The new challenges of anti-racist solidarity between the tightening of the border regime and new political imaginaries: An ethnographic research in the city of Padova

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Citation: Farina F.G., Tabar O.F. (2025), *The new challenges of anti-racist solidarity between the tightening of the border regime and new political imaginaries: An ethnographic research in the city of Padova*, in «Cambio. Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali», doi: 10.36253/cambio-18527.

Published Online: 19/12/2025

Abstract: This article explores the new challenges of anti-racist solidarity in the context of increasinglyrestrictive migration policies and the evolving political landscape. Based on ethnographic researchconducted in Padova, Italy, it examines the role of grassroots solidarity initiatives and theirambivalent relationship with the tightening border regime. The research investigates the experiences and daily practices of volunteers, activists, and solidarity participants, focusingparticularly on asylum seekers, within a shifting socio-political framework characterized by the convergence of humanitarian and securitarian mechanisms. The analysis draws on the concept of migration autonomy, considering both its potential for resistance and its inherent contradictions. Solidarity practices, particularly in urban contexts wheremigrants are marginalized and excluded, have become critical in addressing the most severe social consequences of these policies. Despite the transformative potential of grassroots solidarity, theseefforts are increasingly exposed to the pressures of the border regime, often resulting in the reproduction of paternalistic and infantilizing dynamics within solidarity networks. The articlehighlights the difficulties faced by volunteers and activists, including the overwhelming demands from vulnerable individuals and the lack of institutional support, which complicate their ability to challenge the border system effectively. Ultimately, the research raises important questions about the capacity of anti-racist solidarity to disrupt the prevailing border regime, particularly in the absence of the migrant subjectivities it aimsto support. Through this reflection, the study examines the limitations and contradictions inherent in solidarity work, suggesting that while grassroots efforts can be subversive, they also risk becomingcomplicit in the very system they seek to oppose.

Keywords: anti-racist solidarity, border regime, migration, grassroots initiatives, urban marginalization

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, migratory movements and the mechanisms employed to control and filter them have become increasingly complex**,** posing new challenges for their analysis. Solidarity practices by volunteers and groups, active both in border areas and urban contexts, are also facing similar challenges. The epistemological approach grounded in the concept of the autonomy of migration (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos 2008, Mezzadra, Neilson 2013, De Genova, Garelli, Tazzioli 2018), is increasingly called upon

to engage critically with these dynamics, acknowledging their ambivalences and contradictions, as well as their strengths and limitations.

This perspective on the rationality and characteristics of the bordering regime (Walters 2011), strongly rooted in Foucauldian studies, focuses on the counter-conducts and forms of resistance that destabilize migrant control, both in terms of migratory movements and in relation to the conditions of staying in or transiting across different territories (Cabot 2012, Manocchi 2014, Campesi 2014, Palmas, Rahola 2022)

This article, based on ethnographic research, reflects on solidarity initiatives engaged in providing support to migrants, with particular attention to asylum seekers. These initiatives are, in most cases, characterized by heterogeneous group compositions, including activists, interns, and volunteers. As highlighted by numerous studies since the so-called "refugees crisis" in 2015, asylum seekers have gained unprecedented centrality in migration policies (Manocchi, Marchetti 2016, Fontanari, Pinelli 2017, Fabini, Firouzi Tabar, Vianello 2019). In this new scenario—defined by an increasingly tight interweaving of humanitarian and securitarian control mechanisms (Pallister-Wilkins 2020), as well as by widespread processes of segregation, victimization, and infantilization of migrants—practices of support and solidarity, together with forms of anti-racist activism, have come to play an increasingly prominent role. Within the battleground (Ambrosini 2020) of conflicts, negotiations, and tensions that shape the urban governance of contemporary migration, the territorial context has assumed a crucial role. This is evident both in the so-called sanctuary cities (Bauder 2017) and in the cities of exclusion (Marchetti 2020), where urban space emerges as a key arena for the assertion of migrants' rights and autonomy, whether they are socially trapped within the legal framework of asylum applications or excluded from it altogether. In contexts marked by institutional abandonment and informal settlements (Belloni, Fravega, Giudici 2020), grassroots initiatives such as support desks (the so-called sportelli), and language schools have played a key role. These bottom-up initiatives aim to address and mitigate the most violent social consequences of recent migration policies. This universe of practices and relationships is highly exposed to the regulations, policies, and institutional practices implemented in Italy (and across Europe), as well as to their increasingly restrictive and authoritarian developments and transformations.

In the ethnographic research presented here, we explored how solidarity groups are facing the new political and social context from different points of view. To achieve this, we investigated the subjective experiences and daily practices of volunteers, activists, and solidarity participants. The analysis engages with recent literature that addresses the potential reproduction of biopolitical processes and procedures of an 'infantilizing' and paternalistic nature, even when emerging from the grassroots, which often have a profound impact on the structural processes of racialization. Additionally, it considers the recent shift toward securitarian migration policies and the characteristics of the border regime, which increasingly make grassroots solidarity efforts indispensable.

In the first section, we aim to briefly outline our position within the field of studies that have focused on borders and migration in recent years. We will do this by identifying key works that have sought to describe and interpret the interplay between humanitarian and securitarian devices for controlling and selecting migration, while also highlighting what we consider to be the most insightful analyses regarding the role and transformations of solidarity and anti-racist activism, particularly with respect to daily support practices. Finally, we will attempt to frame these discussions within the context of the emerging authoritarian and repressive trends in migration governance, to examine their broader implications for the lives and activities of solidarity workers and activists.

