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Contesting Borders Through Spaces and Practices. Transformative Forms of Grassroots Solidarity Along the Balkan Routes

Chiara Martini
University of Milan
chiara.martini@unimi.it

Abstract
Since the 2015 "long summer of migration" and the tightening of EU migration policies, grassroots solidarity movements along the Balkan Routes have resisted the border regime by providing support to people attempting to reach Europe. Over the years, a dynamic network of individuals and organizations has engaged in solidarity practices, mutual aid, and care to challenge borders, question humanitarian logic, and address divisions based on class, ethnicity, and gender. This paper examines the practices of autonomous groups operating in transit zones in Greece, Bulgaria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, focusing on how they navigate power dynamics and intersectional inequalities in their solidarity efforts. It highlights the political and transformative potential of their work, even when not overtly contentious, through an analysis of the spaces they create, the practices they employ, and the meanings they attribute to their actions, emphasizing the importance of mutual aid and care in disrupting hegemonic migration policies.

Keywords: borders, solidarity, care, Balkan Routes

Introduction

Since the so-called 'long summer of migration' (Hess & Kasparek, 2017) of 2015, the routes along the Western Balkans have become some of the most crossed paths for people seeking to reach Europe. In these regions, the intensification and proliferation of borders have turned countries like Greece, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and Bulgaria into testing grounds for controlling people's movement. At the same time, numerous acts of solidarity and forms of resistance have emerged, showing that borders are not only mechanisms of violence and inequality, but also spaces that create new possibilities. (Brambilla & Jones, 2020; Agustín & Jørgensen, 2018).

The actions and practices carried out by both migrants[1] and 'solidarians' (Rozakou, 2017) in these areas have been studied and analyzed by scholars, particularly focusing on solidarity actions, mobilizations, and struggles (Della Porta et al., 2018; Stierl, 2019; Fleischmann, 2020). As these studies reveal, the practices implemented since 2015 are highly heterogeneous, illustrating how solidarity can be understood and enacted in diverse ways with various objectives. Recently, specific attention has been given to more subtle forms of contesting border regimes through the analysis of actions that do not explicitly aim to achieve political change or advance overt political claims (Ambrosini, 2022; Fleischmann, 2020; Zamponi, 2017). These actions include the distribution of food and non-food items (NFIs), medical and legal support, recreational activities, the creation of non-formal schools, and the activation of aid networks. Despite often lacking explicit political motivations, these practices—termed as expressions of mutual aid or care, and everyday acts of resistance (Scott, 1985)—carry inherent political and transformative potential. In contrast to the 'humanitarian reason' and approach, criticized by various scholars (Fassin, 2012; Malkki, 1996; Agier, 2011; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022), they actively foster alternative forms of recognition, inclusion, and alliance, countering the prevailing logic of criminalization and the generation of lives considered devoid of value. Additionally, they seek to redefine boundaries shaped by distinctions of class, age, nationality, and gender.

This article stems from analyses and reflections resulting from various and prolonged experiences of volunteering and working within autonomous grassroots organizations and informal groups operating in support of people on the move in transit zones along the Balkan Routes, and from research I am currently conducting within the same contexts. Since 2020, I have been collaborating and researching in Greece, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Bulgaria with some Italian, Swiss, and Spanish organizations, which for many years have been following the routes of people crossing the Balkans, trying to offer support, help, and care. They facilitate the passage of people and restore moments of dignity and humanity in an otherwise highly hostile context. This experience has given, and continues to give me, a unique perspective on the existing dynamics, enabling me to build trusting relationships, especially with the actors involved in the analysis.

In the following paper, I will investigate and analyze the activities and dynamics within some specific grassroots organizations and informal groups that work along the Balkan Routes. Their actions, practices, and motivations are central and significant objects of observation: even in the absence of explicit political contention, they contribute to challenging prohibitionist border regimes, revealing their necropolitical repercussions and the ensuing racialized environments. In the next pages of this contribution, I will highlight how political and transformative potential can emerge even within practices and situations often framed in the humanitarian paradigm (Fleischmann, 2020; Dadusc & Mudu, 2020). I

