrounding migration in Europe. Volunteers often reflect on how these environments provide not only practical assistance but also a sense of dignity and recognition that contrasts sharply with the wider social and political atmosphere. As one participant articulated:

“Um, you know, just knowing this is a place where they can actually find support. And I think, especially with the current political climate in Europe - everything shifting more and more to the right, more anti-migration, anti-people on the move - it feels really important to have spaces like this. Spaces where people can see that not everyone in Europe is against them, that they’re respected here. And considered as people.” (T_2418 15-03-24 GR)

Similarly, in Sarajevo, since 2020 a collective of local volunteers and activists has managed a small day center that quickly became a crucial point of reference for migrants transiting in the city. Initially established to provide basic services (such as showers, laundry facilities, food distribution, and legal

assistance) the center assisted nearly 7,000 individuals in just the first six months of 2021. Over time, its physical and social infrastructure expanded: two additional showers were installed, and the “shop,” where migrants could access food and other essential items, was enlarged. These material improvements were accompanied by a qualitative transformation in the use and meaning of the space. What had begun as a service-oriented initiative gradually evolved into a setting more akin to a “community center,” with the addition of a shared “living room.” Here, people could pause to rest, drink tea, charge their phones, or engage in informal social activities such as playing board games.

As one of my informants - based in Sarajevo and embedded in an organization that has been working in the city since 2018 - made clear during our conversation, this dimension is inseparable from the work of meeting basic needs, and in many ways just as urgent: what solidarity actors are reaching for, even if they do not always name it as such, is the possibility of allowing people to simply exist for a moment outside the logic of emergency, to inhabit, however briefly and imperfectly, something that feels like ordinary life, in a setting that otherwise offers little respite from precarity and hostility.

“Then we managed to get some funding for renovations, which changed everything. Before that, one single shower for everyone, you can imagine the lines. And the space itself was tiny, barely functional. Working with so many people in those conditions was really tough. But after the reconstruction, everything opened up. Three showers now, and a communal area that actually feels welcoming, somewhere people can sit, breathe, have a coffee, play a game, pick up a book, play some music. It finally feels like what we had in mind from the beginning. A community center, in the real sense of the word. Somewhere people come together, not just a place you turn to in an emergency.” (L_2441 27-06-24 BiH)

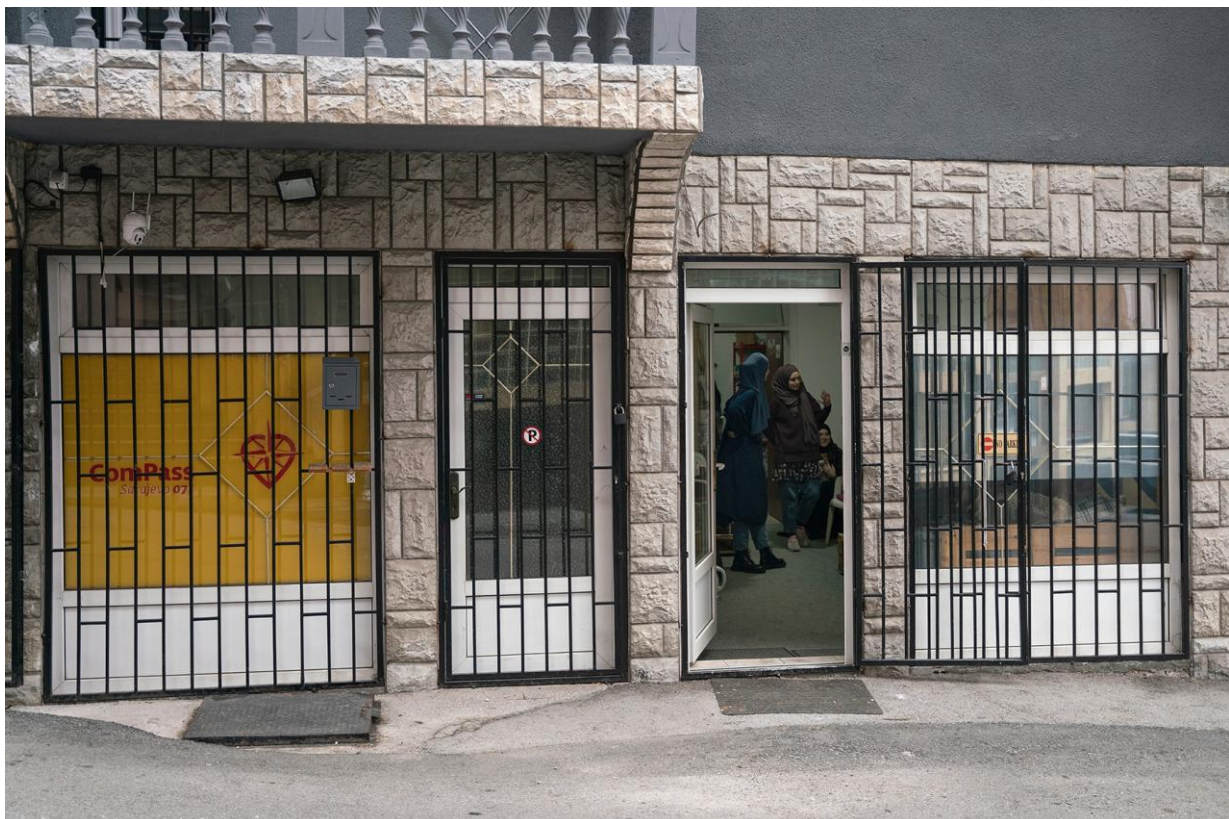




Fig. 19 and 20. Community Center in Sarajevo, from the outside and from the inside. Source: the author and Kompass 071

The conditions I observed within these community spaces, both through the activities that take place there and through conversations with participants, closely resonate with the concept of the “safe space” (Lewis et al., 2015). In her study of women’s safe spaces, Lewis argues that temporary relief from the routine threats and insecurities of everyday life enables personhood to flourish. Such spaces, she suggests, provide opportunities for individuals to engage, debate, interact, and learn in an environment where they can feel secure. Safety, in this sense, is not merely the absence of danger, but the presence of freedom: the freedom to “be oneself,” to speak and be heard, to learn, and to express emotions without fear (Lewis et al., 2015).

During my fieldwork, I observed similar dynamics across community centers and spaces that were not exclusively designated for women, yet were frequented by individuals from diverse backgrounds who nonetheless shared experiences of marginalization, criminalization, vulnerability, and exclusion. Many interlocutors explicitly described these centers as “safe spaces,” emphasizing their function as temporary sanctuaries from the pressures and uncertainties of everyday life. For instance, J., a Syrian man who regularly attended one of the community spaces I observed in Athens, reflected on its significance in these terms while casually chatting: *“So it’s kind of like... like a ‘safe space,’ where you can forget for like an hour about all the things that are happening in your life.”* His words capture the

essence of what these spaces represent for many participants: not merely physical shelters, but environments in which the weight of precarious legal status, economic hardship, and personal trauma could, even if briefly, be set aside. Building on Lewis's conceptualization, I suggest that the notion of safe space can be extended to these broader contexts, where protection and recognition are actively cultivated through collective practices of care and conviviality. In this sense, such spaces emerge as environments that, as Lewis (2015) underscores, nurture freedom, self-expression, and social connection, while simultaneously providing a counterpoint to the hostile and often violent settings that constrain the flourishing of personhood.

Another dimension that emerged from my observations concerns the ways in which these spaces deliberately center inclusivity, extending their practices to a wide range of marginalized communities. The present context of hostility, exclusion, and violence has been intensified over recent years by multiple crises - such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic downturn - which have profoundly shaped the activities and practices of mutual aid groups and social movements (Zajak et al., 2021). While these crises have exacerbated existing inequalities, they have also broadened the scope of grassroots organizations, fostering alliances among diverse collective identities and emphasizing solidarity with all marginalized groups. The emergence of intersecting inequalities and overlapping forms of marginalization has encouraged the organizations I encountered to connect people from heterogeneous backgrounds and to offer services that move beyond single-axis approaches and the deserving/undeserving dichotomy (Dean, 1996; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

In this sense, as processes of marginalization and exclusion have intensified, the grassroots initiatives central to my study have consciously broadened their scope and reach. While many of these projects were originally conceived with the specific aim of addressing the needs of migrant populations, over time they have increasingly become places accessed by people from a variety of social and economic backgrounds. As several interviewees pointed out, *"Here, everyone has access and is welcome. Also, many local Greek people in need often come here."* This openness has been described by some solidarity actors as a "transversal form of assistance," underlining a mode of support that is not limited to a particular legal or social category but instead directed toward anyone experiencing vulnerability. In practice, this approach not only challenges exclusionary logics that tend to separate "migrants" from "locals," but also fosters encounters and solidarities across different marginalized groups.

One informant explicitly linked this openness and inclusivity to the notion of safe space:

"I think the space is extremely important even though the building itself is not the most beautiful, even though we don't have loads of resources, the fact that there's a safe space for people to come where everybody knows that nobody's going to check the documents, no one's going to ask who they are. No one's going to ask what they're doing. Everyone is welcome. Um I think it is extremely, extremely important and, and in general, I haven't seen anyone disrespecting the space, let's say no, no one's graffiti, no one's hitting things. I mean, no, no one's leaving dirt all over the place. It, it seems to be very well respected." (S_2419 19-03-24 GR)

This dynamic was also apparent among groups engaged in food distribution. For example, P., a volunteer in Thessaloniki, emphasized that in recent years the number of Greek individuals accessing food services during the week often exceeded that of non-Greek individuals:

“What we do here began as a project to help migrant people stranded and homeless in this area. Now, however, we have expanded and understood that our focus must be all the people vulnerable to the system in which we live. As we always say... we serve undocumented people, as well as documented, and we do believe in equality between these two groups. We serve indiscriminately, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, and/or ability, and encourage close interpersonal exchanges to foster solidarity and contribute to the fight against injustice.” (T_2418 15-03-24 GR)

A similar trend was evident in Sarajevo, where community spaces have increasingly been used by local residents in need of laundry facilities, clothing, or simply a warm environment in which to gather. One activist stressed that their decision to remain open to everyone reflects a deliberate refusal of the deserving/undeserving logics that often characterize large humanitarian organizations:

“You know, here, also many locals come. It’s not just the migrants stuck here that suffer the cold, the inability to buy warm clothes or to wash them. This country is in a permanent crisis and also the local population is in difficult conditions. And of course, everyone can come here and ask for support. We don’t want to be like this big NGOs that only focus on a target population and if you don’t fit, then you are out, not worthy of help.” (L_2441 27-06-24 BiH)

By bringing together locals and newcomers, each occupying distinct social positions and carrying different identities, these grassroots spaces become arenas of encounter. They facilitate initiatives accessible to all, regardless of gender, nationality, religious beliefs, (in)ability, or sexual orientation, thereby fostering new connections and exchanges while cultivating shared struggles for basic rights (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Ataç et al., 2016).

As one participant expressed, this work of creating inclusive spaces is not simply about survival, but about imagining alternatives:

“Well, to provide community space. I would like to give people like this dignified access to the basic rights, but also to bring people together... and to bring people together and to socialize, to create a welcoming atmosphere for people who just arrived but also for those who are here for longer time, stuck here... I think the main group is still people on the move but it's also open for everyone who wants to visit and take the services. And yeah, I think it's also like a little bit like creating this, yeah. And in this capitalistic world also to create some other yeah, new forms of working together, new forms of coming together.” (M_2410 20-02-24 GR)

From the perspective of those who frequent these spaces, both migrants and local residents, I sought to understand how they experienced such heterogeneous environments. Many migrants recalled that, at first, it felt strange to see neighborhood residents sharing the social kitchen with them. They were not used to *“not being the only ones in need.”* Over time, however, their perception shifted. As one person explained, *“At first it was weird... but then you realize the state is abandoning both us and them, so you start to see things differently.”* The shared experience of precarity opened the door to unexpected connections, allowing people to recognize common struggles and experience moments of solidarity that transcended nationality or legal status. Local residents, in turn, also found meaning in these spaces. An older Greek woman described enjoying the presence of younger people speaking different languages: *“I might even learn a new language, at my age,”* she said with visible enthusiasm. For her, the social kitchen was not only a place to access food but also a site of exchange, curiosity, and playful learning, where encounters with difference became an opportunity for connection and mutual engagement.



Fig. 21. Entrance door of one of the community centers in Athens. Source: the author

The commitment to inclusivity was evident from the very threshold of one of the centers I frequented. A prominent sign at the entrance announces, *"Everyone is welcome."* While seemingly simple, this statement resonates deeply in a context where many of those frequenting the center had encountered persistent exclusion and hostility since their arrival in Europe. The sign thus serves not only as a message of openness but also as a symbolic counterpoint to the bordering practices and everyday acts of rejection that structured their lives.

Yet, as I was reminded in conversation with one of the coordinators, the ethos of inclusivity should coexist with the necessity of ensuring safety for all. As she underlined, *"When you provide free access to everyone, sometimes critical or extreme situations can arise."* Her words pointed to the challenges of sustaining openness in spaces marked by overlapping vulnerabilities, precarities, and tensions. To address these challenges, the center developed a set of protocols aimed at balancing access with protection, including specific measures to respond to situations of heightened risk.

In my fieldnotes, I reflected on this balancing act:

“I observed that in all these spaces there are some practical rules to avoid critical situations, in order to make everyone feel safe. Being open to everyone, these centers are attended by various people affected by different modes of marginalization. For this reason, some centers have organized specific services, targeting specific vulnerabilities, that can be activated when for example there are women or children in need.” (fieldnotes, 29-10-2023, Athens, Greece)

In practice, these measures took different forms. Volunteers and staff were trained in de-escalation techniques to handle conflicts, while designated areas with controlled access were set aside for women and children. These spaces did not merely provide physical safety; they also offered possibilities for care and growth, places where women could spend their days in security, where children were cared for, and where both groups could participate in activities and skill-building workshops. What might appear as small organizational arrangements were, in fact, central to the everyday reconfiguration of space, ensuring that inclusivity was not reduced to a rhetorical gesture but materialized through practices of protection and recognition.

As pointed earlier, these practices align with Lewis’s (2015) understanding of “safe spaces” as transformative environments that cultivate inclusivity, empowerment, and community cohesion. They demonstrate how spatial arrangements and everyday practices can be reimagined to generate belonging and provide support for marginalized populations. At the same time, they reflect an attentiveness to the complex, intersecting dimensions of identity and oppression discussed by Cho et al. (2013) and Dean (1996). In this way, such spaces not only extend a principle of openness to diverse individuals but also actively engage with the layered and multifaceted character of their lived experiences.

2.2 Solidarity Spaces in Border Zones.

The creation of spaces of encounter becomes particularly complex in the highly precarious contexts of Europe’s borderlands, where borders are also physically and materially enforced. During my fieldwork, I spent time in the border zone between Bulgaria and Turkey as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina along the frontier with Croatia. In both settings, the initiatives I observed and took part in went beyond the provision of urgently needed practical assistance in contexts marked by pervasive violence and uncertainty. They also sought to carve out spaces of encounter and relief, sites where migrants could experience, however fleetingly, moments of dignity, conviviality, and care.

The exclusion and hostility that characterizes urban areas is also unmistakable in these peripheral regions, albeit in different forms. As explained in the previous chapter, abandonment by state institutions manifest most visibly in the infrastructures of reception themselves and in the constant efforts made to make migrants invisible and criminalized: asylum-seekers are often left without basic necessities, while those in transit are always forced to hide in abandoned buildings forests and so-called “jungles” along the route. In Bulgaria, many find themselves stranded after crossing from Turkey, obliged to submit an asylum claim while living under the constant risk of pushbacks and deportation. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, people are repeatedly blocked by Croatian border police and stranded in limbo, unable to move forward. These conditions generate an atmosphere of permanent precarity in which nothing can be taken for granted. At the same time, the criminalization of solidarity is pervasive: in

Bosnia, local authorities at one point imposed a ban on food distribution by non-governmental groups, while in Bulgaria, even search-and-rescue operations were framed by institutions as smuggling.³⁹

Providing support in such environments is therefore fraught with difficulty. Yet, despite these constraints, grassroots solidarity actors have displayed and are displaying remarkable adaptability in their efforts to create safe and welcoming spaces, constantly changing and adapting their practices, places of actions, to the needs of the people and of the context. In the absence of the possibility to operate in formal and physical infrastructures, they rely on flexible and mobile forms of shelter and care, constantly adjusting to the shifting realities of the terrain. Here, safety and care are not guaranteed by institutional mechanisms but improvised through ephemeral presences and everyday gestures: a blanket spread out in a park, a van converted into a medical point, or a sheltered corner designated for women and children.

During my time in these regions, I frequently witnessed the creation and realization of such spaces and moments taking shape. Sometimes they appeared as small-scale distributions, a thermos of hot tea and a packet of biscuits shared outside a camp, children's games organized at the edge of a forest clearing, or dry clothes, shoes, and blankets offered to people soaked after days of walking in the rain. In other cases, more structured initiatives emerged: a car parked in a discreet location that served as a reference point for new arrivals; a van transformed into a mobile station providing medical support or simply a listening ear; a tent temporarily erected near a railway station that became a point of reference in a constantly shifting geography of transit. Each of these examples underscored how, even under the most unstable conditions, collective efforts sought to construct environments that were not only sites of survival but also of recognition, sociability, and human connection.

"Once again, I found myself within solidarity dynamics very much centered on seeking out and creating moments together, of sociality. Volunteers and activists tell me that it is practically impossible here to find physical spaces to rent or where activities can be organized—'like the community centers you find in Athens,' one of them tells me. I smile, because I know that many of them have passed through Greece over the years, bringing different forms of support there, and they surely came across many of the solidarity initiatives I also encountered. 'Here,' they say, 'you have to make do, you have to invent something.' Last month, since it was hot, we organized picnics by the river, with people living in the camp or with those stuck here while trying to play the game. This week we'll move a little closer to Lipa, there's a camp nearby and we'll have another picnic. Maybe some of the guys will bring food.' A few hours later, we are in the camp: some people have brought falafel, hummus, and bread, while we brought drinks, a guitar, and some board games. We spend the afternoon like this, eating, playing chess, and occasionally improvising short language lessons and exchanges: English-Arabic, Italian-Arabic." (fieldwork, 01-10-2024, Harmanli, Bulgaria)

³⁹ Reference here:

<https://nova.bg/news/view/2025/02/09/486838/%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B4%D1%8A%D1%80%D0%B6%D0%B0%D1%85%D0%B0-%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B8-%D0%B8-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%87%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%B8%D0%BC-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B4%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2%D1%8F%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%B5-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%BB%D1%86%D0%B8-%D0%BE%D1%82-%D0%BD%D0%BF%D0%BE/>

Alongside the convivial encounters created around food, other concrete initiatives further illustrate this politics of improvisation. Near the Lipa camp in Bosnia, for instance, grassroots groups and organizations organize informal “tea parties”: moments of sociability where activists and volunteers bring blankets, instruments, games, food, and tea to a field near the camp. These gatherings invite people stranded in the area to share an afternoon of encounter, exchange, and joy, offering not only bodily relief but also a fleeting sense of recognition and belonging. One of the volunteers I encountered there told me this about these spaces and moments:

“Here our activities are very wide. We focus on giving basic necessities that are denied to people on the move, constantly... we collect testimonies of border violence. But then we also have to create these spaces. Because... to have the space, I mean, even if it’s just a blanket in the field, in the park, and to stay there with people and hang out, having a moment where they can forget about the shit that is happening... it is very important.” (S_2445 04-07-24 BiH)

The migrants I spoke with frequently emphasized how much these moments mattered to them. Many described looking forward to these gatherings, valuing them not merely as opportunities for rest or refreshments, but as rare occasions that resembled a sense of normality. As one person explained during a tea party near Lipa, the experience of sitting together, sharing food, music, and conversation, “*felt like a small piece of life I used to know... like being part of something normal again.*” In my fieldnotes, several people on the move described these moments as a rare and meaningful break from the harsh realities of life at the border. Stranded in the camp, frustrated by the impossibility of continuing their journeys, and bearing the weight of past violence and ongoing uncertainty, they valued these small gatherings as an opportunity to feel a sense of normality. For a few hours, they could make choices, socialize, laugh, and be treated as full human beings rather than as mere recipients of aid. These moments, though fleeting, offered a vital sense of recognition, dignity, and connection amid the precarity and hostility that otherwise define their everyday existence.

In Bulgaria, mobile medical units operated by different collectives and international groups provide equally crucial forms of support in the Harmanli area, where people confined in the local reception center have access to only meagre food provisions and almost no medical assistance. To address these systemic neglects, volunteers set up improvised medical points in nearby parks or in discreet, hidden spaces where people could safely approach without fear of harassment.



Fig. 22. A moment during the mobile medical point in Harmanli park, Bulgaria. Source: Francesco Cibati.

During my time there, I also observed the creation of a women's safe space, designed for women and children living in precarious conditions in and around Harmanli. In an otherwise hostile and surveilled context, this space allowed women to gather, interact, and experience a sense of security and belonging that was systematically denied in institutional settings. While talking, knitting and drinking tea, R. a young girls who was participating told me: *"I'm very happy about this. Also my mother that in the last months was feeling very sad about our situation here in Bulgaria and she was not going out... Now she comes, and she is staying with the other women. It is good."* (fieldnotes, April 2024, Harmanli, Bulgaria). By carving out a temporary zone of safety, volunteers created the conditions for building trust and for addressing sensitive needs - such as access to menstrual products - that were otherwise silenced by stigma or by fear of exposure.

One of the volunteers involved in this project described it to me like this:

"At the beginning we thought no one would show up. We organized it saying 'women and children' can come, we will drink tea, eat biscuits, listen to music and do crochet. It is a space, a moment just for you. We found a nice spot in the park and sent the location to our contacts. So many people showed up and more and more in the weeks after, because it was something more solid and words of mouth works very well. It is such a simple thing but it makes such a big difference. In that space women were feeling more and more safe and at ease. So having managed to create a place where women can feel more or less safe... And then being able to distribute sanitary pads, that's important... before, every time a family or a woman wrote to us, we asked, "Do you need diapers or sanitary pads?" and they always said no. Instead, with the "women's space," I think we've found the right balance to be able to distribute them, yes. And

considering all the taboos surrounding this important issue, I think the fact that they felt comfortable enough to say “yes, okay” was very important.” (A_2429 29-05-24 BG)

This testimony illustrates how the very act of establishing a safe space, however provisional and fragile, was transformative: it enabled women to articulate needs that had previously remained unspoken, while fostering dignity, comfort, and collective resilience. When talking to them, all the participants to these moments were enthusiastic and happy to have a moment for them, outside the walls of the camp/reception center. In this sense, the creation of such spaces must be understood as a political intervention, one that contests the pervasive insecurity of border regimes by affirming the right to safety, privacy, and recognition in contexts where these are systematically denied.



Fig. 23. The women’s space organized by solidarity groups for the women and children living in the reception facility in Harmanli, Bulgaria. Source: the author.

Although modest in scale, these spaces and practices exemplify what scholars have described as “infrastructures of solidarity” (Rozakou, 2016; Papataxiarchis, 2016; Tazzioli & Walters, 2019): fragile yet resilient configurations of care and support that emerge in the interstices of state abandonment and repression. They challenge the pervasive precaritization of particular contexts and the hostility of their environments by carving out alternative modes of sociality and protection. Crucially, such infrastructures are not anchored in durable material frameworks or permanent physical structures; rather, they are sustained through the embodied presence, affective labour, and continuous commitment of those engaged in solidarity practices. In this regard, AbdouMaliq Simone’s (2004) notion of “people as infrastructure” becomes particularly illuminating. Here, the infrastructure of safety and care is constituted not by formal systems but by human interactions, networks of trust, and collective improvisation. It is precisely through these relational dynamics that conditions of recognition, dignity, and temporary security are made possible, even within settings defined by systemic neglect and violence.

2.3 Negotiating and Contesting Bordering Processes Through Spaces of Encounter.

Bringing together the different contexts and dynamics observed throughout my fieldwork, it becomes evident that the creation of solidarity spaces, whether in the form of urban community centers in Athens, Thessaloniki, and Sarajevo, or in the improvised and mobile infrastructures of support along the borders of Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina, constitutes a crucial counter-response to the exclusionary and violent logics of European migration governance. What links these initiatives, despite their heterogeneity, is their shared commitment to cultivating environments that stand in stark contrast to the spatialities of hostility and exclusion permeating everyday life for people on the move. If the bordering practices that I observed across Greece, Bulgaria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina manifest not only in fences, checkpoints, and police patrols but also in the subtle regulation of gestures, movements, and social relations, then the solidarity spaces I encountered can be read as an attempt to negotiate and contest these bordering mechanisms affecting these contexts. By transforming abandoned buildings into meeting places, by opening up community centers where conviviality is cultivated alongside the provision of food and basic necessities, or by improvising ephemeral safe zones in parks, forests, and borderlands, grassroots actors generate spaces where dignity, recognition, and belonging can be experienced, even if only temporarily.

In urban contexts, the community centers I became involved with highlighted the importance of everyday practices of sociability and recognition. While not always framed as explicitly political, their significance lies precisely in their capacity to foster transversal encounters across lines of difference, providing safe environments where migrants, volunteers, and locals alike can interact, support one another, and build relationships. Here, the meaning of “safe space” resonates strongly: not simply the absence of danger, but the presence of freedom, conviviality, and the possibility to “be oneself” in environments otherwise saturated with control, surveillance, and marginalization. These spaces materialize alternative forms of community that go beyond service provision and charity, affirming instead the value of relationality, mutual respect, and solidarity. They challenge the logic of deservingness that underpins much institutional humanitarianism by consciously remaining open to all marginalized groups, thus prefiguring transversal alliances.

On the other side, in border zones, where precarity is even more acute and where the material enforcement of borders is coupled with a growing criminalization of solidarity, the practices I observed were necessarily more fragile, mobile, and improvised. Yet, they were no less significant. Whether through mobile medical points set up in discreet locations in Bulgaria, “tea parties” and picnics organized near Bosnian camps, or the establishment of temporary women’s spaces for safety and care, these initiatives illustrate how infrastructures of solidarity can be generated even in conditions of systemic neglect and repression. What is at stake here is not simply survival but also the affirmation of recognition and dignity, the cultivation of conviviality, and the collective refusal to accept exclusion and abandonment as the only possible realities. These interventions, fragile in their material conditions yet resilient in their effects, can be understood through the analytical lens of what AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) conceptualized as “people as infrastructure”: relational assemblages sustained through embodied presence, affective labor, and forms of collective improvisation, which temporarily but decisively enable conditions of safety, belonging, and connection.

Across both urban and border settings, then, the solidarity spaces I encountered should not be understood merely as complementary forms of humanitarian relief or as temporary patches to structural violence and abandonment. Rather, they contest bordering mechanisms that continuously produce precarity and exclusion, carving out openings where alternative modes of living together can be

rehearsed. These spaces function as counter-sites to the exclusionary logics of state policy, not as incidental byproducts of humanitarian action, but as situated responses to the hostile environments produced by securitization, deterrence, and bureaucratic violence. Their fragility and impermanence should not be mistaken for insignificance; on the contrary, it is precisely because they emerge within contexts of hostility and precarity that they reveal the persistence of collective efforts to contest and reimagine the spatial and social orders imposed by border regimes. This reimagining, as recent scholarship has begun to theorize (Milan & Martini, 2024), carries a prefigurative charge. Drawing on Yates (2021), prefiguration denotes “*the future-oriented construction of political alternatives, or of attempts to reflect political goals or values in social movement processes*”, a practice that is at once imaginative and material, oriented toward an elsewhere while enacted in the present. Understood in these terms, the infrastructures of solidarity examined here do more than address immediate needs: they enact, in the texture of everyday practice, a different ordering of shared space, one in which care, recognition, and conviviality displace surveillance, exclusion, and control as its governing principles.

3. De-Bordering Through Practices.

Scholars and researchers have shown (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020; Fortarezza, 2023) that the consistent withdrawal of institutional responsibility for the welfare of migrants, who are often immobilized or trapped in specific transit and border zones, has not simply generated a vacuum of assistance but has actively shaped the conditions under which alternative forms of support and resistance emerge. Within these conditions, solidarity actors in diverse contexts along the migratory routes to Europe have developed practices that respond to both the immediate survival needs of migrants and the broader dynamics of exclusion and abandonment that define contemporary border regimes.

Focusing specifically on the Balkan Routes, my research highlights how these practices unfold in both urban transit hubs, such as Athens and Thessaloniki, and in border zones, including those between Turkey and Bulgaria or Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. In these settings, solidarity initiatives have increasingly taken the form of care and mutual aid rather than overtly contentious political mobilization or direct confrontation with state authorities. Their practices encompass a wide range of material and symbolic interventions: distributing food and non-food items (NFIs); conducting search and rescue operations; supplying firewood, clean water, and hot showers; establishing mobile clinics; and setting up information points that provide legal and medical assistance.