In the second section, we clarified our methodological choices, integrating them with some brief reflections on our positioning within the research field. In the third section, we present the empirical analysis, which focused on the self-organized solidarity actions in the city of Padova, analysing their best practices and strengths, limitations, contradictions, and ambivalences. The use of qualitative and ethnographic methods allowed us to explore the vital importance of such activities for the journeys of migrants and refugees in the cities. It also examined the criticalities and ambivalences of these efforts. After describing the solidarity initiatives involved in the city of Padova, we focus primarily on three elements that emerged during the analysis: the increasing centrality of solidarity practices in the city, in response to the broader securitarian shift at international, national, and local levels; the material, emotional, and relational challenges faced by these solidarity efforts; and the positioning of volunteers

and activists, particularly in relation to the purpose and meaning of their voluntary and political engagement. Additionally, we briefly describe a research project and the collaborative process carried out with one of the solidarity desks. Within this work, a path of training and critical reflection was initiated on the practices and stances adopted in interviews with users, questioning whether—and how—some of these practices might reproduce, even "from below," certain traits of the humanitarian device, thereby triggering infantilizing and paternalistic dynamics.

ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK AND SOLIDARITY PRACTICES: METHODOLOGY, POSITIONALITY, AND REFLEXIVITY IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

The research presented here began in November 2022 and, although its conclusion is difficult to determine precisely, unfolded over approximately six months in Padova[1]. Rather than adopting a positivist ethnographic approach, our methodological stance is grounded in reflexive and critical ethnography. We consider the researcher as part of the social field and engaged in the co-construction of knowledge through continuous reflection. This methodological choice aims to capture practices as they evolve within the specific contexts where the interaction between the solidarity sector and migrants takes place. At the same time, the use of discursive interviews allowed the solidarity participants to express, within spaces and timeframes that only ethnography can ensure, the lived experiences involved in such practices, the positions expressed, and the challenges identified.

The research was preceded by a preliminary study and mapping of the solidarity organizations present in the city, facilitated by the involvement of several *key informants*, who are the historical memory of activism and solidarity in Padova, as well as migrants who have personally experienced both formal and informal reception processes. Through the 8 interviews and various informal conversations conducted, we identified the organizations deemed essential for the migration paths and orientation of migrants in Padova and gathered initial observations on the changing conditions of reception and, consequently, the evolution of solidarity practices.

The exploratory phase led to the identification of heterogeneous organizations (Catholic-based organization, linked to social movements, connected to political parties, grassroots trade union). In all these organizations, support and orientation services are active, though with different methods and timeframes. In the case of the Catholic-based organization, access is restricted to users with "regular" status in Italy, whereas other support desks welcome even undocumented individuals. During this phase, we also took great care to clarify our positioning to the people involved in the research, explicitly communicating that the study was not solely for knowledge purposes but rather aimed to initiate a path of collective reflexivity within the research theme, while also highlighting the public and transformative role of sociology (Burawoy 2005). This positioning aligns with traditions of participatory and co-research in sociology, where reflexivity, situated knowledge, and collective engagement are essential methodological and ethical components (see Burawoy 2005; Pellegrino Massari 2020; Gatta, Massari, Miceli 2024). The adoption of an emancipatory approach in sociological inquiry required special attention to emotional and relational aspects, as well as a continuous commitment to critical reflection, which served as its necessary condition.

The main site selected for the research is the Open Gates *sportello socio-legale* (socio-legal support desk), located within the Stria space[2]. The choice of this desk was based on the great access to volunteer activities it offered, as well as its geographical location, situated in a particularly relevant area for the research—a border zone yet central to the city of Padova (between the train station and the historic centre). This area underwent significant symbolic and demographic changes during the research period.

[1] The fieldwork was conducted more intensively and systematically over a six-month period in Padova starting from November 2022, and more intermittently throughout the duration of the PRIN2020 project, in connection with urban events related to borders struggle and other relevant dynamics. The ethnography was carried out within the research activities of the University of Padova unit, coordinated by Annalisa Frisina, as part of the PRIN2020, MOBS Mobilities, solidarities and imaginaries across the borders: the mountain, the sea, the urban and the rural as spaces of transit and encounters.

[2] Stria is an experimental social and cultural space that aims to intertwine solidarity and social support projects with processes of political struggle.

In the early period of observation, an informal settlement had emerged within the square, primarily composed of individuals with irregular status or those expelled from reception systems. In some cases, these individuals referred specifically to the Stria space and the legal support desk. Over the course of the research, this configuration and the frequency of individuals in the square changed, influenced by the social effects of decisions made by the local administration, which led people to move to other locations and gradually altered the user base of the support desk. This embedded role further reflects our reflexive and situated approach to ethnography, as previously discussed.

Participant observation was also repeated at other *sportelli* (socio-legal support desks), though with more limited access and freedom during interviews with users and meetings among activists. Seven other solidarity socio-legal support desks in the city were involved: one Catholic-based support desk (Caritas-Parrocchia Santa Teresa di G.B., Guizza), one grassroot trade union help desk (ADL Cobas), two linked to left-wing political parties (Catai and Sportello Sociale / GAP/ Casa del Popolo Meri Rampazzo) , and one located in the *centro sociale*[3] Pedro (Open your borders Italian school and help desk). At each of these spaces, two or three interviews with solidarity workers were conducted, along with various informal observations and dialogues.