[1] Referring to people on the move or stranded along the Balkan routes is complex. Activists and volunteers have highlighted ongoing debates about this terminology. The challenge lies in the diverse migratory backgrounds of these individuals, each with unique aspirations and agency. Rigid categories can unintentionally reinforce exclusion and selection. Consequently, this contribution considers the issue, using terms like 'migrants', 'refugees', and 'people on the move or in transit' interchangeably. In many cases, 'people', with contextual details, is preferred.

will focus especially on the spaces used, the specific practices, and the meanings ascribed to them. Throughout this contribution, I will show how various situations, encounters, and connections foster conviviality by recognizing differences and promoting mutual trust and respect (Dean, 1996). This approach aligns with Yuval-Davis's (2006) concept of transversal politics, which aims to connect diverse groups by promoting dialogue and cooperation. It ensures that unique identities and experiences are acknowledged and respected, avoiding reliance on universal principles, fixed identities, or homogeneous groups (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2011; Braun, 2017).

Theoretical perspectives on solidarity practices along the Balkan Routes

Focusing on grassroots solidarity practices, this contribution draws from literature across various disciplines, including social movements and solidarity studies (Della Porta et al., 2018; Feischmidt et al., 2019; Giliberti & Potot, 2021). Additionally, it incorporates border studies (Balibar, 2009; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2018; De Genova, 2017; Brambilla & Jones, 2020) to contextualize the actions and practices analyzed within the framework of border reinforcement and securitization that have affected the EU and its peripheries. By looking at borders and transit zones as battlegrounds (Ambrosini, 2021), the analysis underscores the conflicts and contestations surrounding migration policies and their enforcement, highlighting the spaces where grassroots efforts challenge and resist exclusionary practices.

An important focus is put on the ongoing debate on humanitarianism and solidarity, which has grown particularly over the past two decades (Fassin, 2012; Malkki, 1996; Agier, 2011; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022), and to the multifaceted nature of the solidarity concept, that shows its resistance to a singular definition (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2018; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012). Recent literature has framed solidarity as a bottom-up assemblage of practices, encounters, and cooperative efforts from below that promote transformative processes (Queirolo Palmas & Rahola, 2020; Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020). Other scholars view it as shaped by contested social imaginaries, embodying ideals for a better society and fostering transformative relationships (Fleischmann, 2020). Solidarity can also be seen as an inclusive form of citizenship aimed at renegotiating societal structures, overcoming exclusion, and fostering connections among people from diverse backgrounds (Dean, 1996; Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020).

When examining social movements and the various forms of mobilization in support of migrants, it becomes clear that the debate is varied, revealing a rich tapestry of perspectives and approaches. Humanitarian organizations and groups are frequently criticized for perpetuating an unjust system, a critique well-documented in numerous studies (Agier, 2011; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). However, these organisations do not operate monolithically as they vary significantly in approach, organisational methods, and objectives (Fleischmann, 2020). In recent years, there has been a growing focus on support practices that may seem less explicitly political at first glance (Zamponi, 2017; Artero, 2019; Ambrosini, 2022). Scholars argue that these seemingly apolitical practices should not be viewed in isolation from political claims (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019; Van Selm, 2020; Sandri, 2018; Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Ambrosini, 2022). For instance, Della Porta (2021) highlights how crises induced by austerity policies and the criminalization of solidarity have led to a 'hybridization of social movement activism and volunteerism, with a transformation in action repertoires, organizational structures, and collective framing' (Della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021). This hybridization indicates that political claim-making and less explicitly political support actions can reinforce each other. Their interactions create shared experiences that foster politicization, facilitate the expression of political demands, and enhance the legitimacy of political claims.

Furthermore, research has shown that intersectional and transversal solidarity can create new imaginaries and common ground in opposition to exclusionary positions (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2021; Ataç et al., 2021), while also challenging dichotomies of subordination

and domination (Montagna, 2018). Jodi Dean's (1996) concept of 'reflective solidarity' is particularly insightful, demonstrating how differences and disagreements can foster communicative action and mutual understanding—both crucial for recognizing and addressing inequalities. Reflective solidarity, grounded in mutual respect rather than assumed uniformity, facilitates unity among diverse groups and aids in understanding differing viewpoints (Dean, 1996; Siim & Meret, 2021). The connections and interactions observed in the analyzed contexts are also examined through the lenses of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Cho et al., 2013) and transversal politics (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Transversal politics, in particular, value both specific identities and shared goals, encouraging individuals to stay rooted in their own experiences while engaging with others' perspectives through dialogue. This approach recognizes the multiple, intersecting social categories that shape individuals and groups, emphasizing an ethic of care that fosters mutual respect, support, and solidarity.

