RESEARCH ARTICLE

'They Do What Institutions Should Do'[1]: Border solidarity in the light of an institutional crisis

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ABSTRACT: While asylum policies at the EU borders get stricter and stricter, civil solidarity initiatives towards people on the move keep spreading and growing around the continent. By looking at these dynamics through the lens of an *institutional crisis*, this paper describes and interprets the components, practices and attitudes of solidarity initiatives within a relational field whose boundaries are defined by the (in)actions of state institutions in matters concerning the protection and reception of asylum-seekers and refugees. For this purpose, I engaged in a relational ethnography in Trieste, at the Italian-Slovenian border, taking myself the role of a solidarity actor and using this positionality as an epistemological and methodological tool of analysis. In this way, the article overcomes reductionist and mutually-exclusive categorizations of solidarity and claims instead that initiatives in support of people on the move are contextual and relational. At the same time, and because of that, it also brings to the surface the deepest and common roots of these projects, which ultimately lie in the political dissatisfaction for and moral condemnation of the current asylum regime.

KEYWORDS: Borders, Institutional crisis, Relational ethnography, Solidarity reaction, State inaction

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[1] Interview with former Deputy Mayor of Trieste (all interviews translated from Italian).

1. Introduction

The so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe has illuminated a deeper crisis of legitimacy and solidarity among and within the states of the EU (Collyer and King 2016)[2]. A gap has emerged in the asylum regime "between rights guaranteed under the law and their selective application within a border management where the state of exception is increasingly visible" (Lendaro, Rodier, and Vertongen 2019, 148). In other words, states have shirked their social and legal responsibilities, *de facto* violating national and international standards on the protection and reception of asylum seekers. As a *re*action to this institutional disengagement, civil initiatives and grassroots organisations supporting people on the move (PoM) spread across the continent and, in some extreme cases, became the only source of free and unconditional support for migrants. This research investigates the nature of these solidarity initiatives by describing their components, practices and attitudes within a relational field whose boundaries are defined by the violent *in*action of state institutions (Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi 2017). In doing so, the article unveils a moment of rupture between the normative order of the asylum regime, which expects states to take responsibility for asylum seekers and refugees, and its implementation on the ground, which has been consistently de-institutionalized and outsourced to civil society and social movements. In this respect, the case of Trieste, an Italian city bordering Slovenia, testifies of an on-going reconfiguration of the relations between (disengaging) state institutions and (proactive) solidarity initiatives in matters concerning the protection and reception of PoM, which I define as an *institutional crisis*.

Having remained on the margins of the public debate and academic reflection, over the years Trieste has produced various socio-cultural experiments that have set an example for the whole country (Gallio 2018; Mezzina 2020). With particular regard to the management of immigration, the border town has acted as the flagship of the Italian reception system (Bona 2016). Yet, despite the acclaimed effectiveness of Trieste's model (Volpicelli 2018), local and national institutions reacted to the post-2015 increase in arrivals from the so-called Balkan route with a dramatic militarization of the border and a progressive contraction of the resources allocated for the reception and integration of foreigners. This led to serious violations upon the right of asylum for those trying to cross the Italian-Slovenian border and the extreme difficulty for those who managed to enter the Italian territory to access even basic services. In the void left by government institutions, from 2019, a bottom-up movement of solidarity emerged in Piazza della Libertà, the square in front of the train station of Trieste where migrants and 'solidarians' (Rozakou 2017; Theodossopoulos 2016) meet everyday in the afternoon.

Drawing on this empirical case, the article looks at how collective practices in support of PoM form and evolve, how they act within and across the space of the border, and how they *inter*act with both migrants and state institutions. To this end, I critically engage with Agustín and Jørgensen's categorization of *autonomous*, *civic* and *institutional* solidarities (2019) and partly overcome it by bringing to the surface the manifold and overlapping features of border solidarities. I therefore challenge reductionist and static categorizations and claim instead that such initiatives are neither conceptually homogeneous nor empirically stable across time and space, but rather contextual and relational. For this purpose, I weave together literature on migrant solidarity[3] (Ambrosini 2022; Bauder and Juffs 2020; Potot and Giliberti 2021) and theories on the

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[3] I am considering solidarity *in relation to* the asylum regime, but I will use interchangeably migrant and refugee solidarity for purely stylistic reasons.

'disengagement' of the neoliberal state, e.g. the (often informal) outsourcing of its functions and responsibilities to third-state, infra-state and non-state actors (Cardwell and Dickson 2023; Gammeltof-Hansen and Sorensen 2013; Longo and Fontana 2022). By looking at what solidarians do in practice, the article highlights, by contrast, what state institutions should do but *de facto* do not. In this perspective, solidarity is not only an object of study, but also an epistemological and methodological tool of analysis. As a matter of fact, I took the role of a volunteer researcher and engaged in a relational ethnography (Desmond 2014) in Trieste, experiencing first-hand the motivations and the complexities that shape civic and political engagement in support of PoM, and how this involvement evolves across time and space.

After discussing the theoretical and methodological arenas within which this study develops, the discussion of the empirical data will be organised into two sections. First, a short description of the violent *in*action and institutional disengagement performed by state representatives in Trieste will draw the contours of the field with and within which solidarity *inter*acts. Then, I will look in detail at the components, practices, and attitudes of the solidarity movement.

