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Refugee solidarity activism in times of pandemic: reorganizing solidarity practices at the EU border

Chiara Milan 

Department of Political and Social Sciences, Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, Italy

ABSTRACT

This article explores how grassroots refugee solidarity groups adapted their solidarity practices to the unprecedented challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. By taking as a case study the EU border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, which is situated along the Western Balkans migratory route, this piece explores how grassroots solidarity groups continued to provide first aid in the field to people on the move during the pandemic by adapting their practices to the changed circumstances. Combining a spatial and relational perspective to the study of solidarity activism, this article found evidence that solidarity groups managed to continue their activities during the pandemic thanks to two specific conditions: the existence of established networks and strong ties between international and domestic actors; and the spatiality of the border, which provided fertile ground for these relationships and ties to develop and thrive. The study placed social movement literature into dialogue with critical border studies and critical geography and is based on online and offline participant observation as well as in-depth qualitative interviews with solidarians engaged in refugee solidarity activism.

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Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic severely affected social and political life worldwide in many ways. The global pandemic and its political and social consequences also considerably altered the context in which social movement organizations (SMOs) could organize and mobilize (Della Porta 2021; Flesher Fominaya 2024; Pleyers 2020), spawning new forms of activism (Santos 2020). In particular, it posed a number of unprecedented challenges to refugee solidarity groups providing first aid support to people on the move¹ traversing European migratory routes. Pandemic-related measures, such as border closures and mobility restrictions, that were put in place throughout the world from March 2020 were also heavily enforced in the countries traversed by the Western Balkans migratory route. This rendered the activity of refugee solidarity activists, such as the distribution of food and non-food items (NFI), as well as the provision of medical support to people stranded in makeshift camps increasingly difficult.

Against all the odds, refugee solidarity groups managed to continue to provide first aid in the field to people on the move during the pandemic, adapting their solidarity practices to the

changed circumstances. As of early March 2020, it was no longer possible for solidarity actors to be physically present at the border, due to travel restrictions. Thus they resorted to ‘social distance direct actions’ (Zajak 2020), combining online and offline activity to support people on the move. The important questions that this article strives to answer are the following: How did refugee solidarity groups adapt their solidarity practices to face the extreme uncertainty and rapid change provoked by the pandemic? What factors created the conditions to allow them to continue their activities despite not being physically present in the field? While previous studies have provided in-depth analyses of the practices of solidarity adopted in the field of refugee support (Fleischmann 2020; Zamponi 2017; 2018), enough attention has still not been devoted to investigating how these were adapted in times of great uncertainty and rapid change, such as the global pandemic.

This article combines various strands of literature as it places social movement literature into dialogue with critical border studies and critical geography in order to explore the factors that created the conditions for refugee solidarity groups to continue their activities despite the challenging circumstances. Taking as a vantage point the Bosnian border with Croatia, which is situated along the Western Balkans route and has become an increasingly traversed migratory path since 2015 (Milan 2019; Milan and Pirro 2018), this study analyses solidarity as a practice situated in space and time (Agustín and Jørgensen 2018), as well as interactions (Milan 2023; Rygiel 2011). It borrows the notion of borderscape from critical border theory (Brambilla 2015) in order to focus attention on the spatial setting in which solidarity groups are embedded, thus enriching social movement literature with a spatial perspective. This space-sensitive perspective makes it possible to explore the border as a socio-political space where interactions occur, relationships are created and reproduced, and social solidarities are formed (Rygiel 2011). The relational and spatial perspective adopted points to two specific conditions that facilitated the adaptation of solidarity practices. The first of these was the existence of established networks and strong ties between international and domestic actors, which allowed solidarity groups to continue their activities. The second condition was the spatiality of the border, which provided fertile ground for relationships and ties to develop and thrive. The borderscape in which these ties were formed influenced the likelihood of their subsequent maintenance, playing an important role in sustaining social action in unfavourable circumstances.

The article is divided into six sections. It starts by sketching out the literature on social movements, with a specific focus on the relational and spatial turn in social sciences. Following this, it offers a theoretical perspective informing the study, before moving on to a thematic description of the context and background of the research. Next, it explains the rationale behind the choice of methods and sources used in the analysis. The article then moves on to analyse the findings of the study, namely the role of interactions and ties based on trust, and the extent to which they were fostered by the spatiality of the borderscape. Finally, the piece concludes by presenting avenues for future research.

