



Grassroots European Solidarity

Italian Solidarity Movements in the Western Balkans in the 1990s and 2020s and Their Visions of Europe

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Abstract

This article investigates how the idea of European solidarity and the vision of Europe changed over time amongst Italian groups and individuals engaged in solidarity actions in support of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees in the Western Balkans in the 1990s and 2020s. By means of document analysis and in-depth qualitative interviews, the article shows that individuals partaking in solidarity initiatives framed their action as European grassroots solidarity, enacted to replace the institutional solidarity that the EU failed to offer. While solidarity groups in the 1990s saw the EU-in-the-making as alternative to the power politics of member states worsening the conflicts in the region, those mobilising in the 2020s expressed a more critical and disenchanted vision characterised by rage, disillusionment, and disappointment towards an EU perceived as having betrayed its ideal foundations while dealing with migration along the Balkan route.

Keywords

European solidarity – peace movements – refugees – Western Balkans – Europe

1 Introduction

The Western Balkans have been swept by several crises in the last decades. In the 1990s the region witnessed a series of wars that provoked an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. The 1991–2001 conflicts pushed thousands of citizens of the region to leave their countries to migrate in search of safety. Thousands of civilians, both war refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), found themselves forced to flee their homes. In the 2020s, instead, the Western Balkans transformed into one of the most frequently travelled migratory paths leading to Europe. Since 2015, the region has been crossed in record-breaking numbers by people fleeing from Asia and the Middle East to seek protection in the European Union (EU)'s territory (Mlinarević and Ahmetašević 2019; Šelo Šabić and Borić 2016).

On both occasions, civil society and grassroots groups from all over Europe organised actions to express solidarity and bring support to war refugees and IDPs in the 1990s, and to individuals crossing the migratory trail in the 2020s (Milan 2019; Milan and Pirro 2018; Hameršak et al. 2020; Cantat 2020; Hromadžić 2020; Sapoch 2018). Italian groups were particularly active in the Western Balkans on both occasions. These solidarity actions were undertaken by a variety of subjects that ranged from Catholic groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to militant collectives and social centres (Zamponi and Gattinara 2020; Zamponi 2017; 2018). The mobilisation that took place in the 1990s found widespread public opinion support (Abram 2014; Bona 2016).¹ By contrast, in the 2020s solidarity activism in the Western Balkans appeared initially as a less broadly participated-in and more isolated phenomenon (Zamponi 2017). Even when it extended to larger portions of civil society, it took place in a generally unfavourable climate towards the reception of migrants.

We choose to analyse those two periods because both can be considered as moments of crisis in which the EU institutions failed to express solidarity towards the Western Balkans in turmoil and to implement adequate policies to solve the crisis. In the 1990s civil society actors invoked international responses to halt the war, and in the 2020s they called for the EU to support the Western Balkans in the management of the increasing migration flows. Following the failure of institutions to intervene, citizens organized solidarity actions from below on both occasions, framing their intervention as an attempt to fill the void left by EU institutions and/or EU member states.

1 For an historical review of Italian solidarity mobilisation see also Marco Abram, Marzia Bona (2016), "Sarajevo. Provaci tu, cittadino del mondo. L'esperienza transnazionale dei volontari italiani nella mobilitazione di solidarietà in ex-Jugoslavia", *Italia Contemporanea*, n.280.

We focus on the meso-level of analysis, that of grassroots organizations. To that end, we conceive of solidarity as a collective endeavour promoted by civil society organisations and social movements (Hunt and Benford 2004). To that end, we look at how grassroots groups engaged in solidarity-related initiatives in both periods framed the notion of European solidarity, and how their vision of Europe changed over time. In so doing, we bring studies on civil society activism into conversation with the current literature on European solidarity. We do so by means of document analysis and in-depth interviews with volunteers and activists engaged in cross-border solidarity initiatives in support of IDPs and asylum seekers in the Western Balkans both in the 1990s and in the 2020s.