These forms of intervention constitute what might be understood as a counter-response to processes of “strategic abandonment” (Medel, 2017; Gilmore, 2007). The concept refers to the deliberate withdrawal of institutional responsibility for the well-being, safety, and survival of marginalized populations, particularly those subjected to racialized criminalization. In this perspective, abandonment is not a passive neglect but an active and political practice: states choose to withhold protection, framing the deprivation of rights and basic services as a legitimate mode of governance. Within this landscape, solidarity actors emerge as crucial agents who not only provide material relief but also contest, through their very practices, the dehumanizing logics that underpin Europe’s migration management regime.

Over the years, scholars have examined these practices, highlighting their political significance despite their often non-contentious appearance. They have been conceptualized in different ways: as “direct social actions” (Zamponi, 2017), “subversive humanitarianism” (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019), and “de-bordering solidarities” (Ambrosini, 2024). What these formulations share is an emphasis on the provision of immediate, concrete support to those in need (food, shelter, healthcare, companionship) through initiatives that take shape outside formal institutional frameworks. As Artero (2024) shows,

such “pro-migrant volunteering” in urban contexts frequently involves practices that resemble activism: organizing distributions, facilitating access to services, accompanying people through bureaucratic procedures, and cultivating everyday forms of inclusion. These activities, though framed as humanitarian or civic engagement, often exceed the boundaries of conventional volunteering and acquire a transformative potential. At the same time, research has shown that these practices, while not overtly confrontational, nonetheless carry an implicit political charge. They tend to erode and destabilize established institutional boundaries: between authorized and unauthorized forms of mobility, between legal and irregular migration, and between state-managed reception and the everyday practices of survival (Hajer & Ambrosini, 2020). In doing so, they challenge the categories and divisions through which migration governance is organized, opening up alternative spaces of solidarity and care.

From Greece to the borderlands of Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina, my fieldwork (grounded in long-term involvement in solidarity initiatives) enabled me to observe these practices from within. This insider perspective allowed for a comparative analysis of both the similarities and divergences across contexts: the specific forms that solidarity takes, the meanings attributed to these practices by those who enact them, and their significance in relation to broader dynamics of bordering, control, and abandonment that characterize European governance of migration.

3.1 Solidarity Practices in Urban Areas.

During my fieldwork in Athens, Thessaloniki, and Sarajevo, the main urban centers where I was based, I directly engaged with and observed a wide spectrum of solidarity practices. These practices were primarily oriented toward aid and care, concretely addressing the everyday needs of migrants as well as other marginalized groups often excluded from institutional welfare systems. While their material forms might resemble humanitarian provision, what distinguished these initiatives is the underlying approach: an emphasis on inclusivity, reciprocity, and mutuality. Solidarity work did not simply aim to meet unmet needs; rather, it reconfigured the very terms through which “care” is enacted. In contrast to paternalistic logics that reproduce hierarchical relations between “providers” and “recipients,” solidarity actors have developed practices frequently described as forms of mutual aid or “abolitionist care” (Medel, 2017). These practices sought to foster relations of mutual recognition and create conditions for shared agency.

Most of these initiatives unfold within the community centers and social spaces discussed in the preceding pages, sites that function not only as nodes of material assistance but as social, and in some cases political, infrastructures. As outlined above, the range of activities they sustain is broad: the distribution of cooked meals and dry food packages; the provision of clothing, hygiene products, and other basic necessities; the organization of recreational and educational activities; the establishment of information points; and access to legal or medical support. In some cases, volunteers also arrange laundry services and shower facilities. Such provisions may appear marginal at first glance, yet they carry considerable practical and symbolic weight in contexts defined by neglect and institutional abandonment. Even practices as seemingly mundane as personal hygiene prove consequential: they bear directly on physical well-being, on the capacity to sustain the journey, and on the ability to navigate everyday life under conditions of profound precarity, making visible, in the most ordinary gestures of care, what state structures have systematically withheld.

In Athens - a city that represents arrival, departure, transit, but also “stuckedness” - I observed the centrality of an information point established inside one of the community spaces where I spent time. This initiative had been developed by volunteers in response to the difficulties newly arrived people

face when navigating the complex web of services and organizations in the city. The info point operated as a kind of “living archive”: volunteers compiled and regularly updated information on available shelters, medical clinics, legal offices, and other solidarity groups, providing orientation to those in need. As one informant, who was active in such service, explained, the project emerged from “*a situation where in a big city like Athens there are a lot of groups, organizations, etc. helping, but also a lot of chaos so most of the times people don’t know where to ask or go.*” Another reflected on the structural difficulties of the context:

“I know, but I’d say it’s because there aren’t many services provided by the Greek state. And the state is making it really hard for people arriving here — there’s no housing, and some people don’t live in camps, so they don’t get food or basic support. A lot of the information that is available is really confusing, chaotic... it makes impossible to know where services are, where help is, what you should do to have your rights respected.” (M_2410 20-02-24 GR)

The orientation provided, however, runs deeper than technical assistance. Within this project, support is conceived as something fundamentally relational, not a service to be dispensed but a process to be built together, slowly, through sustained presence, shared problem-solving, and the kind of trust that only accumulates over time. What volunteers describe is less an intervention than an accompaniment: a deliberate refusal of the distancing logic that so often structures humanitarian encounters, and an insistence that the people they work with are not recipients but interlocutors. As one volunteer emphasized:

“But what we try to do is to work and build something together with these people. We try not to stop at ‘Okay, you’re hungry, I’ll give you some food; okay, you need legal support, I’ll give you a lawyer’s number...’ Instead, we try to create a path together. We collaborate. We try to find resources together... The key approach we always use is: we are not here to work for you. We are here to work with you—if you allow us, if you place your trust in us...” (M_2416 28-02-24 GR)

This orientation captures the broader approach of the initiative. As another volunteer put it, “*It is not about telling people what they should do, but about making sure they know what options exist, so they can decide for themselves.*” Such reflections underscore the intention to move beyond an assistentialist logic: rather than reproducing hierarchical relations of dependency, these practices aim to create conditions for agency and self-determination within a city that often presents itself as hostile and exclusionary. At the same time, in the messiness of everyday encounters, the distinction between assistential and non-assistential practices is never straightforward. Forms of support and forms of empowerment frequently intertwine, making it difficult in practice to draw a clear line between the two.

In Thessaloniki, which functions more prominently as a transit hub, solidarity is similarly structured around material provision but takes on a distinct form. Here, the daily preparation and distribution of cooked meals by one grassroots organization have become a focal point of solidarity. Volunteers gather each day to prepare large quantities of food, distributed in a community space where people congregate throughout the day and where other organizations also operate. Meals are mostly vegetarian and vegan, with attention given to ensuring variety and balance. Much of the produce comes from local farmers’ markets, which donate unsold items to avoid waste. Importantly, attention to dietary requirements, acknowledging religious practices, cultural preferences, and health need, constituted an explicit dimension of care that distinguished this practice from standard humanitarian food distribution.

Yet the significance of this practice, as those involved were keen to articulate, extends beyond the nutritional. During one of my visits to the space, a long-standing volunteer paused mid-conversation to reflect on what it actually means to feed strangers and on the quietly subversive charge of that gesture:

“You’re changing the network of support just by giving food to people you don’t know, or providing medical support to people you don’t know. In the system we have now, if you need food, you’d rely on a service you pay for, or on a family network, or maybe friends. So by opening this sort of social kitchens and giving out food, you’re bypassing those networks — you’re subverting them. And that’s political, because you’re questioning all those systems: capitalism, how it works, even family networks. In a capitalist system, nuclear families and those networks are part of keeping capitalism and individualism in place. So giving out food for free subverts all of that.” (M_2410 20-02-24 GR)



Fig. 24. A moment after the distribution of food in a community space in Thessaloniki. Source: the author.

I was present during Ramadan, when the preparation and distribution of meals were adapted to the rhythm of iftar, the evening meal breaking the fast. While in other months meals are normally served around 3pm, during Ramadan a second distribution took place after sunset, including specific foods customarily consumed when breaking the fast. This adjustment not only addressed immediate nutritional needs but also acknowledged the cultural and religious significance of food, transforming what might otherwise have been a routine distribution into a moment of recognition and community. It underscored how solidarity is enacted not only through material provision but also through attentiveness to the symbolic and relational dimensions of care.

Alongside food distribution, the center offers a fuller infrastructure of everyday support. Laundry facilities and showers are available to those passing through; an information desk provides access to legal counseling; a medical point attends to health needs. Taken together, these provisions reconstitute, however partially, the texture of an ordinary day, the small, unremarkable rituals of bodily care and practical orientation that most people move through without a second thought, but which, for those navigating displacement and exclusion, have become inaccessible or contingent. It is precisely this ordinariness that carries weight here. During one of my visits, a volunteer who had been with the organization for several years sat with me for a while after the lunch distribution had wound down.

Unprompted, she began to reflect on what it means to offer something as simple as a shower or a charged phone and on the kind of statement that makes, in a context where such things cannot be taken for granted:

“I think the fact of, like, providing showers, laundry, food, clothes... like washing stuff, um, also a social environment, and even a phone charging service—I think all of these things basically show something. Like, this is what everybody kind of takes for granted in their daily lives. You know, most people, privileged people like me and you, they wake up with their phone charged, with a shower available, with clean clothes, all of that. But a lot of people here just don’t have those things. So, yeah, I think it’s about respect, about humanizing people, and giving them the tools to feel a bit more respected in a context where, honestly, there’s absolutely no respect for them whatsoever.” (T_2418 15-03-24 GR)

A further example of grassroots solidarity taking a distinctive form was evident in Sarajevo, where volunteers organized what they called a “free shop”. Although focused on distributing clothing and other necessities, the initiative deliberately avoided the format of a handout line. Instead, the space was arranged to resemble a shop: shelves were neatly organized, items displayed for browsing, and volunteers available to answer questions. People could enter, look around, and choose according to their preferences.



Fig. 25 The free-shop in Sarajevo, organized as an actual shop where people can choose what to take. Source: Kompass 07.

My fieldnotes describe it as such:

“The free shop is conceived as a place where the dignity of choice can be reclaimed. Unlike conventional aid distributions, there are no pre-packaged bundles of clothes, objects, or food; there are no bags filled at random with the idea that “since they are in need, they will accept anything.” Instead, people are welcomed into a space where they can look around, take their time, and decide for themselves what they need or prefer. They might pause in front of a shelf to choose a t-shirt in their size, compare a couple of pairs of trousers, or pick out socks for their children. On another table they may find hygiene products like shampoo, soap, sanitary pads, or move over to the food section to select the type of rice or pasta they like best. What could appear as small and ordinary gestures take on a different weight here: it’s like it reintroduce a sense of autonomy and normality into lives often marked by constraint and scarcity.”
(fieldnotes, 08-05-2024, Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina)

One of the people I met there elaborated: *“It’s about dignity. People shouldn’t have to stand in a line to be given whatever we decide. They should be able to choose, like anyone else.”* This simple shift fundamentally altered the interaction, recognizing those who entered not as passive recipients of aid but as individuals exercising choice. In doing so, the free shop resists the depersonalizing and disciplinary features often associated with humanitarian distribution, creating a space where people are treated as active participants rather than objects of charity. By emphasizing autonomy, mutual respect, and relational engagement, it transforms what might otherwise be a transactional encounter into a practice of solidarity that affirms both needs and agency.

Across these experiences, what becomes most striking is that the significance of these initiatives lies less in the specific actions performed and more in the relationality and intentionality behind them. Often, the spaces and activities themselves - whether distributing food, clothes, or other necessities- become an excuse to inhabit certain urban environments and encounter others, where the defining difference is not what is offered but how it is offered. As one informant put it, it is *“not about what you do, but how you do it.”*

Another participant I interviewed in Sarajevo highlighted how such initiatives often create opportunities for sociability: distributions transform into occasions to sit, share tea, and converse, moments that foster connection beyond material aid.

“It’s like everything is going so bad and then at some point it seems like the only way... I mean, the way of these people that are forced into these situations is like offering tea, some food, maybe a shower... a space of relief, playing cards and being listened to, having a moment of... I really love random joy... I really love when we have all these people coming here and just hanging out and playing cards... they’re not even coming for the clothes... so many people are just coming to hang out, and that makes me really happy that we’ve been able to provide this kind of nice safe space where they can just chill, play cards, and have some lemonade or tea.”
(M_2439 25-06-24 BiH)

These urban solidarity practices can thus be understood not merely as acts of assistance, but as relational interventions that enact subtle forms of resistance to institutionalized hierarchies and exclusions. They resonate with the notion of “direct social actions” (Zamponi, 2017), which highlights how small-scale, intentional acts of support can carry political significance, and with Ambrosini’s concept of “de-bordering solidarities” (Ambrosini, 2022), which emphasizes how solidarity practices can challenge the

rigid boundaries imposed by migration governance. Through care, conviviality, and shared presence, these initiatives produce spaces where normative rules and institutional constraints are quietly questioned, creating opportunities for social connection and collective empowerment that extend far beyond the immediate provision of aid.

3.2 Solidarity Practices in Border Zones.

As already mentioned, the situation of border areas is different in many respects but still part of the overall dynamics characterizing the border and migration regime of the European Union. Here, the bordering mechanisms express themselves not only through explicit and physical manifestations of control, but also through more subtle forms of exclusion and abandonment. These are spaces where the EU's migration governance materializes in its most tangible form: in fences, patrols, pushbacks, and the bureaucratic filtering of mobility. Yet they are also zones of absence, where state institutions retreat from any responsibility to provide for those stranded in liminal spaces, leaving instead a void that grassroots solidarity practices attempt to fill.

In these contexts, the practices of grassroots solidarity actors are marked by a flexibility that is both necessary and precarious. Their actions are deeply influenced by the dynamics embedded in migration governance: policies characterized by randomness, discretionality, and an ever-changing nature. Just as the routes and trajectories of people on the move are constantly reshaped by shifting controls, violence, and exclusionary logics, solidarity practices, too, are compelled to adapt to the changing environment. Between 2023 and 2025 I returned several times to the sites at the center of my research, and I was able to observe how, in just a few years, practices and dynamics had significantly transformed, both on the side of solidarity actors and in the approaches of institutions and police forces.

Grassroots solidarity in border areas is not built once and left to stand, it is remade, continuously, in response to the shifting needs of people stranded or in transit. What emerges from sustained fieldwork in these zones is less a stable repertoire of practices than an ongoing negotiation: between organizations and the people they accompany, between what is planned and what the moment demands, between the logics of institutional response and the irreducible particularity of individual circumstances. Along the border between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina - particularly in the Una Sana canton - and along the crossing between Bulgaria and Turkey, this quality of restless adaptation was unmistakable. Solidarity practices here were not handed down from above or fixed in advance; they were continuously reshaped through dialogue, presence, and attentiveness to what people themselves identified as urgent. This refusal to impose pre-defined forms of help - to arrive with answers before the questions had been asked - was something solidarity actors returned to repeatedly in conversation, as though it were not merely a methodological choice but a kind of ethical commitment. As one informant explained:

"We do what is needed to do. What people told us they need. It is important, not to come here with the presumption to know what people need. So we always try to have a constant communication, to meet, ask and listen. Two months ago for example there were more people passing to do the game, the weather was shit, so we were distributing a lot of dry clothes, k-ways... now it's more about other necessities, like hygiene kits. Many that are living in the camp are telling us they are not receiving food, so we are trying to organize also something related to that... of course, it will be never enough, but we try." (T_2431 10-05-24 BG)

This extract highlights the centrality of responsiveness and listening in solidarity practices, a methodological humility that contrasts sharply with the top-down imposition of needs often inherent in

other interventions (Fassin 2012; Ticktin, 2011). The grassroots actors' insistence on "not coming with the presumption to know what people need" can be read as both a critique of humanitarian paternalism and as a political stance that recognizes the agency of people on the move. In this sense, solidarity is not merely the distribution of material aid, but the enactment of a different relationality, one based on mutual recognition and an ongoing dialogue that reshapes the practices themselves. The words of this activist also reveal several key aspects of solidarity in borderlands. First, solidarity practices are not fixed repertoires but shifting assemblages, oriented toward immediate needs and contingent circumstances. The distribution of dry clothes during a rainy season, or the organization of food provision when state camps reduce supplies, reflects an ethic of improvisation, or what Papataxiarchis (2016) has described as a "solidarity-in-action," which constantly recalibrates its modalities in relation to a hostile environment.

Ethnographic observations across different sites reveal, however, that this adaptability reaches well beyond the calibration of material provisions, beyond decisions about what to pack in a distribution bag or how many meals to prepare. What solidarity actors are navigating, at every turn, is the unpredictability of border violence itself: the shifting thresholds of police tolerance, the sudden enforcement of regulations that had previously gone unapplied, the ever-present risk of criminalization that hangs over volunteers and people on the move alike. In Bihać and the surrounding area, this precariousness was palpable. The legal landscape governing solidarity work in Bosnia-Herzegovina is deeply ambiguous, a post-Covid regulation formally prohibits the provision of assistance to migrants outside the official camp system, yet enforcement has never been consistent or predictable. What exists in practice is not legality but a kind of negotiated semi-legality, a fragile and unwritten equilibrium between organizations and local authorities that can hold for weeks or months and then, without warning, collapse. Volunteers learn where the line is, as one of my interlocutors put it with quiet precision, only when they have already crossed it:

"Eh, for me it was interesting to see how, over the course of three months, there was a kind of evolution in our approach to distributions. Because, I mean, at the beginning, when I first arrived... I believe it was early April... letters of expulsion had just been issued to three volunteers, who had been stopped by the Bosnian police during a distribution. So the system shifted from what it was before, which was hand-to-hand, right? I mean direct delivery of bags with food, clothes, basic necessities... to another system. Basically, a location and time were shared in the chat, and we would leave the bags around the city. We sent a photo, but there was no direct encounter between us and the people. Then, little by little, as time went on, we managed to return to hand-to-hand delivery. This is because, well, in Bosnia you always work in a kind of semi-legality. After Covid, they passed a regulation that made it illegal to provide assistance to migrants outside the camp system. But, let's say, a sort of balance is created with the police or local authorities: if you don't attract too much attention and don't bother anyone, in the end they let you do it. The thing is, this balance isn't written anywhere... and you only realize where the line is when you cross it." (K_2448 29-07-24 BiH)

The constant change in practices mirrors the instability and precarity of the border regime itself: when pushbacks intensify, people require medical assistance and shelter; when camps reduce services, food and basic items become urgent. Solidarity actors thus find themselves in a permanent state of improvisation, caught in the tension between systemic insufficiency and the pressing, embodied needs of those at the border.

Looking more specifically at the two border zones I observed during my fieldwork - Bosnia and Herzegovina on the one side, and Bulgaria on the other - it becomes evident how the local specificities of context shape both the needs of migrants transiting or stranded there and the practices of solidarity that emerge in response.

In Una-Sana Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina, many of the people stranded are there in order to attempt the “game” - the term used by migrants themselves, with some irony and bitterness, to describe the repeated, risky, and often violent attempts to cross the borders to reach the European Union’s countries. The “game” encapsulates not only the act of crossing but also the uncertainty, exhaustion, and exposure to police brutality that accompany it. Those who are pushed back are left without food and water, often deprived and stolen of their clothes, telephones, shoes, forced to live in makeshift shelters, squats, or abandoned buildings, or else to survive in the surrounding forests. Against this backdrop, local volunteers and activists organize distributions of food, clothing, and essential items that are carefully adapted to the season, the terrain, and the individual needs of those in transit. As one activist explained:

“The things we do every day include distribution, where we’re in contact with the MTT messenger system. The goal is to bring people the things they really need in the most personal way possible. So, clothes, underwear, sleeping bags, socks, shoes. When it’s hot, like now, we also provide hygiene products or water, especially now when it’s super hot, to support people living in difficult conditions. We try to provide some hygiene products, which I think are super necessary, and offer support to those who have been pushed back and have to sleep in these squats near the border.” (M_2446 04-07-24 BiH)

Distributions in this sense are not generic charitable gestures but practices that sustain mobility and resilience. Volunteers provide not only food but also items that are materially indispensable for the continuation of the journey: backpacks, sleeping bags, shoes, and hygiene products that help prevent illness or injury. In this way, solidarity practices are intimately tied to the rhythms of the “game”, enabling people to recover from pushbacks and to reattempt crossing. One particularly significant initiative is the provision of portable showers, designed to address the acute lack of hygiene in the living conditions of those forced to stay outside formal camps. As another volunteer explained:

“Another part of what we do is about showers. Hygiene is honestly one of the biggest problems people face on their way to Europe. If they’re not in camps — where they’re basically confined and have no independence — then they’re out in the bush, sleeping in the open air, or in abandoned, crumbling houses. A few years ago, thanks to the idea of another collective, we started bringing portable showers to the places where people are staying. That way, they can at least have a hot shower and maintain a minimum of hygiene wherever they find refuge. The system is pretty simple: it uses a gas cylinder to heat the water, there’s a little pump, and it’s easy to carry around. And, you know, sometimes something as simple as a shower makes a huge difference. It can actually prevent physical issues that might stop someone from continuing their journey. During the showers, we also do anti-scabies treatments. Because if a scabies wound isn’t treated, it gets infected, and then it can seriously affect someone’s overall health and their ability to move on.” (M_2446 04-07-24 BiH)



Fig. 26. The waiting line to have a shower in the forest in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Source: the author.

The portable showers exemplify how solidarity practices are attuned to the specific challenges of life in transit. Hygiene here is not framed merely as a matter of dignity or comfort but as an essential condition for survival and for the capacity to continue moving. Grassroots actors thus enable people to regain a minimum of control over their journey. These practices show how seemingly “simple” acts of care - food distributions, clothing provision, showers - become constitutive of dynamics that deconstruct the border by sustaining mobility against state efforts to block it.

In Bulgaria, on the other side, the specificity of the context is shaped by its membership in the European Union and the operation of the Dublin III Regulation, which makes the state formally responsible for examining asylum claims lodged upon first entry into the EU. As a consequence, many people on the move have found themselves in these past years compelled to apply for asylum in Bulgaria, despite not intending to remain there. Once registered, however, they are confronted with the near-total absence of integration policies and the institutional neglect of basic needs such as food, clothing, and healthcare. For this reason, many grassroots solidarity initiatives are focused on distributing essential items and providing medical assistance that the state systematically fails to ensure. But, as one activist underlined, also here such distributions are *“not just about food. It’s also about meeting people, building trust, and creating a moment where they can step outside the structure of the camp and experience different forms of sociality, instead of just the daily brutality of the camp.”* (Q_2450 07-11-24 BG)

At the same time, the Bulgarian-Turkish border has become an increasingly militarized landscape, one defined by intensified surveillance, dense patrols, and a near-systematic resort to pushbacks. For those attempting to cross, the forest that stretches along this frontier is not merely a physical obstacle but a

zone of acute vulnerability: people are left stranded for days, exposed to dehydration, hunger, and injury, with little prospect of assistance from state actors and every likelihood of violent expulsion if encountered by border police. It is into this space that collaborative networks of groups and collectives have moved, developing search and rescue practices oriented toward reaching people in life-threatening situations, responding to distress calls, and interrupting, where possible, the machinery of pushback. The work is understood by those who carry it out as simultaneously humanitarian and political, a distinction that, in practice, dissolves entirely. As one volunteer explained:

“For me, there are mainly two areas of activity. And, well, I think they’re very connected ... like, you really can’t do one without doing the other, they’re totally intertwined. So, the first area of activity is distributions. That’s probably what takes up the most time and money. Basically, it means getting close to the camp, meeting people, and trying to support them both socially and materially. The main part is food distribution, but it’s not just about food. And then there are the rescues - and everything that goes along with them. We call it “rescues,” which is kind of a humanitarian term, but I think we all agree it’s not just humanitarian. It’s also about preventing pushbacks and, in the end, making the borders fail, even if only at a very small scale.” (Q_2450 07-11-24 BG)





Fig. 27 and 28. Two rescues done by groups of solidarity activists in the woods of the border area between Bulgaria and Turkey. Source: Francesco Cibati.

The search and rescue operations described by volunteers unfold in conditions of extreme physical and institutional difficulty. The terrain is rugged and often only accessible on foot; the people encountered have typically spent days in the forest without food or water, their bodies bearing the cumulative toll of exhaustion, dehydration, and the violence of barbed wire and border crossings. What grassroots actors bring into that space is both material (water, food, first aid) and something harder to name: a witnessing presence that carries real protective weight. When emergency services are called, it is almost invariably the Border Police who arrive, and medical assistance, in practice, rarely follows. Yet the presence of volunteers in the forest changes the calculus: their being there, visible and documenting, makes illegal pushback harder to carry out with impunity. In their absence, expulsion is near-certain; their arrival does not guarantee protection, but it disrupts the invisibility that makes violence possible. Volunteers thus find themselves occupying a position that is at once caring and strategic: keeping people alive while also, by the sheer fact of their presence, making it more difficult for the state to erase them. As another volunteer recounted:

“So, concretely, when a report comes in, we try to reach the coordinates as quickly as possible. Um... often we have to continue on foot, sometimes for hours, because these are extremely rugged areas. We always carry backpacks with water, vitamins, some food, energy drinks... and a first aid kit. The people we encounter are almost always in a state of total emergency. They’ve spent entire days in the forest, without drinking, without eating... many are dehydrated, hungry, in shock, cut by barbed wire, and may already have pre-existing illnesses that get worse. We call 112, the general emergency number, and request an urgent ambulance. But, I mean, we know the Border Police will arrive. Almost always, in fact, medical assistance is not provided to them. Our arrival has basically two objectives: on one hand, to make sure people are rescued and not left to die of thirst or exhaustion in the forest... and on the other hand, to prevent the police from illegally pushing them back into Turkey. Because there, I mean, the situation is even worse: they get beaten, attacked by dogs, stripped of everything, and thrown back at the border.” (M_2449 09-12-24- BG)

These narratives indicate that solidarity in Bulgaria cannot be reduced to charity in its conventional sense, that is, the unilateral provision of goods or services without engaging with the structural conditions producing vulnerability. Rather, it functions as a form of counter-border practice, wherein the distribution of water, food, or medical aid is inextricably linked to efforts to mitigate deportability and resist the violences of state-controlled border regimes. In this sense, search and rescue interventions not only keep people alive in the forest but also enact small-scale disruptions of the border regime, challenging its claim to absolute control over mobility.

In the words of another activist:

“We’ve learned that the only real way to jam up the deadly machinery of the border is to show up in person, put our bodies on the line, physically protect people, and be present exactly where they’d rather keep acting without consequences. And more than anything, we’ve realized they can be afraid of us too. That by fighting, we can win our own small-but-mighty victories and carve out spaces for action that once felt impossible in such a heavily militarized zone.” (M_2433 05-06-24 BG)

Taken together, these practices reveal the entangled dimensions of solidarity at the Bulgarian border. By providing for survival, preventing pushbacks, and physically interrupting border violence, these practices open up cracks in the seemingly impermeable machinery of EU externalization. They produce small-scale but significant processes of de-bordering, in which the material and relational infrastructures of solidarity enable people to resist forced immobility and assert the possibility of movement against the constraints wanted by the border regime.

3.3 Beyond Practical Help: Being Present and Bearing Witness.

One of the recurring themes that emerged across the different contexts analyzed is the centrality of presence. Solidarity practices at the borders are not only about providing material support to people in transit but also about ensuring that episodes of violence, neglect, and systemic exclusion do not remain invisible. As some activists in Bulgaria have emphasized, their actions - such as search and rescue operations - are inseparable from the need to bear witness to what is happening at the margins of Europe. The act of being present is thus not reducible to humanitarian assistance: it acquires a political and symbolic dimension. To be there means to see, to listen, to document, and to contest.

In the words of one activist I met in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the border area of the Una-Sana canton:

“So the thing is, I think, on a practical way, it's important to be in solidarity with the people and give them what they need. But always have in mind to fight the system, and you should not lose this mentality or this approach of like... yeah, it's not just the help. It's also like the whole contestation of what's going on. And if we are not here, then everything can pass unnoticed, and Europe can kill whoever they want, how they want, without anyone to know or anyone to say, 'No, that's not...' I mean, denouncing it, you know. Yeah, but for me, this is still a question. Okay, we have this archive about all these violence, pushbacks, what's going on. And in a way, it's good to raise awareness about what's going on, but if you raise awareness, it doesn't matter - they still will beat the people. And so the next step must be to really have a movement against this. And not just, 'Okay, we raise awareness and then it's gone.' And then, yeah, in a way, to say, 'Okay, we monitor your human rights violations' and then ask the same people who are doing the violence to stop them.” (M_2446 04-07-24 BiH)

This reflection illustrates the double-edged nature of presence. On one hand, solidarity initiatives enable the collection of crucial testimonies, building archives of abuses that are systematically denied or silenced by institutional actors. On the other, the persistence of violence despite documentation raises questions about the effectiveness of such practices and the necessity of transforming awareness into broader political mobilization.