In line with these perspectives, another analytical framework involves examining hospitality from a feminist perspective (Hamington, 2010) and critically analyzing solidarity practices through the lens of 'care work', connecting them to the broader framework of feminist 'ethics of care' (Montes & Paris Pombo, 2019). The concept of care has become central in studies of solidarity along the US-Mexico border, where Medel (2017) frames it as 'abolitionist care'—a form of direct action with political power that challenges the logic of criminalization and the devaluation of life, which serve to protect and maintain borders. The politicization of care (Tronto, 1996) underscores that caring practices are not merely personal acts of compassion but are essential for building coalitions and inclusive communities that acknowledge and address systemic and intersectional inequalities.

Given that solidarity and care practices are intrinsically linked to spatial contexts, I have also drawn on Lefebvre's concept of space as an active, rather than neutral or passive, entity. Lefebvre (1974) argues that space is shaped through processes such as claiming, occupying, transforming, utilizing, producing, and representing. Building on this perspective, I have also incorporated the feminist concept of 'safe spaces', which refers to environments that provide relief from external threats and hostile conditions, while allowing individuals the freedom to 'be themselves' (Lewis et al., 2015). This combined focus on the dynamic nature of space and the creation of safe environments underscores the crucial role of spatial considerations in fostering practices of solidarity and care.

As Cantat et al. (2019) emphasize, 'solidarity means different things to different actors, taking on various forms in different contexts'. Therefore, to fully understand the meanings and different expressions of solidarity along the Balkan Routes, particular attention has been given to studies and research that analyze self-organized local and transnational solidarity structures and groups in the Western Balkans (Cantat, 2021; Milan, 2019). These contributions also critically explore the complexities of conducting research in these historically and socially intricate contexts. For example, the studies by Majstorović and Hameršak have provided a nuanced exploration of these territories and their dynamics. They have highlighted how solidarity practices emerge as responses to post-socialist challenges and the so-called 'migrant crisis' (Majstorović, 2023), as well as the dual role of supporting and reporting on migrants, illustrating the tensions and ethical dilemmas faced by those engaged in documenting and assisting people along the routes (Hameršak, 2021).

Another important aspect to consider is the use of specific terminology. The term 'Balkan Route' varies in meaning depending on the user and context (Hameršak et al., 2020). While it is commonly viewed as a unidirectional migratory path from Turkey and Greece through the former Yugoslav countries to Austria or Italy, the reality is more complex. Since the closure of the formal migration corridor in 2016, movement patterns have become fragmented, non-linear, and sometimes circular. As a result, some academics now refer to it as the 'Balkan Circuit', which reflects both securitization practices and resistance to them (Hameršak et al., 2020). In this contribution, I will continue to use the term 'Balkan Routes', with an emphasis on the plural 'routes', to acknowledge the diverse paths taken through these

territories. This choice reflects ongoing discussions about terminology and is also informed by the language used by the individuals I interacted with in the field.

Following the routes. Cases and methodology

In recent years, the roles and experiences of those involved in supporting individuals seeking entry into Europe have been extensively studied, analyzed, and critiqued from multiple perspectives. As constituents of a humanitarian paradigm, organizations and groups have frequently faced accusations of perpetuating an unjust and detrimental system, as demonstrated in an extensive body of literature (Fassin, 2012; Agier, 2011; Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). However, it has also come to light that within the broad landscape of diverse actions undertaken to assist migrants, there exist various approaches, organizational structures, and objectives (Fleischmann, 2020).