Our findings suggest that Italian civil society actors mobilising in the Western Balkans in the 1990s and in the 2020s have redefined and to a certain extent challenged the notion of European solidarity, introducing what we term “European grassroots solidarity”, a type of solidarity from below and amongst peers that substituted the (absent) institutional one. European solidarity as it emerges from this analysis is conceived not only as interstate cooperation, but as “interpersonal solidarity action by EU citizens” (Lahusen and Grasso 2018b) towards non-, or not yet, EU citizens.

This study contributes to the literature exploring the visions of Europe and of the European integration process from below, in particular those expressed by social movement actors. Previous studies have analysed how social movements refer to European issues and targets (della Porta and Caiani 2007, 2009), and how their visions of Europe changed after the financial crisis (see for instance the special issue edited by della Porta, 2020). For what concerns the Italian case, previous literature has considered the visions stemming from self-managed spaces (Milan 2020), environmental movements (Bertuzzi 2020), and feminist groups (Chironi 2020), while solidarity movements have not been explored to date. This article advances the research on the visions of Europe by contributing with an analysis of the perspectives elaborated from below by grassroots solidarity actors, whose visions so far have not been investigated. By comparing the visions expressed by this kind of movements before and after the European Union came to being, this study introduces a new type of horizontal European solidarity called “grassroots European solidarity”.

The article is organised as follows. The next section delves into data collection and methods, while the following ones investigate the unfolding of solidarity movements in the 1990s and 2020s, before discussing how the notion of European solidarity and the vision of Europe changed over time. The last section summarises the findings and outlines the avenues for further research.

2 Data Collection and Methods

Our study relies on document analysis and in-depth qualitative interviews to trace how the notion of European solidarity was framed differently in the 1990s and 2020s by individuals participating in solidarity initiatives in both periods. Studies addressing solidarity in informal groups had defined them as characterised by the fact that they do not benefit directly from the outcome of their involvement (Giugni 2001; Giugni and Passy 2001). Their actions are “collective, altruist, and political” (Passy 2001) and involve individuals who “defend the interests, rights and identities of others” (Passy 2001: 5). As in the 1990s civil society actors helped asylum seekers from the Balkans and in the 2020s they helped asylum seekers crossing the Balkans, we regard both cases as relevant instances of solidarity movements. In both cases the mobilisation from below had a strong impact on public opinion in Italy, as solidarity groups mobilised at the borders of the EU in a time of crisis (the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, the so-called “refugee crisis” in the 2020s) which called into question the notion of “European solidarity”.

To that end, we conducted twenty in-depth semi-structured interviews with Italian participants in solidarity initiatives in the Western Balkans in the 1990s and 2020s. These groups represent a diverse range of actors. Our respondents participated both in grassroots independent groups and more structured civil society organisations and networks involved in solidarity activism in the 1990s and in the 2020s in the Western Balkans area. So far as concerns the solidarity movements of the 1990s, we chose ten interviews amongst those that were collected between 2013–14 in the framework of the project “Cercavamo la pace” (We were looking for peace),² aimed at building the history of the Italian solidarity movement in the 1990s, that are part of a database maintained by the think tank Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCCT) that includes several interviews with volunteers and activists. The selected interviews were those that examined in greater depth the European dimension of the solidarity actions.

As regards the 2020s solidarity movement, we carried out ten interviews with the representatives and spokespersons of Italian informal grassroots groups involved in supporting people on the move along the Western Balkans route since 2015. Interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2021 in the framework of the project Transnational Political Contention in Europe (TraPoCo).

2 <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/Dossier/Cercavamo-la-pace>.

The interviews were conducted in person, except for four interviews which had to be carried out online in 2020 given the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The questions focused on the reasons for engagement in solidarity movements, the values motivating it, the organisational forms and structure of the groups, and the respondents' vision of Europe and of European solidarity. The interviews were carried out in Italian, recorded, and transcribed. To preserve anonymity, we concealed the name of interviewees.

In both cases we delved into the content of the interviews to look for recurrent themes, in this case how our respondents framed the notion of European solidarity and the attitude they expressed towards the EU intervention (or lack thereof) in the Western Balkans. As the interviews on the 1990s solidarity movement were conducted in 2013 and 2014, we strove to use the most similar interview guide in carrying out the interviews in 2020–2021.