Refugee solidarity activism during the pandemic: a relational and spatial approach to solidarity practices at the border

Social movement scholars maintain that periods of crisis provoke a shift in repertoires, frames and organizational structures (Della Porta 2020). For instance, recent studies

investigating the impact of the pandemic in social movement activity have claimed that the outbreak of COVID-19 represented an opening up of opportunities for movement actors, who adapted to the mutated circumstances by engaging in mutual support activities, providing basic support and solidarity within their communities and beyond (Pleyers 2020). In a similar vein, Woods (2020) has observed that during the pandemic solidarity SMOs reacted by arranging food distribution for migrants and the most vulnerable categories of citizens, while other scholars have outlined how solidarity groups organized mutual aid groups in their neighbourhoods (Chevéé 2022). Studies in refugee solidarity activism have found evidence for a strengthening of ties amongst refugee solidarity groups at both the local and transnational level (Milan 2020a), and of a proliferation of mobilization in support of people on the move (Zajak, Stjepandić, and Steinhilper 2020). During the pandemic, pro-migrant movement actors resorted to 'hybrid protest practices' (Zajak, Stjepandić, and Steinhilper 2020), experimenting with novel tools and forms of organization and mobilization, and combining online and offline activities to compensate for the lack of collective action in public spaces (Zajak 2020). Other scholars have noted that periods of crisis have increasingly blurred the lines between contentious and non-contentious forms of civil society engagement in the field of solidarity with migrants, an arena characterized by activities that often lie at the intersection between humanitarian practices and contentious politics (Steinhilper and della Porta 2021).

To explain this shift and adaptation of repertoires of action, the discourse in traditional social movement literature has mainly revolved around a structural explanation. According to the 'political process' perspective, social movement actors adapt their repertoire of action to the change in political opportunities (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Tarrow 2011; Tilly 2006). Other scholars have added that movements also respond to threats, as well as opportunities (Goldstone and Tilly 2001). In times of restrictive conditions and circumstances, such as economic crises or repression, social movements can increase their mobilization capacity (Della Porta and Mattoni 2014; Flesher Fominaya 2020) and reconfigure the set of accepted action forms (Bosi and Zamponi 2015), adjusting them to the mutated environment. Although he acknowledges that structure and the macro-historical context do constrain the activity of protestors (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), Jasper has complemented this dominant structural explanation with a cultural perspective that attributes importance to meanings, emotions and moral values (2008). Subsequently, Duyvendak and Jasper (2014) enriched this view from an interactionist perspective, inviting us to focus on the meso-level and to take into account the interaction between different players, thus sparking a relational turn in social movement studies. The relational approach to social movements pointed to the relevance of relationships, networks and interactions for political mobilization (Passy 2003; Tarrow 2011). Amongst others, Passy (2003) has stressed the importance of networks, social interactions and interpersonal ties to foster mobilization and individual participation, in line with what Diani (1997) termed 'social capital', meaning the capacity of movement actors to engage in relationships, creating ties based on mutual trust and recognition. Several scholars have outlined how networks act as a resource for SMOs, as 'strong ties enable activists to contribute their scarce resources to risky collective struggles' (Nicholls 2009, 83).

According to Duyvendak and Jasper (2014), the interaction between players occurs in the arena, a concept that came to the fore with the spatial turn in social sciences (Sewell 2001; Springer and Billon 2016), which occurred simultaneously with the relational turn. A group of scholars from the field of critical geography began to explore the relational qualities of space (Martin and Miller 2003; Nicholls 2008; 2009), therefore paying attention to the spatialities of contention (Daphi 2017). The importance attributed to space built on Lefebvre, who first pointed out that space is made by social activity, and is consequently socially produced and constantly re-enacted in everyday life (Lefebvre 2003). Consequently, scholars have argued for the centrality of cities and urban environments 'as incubators for counterhegemonic political activity' (Steinhilper and Ataç 2019, 346), since place provides favourable geographic conditions for relatively strong ties and networks to develop between different activists (Nicholls 2009).

Building on the observation of Agustín and Bak Jørgensen (2021) that solidarity is both produced in and produces spaces, this study focuses on the ways in which the spatiality of the border shapes and is shaped by interactions and relationships between people, groups and institutions. As previous scholarship has outlined, solidarity takes place in the spatial demarcation of the borders, spaces of social movement activity that can be considered to be sites of struggle (Naples, Bickham Méndez, and Ayoub 2015). Other scholars have stressed the fact that borders are also socio-political spaces, milieus where social relations are created, and which also involve struggles over their very meaning (Rygiel 2011).

Combining both conceptual and empirical insights, this article aims to provide new theoretical reflections and empirical evidence regarding the relevance of applying a relational and spatial perspective to the study of refugee solidarity groups and the support practices they provide to migrants in the specific geography of the border, which is studied here as a space of encounter shaped by interactions and social relationships. To this end, I will look at the relational qualities (Nicholls 2008; 2009) of the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, examining it as a space of contention (Monforte 2016) that has relational qualities (Nicholls and Uitermark 2016). Furthermore, I will look at how the offline space intersect with the online one, elucidating how the simultaneous presence of solidararians on the field and their use of digital media platforms allowed ties of trust to be maintained across time, fostering thus hybrid solidarity practices.