2. Theorising solidarity

While accepting that "solidarity means different things to different actors, takes on different shapes in different contexts, and is invoked to explain and define a wide range of practices, discourses, positionings and social relations" (Cantat, Sevinin, Maczynska, and Birey 2019, 4), this research seeks to mitigate these differences and identify the common matrix of solidarity in border areas. To this end, I draw on Agustín and Jørgensen's categorization of *autonomous*, *civic* and *institutional* solidarities (2019), but only to highlight how these three prototypes are neither internally homogeneous nor independent from each other. Rather, this research suggests that migrant solidarity, whether with an assistentialist (*civic*) or a contentious (*autonomous*) approach, and public and private institutions committed to the support of PoM (*institutional* solidarity) cohabit and cooperate in and across the space of the border. As a matter of fact, solidarity in Trieste includes both non-politicized volunteers offering informal assistance and political collectives actively engaged in denouncing the border regime, as well as the Italian Consortium of Solidarity (ICS), a state-funded, private organisation. Meanwhile, Caritas, a charitable network that depends on the Catholic Church, has generally aligned its intervention within the government parameters. Although useful as a conceptual tool, Agustín and Jørgensen's distinction conceals the fact that various forms of support to migrants coexist and interact regularly (Amigoni, Aru, Bonnin, Proglio, and Vergnano 2021; Queirolo Palmas and Rahola 2020), that their participants usually engage simultaneously in assistance work and advocacy campaigns (de Jong and Ataç 2017; Fleischmann 2017; Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017; Minkoff 2016; Vandevoordt and Fleischmann 2020), and that their effectiveness heavily depends on the complementarity of skills they employ. Drawing on the empirical case of Trieste, this research thereby overcomes mutually exclusive categorizations, such as humanitarian *vs.* political, and instead interprets the hybridization of solidarity initiatives (Jasper and Duyvendak 2015; Kousis, Paschou, and Loukakis 2021; Sandri 2017; Schwiertz and Steinhilper 2020; Sinatti 2019; Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019) as a growing communion of intentions and ideals. Namely, the widespread and compelling need to express empathy and support towards PoM has generated new subjectivities and alliances among otherwise independent actors, in turn fostering the elaboration of innovative praxes along and across nation-state borders (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019; Lahusen, Zschache and Kousis 2021).

This kind of generative drive especially manifests in times of *crisis*, during which the lines between contentious and non-contentious forms of social engagement blur (Bosi and Zamponi 2019; Kousis *et al.* 2021). By looking at the issue at hand through the lens of an *institutional crisis*[4], e.g. a reconfiguration of the relations between institutional and non-institutional actors, rather than that of a *refugee crisis*, this study points at the progressive disengagement of state institutions from their social and legal responsibilities, and reflects on solidarity initiatives as an increasingly relevant provider of services and rights for PoM. In this perspective, states' "institutional abandonment and intentional indifference should be interpreted as 'violent *in*action', a form of structural violence and a means of control perpetrated through *in*action" (Sandri 2017, 6; Davies *et al.* 2017). In this vein, Tazzioli (2019) identifies a "triple governmental retreat" consisting in "*not seeing*, *not dealing with* and *not protecting* the migrants in transit" (8). This retreat manifests simultaneously through the non-compliance with international norms and the dismantling of national welfare services. As the neoliberal project prompted governments to conform to the norms of the market and hence to outsource public services and state responsibilities (Darling 2016), other actors came to intervene in the elaboration and implementation of immigration policies. In this respect, critical migration studies have clarified the strict correlation between states' disengagement and the growing influence of both private companies and criminal networks (Gammeltof-Hansen and Sorensen 2013; Khosravi 2010). These actors slip into the void left by governments and, since they make a great profit out of this, they have no interest in questioning such state of affairs. My research focuses instead on civil and social actors that intervene in the management of migration by supporting PoM non-for-profit. As such, these initiatives not only compensate for the *in*action of the welfare state (Baglioni and Giugni 2014; Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991), e.g. they provide migrants with aid and services in lieu of governments, but they also thereby *counter*act the *status quo, e.g.* they spot problems and propose alternatives to address them. Hence, the very existence of these initiatives highlights not only the limits and incongruity of the neoliberal nation-state, but also the "unexpected ways in which new kinds of collective living may emerge out of, and despite, new forms of difference and inequality" (Muehlebach 2012, 8).

The proliferation of different types of crisis (economic, migratory, financial, etc.) pushed solidarity movements to adapt their intervention in accordance with not only the difficulties but also the opportunities that these moments of change have imposed (Lahusen *et al.* 2021). Finding little room for manoeuvre at the national level, these groups have oriented their actions towards "small scale everyday solidarity activities in order to transform society from below" (Maggini and Federico 2021). In parallel, they have appealed to supranational and transnational spheres to find new resources with which to sustain their projects (Alagna 2023). As such, solidarity movements position themselves beyond the methodological nationalism that still connotes the study of and the response to immigration. And thus the need to analyse solidarity "beyond borders – 'real' (that is, geographical) borders as well as categorical borders. Both must be transgressed to understand the new modes of contestation and resistance we currently identify in Europe" (Agustín and Jørgensen 2016).

In light of the above, solidarity initiatives are herein interpreted as "a morally motivated series of actions which acquires a political character [...] through their implicit opposition to the ruling socio-political climate" (Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019, 105), that is as a symbol against violent policies of migration and an alternative to formal humanitarian aid (Sandri 2017). Practices in support of refugees thereby shape themselves

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[4] 'Crisis' comes from the Ancient Greek verb κρίνειν, which indicates a moment of separation, distinction, and ultimately of choice between one condition and another (*see* Dafermos 2022).

in relation to the boundaries of states' policies – geographical, legal, administrative, cultural – and take on different forms because many and diverse are the (in)actions to compensate for.