We complemented the analysis of interview material with document analysis, particularly useful in the case of the 1990s movement. To that purpose, we relied on the research work carried out by OBCT, which provided a solid historical background to the current comparative effort (Abram and Bona 2016). As for the current period, we also conducted virtual participant observation in several online meetings and webinars organised by the activists and groups providing support to migrants along the Western Balkans route and involved in advocacy campaigns targeting domestic authorities and the EU. Between March and December 2020, we carried out virtual participant observation in several online meetings and webinars organised by the network of pro-migrant grassroots activists, namely, “Beyond the borders. The state of emergency in the Western Balkans” (April 2020), “COVID-19 and border violence along the Balkan route” (May 2020), and the international conference “Along the Western Balkans route”, organised by the Italian network *RiVolti ai Balcani* (Looking at the Balkans) in November 2020. Our role was not limited to being auditors, since the webinars were structured in a way that allowed auditors to interact and pose questions. Furthermore, we regularly consulted blogs of independent press and groups, also following their news feeds. We also analysed the local press and consistently consulted blogs of independent press and groups, following also their news feeds. The data stemming from webinars and blog posts helped us to shed light on the repertoires of action used by activists and the reasons motivating their engagement, and to trace the change of actions throughout time. This was particularly useful to grasp the transformations provoked by the outbreak of the COVID-2019 pandemic, which forced activists to reconsider and adapt their repertoires of action.

3 Italian Solidarity Activism in the Western Balkans in the 1990s and 2020s: Redefining the Notion of European Solidarity from Below

The notion of European solidarity has served as a founding value for the European integration project since its inception, and it has received heightened attention in public debates and in recent research. Scholars have investigated both institutionalised forms of solidarity, such as redistributive policies (Baute et al. 2018; Ross and Borgmann-Prebil 2010), and interpersonal solidarity action by citizens (Lahusen et al. 2018; Lahusen and Grasso 2018b; Lahusen and Theiss 2019), the latter having a transnational character. Nevertheless, the series of crises that hit the EU in the last decade, namely the so-called Eurozone crisis, the sovereign debt crises, the Great Recession, the refugee crisis, Brexit, and lately the COVID-19 pandemic, has posed a challenge to this dynamic both among European citizens and among the EU member states (MS) (Di Napoli and Russo 2018). They also put the idea of European solidarity under stress (Lahusen and Grasso 2018a), to the extent that some scholars have claimed that international solidarity is dead (Balibar 2010).

While European solidarity conceived as interstate cooperation between EU countries indeed appears to be under strain, at the individual level European solidarity, envisaged as “interpersonal solidarity action by EU citizens” (Lahusen and Theiss 2019, 445), seems to have been revived (Lahusen and Grasso 2018a). In the aftermath of the financial crisis, all over Europe citizens engaged in support of their peers in need by means of direct social actions and solidarity practices (Bosi and Zamponi 2019; 2015; Grasso and Giugni 2016; Kousis 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, in the field of migration, pro-migrant activists kept mobilising in support of people on the move stranded along the Balkan route (Zajak, Stjepandić, and Steinhilper 2020), at times with alternative means as they could not cross borders.

In our analysis we draw upon Isin and Nielsen (2013) and Isin (2017), who conceived of cross-border solidarity as a transgressive “act of citizenship”, portraying it as a manifestation of international citizenship that attempts to countervail injustices. We thus inquire into the extent to which solidarity actors who perform those acts of citizenship conceived and redefined the idea of European solidarity and how their vision of Europe changed over time. Previous scholarship has investigated anti-war activism in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s in its transnational (Bilić and Janković 2012) and European dimension (Schweitzer 2014, Moll 2019), while more recent scholarship has explored European transnational solidarity from the perspective of political citizenship (Lahusen and Theiss 2019), taking into account solidarity activities in support of other Europeans. Nevertheless, these studies have focused mainly on the