The organizations and groups at the center of this article distinguish themselves by adopting an approach that is not overtly political, often avoiding direct confrontation with the border regime and reception systems. Their initiatives align with what scholars describe as 'direct social actions' (Zamponi, 2017), 'subversive humanitarianism' (Vandervoordt & Verschraegen, 2019), and 'de-bordering solidarities' (Ambrosini, 2022), as they primarily provide direct and practical support to those in need. Specifically, in the contexts under examination, I focus on grassroots organizations operating in Greece, such as One Bridge to Idomeni, Khora Collective, One Happy Family, and Wave, identified through a combination of contacts, voluntary work, and participant observation in Athens and Thessaloniki. Furthermore, I include organizations based in other Balkan countries, particularly in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria, such as No Name Kitchen, Collective Aid, and Kompass 071, selected using similar methods. Although their actions might appear purely humanitarian, their work is rooted in a bottom-up approach that challenges dominant and controlling methods of governing migration in Europe. Despite differences in their approaches and methodologies, these organizations continue to create and maintain collaborative connections and exchange practices, working together to present a unified stance in advocacy and denunciation efforts, thereby demonstrating the shared and exchange-driven nature of their actions. Throughout this contribution, particularly in the empirical section, I have deliberately avoided making specific references to each organization to safeguard their safety and anonymity, as well as to prevent any potential interference or issues that could arise from the delicate and complex contexts under analysis.

As previously mentioned, the ethnographic material analyzed in this article stems from a combination of preliminary analyses and extensive participant observations conducted during my volunteer experiences since 2020. This data is further enriched by extended fieldwork undertaken as part of an ongoing research project focused on Greece, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Bulgaria. Over these years of volunteering and research, I conducted numerous interviews with volunteers, activists, and personnel from various organizations. Specifically, in 2021, I conducted eleven interviews with volunteers and activists in Greece and Bosnia-Herzegovina as part of a study on the (im)mobility conditions of people crossing the Balkans. Additionally, between April 2023 and June 2024, as part of my ongoing research on grassroots solidarity practices, I conducted forty one interviews in mainland Greece, southeastern Bulgaria, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Complementing these semi-structured interviews, I also gathered valuable ethnographic data through numerous informal conversations, exchanges, and interactions during volunteer activities and daily life across all contexts. These conversations were meticulously documented and incorporated into the field diary, which forms an integral part of the empirical analysis.

Lastly, given my deeply engaged role as both a volunteer and researcher, it is important to acknowledge that issues of positionality, power dynamics, privilege, and the

nuances of attachment and bias were central to all analyses, considerations, and reflections. The dual role of volunteer-activist and researcher, and the complexities of being both an insider and outsider in various situations, significantly influenced every interaction, relationship, and the collection and analysis of materials. Scholars emphasize the importance of establishing a participatory role that is 'culturally definable' within a research community, as this helps build relationships by mitigating the 'stigma associated with an outsider's status' (Johnson et al., 2006). This approach can provide unique insights into a community's unwritten rules and complex interactions (McMorran, 2012). However, it has also faced criticism for potentially lacking detachment from the field, risking emotional attachment, and presenting arguments that may appear simplistic or insufficiently nuanced (Burke, 1989). Despite potential drawbacks, this approach enabled me to collect data while simultaneously challenging hegemonic ideologies, offering privileged access and a unique perspective on the explored content.

The contestation of border and migration regimes through spaces and practices

Hostile environments and the creation of communal 'safe spaces'

In recent years, countries on the borders of Europe, such as Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, have implemented increasingly oppressive and exclusionary policies aimed at controlling and managing people seeking entry into the EU. Numerous NGOs and human rights organizations, including the Border Violence Monitoring Network, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Center for Peace Studies, report that practices such as intensified border surveillance, pushbacks, and systemic violence have become commonplace in these countries. These actions reflect broader European migration management policies. Moreover, access to asylum and basic rights has become more restricted, while the efforts of local and international organizations continue to face criminalization. This consolidation of hostile environments has given rise to what scholars call 'shrinking spaces' (Della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021), where opportunities for movement, advocacy, and access to fundamental rights are increasingly limited or outright obstructed.

In response to the challenging and often hostile conditions faced by migrants, numerous organizations have developed innovative strategies to resist and reimagine their practices (Della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021). These contexts can be understood as battlegrounds (Ambrosini, 2021), where various actors interact, both collaborating and conflicting. Through various fieldwork experiences, I observed how diverse communities and groups have confronted exclusionary environments by establishing communal spaces designed to be inclusive and accessible to all. These spaces aim to counteract prevailing inequalities in border regions, illustrating the potential for spaces to be reinterpreted, reappropriated, and transformed to embody new social realities and possibilities (Lefebvre, 1974). In many of the situations analyzed, grassroots organisations focalise on self-managed community spaces, where everyone contributes to both their maintenance and functioning. Unlike the well-documented cases of space reappropriation and occupation central to migrant rights struggles, especially in Greece (Cantat, 2018; Fisher & Jorgensen, 2021; Papatzani & Knappers, 2020), these community centers function as venues for services and activities without an explicit political agenda. However, their political significance lies in their mission to create spaces for exchange and sharing, where everyone feels safe and accepted, emphasizing engagement across diverse perspectives and fostering mutual respect and solidarity (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Within these 'community centers', as referred to by volunteers and activists, a range of activities is organized, including the distributions of food and basic necessities, language courses, cooking classes, and workshops. Additionally, legal aid and healthcare support services are also often provided. While these activities and spaces do not explicitly address political issues or seek to openly criticize the dire conditions faced by migrants in Greece and the Balkan countries, their inherent transformative and political significance lies in the