As is common in qualitative research, the positions of the researchers shape the epistemological assumptions of the study. The authors shared reflections, challenges, strengths, doubts, strategies, and positions regarding solidarity activities, each starting from different standpoints. The first was external to the world of activism in the city of Padova, unfamiliar with the city's power dynamics, as she lived elsewhere and was not acquainted with the solidarity organizations. The second was an activist within one of the selected solidarity contexts, initially involved as an activist and later as a researcher. Throughout the research, the two researchers actively engaged in a process that transformed some of the observations gathered during the study into plans for future solidarity initiatives and into the collaborative design of a training program for volunteers and solidarity workers at the support desks. In this sense, borrowing the words of Fontanari, Gaiaschi, and Borri, we too can say that «we were continually negotiating, as well as reflecting, on our double role as researchers and activists» (Fontanari, Gaiaschi, Borri 2019, 144-145). This hybridization of roles, expectations, and positions has made the boundaries between research and activism particularly blurred (Garelli, Tazzioli 2013, Firouzi Tabar 2021), opening the door to complex processes of 'mutual re-subjectivation'.

SOLIDARITY AND ACTIVISM IN THE "SECURITARIAN" TURN

In recent years, particularly following the global pandemic and related legislative reforms, non-institutional anti-racist solidarity networks supporting migrants' rights and freedom of movement have faced increasingly complex challenges. These initiatives operate within a European and Italian migration policy framework that has become more securitized and repressive, affecting their objectives, strategies, and internal structures. From a broader perspective, these solidarity initiatives contend with the escalating criminalization of their activities (Tazzioli, 2018; Denaro, 2024) and an unprecedented attack on migrants' rights, particularly asylum seekers. This offensive manifests itself in new forms of criminalization, precarious legal statuses, and increased socio-spatial segregation, further marginalizing migrants from meaningful territorial inclusion. Migration and mobility in contemporary Europe have prompted a re-evaluation of theories on citizenship, democracy, and social justice (Balibar, 2010). This shift has given rise to new perspectives on social justice, participatory and transnational democracy (Fraser, 2013; della Porta, 2013). However, the rise of neo-nationalism and populism undermines pro-migrant solidarity networks, weakening citizens' ability to develop a «politics of friendship» (Derrida, 2006) and counter the «politics of fear» (Wodak, 2015).

[3] In Italy, social centers (centri sociali) are self-managed and often squatted spaces run by groups of citizens, youth, or collectives who organize to create environments for socialization, culture, and community engagement. These places originated mainly in the 1980s with the aim of providing alternatives to traditional leisure and social spaces, but also to support and to promote political, cultural, and social movements.

The overall regime of migration control and selection still relies on an intertwining and hybridization of two logics: the securitarian logic, which has dominated for almost 30 years (Huysmans 2000, Vaughan-Williams 2015, Campesi 2021), and the humanitarian logic, particularly concerning refugees and asylum seekers (Malkki 1996, Ticktin 2011, Fassin 2012).

What we observe is not so much a radical shift or a complete paradigm change in the governance of migration. Too many structural continuities persist within this bordering regime, especially with regard to its main objectives: institutional processes of racialization—shaped by the constant interplay between paternalism and authoritarian containment (Hess, Nagel 2021), care and control (Agier 2005), compassion and repression (Fassin 2005), and the hybridization of securitarian and humanitarian dynamics (Hess, Kasparek 2017) remain functional to the stigmatisation of migrants and to their differential inclusion within the territories, in particular into the exploitative labour circuits (Ambrosini 2008, Mezzadra 2013, Cutitta 2016).

The current landscape is marked by a progressive "securitization" of migration governance (Sanò, Firouzi 2021; Fabini, Firouzi 2023) and a broader "de-humanitarization" of the securitarian-humanitarian rationale (Heller, Pezzani, Stierl 2023). A key turning point in this authoritarian shift, was the approval of Law 132 of 2018 (the conversion of the so-called Salvini decrees) that introduced measures criminalizing solidarity—through the expanded use of the crime of facilitating irregular migration—alongside severe cuts to asylum reception funding, the abolition of humanitarian residence permits, and the exclusion of asylum seekers from public reception facilities. These policies contributed to the normalization of an emergency regime, reinforcing institutional neglect, segregation, and marginalization. This trend accelerated during the COVID-19 syndemic, which functioned as a testing ground for emergency-driven border control mechanisms. These measures, initially framed as temporary responses, gradually became institutionalized as structural elements of migration governance (Stierl, Dadusc 2021; Tazzioli, Stierl 2021).

During the syndemic, emergency decrees disproportionately affected those arriving by sea, who were subjected to segregation aboard quarantine ships. At the same time, asylum seekers already present in the country were also severely impacted, as they were completely excluded from the-socio-economic support measures provided for native citizens. Moreover, they endured violent forms of isolation during lockdowns, with no specific guidelines for managing cohabitation in overcrowded spaces. Their abandonment was further exacerbated by the immense difficulties faced by solidarity networks in maintaining even minimal communication and interaction with them.

With Law 50 of 2023, we are witnessing a further consolidation and radicalization of these trends. The key aspects of this intensification include harsher penalties for activities classified as smuggling, an escalation of the criminal crackdown on solidarity efforts both at sea and on land, the strengthening of fast-track asylum procedures, and the establishment of dedicated detention centers for migrants arriving from so-called "safe" countries, alongside the construction of new emergency reception camps for both adults and minors.