organisational trends and repertoires of action adopted. While previous studies discussed European interpersonal solidarity, meaning “people’s practices of engagement in support of the rights of citizens of other European countries” (Lahusen and Theiss 2019, 445), our article presents fresh insights into a notion of European solidarity that is expressed by EU citizens towards individuals that do not enjoy the formal status of EU citizens (that is to say here citizens of Yugoslav successor states and migrants). As previously mentioned, in both cases solidarity groups invoked the intervention of the EU to solve the crisis. With their actions, they called into question the idea of European solidarity intended merely as solidarity towards other EU citizens or states – which they deemed absent – and introduced what we called “grassroots European solidarity”, a type of horizontal European solidarity of EU citizens towards non-EU peers. We argue that the concept of grassroots European solidarity emerges in our analysis as an expression of an idea of shared humanity, whose cultural belonging to Europe constitutes a prominent component, but which is imbued with a cosmopolitan feeling. As elaborated by the interviewees and in the documents produced by the solidarity movements, it appears that grassroots European solidarity evokes European values for the protection of universal rights rather than only (European) citizens’ rights.

4 The Solidarity Movement during the Wars in the 1990s and the Hope in the European Integration Process

During the conflicts in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, tens of thousands of Italian citizens participated in humanitarian missions in support of the population affected by the war. The solidarity movement that emerged from this mobilisation had its roots in the peace movement born from the struggle against Euromissiles in the early 1980s. Back then, it had established connections with the dissident movements in the communist bloc thanks to the Helsinki process initiated by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. At that time, the Berlin wall was still standing and there was still the European Economic Community, not the European Union. As the leader of one of the main Italian associations organising solidarity actions during the wars in the 1990s explains, back then the purpose of the peace movement “was also to fight for a united Europe”.³

One of the most famous initiatives of the anti-war movement was the peace march called “the European Peace Caravan”, organised in September 1991 by the

³ Interview with a representative of the association Arci, 1 April 2014.

Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, which brought to Sarajevo around 400 pacifists, amongst which Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and national MPs, in solidarity with the local population. The Caravan crossed the territory of then Yugoslavia to reach Sarajevo from Trieste and Skopje, calling for peace, showing support to all anti-war initiatives in the Yugoslav republics, and "offering to all Yugoslav peoples the full European integration" into the then European community (Langer 2013, 337). Geographical proximity was a key factor for solidarity mobilisation in the Italian civil society, as it enabled access to the area. Volunteers from northern and central Italy could easily travel by private car or vans to reach the refugee camps in Croatia and Slovenia, where they provided support to refugees and displaced people escaping mostly from Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). Geographical proximity went hand in hand with an idea of shared cultural space and belonging: war had returned to Europe after decades of peace, in a totally unexpected way, in a time of hope after the end of the Cold War. This created bewilderment and a mobilisation in favour of the civilian victims, refugees, and displaced people as well as deserters that were identified as fellow Europeans. Besides the geographical proximity with the former Yugoslavia, a territory with which Italian and European activists had also familiarised themselves during tourist experiences in the previous decades, there were also ties of a political nature, since Yugoslav socialism was still popular in Italy, especially among local administrations governed by the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*). Furthermore, the solidarity movement in the 1990s had some roots also in common religious belonging, as Catholic volunteers were among the first to respond to the violence which exploded in Croatia, a traditionally Catholic country.

The physical, political, and religious proximity facilitated the European solidarity mobilisation, and also created a space for reflection on the responsibility of civil society in the face of the inability of states and international institutions to act. In that regard, one activist cited the need for civil society groups to intervene from below, given the perceived inability and/or unpreparedness of state actors to halt the war for the disintegration of Yugoslavia, as emerges from the following excerpt: "For me personally, there was a clear perception of how close they were to us, and how much we also had responsibilities, beyond the Italian history in Rijeka and Croatia. There it became clear how much Europe was not prepared for such a thing: to immediately give the okay to the secession of Slovenia, the intervention of the Vatican for Croatia. It was clear that in any case there were big responsibilities."⁴