3. Solidarity as 'method'

European borders have become crucial arenas for the elaboration and contestation of public policies. Through a "simultaneous performance of control and crisis" (Pickering and Weber 2013, 58), these spaces are strategically used not just by institutions to transform the balance between security and liberties (Basaran 2008, 339), but also by social actors as a "transgressive category of practice" that can generate confrontation, conflict, and ultimately political change (Kallius, Monterescu, and Rajaram 2016, 10). In light of this, borders have been conceptualised as liminal spaces, that is as laboratories within which alternative or new orders and normalities can be analysed in the making (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). *"Perhaps the border is also an incentive to experiment* – told me one of the interviewees – *because you are in an area that continually urges you to face those who arrive, those who leave, and therefore this ends up producing very enlightening, virtuous experiences"*. Critical and (self)reflexive approaches are particularly well-suited to understanding these processes, since they question static and standardised representations of reality in favour of an ever-evolving negotiation between what we think we know and what we actually find in the field. Therefore, I adopted a constructivist paradigm and applied an interpretive approach. This allowed me to "explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of [my] research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings they generate" (Mason 2018, 1). As such, the emergence of interpretation and theorising of data took place in the course of the analysis (Corbin and Strauss 1990) through the inter-actions with the subjects at the centre of the research (Charmaz 2006). The reality presented in this article is indeed the result of the mediation between the partial yet complementary experiences of both the researcher and the research participants, which in turn arise from the social, cultural and historical conditionings in which these experiences were immersed (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2009). Accordingly, I interpreted such reality "through a 'sense-making' process rather than a hypothesis testing process" (Bhattacherjee 2012, 103), trying to achieve a practical middle ground "between a theory-laden view of the world and an unfettered empiricism" (Suddaby 2006, 635).

Given the above, this research digs into "the complexities and contradictions that unfold 'on the ground' as solidarity is practised" and interprets them "as theoretically, methodologically and epistemologically productive spaces" (Cantat *et al.* 2019, 15-16). This means using solidarity (also) as a 'lense' through which to read not only solidarity intervention itself but also, by contrast, state negligence. Thus my field-work took the form of an embedded and relational ethnography (Desmond 2014) in the "places where the power of the border as a constitutive relation was unfolding" (Kallius *et al.* 2016, 10). Taking the role of a volunteer researcher, I became active with different grassroot organisations across the Balkan route. I focused on a main case study, e.g. the Italian-Slovenian border and the city of Trieste, and I combined it with a multi-sited data collection in different border zones across the Balkans (Marcus 1995), including one month in Serbia and one in Greece, and one week in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This choice allowed me to delve into the micro-stories of the Triestine border without losing sight of the (dis)continuities of such dynamics at the transnational level and over time. Field-work started in December 2020 and ended in June 2022, however the research covers a longer time frame, starting from the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015, conventionally defined as a turning point for the EU

asylum regime. Data was mainly collected through participant observations in Piazza della Libertà, 32 semi-structured interviews, countless informal interactions, and online observation. Interviews in Trieste included volunteers and activists, social operators, state officials involved in immigration and asylum matters, local politicians, police officers, and lawyers, selected through snowball sampling. I herein use 'solidarians' to define the volunteers, activists and professionals that engage in non-profit initiatives in support of migrants and refugees (Rozakou 2017; Theodossopoulos 2016), sometimes taking up – either alternatively or simultaneously – both formal and informal roles.

Due to my previous involvement as a solidarian in other frontier areas, it came as relatively natural to establish a good degree of mutual trust with my namesakes, who in turn felt comfortable in sharing their experiences and thoughts with me. Engagement-driven research can in fact mitigate the "stigma associated with an outsider's status" (Johnson, Avenarius, and Weatherford 2016, 114), while providing unique insights on "unwritten rules and complex interactions" (McMorran 2012, 482). Moreover, activist research befits studies dealing with matters of social justice and power relations, as it seeks to highlight, counter and transform forms of injustice (Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz 2022). I therefore aimed to make my approach "performative" – i.e. questioning the relationship between experiences and representations – "participatory" – i.e. imposing a sharing of the research space in which observers and observed co-exist and co-operate – and therefore "political" – i.e. the "method has more to do with acting on the world than with knowing it" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 17).

Being *present* in the field for prolonged periods of time, I became socially and emotionally involved in the lives of the research participants. This required a constant, and sometimes challenging, work of methodological self-consciousness to avoid and if necessary deconstruct my own biases and prejudices. This meant detecting and dissecting my worldviews, language, and actions and revealing how they affected my perception and understanding of reality (Charmaz 2016). Because of my prior engagement with and within the field of the research, I had to strike a balance between being a researcher and a solidarian. In some cases, this required me to take some distance from the field, in order to preserve a critical perspective. In other circumstances, in which non-intervention in the name of 'objective' research would have been unethical (MacKenzie, Christensen, and Turner 2015, 316), I preferred to prioritize the solidarity activity. In this way, I tried to reduce the risk of research 'extractivism' by offering my time and energies to the solidarity projects. In this respect, I want to clarify that the voices of migrants have been intentionally left in the background, even though the encounters with them and the testimonies they brought to me have inevitably and deeply shaped my feelings and thoughts. However, at this stage, my research cannot offer any concrete improvement or solution to their situation, hence it felt fairer not to 'exploit' their voices without being able to give anything in return. As a final remark, it is worth stressing that access to informational sources within the state apparatus, and especially law enforcement agencies, has been at times challenging. This was primarily due to a combination of my personal positioning paired with the fact that the nature of my research topic has recently been an uncomfortable issue for the Italian Ministry of the Interior. Under these circumstances, it proved helpful to explain to all my participants that my intention was not to smear and embarrass, but rather to give nuance and depth to the description of my field by considering different and sometimes conflictual perspectives.