Additionally, with significant consequences for solidarity groups, further cuts to reception system investments have been introduced, resulting in the elimination of essential services such as legal support, psychological assistance, and Italian language instruction.

To complete this picture, we must highlight a widespread practice across Italy that has created new challenges for solidarity initiatives we observed during our fieldwork and in particular was reported by many volunteers of the socio-legal help-desk ("sportello"): many Prefectures have been systematically delaying the formal registration of asylum requests for "newcomers," particularly those arriving via the Balkan route, for several months after their arrival in Italy. In recent years, this practice has resulted in many individuals being excluded from the limited benefits of the reception system, leading to a state of uncertain legality and lacking institutional social and healthcare support.

The new European Migration Pact and, in Italy, the law decree 48/2025 (the so called "security decree") 50/2025, converted in law 80/2025, are the most recent measures that reinforce this new authoritarian shift, which increasingly prioritizes less care and more control, particularly targeting asylum seekers and refugees. These policies integrate them into new, ever-expanding, and hybrid «detention chains»

(Gennari, Ferri, Caprioglio 2021), progressively subjecting a growing number of migrants to criminalization on one hand and institutional neglect on the other.
Before this authoritarian shift, the right to asylum and the reception system operated as disciplinary mechanisms, producing docile and functional subjectivities. While structurally aligned with the neoliberal order (Sözer, 2020), the previous humanitarian and legal framework, despite its stigmatizing and infantilizing aspects, still provided avenues for rights recognition and emancipatory struggles. Today, however, access to these protections is increasingly restricted, further eroding possibilities for autonomy and resistance.

This was true primarily for migrants and the multiple forms of resistance they engaged in, but at the same time, it also served as a structural reference point for the positioning and activities of solidarity networks. In this sense, we believe that the oscillations and balances in migration governance strategies between humanitarianism and securitization represent a crucial variable for studying the characteristics of solidarity. However, in the extensive literature on the subject, these dynamics and this political variable, belonging to a materialist approach to migration studies, do not always serve as a central interpretative lens. Our attempt has been to observe the anti-racist support groups, collectives, and associations in relation to this changed general framework, focusing on its material effects on the activities and perceptions of the volunteers and activists we encountered. Thus, we have sought to situate empirical research in this context, considering these changes, and drawing from recent literature, we have aimed to engage with solidarity activists and interpret their approaches to topics that have often been at the centre of studies and empirical research conducted in Europe, especially since 2015.
Starting from the so-called refugee crisis and in response to the changes experienced in Italy regarding migration movements and their control, the complex universe of solidarity has undergone significant transformation. The sudden prominence of asylum seekers and refugees, both in terms of their media visibility and their physical presence in many urban and metropolitan areas, triggered an unprecedented wave of support activities accompanied by a certain reconfiguration of solidarity groups (Hamann & Karakayali 2015). Since 2015, anti-racist collectives and associations, as well as individual activists, have organized various protection and support activities for «important numbers of people seeking to claim asylum in core European countries were stranded in various sites between their desired destination and their point of departure, often with limited or no official support coming from state» (Cantat, Feischmidt 2019: 4). This new prominence of extra-institutional solidarity activities calls for an urgent analysis of their nature, strength, but also their contradictions and ambivalences (Firouzi Tabar 2020).
More generally, the new securitarian tendency, excluding many migrants from the framework of reception, depriving those inside the structures of essential services, and increasing the number of individuals without any public or institutional support, make the role of solidarity organizations increasingly important in terms of primary rights, as well as safety nets and decisive filters in relation to survival dynamics in the territories. While they were often active in complementing the services provided by cooperatives managing reception, they are increasingly finding themselves completely replacing them, with all the emotional, personal, and political difficulties this entails.
The first point of complexity concerns the relationship between these daily practices and the border regime, and the degree of impact they have on the multiple governance and control mechanisms that structure it. Are these practices disruptive of the border regime, do they occupy a position of neutrality, or are they ultimately compatible with it – thereby risking the reproduction and reinforcement of its discriminatory and oppressive dynamics? Put differently, the issue is whether such practices foster transformative change or instead end up sustaining an increasingly restrictive migration regime by reproducing existing power asymmetries and hierarchical inequalities (Fleischmann, Steinhilper, 2017).
Much of the literature on this topic interprets this ambivalence by emphasizing, through concepts such as "debordering solidarity" (Ambrosini, 2022), both the political nature of these practices and their potential to challenge the oppressive and discriminatory mechanisms of the border regime, and their connection with more traditional forms of struggle and activism. It has been shown that, once the "gift taboo" (Rozakou 2016) has been lifted, despite the resistance of some anti-racist collectives and associations who saw the provision of material support as a risk of reproducing paternalistic dynamics