To help unpack the co-implication of solidarity practices and space, I will borrow the notion of borderscape from critical border studies, where the suffix 'scape' expresses the fluid and irregular form of globalization (Brambilla 2015). This concept makes it possible to explore the new agencies and political subjectivities that continuously emerge at the borders in depth (Brambilla 2015). A borderscape qualifies as a fluid, shifting space where relationships are produced and different ideas of identity are formulated and negotiated (Perera 2007). By emphasizing 'the potential of the borderscape as a space for liberating political imagination from the burden of the territorialist imperative while opening up spaces within which the organisation of new forms of the political and the social become possible' (Brambilla 2015, 10), I will thus argue that the borderscape under investigation here has created fertile ground for networks to be formed and reproduced, involving and connecting various actors at the local and transnational level. The simultaneous coexistence of, and interaction between, local and transnational actors has

facilitated the emergence and strengthening of ties based on trust that, during the pandemic, continued both online and offline. Before moving to the explanatory part of this paper, the following section will delve into the methods used in the research and the rationale of the case selection.

The Bosnian-Croatian border during the pandemic: actors and research context

Since the so-called ‘long Summer of migration’ in 2015 (Della Porta 2018; Kasperek and Speer 2015), the former Yugoslav states have performed the role of transit countries along the migratory trail known as ‘the Western Balkans route’ (Šelo Šabić and Borić 2016). The migratory route attracted individuals fleeing war-torn states – mostly originating in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Iran – heading to Europe having crossed the Turkish-Greek border (Milan and Pirro 2018). For most of them their final countries of destination were Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden. Following a series of restrictions put in place by numerous governments, the transit of migrants that since 2015 had crossed North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia was halted in March 2016 (Milan 2019). In the following years, people in transit had to reroute their journey to Bosnia and Herzegovina, which from 2018 onwards became the bottleneck in the Western Balkans route. Due to its proximity to the EU (Hromadžić 2020), people on the move were stranded predominantly at the border with Croatia, in the north-eastern canton of Una-Sana (hereinafter USK)², in the area surrounding the towns of Bihać and Velika Kladuša, either outside or inside the official refugee reception system, from where they made attempts to cross the border. At the beginning of 2023, thousands of individuals were still waiting to cross the border leading into Croatia, and therefore EU territory, risking their lives in the so-called ‘game’, the overnight attempt to cross the border by foot without being detected and sent back by the border police (Kovacevic 2020).

The USK canton, with its capital Bihać, is the place where grassroots solidarity groups have been acting since 2018, as it is at the forefront of the ‘migratory challenge’. Despite the limited number of arrivals, which in 2019 ranged between 16,000 and 29,000 individuals (LIBE Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs 2022), management of the situation by local authorities worsened quickly due to a combination of institutional unpreparedness, and long-term structural problems that were not merely limited to the migration management system. At first, the local population intervened to provide first-aid to people on the move who had found shelter in abandoned houses and makeshift settlements, which usually consist of abandoned buildings close to the border crossings that are squatted and self-organized³. Confronting the inaction of both local and international actors, they were joined by groups of international solidarians. These were ‘young European kids who came to the field to spend their time’⁴, and arrived in the area in support of migrants who, intentionally or not, had found themselves outside of the official system of state-run and EU-sponsored camps (Cantat 2020). These groups enacted a variety of solidarity initiatives aimed at satisfying immediate needs: the emergency provision of food, clothes, blankets, stoves and laundry service, help with translation and medical assistance, as well as the provision of SIM cards, Wi-Fi connections and power banks. They act in an independent manner and in a self-organized way,

therefore they belong to the category of ‘autonomous solidarity’, which differs from humanitarianism insofar as it rejects the legal obligations to check and report undocumented migrants that humanitarian aid often pursues (Dadusc and Mudu 2022). The participants in these activities have been called ‘solidarians’ (Rozakou 2016), a term that is used in this article to identify self-organized, mostly young, foreign individuals engaged in support for people on the move across Europe in the aftermath of the 2015 ‘long Summer of migration’.

What took place in the USK canton recalls a phenomenon that has occurred on the Greek islands and other places that have become crucial nodes of European migratory paths since 2015. Ever since this point, alongside official humanitarian organizations, a loose and ‘heterogeneous community of actors’ (Cantat 2020, 97) has emerged in the refugee solidarity field, where it has engaged in providing support to people on the move in an independent, horizontal and autonomous manner, outside of the established and institutionalized channels of assistance. What has been termed ‘solidarities in transit’ (Cantat 2020), due to the fact that these groups provide support to people on the move at different points along the migratory routes, consists of a composite network of grassroots groups mobilized and organized to help people on the move in an independent way and in several countries across European territory (Della Porta 2018). Its components are characterized by a high degree of flexibility and biographical availability, that is to say the ‘absence of personal constraints that may increase the costs and risks of movement participation, such as full-time employment, marriage, and family responsibilities’ (McAdam 1986, 70). Solidarians are mostly individuals who have resources at their disposal, such as flexibility and time availability given the fact that most of them are students or young independent workers, that they decide to devote to refugee solidarity activism. They have taken centre stage in providing solidarity to people in transit due to their high level of flexibility, which allows them to quickly move to different nodes on the migratory route when needed.