4. The *boundaries* of the crisis: the institutional disengagement

Italy is part of the Geneva Convention (1951) and the right to asylum is provided for in art. 10 par. 3 of the Italian Constitution. The reception of asylum seekers and refugees in the country has developed according to the model envisaged by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that establishes a complementarity between first and second reception (Campesi 2008). First reception is responsibility of the state, which should accommodate asylum seekers in large structures for short periods of time and guarantee food, clothing, health and psychological assistance, as well as legal counselling. Second reception, on the other hand, functions as a publicly funded network of local authorities, third sector organisations and NGOs. As such, the long-term process of integration of refugees into the social fabric was outsourced to infra- and non-state actors since the beginning. This stemmed also from the specific administrative structure of the country, which recognizes four types of territorial entities with specific powers and functions (state, regions, provinces and cities). The Constitution explicitly recognizes and incentivizes local autonomy (art. 5) and grants five regions a special legal regime of autonomy (art. 116), including Friuli-Venezia Giulia (FVG) of which Trieste is the administrative centre. Although legislation on immigration remains within the jurisdiction of the state, municipalities are thus the main institutional interlocutor 'on the ground' for immigrants (Caponio 2004; Fauser 2017; Lacroix and Spencer 2022). As such, the provision of social and legal services largely depends on the initiative or lack of initiative of these bodies, which in turn consistently rely on the competencies and skills of the third sector. In the North of the country, traditionally richer than the South, this leeway allowed some resourceful administrations to develop innovative practices beyond the sometimes too narrow margins of national policies. In this context, virtually everyone in Trieste is aware and quite proud of the way in which the border city managed to cope with otherwise neglected social issues and even anticipate national reforms (Gallio 2018; Mezzina 2020). "*Trieste has an important history in terms of experiments in the social services, in a broad sense* – stressed one of the solidarians – *The same reception system was born here after the Balkan war".* The non-governmental reception network set up in Trieste in the 90s for refugees escaping the war in the Balkans inspired the creation of the national System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR)[5], so-called 'second reception'. This innovative drive depended largely on ICS, which since 1998 has been institutionalised as an association committed to the protection of asylum seekers, refugees, and persons with subsidiary or humanitarian protection in Trieste and in FVG. Its origins date back to 1993, when the Consortium promoted and coordinated the reception and integration of refugees fleeing the ravaged territories of the former Yugoslavia. Drawing on this experience, ICS created a system of *accoglienza diffusa*, literally 'spread hospitality'. By hosting foreigners in apartments scattered across the city, instead of confining them in big and isolated structures, and by promoting their autonomy and proactivity, the association established a climate of trust and mutual understanding between natives and newcomers, fostering social, economic, and cultural enrichment for both sides.

The reality of ICS is a bit of an exception at the national level, because the 'accoglienza diffusa' distributes people evenly throughout the territory. This greatly mitigates the social impact. Here we managed the same numbers of arrivals as other border cities, but without creating ghetto-like concentrations (Activist).

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[5] SPRAR was reformed into SIPROIMI (System of Protection for Holders of International Protection and for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors) in 2018 and SAI (System of Reception and Integration) in 2020.

In 2018, the Italian reception system was dramatically overturned by Decree Law 113/2018, so-called 'security decree'. By reducing guarantees for refugees, cutting public funding and favouring the involvement of private actors in the management of immigration, the reform, "*de facto*, has abolished the phase of second reception" (Terlizzi 2020, 22). Inevitably, and strategically, this resulted into a *crisi dell'accoglienza*, e.g. crisis of the reception system, that has been politically exploited to justify the rhetoric of emergency and the need for stricter policies. In confirmation of this, various informants testified of an unprecedented sense of distrust spread towards the reception system in the years following the reform, even in Trieste. According to some interviewees, local politicians strove to create a sense of "terror and panic" aimed at discouraging migrants from staying and locals from supporting their transit and arrival.

Trieste was the only reality in Italy where the border was normalised. Everything that is happening now is artfully created. I am referring to the attempt to deconstruct the forms of local welfare. These were essential because they have always allowed to avoid the emergency. Instead, they put grains of sand in the system to jam it, to produce this type of emergency…now the reception system is in distress (Social operator).

Although the system set up in Trieste was in the position to cope with the increase of arrivals from the Balkan route, since 2015 local and national authorities have proceeded with "almost zero planning" (Public official), manifesting their incapacity, or unwillingness, to "come up with any permanent solution" (Police officer).

Nobody here has a quick-fix solution, but sometimes the feeling is that there is not even the will to look for it, and I say this as a politician…The impression is that here, as it often happens in Italy, the emergency is the rule (Local politician)[6].

Once the emergency was artfully created[7], first reception services were progressively and alternatively reduced as well. 'Low-threshold' facilities dedicated to providing first aid and basic information to PoM were repeatedly shut down.

[The municipality] started doing a whole series of rather unpleasant things… They temporarily closed the day centre to do something else there, but it made sense as a dormitory because it was close to the station, in a quiet area, and allowed the homeless and people in transit to have a safe place to stay (Social operator).

At the beginning of 2020, during the Covid-19 national lock-down, the municipality of Trieste decided to close the Help centre, a room inside the train station where assistance and information were provided to people in distress.