alternative vision of community they offer. They illustrate different ways to build alliances, create connections, and strengthen relationships, demonstrating the profound potential for change embedded in these practices.

'We aim to create a safe space where everyone feels welcomed', says S., a coordinator of one of the projects I worked with in Athens. Their communal space serves as an information hub for individuals seeking assistance with navigating the city's services. It also functions as a meeting place for various organizations and informal groups to convene and collaborate, enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of aid services while strengthening network connections. Some people use the space simply to warm up during the winter, enjoy hot tea, charge their phones, socialize, and connect with others. Depending on the users' preferences, the space occasionally hosts recreational activities such as informal English or Greek lessons, sewing and cooking workshops, IT labs or games, demonstrating how such venue can support and encourage personal expression.

The conditions observed in these spaces, both through the activities taking place and conversations with participants, may align with the concept of a 'safe space' (Lewis et al., 2015). Lewis's study of women's safe spaces suggested that temporary relief from routine threats to one's safety can enable personhood to flourish. According to Lewis, a safe space provides the opportunity for individuals to engage, debate, interact, challenge, and learn in a secure environment. Safety in this context is characterized by the freedom to be yourself, to speak and be heard, to learn, and to express emotions freely (Lewis et al., 2015). In my research, I noticed similar dynamics in spaces not exclusively meant for women. Many individuals I interviewed and observed during my fieldwork and volunteer experiences referred to the community centers they frequent and spend time in as 'safe spaces'. By extending the concept of a safe space, it becomes apparent that it can be applied to environments and contexts inhabited by diverse individuals who face various forms of marginalization, criminalization, vulnerability, and exclusion. The spaces highlighted in this study have emerged as environments that, as Lewis (2015) articulates, foster freedom and self-expression, offering a counterpoint to the surrounding hostile settings that impede the flourishing of personhood.

It has then emerged that recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have expanded the demographics requiring mutual aid provided by the autonomous organizations and collectives being studied beyond the original 'target' population of people on the move. This shift has also highlighted new patterns of intersecting inequalities and marginalization. In response, volunteers and activists have often exemplified what Dean (1996) calls reflective solidarity, demonstrating the potential of political intersectionality (Cho et al., 2013). They have deliberately broadened their efforts to address the worsening conditions, extending their support to a wider range of affected groups. As many interviewees noted, everyone has access to the offered facilities. For instance, many local Greek people in need visit the communal centers as well. Some described this approach as a 'transversal form of assistance', which supports anyone in need rather than targeting a specific population. This inclusive characteristic was especially notable in the complex and diverse environments observed during my fieldwork. By bringing together locals and newcomers—each with distinct social positions and intersectional identities—the spaces used by grassroots organizations have been transformed into dynamic arenas of encounters. Such arenas facilitate initiatives accessible to all, regardless of gender, nationality, religious beliefs, (in)abilities, or sexual orientation, fostering connections and exchanges while simultaneously cultivating shared struggles for basic rights (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Ataç et al., 2021).

This dynamic was similarly observed among numerous groups and organizations engaged in food distribution. For example, P., a volunteer I encountered in Thessaloniki, frequently reported that in the last years, during weekdays, the number of Greek individuals accessing the food services at the community center often surpassed that of non-Greek individuals.