A similar emphasis on the long-term significance of testimony collection emerges from another interview:

“Many people always think that the EU is a place that respects human rights, but they have no idea what’s really happening at the borders, how the EU actually treats refugees. That part of the job, for me, feels like it could have a more long-term impact. It’s not just about short-term help, like giving someone a t-shirt or offering tea. It’s also about the long-term work, like collecting testimonies. We’re building a huge database of stories to show that these violations aren’t rare or one-off incidents, like a single border officer beating someone. It’s a systemic issue, and documenting it matters.” (M_2439 25-06-24 BiH)

Here, the emphasis shifts from immediate humanitarian relief to the construction of archives of systemic violence, which can challenge the dominant narrative of the EU as a space of rights and protection. Such archives are compiled through the trust relationships built in everyday practices like food distributions or medical support and become crucial tools for both advocacy and scholarship.

Another testimony highlights the existential necessity of presence in contexts where death and disappearance are recurrent realities:

“And I think, you know, one of the really important things of being here, of being in this context, is that you’re not just helping, you’re also witnessing everything that is happening. Like, you become part of that memory. Because, for example, take the story of Fadi—if there hadn’t been this network of people going there, giving a name to his body, following up on what happened afterwards, writing those reports, putting things out on social media... probably his body would have just stayed there in the forest, forever. Just another person disappearing in those woods, without anyone ever knowing, without anyone ever remembering.” (N_2432 27-05-24 BG)

This account recalls the political work of naming, witnessing, and memorializing, which interrupts the border regime’s tendency to reduce lives to numbers or make them disappear altogether. To follow up on a death, to attach a name to a body, or to ensure that an event is not forgotten is itself an act of contestation to the erasure produced by border policies.

At the same time, the independence of solidarity actors from official reception structures is repeatedly underlined as a necessary condition for critical engagement. Unlike institutional actors, volunteers and activists often stress that their legitimacy derives from trust-based relationships with people on the move, rather than from state recognition. This autonomy enables them not only to avoid reproducing dominant narratives but also to contest them, using the material practices of care - distribution, first aid, accompaniment - as entry points into monitoring and denouncing.

This dimension emerged for example in Bosnia-Herzegovina, when I managed to speak with some organizations who are granted access to institutional reception facilities. Such access may allow them to be in closer and more regular contact with migrants inside the camps, but it also comes at the cost of limiting their ability to take a critical stance toward the system itself and the violations that occur within

it. By contrast, more autonomous and less institutional groups that remain outside of the official reception framework can preserve their independence, maintaining the freedom to denounce abuses and challenge state logics of management and control. As a person working there put it,

“If you go inside the camps, you see more, you meet more people, but you also have to play by the rules. You are part of the system and you have to obey. When I tried to be critical and spoke about what was happening here, the organization got contacted by the Service of Foreign Affairs that were telling that if I didn’t stop, they would have close our outreach project. From outside, maybe you see less, but at least you can say things as they are, you can denounce, be critical.” (S_2443 03-07-24 BiH)

Many of these groups are also embedded in broader transnational networks, such as the Border Violence Monitoring Network, which coordinates the production of systematic reports documenting violations across multiple border contexts, including not only external frontiers but also sites of internal violence.⁴⁰ Other organizations publish reports on the conditions of camps in mainland Greece⁴¹, on the deterioration of the asylum system, on the use of detention and administrative confinement⁴², or on specific national contexts, such as Torchlight⁴³ or Frozen Lives⁴⁴ on Bulgaria. In all these cases, localized experiences and testimonies are transformed into structured, evidence-based knowledge that can circulate at the European level. In doing so, solidarity actors produce counter-narratives that resist the normalization of violence and abandonment at the borders, while simultaneously confronting the inherent limitations of reporting as a political strategy.

Indeed, when speaking with those engaged in these efforts of monitoring and denouncing, a recurrent theme is a sense of disillusionment regarding the efficacy of such practices. Despite years of meticulous documentation and public denunciation, border violence persists largely unchanged, and in some cases has intensified, accompanied by new technologies of control and deeper institutionalization of abandonment. As one activist framed it with bitter clarity:

“By now we know the impact of these reports is what it is. Just look at how things changed after the publication of the Book of Pushbacks⁴⁵ by the Border Violence Monitoring Network. They changed, yes—but for the worse. And everything just keeps getting worse. So, if you collect testimonies and write reports thinking you’re going to change policies, that’s a bit naïve. What many people hope for—and the reason to keep doing it—is that one day, who knows when, there will be a kind of big trial for all these deaths, for all the violence carried out over these years. And we’ll be there, with all the evidence...” (F_2455 08-10-24 BG)

This ambivalence that emerged, between disillusionment with the limited political impact of denunciation and the persistence of documentation as an ethical and political responsibility, captures a central tension within many solidarity practices and their initiatives connected with monitoring and bearing witness actions. In this light, reporting is less about exerting immediate influence on policies

⁴⁰ Reference here: <https://borderviolence.eu/reports>

⁴¹ Reference here: <https://rsaegean.org/en/refugee-camps-in-mainland-greece/>

⁴² Reference here: <https://detentionlandscapes.uwazi.io/en/page/43r5t2k8unp/about>

⁴³ Reference here: <https://www.meltingpot.org/2024/01/torchlight-gettare-luce-sulla-violenta-opacita-del-regime-europeo-dei-confini-2-report/>

⁴⁴ Reference here: https://bloodyborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/NNK_Frozen-Lives_25-01-20_2.pdf

⁴⁵ Reference here: <https://borderviolence.eu/publications/black-book-of-pushbacks-2020-vol-1-2>

than about producing a collective archive of memory and evidence. It is a way of refusing the erasure of violence, of ensuring that the deaths, pushbacks, and everyday abuses at the borders are not rendered invisible but remain inscribed in a historical record that may one day serve as the basis for accountability.

4. Migrants' Roles within Solidarity Spaces and Practices.

Within these spaces and practices of solidarity, the roles occupied by people on the move are often far more active and multifaceted than a first glance might suggest. Their position is still predominantly framed - by institutions, by the organizational logics of many initiatives, and sometimes by volunteers themselves - as that of recipients: of services, aid, material support. This framing is not without consequence; it encodes real power asymmetries between those who provide and those who receive, asymmetries that will be examined more closely in the following chapter. And yet, in practice, participation frequently exceeds and unsettles this positioning, spilling over into the social, practical, and relational dynamics of the initiatives themselves in ways that quietly reconfigure who does what, and for whom. In contrast to more assistentialist and emergency-oriented forms of humanitarian aid, many of the situations I observed were characterized by a relative openness and fluidity of roles, made possible by relationships of trust and mutual recognition developed over time between migrants, volunteers, and activists (a process discussed in greater detail in the next chapter). In these contexts, migrants were not always confined to the categories of "beneficiaries," "people in need," or passive objects of care.

During my fieldwork, I was able to observe how migrants regularly took part in a wide range of activities: helping to prepare meals in social kitchens, acting as informal interpreters for newcomers, supporting volunteers during distributions, or acquiring basic medical and first-aid skills to assist others. In some cases, individuals initiated activities themselves, organizing games, offering informal language lessons, or facilitating moments of collective storytelling, thereby transforming routine interactions into spaces of exchange and community-building. As one person with whom I frequently spoke during my shifts in a social kitchen in Athens told me: *"I started helping in the kitchen... at first just to keep busy, but then I realized I could help others feel welcome too. I know what it's like to wait and not know what will happen next."* Similarly, another individual I spoke with at a mobile medical point in Bulgaria described how assisting volunteers with translation was not only a way to support others but also an opportunity to acquire practical skills that could later be shared with other people living in the camp or navigating the routes in the Balkan region. *"You know,"* he told me, *"here I learned how to treat a wound, how to clean it good... And when we continue our journey, it will not be easy. These things will be useful."* Through such practices, migrants move beyond a purely receptive role and actively shape both the tempo of everyday activities and the meanings through which solidarity is enacted.

Across the different contexts I observed, engagement was motivated by a range of factors. Many described their involvement as a way of expressing gratitude for the support they had received, as a strategy to cope with prolonged periods of waiting and experiences of "stuckedness," or simply as a means of doing something meaningful in otherwise suspended and precarious circumstances. Others, having reached relatively more stable conditions, returned to these spaces to contribute, drawing on their own past experiences of dependence on similar forms of support. Beyond assisting with daily tasks, migrants frequently shared knowledge and practical strategies for navigating border regimes and asylum systems, offered guidance to newcomers, and participated in the documentation of violence, pushbacks, or institutional neglect. These everyday practices (cooking, interpreting, distributing goods, providing medical assistance, or organizing activities) fulfil both practical and symbolic functions: they

assert presence, foster relational ties, and cultivate forms of shared responsibility. In this sense, solidarity is enacted not only through material support but through embodied, situated practices that are deeply embedded in specific places and relations.

The extent to which such reconfigurations of roles and positions were possible, however, varied across contexts. These dynamics were particularly visible in environments marked by heightened precarity and uncertainty, such as border areas, where instability is a structural condition of everyday life rather than an exception. In these contexts, the absence of stable infrastructures, the volatility of police presence, and the constant risk of displacement or pushback make fixed procedures and clearly defined roles largely unworkable. Solidarity practices therefore rely on flexible, improvised, and situational forms of cooperation, with tasks and responsibilities continuously reshaped in response to changing needs. Fieldnotes from border zones frequently document rapid shifts in activity - distributions turning into medical assistance, waiting into collective problem-solving - as circumstances evolve. In such settings, the fluidity of roles between migrants, volunteers, and activists becomes not only possible but necessary. Migrants' experiential knowledge of the border (routes, risks, and survival strategies) often functions as a crucial resource, informing collective decisions and everyday practices. The temporalities of border spaces, marked by prolonged waiting punctuated by sudden urgency, further reinforce this flexibility, fostering forms of proximity and mutual reliance that unsettle conventional distinctions between "helpers" and "helped." While such improvisation emerges under conditions of acute vulnerability and should not be romanticized, it nonetheless illustrates how agency is enacted relationally and situationally in response to structurally produced uncertainty.

In urban settings, by contrast, roles tended to be more fixed, reflecting the greater professionalization and institutionalization of certain practices. Legal aid offices, medical clinics, and social services often rely on formal expertise, accreditation, and established protocols, which produce clear divisions of labor and delineate who has decision-making authority. Fieldnotes from an Athens info point with legal support, for instance, describe migrants being present primarily as beneficiaries during consultations, while volunteers manage case files, and coordinate appointments. In these contexts, the predictability and structure of routines make participation more circumscribed, and the flexibility observed in border spaces is largely constrained by organizational hierarchies and professional norms. Nonetheless, even within urban environments, some spaces, most notably social kitchens, informal community centers, and grassroots initiatives, retained a degree of fluidity that allowed for moments of horizontal engagement. In a social kitchen where I volunteered, a Syrian woman began helping with meal preparation and quickly turned her participation into an opportunity to share knowledge. She taught others, including volunteers and migrants from different countries, the proper way to cook rice, a staple she emphasized was often mishandled in large batches, and explained techniques she had learned from her own family. Over time, she also began offering informal cooking tips to newcomers, helping them adapt recipes to the ingredients available, and demonstrating how meal preparation could be a site of learning, collaboration, and small acts of recognition.

At the same time, these processes unfold within, and are constrained by, persistent structural asymmetries. Resources, skills, and decision-making power remained unevenly distributed, and in many spaces, particularly those that were more structured or institutionalized, the distinction between "providers" and "beneficiaries" continued to organize interactions. Even when migrants assume active roles, their capacity to influence decisions or shape the overall direction of initiatives is often limited, while the material and symbolic authority of volunteers, activists, or organizations delineates the boundaries of participation. These dynamics highlight that, although solidarity practices may foster

agency, collaboration, and mutual recognition, they do not automatically dismantle the inequalities and hierarchies embedded in systems of aid and support.

Taken together, these observations complicate the rigid dichotomy between “beneficiaries” and “providers” that underpins dominant humanitarian and solidarity frameworks. Migrants’ contributions instead point to the co-productive nature of care, in which solidarity is continuously negotiated and enacted through reciprocal, though asymmetrical, relations. Knowledge, skills, and affects circulate in multiple directions, and the apparent passivity associated with receiving aid is frequently reworked into active forms of participation, exchange, and sociality. Through engagement in these practices, migrants enact alternative modes of relationality, asserting agency, forging connections, and collectively navigating the uncertainties, violences, and constraints of border life. From this perspective, solidarity emerges not merely as the provision of material assistance, but as a constellation of situated practices through which social, political, and ethical relations are continuously produced, contested, and unevenly negotiated.

5. The Meaning of It. Resignifying Practices, Care and Mutual Aid.

The testimonies collected across multiple European border zones reveal a profound reconfiguration of what it means to engage in practices of solidarity, aid, and care. A central theme that emerges is how volunteers, activists, and other solidarians involved in grassroots initiatives consistently articulate their actions not as humanitarian gestures, but as deliberate political acts. This reframing is not incidental; it is fundamental to how these actors situate their role within a broader landscape of exclusion, repression, and structural violence. The phrase *“It’s solidarity, not charity”* recurs frequently across interviews and fieldnotes, operating both as a slogan and as a boundary marker. As it emerges from the data I collected, this articulation signals a conscious effort to distance grassroots practices from depoliticized logics of aid, logics often grounded in compassion but detached from any structural critique of the conditions that produce precarity. In this sense, what might appear as non-contentious forms of assistance are instead invested with a deeper political meaning. As numerous scholars have noted (Zamponi, 2017; Ambrosini, 2022; Vandevordt, 2019) practices of solidarity carry within them an inherently transformative potential, insofar as they destabilize regimes of bordering, confinement, and disposability. Yet what also becomes evident ethnographically is that this politicization is not merely attributed by external observers or analytical frameworks: it is often explicitly recognized and reflected upon by volunteers and activists themselves. In conversations and practices, they frame their actions not simply as the provision of material support but as an intentional stance, one that situates everyday acts of care within broader struggles against exclusion and violence.

As one participant explained: *“It’s about justice, not about charity. It’s about people having their rights. It’s not about I’m going to leave you a jacket because I’m very nice person. I’m giving you a jacket, but it’s about people having rights and we need to fight all together for their rights to be respected.”* (C_2428 03-05-24 BiH). This statement encapsulates a broader ethos: the act of giving is not a benevolent gesture but a claim-making practice, one that affirms the political subjectivity of people and contests their reduction to passive recipients of aid.

This deliberate distancing from a humanitarian framework, often associated with depoliticized and paternalistic forms of compassion, compatible with state and EU migration management - was highlighted by M., a volunteer active in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina:

“And also honestly, for me personally, I'm not an humanitarian worker... What I'm doing for me is a very political act. And I don't want to run a humanitarian organization. That's just not what we want to do. To me everything, every sleeping bag, jacket, shoe that we give out is political. I know why I give it. But I absolutely agree it's not enough.” (L_2441 27-06-24 BiH)

Similarly, P., a volunteer in Athens, stressed that *“it's not about what we do. It's about how we do it. Even a small gesture of care and aid, like giving food, can have a political meaning, if you ask yourself why you are doing what you are doing.” (P_2422 13-05-24 GR)*

These accounts point to a process whereby everyday acts of support, assistance, and care acquire political significance both because of the context in which they are enacted, marked by exclusion, repression, and violence, and because of the interpretative frameworks and political consciousness of those involved.

This framing resonates with recent scholarship that conceives practices of care as inherently political, insofar as they confront systemic conditions of abandonment and violence (Milan & Martini, 2024). As Tronto (Tronto, 2009) has argued, care is never neutral: it entails moral and political choices about who is deemed worthy of care, and under what conditions. Feminist scholarship has further emphasized how the reappropriation of care practices by grassroots actors transforms care from a privatized, feminized, and devalued domain (Glenn, 2000) into a collective and public practice endowed with subversive potential. Indeed, solidarity collectives often mobilize the language of “care” and “radical care” to describe their work. As one collective active at the Bulgarian border wrote:

“Amidst this abandonment and neglect, we intervene with our modest capacities. Our aim is to address people's immediate needs, gather their firsthand accounts, and resist the stark brutality of European border regimes... a brutality that is so shockingly manifested on their very bodies. In our own small way, we are building and practicing spaces of radical care.” (CRB Facebook Post)

Here, the act of offering medical support is not only a matter of tending to wounds but also of testifying against the violence that produces them, creating *“spaces of radical care”* in the very shadow of the border.

Furthermore, the political significance attributed to solidarity also derives from the repression and criminalization these groups frequently face, in different forms and on different scales.

As one interlocutor from Bulgaria observed:

“Already being in a part of the world where solidarity is so heavily repressed is a big political act. Because you go there knowing that repression exists, knowing that you are doing something that the State does not want you to do, helping people that no one wants to help.” (N_2432 27-05-24 BG).

In the same vein, a volunteer in Greece stressed: *“Within the current context, I don't think you can be non-political. Simply offering help to undocumented people is a political act, because they are defined as illegal, and we are working with them as equal human beings.” (S_2419 19-03-24 GR).*

As scholars such as Donatella Della Porta (2022) have emphasized, the effects of criminalization on solidarity practices are neither linear nor homogeneous, but rather differentiated and ambivalent. The

intensification of surveillance, policing, and legal risks does not produce a single trajectory of response; instead, it can foster diverging dynamics, ranging from the radicalization of practices and discourses to processes of demobilization and withdrawal. This multiplicity of outcomes contributes to what Della Porta describes as the fragmentation and erosion of sustained support networks, as collective actors navigate an increasingly hostile environment.

In the contexts I encountered during my fieldwork, these dynamics became particularly visible. On the one hand, certain solidarity groups explicitly articulated the need to become “quieter” and “less problematic” in order to preserve the continuity of their activities. This did not necessarily entail abandoning their political positioning, but rather recalibrating their strategies, shifting more contentious forms of engagement into less visible, often more discreet, modalities. In this sense, repression engendered a kind of tactical invisibility, allowing groups to continue their interventions while minimizing exposure to legal or police repression. One of my informants well explained this situation:

“We use to be pretty vocal you know, about everything we were seeing. The violation in Greece, at the borders... on social media and through our channels, trying to mobilize... then police started to show up here at the center. Doing checks up, bothering the people here. You know, many of those who come here don’t have documents, so this growing presence was making things difficult... people were not feeling safe anymore. So... we did a lot of meetings and talked and we decided to try to be more quiet, less vocal. We are still collaborating with all those political things, but in a more hidden way.” (T_2418 15-03-24 GR)

Conversely, other actors described how the harsh realities they faced while volunteering, ranging from direct encounters with border violence to witnessing systemic rights violations, had the opposite effect. Far from discouraging participation, these experiences deepened their political awareness and intensified their commitment to mobilization. For some, the field became a space of politicization in its own right, a place where sustained proximity to suffering and structural violence slowly, or sometimes suddenly, produced a heightened sense of responsibility: to denounce abuses publicly, to take more vocal and confrontational stances, to carry something of what had been witnessed back into life elsewhere. I encountered this trajectory repeatedly across fieldsites, in conversations that often began with practical matters and gradually opened onto something more searching. One person I met in Thessaloniki, during activities organized by a local collective, paused at a certain point and reflected on how their sense of themselves had shifted since becoming involved in solidarity work: *“I did not consider myself a super political activist before coming here.”* They continued, after a brief silence: *“But I don’t know how someone can keep going with it life when you see and hear all these stories, all this shit. Now I try to do my best here on the field, to keep returning, to denounce and also to organize things when I’m at home.” (fieldnotes, 19-03-2024, Thessaloniki, Greece)*

These divergent trajectories illustrate how rather than simply weakening or silencing solidarity, criminalization reshapes it, producing new forms of both retreat and resistance, invisibility and visibility, silence and voice.

Crucially, the political dimension of solidarity that has emerged from the material and data collected is not only reactive but also prefigurative. Volunteers frequently describe their practices as moments where alternative social relations can be envisioned and enacted. These are understood as prefigurative practices: forms of collective life that instantiate, even temporarily, other ways of being together. As one participant put it:

“You can create situations that, in the middle of all these years of shit people are living, become moments of relief, of care, of being together with another vision of the world. And this is also a form of resistance against the system... a message to governments that there are people who do not agree with what they are doing.” (S_2401 23-01-24 GR)

In this sense, solidarity generates temporary yet significant spaces where the hegemonic order is both negotiated and contested, and where different futures and forms of collective belonging can be imagined. As another volunteer reflected: *“If I only look at the news, or at how policies and laws are going, it’s so bad... But here, you feel part of something that resists that. It gives hope. It reminds you that maybe it’s not all that bad, that there’s also a positive side.” (S_2445 04-07-24 BiH).*

For some interlocutors, solidarity is articulated even more explicitly as a spatial practice that intervenes in the borderscape, the material and symbolic terrain through which states exercise control over mobility. It entails a direct confrontation with the border and its claim to sovereignty. As one participant explained:

“For me, we combine solidarity to help support people, but also something more political. I think the rescues are exactly about this. We, collectively, we save lives there. Collectively, we prevent violence in Bulgaria, Turkey, and Syria. So that is the humanitarian part. But also for me, it is about intervening in the border scape that the state imagine as its monopoly. And yeah, we intervene in this regime and by our intervention, we modify the settings of what is happening.” (Q_2450 07-11-24 BG)

As another activist described, these practices embody what they called *“making the border fail.”* They attempt to disrupt the state’s claim to control and sovereignty, even if only at a limited scale. As one interlocutor concluded:

“This kind of work, the way we do it, for me it’s about social conflict. Even if we’re just providing basic needs, medical support, or rescuing people in the woods... what we’re really doing is confronting an established situation. Something that happens because of the system, because of institutions, that we see as unjust and violent. And we decide to put our bodies against it. We try, actively, to make a difference, to make this system fail—with our bodies, in the forests, out there in the field... even if it’s just on a small scale.” (H_2454 06-12-24 BG)

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that solidarity in different borderscapes cannot be reduced to “aid” or “charity.” It constitutes a mode of care that refuses privatization or depoliticization; a form of resistance enacted through presence, relation, and refusal. It is about, as one interlocutor put it, *“being there and act against and in reaction to what you think is unjust and violent,”* even if expressed through the simplest of gestures of care and aid. In muddy forests, noisy kitchens, and crowded squats, solidarity generates fragile yet significant spaces in which the border regime and its mechanisms of control are constantly negotiated and subtly contested.

In conclusion, the ethnographic evidence highlights that practices of solidarity at European borders are simultaneously practical, political, and prefigurative. They emerge from concrete acts, like distributing food, offering shelter, providing medical care, but these acts acquire meaning precisely through the ways they are enacted, interpreted, and situated within broader regimes of exclusion and violence. As mentioned earlier, I aimed to highlight and examine the spatially differentiated configurations of grassroots solidarity, exploring how they take shape both within urban settings and along physical

borders. Solidarity is in fact inseparable from the context in which it operates: it is shaped by repression, border enforcement, and the criminalization of aid, yet it also transforms these constraints into opportunities for creative, strategic, and reflective engagement. Far from being neutral or purely charitable, these practices cultivate spaces in which dignity, agency, and political subjectivity are recognized and affirmed, and in which alternative social relations and forms of collective belonging are imagined and temporarily enacted. Whether through quiet, tactical interventions or more visible, confrontational gestures, solidarity at the borders functions as both immediate care and deliberate resistance, a form of action that simultaneously responds to suffering, challenges structural violence, and prefigures other possible ways of organizing life and social relations beyond the dominant logics of control.

6. Conclusions: Care, Presence, and the Spatially Differentiated Politics of Grassroots Solidarity

The ethnographic and analytical journey undertaken across this chapter has traced the contours of a heterogeneous yet coherent field of practice: grassroots solidarity along the Balkan Routes, as it unfolds across urban centers, transit hubs, and militarized borderlands. What emerges from this mapping is neither a unified social movement nor a simple humanitarian infrastructure, but something more elusive and politically significant: a constellation of situated, embodied, and relational practices that simultaneously respond to immediate suffering and contest the structural conditions that produce it.

The heterogeneity of solidarity actors reflects not only organizational diversity but also the deeper ambivalences inhabiting the field itself. The tension between “volunteering” and “activism,” between “solidarity” and “humanitarianism,” between explicitly political engagement and more diffuse moral impulses, does not resolve itself neatly across the cases examined. These distinctions operate as mobile, situationally negotiated boundaries, invoked and reworked by actors themselves in ways that reflect the shifting pressures of criminalization, resource scarcity, and political urgency. The figure of the “solidarian” names not a fixed subject position but an aspiration: a mode of being-with that refuses the hierarchies embedded in conventional humanitarian encounter, even as it acknowledges the difficulty of fully escaping them. This difficulty is not a failure of practice but a constitutive condition of solidarity work in contexts shaped by unequal power and unequal vulnerability.

A central analytical contribution of this chapter lies in what has been described as the spatially differentiated configurations of grassroots solidarity: the observation that solidarity does not take the same form everywhere, but is fundamentally shaped by the spatial contexts in which it is enacted, with urban settings and border zones producing distinct, though interrelated, modalities of support, engagement, and political meaning. This differentiation is not merely a matter of organizational logistics or resource availability. It reflects deeper structural conditions - the proximity to border violence, the degree of institutional abandonment, the intensity of criminalization, the temporal rhythms of transit and stuckedness - that configure both the needs of people on the move and the possibilities open to those who seek to accompany them. Urban and border solidarity are not simply two variants of the same practice; they constitute, in important respects, different political formations, shaped by different spatial rationalities and oriented toward different, if complementary, forms of contestation.

In urban contexts, solidarity initiatives have tended toward forms of relative stabilization and, in some cases, professionalization. Their political character expresses itself through the deliberate cultivation of inclusive and anti-hierarchical spaces, through the refusal of the deserving/undeserving distinction that governs much institutional humanitarianism, and through the insistence on conviviality, sociability, and

mutual respect as constitutive rather than incidental dimensions of care. The gradual professionalization that some urban initiatives have undergone introduces genuine tensions, as the imperative of institutional survival can dilute more contentious forms of engagement. Yet even within these constraints, the relational and spatial practices of urban solidarity retain a prefigurative charge: they produce, in the heart of cities that otherwise reproduce migrants' marginalization, environments in which alternative forms of sociality and belonging are materially enacted. In border zones, by contrast, the spatial logic of solidarity is transformed in fundamental ways. Here, the physical enforcement of borders, the systematic use of pushbacks, the criminalization of assistance itself, and the near-total withdrawal of state responsibility compress the space available for solidarity action while simultaneously intensifying its political stakes. Even the most elementary gestures of care - distributing dry clothes at the edge of a forest, offering water to people stranded on the Bulgarian-Turkish frontier, setting up a portable shower in a makeshift settlement - cannot be disentangled from contestation of border violence, because the state's strategy of deterrence and abandonment depends precisely on the denial of such gestures. As Tazzioli has argued, the removal of care from border zones is not incidental but constitutive of their functioning: solidarity actors who intervene in this void are not supplementing a deficient system but contesting its operating logic.

The relationship between urban and border solidarity is ultimately not one of hierarchy or substitution but of productive tension and mutual dependence. Border solidarity's immediate confrontation with state violence generates forms of political consciousness that flow back into urban settings, politicizing actors who began their engagement from more humanitarian starting points. Conversely, the longer temporal horizons and more stable relational infrastructures of urban solidarity provide forms of support (legal assistance, psychosocial care, material continuity) that complement what border solidarity can offer in conditions of acute precarity. Many of the actors encountered during fieldwork moved fluidly between these settings, carrying knowledge, networks, and political orientations forged in one context and deployed in another. The Balkan Routes should be understood, in this sense, not only as a geography of migration but as a geography of solidarity: a spatial field in which different modalities of care and contestation are distributed across distinct sites, each shaped by its own structural conditions yet connected through shared political commitments and overlapping networks of actors.

It is worth pausing here to consider how the solidarity practices examined in this chapter relate to broader theoretical debates on border abolitionism, as elaborated by Tazzioli. In her framework, border abolitionism is not a future political project to be achieved but a present practice to be enacted, through the multiplication of small-scale disruptions, refusals, and counter-conducts that cumulatively erode the infrastructures through which borders exercise their violence. Abolitionism, in this sense, proceeds not through grand programmatic declarations but through the patient, situated, and materially grounded work of producing cracks in the border apparatus: moments and spaces in which the regime's logic is interrupted, its invisibilities made visible, its violences documented and contested. Read through this lens, the solidarity practices examined in this chapter acquire additional analytical resonance, even if the actors involved would not necessarily describe their work in these terms, and abolitionism does not always figure as an explicit reference point in their practice. The search and rescue operations in Bulgarian forests, the portable showers in Bosnian borderlands, the community centers in Athens that refuse to check documents at the door, the archives of testimony assembled against the impunity of pushbacks - these can be understood as practices in Tazzioli's abolitionist sense: materially modest yet politically significant interventions that chip away, incrementally and persistently, at the conditions through which border violence is normalized and reproduced. At the same time, Tazzioli's framework cautions against overly celebratory readings, insisting on the ways in which solidarity can be re-

absorbed into the governance of migration through co-optation, humanitarianization, and the gradual normalization of emergency as a governing logic. The tensions observed throughout this chapter - between humanitarian and political orientations, between service provision and contestation, between institutional survival and critical autonomy - are best understood not as individual failures of political consciousness but as structural pressures generated by a border regime that is itself capable of incorporating and neutralizing challenges to its legitimacy.