The pandemic produced a 'criminal' contradiction, in the sense that the municipality transformed a day centre and redefined the low-threshold services present in the area at a moment in which there was the

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[6] *See* Bona 2016.

[7] https://actionaid-it.imgix.net/uploads/2022/02/centri_italia_emergenza._2021.pdf

obligation for people not to circulate. Thus, in the end, there were no trains, no services, and people did not know where to go (Social operator).

In those same months, NGOs and solidarity networks across the Balkan route started to circulate testimonies of unlawful practices perpetrated by the Italian police against people seeking asylum at the north-eastern border. One year later, in January 2021, the Italian Court of Rome judged the Italian Ministry of Interior guilty of conducting 'informal readmissions' of asylum seekers to Slovenia. Informal readmissions, or push-backs, are procedures enacted by police or military personnel that consist of intercepting people who try to cross an international frontier and preventing them from physically and legally accessing systems of protection in a determined country. These practices circumvent safeguards governing international protection, detention and custody, expulsion, and the use of force, among others (Astuti, Bove, Brambilla, Lici, Rizzi, Stege, and Stojanova 2022; Bove and Rizzi 2021). Overall, push-backs served a double purpose: on the one hand, they maintained an ideological profile, e.g. the rhetoric of the invasion and the need to secure national borders; on the other, combined with the contraction of the reception system, they achieved the practical objective of creating a harsh environment that dissuaded people from transiting through and remaining in Trieste. As confirmed by a social operator, "*most of those who arrive now in Trieste are still afraid of being pushed back. Some arrived again this year [2021] and are still afraid of applying for asylum in Trieste, they prefer to go elsewhere*". Hence, readmissions can be interpreted as part of a political project aimed at transforming Trieste from a city of arrival and integration into a hostile and transitory stop for migrants.

5. The *potentialities* of the crisis: the intervention of solidarity

In this bleak picture, a bottom-up solidarity initiative flourished in 2019 in Piazza della Libertà, in front of the train station of Trieste, thanks to the gumption of a retired couple that started noticing more and more people transiting through the city, without local institutions providing any kind of material and legal support. "*There is a lack of everything here* – commented a social operator – *There are no public toilets, no showers. People arrive after travelling for at least 15 days, sometimes a month, and they are in disastrous conditions...Then there is no social helpdesk, even just to distribute leaflets to explain what asylum means, where to go and ask for it, etc. These are big deficiencies. What the volunteers do is the work that the state should do*". Waiting for the people arriving by foot from the Balkan route, the first group of volunteers started gathering in Piazza della Libertà every day at the same hour and improvising first reception services for them.

5.1 Composition of solidarity: a multifaceted personality

For those who have been in Piazza della Libertà, or have seen it online, the main image that comes to mind is the *cura dei piedi*, e.g. feet care. The most evident and symbolic service offered by solidarians is in fact the treatment of the wounds and sores that migrants carry after weeks of walking. While volunteer nurses and doctors deal with these and other injuries, other volunteers distribute food and drink. At the end of the meal, backpacks are donated to migrants, along with a 'survival kit' that includes a change of clothes and shoes, sanitary products, a sleeping bag in winter, face-masks and sanitising gel during the pandemic. These

fundamentally assistentialist activities remained immortalised in the pictures posted on Facebook every day. The practice of care thereby became the medium through which to convey a political message. These posts expose the violence of the European border regime and denounce national and local institutions for their inefficiency and indifference. From the beginning, the Piazza manifested a critical attitude towards the political *status quo* and, as such, it was born with a strong component of *autonomous solidarity*. Using Agustín and Jørgensen's words, it developed through "relations and practices that are produced in self-organised (mainly urban) spaces […] based in forms of horizontal participation", and "cooperation with the state and its 'securitized humanism' […] is rejected" (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019, 40). Many volunteers tell of their first encounter with the organisation and how the veterans invited them to come to the square in a very informal way and to find their role by doing, by meeting the migrants and acting among them. A volunteer told me about his first time in the Piazza. He remembered saying "Ah, I like this humanitarian activity you are doing", and being told "No! We don't do charity, we are here to conduct a political struggle!". Still, the spontaneity of the project, in addition to the morphology and position of the square – open on all four sides and an obligatory passage to reach or leave the train station – immediately connoted the Piazza as an open and welcoming space for anyone interested in supporting people in transit. Different personalities with various backgrounds and motivations converged: from pensioners to university students, from political activists to Catholic scouts, from mathematicians to philosophers. Italian, Bosnian and Pakistani are just a few of the nationalities represented by solidarians in the square. A strong component of *civic solidarity* has thereby been absorbed. In this case, the engagement of the volunteers "is not transformative of the state's legal framework but can rather be seen as a necessary supplement or alternative social framework" (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019, 73). Some of the volunteers thus concentrated on the humanitarian dimension, spending a few hours a week cooking meals or tidying up the warehouse of Linea d'Ombra (LdO), the first association officially organised in Piazza della Libertà. Regarding this civic component, it is worth emphasising how the presence of retirees and people with limited work or political commitments has ensured a continuity of 'manpower'. Nonetheless, even the more 'charitable' components of the group have often participated in events of a more properly political nature, as they recognized the inability of the current system to guarantee legal and safe migration. The contestation of European and national policies became, over the years, the pivotal point for a growing debate in Trieste. Exposing on social media the horrifying conditions in which migrants reached Piazza della Libertà became the symbol of a moral and political condemnation of European borders and the expression of a general discontent with Italian institutions. The Piazza became a reference point for operators of the *Progetto Stella Polare* and *ICS*, for activists of *Casa delle Culture*, *Tilt Collective – Precarious Autonomous Resistances* and the *NO CPR* network, and for the volunteer doctors and nurses of *Strada SiCura,* among others.