> What we do here began as a project to help migrant people who are 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 ones, 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. (Interview with P., volunteer and activist, April 2023)

Therefore, these solidarity spaces and initiatives can offer transformative potential by moving beyond entrenched inequalities and forms of precarization and victimization. They propose, in fact, an alternative narrative characterized by mutual care and shared vulnerability (Squire, 2018). These endeavors foster the creation of new familial and communal bonds (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2021) among individuals who, despite being strangers, are bound together by a shared experience of liminality (Dean, 1996; Sandri, 2018). However, it is crucial to recognize that some studies caution against an excessively optimistic perspective. While these initiatives aim to promote positive change, they can inadvertently become sites of other power dynamics intricately connected to intersecting systems of race, gender, and broader forms of difference (English, 2017). In the contexts observed during my fieldwork, these potential issues were often mitigated by acknowledging the differences among participants and striving to create an environment where everyone could feel safe, as documented in my fieldnotes.

> '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, September 2023).

The critical situations I describe in this field diary excerpt are, in fact, consequences of the extreme marginalization experienced by many individuals. These situations may involve individuals under the influence of substances, moments of aggression triggered by the harsh living conditions many face, overcrowding, and chaotic circumstances during distribution events. In day-to-day practice, these occurrences are handled while consistently upholding the principle of inclusivity, which serves as the foundation for all organized activities. The commitment to inclusivity is evident right at the entrance of one of the centers under examination, where a prominent sign declares, 'Everyone is welcome.'This statement holds significant meaning, especially in a context frequented by individuals who have often felt unwelcome since they arrived in Europe. However, in a conversation with one of the coordinators, she emphasized that while inclusivity remains a central tenet, ensuring the safety of all people is equally crucial. 'When you provide free access to everyone, sometimes critical or extreme situations can arise,' she noted. Consequently, the center has instituted protocols to manage potential risks and address specific vulnerabilities. These measures include training volunteers and staff in de-escalation techniques to effectively handle conflicts, as well as establishing controlled-access spaces for women and children. These designated areas offer a secure environment where individuals can safely spend their days, engage in various activities (with childcare provided), and acquire new skills. These practices exemplify Lewis's (2015) conception of safe spaces as transformative environments that promote inclusivity, empowerment, and community cohesion. They illustrate how spaces can be reimagined and reconfigured to foster a sense of belonging and support among marginalized populations. Furthermore, these practices respond to the complex and

intersecting dimensions of identity and oppression, as articulated by Cho et al. (2013) and Dean (1996), ensuring that the spaces welcome diverse individuals and address the multifaceted nature of their experiences.

Resignifying care and mutual aid

Due to the consistent lack of essential services provided by local authorities to people on the move or stranded in specific areas, grassroots solidarity organizations along the Balkan Routes have taken on the responsibility of delivering fundamental services. In transit cities like Athens and Thessaloniki, as well as in border zones between Turkey and Bulgaria or Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, their activities have increasingly aligned with forms of care and mutual aid rather than with contentious actions aimed at openly denouncing and contesting the conditions in these contexts. These solidarity practices often involve collecting and distributing food and NFIs, providing wood, clean water, and hot showers, setting up mobile clinics, and organizing info points with legal and medical support. By engaging in such actions, volunteers and activists offer a robust, practical response to the process of 'strategic abandonment' (Medel, 2017; Gilmore, 2017). This term encapsulates the intentional and active decision by institutions and authorities to shirk responsibility for the well-being, safety, and survival of marginalized groups, particularly those subjected to racialized criminalization. At the core of 'strategic abandonment' (Gilmore, 2017) is a deliberate disengagement by governing bodies, justified by policies that neglect the basic needs and rights of certain populations. In the contexts analyzed, it is evident how volunteers and activists emerge as vital agents challenging this dehumanizing narrative. They step into the void created by strategic abandonment, proposing forms of care and mutual aid, which have also been framed as 'abolitionist care' (Medel, 2017). This approach seeks to "dismantle, change, and build" (Medel, 2017: 878) the structuring logics operating at the borders, addressing not only immediate needs but also the underlying systemic injustices.