and being functional to the framework of institutional humanitarianism, these practices go beyond "humanitarian minimalism" (Sinatti, 2019) and implement "subversive humanitarianism" through «a morally motivated set of action which acquires a political character not through the form in which these actions manifest themselves, but through their implicit opposition to the ruling socio-political climate» (Vandevoordt, Verschraegen, 2019: 4).
Thus, the idea is that these practices have an implicit and intrinsic conflictual value, as they materially challenge the attack on fundamental rights that, especially recently, has become the cornerstone of border governance. In other words, «Solidarity to refugees emerges, therefore, as a political project that extends beyond the offer of immediate help towards a reconstruction of society along lines of autonomy, equality and justice» (Siapera 2019: 18).
The hypothesis of the political and implicitly conflictual character of solidarity practices has led to the idea of the creation of hybrids between these and initiatives explicitly oriented towards contesting the border regime (Della Porta, Steinhilper 2020), suggesting the idea of «fluid boundaries between volunteerism and activism and the transformative effects of solidarity» (Cantat, Feischmidt 2019: 8). In this sense, we can look at these daily practices as «far from isolated and apolitical but rather entertain a dynamic relationship with political protest.» (Zamponi 2017: 18).
These authors, while emphasizing the ambiguities and ambivalences of solidarity support and bottom-up humanitarianism, tend to downplay and blur the opposition between autonomous solidarity and humanitarian assistance (Dadusc, Mudu 2020), even when they do not act in reference to and against the processes of racialisation viewed as "total social facts", as structural elements functional not only to the border regime, but to ever-widening sectors of Italian and transnational capitalist development (Mellino 2018).
Considering the ongoing securitarian shift, Paola Bonazzoni's reflections are highly significant and useful for interpreting the processes currently underway when she argues that «the more access to services is selective, stratified, conditional, and lacking, the more strategic becomes the compensatory action of volunteers who, informally, attempt to expand the internal boundaries of social citizenship in a direction aimed at including those who are formally excluded» and by doing so, implicitly challenge the cornerstones of the current border regime (Bonazzoni 2023: 115). The actions of those involved in support initiatives, therefore, challenge the core principles of the current border regime, actions that «are, moreover, inevitably, though not intentionally, conflictual when they aim to affirm the values of inclusion in an excluding social context, when it is not explicitly criminalizing.» (Bonazzoni 2023: 119).
A second key aspect of recent migration sociology literature concerns the self-perceptions and subjective positioning of solidarity actors, as well as the emotions and relational challenges they face. A central issue is how these actors position themselves within relational dynamics shaped by privilege (King 2016) and navigate two critical concerns. First, there is the frustration and sense of powerlessness experienced by those engaged in daily support efforts, particularly given the extreme marginalization, institutional neglect, and systemic violence affecting asylum seekers. In this context, several factors become crucial, including volunteer training, resource availability, inter-group networks and alliances, and relationships with local institutions. The latter, especially amid the growing securitization of migration governance, presents a significant challenge for solidarity groups operating in critical urban spaces (Firouzi Tabar, 2024). Another crucial element in this evolving context is the issue of vulnerability. While recognizing the complexities and critical aspects of institutional narratives, legal frameworks, and practices that shape this concept (Marchetti, Palumbo, 2021), individuals previously identified as vulnerable now face a heightened risk of exclusion from institutional care and protection. This exclusion leads to increased exposure to institutional abandonment, pushing them toward extra-institutional and self-organized solidarity networks. In this regard, the case of unaccompanied minors is particularly significant.

On the other hand, we also observe the reproduction of the same victimizing and paternalistic dynamics that, as previously highlighted, characterize the institutional humanitarian apparatus. Within self-organized solidarity initiatives, these approaches may manifest – often unintentionally – when unmet emotional expectations, such as the search for recognition and gratitude, come into play (Karakayali, 2017). Similarly, tensions arise when support projects, rather than responding to the desires and needs of the migrants they engage with, impose their own political agendas upon them (Belloni 2016). As Cappiali

points out, this can result in «an attitude that seeks to speak on behalf of immigrants, rather than supporting the self-organization and self-determination of immigrant communities» (Cappiali, 2016).
These relational challenges, embedded within the asymmetries of power that inevitably shape such experiences, often lead to emotional reactions such as disappointment, frustration, and anger, particularly «in such situations when expectations are not met, emotional re-actions including disappointment, frustration, and anger likely develop» (Gauditz, 2017: 54).
In this regard, Maren Kirchhoff's (2020) concept of 'differential solidarity' is particularly relevant. In the context of support initiatives directed toward "irregular" and thus "deportable" individuals, Kirchhoff identifies the presence of selective solidarity dynamics shaped by logics of deservingness. The idea proposed is that some activists seek to remain within a "comfort zone" that allows them to avoid confronting the most violent contradictions of the border regime.
This concept effectively captures the complexity of support practices—an ambivalence generated by multiple structural and subjective variables, shaped both by the concrete orientations of migration management and selection policies and by the forms of resistance enacted by migrants, solidarity groups, and antiracist movements within an ever-shifting "battleground".

GRASSROOTS SOLIDARITY PRACTICES WITH MIGRANTS: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND AMBIVALENCES IN PADOVA

This section explores the role of grassroots anti-racist solidarity practices with migrants in Padova, in relation to migration governance. The aim is to identify the strengths, limits, and ambivalences of these practices and interactions, to understand their function within the broader landscape of reception systems and migrants' lived realities. The analysis highlights three core aspects listed below.

Solidarity practices in the city during the era of the securitarian shift

Solidarity initiatives in Padova are undergoing internal restructuring to adapt to new national and local regulations, and to challenges linked to increased and diversified service demand. These practices unfold in a context marked by border closures and the retreat of institutional reception policies, replaced by securitarian logics promoting urban "bordering processes" and deepening inequalities. These dynamics are visible in activist narratives and practices, as seen in interviews and participant observation.

Volunteers report a sharp rise in people seeking help and a diversification in their profiles.