These groups belong to the category of grassroots solidarity movements, which is characterized by the fact that they do not benefit directly from the outcome of their involvement (Giugni 2001; Giugni and Passy 2001), since their actions are ‘collective, altruist, and political’ (Passy 2001). They can be considered to be engaged in high-risk border activism, meaning that they implement activities intended to assist underground refugees and other forms of civil disobedience, as opposed to low-risk activism, which entails actions such as collecting and donating clothes, food and money to refugees, petitioning and demonstrating (McAdam 1986). Indeed, solidarity groups are characterized by a strong political background and interpret solidarity activities as a chance to express their political claims (Zamponi 2017), thus reclaiming the political connotation of their activity (Cantat 2020). The political positioning of solidarians is frequently marked by a strong endorsement of freedom of movement and a deep criticism of EU border policing and management, which distinguishes them from NGO practitioners (Santos 2020). In several cases, proximity to Western Balkan countries facilitates rapid and frequent travel to the borders – for instance during weekends – in order to provide people in transit with mobile solidarity infrastructure such as showers and mobile kitchens.⁵ Their organizational model and practices differ radically from those of large-scale humanitarian agencies that are based on service provision, as their

approach is grounded in ‘equalitarian social interactions’ with people on the move (Cantat 2020, 107), rejecting mainstream assistentialism.

In winter 2020, notwithstanding the freezing temperatures, the government of the USK canton prevented outreach mobile teams from all organizations from distributing blankets, food and water to people on the move sleeping rough in the area (Are you Syrious? 2020). Against all the odds, during the COVID-19 pandemic grassroots solidarity groups did not stop their activities in support of those crossing the border, but rather they adapted them to the changed circumstances. Namely, they continued to distribute food and NFI by means of an initiative termed ‘solidarity markets’. As a member of the Italian group ‘Bozen Solidarity’ recounts, this activity consisted in financing local shops, such as:

a shop in Velika Kladuša, at the Bosnian-Croatian border, which sells cheap phones to migrants and offers them the possibility to charge them. This is to say that we were sending money to the owners of these markets - very few, honestly! We are talking about one market for each city, more or less, because the others applied a policy of refoulement, in the sense that (...) even on social networks you could see the ‘no entry for migrants’ signs at their doors.⁶

Other solidarity groups followed this approach during the 2020 global lockdown. Unable to ‘bring food to people’ given the border closures and mobility restrictions, the solidararians of No Name Kitchen (NKK), an independent NGO set up in 2017 by a group of Spanish activists⁷, decided to ‘let the people have the choice to come for their food’⁸, particularly reaching out to migrants that were sleeping rough in abandoned buildings due to the fact that they could not (or had opted not to) access the official transit and reception centres. To this end, they promoted the ‘Vouchers4food’ programme, first created and implemented in the town of Velika Kladuša. The people in transit who contacted NKK volunteers online received a voucher with a code via Messenger with which they could go to a local supermarket to buy food and hygiene products. From the implementation of the first lockdown in March 2020, when almost all international volunteers found themselves forced to leave the region, online vouchers allowed solidararians to comply with the physical distancing rules while at the same time continuing to reach out to people on the move despite not being physically present in the field (Milan 2020b). These type of ‘solidarity markets’ made it possible to reach out to hundreds of people a week, while at the same time supporting local shops and bakeries that the groups had previously been in contact with. With this initiative, the volunteers managed to reach more than 1000 people on a weekly basis.

Researching refugee solidarity groups along the Western Balkans route: methods and case selection

Methodologically, this article builds on, and combines, in-depth semi-structured interviews, as well as participant observation both in person and via digital tools. As refugee solidarity groups increasingly switched to the use of digital tools due to the outbreak of the pandemic and redefined their solidarity practices not only on the field, but also in how they interact, a significant part of the communication with them has been undertaken on the digital side. Here I am mainly referring to 14 semi-structured interviews with representatives of refugee solidarity groups active along in the USK canton

during the pandemic in support of those crossing the borders, namely: Bozen Solidarity, a political collective based in Bolzano/Bozen (Italy); *Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche Alto Vicentino* (Balkan Route Collective of Upper Vicenza), based in Vicenza, a town in Northern Italy; the independent NGO No Name Kitchen – which is also a member of the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN)⁹; *La Strada Si.Cura* (the Safe Road/The Road Cares), a group of sanitary workers based in Trieste; *La linea d'ombra* (The Shadowline), a volunteer group providing sanitary assistance to migrants passing through Trieste and along the Western Balkans route; Blind Spots, a German solidarity group providing first hand support to migrants in Velika Kladuša; the informal organization Open Your Borders, based in Padua (Italy) which is part of the wider Italian campaign ‘Lesvos Calling’; One Bridge to Idomeni, an independent group formed in Verona (Italy) but that brings together young volunteers from all over Europe and active in Greece, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina; Kompas 071, a grassroots group composed mainly of Bosnians active both in Bihać (at the Croatian-Bosnian border) and Sarajevo; Collective Aid, a grassroots group based in Spain; Mediterranean Hope, the refugee and migrant programme of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy; Frach collective, a group of solidarians from Switzerland; and *U Pokretu*, based in Bihać (Bosnia and Herzegovina). These groups have been selected on the basis of their continuous participation in solidarity activities at the border during the pandemic. Contact with the organizations was made possible thanks to common acquaintances, as well as pre-existing personal contacts established through previous fieldwork in the region. To preserve anonymity, the names of interviewees have been concealed.