Paradoxically, in the Piazza, we work together among realities that up to two years ago looked at each other with distrust, from a political point of view. And there, in the Piazza, in the action, these differences just vanish, and this is fantastic…We tried to collaborate. We tried to rebuild networks in the territory while setting our differences aside (Activist).

It is again worth stressing that the Piazza was born within a context that was *a priori* strongly connotated by the 'mentality' spread by ICS. The Consorzio is a private, secular and non-profit association which receives funding from the municipality and the Prefecture, a peripheral organ of the Ministry of the Interior with representative duties on the city. This type of *institutional* solidarity is produced by formalisation of solidarity

relations, which means "that there is a constant tension between the potential political action of solidarity and its regularisation by the institution" (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019, 42). ICS has operated since 1993 to guarantee continuity and coordination in humanitarian interventions in Italy and beyond the border, becoming over time a UNHCR's logistics partner and a stable interlocutor with government institutions. It nonetheless managed to maintain an independent approach, sometimes openly in contrast with the political apparatus and bearer of critical demands. Bucking national trends, ICS 'opened the doors' of the reception centres and actively promoted the integration of immigrants within the urban fabric and social life of the city. In addition to this, ICS provides legal and social support to asylum-seekers and refugees; organises public events on issues concerning protection and reception of PoM; collects, analyse and disseminate data on the Balkan route and particularly on the reception system in Trieste; and collaborates with solidarity networks such as the Association for Legal Studies on Immigration (ASGI) and RiVolti ai Balcani. In light of the above, it is reasonable to think that the 'spirit' of solidarity instilled in the city by the Consortium played an important role in encouraging civil and political involvement in the activities of the Piazza.

5.2 Practices of solidarity: from local to transnational and back

From 2019, tens of trips across the Balkan route were organised from Piazza della Libertà. Meant to bring support to people encamped in *squats* and *jungles*[8], these visits enabled solidarians based in different hubs of the route to meet and exchange resources and information. They thereby learnt how to think in a systemic way and administer their resources so as to ensure a holistic intervention throughout the different stages of the migratory experience.

In Trieste we welcome those who arrive and in Bosnia we support them before their departure…: Piazza della Libertà and the Bosnian border are inextricably linked, the beginning and the end of the 'game'[9]. There cannot be one without the other (Activist).

Once physiological needs are met, volunteers in Piazza della Libertà provide migrants with information on the rights they can exercise and the services they can access. The intervention of some ICS operators has been essential in this sense. From 2020, on a voluntary basis and outside working hours, some of them started to provide legal support to the people in the square. In turn, through these conversations, solidarians become aware of the mosaic of abuses suffered by PoM on their way to Trieste. Sharing some hot tea on a windy winter day can indeed become an opportunity to collect evidence on push-backs and other violations. Part of this information is disseminated and systematised through networks of associations and NGOs, fostering transnational alliances and cross-border initiatives that amplify the political scope of the daily interactions between solidarians and migrants in border zones (Davies, Isakjee and Obradovic-Wochnik 2023). In December 2022, the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN) released the second edition of *The black book of push-backs*: almost 800 pages documenting more than 1,635 testimonies of human rights violations affecting almost 25,000 people. Drawing on one of these testimonies – reporting the chain push-back of a Pakistani citizen from Italy to Serbia – lawyers of ASGI presented an appeal to the Human Rights and

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[8] Informal settlements.

[9] How migrants call their attempt to cross international borders.

Immigration Section of the Ordinary Court of Rome. In January 2021, the court condemned the Italian Ministry of Interior for the 'informal readmissions' of asylum-seekers to Slovenia and ordered to stop these procedures. On the occasion, ASGI defined the sentence as "the result of a network work that has involved various subjects active in the contrast of violence against people on the move along the Balkan route" – including journalists, the network RiVolti ai Balcani, the NGO Along the Balkan route, the Legal Center for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment, the Medea project of ASGI, ICS, LdO, the Zagreb Peace Center – "and all the activists who act for protecting human rights […] along the routes travelled by people in transit"[10].

Besides 'looking back' towards the Balkans, solidarians in Trieste project their work forward, trying to prepare migrants for what comes next and to guide them to places where they can have support without being exploited by *passeurs*. To do this, they "rely on a network that includes other key points of the route, such as Milan, Ventimiglia, and Oulx" (Social operator). In this respect, several solidarians acknowledged the effectiveness of LdO's communication skills in reaching a wide and transnational audience and creating synergies with diverse realities across Europe.

The communication activity had great media coverage and created a gigantic network…even outside Trieste, from Bosnia to France, in Germany, all around Italy. In March 2021, we organised a demonstration that eventually mobilised 40 squares in Italy plus Berlin, Vienna, Athens, Paris, the border of the Basque Country, Claviere, the border at Brenner. There were simultaneous demonstrations at the same time. That was quite a big thing (Activist).

This kind of events attracted national and international media, making volunteers and activists mouthpieces for the violations committed along and beyond the Balkan route. In this way, Piazza della Libertà has become the gathering place for the conscious citizens of Trieste, but also the arena of a transnational dialogue among solidarity groups, scattered across Europe and yet united in their demand for justice. Emblematic, in this sense, are the words of the call for participation in the migrant caravan from Trieste to Maljevac, organised in June 2021 by LdO and other associative and political realities.