> We are trying to keep up with the changes... But it's not easy, given the increasing complexity of users' requests and needs. (Stria, Interview with M., 17/03/2023)

Even long-term volunteers now face more complex situations, including newly arrived individuals and people excluded from reception systems due to legal or bureaucratic issues.

> The situation is very different... Many have exited the reception system... what we witness every day are marginalization, neglect, and institutional abandonment. (Stria, Interview with O., 10/01/2023)

During the research period the Padova Prefectures and the Immigration Office failed to formalize numerous asylum applications, effectively preventing applicants from being integrated into the reception system. As a result, many individuals were excluded even from municipal social services, as they were not officially under their responsibility. Informal socio-legal support desks thus became the only point of reference for those living on the streets and without other means of support. This issue was further exacerbated by the overall conditions of the Italian reception system. As highlighted in a recent report by Action Aid and OpenPolis (2024), Italy's reception system remains driven by an "emergency-driven approach," failing to address long-term needs. The connection between first and second-level reception

services is problematic, leading to the exclusion of many individuals from long-term programs like SAI (Reception and Integration System[4]). Between January 2023 and October 2024, around 3,500 eligible individuals were excluded from SAI. Structural deficiencies and asylum application blocks, worsened by cuts to the formal system, have pushed many individuals and support services toward informal solidarity networks[5].

The research conducted in Open Gates support desk highlights how internal bordering processes within the city and increasingly securitarian and less inclusive reception policies manifest in migrants' lived experiences and are, to some extent, absorbed by informal solidarity spaces. During the study, the cultural centre was located at the heart of an informal settlement of homeless individuals, asylum seekers, and migrants who had exited official reception programs. The presence of the support desk and social centre in this specific context played a crucial role in maintaining a fragile balance in an area frequently subject to media controversies and institutional interventions framed primarily in terms of public order. Volunteers at the support desk and social centre maintained direct relationships with homeless individuals, fostering a sense of recognition and humanization within solidarity networks. At the same time, this condition of extreme marginality made the volunteers' work increasingly complex and unpredictable.
Solidarity practices are essential not only for initial reception needs or for handling complex legal situations but also for managing everyday bureaucracy, accessing email, addressing health issues, and navigating medical procedures. This is evident among users of social and cultural centre help desks, as well as within a Catholic association that, in contrast, exclusively serves individuals residing in Italy with "regular" permits, selected according to their income (ISEE)—typically workers or former workers who have been in the country for some time. Medical volunteers report frequent encounters with people seeking medical advice, especially regarding children. They assist with booking appointments and interpreting prescriptions, as many struggle to access healthcare services that are increasingly exclusive and difficult to navigate. For people who have not formalized their request for international protection, access to healthcare remains a major issue, with many unaware of how to enter the system.

Another key issue emerging from the research is the housing crisis, which affects both migrants and broader urban populations. As volunteers in the social centre P. affirm «Italian language school students frequently seek help in finding housing or dealing with legal issues such as proof of residence. Even those with stable employment struggle to secure rentals due to market constraints». Discrimination in the rental market is a major barrier, with landlords and agencies refusing to rent to foreigners. The difficulties migrants face in finding rental housing are compounded by inflation and rising property prices. These barriers prevent individuals who have recently exited reception programs from completing the legal and bureaucratic processes necessary for full social integration, despite having lived in the area for years.

> Recently, many refugees and asylum seekers who've left the reception system are stuck in overcrowded housing—often just one rented room shared with their whole family. After spending two or three years in official programs, they now rely on informal sublets from friends because they can't afford their own place. This has created an unregulated subletting market. The problem is deeply tied to the Bossi-Fini law, which links residence permits to both work and housing contracts. Many are stuck in legal limbo—their applications are rejected or under appeal, and their permits are expired or about to expire. But to renew their status, they need a valid housing contract. It's a vicious cycle that forces them into illegal, unstable living situations. Instead of helping, the law actually pushes people further into illegality. (ADL helpdesk, Interview with D., 8/3/2022)

[4] https://www.retesai.it/english/

[5] The ActionAid Openpolis 2024 report highlights the elimination of information and legal orientation services, territorial guidance, psychological assistance, and Italian language courses. Additionally, it notes the emergence in 2023 of "temporary centers," which provide only food, shelter, and minimal healthcare, without offering any social services.

The residence permit requirement being tied to a housing contract (as per national law) and family reunification being dependent on a certificate of habitability (due to regional legislation) foster conditions of illegality and exploitation in the city, as frequently reported at support desks. Such bureaucratic procedures lead to the suspension of rights, pushing individuals into dehumanizing situations where they lose fundamental rights and are forced into irregularity:

> So basically, before a foreign citizen can bring over their mother, wife, or daughter, they must ask the municipality if their house—which was already hard to find—meets the required standards. They file a request and, *if the place is considered suitable—hygienic and big enough*—they get a certificate. Once they have the paperwork, we forward the application to the police or the prefecture for family reunification or permit renewal. But the wait is ridiculously long—like eight months. That's eight months of suspended rights. (ADL, Recorded conversation with M., ethnographic notes, 26/2/22)

"Emotional labor and structural challenges in migrant solidarity work: volunteer training, burnout, and ethical dilemmas"

The changing profile of users at migrant solidarity desks, the increasing number of requests, and the growing complexity of cases—often involving extreme marginalization—require volunteers to develop crisis management skills and handle moments of panic. This situation highlights the lack of human and material resources and the urgent need for volunteer training to deal with psychologically demanding situations. These challenges are frequently raised by volunteers.