What the chapter has demonstrated, across contexts ranging from social kitchens and free shops to mobile medical points and documentation networks, is that the political significance of grassroots solidarity is not appended to its practical activities as an external ideological gloss. It is immanent to them. The insistence, articulated by numerous interlocutors, that distributing food, clothing, or medical care constitutes a political act reflects an understanding, both reflective and experiential, that treating people rendered illegal, disposable, and invisible as full human beings enacts a counter-logic to the border regime. As Tronto's political theory of care suggests, care is never neutral: it encodes decisions about who deserves recognition and under what terms. When solidarity actors insist on offering choice rather than charity, accompaniment rather than instruction, presence rather than management, they are making precisely these political decisions in a field where dominant institutions have consistently made the opposite ones. This is equally evident in the co-productive roles that migrants occupy within solidarity spaces: cooking, translating, documenting violence, sharing knowledge of routes and risks, organizing activities. These contributions unsettle the binary between provider and recipient that underpins dominant humanitarian logics, revealing solidarity as a relational and ongoing negotiation rather than a unilateral transfer of resources.

The concept of prefiguration provides a final but crucial analytical lens through which these dynamics can be understood in their full political register. Drawing on Yates's formulation and the emerging scholarship engaging with prefiguration as political practice, the chapter has argued that solidarity initiatives along the Balkan Routes are not merely reactive - compensating for state failure, filling the gaps left by institutional abandonment - but generative: they produce, in the texture of everyday practice, social relations and spatial arrangements that embody, however partially and provisionally, the alternatives they seek. The community center that refuses to distinguish between documented and undocumented visitors, the free shop that insists on the dignity of choice, the search and rescue team that enters the militarized forest to disrupt the machinery of pushback, each of these can be read as a future-oriented construction of political alternatives, enacted in the present. Situated within the debate on border abolitionism, prefigurative solidarity acquires an additional theoretical valence: it does not merely anticipate a world without borders as a distant horizon but enacts, in fragmented and provisional ways, the social relations that such a world would require. In this sense, the abolitionist and the prefigurative dimensions of grassroots solidarity are not parallel but convergent: both insist that the dismantling of border violence begins not with legislative reform or institutional redesign but with the patient, embodied, and relational work of producing different ways of being together in the spaces where borders are most violently felt.

This prefigurative and abolitionist dimension also carries within it, however, an irreducible fragility. The spaces and practices examined in this chapter are, by their very nature, provisional, contingent, and vulnerable to the forces they resist. Criminalization reshapes solidarity rather than eliminating it, producing tactical retreats, recalibrations, and new forms of invisibility. Volunteer fatigue, resource scarcity, and the relentless pressure of border regimes generate cycles of mobilization and withdrawal that place the long-term sustainability of these initiatives in constant question. The disillusionment articulated by several interlocutors regarding the limited political impact of documentation and

denunciation reflects a broader tension between the ethical imperative to bear witness and the structural persistence of the violence being witnessed. Tazzioli's abolitionist framework is useful here too: it does not promise that these practices will accumulate into a transformative political rupture, nor does it measure their significance by their capacity to produce immediate policy change. What it insists upon, rather, is the importance of sustaining the practices themselves, of refusing the normalization of border violence, of keeping open the spaces in which alternative relations are possible, of maintaining the archives, the networks, and the embodied commitments through which the border regime's claim to inevitability is persistently, if incrementally, contested. These are not failures to be overcome but constitutive tensions to be held.

What this chapter has ultimately sought to demonstrate is that grassroots solidarity along the Balkan Routes, in all its heterogeneous, fragmented, and spatially differentiated forms, constitutes a mode of counter-politics of care: a field of collective action that operates at the intersection of immediate material need and structural political contestation, of embodied presence and prefigurative imagination, of humanitarian gesture and abolitionist practice. It is enacted not in the extraordinary moments of dramatic confrontation with state power, but in the ordinary, repeated, and affectively saturated gestures of everyday life at the margins of Europe's border regime: in a shared meal, a hot shower offered in a forest clearing, a name given to a body, a document filed against impunity. Understanding solidarity in these terms is not simply an analytical move: it is a way of taking seriously what those who engage in it consistently articulate, across diverse contexts and despite full awareness of its limitations: that these practices are not reducible to charity or humanitarian relief, but constitute a situated and ongoing engagement with the structural conditions that make borders, and their violence, possible.

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Chapter 6

“The real strength that keeps you going.”

Relational Dynamics within Grassroots Solidarity Practices.

Moving across the different spaces and practices of solidarity discussed in the previous chapter, one element consistently surfaced across all contexts, conversations, and observations: the centrality of the relational dimension. Whether in urban networks of support or in the makeshift infrastructures at Europe’s borderlands, relationships appeared not as a secondary feature of solidarity, but as its very foundation, as the medium through which solidarity is enacted, negotiated, and endowed with meaning.

Solidarity is inherently a relational practice. It is enacted through encounters, gestures, and forms of interdependence that bind together actors positioned differently within the hierarchies of mobility, legality, and belonging. Yet, to take this relationality seriously means to look beyond the idealized notion of solidarity as a horizontal, egalitarian relation. It requires instead a closer examination of the tensions, asymmetries, and affective dynamics that shape such interactions. As Fassin (2012) and Rozakou (2017) remind us, solidarity and humanitarianism are never detached from power; they are shaped by it. Thus, the analysis of relations within solidarity practices opens up crucial questions about the reproduction, negotiation, or subversion of borders, not only as geopolitical lines but as social and affective boundaries that order interactions and define who can act, speak, and belong.

This chapter is dedicated to an exploration of the relations and interactions that unfold within the grassroots solidarity practices at the center of this research. It seeks to understand what role these relational configurations play in the everyday constitution of solidarity and, more broadly, how they can be understood within the analytical framework of border deconstruction and “de-bordering” (Ambrosini, 2024). By focusing on relationships as both social processes and analytical lenses, the chapter asks: how do interactions between volunteers, activists, and migrants shape the practice and meaning of solidarity? How do internal dynamics among solidarity actors influence collective action and the sustainability of networks? And to what extent do these relational entanglements reflect, challenge, or re-inscribe the very hierarchies that border regimes produce?

The chapter proceeds by analyzing relations on two interconnected levels. The first concerns interpersonal relations, focusing on the encounters between those who offer and those who receive or co-construct solidarity: activists, volunteers, and migrants. These relationships are often imbued with care, empathy, and mutual learning, yet also marked by fatigue, frustration, and the constant negotiation of difference. The second level concerns intergroup relations, that is, the connections and frictions among the various solidarity actors themselves, local and international collectives, organizations and informal groups, activists of different political backgrounds, or volunteers with diverse temporal and ideological commitments.

A central thread running through the chapter is the contextual variability of relational dynamics. As the previous chapter suggested, the character of solidarity in any given setting reflects its relational

geometry: the density of connections among actors, their exposure to state surveillance and policing, the temporal rhythms of arrival and departure, and the presence or absence of organizational infrastructure capable of sustaining collective engagement over time. The discussion contrasts the forms and meanings of solidarity as they unfold in urban contexts, where interactions often develop within more stable, politicized, and networked environments, with those observed in border areas, where encounters tend to be more fleeting, precarious, and shaped by the immediacy of mobility, surveillance, and control. The analysis also foregrounds the temporal dimension of these relations, examining how they are conditioned by the divergent temporalities of the actors involved - migrants, volunteers, activists, and institutional actors - and how these relations are articulated and sustained across local, national, and transnational scales.

All these dynamics will be examined through a critical lens attentive to power asymmetries. Relations in such contexts and experiences are shaped by multiple axes of differentiation, legal status, citizenship, gender, race, language, mobility capital, that produce unequal positions and forms of dependency. Yet, these inequalities are not static; they are constantly managed, negotiated, and sometimes subverted through everyday practices of care, mutual recognition, and shared struggle. By paying attention to these micro-dynamics, the chapter aims to capture the ambivalence of solidarity as a site of both reproduction and contestation of categories, forms of belonging and bordering processes.

In summary, this chapter situates the relational dimension at the core of the analysis of solidarity practices. It argues that the politics of solidarity cannot be fully understood without examining the ways in which people relate to each other, across differences, through affect, and within structures of inequality. Relations are not secondary to political action; rather, they constitute the very terrain upon which borders are lived, negotiated, contested, and at times deconstructed.

1. Interpersonal Relations.

When I began working, volunteering, and conducting research on solidarity and migration along the so-called Balkan routes, I did not anticipate that what would affect me most deeply were the relationships and interactions with the people I met along the way. From fellow activists, volunteers, and comrades to local residents and migrants - those in transit, those temporarily stuck, those living in a state of protracted uncertainty - each encounter left a lasting impression. These relations shaped not only my understanding of solidarity but also my own position within it, revealing the extent to which emotional, ethical, and political dimensions are entangled in everyday practices of support and resistance.

A growing body of scholarship (Milan & Martini, 2024) has drawn attention to the affective and relational dimensions of encounters within contexts of mobility and care. Studies in anthropology and migration research (Papataxiarchis, 2016; Tazzioli & Walters, 2019) have shown how emotions, attachments, and embodied interactions constitute key sites through which solidarity is produced and experienced. Such works suggest that solidarity cannot be understood solely as an ideological or organizational phenomenon, but as an affective and performative practice that unfolds in situated relationships. Affective encounters, whether fleeting or sustained, mediate the boundaries between self and other, host and guest, activist and migrant, and often reveal the ambivalences of proximity, care, and power that characterize these fields.

In both research and activism, these affective and relational dimensions are constantly present. They shape practices and are, in turn, shaped by spatial and temporal conditions: the rhythms of movement

and waiting, the specificities of border zones and urban neighborhoods, the temporariness of presence and the permanence. Within these shifting configurations, solidarity emerges as an unstable and negotiated process, deeply embedded in the material and emotional textures of everyday life.

At the micro, interpersonal level, I observed how interactions between migrants, volunteers, activists, and locals often took form through shared tasks, conversations, meals, conviviality, and gestures of care. These encounters unfold across linguistic barriers, legal categories, and precarious living conditions, frequently destabilizing the rigid distinctions between “helper” and “helped,” “activist,” “volunteer” and “migrant.” As in other contexts of grassroots support (Rozakou 2017; Vandevoordt, 2019), migrants are often not passive recipients of assistance, but active participants in the making and sustaining of solidarity initiatives. Through their involvement, they frequently assume responsibilities, contribute to collective forms of care, and often become crucial reference points within local networks. These roles are neither fixed nor uniform: some individuals move fluidly from receiving to providing support, while others engage by mobilizing specific skills, forms of knowledge, or simply a willingness to share and learn within collective spaces.

Within these dynamics, diverse forms and modes of relating are continuously generated and transformed. Relationships take shape and evolve in response to shifting circumstances, adapting to the instability of contexts, the fluidity of roles, and the unpredictability of movement. Through everyday interactions, connections are forged between people whose lives, trajectories, and social positions might otherwise never intersect. These encounters produce not only practical forms of cooperation but also affective and ethical bonds that temporarily suspend or reconfigure the hierarchies inscribed by borders. What also emerged clearly from my fieldwork is the extent to which these relationships shape the subjectivities of those involved. The experience of engaging in solidarity (whether as an activist, volunteer, or a migrant) often entails a profound transformation in how individuals perceive themselves and others. Many interlocutors spoke of a distinct “before and after,” marking the way their encounters and shared experiences had altered their sense of belonging, responsibility, and political awareness.

Observing these everyday interactions thus reveals how solidarity is enacted through relational and affective labour, through the slow construction of trust, reciprocity, and mutual recognition under conditions of constraint. They also expose the tensions that accompany such labour: the weight of asymmetries, the unequal distribution of privilege, the risk of paternalism, the long-term consequences that might rise, and the affective exhaustion that can emerge in such complex and demanding situations.

In the following sections, I will explore how these interpersonal dynamics unfold across different contexts, both in urban environments and border areas, and how they are shaped by varying temporalities and spatialities. By examining these relations ethnographically, I aim to show how solidarity practices not only respond to but also reconfigure the boundaries of belonging, responsibility, and political imagination along the Balkan routes.

1.1 Interpersonal Relations in Urban Contexts.

To understand how interpersonal relational dynamics unfold within urban contexts, it is crucial to situate the observations within the specific spaces where they occurred. My fieldwork took place primarily in community centers and social kitchens, in spaces intentionally designed to facilitate encounters and interactions beyond the constraints that characterize life outside their walls. These sites functioned as alternative social infrastructures, where people could temporarily step out of the logics of control, surveillance, and exclusion that often dominate the urban experience of migrants and solidarity

actors alike. Within these settings, everyday practices such as cooking, eating together, or simply spending time in proximity created conditions for mutual recognition and the reassertion of dignity. For many who entered these spaces, whether asylum seekers, recognized refugees, people rendered illegal by migration regimes, or individuals in prolonged transit, they represented rare moments of calm, safety, and relief amid otherwise precarious and uncertain lives.

In this sense, the spatialities of encounter and the construction of safe spaces (Lewis et al., 2015) emerge as key dimensions through which urban solidarity takes shape, as also underlined in the previous chapter. These spaces are not neutral backdrops for interaction; they are actively produced through collective efforts and imbued with political and affective meanings. They constitute what some authors have described as “islands of solidarity” or “temporary autonomous zones” within the broader urban fabric (Rozakou, 2017; Tazzioli, 2020), where the everyday reproduction of exclusion is momentarily suspended and alternative forms of sociality can be imagined and enacted. Yet, their “safety” is always partial and fragile, constantly negotiated in relation to external pressures such as police controls, municipal regulations, or the volatility of funding and participation.

Equally significant is the dimension of temporality. Compared to the volatile and often emergency-driven contexts of border zones, urban spaces tend to allow for greater continuity and stability, both in the lives of migrants and in the organization of solidarity practices. Volunteers and activists are frequently long-term residents of the city, while many migrants who engage with these initiatives, whether by choice or constraint, develop longer-term forms of presence within the urban environment. This relative permanence fosters the gradual building of trust, reciprocity, and familiarity. Relationships in these contexts are therefore less episodic and more sustained, allowing for deeper forms of mutual engagement and collective learning. The temporal stability of urban solidarity spaces also enables the emergence of shared rhythms and routines that structure everyday life. Cooking, cleaning, organizing language classes or cultural events, these repetitive activities, often taken for granted, are in fact central to the slow production of social ties and a sense of belonging.

These dynamics were clearly described by a social worker who has been active for years in various solidarity initiatives across Athens. Drawing on her long experience working with both local and migrant communities, she reflected on the importance of stability and continuity within these spaces, especially when so much of the work depends on short-term volunteers and ever-changing teams:

“People often think, you know, that you shouldn’t get too close, that you can’t really build strong relationships — like it’s better to keep some distance. But actually, you can, if you take the time to build something solid and if you’re not just going to leave after a while. And the “leaving” part is really the key. Especially in organizations that rely a lot on volunteers who come and go. For people from the community, the ones supposedly being “helped”... it can be really tough. They start trusting someone, they get used to seeing them around, and then suddenly that person is gone. It can feel like abandonment, and it creates a lot of problems. That’s why projects, spaces, and people that are stable, that stay, are so important. They make it possible to build something that goes beyond just practical support. Like here, for example: some volunteers stay just a month or two, but there are also many who actually live in the city and won’t leave. Their presence gives continuity... it makes the space and the community feel safer, more stable.” (D_2423 10-04-24 GR)

The importance of continuity and the creation of a genuine “safe space” (Lewis et al., 2015) was also emphasized by one of the volunteers at the community center I often visited in Sarajevo. She explained it this way:

“This stable space means people can come regularly, you know? Relationships grow little by little, day by day. Here in Bosnia-Herzegovina it’s not easy to rely on local volunteers who actually live here — people are struggling with their own lives and often don’t have the time to volunteer. But that’s something we’re really trying to build: a stable place where everyone feels welcome and safe, a bit less alone... somewhere you can find people you trust — who can help you if you need it, but also just sit down with you, have a chat, play some chess, or share a cup of hot tea.” (F_2440 19-06-24 BiH)

Across all the contexts I observed, the most meaningful interactions tended to unfold through the simplest, everyday activities: during food distribution, while cooking or cleaning together, or in quieter moments of rest; sharing a coffee after a long day, playing chess or cards. Within these solidarity spaces, such seemingly ordinary moments carry a deeper significance. They become micro-sites where conventional hierarchies are softened or even temporarily suspended, allowing new forms of sociality to emerge. As I also underlined in the previous chapter, in these spaces people relate to one another beyond the rigid roles of “helper” and “helped,” fostering connections grounded in mutual presence, shared routines, and small, everyday gestures of care.

As my fieldnotes attest, I encountered such situations firsthand on numerous occasions while visiting spaces in Athens and Thessaloniki. Over time, as I became a more familiar presence in these places, I found myself drawn into the rhythms of daily life rather than standing apart from them. It was often in these unplanned, interstitial moments, like waiting together while a delivery was late, sitting quietly during a slow afternoon, that the most revealing dynamics came into view.

“After spending a few weeks coming to the community center in Athens, I began to notice how fluid and negotiable the roles within this space are. Responsibilities shift constantly; hierarchies blur. There is Ahmed, who helps at the front desk with translation; Karim, who assists in distributing food when it arrives; and George, who has learned how to recognize scabies and now offers advice to anyone who needs it. Yesterday, when the electrical system suddenly stopped working, two men who had come for an appointment with the legal team stepped in to help us identify and fix the problem. “This was our job back in Syria,” they told me. In the women’s space, this dynamic is perhaps even more evident. There is a continuous exchange of knowledge, gestures of care, and small acts of responsibility shared among everyone. Aid here is never one-directional, it is reciprocal, mutable, and constantly changing.” (fieldnotes, Athens 03/04/24)

These observations point to a broader reconfiguration of social and political subjectivities within such spaces. The fluidity of roles and the reciprocity of everyday practices allow political identities to be reworked (if only temporarily) outside the constraints of institutional categorization. In this sense, these sites can be understood as situated communities along migratory routes: inherently fragile and contingent, yet deeply meaningful. They are spaces where mutual recognition is cultivated through practice, and where horizontal forms of connection become not only imaginable but experientially real.

In one of the social kitchens where I volunteered in Thessaloniki and Athens, several of the people involved in the preparation and distribution of food were formerly among those who initially came to

the space as “guests.” Over time, some of them began to assist in serving meals and eventually became core members of the collective. Their presence challenged the implicit division between those “helping” and those “being helped,” illustrating the fluidity and reversibility of roles that characterized many of the solidarity initiatives I observed.





Fig. 29 and 30. Two moments from a social kitchen in Athens, where cooking and sharing the meal are collective acts, and everyone takes part in both. Source: Khora Collective and the author.

B., one of these participants, recounted to me the story of how he first began frequenting the kitchen and how his engagement gradually evolved over the years:

“When I arrived in Greece five years ago, from Afghanistan, everything was a mess. Greece is not a good place for refugees. I was rejected many times, and I was living in Athens, alone. When you don’t have a job or documents, there is not much you can do. One friend told me about [name of place]. He said, ‘You can go there to get food, and maybe also help if you want.’ I always loved cooking, so I decided to go. They had this small introduction meeting for new volunteers—I went, and I liked it. Since then, it’s been four years. I come here almost every day, I cook, and we eat all together. I made many friends here. Ah, and in the meantime, I also got my documents. Because of the people I met in the kitchen, I found a good lawyer who helped me with my case. So, you see, these connections... they are really important. They change things.” (B 2452 04-11-24 GR)

In other situations, for example in a community center in Athens, I observed how some of the people who initially came simply to spend time with others, drink coffee, or play chess gradually became more involved in the everyday life of the space. Over time, several of them began to assist with small tasks such as cleaning, organizing activities, or translating for newcomers. Their participation blurred the boundaries between “visitors” and “staff,” reflecting the fluid nature of engagement within grassroots spaces of solidarity. K. and B. were two of these individuals. During the months I spent volunteering and helping at the center, they often shared with me their reflections on the dynamics emerging from their position, how their linguistic abilities or social connections sometimes placed them in roles of mediation, and how they experienced their place within the wider community of the center and in relation to other volunteers.

As B., an Iranian refugee, told me one afternoon while we were closing the center:

“You know, Chiara, for me the most important thing here are the people. When I come here, I don’t feel alone. I know everyone, Greek volunteers, refugees from other countries... we talk, we joke, we help each other. It’s not only about food or activities; it’s about feeling connected. In this place, people look at you like a person, not like a refugee. I learned so much from being with them. That’s why I keep coming, why I help now. Because of the relations, the friendships. They make life a bit easier, a bit lighter.” (B_2412 27-02-24 GR)

B.’s account highlights how participation in these spaces cannot be reduced to material assistance alone. Rather, it is deeply embedded in affective and relational dimensions, feelings of recognition, companionship, and shared humanity. His narrative underscores how the center functions not only as a site of service provision but as a social environment in which personhood is reaffirmed and stigma temporarily suspended. The shift from receiving to contributing emerges here as a relational response: an investment in the very network of ties that sustains one’s sense of belonging. In this sense, engagement is both shaped by and generative of social relations, producing forms of mutuality that complicate and unsettle conventional distinctions between aid-giver and aid-receiver.

The urban context has also emerged as a spatial and social setting in which more stable forms of support and solidarity can take root. Although the increasing criminalization and repression of solidarity practices have made it progressively difficult for different actors to sustain their activities and continue their engagement, the overall environment remains less precarious than that of border areas. In urban settings, solidarity actors often maintain a more continuous and long-term presence, which contributes to a greater stability in both their initiatives and the relationships they establish with other actors involved. This temporal dimension allows for the gradual construction of trust, nurtured through sustained interactions, shared experiences, and the everyday dynamics of cooperation. As a result, forms of mutuality and reciprocity are more likely to emerge and be consolidated over time. Several of the informants I met and interviewed emphasized the significance of this aspect: a long-term presence, they noted, facilitates the development of trust-based relationships, which can subsequently evolve and take on diverse forms of collaboration and support.

P., a volunteer in a social kitchen in Athens, explained this dynamic very clearly:

“Here in the city, things move more slowly, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing. There is a lot of chaos and difficulties, but there is not the urgency you see on the border. There everything is urgent... people arrive exhausted, they need food, clothes, a place to rest, and then they move on. Here, instead, we see people again and again. You meet them in the neighborhood, at the language school, in the park, on the bus. Over time, you start to know recognize each other, to know each other’s story.... it’s this... the everyday, that makes relations grow.” (P_2422 06-04-24 GR)

In a similar vein, L., who works in the community center I visited in Sarajevo, reflected on the importance of continuity and presence in everyday interactions.

“The fact that we are here, that people see the same faces every day. That we can become friends. This makes things different. People trust you more, you can think more about long term projects... You are able to build a community, ways of sharing and helping that are more based on mutuality and reciprocity and not just on ‘I have some resources I am going to give you’...” (L_2441 22-06-24 BiH)

Her words echoed a broader sentiment expressed by many of the actors I met in urban contexts: that stability and everyday proximity can gradually transform relations of assistance into more reciprocal and trust-based forms of solidarity.

The relative stability of the urban context also produces distinct effects, both in terms of practices and social relations. As discussed in the previous chapter, the long-term engagement and public visibility that characterize urban settings have prompted some solidarity initiatives to adopt increasingly formalized and professionalized modes of organization. Consequently, many of these practices have begun to resemble forms of service provision rather than spaces of mutual aid and collective care. At the same time, certain areas of action, such as medical assistance or legal support, inherently require the involvement of professionals, such as doctors and lawyers. Their presence tends to reproduce more hierarchical relationships between “helpers” and “helped,” owing to the asymmetry of expertise. However, this dynamic is often mitigated by the ways in which specific and specialized forms of knowledge are shared and circulated within solidarity spaces. For instance, women’s health initiatives frequently operate through mutual learning and peer support, blurring the boundaries between professional and lay knowledge. Similarly, in legal information desks, collective sessions are organized where information is exchanged and participants are encouraged to share their experiences and disseminate knowledge further. These practices contribute to fostering a more horizontal and participatory approach, which partially counterbalances the professionalization of solidarity work.

When I asked B., a volunteer doctor who was active in the safe space for women and children in a community centre in Athens, how she saw her role, she smiled and said:

“Yeah, I mean, sometimes people come here because they need a doctor... and that’s fine, that’s part of it. But we try not to make it just about that, you know? We sit together, we talk, we share experiences. Often it’s the women themselves who teach each other — about their bodies, about what to do in certain situations. So yes, I bring my knowledge, but I also learn a lot from them. It’s really more about exchanging than just me giving something.” (B_2407 08-02-24 GR)

M.’s words point to a form of care that moves beyond a purely biomedical model. While her medical expertise remains important, it is enacted through everyday interactions that emphasize dialogue, trust, and shared presence. Knowledge here does not flow in one direction; rather, it circulates among the women, who actively contribute their own experiences and understandings. In this sense, the space becomes one of mutual learning, where distinctions between “expert” and “recipient” are softened without disappearing entirely. M.’s role is not simply to provide care, but to participate in a relational process in which care and knowledge are co-produced. Her account thus highlights how solidarity initiatives can rework conventional hierarchies, fostering more horizontal and reciprocal forms of engagement.

In parallel with these practical dynamics, relational forms grounded in sharing and the routines of everyday life also take shape within spaces of encounter between migrants and those engaged in solidarity practices. These relationships often arise in the course of mundane activities, during collective cooking, cleaning, or repairing spaces, while smoking together outside, or in the quiet intervals between distributions and bureaucratic appointments. Moments of laughter, informal storytelling, and reciprocal language exchanges (“*I teach you some English, you teach me some Arabic*”) become part of an everyday rhythm that blurs the distinction between assistance and companionship. Through these repeated, embodied interactions, people come to know one another in ways that exceed the formal

categories of “volunteer” and “migrant,” producing instead fragile yet meaningful bonds of mutual recognition.



Fig. 31 Flyers of a chess competition organized in a community center in Athens. Source: the author.



Fig. 32 and 33. People playing chess during the competition organized in one community center in Athens. Source: the author.

Such interactions are often deeply embedded in sensory and affective registers: shared tastes, gestures of hospitality, and the bodily proximity of working side by side. The smell of food cooking, the

overlapping sounds of multiple languages, and the improvisation required to communicate without a shared tongue all contribute to the production of what many participants describe as fleeting moments of “normal life” within an otherwise exceptionalized context of displacement. These are not simply background elements, but central to how these spaces are experienced and remembered. As one volunteer of a community space in Sarajevo reflected, these small, seemingly ordinary moments (offering tea, sitting together, playing cards) become meaningful precisely because they interrupt the broader conditions of precarity and uncertainty:

“It’s like everything is going so bad and then at some point it seems like the only way... I mean, the way of these people that are forced into these situations is like offering tea, some food, maybe a shower... a space of relief, playing cards and being listened to, having a moment of... I really love random joy... I really love when we have all these people coming here and just hanging out and playing cards... they’re not even coming for the clothes... so many people are just coming to hang out, and that makes me really happy that we’ve been able to provide this kind of nice safe space where they can just chill, play cards, and have some lemonade or tea. And a nice thing about these moments, is that when you talk with people after some years, when hopefully they are in a better place, what they remember is the moment of laughs, the fact of having been together just to drink tea and play chess. Once someone told me... ‘those moments of normality gave me the rest and the strength to keep going despite all the bad things’ ... So even if they seem useless and small, these things matter in the end.” (M_2439 25-06-24 BiH)

What emerges from this account is how these ephemeral gatherings (organized around food, conversation, or shared activities) function as more than temporary relief. While they may dissolve as quickly as they form, they leave enduring traces in memory and subjectivity. They offer brief but significant interruptions to the logics of displacement, creating spaces where people can momentarily inhabit forms of sociality not defined by need or crisis. In this sense, their value lies not in their durability, but in their capacity to sustain affective connections and provide moments of recognition, rest, and collective presence.

In this sense, the study of everyday life in urban borderscapes (Brambilla, 2015) highlights the interplay between structural power and micropolitical action. It reveals how the ordinary, like cooking, chatting, teaching a word in a new language, can generate relational and affective infrastructures that shape subjectivities, foster solidarity, and momentarily suspend the asymmetries of power endemic to urban migration governance. Through these practices, urban borderscapes are continuously remade, not only as spaces of transit or control but as sites of social experimentation and emergent community.