The interviews, conducted both remotely and in person between June 2020 and March 2022, were carried out in Italian and English, recorded and transcribed. The questions posed to the respondents, who are the representatives and/or spokespersons of these groups, explicitly focused on pandemic-related challenges to activities in support of migrants traversing the Western Balkans route, and the ways in which they had adapted their practices to the changed circumstances. I have also drawn on online discussions with representatives of various grassroots solidarity groups, which was livestreamed on social networks (mainly Facebook) during the period in question. Between March and December 2020, I have conducted remote participant observation of several online meetings and webinars organized by the loose network of grassroots solidarity activists.¹⁰ Here, my role was not limited to being an auditor, since the webinars were structured in a way that allowed auditors to interact and pose questions. Finally, in October 2021, I conducted a field trip to the Bosnian border with Croatia, which allowed me to interact with and interview solidarity actors in Bihać and the surrounding area. Some interviews were carried out by a research assistant who was both a scholar and an activist engaged in supporting people on the move at the Bosnian border, and who had spent a considerable amount of time in the field as part of the *One Bridge to Idomeni* team, which was active at the border between 2020 and 2022. The timeframe of analysis spans the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period approximately lasting from March to December 2020, as well as the ‘second wave’ (and lockdown) that lasted approximately from February to April 2021.

The material collected was systematically analysed by means of qualitative content analysis. Specifically, the transcripts were scrutinized by means of coding, a process which consists of identifying a passage in the text, searching and categorizing concepts

and finding relationships between them. The codes applied were the following: ‘values’, ‘pandemic’, ‘solidarity’, ‘mutated context’, ‘domestic actors’, ‘online activities’, ‘physical presence’, ‘trust’ and ‘ties’. A set of questions in the interview guide, available as Appendix 2 in the article, asked participants to reflect upon these concepts. The answers to these questions and the ensuing conversations form the basis of the discussion, while the coding enabled to organize the data to examine and analyse them in a structured way, assigning categories to disclose the respondents’ interpretations of reality.

The relational dimension: the role of ties and networks in refugee solidarity activism

The claim that social movement actors and their members create, sustain and repair social relationships (Santos 2020) invites us to delve into the relational dimension of refugee solidarity activism (Monforte 2020). In this section I will therefore look at the interaction between actors and explore the ability of solidarity actors to form connections, looking at the role of the networks and ties they create. As prominent scholars have explained, solidarity is a type of action based on trust amongst individuals that produces bonds between people (Monforte and Maestri 2022; Monforte, Maestri, and d’Halluin 2021). I argue that the first factor that allowed refugee solidarity groups to function effectively during the pandemic were the strong ties based on trust that had been formed prior to the pandemic, both with domestic activists and people on the move stranded at the border. In this study, the relational dimension of solidarity is analysed as situated in space, specifically the EU border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. Moreover, I will explore how the creation of an offline space by means of the use of digital media platforms allowed ties of trust to be maintained across time, and how the connection between the online and offline space production contributed to foster solidarity practices.

Unlike large-scale international organizations and institutional actors dealing with migration management, refugee solidarity groups act according to a horizontal principle, which means establishing alliances on an equal footing with both locals and people on the move. Concretely, solidararians have tried to establish connections with domestic actors and reach out to people on the move in person, providing them with food and NFI in the squats and makeshift camps where they often hide before attempting to cross the border at night. This horizontal approach aims to break down the migrant/solidarians divide. Thanks to their long-term, intense and everyday presence at the border, specifically in the towns of Bihać and Velika Kladuša, which are central nodes on the Western Balkans migratory route, solidarity groups have gained an in-depth knowledge of the local context and of the underlying social dynamics. Over time, through their everyday activities, solidararians have managed to create a relationship of trust with local solidararians and people on the move in the communities. As a representative of *One Bridge to Idomeni* explains, the action they carry out aims at establishing strong support with the local communities, who they genuinely cared about. To that end, OBTI worked outside the official camps, to serve the section of people on the move that official aid does not reach and is considered by local communities to be the most troublesome, as the following excerpt illustrates:

Our action tries to foster the cohabitation between the community of refugees and the local population that lives nearby (...) which is why we work outside official camps, precisely to

promote this stimulus of cohabitation, always trying to support not only the migratory reality, but also the territory that is crossed by migratory flows.¹¹