Crossing countries and borders that embody the hypocrisy of European policies, we want to denounce those who implement chain rejections and unroll barbed wire, to demand the opening of borders, the closure of all the detention camps and the end of violence and pushbacks…We want to act from below and network at European level, in order to create moments of breaking of the ordinary and to question the past, the present and the future of the securitarian system of immigration policies…For us, being in Maljevac means being in Ceuta and Melilla, in the Canary Islands, in Lampedusa, in Lesvos, and in Evros…We want to overturn a narrative that constantly speaks of emergency and humanitarian catastrophe, as if it were a natural disaster, without identifying the causes and those responsible for it! We want a radical change![11].

5.3 Interactions with the institutional environment: the criminalization of solidarity

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[10] https://www.asgi.it/media/comunicati-stampa/rotta-balcanica-riammissioni-a-catena-condannato-il-ministero-risarcimento/

[11] https://facebook.com/events/s/balkanroute-calling-caravan-fo/927105304754317/

"We make fluid a situation that could jam – told me an activist – *as if we were cleaning a stream bed and allowing the water to flow away and not to overflow, right? So I think that basically the municipality may be pleased if someone clears the ground, in this way there is no need for them to intervene"*. Though, while facilitating the flow, the Piazza brings to the surface a phenomenon that the city would rather ignore. According to a social operator, *"What LdO does can be disturbing, because it makes people visible…If you act publicly, claiming that there is a problem, this clearly bothers, because it makes the problem evident"*. If from a practical point of view solidarity is hence tolerated, from an ideological and political perspective this visible and noisy presence has triggered suspicious if not openly hostile reactions. As in the rest of the country (Bontempelli 2017), solidarity practices have been increasingly discouraged, vilified and, in extreme cases, violently repressed and criminalised. It is legitimate to interpret the criminalization of solidarity as a political reaction of the state to the contestation of the *status quo* by a composite and proactive part of the civil society. However, rather than dissuading, attempts to repress solidarity in Trieste led to the consolidation of the political conviction of its components. Asked about this issue, one volunteer argued that solidarity *"becomes political when and because it resists certain accusations"*, that is *"the very fact that it resists makes it political"*. For those already embracing a defined political orientation, the criminalization of solidarity represented a re-confirmation of the institutional inadequacy and the rightness of their struggle.

It is annoying that they continue to attack us politically, but this means that we are on the right side of history (Activist).

For those who started from a more neutral position, these attacks represented moments of reflection that made them start questioning the system. In this regard, the testimonies of two solidarians, both with no political background, are illuminating. They refer in their respective stories to two episodes involving LdO. The first dates back to October 2020, when the Trieste Police Headquarters granted the *Son Giusto* group the permission to organise a demonstration – which among others gathered representatives of far-right groups such as *Forza Nuova* and *CasaPound* – in Piazza della Libertà during the hours normally dedicated to the solidarity service. *Son Giusto* is known in Trieste for spreading false information on its social pages relating primarily to migrants and the reception system. The combination was predictably explosive and the affair ended with a disproportionate attack by the police against the solidarians who took to the Piazza to peacefully express their dissent. Eight solidarians were charged[12] and among them one was taken to the hospital for police beatings[13] – no consequences instead for the Fascist salutes adorning the square and the chairs thrown by the demonstrators against the solidarians.

It was really something that changed my approach…This thing of applying double standards shocked me…It was absolutely premeditated, of course, there is no other explanation. I don't know, that stuff didn't let me sleep for two days (Volunteer).

What happened that day was crucial to mobilise consciences in Trieste and generated a new wave of solidarity around the Piazza. In June 2022, *Tilt Collective* organised a fundraising event to support the legal costs of the eight solidarians on trial. On the Facebook page of the event, the press release opened with "ON

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[12] https://www.lineadombra.org/2021/12/15/in-piazza-liberta-il-24-ottobre-2020-ceravamo-tutt/

[13] https://www.lineadombra.org/2020/10/26/inaccettabile-gestione-di-piazza-liberta-violenza-della-polizia-e-saluti-fascisti/

OCTOBER 24th WE WERE ALL THERE" and concluded: "Solidarity – towards the defendants, towards those who received the batons, towards those who work in that square every day and, above all, towards those who personally suffer the violence of the borders – is our main weapon to resist"[14]. Since that day, solidarity in and with the Piazza has been reinvigorated and new projects were born, such as the self-organised and mutualistic network TRAMA.

The second criminalising attack concerns the investigation for abetting illegal immigration for profit against the president of LdO, later also extended to the vice-president. Charges were supported by the fact that they had hosted an Iranian family in their home and purchased train tickets for them. The accusation unleashed a strong reaction not only from associations and political collectives, but also from universities and researchers attentive to migration and border issues[15]. After a few months, the investigation ended with the accusations being dropped and the feeling among solidarians that the persecutory act had been political in nature.

This makes me think it's all a farce, that the political and legal sides are a farce, and that we are doing well. It also tires me. This attempt to suppress any help, any new energy, makes me angry and tired. But if you ask me about my feelings, apart from those moments of anxiety in which I wondered 'who knows if one day we will be judged for this…', I did what I had to do, and that's it (Volunteer).

In this regard, solidarians themselves recognize the subsidiary role that their action assumes with respect to the inefficiency of the state. This subsidiary role, however, becomes extremely relevant if interpreted as a support to a bigger cause. Aware of not being able to "change the world", solidarians become ancillary tools to amplify migrants' struggle. Forced to disobey border restrictions, PoM carry out a contentious act that is expressed through their bodies in transit, before and beyond any ideological statement. Hence, according to some, the political dimension of solidarity also lies in acknowledging this 'revolutionary' act and favouring its success as far as possible.