Despite not being openly political or critical regarding the situation, these types of practices have thus demonstrated their political aspect. The concept of 'subversive humanitarianism' (Vandevoordt, 2019) encapsulates the dynamics observed in these contexts. Vandevoordt posits that certain forms of humanitarianism, particularly those originating from grassroots and activist groups, possess a subversive quality by challenging state policies, questioning entrenched power dynamics, and advocating for systemic change rather than merely addressing immediate needs. Conversations with individuals involved in these solidarity practices have revealed that both volu(nteers and activists often attribute a deeply political significance to their actions, consciously distancing themselves from the conventional 'humanitarian' discourse typically associated with such practices. As M., a volunteer from a grassroots organization active in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, pointed out:

> 'To be honest, from my personal perspective, I don't see myself as a humanitarian worker. What I do is political. I don't want to be a humanitarian worker or be in a humanitarian organization. Everything we give and do is a political act. Even the simplest things, like offering tea to people, giving them a warm blanket or a hot meal.' (interview with M., volunteer and activist, December 2021)

Similarly, a volunteer I interviewed in Athens, talking about the activities of the organization, which mainly consist of cooking and distributing hot meals to those in need, stressed this perspective:

> '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'. (interview with P., volunteer, October 2023)

According to recent studies (Milan & Martini, 2024), practices of care and aid in these contexts are often perceived as inherently political, as they confront structural issues of exclusion, oppression, and scarcity. As I was able to observe through the words and actions of volunteers and activists in various organizations, notions of care and aid often go beyond their conventional humanitarian meanings, taking on political and transformative dimensions (Tronto, 1996). Scholars and activists have noted that in recent decades, the feminist movement has reappropriated and redefined the notion of care, moving it from a 'privatized, feminized, and therefore devalued domain' (Glenn, 2000) into the public sphere. As a practice, care involves creating relationships of interdependence and can be transformed into a public or communal responsibility. This perspective has led to the idea of politicizing the concept of care (Tronto, 1996), where care is defined as 'a specific 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' (Tronto, 2013).

In relation to this notion of care and mutual aid directed toward strangers, the perspective of feminist hospitality, as framed by Hamington (2010), has also been useful for understanding the analyzed practices and contexts. Feminist hospitality reflects a performative extension of care ethics by promoting stronger social bonds and fostering inclusive host-guest relations. Through the related concepts of inclusivity, reciprocity, and embodiment, hospitality can describe the solidarity practices carried out, offering an alternative approach to personal, social, and political relationships (Hamington, 2010), as also emerged in the experiences of the volunteers I encountered.

> 'What is done here, when we give a hot meal, a place where to rest, but also moments of fun and game, it's not about the giving itself. It's about interactions, relations, seeing people as people, talking, engaging, listening, sharing. That's the focus.' (interview with E., volunteer and activist, January 2024)

In addition, many individuals I spoke with highlighted that these alternative ways of coming together, forging connections, and sharing experiences were vital for them in finding strength amidst struggles and difficult circumstances. Z., one of the interviewees, expressed it this way:

> 'I know it can be viewed as a bubble, because it is, but being here, meeting all these people, and I'm not talking about the food or the services we provide... it's about the connections, the environment, feeling like you are part of an alternative proposal. Europe is killing people at the border, or excluding them... So, we want to show there is something else. And, also, for the people on the move we are meeting... it's like trying to show that there are people and communities that don't treat them like shit. Also to give them hope along their journey...' (interview with Z., volunteer and activist, April 2024)

Of course, when examining such relations and interactions, it is also important to consider the power dynamics and imbalances inherent in contexts where individuals with disparate resources and levels of privilege encounter and relate to one another. Even in situations where efforts are directed toward fostering inclusive and symmetrical relations, the unequal distribution of power, privilege, and resources can still influence interactions and outcomes. In this regard, Agustín and Jørgensen (2021) underscore the necessity of reflexivity among activists and volunteers. They argue that acknowledging and critically reflecting on one's positionality and the inherent power dynamics are essential to mitigating the reproduction of inequalities within these spaces. This reflexive approach resonates with Dean's (1996) notion of 'reflective solidarity', which advocates for mutual respect and understanding while recognizing and valuing differences rather than attempting to erase them. In practice, this

implies that while solidarity spaces strive to be inclusive, they must persistently address and navigate the underlying power imbalances.

Moreover, this resignification and reappropriation of the concept of care in a political way is also deeply linked to the ongoing criminalization of solidarity activities in all the researched countries. As framed also by Della Porta and Steinhipler (2021), repression against migrant solidarity has taken many forms over the years: it can include legislation, bureaucratic implementation, and judicial decisions, but also the spreading of stigmatization and other forms of 'soft repression' (Ferree, 2005). In all the analyzed countries, this has led many organizations to reshape their practices and activities, resulting in actions that are less explicitly contentious and more directed toward meeting people's practical needs. Nevertheless, the meaning they continue to place in what they do remains intrinsically political. As some of the volunteers I encountered explicitly phrased it, 'when even handing out food or sleeping bags becomes something that is questionable or can create legal problems, then that act actually becomes a political choice' (fieldnotes, April 2023).