> It's definitely a stressful activity because it requires commitment, technical skills, and focus. Unlike school, this isn't just social service—you hold people's futures in your hands. You have to respond appropriately because people rely on you. If something goes wrong, you feel responsible. It would help to have psychological support training. In recent years, we've faced some really tough situations. (Pedro, Interview with A., coordinator at the OYB help desk, 20/2/2023)

The work at the help desk becomes emotionally intense. A key part of training is recognizing personal limits and accepting that not all cases can be resolved. Volunteers often feel frustrated navigating unjust regulations, while emotionally managing difficult situations that require both empathy and practical action. Collaboration and peer support become essential.

Close interaction with users creates emotional involvement, which re-humanizes stories that are often dehumanized by media and bureaucracy. But this also causes burnout and complicates relations, sometimes infantilizing users and reducing their agency. Urgency can push volunteers into interactions that unintentionally humiliate users.

One critical moment observed during research involved the collection of "memories" in a user's second meeting, aimed at reconstructing life stories for legal support. Lawyers collaborated with the desk to help with protection claims. However, recalling traumatic experiences raised ethical concerns. These episodes triggered broader reflection among researchers and volunteers.

> E. (a volunteer) asks M. about his family: "Four children, Nigeria, five years of school." E.: "After school?" M.: "Work, as a labourer." E. presses: "Political parties?" M.: "Movements? No... Yes, demonstrations." E.: "Did you leave for political reasons? No?" M.: "I was in Biafra!" Confusion arises. "When did you leave Nigeria?" M.: "I don't know..." "How did you get here?" M. whispers, "I came without permission." Volunteers struggle to make sense of his story. He says he came from Libya, but doesn't want to elaborate. Elena presses: "How long from Libya? Months? Days?" M.: "I don't remember." I feel the pressure on him. (Stria, Field notes, Open Gate help desk, 14/11/22)

The interview lasted over an hour, but the individual chose not to sign the memory collection. This and similar cases sparked internal discussions on power dynamics in solidarity practices. The UNIPD research team co-designed a training program with the help desk, covering legal, political, and ethical topics. Studies show that migrants often feel forced to repeatedly recount trauma, which is re-experienced as

violence (Gatta, Massari, Miceli, 2024). The researchers' involvement helped reassess memory collection methods. Though veteran activists held strong political foundations, these were often sidelined during emergencies in favor of immediate needs. Training encouraged critical evaluation of support dynamics, incorporating migrant-background interns and trainers. After a month, new principles were adopted: interviews clearly explained their purpose, respected time and emotional limits, and avoided traumatic details. Volunteers stressed the importance of ongoing learning and sharing to meet rising needs. This was echoed at other centers, where sustaining a stable volunteer base is a challenge. As an activist noted:

> We are activists with a clear vision and training. We stay for years. Others join for credits and leave soon after. It makes shared practices harder to maintain. Still, their help is essential—we couldn't run Italian classes or activities weekly without them. (Interview with A., Pedro activist, OYB help desk, 23/1/23)

The political dimension of solidarity with migrants and the positioning of solidarity organizations

Solidarity initiatives often reflect on their limits. Volunteers try to challenge border regimes while material constraints risk reducing their work to humanitarian aid. They constantly analyse power dynamics their actions may reinforce and explicitly debate the political meaning of their everyday agency, oscillating between an understanding of themselves as "service providers" and as collective actors engaged in broader struggles for social justice.

> The help desk is essential for understanding people's issues, but if it's meant as a tool for transformation, you need more. Changing one life matters but building a movement needs broader strategies. A housing desk alone isn't enough if you're not resisting evictions too. Structural change is hard. (Interview with M., ADL Cobas help desk, February 2022)

At the same time, the continuous emergency frame and the pressure to respond to basic needs often leave little time and energy for collective elaboration, thus constraining the possibility to act on more long-term emancipatory dynamics. This view is especially present where individuals with migrant backgrounds, shape initiatives:

> Migration erases your past. What you were—your skills, your story—is lost. You start over, especially women. Borders erase their experiences. We need spaces where migrants are seen as people with stories and skills. It took me two years to find such a space, even with a sociology degree. That's why I always treat people as people first. (Interview with M., ADL Cobas help desk, 23/3/2023)

The presence of migrants and racialized individuals at help desks is a critical issue, discussed collectively in the analysis of practices (see Frisina, Garcia Figueroa, Helm in this issue).
Beyond their internal reflections, solidarity groups in Padova increasingly operate within informal yet dense territorial networks, composed of socio-legal desks, grassroots unions, Catholic organisations and professional actors such as lawyers, doctors and social workers. Our interviewees describe frequent practices of referral, joint public campaigns and shared training initiatives, which allow different groups to pool scarce resources and gain visibility towards local institutions. At the same time, these networks remain conflictual, fragmented, fragile and highly dependent on a few activist hubs and on personal relationships, which limits their capacity to scale up and to stabilise emancipatory processes over time.
Except for Catholic groups that frame their work as charity, most solidarity efforts are part of political projects. Leftist organizations see help desks as "mutual aid" tools, where actions like food redistribution or language classes connect to broader goals. Sometimes the politics are embedded in how things are done.

One significant example is the proposal for a "citizen observatory" by the S. desk, to map and denounce institutional neglect. Though the impact was limited, it shows how new security-driven policies pushed activists toward collective political advocacy.