A territory that, specifically in the case of the USK canton, is particularly poor in resources. As a matter of fact, Bosnia and Herzegovina found itself at the border of the EU and there is a widespread perception among the local population that they have been forced to bear the brunt of the migratory challenge due to their proximity to the EU border, meaning that they are required to host people in transit striving to reach the EU within their territory. Several respondents explained that solidarity groups at the Bosnian-Croatian border could count on a constellation of both local and international allies operating in an independent, horizontal, non-hierarchical and non-institutionalized fashion in support of migrants, as well as on those local solidarians on whom they relied during the pandemic period, thus supporting the logistics and organizational activities on the ground during the pandemic. The ties constructed over time with a part of the local population and based on trust were of paramount importance to overcoming the obstacles that the pandemic posed to support practices for migrants. These networks are interpreted by activists as opportunities to develop political action, always grounded and respectful of the local context, in contrast to the approach of large international organizations. An Italian activist explains the situation as follows:

[...] we did work in the territory by getting to know the very few militant and activist associations on the ground, and then carrying out distribution and contact work with migrant youth.¹²

As a member of NKK, who is also part of the Border Violence Monitoring Network, recounts, resorting to socially distanced direct actions during the pandemic was made possible because solidarity groups could count on an established support structure composed of a network of local and international contacts, based on a web of relationship of trust between international and local volunteers, as well as market owners. This network was built over years of engagement in solidarity activism on the ground, as a member of NKK reminisces:

[...] In theory, if you have social connections already in place, you can replace it in some ways by voice calls or messaging. And I think the reason why we do it [distribution activities] in person, and the reason why it works best in person, is because it really builds upon these everyday social interactions that you have with people in the field, and it would be difficult to do it exclusively online. However, during the pandemic this is something that we were forced to do. And it is quite interesting: there was some trial and error to understand the best way to do it, but as a band-aid it worked relatively well.¹³

The creation of relationships of mutual trust in the border zone in which solidarity groups are operating represents a pattern for groups like NKK, who could count on a capital of credibility and legitimacy produced by their long-term involvement in the field. This capital could then be spent during the pandemic, to the extent that in other nodes along the Western Balkan route the group has been 'repetitively praised by Serbian activists' (Cantat 2020, 107) – notwithstanding growing discontent from the local population against the presence of migrants in their cities and towns.

In the online space, digital media platforms played a crucial role in the way solidarians responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic. The appropriation of internet tools

from below allowed to overcome social distancing rules and to keep social activism alive. In fact, with the outbreak of the pandemic solidararians created an online space on social media, mainly by means of Facebook and Instagram, through which connections with people on the move could be maintained on a daily basis, and their needs be addressed with no delay. At the same time, this newly created online space was used to communicate with supporters and update them on the activities undertaken to assist people on the move. Along with the findings of Kavada and Dimitriou (2017), the intersection between the online and offline space, and their continuous interaction, facilitated the maintenance of the ties of trust that had been created on the field, and allowed for the continuation of solidarity practices by permitting service provision to people on the move in a continuous manner by means of voucher distribution. In line with the argument made by Van Laer (2010), digital communication channels were found extending the mobilizing potential of solidarity activists, who were simultaneously present at the border thanks to domestic activists and continued their support to people on the move by using digital media tools.

However, networks and ties alone cannot explain how it was possible to adapt solidarity practices to the changed circumstances. For an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, it is necessary to delve deeper into the spatial setting in which solidarity groups are embedded, namely the border as a space of contention and encounter, which will be the focus on next section.

The spatial dimension: the relational quality of the borderscape

To better understand the interaction of geography and social relationships, it is necessary to delve into the specific nature of the borderscape under examination here. The USK canton is a territory located along an international border that not only separates Bosnia and Herzegovina from Croatia, but since 2013 when Croatia joined the EU has also divided non-EU space from EU territory. Ever since, the significance of the border has changed (Helms 2023), as Croatia transformed into the guardian of the external EU border (Helms 2023) in exchange for the promise of becoming a member of the border-free 'Schengen Zone' – which Croatia eventually joined in 2022. The intensification of arrivals since 2018 has affected local communities, insofar as it introduced new social divisions within the local population (Helms 2023), who are still suffering from the consequences of the war in the 1990s, corruption, and economic stagnation (Majstorović 2021). Since 2018, the area has also been crossed by international solidararians who interact with the local population on a daily basis. Unlike the large-scale international organizations and institutional solidarity actors, the oftentimes grassroots solidarity groups have relied on locals to provide support to migrants, and, in several cases, acted in collaboration with the local population, helping to build a relationship of trust with both migrants and the local community, as outlined above. Furthermore, solidarity groups have striven to address the needs of locals as well as those of migrants, thus creating and reinforcing trans-local alliances.