Yet, while these everyday interactions generate temporary communities and moments of mutual recognition, they are not without contradictions. As it will be more deeply explored in one of the next sections, the very practices that foster intimacy and care can simultaneously reproduce bordering mechanisms and social hierarchies. Language, for instance, often structures relational dynamics: throughout my fieldwork I managed to observe how those who are fluent in dominant or widely used languages (such as English, or the local national language) tend to form deeper bonds with volunteers, activists and other solidarity actors, gaining easier access to information and resources. This linguistic asymmetry, while subtle, produces differential visibility and shapes who is able to participate more fully in the communal life of urban borderscapes. Gender further mediates these interactions in ways that go beyond task distribution. Socialization as a woman or a man influences how individuals navigate intimacy, risk, and trust, as well as what they choose to share or withhold. Women and men may experience the same space differently: women might cultivate networks of affective support and

confidentiality while simultaneously being more exposed to certain forms of risk, whereas men may negotiate visibility and mobility differently, often prioritizing public-facing or logistical interactions. These gendered patterns shape both access to resources and the affective dimensions of social life, influencing who feels able to participate fully, and under what terms. Partiality in the provision of services also emerges as a structural concern. Volunteers' personal connections, capacities, and unconscious preferences sometimes influence those who receives attention and support, producing uneven experiences of care. Even within spaces oriented toward solidarity, micro-level decisions and relational asymmetries can reproduce broader inequalities, reflecting the structural hierarchies embedded in urban migration governance.

It is in this context that critical reflexivity becomes essential. Being aware of the power dynamics embedded in language, gender, and access allows volunteers and solidarity actors to recognize how well-intentioned actions may inadvertently reinforce exclusion or dependence. Reflexive practices, such as questioning assumptions, distributing responsibilities equitably, and remaining attentive to who is made visible or invisible, can help mitigate these dynamics and make solidarity more inclusive and ethically grounded. In this sense, urban bordescapes are spaces of tension: they are sites where solidarity, care, and provisional belonging are enacted, but simultaneously where exclusion, hierarchies, and bordering mechanisms might be reproduced. Everyday solidarity practices operate as both forms of social support and micro-political arenas, through which participants navigate, negotiate, and, when approached reflexively, challenge the structural inequalities that shape life in the city.

1.2 Interpersonal Relations in Border Areas.

Among the different aspects that emerge from observing solidarity actors, practices, and spaces along the so-called Balkan routes, one of the most significant distinctions lies between the dynamics unfolding in border areas and those characterizing urban settings. While urban contexts, as discussed in the previous section, tend to offer relatively stable and less precarious conditions that allow the development of enduring infrastructures of solidarity - including permanent spaces, organizational continuity, and the presence of long-term volunteers and activists - border areas are defined by volatility, uncertainty, and transience.

In border zones, the precarity of the context and the continuous movement of people make it difficult to build trust and long-lasting relationships. The everyday realities of these areas are shaped by the proximity to militarized borders, the frequency of police operations and pushbacks, and the temporariness of those involved, both people on the move and solidarity actors. As a result, grassroots solidarity at the border is marked by what might be called its fluctuating and ever-changing nature. Initiatives emerge, transform, and sometimes disappear entirely, following the shifting geography of migration routes, the evolution of state control measures, and the rhythms of humanitarian and activist presences.

Reflecting on my own experiences and subsequent fieldwork, these dynamics become particularly visible when looking at places such as Bihać, in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Una-Sana Canton, or the Bulgarian-Turkish border region. Even within the relatively short span of three years, the transformation of these contexts has been striking. When I was volunteering in Bihać in 2020–2021, most solidarity activities revolved around supporting people living in abandoned buildings within the city - informal shelters where many were stranded after repeated attempts to “play the game,” that is, to cross the border into Croatia without being pushed back by the police. These sites of improvised dwelling became crucial spaces of encounter. Daily gestures, sharing tea, preparing food together, chatting around a fire, fostered

fragile yet meaningful relations, creating ephemeral moments of familiarity and trust amidst displacement and exclusion. When I returned to Bihać in 2023 for research purposes, the landscape had profoundly changed. Most of the squats in abandoned buildings had been evicted, and the visible presence of people on the move in public spaces, along the river, in parks, or near bus stations, had largely disappeared. As several long-term social workers and volunteers explained, almost everyone had been relocated to Lipa camp, a remote reception facility situated about 30 kilometers from the city. This spatial reconfiguration profoundly altered both the practices and the possibilities of solidarity. The relocation to Lipa not only imposed a new geography of containment but also disrupted the relational fabric that had previously developed in urban Bihać. Encounters that once occurred spontaneously in shared urban spaces became mediated by institutional logics of control, surveillance, and access regulation.

From an ethnographic perspective, this shift illuminates how border regimes do not merely control mobility but also shape the very conditions under which solidarity can emerge and endure. The constant reorganization of space, through evictions, relocations, and the creation of isolated camps, produces discontinuity and erases the traces of shared histories and affective relations that might otherwise sustain forms of collective resistance. In this sense, the temporality and spatiality of solidarity at the border are deeply entwined with the state's attempt to manage, contain, and render invisible both migration and the solidarities that arise around it. In my fieldnotes, I recorded a range of observations and reflections on these dynamics, drawing not only from my current research but also from earlier experiences I had in these contexts. Having spent time in these spaces before allowed me to witness firsthand the changes that have taken place over time, and to reflect on how interactions, relationships, and practices of solidarity have evolved.

"Sometimes it is unexpected how much things can change in such a small and peripheric area. Dynamics related to solidarity, mobility, interactions with institutions, authorities, and people on the move, are so different compared to 2021. In those days migrants were squatting buildings and places in or near the city of Bihać. You could see their presence on the streets, in the parks and along the Una river. And also solidarity had a different meaning. It was built on this everyday presence, everyday interactions, connections, frictions, with all the people involved. Now it feels like they manages somehow to 'clean' the area, 'hide' the migrants, out of sight... And volunteers and activists had to find new ways, new strategies, to be able to reach out to people transiting and in need of help. Those daily interactions are gone. And for this reason also the relations that you can establish are different, more volatile." (fieldnotes, Bihać, 08/05/2024)





Fig. 34, 35 and 36. Dom Penzionera in Bihac in 2021, when migrants were squatting it and in 2024, evicted and empty. Source: Francesco Cibati, Altreconomia and the author.

Similarly, in the border region between Bulgaria and Turkey, the attempt to obstruct any form of continuity or stability in grassroots solidarity manifests through an increasing process of isolation, restriction, and criminalization of solidarity practices. Over the past few years, both local and international organizations active in this area have faced mounting institutional and political pressure due to their involvement in supporting migrants arriving or passing through these territories. This pressure operates through a combination of administrative barriers, surveillance, and public delegitimization, mechanisms that together contribute to producing an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty surrounding acts of assistance and care.

Local organizations, in particular, have been the most exposed to these dynamics. Several have been repeatedly accused of “facilitating irregular migration” or publicly shamed through discrediting media campaigns, which have portrayed them as threats to national security or as actors operating in the grey zone between legality and illegality. Such stigmatization has not only undermined their legitimacy but has also forced some groups to withdraw or drastically scale down their activities. This process of criminalization, as observed elsewhere along the EU’s external borders, operates as a key technology of border governance: it extends the logic of deterrence beyond the control of migrant mobility to encompass and discipline those who stand in solidarity with them. The presence of international humanitarian and medical organizations in this area is likewise unstable and precarious. Many of them, engaged in activities such as mobile medical clinics, food distribution, provision of non-food items (NFIs), or even search and rescue operations in remote forested areas, have had to navigate an increasingly restrictive operational environment.

This uncertainty profoundly shapes the temporality, the affective and relational texture of solidarity work. Volunteers and aid workers operate in a constant state of contingency, where planning and continuity are almost impossible, and where the emotional toll of witnessing violence is compounded

by the precariousness of their own position. The strategies of adaptation that emerge under these conditions, for example discreet networking, rotating presence, reliance on informal channels, reflect a broader pattern of a form of “underground” solidarity (Queirolo Palmas & Rahola, 2020) that must continually reinvent itself to survive within hostile environments.

These aspects emerged both in the everyday dynamics I was able to observe during the time I spent on the field, and through the testimonies I collected. The words of a social worker and a volunteer active respectfully in Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina, recollect these issues clearly:

“I can’t even think on how much things have changed in the past 3 years. Every year is different, every month every week is different... And there’s something like a game. I always feel like we are in a game. And when we wake up, the next week, the next day, we’re just asking ourselves, “Okay, what is the next level?” And this makes things really hard for our job. The services, the projects we want to implement... it’s difficult when you don’t have any idea on how things will be, if people will be given asylum, if the camp will stay open... for example one year are they were givin protection to all people from Syria. Now they all get rejections...” (E_2426 24-04-24 BG)

“Eh, every year, maybe even every month, things change. Think that in 2022, 2023, after the investigation came out about the beatings migrants were taking in Croatia, things shifted. Especially last summer, Croatia stopped controlling so much, so people were actually managing to cross. Even the game keeps changing... in the last few years a whole network of car rides has developed, what they call the taxi game. People have these organized lifts now, they have meeting spots, times... they cross much faster than before. Also, the time people spend in camps like Lipa has changed. Now they stay three or four days, maybe a week. So all the dynamics change, the relationships, and the kind of work we do, everything changes. It’s all very fragile and constantly shifting...” (T_2442 08-07-24 BiH)

What these narratives reveal is how unpredictability is not an abstract condition but an everyday lived reality that shapes both practice and perception. Both testimonies points to a continuous need for adaptation, where rules shift without warning and actors are required to constantly recalibrate their actions. This instability permeates not only institutional frameworks (such as asylum policies, camp management, or border enforcement) but also the temporalities of interaction on the ground.

In such a context, establishing continuity and building trust becomes particularly challenging. Migrants’ trajectories are themselves structured by abrupt interruptions (pushbacks, arrests, transfers) which fragment their presence in any given place (Martini, 2024). As a result, encounters with solidarity actors are often compressed into brief, contingent moments, making it difficult for relationships to develop gradually over time. Ethnographically, this produces forms of engagement that are marked by immediacy and partiality, where support must be offered quickly, often without the possibility of follow-up. For these reasons, the relational dynamics that emerge in these settings are inherently fragile and provisional. Solidarity practices unfold under conditions of limited time, constrained mobility, and varying degrees of institutional oversight. Rather than stable or continuous relationships, what takes shape are intermittent connections (intense yet short-lived) embedded within a broader landscape of constant movement and uncertainty.

On the other hand, despite the criticalities, uncertainties, and fragile social infrastructures that characterize both the Una-Sana Canton in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the southeastern border region

of Bulgaria, it is precisely within these precarious and shifting environments that meaningful forms of connection and collaboration continue to emerge. Ethnographic observation in these contexts reveals how, even under conditions of instability and repression, people manage to create temporary communities and relational networks that have a profound impact both on individual subjectivities and on the broader, everyday forms of resistance to bordering processes.

What becomes evident is that shared experiences of precarity and liminality - albeit from different positionalities - often serve as a powerful ground for the formation of solidarity ties. On one side are migrants living in conditions of illegality, invisibility, and marginalization, subjected to pushbacks and institutional neglect. On the other are solidarity actors, whose activities are frequently constrained by criminalization, stigmatization, and the volatility of their operational environments. Yet this convergence in vulnerability does not necessarily weaken their interactions; rather, it can foster forms of intimacy, mutual understanding, and complicity that are sometimes more intense than those observed in more stable and structured contexts.



Fig. 37. A graffiti on the wall of an abandoned building in the Una-Sana Canton, once used for squatting and now empty. Volunteers, activists, and people on the move have left behind signs, phrases, and drawings reflecting the ongoing situation. Source: the author.

When I asked participants what they considered the most significant aspect of their experience in these settings, their responses consistently shifted the focus away from measurable outcomes or specific interventions. Rather than pointing to particular activities, services, or “successes,” many emphasized the relationships they had been able to build, relationships that unfolded through everyday interactions and often in ways that exceeded the initial scope of their engagement. As the following testimony illustrates, these connections are experienced as meaningful precisely because they are grounded in reciprocity, informality, and shared presence:

“In my opinion, in the end, the most important and impactful thing is the exchange. Exchanges on a cultural level, but also through language: I learn a bit of Arabic, you teach me a bit of

English. Or, I don't know, we make bracelets, you show me how to crochet a chain; before leaving, I give you a little gift. In the end, the solidarity we have toward people is like a little seed. I don't know, you can see it in situations like when Mohamed walks you to the station and carries your backpack, or Rahmi says to you, "Go, go to Turkey, I'll organize the trip for you, where to stay, my friends are there and can arrange everything." These are enriching exchanges, full of joy and beautiful shared moments, and a way for me to channel my anger into something practical that's useful to someone. Because if I just stay in my room, all pissed off, it doesn't make any difference." (A_2429 29-05-24 BiH)

Here, solidarity is described not as a one-directional act of assistance but as a series of exchanges - material, linguistic, affective - that generate forms of mutual enrichment. The emphasis on small gestures, such as accompanying someone to the station or sharing skills, highlights how relationships are built through everyday practices that carry both practical and symbolic value. At the same time, these interactions are framed as a way of transforming frustration and political anger into situated, relational action.

A similar emphasis on the relational dimension emerges in another account - from a volunteer I met in Bulgaria - where the significance of these experiences is located in the possibility of encountering others beyond instrumental roles or predefined objectives:

"Sometimes you kind of forget that you can be useful simply as a human being, and not as a homo faber who accomplishes a goal... So from that point of view, that was what touched me most about being in Bulgaria, realizing this closeness with people with whom, in another context, I would have never had the chance to talk. The whole dimension of relationships, of interactions, even if, when you're caught up in the urgency of doing certain things that seem operationally or immediately important, sometimes stopping and saying, "I'll just listen to someone telling me their story for two hours," is not a waste of time; on the contrary, it has a very deep importance." (M_2449 17-12-24 BG)

This reflection points to a tension that frequently emerged during fieldwork between the urgency of "doing" and the value of "being with." In highly pressured environments shaped by scarcity and constant change, time tends to be organized around efficiency and immediate needs. Yet, as this testimony suggests, moments of listening and co-presence, often perceived as secondary or non-productive, are in fact central to how participants make sense of their engagement. They open up spaces for recognition and connection that challenge more instrumental understandings of solidarity.

Across these accounts, relationships formed through small gestures of care, shared risks, and collective improvisation are not simply by-products of solidarity work but constitute its core. As one participant noted, they represent *"the real strength that keeps you going,"* functioning both as an emotional resource and as a subtle form of political positioning. The act of relating itself becomes meaningful in a context structured by separation, isolation, and deterrence:

"When things get difficult, I always think we also have social symbolic retributions that contribute to making things easier for us... And like, yeah, I think the best friends I have in my life, it's people I met at the border doing solidarity stuff. So it's also about this, like uh it's not just pain, suffering, violence... there are also these positive aspects that help us continuing, that keep us going..." (Q_2450 28-11-24 BG)

This emphasis on the affective and relational “returns” of solidarity highlights how these experiences are sustained not only through political commitment, but also through the bonds and forms of belonging that emerge within them. Such connections complicate dominant representations of border spaces as sites defined exclusively by suffering and crisis, revealing instead a more ambivalent landscape in which hardship and meaningful sociality coexist.

Finally, these relationships are also shaped by a shared awareness of operating within a hostile and unpredictable environment. This often gives rise to forms of tacit collaboration and mutual attentiveness, where solidarity actors and migrants navigate risks together and develop situated strategies of coordination:

“It happened many times, during distributions for example, or when organizing it, that i had the feeling we were a united front against the police and institutions, that was impeding them to reach their destination, forcing them to live in such conditions and risk their lives, and impeding us to help. So it was all about deciding each time which was the best place where to do the distro, at what time, in which modality. And we always tried to decide together. And if there were some situations that were potentially risky they were warning us and we were warning them.” (A_2429 29-05-24 BG)

In this account, solidarity is framed as a form of collective positioning vis-à-vis external constraints, where cooperation is both pragmatic and relational. The idea of a “united front” does not erase asymmetries, but points to a shared orientation shaped by common obstacles and overlapping vulnerabilities. Ethnographically, this highlights how relationships in these contexts are not only affective but also strategic, emerging through ongoing negotiations of risk, trust, and mutual support within a constantly shifting landscape.

Another aspect that emerged is that these relations and interactions, though often born in precarious and transient circumstances, frequently extend beyond the immediate spatial and temporal boundaries of the “field.” The connections formed in border zones or in places of transit do not necessarily dissolve once people manage to reach their destination or leave, or projects come to an end. Rather, they often evolve into lasting forms of friendship, transnational networks of mutual support, and collective memory practices that continue to sustain both migrants and solidarity actors long after the initial encounter.

Many of the individuals I met during fieldwork described how the relationships established in these difficult contexts continued well beyond their time at the border. Volunteers and activists often stay in contact with people they met during fieldwork or solidarity initiatives, following their journeys across Europe and, in some cases, visiting them in the countries where they eventually settle. These post-border encounters and connections are not only affective continuations of solidarity but also acts of re-signification: they reframe relationships once defined by the constraints of aid or assistance into genuine bonds of reciprocity, friendship, and shared life trajectories. Through these ongoing exchanges what begins as “fieldwork” or “volunteering” becomes part of a broader, transnational web of relations that subtly undermines the logic of separation and containment imposed by borders. M. a volunteer and activist that I met in Bulgaria and was often on the field doing solidarity, explained pretty clearly this dimension:

“I think that once you come into contact with the reality of borders, what they actually mean, the violence they produce, and the fact that they’re such a key element in maintaining global

injustice... it just becomes something really central in your life. Both in terms of your interests, I guess, but also emotionally. Like, at this point, I've met so many people who've become part of my life and who are connected to these places, these geographies, these circles... so yeah, I think that's worth mentioning too." (M_2433 05-06-24 BG)

"And yeah, I don't know... I'd also say that the friendships you build at the border really last. Maybe they're people you haven't seen in a long time, but for example, especially with the people on the move I met in Bosnia during that winter in 2021 — they're people I still talk to, and I still know what's happening in their lives, sometimes I managed to go and visit them in Germany or England or France, where they are. It's hard to see each other often because they still don't have the freedom of movement to travel around Europe, but yeah, I think we still support each other, even after just three months spent in the same town. So these long-term relationships are, I think, something really positive." (M_2433 05-06-24 BG)

This persistence of relationality also takes shape in collective initiatives such as the project Border Memory⁴⁶. Initially founded by solidarity activists together with the families of those who died or disappeared along the Bulgarian–Turkish border, the project has grown into a shared and open space of remembrance, one that documents, investigates, and commemorates the lives lost along the Balkan routes. Through its reporting tools, maps of incidents, and deep collaboration between migrant families and activists, the Border Memory Project does far more than record tragedies: it builds a relational infrastructure of remembrance and connection. It transforms fleeting, precarious encounters into an enduring, collective process of memory-making and resistance. In doing so, these lasting relations of memory expand the meaning of solidarity, stretching it beyond immediate acts of care into the realm of political witnessing. As H., an activist involved in this initiative, explained:

"The whole project was born from, and through, the relationships we built on the ground in Bulgaria: with people in transit, and with the families of those who had gone missing. It started from the need to stay connected, to remember together, and to make those stories visible." (H_2454 08-10-24 BG)

Another important relational dynamic can be seen within the networks of one grassroots organization active along the Balkan routes, which now stretches across multiple European contexts. Its decentralized, transnational structure allows migrants and solidarity actors to maintain contact and support across borders. For example, a young Afghan man assisted in Una Sana Canton might later reconnect with the same network in Germany, Italy, or France, receiving advice on housing, documents, or work opportunities. Volunteers and activists often travel to visit “former” acquaintances who have settled elsewhere, bringing small gifts, sharing news from the border, or simply spending time together over a meal. Digital channels also play a crucial role: WhatsApp groups, social media, and informal messaging keep these connections alive. I recall hearing how a group of volunteers that were in Bihać stayed in touch with a family of refugees now in Germany, coordinating support for school enrollment and legal procedures, while another migrant shared tips with newly arrived friends on how to navigate local bureaucracy. These examples illustrate how people themselves become the infrastructure that sustains mobility and solidarity, weaving enduring networks across fragmented geographies of exclusion and turning ephemeral encounters into long-term bonds of care and assistance.

⁴⁶ Reference here: <https://www.bordermemory.org/>

This endurance of connections and relations can be productively understood through AbdouMalik Simone's notion of "people as infrastructure" (2004), which emphasizes how social relations, networks, and everyday collaborations themselves constitute forms of urban and political infrastructure. While AbdouMalik Simone's concept of "people as infrastructure" (2004) was originally developed to analyze urban contexts, where marginalized populations creatively sustain life and circulation through flexible, improvised networks, this framework can be fruitfully extended to border spaces. In such settings, the capacity to navigate and negotiate constantly shifting configurations of danger, aid, surveillance, and control is not only essential to survival but to mobility itself.

The ethnographic observations from the Una-Sana Canton and the Bulgarian-Turkish border reveal that, despite pervasive precarity, people continuously generate these relational infrastructures through everyday acts of care and collaboration. The bonds forged between migrants and solidarity actors, through shared meals, assistance, emotional support, or collective improvisation, often become the basis for practical forms of navigation and survival. Over time, these relations may develop into transnational connections that endure beyond the field: volunteers visiting friends who have settled elsewhere in Europe, maintaining contact through digital communication, or offering ongoing help through informal channels. These continuities exemplify how people themselves become the connective tissue that sustains mobility across fragmented geographies of control. Extending Simone's framework from the city to the border thus highlights the broader applicability of his insights to spaces of transit, irregularity, and exclusion. In border zones, infrastructures forged through solidarity are not merely supporting structures for surviving abandonment; they are active and generative assemblages that enable movement, protection, and the persistence of social life within conditions designed to fragment and immobilize.

1.3 Navigating Inequalities and Power Asymmetries.

Having reflected on the formation of interpersonal relations across different borderscapes (Brambilla, 2015), from urban spaces to remote and securitized border areas, it is essential also to underline that these relationships do not arise under equal or ideal conditions. Rather, they unfold within profoundly asymmetrical structures marked by uneven access to legal status, mobility, resources, and safety. They are also shaped by the precarious and often temporary nature of solidarity infrastructures themselves, which depend on fluctuating human, financial, and emotional resources. Recognizing these conditions is fundamental to avoid romanticizing encounters between solidarity actors and migrants as inherently horizontal or transformative.

Imbalances and asymmetries were felt on different accounts by most of the solidarity actors I encountered. Yet what was striking, ethnographically, was not simply that these asymmetries were acknowledged - awareness of privilege is, in many solidarity milieus, almost a discursive norm - but the specific moments and registers in which they became viscerally felt. It was rarely in the abstract that volunteers confronted the gap between their own condition and that of the people they worked with; it was in the body, in the cold, in the moment of leaving. The reflections I collected on this theme were often marked by a particular kind of affective weight. One volunteer who had been active in Bosnia-Herzegovina gave one of the most striking accounts of this I encountered during my fieldwork, moving through three distinct but connected moments of recognition:

"The first thing that comes to mind is this one time we were in a squat. It was freezing cold , like, really freezing... and I'd never felt anything like that before, that sensation of having your feet frozen all the way up to your hips. My legs were completely numb. At some point, we looked

at each other and said, "Alright, you know what? We finished the distribution two and a half hours ago, I think we can call it a day and go home." But they were still there, in flip-flops, freezing their asses off... And that's the thing... I think it's when you go back home that you really feel the imbalance. Like you said: you go back to your bed. For me, that's the biggest difference... that's when you feel it so strongly, this imbalance.

(...)

Because in the end, we can pretty much do whatever we want. Even when you talk to the police, you know that at worst they'll give you a notice to leave, or take you to trial, maybe even ban you from the country. But you're not really at risk. And we kind of play with that, you know? We push it as far as we can. But that's exactly the point: we can do that, they can't. And that creates a huge gap.

(...)

It's the simplest thing in the world, but for me, it's the one that weighs the most: tomorrow I can go back to Italy in eight hours. For them, it takes six months. That's it. Small things that make you realize just how disproportionate it all is." (T_2402 24-01-24 BiH)

What this account foregrounds is how asymmetry is experienced as something both immediate and relational. The shared moment of standing together in the cold, participating in the same distribution, creates a temporary sense of proximity. Yet this proximity is sharply interrupted by the unequal possibilities that follow: the ability to leave, to return to safety, to disengage. The contrast between "going home" and "staying" becomes a powerful lens through which structural inequalities are felt and understood.

Others, reflecting on the persistence of these asymmetries, emphasized how deeply they shape the relational dimension of solidarity practices. Rather than being external to interactions, inequalities are embedded within them, influencing how proximity, care, and even friendship are experienced. As one participant explained:

"I think the first step is obviously to recognize that they exist, that we cannot change them in this situation and that it's not like that it's not anybody's fault necessarily. So like, we also don't have to be washed away by white guilt... Yeah, like the thing like, oh, I feel so guilty that I'm in this position and you're in this position. Like that doesn't help anyone and it's a bit weird. So like just recognizing, okay, I am in a position of power. I am a passport holder, I'm white, I'm not going to be racialized by police. I control the resources that people want access to... Whether that's shoes, whether that's a tent, whether that's hygiene items or a shower... No, like that is power controlling those things and then drawing certain consequences out of it. So realizing, okay, yes, it is 100% possible to get very close to someone emotionally, but is it a friendship on an eye to eye level the same way that maybe it would be if you met somebody at university in Italy or traveling through Amsterdam or whatever? No, it's not. Because you are part of that context and they are as well." (N_2432 27-05-24 BG)

This account underscores a reflexive awareness that closeness does not erase inequality. While meaningful relationships can develop, they remain shaped by differences in mobility, legal status, and access to resources. Recognizing these conditions, rather than attempting to dissolve them, becomes part of how solidarity is practiced and understood.

One of the key dimensions through which asymmetries and imbalances became evident in my fieldwork was that of gender. This axis of difference manifested itself in multiple ways, both among solidarity actors and among migrants, revealing how gendered socialization profoundly shapes practices, relationships, and experiences within the field of migration and solidarity. On the side of solidarity actors, gender informed not only how individuals experienced and performed their engagement, but also the kind of relationships they were able, or felt entitled, to establish. Among migrants, gender structured trajectories, forms of marginalization, and access to protection or mobility, producing differentiated vulnerabilities and strategies of survival. Importantly, these dynamics were not static but embedded in the context. In urban contexts, solidarity initiatives tended to attract and involve a greater number of women, while in border areas, the presence of women was less visible, albeit still significant, as in the case of Bulgaria. The spatial dimension thus intersected with gender, affecting both the composition of the groups involved and the nature of interactions taking place within them. Gendered experiences of solidarity and migration should therefore be read in relation to the specific territorial, institutional, and social configurations in which they unfold.

Across the various field sites, the majority of volunteers and activists I encountered were individuals socialized as women⁴⁷. Although in some contexts there was also a significant presence of those socialized as men, the dynamics I was able to observe and experience myself, as a researcher, volunteer, and activist socialized as a woman, were primarily shaped by this gendered configuration. Those socialized as women often reflected on their positionality in ambivalent terms, identifying both enabling and constraining aspects. On the one hand, many described the difficulty of navigating relationships with male migrants, noting that gendered expectations and concerns about being misinterpreted often limited opportunities for closer, more trusting connections. Because interactions were frequently viewed through a heteronormative lens, volunteers and activists felt compelled to carefully regulate their emotional expression, physical comportment, and everyday behaviors. This constant self-monitoring constrained forms of intimacy, mutual recognition, and the relational dimensions of solidarity, shaping how care and support could be offered or received. On the other hand, their gendered positionality could also become an enabling condition of relationality. Being perceived as women facilitated forms of proximity and trust with migrant women, relationships that were often inaccessible to male activists, and sometimes allowed men to express vulnerability, care, or emotional openness that would otherwise remain unspeakable.

As one volunteer put it:

“I mean, yeah, it’s definitely a thing, especially if you’re a woman doing fieldwork and you’re dealing mostly with single men. It can kind of limit what you can do sometimes, you know? But it’s not always like that. It can also work the other way around, sometimes men open up more, share things that are more personal or vulnerable, things they might not say to another man. So yeah, these gender dynamics are definitely there, and they shape the kind of relationships that happen in the field.” (M_2446, 04-07-24, BiH)

This observation captures the ambivalence of gender as both a limitation and a resource. On the one hand, being a woman could constrain one’s range of action and require heightened awareness of boundaries, particularly in male-dominated environments. On the other hand, it could also enable a

⁴⁷ Cf. note 2

different kind of proximity, allowing men to express forms of vulnerability and fragility that they might not reveal to other men.

Another volunteer elaborated on this ambivalence:

“And then, yeah, as a woman in the field, it definitely plays a role, every single time. From being asked things like ‘Do you have a boyfriend?’ or ‘Are you married?’ to being seen as more approachable. I’ve also heard this from some of my male colleagues, actually — that people tend to be more open or vulnerable with women, maybe because it feels less threatening or just more comfortable, you know?” (N_2432, 27-05-24 GR)

Here, gender appears as a relational modality, shaping both the emotional tone and the perceived legitimacy of encounters. Being socialized as a woman could expose volunteers to gendered expectations or unwanted questions, while also facilitating access to emotional and communicative spaces that remained closed to men.