Thus, when offering care and aid, these individuals not only provide immediate material support, but also engage in an act of resistance. They challenge normative structures that perpetuate inequality and exclusion, proposing an alternative paradigm that prioritizes compassion, solidarity, and the development of meaningful relationships (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Ataç et al., 2021). Their practices of care extend beyond mere reaction; they embody a visionary approach that imagines and articulates new modes of recognition and inclusion. In the face of exclusionary border regimes and the devaluing impact of racialized criminalization, these acts of hospitality (Hamington, 2010), care, and aid (Tronto, 1996) create spaces and moments where people, irrespective of their background, can find acknowledgment, dignity, and shared humanity.

Therefore, volunteers and activists, through their commitment to solidarity, care, and aid, actively contest the systemic dehumanization embedded in current migration and asylum policies. Their actions resist structural inequalities and prejudices that marginalize certain groups. Examining their practices through an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 2011) reveals the formation of intersectional coalitions and alliances, integrating the realities of marginalized people into an inclusive narrative centered on solidarity (Dean, 1996). Consequently, the distribution of necessities and the establishment of spaces for care by these individuals offer not just a response to immediate needs but also a vision for a more inclusive and humane society.

Conclusion

This contribution delves into the complex dynamics of grassroots solidarity along the Balkan routes, highlighting the transformative potential of seemingly apolitical practices. The geopolitical shifts following the 'long summer of migration' (Hess & Kasparek, 2017) in 2015 transformed Greece, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and Bulgaria into contested territories and actual battlegrounds (Ambrosini, 2020). In these spaces, borders are not only intensified and proliferated but also transformed into arenas for alternative forms of recognition, inclusion, and alliance.

Drawing from ethnographic observations, volunteering experiences, and research, this paper illuminates how border and migration regimes are contested through spatial and practical dimensions. First, the creation of communal 'safe spaces' emerges as a response to the hostile environments constructed by oppressive policies. These spaces, central to many grassroots organizations' activities, challenge prevailing narratives by fostering inclusivity, transversal assistance, and a reimagined sense of togetherness. They provide new opportunities for encounters and exchange (Ataç et al., 2021), offering an alternative vision that transcends categorizations based on gender, age, nationality, and other differentiating factors, as well as single-axis approaches (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Additionally, the resignification of care and mutual aid (Tronto, 2013; Medel, 2017) emerges as a powerful theme within these grassroots initiatives. Seemingly apolitical

practices are imbued with political and transformative potential (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017). Testimonies and fieldwork notes reveal that volunteers and activists consciously distance themselves from purely humanitarian discourse, framing basic acts of care as political choices. These activities are not merely filling gaps left by the state but creating cracks, resisting the commodification and depoliticization of border violence (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020). This dimension is further influenced by the criminalization of solidarity activities, driven by xenophobic politics, which has led to a hybridization of social movement activism and volunteerism, transforming actions, organizations, and collective goals (Della Porta, 2020). Consequently, the traditional differentiation between political social movements, apparently neutral humanitarianism, and 'potentially political' (Ekman & Amna, 2012) volunteering becomes blurred.

In essence, this contribution specifically investigates how practices that may initially appear apolitical can effectively challenge and subvert oppressive border regimes. The analysis demonstrates that the creation of 'safe spaces' and the implementation of mutual aid and care practices are instrumental in resisting marginalization, exclusion, abandonment, and various forms of control. By cultivating environments that prioritize safety and support, these grassroots initiatives not only contest systemic injustices but also offer robust avenues for resistance against oppressive border controls, thereby fostering a more inclusive and resilient response. Therefore, the intricate interplay between spatialities, practices, and meanings within the analyzed initiatives paints a picture of resilience and resistance with prefigurative power (Yates, 2021). Engaging with the discussions of Cho et al. (2013), the experiences of solidarity practices from below in support of people on the move along the Balkan Routes also reveal how intersectionality expresses its political and generative aspects. It exposes stratified configurations of violence and inequality while reshaping modes of resistance and creating alternative practices and connections.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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