So, ultimately it is about supporting someone who is changing the world. Over time and with the creation of networks, it is a utopia to strive for...Social upheavals have already happened, why shouldn't they happen again?...I don't see the meaning of my daily actions if there is nothing more to aim for (Activist).

As such, solidarity initiatives are locally grounded in the imminent needs of people in transit but also, and because of that, projected beyond the material and symbolic constraints of the asylum regime. Physical assistance evolves into protest campaigns, giving shape to a political project founded upon values of care, reciprocity and, of course, solidarity. Thus, in Piazza della Libertà like in other border zones, the humanitarian becomes political because it is the creation of human connection and empathy to be experienced as a contestation of the *status quo*.

It's about having a moment of leisure, of encounter, a pleasant moment. It's not just about the physiological needs, because those have been tormenting these people since the day they left. So, that's not enough, that's taken for granted. The real work starts after that. It's like in martial arts: the physiological and

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[14] https://www.facebook.com/events/s/il-ballo-dellantifa-concerto-b/551257233158813/

[15] https://www.laboratoriosociologiavisuale.it/new/tag/appello/

legal needs you satisfy are from the white belt to the black one, from the black one onwards it's the human connection, the fact of feeling good together… there can be a humanitarian way of acting that is intrinsically political, even if you don't want to connote it that way. It is political for the way you do it (Activist).

5. Conclusions

Since my first visit to Trieste, in early 2021, many things have changed, except one. New and different solidarians added to the 'veterans' of the Piazza and volunteers, social operators and international humanitarian officers now sit together regularly to discuss the situation at the border and plan coordinated actions. The *autonomous* momentum slightly eased to create a common ground of discussion with national and international institutional bodies, which in turn acknowledged the need to rely on grassroot organisations for a more fruitful interaction with migrants. Meanwhile, some of the activists from the Piazza are joining the European Citizens' Initiative "Stop Border Violence": one million signature to ask the European Commission to prevent torture and inhumane and degrading treatments against PoM at EU borders. Informal readmissions are officially suspended and a day centre has been (re)opened a few steps from Piazza della Libertà. Everything seems different, except that the newly elected government (2022) has announced the intention to reactivate readmissions[16] and in less than a year after taking office it passed a law (50/2023) that further dismantles the reception system [17]. As a matter of fact, the new day centre in Trieste is financed with 'solidarity funds'. Among the operators, the faces of the ones who used to be in the Piazza.

Trieste is just one example of a process concerning European borders in general. Proof of this are, on the one hand, the systematic and repetitive violation of refugees' rights along different EU and non-EU borders, and on the other, the ever-growing transnationality of solidarity initiatives. The 'exceptionality' of Trieste – e.g. the fact that the asylum regime in Italy owes a great deal to this city and particularly to ICS – has only permitted to see more vividly the ongoing institutional crisis: from excellence model to umpteenth 'migrant emergency'. At the same time, the peculiarity of this territory brought out the complexity and dynamism of solidarity movements. Rather than unitary projects, solidarity initiatives are choirs of voices that form, evolve and recombine depending on the necessities of the people they support – in some cases it is a hot meal, in others is legal advice, virtually in all is the need for recognition of their rights – and the political climate in which they are immersed. The nature of these projects cannot be crystallised in fixed categories because it is the relational context with which they interact that shapes them: for every *in*action of the state – be it the violation of international law or the refusal to manage the transit and arrival of migrants – there is a *re*action from solidarians. And nonetheless, this article also brings to the surface the deepest roots of this reaction, which ultimately lie in the political dissatisfaction for and moral condemnation of the current immigration regime. Shared among different sensibilities and expressed through a variety of actions, solidarity should hence be interpreted as a collective and participative attempt to compensate for the failures of contemporary welfare states and, as such, as an intrinsically political project. Repeatedly, initiatives in support of migrants have represented "primarily an attempt to alleviate suffering" but also "a political laboratory", "which originated from an openness and a solidarity drive that has the characteristics of transnational commitment" (Bona 2016, 99). In this light, migrant solidarity can be revealed "as a particularly charged terrain between politics and

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[16] https://www.meltingpot.org/2022/12/trieste-nuova-direttiva-piantedosi-ripartono-le-riammissioni-illegali-in-slovenia/

[17] https://www.meltingpot.org/2023/05/cosa-resta-della-prima-accoglienza-dopo-il-decreto-cutro/

ethics" (Bornstein and Redfield 2011, 25), that is, as a political alternative founded on the re-definition of care and reciprocity between human beings (Woodly, Brown, Marin, Threadcraft, Harris, Syedullah, Ticktin 2021). While governments' institutions pursue politics that hamper migration through the creation of hostile environments both for refugees and solidarians, the latter facilitate secure migration by creating safe spaces and empathetic inter-actions. In doing so, solidarity contests the national(istic) manicheism between securitization and humanitarianism, and because of this states themselves treat solidarians as hostile political actors threatening the *status quo*. Yet, this can in turn trigger politicisation 'from within', namely a reaction of solidarians to state repression.

Given that "the way in which a social and political system treats immigrants and refugees also sets the standard for the rest of society" (Agustín and Jørgensen 2016), border practices represent the litmus test of a moment of rupture and transformation for contemporary societies, that is a crisis in their institutional framework, e.g. in the relation between institutional and non-institutional actors, and in the allocation of resources and responsibilities among them. As such, more research is needed to connect the field of immigration to other public sectors, and especially to transnational policies on commons, in order to identify possible similarities and, if necessary, prevent analogous drifts and propose alternatives.

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