Over time, the action of solidarity groups has shaped the spatiality of the Bosnian-Croatian borderscape and produced new spaces where ties between international and domestic solidararians, as well as people on the move, could be formed and allowed to

thrive. A prominent example of this is the activity of the *U Pokretu* association (meaning ‘In motion’) based in Bihać, which constitutes a case in point. *U Pokretu* was formed at the beginning of 2021 by a group composed of local young people and international solidarians as an ‘association of young people for young people’. Aside from having to deal with the increased influx of people in transit, the town of Bihać suffered from scarcity of opportunities for local young people. The idea of re-opening the youth centre in the town, which had been abandoned and was in ruins, stemmed from the need to have a space where local, international and migrant young people could gather together and hang out, as well as ‘developing and channelling their potentiality through art, music and sport’.¹⁴ Once reopened, several activities were also instigated in the centre to raise awareness on the migratory phenomenon, while others targeted topics such as gender equality, human rights and ecology. The youth centre also offered free Wi-Fi connection to migrants, as well as to local young people, who often did not have access to the Internet at home.¹⁵ Reopened in 2022 thanks to the relationships that had been previously established, the youth centre has become a space where the young people living in the same territory, whether on a temporary basis or not, can meet and forge social relationships. By reopening the derelict former youth centre, which is symbolically located in close proximity to a dilapidated building where refugees found shelter in the peak of the 2018 arrivals,¹⁶ local and international solidarians re-signified the meaning of the space, opening it up to migrants living in closed reception centres, to local young people experiencing deprivation, and to international solidarians living in the area temporarily. In this way it was possible to re-negotiate not only socio-spatial relationships, but also the relationships of power between groups and individuals’ social positionalities. As a member of *U Pokretu* explains,

During the pandemic, the kids in the camp could not go out of the official camps, so we brought in the locals, with activities, recreational workshops on different topics ... and the result was very interesting. So much so that the kids involved in these workshops are the ones who went on to become *U Pokretu* volunteers.¹⁷

The spatiality of the borderscape would therefore appear to be of paramount importance in fostering interactions, facilitating the development of ties and creating networks, as it allowed different individuals and groups to come together and establish relationships of mutual trust and support that lasted over a long period of time, shaping the space around them. At the same time, the local scale intertwined with the transnational one as interactions gradually developed into stable relationships of trust between people on the move, local and international grassroots solidarity actors. The strategy of addressing local needs, such as those of disadvantaged young people, in addition to those of migrants, reaffirmed the attention and care of solidarians towards the needs of the broader community. Solidarity groups thus managed to address both local needs and socio-spatial disparities deriving, on the one hand, from the situation of disadvantage experienced by the young people in the USK canton and, on the other hand, by their twofold spatial exclusion: from EU territory, as Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a EU member and therefore its citizens need a working permit to work in its territory, and from the official migration management system, which is perceived to leave the citizens alone in the management of the growing influx of people.

Conclusion

This article took solidarity activism at the EU border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia as a vantage point to investigate the adaptation of solidarity practices in a circumstance, such as the pandemic, in which opportunities to provide first aid to refugees as forms of action shrank due to mobility restrictions and physical distancing rules. In particular, it explored the conditions that favoured the adaptation of solidarity practices to the mutated circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic, thus allowing refugee solidarity groups to continue their support practices for migrants under challenging circumstances. Since March 2020, the restrictive measures, legitimated in terms of public health, imposed strong constraints on refugee solidarity groups, as the strengthening of border controls and travel restrictions formed concrete impediments for solidarians in reaching out to migrants living in makeshift settlements along the border, in towns that had become central nodes along the Western Balkans route. By adopting a perspective that examined the spatial and relational dimensions of solidarity initiatives, this article has revealed the extent to which the establishment of networks and ties between individuals and groups facilitated the continuation of solidarity activity in mutated circumstances, while the intersection between online and offline space allowed for its maintenance; and how the spatiality of the border in which solidarity groups operate shapes, and was shaped by, these relational interactions, which have proved necessary for the continuation of support activities. The spatiality of the borderscape has allowed for the creation of networks, which constituted a resource for solidarity actors to continue their support practices for migrants in a context where they were considered unlikely to occur.

The relational approach has uncovered the role of networks and ties based on trust in allowing solidarity groups to continue their activities in changed circumstances, while the focus on the online space helped to understand how digital media platforms played a supporting role in facilitating solidarity practices in times of pandemic. The space-sensitive perspective has shown how social movement actors can shape the space they inhabit, in addition to being shaped by it, and how solidarity has enabled the foregrounding of new socio-political spaces that solidarians opened up and where transversal alliances between migrants, local and international solidarians could develop and thrive. The article has thus revealed that the spatial setting of the USK borderscape has provided fertile ground for ties and networks to develop and be reproduced, while the intersection between the online and offline space helped their maintenance. By cross-fertilizing social movement literature with critical geography and critical border studies, this article has introduced novel insights into the study of social movement organizations, specifically those active in the field of refugee solidarity, as well as their repertoires of action, in periods of suddenly changed circumstances. Future research might address the processes of adaptation by social movement actors to different contexts besides the migratory question. Additional research is needed to further advance our understanding of the practices of SMOs in times of crisis and emergency. A promising direction of inquiry might be to investigate how this analysis intersects with other studies on grassroots activism and practices during the pandemic, aside from solidarity movements. Finally, further research could explore the long-term trajectories of SMOs in the context of the pandemic, in order to understand how solidarity groups formed networks and continued their activities once the emergency came to an end.