In Bulgaria, another activist reflected on these differences by comparing interactions depending on the gender of the volunteers:

“Being a woman? Yeah, definitely. We were actually talking about this with the team on the ground. It first came up when I arrived, because a man had just left, and the volunteers who stayed were telling me how differently people interacted with him compared to us. Like, I don’t know... when he showed up at the park it was all, ‘Yo bro, how are you? Hey man!’ — hugs, kicking off a football game, chatting right away. With us women, there was a bit more distance. Sure, we played football too, but it wasn’t as ‘wild’ as with a guy. And you can always feel that difference in how people act around a man versus a woman — and honestly, it really pisses me off... But then, there’s also the other side of it — like being able to take part in women’s days, building more trust with women. Because they’re a group that’s already discriminated against — for being women, for being Black, for all sorts of reasons. It’s just so messed up. So yeah, I do have that privilege — being able to connect more deeply with women and kids. That’s something a male volunteer just wouldn’t have access to in the same way.” (A_2429, 29-05-24, BG)

These observations illuminate the relational and affective dimensions of gender in contexts of mobility and solidarity. Gender operates not only as a structural axis of inequality but also as a situated resource that shapes the texture of encounters, the circulation of care, and the possibility of intimacy across lines of difference.

Considering the multiple axes along which asymmetries and inequalities may emerge (such as gender, nationality, class, and economic resources) it also became evident that the various solidarity actors I encountered continuously sought to engage with and navigate these dynamics. As Agustín and Jørgensen (2021) remind us, reflexivity is a crucial tool for preventing solidarity from reproducing the very hierarchies it seeks to challenge. This means acknowledging the privileges that enable some actors, such as volunteers, NGO workers, or researchers, to remain, intervene, or withdraw at will, and understanding how these privileges are mediated by race, class, gender, citizenship, and legal status. Throughout my fieldwork, I sought to observe and analyze how both the different actors involved in solidarity practices became aware of, articulated, and negotiated these asymmetries in practice.

Many volunteers emphasized the importance of awareness as a necessary starting point for recognizing and addressing power imbalances. They approached it both as a personal exercise, reflecting on their own positionalities, assumptions, and potential biases, and as a collective practice, bringing these reflections into discussions during meetings, assemblies, and other shared moments. Through this combination of individual introspection and group dialogue, they sought to foster more equitable interactions, negotiate relational dynamics thoughtfully, and make their practices of solidarity more attentive and responsive to the needs and agency of the people they supported. For some, this involved a constant exercise of situated reflexivity, recognizing one's positionality, questioning one's motivations, and learning how to act in ways that minimized dependency or paternalism. As one activist working in Una Sana Canton explained, *"You have to be aware of your position... that's the first step. Reflect on that and try to act and behave accordingly... Otherwise, you end up reproducing what you're trying to resist."* Reflexivity, in this sense, was not a purely intellectual attitude but an embodied practice: as I was able to observe and witness, in the everyday interactions and encounters, it meant listening, sharing space, accepting help rather than always offering it, and being attentive to the subtle dynamics of giving and receiving. One of my informants described it well as a constant negotiation, an ongoing exercise in staying attentive and open to questioning one's own behavior.

"At the beginning, I refused to take anything from the people who came here, sometimes they'd bring us food, homemade things, and I just couldn't accept it. I kept thinking, they already have so little; why should I take what they have? But over time I realized how patronizing that attitude was. It wasn't generosity on my part, it was a kind of distance. So I started accepting, sharing, exchanging more. Because, in a way, these gestures, like offering food, sitting together, eating the same things... they help to rebalance, even if just for a moment, the huge inequality that exists between us." (F_2440 19-06-24 BiH)

Several interlocutors reflected on the impossibility of fully transcending the structural inequalities that shape encounters at the border, while emphasizing the importance of *"making them less extreme,"* as one participant put it. Such attempts often materialized through modest gestures and shared moments that momentarily suspended established hierarchies, brief interruptions in the otherwise pervasive asymmetries of power and mobility. One activist described how, during moments of play or laughter with the people he met, *"there were some moments, some fractions when we were able to make these big asymmetries matter a little less, like making them stop for a little,"* referring to a fleeting suspension of the inequalities that otherwise seemed omnipresent. Across several accounts, fragments of conviviality, like an improvised football match, cooking together, listening to music, exchanging language lessons, were remembered as spaces where care, joy, and mutual recognition temporarily displaced the hierarchies that structure everyday life in border contexts. These moments, while ephemeral, suggest how affective and embodied forms of solidarity can unsettle the rigidity of humanitarian and securitarian logics, creating cracks through which alternative relations might briefly emerge. B., one of the volunteer and activists I met in Bosnia-Herzegovina, described this dynamic:

"Well, of course, there are power imbalances, especially when you're on the field, because also in the interaction that you have with people on the move, many times you're giving things. You have resources that they don't have, unfortunately, because of the whole fucked-up system. So, there is an imbalance. But I always find it interesting how people can manage to try to make the differences and the imbalance less heavy. Like, for example, playing cards or having these moments where it's not about the distribution, but it's about just chatting, playing cards, playing football, or these kinds of situations... the things that everyone can enjoy." (B_2447 02-08-24 BiH)

In some situations, people navigated asymmetries and imbalances by either reinforcing their roles or deliberately relaxing them. In several of the social kitchens I frequented, the general approach was to avoid rigid distinctions between those giving and those receiving food, as one of my interlocutors highlighted:

“And it’s also a space that’s less rigid about roles. There isn’t always a sharp distinction between people who come for services and people who provide them. In other organizations, there’s usually a clear separation between beneficiaries and volunteers. Here, at least in the kitchen space, we try to overcome that distinction a little bit. And I think that makes a difference.” (M_2410, 20-02-24 GR)

By contrast, in other contexts - such as community centers providing specialized services like medical or legal support -, asymmetries were managed through the adoption of professionalized roles and a focus on “providing a good and fair service.” A volunteer from a grassroots medical group in Bulgaria described this approach explicitly:

“I know there are these structural asymmetries and different privileges. And when I think about them I try to focus on my work, on the service I’m providing. I’m a nurse here, just as I am in Italy, and I try to do my best in all situations. As a nurse, I also try to establish some boundaries, the same way I do at home.” (S_2401 23-02-24 BG)

These contrasting approaches illustrate how solidarity practices are relationally negotiated. In spaces like the social kitchens, horizontality and shared participation can temporarily suspend the hierarchies inherent in the border context, fostering moments of reciprocity and mutual recognition. In more specialized service contexts, by contrast, the professionalization of roles can function as a pragmatic strategy to navigate structural inequalities while ensuring ethical and effective care.

At the same time, relationships can also evolve across time and space, shifting their meaning as people’s circumstances changed. Several volunteers spoke of visiting friends they had met in Greece or Bosnia once these had reached more stable conditions in Italy, Germany, or France. In those later encounters, the relational imbalance, once marked by humanitarian or activist intervention, was reconfigured. *“When you see them again, it’s different,”* one person explained. *“You’re just visiting a friend, not helping someone anymore.”* Such ongoing connections reveal how solidarity relations can be reframed beyond the immediate temporality of crisis and beyond the spatial confines of the border. This dynamic emerged repeatedly in conversations with different interlocutors. M., a volunteer I met in Bulgaria, described it as a *“kind of reciprocity”* connected to the interactions that had taken place at the border.

“Of course, the fact remains that we’re people with completely different lives, with different levels of privilege, and so it’s hard... it’s always been really hard for me to navigate these things. You might really get along with someone, you connect, but then you go back home and you also have your own damn problems in your everyday life... while these people are literally doing the route. How can you really have an equal exchange when there’s such an imbalance? It’s not simple. But at the same time, it’s really beautiful to stay in touch, to find occasions to see each other again, or when the person finally manages to get where they wanted to go, to say: okay, now I’ll come visit you, and they host you. In those moments, something happens, a kind of reciprocity for what was once lived together at the border.” (M_2449 17-12-24 BG)

These dynamics were also emphasized by several migrants I spoke with, both during their time in transit through the Balkan region and later, once they had reached their destinations. R., a young woman from Syria whom I first met in Bulgaria and who now lives in Germany with her family, reflected on the importance of keeping in touch with the volunteers and activists she met while she was stuck in Bulgaria. Now that her situation is more stable, she told me that she looks forward to welcoming them into her home. This inversion of roles, no longer mediated by the precarious conditions of the border, reveals how relational configurations can shift once mobility is (partially) regained, allowing for more reciprocal and balanced forms of connection, even if structural asymmetries remain. As R. told me:

"You know, I still can't travel freely around Europe, so I can't come to visit you in Italy. But here in Germany I have a home now... finally!... and I can host you. In one month my brother is getting married, and I told my family I'd like to invite my Italian friends. We'd be so happy if you could come... it would mean a lot. Before, when I was in Bulgaria, they were the ones helping me all the time. Now it feels good to be able to do something for them, to give back a little." (fieldnotes, 15-10-24, Harmanli, Bulgaria)

Her words capture the affective and symbolic dimension of reciprocity that emerges once the conditions of waiting and dependency at the border are lifted. The act of "hosting back" becomes a gesture through which former hierarchies between helpers and helped are unsettled, allowing care and hospitality to circulate in new directions and to acquire renewed meaning beyond the border.

These practices of awareness, care, and continuity illustrate that navigating inequalities within solidarity work does not necessarily mean resolving them. Instead, it involves staying attentive to how power circulates within everyday encounters and how it may be softened, redistributed, or temporarily suspended. This ongoing negotiation reflects what Agustín and Jørgensen (2021) describe as the reflexive dimension of solidarity, one that recognizes its own limits and contradictions while striving to transform the conditions that sustain inequality in the first place.

2. Intergroup Relations.

Over the years I spent in the field, as well as through the contacts and networks built during my long engagement in volunteering and activism along the so-called Balkan routes, one key dimension of grassroots solidarity gradually came into view: the intricate web of collaborations and connections sustaining it. These networks, sometimes formalized and structured, at other times fluid, improvised, and ephemeral, constitute the very infrastructure through which solidarity along the routes takes shape, evolves, and endures. In countless conversations with volunteers, social workers, and individuals involved in these practices, what consistently emerged was the presence of a dense and interdependent network operating beneath the surface of most solidarity initiatives examined in this research. Far from being a homogeneous or coordinated system, it is better understood as a living, dynamic assemblage, an organism in constant transformation, adapting to the pressures of border regimes, shifting mobilities, and internal tensions. From a more distant perspective, one might imagine it as a sprawling spider web: at once interconnected and chaotic, fragile yet resilient. Across this web, organizations, collectives, and informal groups, - often from different countries, with various backgrounds, animated by diverse operational methods - remain bound together through shared principles of solidarity.

What emerges, in fact, is that solidarity work extends beyond the sphere of individual interactions and commitments. It is also structured by a meso-level fabric of relationships among groups, collectives, and organizations. This intermediate layer plays a crucial role in shaping how solidarity is organized,

sustained, and transformed over time. At this level, collaborations, exchanges of information, shared infrastructures, and overlapping memberships contribute to the formation of a relational landscape that gives consistency to otherwise dispersed initiatives. The practices and strategies of solidarity actors are thus not only the result of individual motivations or local contexts but are also deeply influenced by these inter-group connections, through which resources, experiences, and forms of knowledge circulate.

A key element that has emerged from my fieldwork (and will be further developed in the following sections) is the growing centrality of collaborations and networks among solidarity actors in recent years. In the immediate aftermath of the so-called long summer of migration (Hess & Kasperek, 2017), the unprecedented visibility of migration across Europe, together with the influx of fundings and media attention, led to the proliferation of organizations and initiatives in Greece and throughout the wider Balkan region. However, that period was also marked by a certain degree of fragmentation and competition among the different actors. Many organizations, both international NGOs and local initiatives, operated in parallel rather than in cooperation, competing for funding opportunities, public recognition, and legitimacy within the humanitarian field.

Over time, however, and particularly in response to the increasing criminalization of migration and solidarity (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2022), the progressive shrinking of civic space, and the drastic reduction of financial and institutional support, new and different forms of cooperation have emerged. In many contexts I observed, informal collectives, associations, and grassroots organizations have begun to develop more sustained relations of mutual support and coordination. These collaborations emerge from the ground up, arising from moments in which different groups experience and share conditions of need with one another. They can be understood both as strategic adaptations to hostile political and material circumstances and as political practices that actively contest isolation, dependency, and fragmentation, conditions that are themselves produced by border regimes and policies of externalization.

Such collaborations assume a multiplicity of forms, depending on the specific socio-political context and on the needs that emerge within it. In some cases, they take the shape of shared spaces (such as squats, community centers, and social kitchens) where different actors jointly organize activities and provide services. In others, they are expressed through transnational networks dedicated to monitoring and denouncing border violence, or through coordinated efforts to manage food and material aid distribution in large urban areas. In yet other instances, they materialize in digital and translocal infrastructures that offer information, logistical support, and legal guidance to migrants. Through these diverse configurations, collaborations weave together different scales of action - local, national, and transnational - creating what can be understood as “infrastructures of solidarity” (Schilliger, 2020) that sustain collective practices across borders.

In the following sections, I will examine how these inter-group relations, articulated through collaborations and networks, unfold both in urban contexts and in border areas. I will discuss their internal dynamics, tensions, and strategies, highlighting the ways in which they negotiate power relations within the humanitarian field and resist the bordering mechanisms that seek to fragment and depoliticize solidarity. The analysis aims to interrogate to what extent these networks can be understood not only as survival mechanisms within a shrinking civic space, but also as political tools that actively reconfigure the terrain of bordering and belonging in contemporary Europe.

2.1 Collaborations on a Local and National Level.

Across the different field sites I explored (Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Bulgaria) the collaborative networks sustaining solidarity practices are primarily local or national in scale, and deeply embedded in the social, political, and historical fabric of each place. Their forms, rhythms, and tensions are profoundly influenced by contextual factors: the legacies of social mobilization, the local political economy, and the specific configurations of migration management policies that define each border or urban environment. Rather than functioning as homogeneous or externally imposed models, these collaborations emerge through everyday negotiations, shared vulnerabilities, and the collective effort to sustain infrastructures of care within increasingly repressive contexts. As the following sections illustrate, each setting reveals a distinct articulation of what these collaborations mean and how they are practiced on the ground.

In Greece, and particularly in cities such as Athens and Thessaloniki, these collaborations are often situated within the broader ecosystem of solidarity spaces that have developed since the so-called “long summer of migration” of 2015. Community centers, squats, and social kitchens have become nodal points around which a constellation of small grassroots organizations, collectives, and individuals converge.

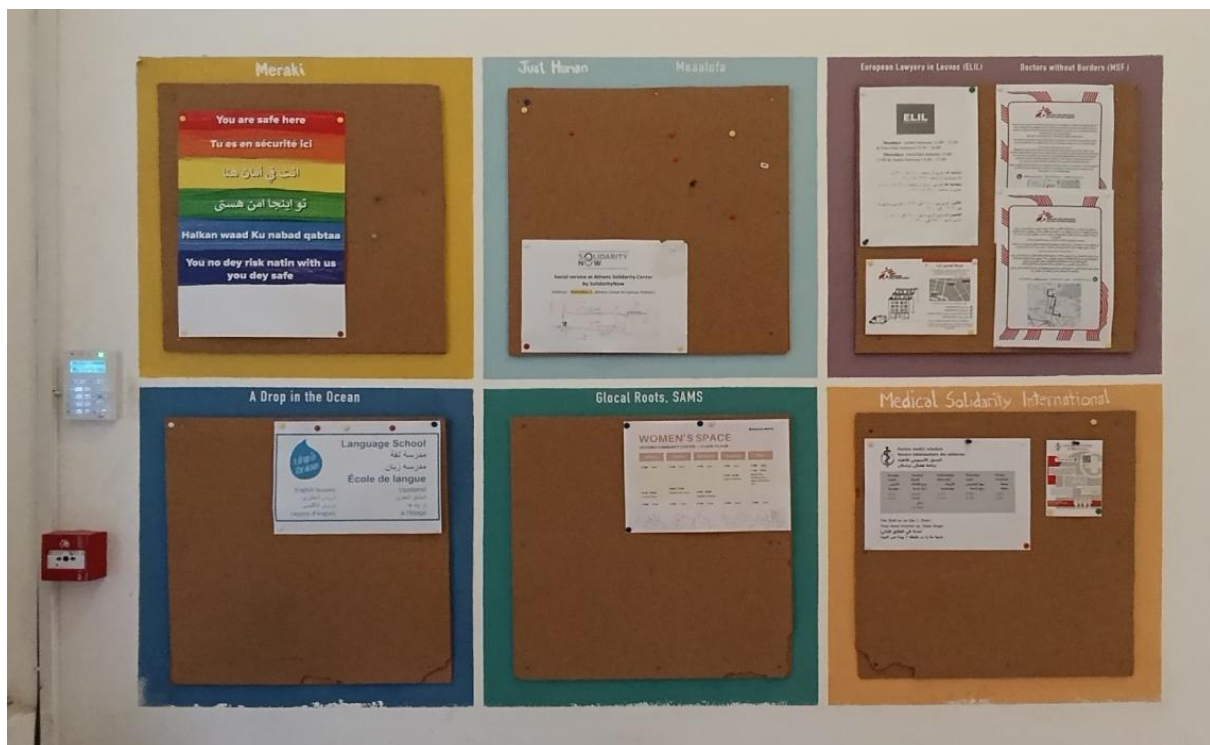




Fig. 38 and 39. Two informative boards and signs in a community center in Athens, showing the different services provided and the different organizations and groups collaborating for the project. Source: the author.

In several community centers in Athens, for instance, rent and maintenance costs are collectively shared among participating groups, while decision-making occurs through weekly assemblies that address both practical matters, such as scheduling and coordination, and broader political questions concerning migration policies in Greece. One of such center is sustained by the joint efforts of eight partner organizations that work together to provide essential resources, support services, and a sense of community. Throughout the day, each group contributes to specific activities, reflecting a multifunctional and holistic approach that includes food distribution, language classes, legal counselling, psychological and medical support, and women's activities. This organizational model embodies principles of horizontality, mutual accountability, and shared responsibility, directly challenging the hierarchical and depoliticizing logics characteristic of humanitarian governance. As one of my informants explained when describing the project and its internal dynamics:

"When we started this whole idea of the community center, with so many different organizations in, some people said we were crazy... especially if you consider how things were 10 years ago, everyone competing, which is very sad. We decided to create this place together because each of us was struggling to survive alone, financially, politically... Sharing a space made it possible to pool our resources and reach more people, but it also meant learning how to negotiate differences every day. Sometimes it's chaotic... different priorities, different ways of working, but that's also its strength. It's alive, flexible, and collective; it works because we keep talking, adapting, and taking care of each other." (S_2419 19-03-24 GR)

Similarly, M. the coordinator in one of these projects revolving around community centers, told me about the situation and the different approach compared to what previously characterized the landscape in Greece.

“In my opinion, no one can, or should, work as a single entity, as an isolated subject detached from others. First of all, it’s a matter of necessity: even if we all worked together perfectly, without wasting a single resource, we would still only be able to cover a tiny fraction of people’s real needs—both in numerical terms and in terms of the complexity of their situations. So, for me, conceptually there must always be collaboration between different organizations. No one can think they have the strength, financial or intellectual, to face everything alone. (...) Of course, it’s more difficult: you have to bring together different minds, different visions. But if the direction is the same, that confrontation becomes a richness, not a problem. Sometimes you might experience it as a limitation, but if you think about it clearly, you realize it’s always an enrichment. The more you broaden the range of cultures and ideas, the more rewarding it becomes to share and mix. Our approach, as Italians, is different from that of a German, an American, a South African, or a Chinese person—and that’s exactly what makes it beautiful. And fortunately, over the years, many organizations have come to understand this. When I first arrived, at the beginning, there was no experience, no precedent to look to. The emergency situation that developed in Greece in 2015–2016 had never been seen in Europe before, at least not in that form. All the organizations were born in that period, without any base of knowledge or experience to start working perfectly from day one—and that’s normal. But there was also a rough phase: competition, jealousy, pride, arrogance. Everyone was convinced that things had to be done their own way, that they had the truth in their pocket. Then, with time, experience, and difficulties, we learned that no one has the truth in their pocket. No one. We learned to question ourselves, to look at what others were doing, to grow together, to mature. Just think: in 2016, there were about five hundred organizations in Greece—ranging from micro-initiatives of one or two people to those with fifty. Today, across the whole country, including the islands, there are fewer than fifty. I’ve witnessed this change: we went from badmouthing each other and working separately to a context with far more collaboration, more dialogue, more synergy, even among very different groups, with completely different approaches. And in the end, all of this is driven by necessity. Let’s be honest: it’s economic difficulties, management issues, government obstruction, the lack of donations... It’s necessity that pushes people to think differently. And even today, necessity remains the strongest force driving these forms of collaboration.” (M_2416 28-02-24 GR)

These collective efforts have also materialized in a citywide food aid network recently established among several organizations engaged in providing meals and basic goods to people in need. The creation of this network exemplifies the transformations that have taken place in recent years, shaped by tightening political and institutional constraints and by an overall erosion of available resources. As one interlocutor explained, *“In the past years, there was a big chaos... everyone was struggling, and the resources were fewer and fewer.”* What were once fragmented and overlapping initiatives gradually converged to coordinate distribution routes, schedules, and supplies, aiming to optimize scarce means while avoiding duplication and waste. This shift reflects not only a practical reorganization of aid but also a broader process of collective adaptation to adverse conditions. In this sense, collaboration emerges less as a moral or ideological stance than as a strategic response to structural precarity and political repression, illustrating how solidarity actors continuously reconfigure their practices to sustain spaces of care and autonomy within increasingly restrictive environments.

Similarly, in Thessaloniki, a social kitchen has gradually transformed into a multifunctional solidarity hub, where various organizations and informal groups provide complementary services, weaving together a dense web of interdependence and mutual support. As one volunteer described during an interview, “*around food, everything connects... people, needs, and struggles.*” The space is organized around the daily preparation of a freshly cooked hot meal, made possible through a collaboration with a Greek organization that aims to reduce food waste while redistributing surplus food to those in need. Each morning, volunteers visit local farmers’ markets to collect donated produce, which becomes the basis for the day’s meal, cooked collectively, using whatever ingredients are available. Over time, the social kitchen has attracted a wider constellation of actors. Around it now gravitates a legal support organization, an informal medical service, and a network documenting institutional violence against migrants. These collaborations have enabled the development of additional services, such as maintaining contact with people held in pre-removal detention centers and organizing solidarity packages containing food, clothing, and hygiene items to be sent to them. These experiences illustrate how urban solidarity spaces can operate at the intersection of humanitarian necessity and political experimentation. On the one hand, they represent survival strategies in an increasingly hostile environment; on the other hand, they embody attempts to reimagine collective responsibility and interdependence beyond institutional frameworks.

In border regions, collaborative dynamics acquire distinctive configurations, shaped by conditions of urgency, risk, and moral ambiguity inherent to operating within spaces marked by violence and illegality. In southeastern Bulgaria, particularly in the areas surrounding the border with Turkey, I observed the fragile yet vital cooperation between local residents, small organizations, informal collectives, and international volunteers engaged in assisting people in distress across the forested borderlands. These interventions often involve providing food, water, and emergency medical assistance, or facilitating access to asylum procedures within Bulgarian territory. Crucially, such activities typically occur at night, under conditions of heightened fear and uncertainty, as any visible act of support risks criminalization under the prevailing securitarian regime. The strength and resilience of these networks rest on a shared recognition of mutual dependency, the understanding that no actor can sustain solidarity work in isolation.

As one social worker from a Bulgarian organization explained, collaboration becomes indispensable not only for operational survival but also for sustaining a political and ethical stance in an increasingly repressive environment:

“First, I think it is necessary, we do not have the capacity to be alone. And yeah, it is about synergies. For example, MW (Bulgaria organization) does not have the capacity to carry out rescues. However, we as internationals also do not have the capacity to be a registered organization in Bulgaria that is known to the public and authorities. So, I think it is about benefiting from each other's strengths. Take the example of Groupa Granica: It is a coalition of many organizations with different backgrounds, political positions, etc., working together, to some extent, to build something. For me, one of the most valuable aspects is our discussions. Yes, they take a lot of time and energy. However, I think being in this mode of debating, arguing, and exchanging ideas, not being allergic to disagreement, is extremely fruitful.” (M_2433 05-06-24 BG)

Here, collaboration is not merely instrumental but becomes a space of negotiation and learning, where differences are acknowledged as productive rather than divisive. The interlocutor’s emphasis on debate

and “*not being allergic to disagreement*” points to a mode of collective practice that relies on constant reflexivity, rather than consensus.

Local organizations also emphasized the strategic as well as relational value of these collaborations, situating them within a broader effort to navigate constrained and often rapidly changing humanitarian and political environments. In their accounts, partnerships, whether formal or informal, stable or temporary, are not only practical arrangements but also mechanisms through which visibility, advocacy capacity, and access to knowledge are produced and expanded across transnational networks.

As one interlocutor explained:

“Any partnership is very useful because it makes advocacy easier for us. It puts more light on the situation in Bulgaria, and also, they can give us a lot of experience, you know, much experience they have, and we can give them a lot of experience also.” (I_2425 07-05-24 BG)

Here, collaboration is framed as a reciprocal process of exchange, in which different actors contribute complementary forms of knowledge and experience. The emphasis is not only on what is gained through partnership, but also on how such exchanges redistribute attention toward otherwise overlooked or under-acknowledged contexts, reinforcing the political and communicative reach of local initiatives.

This relational and cumulative dimension becomes even clearer when participants reflect on how their capacity for action has evolved over time through expanding networks of cooperation:

“Years ago, it wasn’t possible for us to have that much impact or see people at that level that easily. But with the capacity of all these collaborations, we are able to find more and more people working on it and advocating for what’s happening here.” (I_2425 07-05-24 BG)

This account points to a gradual transformation in the scale and effectiveness of local engagement, made possible through the consolidation of collaborative ties. Rather than operating in isolation, organizations increasingly situate their work within broader constellations of actors, through which information circulates more rapidly and advocacy efforts gain amplification.

In another border region, the Una-Sana Canton in Bosnia and Herzegovina, similar constellations of collaboration have taken shape around the practical and urgent need to support people stranded along the Croatian border. Over the past years, small local associations, international collectives, and grassroots organizations have coordinated, often informally, to distribute food, blankets, hygiene products, and firewood, and to set up temporary showers, especially during the harsh winter months when official camps reach capacity. These collaborations, while rooted in immediate humanitarian necessity, are also shaped by scarcity and repression: access to public space is heavily restricted, and aid activities are frequently obstructed or criminalized by local authorities. Yet, within these constraints, solidarity actors cultivate creative and adaptive forms of cooperation, grounded in everyday improvisation and mutual dependence. During my time in the area, I observed how groups shared vehicles, storage spaces, and materials, exchanged information on police patrols, and pooled technical knowledge—for instance, about the operation of mobile shower systems initially introduced by one collective and later adopted by others as a shared, movable resource to support people in informal settlements. These fluid and decentralized networks, while often temporary, exhibit a notable degree of resilience and flexibility, sustaining practices of care and connection under conditions of repression. They exemplify what Papadopoulos and Tsianos (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013) conceptualize as “mobile commons”, a dynamic assemblage through which resources, knowledge, and affect circulate,

enabling both human mobility and solidarity to persist despite the bordering mechanisms designed to immobilize and isolate.

As already mentioned, collaborations between local and international actors are not always smooth or functional. Rather, they are deeply embedded in specific socio-political and historical configurations. The tensions that often emerge within these interactions are inseparable from past experiences in which international organizations established a presence in certain territories, frequently generating additional challenges rather than providing genuine support. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, as outlined in the previous chapter, the problematic legacy of international NGOs during and after the Yugoslav wars has left deep scars and a widespread sense of skepticism toward external interventions. This historical memory has intersected with the more recent, and at times superficial, involvement of international volunteers assisting migrants in the past years, an involvement that has sometimes been seen as problematic when it failed to reflect on its own positionality and on the layered histories of the places in which it operated (Tazzioli, 2020; Rozakou, 2017; Helms, 2023)). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, this dynamic has often materialized in contexts where international volunteers, driven by strong ethical and political commitments, nonetheless struggled to collaborate effectively with local communities or underestimated the complex political sensitivities of a post-war society characterized by ethnic fragmentation, economic precariousness, and institutional weakness. A similar skepticism toward “internationals” and NGOs emerged in the Greek context, particularly in the aftermath of the so-called “long summer of migration.” In this context, the rapid expansion of large international NGOs - typically better funded, more institutionally embedded, and oriented toward technocratic and managerial forms of humanitarian governance - introduced competing and often conflicting frameworks for the organization of aid. Their growing presence generated significant frictions with grassroots collectives and organizations, particularly those embedded in local communities and grounded in solidarity as a political praxis. While the latter framed assistance as a relational and explicitly politicized intervention, international humanitarian actors tended to operate through depoliticized, standardized, and bureaucratic logics of intervention, thereby reshaping the field of aid along hierarchical and managerial lines (Cabot, 2019).