For grassroots unions, help desks link to broader labor struggles:

> Our work is both practical and political. We block evictions to prevent homelessness and address the wider housing crisis. (Interview with D., ADL Cobas help desk, 28/3/2023)

Historical roots also shape help desks:

> This has always been part of us. Union A. came out of activist movements like RAZZISMO STOP. (ADL Cobas, field notes, 28/3/2023)

In autonomous centers, solidarity is openly political. These spaces are first-response points for the most marginalized.

> We don't see ourselves as volunteers. Teaching Italian isn't charity. Language is a tool for self-determination. That's why we also do dinners and political events. Over time, some students become activists, especially once they speak Italian and have stable jobs. (Pedro, Interview with L., O Y B, 26/1/2023)

Another event involving the O.G. legal support desk further illustrates the tension between everyday solidarity and political engagement. Asylum seekers often visit the support desk to report poor living conditions at a new temporary reception camp in the city's former military airport. This camp is the first in Italy to accommodate both adult migrants and unaccompanied minors. On the one hand, the support desk provides individual assistance—helping with legal precariousness as well as distributing clothing and essential goods. On the other hand, after numerous visits inside and around the camp, activists launch a public campaign demanding its closure, secure a meeting with the mayor, and organize a large demonstration in the city centre[6]. A few months later, following widespread public criticism, the section of the camp housing minors was shut down, and they were relocated to more suitable facilities. This example seems very significant to us because it shows how around a specific solidarity activity, a territorial network can emerge that becomes politically active for the rights of migrants, criticizing national policies on reception organization.
These dynamics show how solidarity, when not reduced to aid, can be transformative—supporting individuals while challenging structural injustice.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The reflections and elements presented thus far from the research field, while considering the specificities of the territory, can lead to broader reflections on the dynamics between the "border apparatus" and the constant re-signification of territories and belonging that migrants and solidarity networks engage in through daily practices. These re-significations and evolutions have been framed within a new process of the progressive securitization of migration governance, which demonstrates its multiple effects even on support and solidarity practices. The general attack on the right to asylum, the erosion of the rights of asylum seekers and recently arrived migrants, and a radical retreat of institutions from even the most basic levels of care and socio-economic protection, push activists and volunteers into a daily dimension where their contribution often becomes the only buffer and lifeline for survival in the territory. This is increasingly true for legal support services, considering that the increasingly authoritarian stance against migrants sees the further precarization of migrants' legal status as one of its main oppressive mechanisms. In this regard, as highlighted by various studies presented in the second chapter, the idea that solidarity practices can be seen as intrinsically subversive is confirmed, as they challenge the border regime precisely at the height of its repressive offensive. As such, «mobilised by humanitarian concerns, they went beyond the neoliberal governance of borders, contesting states and the border regime» (Ambrosini 2022:522).

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[6] https://www.mattinopadova.it/cronaca/lappello-accoglienza-allallegri-a-padova-sospesi-i-diritti-e-lumanita-chiudiamo-il-campo-imj6qe5r

That said, our study raises some interconnected issues that *stress* this hypothesis, not simply by pointing to its limits, but by reframing the very conditions under which solidarity can be considered transformative. What emerges from our empirical material is that transformation is never an implicit or automatic outcome of solidarity practices; rather, it is a fragile and contested process, constantly negotiated by those who act within the contradictory spaces of the border regime.

First, it is difficult to speak solely of the implicit transformative potential of solidarity practices, as this issue is often directly addressed by volunteers and activists themselves. On many occasions, the risk of reproducing elements of compatibility with the border regime, or of merely "humanitaristically" addressing the forms of marginalization and institutional abandonment, is explicitly discussed within groups. More than being a phenomenon of inherent opposition to the violence of migration policies, anti-racist solidarity is experienced by solidarity actors—sometimes even by volunteers with no prior political experience—as an ambivalent practice whose subversive value must be constantly re-evaluated in light of the social effects produced by securitization processes.

These tensions and fragile balances ultimately seem to revolve around another widespread issue: the tendency for migrants and racialized individuals to be absent from the groups of activists and volunteers engaged in solidarity projects.

Leaving aside the complex reasons behind this significant absence—almost a common denominator among anti-racist groups, some of which actively seek to address and explore its problematic roots—we question how, intrinsically or otherwise, an action can effectively challenge, at some level, the current border regime in the almost complete absence of the subjectivities that suffer under this regime and who, in relation to it, engage in widespread counter-conducts and multiple forms of resistance. This absence, therefore, signals a contradiction and an additional limitation of solidarity groups, even when they create spaces for conflicting narratives and practices.

We conclude by introducing a hypothesis that we have glimpsed, albeit indirectly and between the lines, under certain conditions. From the perspective of support and solidarity activities, migration governance is imposing a rather abrupt and marked shift in the "frontline," as already mentioned, focusing on basic rights and minimum living and survival conditions in the territories. This drastic lowering of the bar places solidarity, either explicitly or in practice, within the realm of political struggle. However, it produces a constant retreat that risks "satisfying" the transformative desires of volunteers or activists when basic rights, dignity, and freedom are guaranteed through security-driven attacks. A clear example of this is the issue of reception. Until the pandemic crisis, anti-racist movements, as well as support and solidarity projects, raised the issue of decolonizing reception, strongly criticizing it as infantilizing, segregating, and hostile to the autonomy of individuals. Today, however, daily demands have regressed to the point where the mere access to reception—whatever its form—is seen as a kind of victory, preferable to institutional abandonment.

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