Notes

1. Throughout the article I use the terms ‘migrants’, ‘refugees’, ‘people in transit’, ‘border-crossers’ and ‘people on the move’ interchangeably to refer to individuals who navigate borders having fled their countries in a bid to escape war, or due to economic deprivation, regardless of whether they have lodged an asylum claim or have been granted official international protection.
2. Following the 1990s war, the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina, one of the two entities composing BiH (the other being *Republika Srpska*) is composed of 10 administrative and largely autonomous units called cantons. These substate layers of governments each have its own constitution, government, and court.
3. Online interview with a spokesperson of NNK/BVMN, 25 November 2020.
4. Online interview with a spokesperson of NNK/BVMN, 25 November 2020.
5. Online interview with a spokesperson of the *Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche Alto Vicentino*, 29 October 2020.
6. Online interview with a representative of Bozen Solidarity, 15 June 2020.
7. NNK holds a high degree of flexibility since its foundation, as their mobile kitchens and showers can be quickly moved from one place to another depending on the circumstances and needs of people on the move, and on the different camps, border crossings and transit zones where people on the move are stranded.
8. Online interview with a representative of Bozen Solidarity, 15 June 2020.
9. BVMN is a network of watchdog organisations active in the Western Balkans and in Greece, which at the times of writing includes the following groups: No Name Kitchen, Rigardu, Are you Syrious, Mobile Info Team, Josoor, [re:]ports Sarajevo, InfoKolpa, Centre for Peace Studies, Mare Liberum, Collective Aid and Fresh Response. It is engaged in documenting violations at borders directed towards people on the move. The network collects testimonies of illegal pushbacks through interviews and publish them on a website database (<https://www.borderviolence.eu/>).
10. Amongst others: ‘Beyond the borders. The state of emergency in the Western Balkans’ (April 2020), ‘The impact of COVID-19 on the Western Balkans route’, organized online by NNK in May 2020, ‘COVID-19 and border violence along the Balkan route’ (May 2020) and the international conference ‘Along the Western Balkans route’, organized by the Italian network *Rivolti ai Balcani* (Targeting the Balkans) in November 2020.
11. Interview with a representative of One Bridge to Idomeni, 19 July 2021.
12. Online interview with a representative of Bozen Solidarity, 15 June 2020.
13. Online interview with a spokesperson of NNK/BVMN, 25 November 2020.
14. Interview with representative of *U Pokretu* association, Bihać, 23 February 2022.
15. Interview with representative of *U Pokretu* association, Bihać, 23 February 2022.
16. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44709252> (accessed 29 December 2023).
17. Interview with a representative of *U Pokretu* association, Bihać, 23 February 2022.

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ORCID

Chiara Milan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2604-3442>

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Appendices

Appendix 1

List of organizations interviewed

1. Bozen Solidarity, 15 June 2020, online
2. *Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche Alto Vicentino* (Balkan Route Collective of Upper Vicenza), 29 October 2020, online
3. No Name Kitchen/Border Violence Monitoring Network, 25 November 2020, online
4. La Strada Si.Cura (*the Safe Road/The Road Cares*), 27 February 2021, Trieste
5. La Linea d'Ombra (*The Shadow Line*), 27 February 2021, Trieste
6. Blind spots, 25 March 2021, online
7. Lesvos calling/Open your borders, 31 March 2021, online
8. One Bridge to Idomeni, 9 July 2021, online
9. Kompass 071, 25 October 2021, Bihac
10. Kompass 071, 27 October 2021, Sarajevo
11. Collective Aid, 11 November 2021, online
12. Mediterranean Hope, 2 November 2021, Bihac
13. Frach Collective, 2 December 2021, Bihac
14. U Pokretu (*In motion*), 23 February 2022, Bihac

Interviews 8, 12, 13 and 14 have been conducted by a research assistant.

Appendix 2

Interview Data: Questions from the interview protocol

1. What are the activities you are engaged upon?
2. Which values drive your organization's efforts?
3. How did your activity change during the pandemic period?
4. How did you adapt your solidarity actions to the mutated context of the pandemic?
5. To what extent did you collaborate with domestic actors on the ground before and during the pandemic period? And with other solidarity actors at the transnational level?
6. How would you define the spatial, social and political context of the border area in which you operate?
7. Which factors, in your opinion, allowed your group to continue to support people on the move during the pandemic period, despite not being able to be physically present at the border?