In recent years, some of these tensions have gradually subsided, partly as a result of the structural conditions shaping the field of solidarity itself and partly because many of the international actors who remained active have a grassroots, non-institutional approach. Those committed to maintaining such a profile, refusing governmental or institutional funding in order to safeguard their political autonomy, often operate under significant material constraints, facing chronic shortages of financial resources, infrastructures, and organizational capacities. Within this landscape, collaborations between local and international grassroots solidarity actors have become increasingly common, grounded in shared political commitments and mutual recognition rather than hierarchical or institutional frameworks.

2.2 Collaborations on a Transnational Level.

Another important dimension of solidarity practices along the Balkan routes concerns the growing and fruitful collaborations among different actors operating within transnational networks. Many of the organizations I encountered during my fieldwork are closely intertwined and often cooperate across national borders. A key example of such collaboration is the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN)⁴⁸, an independent and self-organised network of NGOs, associations, and collectives that monitors human rights violations at and within European borders and advocates for

⁴⁸ Website of the network: <https://borderviolence.eu/>

the end of violence against people trying to reach Europe. Through systematic documentation and the recentring of lived experiences, the network collects evidence to hold those responsible for border violence accountable. BVMN's work relies on the active participation of its member organizations, allied groups, and their local teams, each contributing according to their specific expertise. The network publishes monthly reports that summarize pushbacks and other forms of border violence across Europe. These reports provide comprehensive overviews of patterns and trends, as well as specific notable cases across various geographical contexts monitored by the network. They document escalating violence, excessive use of force, and even cases of alleged torture, making them an invaluable source for studying the mechanisms and effects of contemporary migration management.

Many of the organizations and collectives I engaged with during fieldwork were part of BVMN, which allowed me to follow the transnational connections between different sites and actors. Beyond its monitoring function, the network also exerts a political role. For instance, its publication of the Black Book of Pushbacks, presented to the European Commission, has drawn significant attention to systemic violence at European borders, particularly along the Balkan routes. While these efforts have not yet led to substantive policy change, they have been crucial in rendering visible the practices of border violence and the contradictions of the EU's human rights discourse.

A further example of transnational collaboration is provided by the Welcome2Europe⁴⁹ platform (w2eu.info). Established in 2010, this network emerged *"to build daily structures and to provide useful multilingual information to empower and support refugees and migrants in transit for their right to move to their desired destination."* The platform remains active today, offering online resources to refugees and migrants traveling to and through Europe. For each country, it provides lists of contact organizations, as well as practical information on asylum procedures, legal assistance, healthcare, employment, and other essential services. Available in five languages, the platform states its aim as follows:

"By providing information that can help them on their journey to and through Europe, we aim to support them in organizing themselves and interconnecting with each other and solidarity structures in their fight for a better future, as well as fighting against misinformation, administrative confusion, wandering and despair. Together we fight against Europe's inhumane border regime, refusals of entry, detentions and expulsions." (w2e website)

⁴⁹ Website: <https://w2eu.info/en>

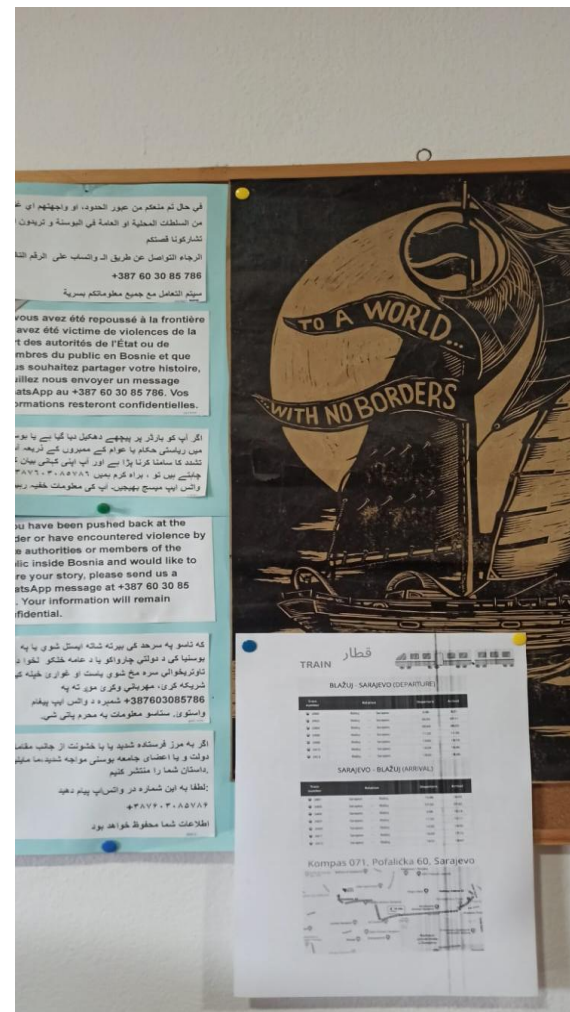


Fig. 40 and 41. An information board in a Sarajevo community center provides details about the Welcome2Europe platform and instructions for reporting border violence. Source: the author.

During my fieldwork across Greece, Bulgaria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, I frequently encountered references to this platform in social centers, solidarity spaces, and reception facilities. Volunteers and activists in all three countries described it as a common and reliable resource to share with people arriving or staying in different European countries. The platform's practical impact was also confirmed by several migrants I met. One illustrative example comes from a young man from the Democratic Republic of Congo, whom I met while volunteering at a center in Athens. Showing me the *Welcome2Europe* platform on his phone, he explained, *"I read about this place on this website."* He went on to describe how the platform had been particularly useful to him during his journey and how he had learned about it through friends who had also relied on it in other countries when in need. This episode exemplifies the tangible ways in which digital infrastructures enable and sustain transnational forms of solidarity, facilitating the circulation of information, support, and care practices across borders.

Another illustrative example of how digital tools sustain and extend practices of solidarity is provided by an online platform developed by one of the organizations encountered during my fieldwork, operating across several sites along the Balkan routes. Rather than functioning as a static repository of information, this platform operates as a dynamic, transnational infrastructure through which volunteers (both those currently in the field and those who have returned to their countries of origin) remain actively connected to ongoing activities. In this sense, it enables continuity beyond physical presence,

sustaining forms of engagement that would otherwise be disrupted by mobility, exhaustion, or return. The platform works as a shared space for the circulation of practical knowledge and situational updates. Participants use it to exchange contact details of lawyers, doctors, and local solidarity groups, to report and verify incidents such as pushbacks, deportations under the Dublin system, or police operations, and to coordinate responses when migrants arrive in new locations requiring immediate assistance or reliable referrals. As one volunteer involved in its use explained:

“I find this tool very useful, on so many ways... You can have the feeling you are still helping out and supporting even if you are back in your country and no longer on the field. All the contacts we have, all the people we met, we can still find ways to support them thanks to this tools that connects us. For example... Sometimes someone writes that a person just arrived in Greece after being ‘dublined’ (aka deported) from Greece, and within an hour someone else replies with contacts of local groups who can help. It’s a way to make sure no one disappears in between borders.” (A_2429 29-05-24 BG)

What emerges from this account is the role of the platform as a mechanism for maintaining relational continuity across distance and temporal discontinuity. Its technical structure, based on messaging threads and shared documents, is deliberately simple, yet it enables a high degree of responsiveness and circulation of information across geographically dispersed sites such as Greece, Serbia, and Germany. During fieldwork, it became evident that this digital layer does not replace on-the-ground coordination but rather complements it, linking localized practices into a wider relational field of action. In this sense, such platforms can be understood as infrastructures of solidarity: they actively produce and sustain the connections through which knowledge, resources, and forms of support circulate. At the same time, they partially reconfigure the fragmented geography of the Balkan routes into a continuous communicative space, where distance is mitigated through immediacy of exchange and shared awareness of ongoing events.

More broadly, this digital dimension represents an increasingly significant - yet often underexamined - aspect of contemporary grassroots responses to bordering regimes. While state authorities have progressively integrated digital technologies into border control and surveillance apparatuses, through tools such as motion sensors, infrared cameras, and data-driven monitoring systems, grassroots actors have simultaneously appropriated digital infrastructures for alternative purposes. This process does not simply replicate the logics of securitization in reverse, but reorients digital connectivity toward practices of care, coordination, and mutual aid.

In this way, digital tools are not merely facilitative instruments of communication, but constitutive elements of transnational solidarity itself. They enable dispersed actors to remain relationally embedded across shifting borders, sustaining forms of collective responsiveness that would otherwise be difficult to maintain. Seen from this perspective, the digital sphere becomes both an operational and political space, in which alternative infrastructures of support are continuously produced in tension with, and often in response to, the technologies of surveillance and control embedded in contemporary border regimes.

2.3 Beyond Differences. Weaving Solidarity on a Local, National and Transnational Level.

Across local, national, and transnational levels, the relations between solidarity actors reveal how collective organization persists and adapts within spaces marked by abandonment and control. The collaborations observed along the Balkan routes emerge not from institutional alignment or

programmatic consensus, but from situated encounters and shared urgencies. They are grounded in trust, reciprocity, and the everyday work of maintaining relations across difference. As such, they embody what Featherstone (Featherstone, 2012) calls relational solidarities: dynamic formations continually reconstituted through situated practices and contingent alliances.

These constellations of solidarity transform contexts marked by scarcity and repression into infrastructures of connection, interdependence, and collective possibility. Whether through the co-management of a community centre in an urban neighbourhood, the coordination of medical or legal assistance at a border site, or the circulation of information via online platforms, such practices constitute acts of collective world-making within spaces where social life is systematically constrained or denied. Through these networks, interdependence becomes both a necessity and a political practice, a relational fabric through which knowledge, resources, and care circulate. What takes shape is not a coherent or unified movement, but rather a constellation of heterogeneous initiatives that persist precisely because of their diversity. Following Featherstone (2012), conceiving of solidarity as relational enables us to trace the multiple connections, interactions, and translations that compose it. This perspective highlights the dynamic and unfinished nature of solidarities: they are not fixed entities but processes continually made and remade through encounter and struggle. Such an approach opens space for imagining political communities that are not bound by sameness or predefined goals, but that emerge contingently through shared practices of resistance and care.

As I observed during my fieldwork and as numerous studies have suggested (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2021), solidarity can link individuals and groups who might appear to have little in common. It is, as Featherstone (2012) writes, a matter of “*constructing relations between places, activists, and diverse social groups.*” Similarly, Agustín and Jørgensen (2021) emphasize that solidarity often connects actors who share few ideological or identity-based affinities, yet who become linked through encounters within contexts of exclusion and hostility. It is precisely in these encounters that new forms of political imagination emerge, forms that contest the fragmentation and isolation imposed by the European border regime. The key issue in the formation of alliances of solidarity, therefore, is not one of identity but of convergence: how diverse political actors meet and collaborate within ongoing social struggles to challenge political closure while maintaining their heterogeneity. This dynamic process nurtures a shared political subjectivity without collapsing into uniformity. Solidarity, in this sense, is an open-ended practice, one that resists closure, values plurality, and acknowledges the complex, uneven, and multifaceted relationships through which collective life is sustained across different contexts.

A distinctive feature of these networks lies in their capacity to operate simultaneously across multiple scales. Local initiatives depend on national and transnational connections for material support, information, and legitimacy, while transnational networks rely on local actors for grounded knowledge and presence. The tension between these scales is not merely logistical but profoundly political: it defines how solidarity can endure and how it can contest the spatial and institutional disarticulation produced by border regimes. Sustaining these multi-scalar relations requires constant negotiation, as actors navigate divergent priorities, unequal access to resources, and the pressures of criminalization or donor dependency. Yet, rather than interpreting these frictions as failures, they should be understood as integral to the practice of solidarity itself. They reveal the labor of maintaining connection under duress: the ongoing process of weaving, unweaving, and reweaving relationships that allows collective action to endure within hostile and uncertain environments.

Within this evolving landscape, digital networks have become an essential layer of transnational solidarity. While states have increasingly deployed technological infrastructures for surveillance,

identification, and deterrence, solidarity actors have started to utilize more and more digital tools to sustain alternative infrastructures of care and communication. Platforms such as Welcome2Europe, the Border Violence Monitoring Network, or informal virtual spaces created by volunteer groups to remain in contact and continue their solidarity work also when they are not on the field anymore, demonstrate how digital technologies are reimagined as tools of connection rather than control. They enable dispersed actors to share information, coordinate interventions, and remain present across borders, even when physical mobility is restricted. From my own observations and experiences in the field, the practical use of social media, chat groups, online pages, and translation tools was integral to making the solidarity practices I describe possible. For example, agreeing on meeting points for distributions in Bosnia and Herzegovina relied on online chat coordination; arranging appointments at medical points in Athens was facilitated through social media communication; the organization of search and rescue operations in Bulgaria depended on multiple digital platforms; and Google Translate was routinely used to communicate with migrants, bridging language barriers and enabling immediate, essential interaction.

In this sense, digital infrastructures do not merely facilitate the logistical coordination of solidarity; they contribute to its very form. They allow movements to organize in polycentric and rhizomatic ways (Gerlach, 1991), fostering fluid alliances that mirror the mobility of the people they support. As Alcalde and Portos (Alcalde & Portos, 2018) observe, digital media contribute not only to the diffusion of information but also to the structuring of movements themselves, facilitating what Bennett (2003) terms “loose ties” that sustain collective mobilization without centralized coordination. Within the restrictive geography of Europe’s borders, these digital spaces preserve connectivity, visibility, and continuity when physical presence becomes impossible, making it possible to act collectively within the dispersed geography of the European border regime.

Ultimately, the relations that unfold across the Balkan routes, material and digital, local and transnational, demonstrate that solidarity is less a fixed condition than a continual practice of weaving. Through these relational and technological infrastructures, actors sustain fragile but enduring forms of collectivity that challenge the spatial, bureaucratic, and epistemic boundaries of the European migration regime. The power of these forms of solidarities does not lie in their stability or institutionalization, but in their capacity to endure through uncertainty: to persist relationally, adaptively, and often digitally, against the disintegrating forces of borders and bordering mechanisms. In doing so, they affirm that care, connection, and communication are not secondary to political struggle, they are its very substance.

3. Relations as De-Bordering Tool.



Fig. 42. A photo of a phrase exchanged and translated via Google Translate between a volunteer and a migrant in Bulgaria, after an afternoon spent together talking and sharing tea. Source: the author.

As it has been outlined throughout the chapter, the core of contemporary grassroots solidarity along migration routes (and in this case the so-called Balkan routes) lies a relational logic that permeates every level of social interaction, from the interpersonal to the transnational. Relationships are not incidental to solidarity practices; they constitute the very infrastructure through which acts of care, support, and political imagination are enacted, rendered meaningful, and sustained over time. In contexts marked by increasingly securitized and violent border regimes, where mobility is criminalized, access to rights is unevenly distributed, and everyday life is shaped by surveillance, exclusion, and coercion, solidarity emerges not merely as material support, but as a set of relational practices that traverse difference, vulnerability, and asymmetry. It can be argued that it is through these very ties that solidarity operates as a form of “de-bordering” (Ambrosini, 2024) of deconstruction, negotiation but even contestation of borders and bordering mechanisms; a process that does not simply cross territorial boundaries, but actively contests and reconfigures the social, moral, and institutional hierarchies that sustain them.

We have seen how at the interpersonal level, solidarity is constituted in the mundane and affectively charged spaces of everyday life. Shared practices such as preparing meals, navigating bureaucratic procedures, providing care, tending to injuries, or simply cohabiting spaces bring actors into prolonged, intimate engagement. These encounters often blur the categories that institutions impose (“migrant,” “volunteer,” “activist”) and foreground relational qualities such as trust, mutual recognition, co-presence, and care. Within these interactions, dominant narratives of deservingness, victimhood, and otherness are destabilized, giving rise to human-centered connections. The fragility and improvisational nature of these bonds, far from diminishing their significance, underscore the contingent and negotiated character of solidarity: it is simultaneously ethical, affective, and political, emerging in spaces where vulnerability and asymmetry are acknowledged, rather than erased. These interpersonal practices thus constitute a foundational layer of solidarity, where the ethical and relational dimensions of support are enacted before, and alongside, any formalized organizational structure or political strategy.

At the intergroup and organizational level, these micro-relational logics are embedded in and extended through networks of collectives, initiatives, and cross-organizational constellations. Networks such as the Border Violence Monitoring Network, Welcome to Europe, and local grassroots hubs like a food distribution network or some Community Center function as translocal arenas of coordination, knowledge exchange, and collective action. Beyond their immediate logistical and protective functions, these networks generate new forms of political subjectivity and relationality. They mediate information flows, provide mutual support against criminalization, and construct alternative infrastructures that circumvent state-imposed fragmentation. By connecting heterogeneous actors across space and organizational boundaries, these networks, collaborations and forms of cooperation exemplify how solidarity can operate as both a reactive and proactive force: reacting to immediate vulnerabilities, while simultaneously prefiguring social and political alternatives to the moral and geographic confines of the European border regime.

At the broader, transnational level, these relational dynamics converge in constellations that challenge the very spatial and institutional logics of bordering. Solidarity is enacted not only through the crossing of borders in a physical sense, but through the weaving of networks, flows of information, and shared practices that destabilize hierarchical logics of inclusion and exclusion. Here, solidarity functions as a form of collective infrastructuring: a process in which actors create and sustain relational, material, and affective spaces that render visible the human and social costs of securitization, while simultaneously imagining alternative modes of community, care, and justice. Such transnational relationality highlights how grassroots initiatives are entangled with, but not reducible to, formal humanitarian interventions, EU policy frameworks, or state-led migration management. They operate in the interstices, in the shadows of institutional power, precisely where new political imaginaries and practices can emerge.

All these dimensions and dynamics illustrate how solidarity is infrastructured, that is, how it takes material and organizational form through the coordination of people, spaces, resources, and information. These infrastructures of solidarity are not fixed entities; they are flexible, contingent, and constantly reassembled in response to changing political and spatial conditions. Drawing on AbdouMaliq Simone’s notion of “people as infrastructure” (2004), solidarity can be understood as a mode of collective world-making in which social relations themselves become the connective tissue that sustains mobility, safety, and life in contexts of precarity. Here, it is the relational labour - of communication, translation, accompaniment, and care - that makes circulation possible, compensating for the systematic withdrawal of institutional infrastructures. People, through their relationships, become the infrastructure through which life and movement persist at the border.

Certainly, these infrastructures of solidarity are deeply shaped also by power asymmetries: between established organizations and informal groups; between local actors and transnational networks; between European and non-European participants. However, rather than being merely hierarchical, these asymmetries are dynamic and negotiated. They reveal how solidarity is a process of infrastructuring, an ongoing effort to assemble resources, affective energies, and knowledges in ways that sustain collective action. This process is often characterized by tensions: between professionalization and horizontality, between care and control, between autonomy and dependence on external funding or institutional legitimacy. Yet, it is precisely through navigating these tensions that grassroots solidarity reconfigures the terrain of political action. In this sense, infrastructures of solidarity operate as both material arrangements and political practices: they enable mobility, visibility, and resistance while simultaneously challenging the fragmentation imposed by state and supranational governance.

Taken together, the relational dimensions of solidarity explored in this chapter demonstrate that these practices are neither incidental nor secondary to the structural conditions they respond to; rather, they constitute an active site of contestation and transformation. “De-bordering”, in relational terms, consists in the cultivation of social ties and relational infrastructures that resist and reconfigure the hierarchies, exclusions, and spatialized moralities underpinning borders. It means to create infrastructures of connection that resist fragmentation, cultivate mutual dependence, and open new possibilities for political imagination. Across micro-level daily practices, meso-level networks, and transnational constellations, solidarity emerges as a dynamic, negotiated, and pluralistic set of practices. These practices are attentive to power asymmetries, sensitive to vulnerability, and oriented toward autonomy, collective care, and shared struggle.

4. Conclusion: Toward a Relational Understanding of Solidarity

What this chapter has traced, across different scales, contexts, and registers of experience, is the centrality of the relational dimension to the practice and meaning of solidarity along the Balkan routes. Yet to say that solidarity is relational is not, in itself, sufficient. What the ethnographic material gathered across Greece, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Bulgaria allows us to argue more precisely is that the specific quality, texture, and political significance of these relations varies profoundly depending on the spatial, temporal, and institutional conditions in which they unfold, and that it is precisely this variability that makes the relational dimension analytically productive rather than merely descriptive.

In urban contexts, as the first section of the chapter demonstrated, the relative stability of spaces and the continuity of presence allow for a slow, cumulative form of relational construction. Trust is built through repetition, through the same faces appearing at the same times, through the gradual accumulation of shared routines, small exchanges, and moments of mutual recognition that exceed the formal scope of any service or intervention. What emerges from this process is something that might be described, following Simone (2004), as a form of social infrastructure: a dense web of relations that sustains not only individual wellbeing but the very capacity for collective life within contexts of precarity. The community centers, social kitchens, and squats observed during fieldwork function not merely as sites of provision but as relational environments in which personhood is reaffirmed, stigma is temporarily suspended, and alternative modes of belonging become experientially real, if always partially and provisionally.

In border areas, the conditions for this kind of slow relational construction are systematically disrupted. The proximity to militarized borders, the frequency of pushbacks and arrests, and the constant

reorganization of space through evictions, relocations, and camp transfers fragment the temporal continuity upon which trust depends. And yet, as the ethnographic observations from Una-Sana Canton and the Bulgarian-Turkish border region consistently revealed, it is often within these most constrained environments that the most unexpected relational intensities emerge. The compression of time, paradoxically, can produce forms of closeness and complicity that more stable contexts do not generate in the same way. Shared exposure to risk, the experience of operating together within a hostile and unpredictable terrain, and the mutual recognition of a common adversary can forge bonds that, while brief, carry a weight and a meaning that participants continue to carry long after the encounter has ended. This dynamic resonates with what several interlocutors described as the enduring quality of these friendships developed along borders, relationships formed in three months that outlast years of geographical separation, maintained through digital channels, visits across Europe, and the slow, ongoing labor of staying present in each other's lives.

This temporal dimension deserves further analytical attention. One of the most significant findings to emerge from the fieldwork is that solidarity relations do not end at the border. They travel, transform, and take on new configurations as the circumstances of those involved change. When a migrant who was once entirely dependent on solidarity networks for food, shelter, and legal support is able, years later, to host the people who helped them - to offer hospitality rather than receive it - something happens in the relational register that cannot be captured by the categories of humanitarian assistance or political activism alone. As R.'s account from Harmanli illustrates, the inversion of the host-guest relation, however partial and however constrained by the ongoing asymmetries of mobility and legal status, represents a genuine reconfiguration of the relational economy of solidarity. It signals that these relationships have become something other than what they began as, that they have exceeded the conditions of their formation and acquired a life of their own.

This capacity of solidarity relations to exceed their original conditions points to something important about their political nature. They are not simply responses to need, nor are they merely expressions of empathy or good will. They are, as this chapter has argued, sites of subjectification: spaces in which the people involved are transformed, however partially and unevenly, by what they encounter in each other. The testimonies gathered across the research consistently attest to this dimension. Volunteers and activists speak of a "before and after," of encounters that altered their political consciousness, their sense of belonging, their understanding of what justice requires. Migrants describe moments of recognition, of being seen as a person rather than a category, that provided not only immediate relief but a kind of moral sustenance, a resource for continuing in the face of conditions designed to exhaust and dehumanize. These transformations are neither symmetrical nor guaranteed. They are shaped by the same asymmetries of power, privilege, and mobility that structure every other dimension of life at the border. But they are real, and their reality matters for how we understand what solidarity does and what it is for.

The analysis of intergroup relations has added a further layer to this picture. The collaborative networks that have developed along the Balkan routes - from the co-managed community centers of Athens to the informal coordinations of border activists in Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina, from the Border Violence Monitoring Network to the digital platforms that sustain transnational connection - are themselves relational achievements, built over time through negotiation, shared vulnerability, and the ongoing labor of managing difference. What the ethnographic material reveals is that these networks are not simply instrumental arrangements for the more efficient delivery of services; they are political formations, constituted through and expressive of a particular vision of collective life. Their organizational logic (horizontal, reflexive, attentive to internal power dynamics, resistant to the

hierarchies of institutional humanitarianism) enacts, at the meso-level, the same values that inform interpersonal solidarity at the micro-level. In this sense, the relational dimension of solidarity is not confined to face-to-face encounters; it permeates the organizational forms through which collective action is structured and sustained.

Yet the chapter has also been attentive to the limits and contradictions that traverse this relational field. Asymmetries of legal status, citizenship, mobility, gender, race, and class do not dissolve within solidarity spaces; they are managed, negotiated, and sometimes temporarily suspended, but they remain structurally operative. The risk of paternalism, of reproducing the very hierarchies that solidarity claims to contest, is never entirely absent. Language structures differential access to resources and recognition. Gender shapes the texture of encounters and the possibilities of intimacy. Privilege, the ability to leave, to disengage, to return to safety, marks every interaction, however horizontal it may aspire to be. The reflexive awareness demonstrated by many of the participants encountered during fieldwork represents an important, if necessarily incomplete, response to these dynamics. What it points toward is not the resolution of these contradictions but their inhabitation: the ongoing, ethically demanding practice of remaining attentive to how power circulates within even the most care-oriented of encounters, and of allowing that attentiveness to reshape, however incrementally, the conditions of one's own engagement.

This is perhaps where the concept of “de-bordering” (Ambrosini, 2024) finds its most precise application in relation to the material analyzed in this chapter. De-bordering, understood relationally, does not refer primarily to the physical crossing of territorial boundaries, though it encompasses that too. It refers to the ongoing, situated, and often precarious work of contesting the social, moral, and affective boundaries that border regimes produce and require: the boundaries between those who belong and those who do not, between those whose mobility is a right and those whose mobility is a crime, between those whose personhood is recognized and those whose personhood is systematically denied. It is through relationships, through the slow accumulation of shared time, mutual recognition, and everyday gestures of care, that these boundaries are contested at their most fundamental level. Not dismantled, not transcended, but persistently, practically, and often quietly refused.

Extending Simone's notion of “people as infrastructure” (2004) beyond its original urban context, as proposed earlier in the chapter, allows us to see this relational labor as itself a form of political production. The bonds forged between migrants and solidarity actors, and among solidarity actors themselves, do not merely support life within conditions of precarity, they actively generate the social conditions under which collective resistance becomes possible. They constitute, in Featherstone's terms (2012), relational solidarities: not pre-given alliances based on shared identity or interest, but formations continually reconstituted through situated practices and contingent encounters. Their strength lies not in their stability or their institutionalization, but in their capacity to endure through uncertainty, to persist, adapt, and regenerate precisely in the contexts designed to fragment and immobilize them.

What solidarity along the Balkan routes produces, then, is neither a solution to the crises it responds to nor a substitute for the structural political changes that would be required to address them. What it generates is something more situated and harder to categorize: the ongoing, imperfect, and often precarious maintenance of a social fabric in which people can recognize each other across the lines that institutional and political regimes draw between them. Through these relations, even if partial, asymmetrical, and contingent, something is sustained that those regimes systematically work to erode: the capacity to act together, to remain present to one another, and to keep open, however narrowly, the possibility of things being otherwise. In this sense, the relational dimension of solidarity is not incidental

to its politics. It is, rather, the terrain on which those politics are lived, negotiated, and, at times, quietly transformed.

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Conclusions.

Tracing the trajectories of grassroots solidarities along the so-called Balkan routes, an expression already charged with geopolitical sedimentations and analytical ambiguities, has required grappling with a context shaped by profound, layered, and historically stratified complexities. The very act of naming this territory, variously framed as the “Western Balkans” or the “Balkan region,” reveals the extent to which bordering takes place not only through fences, checkpoints, and administrative categories, but also through discursive and epistemic practices. Since 2015, this area has become emblematic of the entanglement between evolving forms of mobility, intensified bordering strategies, and the emergence of counter-practices of support from below. What unfolded here in the aftermath of the so-called “long summer of migration” is not simply a chapter in European migration governance, but a dense terrain of struggle where bordering and de-bordering processes continuously collide, overlap, and are renegotiated.

Against this backdrop, this thesis has sought to understand how grassroots solidarities emerged, endured, and transformed within this volatile and constantly shifting landscape. By analysing bordering processes both at the physical edges of state territories and within their interiors, it becomes evident that such practices take shape in heterogeneous ways, yet also display recurrent patterns across different settings. Bordering “at the edge” - for instance through pushbacks, surveillance infrastructures, or the policing of mobility corridors - functions through the material governance of movement. Conversely, bordering “within” the territory manifests through bureaucratic obstacles, reception policies, containment measures, and the criminalization of mobility and solidarity. Examining these multiple scales in relation has revealed how solidarities are shaped by, respond to, and sometimes subvert the spatial and institutional architectures of control.

What emerges is a complex “battleground” (Ambrosini, 2021) where diverse actors (state authorities, local administrations, humanitarian organizations, grassroots organizations, informal solidarity groups, activist networks, and migrants themselves) intersect, converge, and confront one another. These frictions produce shifting configurations of constraint and possibility: solidarities must navigate legal ambiguities, moral economies, and variable degrees of repression, while also generating new forms of collective action and alternative infrastructures of care. In this sense, the Balkan routes cannot be understood solely as a transit space or a security perimeter, but as a dynamic field of struggle in which the political meaning of borders and mobility is continually contested and reconfigured.

Rather than portraying the Balkan routes solely as spaces of violence, repression, and immobilisation - though these remain their dominant coordinates - I have argued that they must also be understood as spaces where alternative imaginaries are constantly being produced. These imaginaries take shape through everyday encounters, improvised infrastructures of care, and collective experiments in living otherwise. In this sense, solidarity becomes not only a response to state-produced abandonment, but also a site of political invention.

Throughout this thesis, I have examined “de-bordering practices” (Ambrosini, 2024) as both collective and individual mobilizations that emerge within, against, and in excess of the violent architectures of contemporary border regimes. Rather than taking the form of overtly confrontational politics, these practices often operate quietly and persistently, carving out situated spaces of care, reciprocity, and

shared responsibility within an otherwise hostile and exclusionary terrain. They materialize through highly precarious infrastructures - such as shared meals, temporary shelters, improvised legal support, informal translation, and cross-border communication networks - but their significance extends far beyond their material fragility. What is at stake is the relational and spatial reconfiguration they enact, as they generate alternative modes of presence, proximity, and mutual obligation across imposed borders.

By tracing the emergence, configurations, contradictions, and transformations of these practices over time, the analysis has shown that solidarity does not pre-exist as a coherent political project, but is produced through encounters, urgencies, and shared experiences of injustice. Solidarity practices are often born at the intersection of affective responses (f.e. indignation, empathy, or moral shock) and situated forms of knowledge accumulated through proximity to border violence. They take shape through everyday interactions between migrants, local residents, activists, and volunteers, and are continuously reworked in response to shifting border policies, spatial constraints, and forms of repression. In this sense, de-bordering practices open fissures within the dominant border regime not by fully escaping it, but by inhabiting its margins and contradictions, pointing toward forms of being-together that exceed its governing logics of control, abandonment, and differential inclusion.

The analysis has further highlighted how grassroots solidarity practices along the Balkan routes emerge not merely as reactive responses to immediate humanitarian needs, but as situated processes of political contestation that unsettle the border itself. Their transformative potential becomes particularly visible when attention is paid to the motivations, trajectories, and relational dynamics through which solidarity is assembled. Many initiatives take shape either in the wake of highly visible emergency situations or through contingent, often unexpected encounters, and are then progressively consolidated through learning-by-doing, iterative experimentation, and the translocal circulation of practices and experiences across multiple border sites. Examining the spaces they occupy, the practices they enact, and the interactions they sustain reveals how, despite their fragility and precarity, grassroots formations persist over time. In doing so, they actively attempt to imagine and enact alternatives to dominant regimes of border control, abandonment, and exclusion, even as they remain entangled in the very structures they seek to contest.

Importantly, these practices should not be romanticized as solutions to the broader machinery of borders and bordering processes. Rather, they can be understood as more than reactive gestures: they constitute embryonic forms of world-making, fragile yet significant efforts to enact alternative modes of belonging, coexistence, and mobility (Tazzioli, 2023). At the same time, such practices carry the inherent risk of reproducing asymmetries, reinforcing existing power dynamics, and reproducing institutional assistential frameworks that can inadvertently generate exclusion and hierarchies of “deservingness.” The contentious and transformative dimension of these non-confrontational initiatives lies precisely in their subtle yet powerful dynamics: in their endurance within hostile environments; in the proximity, reciprocity, and materiality of practical help; in the creation of encounter spaces that are at once fragile and mobile; in the relational networks and collaborations fostered through care and mutual aid; in the acts of presence, witnessing, and giving meaning to action; and in the acknowledgment of difference alongside an acute awareness of asymmetries.

In this context, Haraway’s call (mentioned in the early pages of this work) to “stay with the trouble” and to create alliances across different worlds becomes especially relevant. Haraway emphasizes the need to inhabit complexity, to remain entangled in the messiness of real-world conditions, and to foster relations across difference rather than seeking neat resolutions. For grassroots solidarity, this entails

embracing the fragility, impermanence, and contradictions inherent in their practices while simultaneously cultivating connections and relational networks that resist isolation and exclusion. Such alliances do not erase differences or asymmetries, but they work within them to generate new possibilities for collective care, ethical coexistence, and transformative mobility. In this sense, Haraway's framework illuminates the radical potential of solidarity practices along the Balkan routes: not as definitive solutions, but as sustained, relational, and ethically attuned engagements that challenge the boundaries of belonging and the logic of abandonment.

1. Spaces, Practices, Relations. Three Interconnected Dimensions.

Throughout this thesis, solidarity emerges first and foremost through the plurality of actors who enact it. Across the contexts examined, solidarity initiatives are carried out by highly heterogeneous subjects, both across different settings and within individual collectives, groups, or grassroots organisations. Participation in solidarity practices involves people with diverse social backgrounds, political trajectories, motivations, and degrees of commitment. This internal heterogeneity makes it difficult to categorise or clearly define a singular "type" of volunteer or activist. Rather than constituting a stable or coherent political subject, solidarity takes shape through the temporary and often fragile alignment of multiple actors whose involvement may be uneven, intermittent, and subject to change over time. For instance, the degree of political involvement among solidarity actors appears as neither fixed nor uniform. It is shaped by prior experiences and individual trajectories, but it also evolves through sustained participation in solidarity practices. While some actors enter these spaces with an already articulated political orientation, others undergo gradual processes of politicisation through everyday encounters with bordering regimes, institutional neglect, and the material consequences of migration governance. Political engagement thus often intensifies the longer actors remain involved, highlighting solidarity as a relational and experiential process through which political awareness is not only expressed but also produced.

This diversity of actors is also reflected in the ways solidarity is practised and organised across space. Building on this observation, the thesis has conceptualised solidarity as an unfolding phenomenon articulated through three interrelated and mutually constitutive dimensions: spaces, practices, and relations. These dimensions do not operate as separate analytical categories but as intertwined elements that allow for an understanding of how solidarity initiatives emerge, are shaped, and endure within uneven geographies marked by bordering processes, forms of state abandonment, and the everyday negotiations of coexistence. By following these dimensions across the empirical chapters (particularly Chapters Five and Six) it becomes possible to trace how solidarity initiatives are configured differently depending on context. In relatively more stable environments, especially in urban settings, solidarity practices tend to become more structured and institutionalised over time, often undergoing processes of professionalisation and organisational consolidation. In contrast, in more precarious and volatile contexts, such as border areas characterised by violence, informality, and constant uncertainty, solidarity initiatives are more frequently reconfigured in response to immediate needs and shifting constraints. In these settings, adaptability, improvisation, and situational responsiveness emerge as defining features of solidarity action.

The first dimension concerns the spatial configurations within which solidarity is enacted. The research highlighted that the spatial dynamics of solidarity vary significantly across urban and border contexts. In urban environments, especially in cities hosting long-established migrant communities or characterized by histories of political organizing, solidarity tends to consolidate around stable infrastructures such as community centers, squatted buildings, and day shelters. These infrastructures

operate simultaneously as logistical hubs and as relational spaces, nurturing forms of hospitality, conviviality, and political subjectivation. Conversely, solidarity in border zones, whether at the EU's external frontier or along its internal transit corridors, assumes a more mobile, provisional, and improvisational character. Here, spatiality is shaped by conditions of heightened surveillance, criminalization, and repression. The creation of safe spaces is therefore contingent, often ephemeral, and reliant on strategies of invisibility, adaptability, and constant negotiation. Despite these contrasts, what unifies these spatial forms is their function as responses to what has been described as "strategic abandonment": the systematic withdrawal of state responsibility for migrant lives, coupled with violent practices of deterrence. Against this backdrop, the reappropriation of space becomes a profoundly political act—one that foregrounds the embodied, affective, and relational dimensions of care and support, paving the way for the analysis that follows.

The second dimension concerns the practices that constitute and sustain these solidarities. Across the different sites of fieldwork, I explored the heterogeneous repertoire of activities, ranging from food distribution, translation, and medical care to legal accompaniment, search and rescue operations, and everyday forms of emotional support. While these practices may appear mundane, they are deeply embedded in the material and political conditions of each context. They respond to the immediate needs of migrants while simultaneously reflecting the ethical commitments, political imaginaries, and affective motivations of those who engage in them. Crucially, however, these acts of solidarity carry a political value that exceeds the intentions of those who perform them. By enabling transit, sustaining survival, and maintaining the conditions under which people can continue moving, they effectively nullify or hinder the closure that border regimes seek to impose. A search and rescue operation in a forest near the Bulgarian border, a distribution of clothes and sleeping bags coordinated through an informal network in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a legal consultation that prevents a deportation - each of these acts, however small and however locally situated, constitutes a practical interruption of the logics of containment and deterrence. It is precisely this disruptive capacity that explains why such practices have increasingly become the target of criminalization. The prosecution of solidarity actors across Europe - charged with facilitating irregular migration, aiding and abetting, or simply obstructing police operations - is not an incidental or disproportionate response; it is a structurally coherent one. States criminalize solidarity because solidarity works: because it materially undermines the effectiveness of border enforcement and because it makes visible, through the very act of care, the violence that enforcement depends upon.

Importantly, these practices do not carry fixed or universal meanings. In some cases, solidarity actors explicitly frame their actions within a political project that challenges borders, racialized exclusion, and the violence of migration governance. In other instances, support emerges from humanitarian or moral imperatives. Yet, as the empirical chapters have shown, even forms of help initially perceived as "apolitical" often become politicized through encounters with repression, criminalization, and the realities of border violence. The act of being prosecuted for offering food or shelter has a clarifying effect: it makes legible the political stakes of what might otherwise have appeared as simple human decency. Mapping these practices across contexts thus reveals solidarity not as a static category but as a contingent, situated, and contested field, one through which broader struggles over mobility, rights, and belonging are articulated, and through which the boundaries between the humanitarian and the political are continuously drawn, blurred, and redrawn.

Moving across these spaces and practices, a third dimension consistently surfaced: the one of relations. Relationships - between volunteers, activists, and migrants, among members of volunteer collectives, and within broader networks of support - emerged not as secondary or derivative, but as the very fabric

through which solidarity is enacted and rendered meaningful. The creation of spaces, even when precarious or ephemeral, enables the cultivation of trust, proximity, and shared vulnerability; simultaneously, practices of care and assistance generate the conditions for encounters and relational bonds. The research thus highlights how spaces, practices, and relations do not operate in isolation but co-produce one another, forming dynamic arrangements that sustain solidarity in the face of structural violence.

It is precisely at the intersection of these three dimensions that solidarity begins to take on the contours of what can be understood as infrastructure. The interplay between spatial arrangements, practical activities, and relational ties reveals forms of organization that exceed the immediacy of emergency response and instead constitute enduring, if fragile, modes of social reproduction. This conceptual shift is crucial: it allows us to see how the cumulative effect of creating spaces, enacting practices, and nurturing relationships generates alternative orders of coexistence that stand in contrast to, and sometimes in direct opposition to, the logics of state abandonment and border enforcement.

Following Berlant's (2016) conceptualization, infrastructures are not merely physical arrangements but also affective and relational compositions that organize the conditions of life and the possibilities for endurance. In this sense, the solidarity formations examined in this thesis function as relational counter-infrastructures: affective assemblages that hold together bodies, resources, and emotions through fragile yet generative ties. Their relational quality is constitutive: they exist through the interactions, dependencies, and exchanges that continually reconfigure social positions and shape emergent political subjectivities. Across the field sites, practices such as collective cooking, distributing essential items, offering legal accompaniment, or providing informal medical care create opportunities for interpersonal connection and intergroup collaboration. These are not merely logistical acts; they are moments in which alternative forms of coexistence and belonging are imagined and tentatively enacted.

Through these everyday interactions, solidarity actors engage in an ongoing process of de-bordering. This does not imply the erasure of borders in a literal or institutional sense, but rather challenges their everyday reproduction by disrupting the spatial, social, and affective boundaries that sustain them. Gestures of recognition, reciprocity, and shared vulnerability unsettle established hierarchies and distinctions, enabling new relational configurations to emerge. In this way, solidarity infrastructures expose the fractures and inequalities produced by the European border regime while simultaneously generating alternative forms of inhabiting, relating, and imagining political community. Their relationality - constantly negotiated, unstable, and affectively charged - constitutes both their vulnerability and their strength.

Ultimately, these insights invite us to rethink solidarity beyond notions of moral disposition or temporary crisis response. Instead, solidarity can be understood as a relational and infrastructural practice of de-bordering: a continuous, collective, and situated effort to assemble alternative forms of life in the midst of violence, abandonment, and exclusion.

2. Research Limitations and Tensions.

This study, while offering an in-depth and multi-sited exploration of grassroots solidarities along the Balkan routes, is inevitably shaped by a set of methodological and epistemic limitations that must be explicitly acknowledged in order to contextualize its findings, clarify the scope of its claims, and reflect on the conditions under which knowledge was produced.

First, the commitment to tracing dynamics along the Balkan routes through a multi-sited ethnographic approach necessarily entailed certain trade-offs in terms of depth of immersion within each specific context. While this methodological choice enabled the identification of patterns, frictions, and continuities across different borderscapes, the relatively limited time spent in each site constrained the extent of contextual knowledge that could be acquired. A single-site study would have allowed for a more sustained and fine-grained engagement with local actors, institutions, and practices. However, given that the objective of this research was to examine the articulation of grassroots solidarities across the region, attending to both convergences and divergences in situated practices, adopting a multi-sited perspective was not only appropriate but essential. It allowed for a comparative and relational understanding of solidarities, illuminating how practices emerge, adapt, and interact across different geographical and political configurations of the Balkan routes.

A second limitation concerns the relatively limited presence of direct narratives from migrants. This should not be read as a lack of attention to their experiences or a disregard for their perspectives. Migrants' voices are present in this research, though primarily through informal conversations recorded in the ethnographic diary rather than through structured interviews. These exchanges, occurring during shared meals, distribution activities, or brief encounters in community centres, squats, and temporary camps, offered genuine, if fragmentary, glimpses into the experiences and perspectives of people on the move, and have informed the analysis in meaningful ways. The decision not to conduct formal interviews with migrants, however, was deliberate and ethically grounded. Interactions often took place in precarious and transient settings where formal research participation would have been ethically fraught. I was acutely aware that academic research frequently provides limited immediate benefit to those who contribute to it, given its timescales, institutional frameworks, and intended audiences. Engaging individuals in interviews under such conditions risked imposing additional burdens on those already navigating extreme vulnerability, or fostering expectations that could not be fulfilled. This ethical consideration, while necessary, has inevitably shaped the balance of perspectives represented in the study, with the voices of solidarity actors and organizational intermediaries more fully developed than those of people on the move, a limitation that future research in this area would do well to address through methodological approaches better equipped to center migrant agency and narrative.

Finally, the research process itself has been emotionally, intellectually, and physically demanding. Direct exposure to the hardships faced by migrants, in contexts marked by uncertainty, precarity, and at times violence, deeply shaped my positionality and informed my analytical lens. Whether witnessing the distress of a young Congolese mother forced to live on the streets after rejection by a reception facility, or the fear in the eyes of a Moroccan young man confronted by border police in Bulgaria, these encounters left a profound and lasting impact. Such moments could not be simply set aside at the end of a day's fieldwork; they accumulated, and they shaped, inevitably and irreversibly, the way I read and interpreted the field. This points to a tension that runs through the entire research process and that deserves to be named explicitly rather than dissolved: the tension between personal involvement and scientific detachment. Engaged ethnography, by design, does not resolve this tension, it inhabits it. The emotional and relational investment that made certain forms of access and understanding possible was the same investment that risked blurring the distance necessary for critical analysis. Managing this required continuous reflexive effort: stepping back from the field at regular intervals, subjecting emerging interpretations to scrutiny, and remaining attentive to the ways in which proximity could produce both insight and blind spots. Acknowledging this tension is not an attempt to preempt critiques of partiality. Rather, it recognizes that the exposed, engaged presence in the field constitutes a critical epistemic resource: one that enabled a grounded and situated understanding of the often opaque

dynamics structuring mobility governance along the Balkan routes, while also carrying its own epistemological risks. Far from undermining the rigor of the research, making this tension visible is part of what rigorous, reflexive ethnographic practice demands.

3. Future Developments.

Treating solidarity as a monolithic or self-evident category risks flattening the tensions, ambiguities, and frictions that traverse it. What ethnographic and analytical engagement reveals is the internal heterogeneity of solidarity practices and their embeddedness in particular constellations of power, history, and politics. These practices take shape within and in response to environments defined by exclusion, precarity, and hostility, and they shift as those environments change. They cannot be read as a coherent or self-evident force for change; their meanings, effects, and limitations are always contingent, contested, and locally inflected. And it is precisely within these contradictions that their political significance emerges. Solidarity is not a fixed attribute or a stable form of collective action, but a process, an ongoing negotiation of ethics, power, and relationality that is continually reshaped by the conditions under which it unfolds.

Considering grassroots solidarities along the Balkan routes in relation to border abolitionist perspectives can help illuminate their dual function within contemporary border regimes. On the one hand, these practices intervene materially and symbolically in the operations of the border, challenging and unsettling the regimes of surveillance, enforcement, and categorisation that seek to regulate and contain mobility. On the other hand, they participate in the imaginative and potentially transformative work of constructing alternative socio-political horizons, spaces and relations that prefigure different terms of cohabitation, belonging, and collective life. This potential does not lie solely in immediate outcomes, which are often severely constrained by the entrenchment and violence of contemporary border regimes, but in the forms of possibility they open up and the ways they contest the naturalisation of borders as inevitable or permanent. These solidarities render visible the incompleteness of borders: far from absolute or fully realised, borders are continuously contested, partially undone, and reassembled through everyday acts of care, refusal, and cohabitation. In the ongoing struggle over mobility, belonging, and freedom, grassroots solidarity practices illuminate emergent worlds-in-the-making, partial, fragile, and precarious, yet politically generative. As already emphasised, however, mobilising the border abolitionist lens does not imply that all solidarity actors consciously engage in such reflections, nor that they would necessarily recognise or embrace this framing. The point is rather that their practices, actions, relations, and the meanings they attribute to their engagement can be read, analytically, as participating in abolitionist processes: contesting bordering mechanisms, generating spaces of livability, and contributing, however partially and contingently, to the production of alternative socio-political arrangements.

The reflections emerging from this research point to several avenues for future investigation. First, the relational and spatial dimensions of solidarity merit deeper theoretical and empirical scrutiny. Future studies could examine how solidarity infrastructures (ranging from informal networks and social media channels to translocal and transversal alliances) are assembled, sustained, and repurposed across different borderscapes. Such an approach would allow scholars to trace the circulations of knowledge, affects, and resources that underpin solidaristic action under conditions of chronic instability.

Second, further research is needed on the internal heterogeneity of solidarity formations. Grassroots groups often mobilize divergent political orientations, ethics of care, and degrees of politicization or professionalization. Understanding how actors negotiate these differences - cooperating, competing, or

colliding - could illuminate both the productivity and the limits of solidarity as a political project. These internal dynamics are not secondary; they shape strategic choices, define the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and influence how solidarity is publicly articulated and contested.

Third, in light of the forthcoming implementation of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum in 2026, it becomes not only timely but necessary to continue examining how solidarity practices are transformed under an evolving legal and political regime. As forms of border violence risk being further normalized through legal frameworks, pushbacks increasingly institutionalized, and the criminalization of solidarity intensified, existing practices of support, care, and resistance are likely to be profoundly reshaped. Future research should therefore pay close attention to how solidarity actors adapt to, resist, or are constrained by these shifts, focusing on emerging alliances and fractures, recurring tensions and criticalities, as well as on novel imaginaries and repertoires of action. Investigating how solidarity is rearticulated in this changing landscape will be crucial for understanding its political potential and its limits in an increasingly hostile European border regime.

Fourth, as technological bordering intensifies - from biometric databases to thermal cameras, to advanced surveillance - there is an urgent need to explore the digital dimensions of solidarity. Digital tools increasingly shape coordination, information sharing, and visibility, while also generating new vulnerabilities, such as surveillance risks or misinformation flows. Analyses of how volunteers and activists navigate, appropriate, and subvert digital infrastructures could offer critical insights into emergent forms of de-bordering and political organization.

Methodological innovation will be central to advancing these lines of inquiry. Multi-sited and longitudinal ethnographies can capture the fluid and evolving nature of solidarity practices as they stretch across time and space. Participatory and collaborative methods hold particular promise for producing more accountable, situated forms of knowledge that reflect the perspectives and desires of people on the move and solidaristic actors themselves. Digital ethnography can further illuminate the online/offline entanglements that increasingly characterize contemporary border struggles. Together, these approaches can help grasp both the material practices of care and aid and the affective, ethical, and imaginative dimensions through which solidarity is constituted as a transformative, if inherently precarious, political practice.

In conclusion, while grassroots solidarities confront escalating forms of repression and structural constraint, their study illuminates crucial dynamics of resistance, care, and political creativity within the European border regime. Conceptualizing solidarity as a situated, relational, and continually negotiated process invites scholars and practitioners to engage seriously with its complexities and contradictions, rather than idealizing or dismissing it. Doing so allows for a better understanding of how, even within contexts marked by violence and uncertainty, solidarity may indicate alternative modes of sociality that question existing arrangements and suggest different future trajectories.

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Appendix 1. List of Interviewees.

Code	Age	Nationality	Country of Interview	Interview Date
M_2301	70	USA	Greece	06/12/2023
S_2401	44	Switzerland	Greece	23/01/2024
T_2402	31	Italy	Bosnia-Herzegovina	24/01/2024
N_2403	27	Switzerland	Bulgaria	26/01/2024
M_2404	27	Germany	Greece	20/01/2024
O_2405	41	Switzerland	Greece	02/02/2024
B_2406	45	Greece	Greece	07/02/2024
B_2407	27	Italy	Greece	08/02/2024
M_2408	23	Luxembourg	Greece	15/02/2024
B_2409	48	Greece	Greece	15/02/2024
M_2410	35	Germany	Greece	20/02/2024
L_2411	—	Germany	Greece	09/03/2024
B_2412	50	Iran	Greece	27/02/2024
L_2413	30	Afghanistan	Greece	29/02/2024
L_2414	25	Germany	Greece	01/03/2024
A_2415	35	Syria	Greece	01/04/2024
M_2416	38	Italy	Greece	28/02/2024
L_2417	29	Germany	Greece	13/03/2024
T_2418	31	Ireland	Greece	15/03/2024
S_2419	49	England	Greece	19/03/2024
B_2420	~40	Greece	Greece	21/03/2024
S_2421	23	Scotland	Greece	06/04/2024
P_2422	29	Germany	Greece	13/05/2024
D_2423	33	USA	Greece	10/04/2024
L_2424	30	Germany	Bosnia-Herzegovina	26/04/2024
I_2425	45	Iran	Bulgaria	07/05/2024
E_2426	40	Bulgaria	Bulgaria	24/04/2024
C_2427	34	Spain	Bulgaria	30/04/2024

C_2428	39	Spain	Bulgaria	03/05/2024
A_2429	21	Italy	Bulgaria	29/05/2024
M_2430	29	France	Bulgaria	21/05/2024
T_2431	26	Italy	Bulgaria	10/05/2024
N_2432	30	Germany	Bulgaria	27/05/2024
M_2433	31	Spain	Bulgaria	05/06/2024
B_2434	45	Greece	Bulgaria	28/05/2024
Z_2435	55	Bulgaria	Bulgaria	14/05/2024
E_2436	40	Bulgaria	Bulgaria	17/05/2024
S_2437	30	UK	Bosnia-Herzegovina	10/06/2024
M_2438	27	UK	Bosnia-Herzegovina	12/06/2024
M_2439	30	Finland	Bosnia-Herzegovina	25/06/2024
F_2440	24	Bosnia-Herzegovina	Bosnia-Herzegovina	19/06/2024
L_2441	35	Bosnia-Herzegovina	Bosnia-Herzegovina	27/06/2024
T_2442	45	Italy	Bosnia-Herzegovina	04/07/2024
S_2443	48	Bosnia-Herzegovina	Bosnia-Herzegovina	03/07/2024
T_2444	31	Italy	Bosnia-Herzegovina	03/07/2024
S_2445	27	Spain	Bosnia-Herzegovina	04/07/2024
M_2446	25	Germany	Bosnia-Herzegovina	04/07/2024
B_2447	33	Netherlands	Bosnia-Herzegovina	07/07/2024
K_2448	24	Italy	Bosnia-Herzegovina	29/07/2024
M_2449	23	Italy	Bulgaria	09/12/2024
Q_2450	23	France	Bulgaria	07/11/2024
B_2451	28	Italy	Bulgaria	15/10/2024
B_2452	29	Afghanistan	Greece	04/11/2024
B_2453	32	Greece	Greece	17/11/2024
Q_2454	59	Italy	Bulgaria	06/12/2024
F_2455	35	Italy	Bulgaria	08/10/2024

Appendix 2 . Interview guide.

Description:

Draft of interviews with volunteers, activists, and operators (both short- and long-term) active in organizations or solidarity groups supporting migrant populations in the analyzed territories.

1. Introduction / Introductory Questions

1.1 To begin, could you please introduce yourself? Who are you, where are you from, what do you enjoy doing, and how would you describe yourself?

1.2 How did you start working or volunteering in this field? How long have you been here, and how long do you plan to stay (if temporary)?

1.3 What motivates or has motivated you to engage in this work? Would you recommend this experience or do it again? Why?

2. The Organization and Daily Work with Migrants / Asylum Seekers

2.1 Could you describe a typical day for you at the Community Center/Info Point, from when you start working in the morning until the end of your shift?

2.2 What type of space is the one where you work or volunteer? What role does it play within the organization's broader activities?

2.3 What activities do you or the organization carry out there? What impact do you hope they have on the people involved?

2.4 Can you share a problem or difficulty you frequently encounter? (Do you recall any specific or emblematic event?)

2.5 How do you or the organization deal with difficult or critical situations?

2.6 Can you share a positive episode, or more than one, that you have experienced during your work or volunteer activities?

2.7 I assume the organization has a code of conduct and operational rules. How do these influence what you do and what you would like to do? What impact do they have on the needs and experiences of the people you support?

3. Socio-Political Context: Local Realities, Policy Impact, and Networks

3.1 Can you describe a positive aspect of the local context where you operate? And a negative one?

3.2 What kind of relationships have you or your organization established with other actors in this territory (neighbors, institutions, other organizations)? Have these relationships changed over time? If yes, how?

3.3 How do you think current migration policies in this context (e.g., Greece, Serbia, Bosnia, Bulgaria, etc.) influence the lives of the migrants you encounter daily? Can you recall any tangible or emblematic examples?

3.4 How do you believe your or your organization's work relates to these policies? Do you consider your/the organization's actions political? In what sense?

4. Relationship with Migrants in Motion / Asylum Seekers

4.1 Can you share a positive episode that stands out in relation to the relationships you have formed with migrants in your daily activities?

4.2 Can you share a negative or difficult episode regarding these relationships?

4.3 What are the main vulnerabilities you observe among the people you meet daily? Can you describe an example or situation that illustrates this?

4.4 And what about their main strengths or forms of resistance? Can you describe an episode that captures this?

4.5 How has your relationship with the migrants you work with changed, if at all, from when you started until today? What do you think explains this change (or stability)?

5. Relationships and Inequalities: Power Relations and Reflexivity

5.1 Can you describe a situation in which the differences between you and the migrants you support were particularly evident? How did this influence your work or interactions?

5.2 Can you recall an episode where you perceived a power imbalance in the relationship? How has it influenced, or does it influence, your work?

5.3 Can you recall a moment when you became aware — or perhaps less aware — of existing structural differences? Can you share an emblematic example?

5.4 How do you think your gender, age, and origin shape your relationships with the migrants you support? Could you share an episode that illustrates this dynamic?

6. Conclusion

6.1 Before we conclude, is there any aspect, fact, or reflection that you haven't shared yet and would like to add?

6.2 We've discussed many things, both positive and negative. How has this experience been for you? Would you repeat it? How would you describe its overall meaning, usefulness, and significance in your personal or political journey?

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