4 Interview with a representative of the association Comitato per la Pace of Sommacampagna, 1 March 2014.

The movement in the 1990s was politically fragmented – composed of activists from the far left to conservative Catholic, all of them sharing a similar idea of solidarity from below. The activists reaching Slovenia in 1991 had often worked in Palestine, and translated their experience in the Middle East to the Western Balkans, which was perceived as bringing “the war on our doorstep”.⁵ At the same time, the movement was a transnational one, as it could count on the presence of volunteers from all over Europe and even the US. During the solidarity initiatives, Italian volunteers had the chance to encounter other Europeans with the same political aspiration to stop the war in the former Yugoslavia and help civilian victims of the conflicts. Indeed, when the humanitarian catastrophe started in 1991, the EU was not yet born, nor was the idea of a new EU enlargement. It was only in 1993 that the criteria to admit post-communist countries were cautiously defined during the EU summit in Copenhagen. At the time, European identity was less institutionalised and more cultural.

It was the pacifist movement fighting against the nuclear arms race in Europe that took the lead of the solidarity initiatives. The movement was able to attract many people in the effort to help neighbouring civilians experiencing war. The slogan adopted back then was “pacifists that practice solidarity”, whereby solidarity was defined as “concrete”, as the movement supplied humanitarian aid as well as spiritual support and political solidarity. Against those who caused death through war, they claimed to “build life, material and moral life”. European solidarity was therefore practiced in concrete terms and amongst peers, with the purpose of “helping the physical, material, and spiritual resistance of civilians” in opposition to a war waged by nationalists “against civilians and civil coexistence” with the aim “to break the possibility of coexistence between people and between ethnic groups, and between cultures”.⁶

Often the anti-war movement’s activists examined the idea of Europe and its responsibilities in the context of the international community at large as well as in relation to the responsibilities of individual European countries. In their opinion, the wars of dissolution of Yugoslavia gave a few European countries the opportunity to renew their old power politics. In that regard, one interviewee recalled: “Europe was standing still in that period, it just did not know how to move. In the sense that there were problems in

5 The Italian expression “La guerra in casa” (which means “The war on our doorstep”) comes from the renowned book on the Bosnian war published by Italian journalist Luca Rastello in 1998.

6 Interview with a representative of the association Assopace, 1 April 2014.

Europe: France and England defended Serbia, Germany defended Croatia. So it was a European conflict rather than a conflict in the former Yugoslavia.”⁷ At the same time, though, the idea of a disintegrating Yugoslavia appeared at odds with the simultaneous efforts towards European integration, according to one of the main leaders of the anti-war movement, Green MEP Alexander Langer (Langer 2013), who became one of the central reference points for civil society mobilisation in solidarity with refugees in former Yugoslavia.

Although the statement uttered by Foreign Minister of Luxembourg Jacques Poos in June 1991, “the hour of Europe, not the hour of the Americans”, raised expectations that the newly born European Union would take the lead in addressing the Balkan conflicts “that threatened the new post-Cold War order”, the EU member states seemed to act in an uncoordinated rather than unified manner. The solidarity movement responded to such inaction or negative political drift with humanitarian work and a few actions of nonviolent interposition – such as two other marches that followed the 1991 “European caravan for peace”, namely the “March of the 500” in 1992 and the *Mir Sada* (“Peace Now”) march in 1993. The former was led by the Italian Catholic group “Beati i costruttori di pace” (Blessed are the peacemakers), the latter was organised together with the French NGO Equilibre and other international actors with the aim to bring hundreds of international pacifists to Bosnia-Herzegovina and reach the besieged capital.

By experiencing solidarity on the ground, Italian volunteers that participated in peace marches or relief initiatives often identified with one of the parties in conflict and split over the ways to intervene, in particular on the opportunity of military intervention. Since the international community did not appear capable of finding a timely and efficient solution to the conflict, there was a true bewilderment in the face of the institutional paralysis, as stressed by an interviewee who claimed: “We realised that there was a total lack of a political project to stop this war.”⁸ The many souls of the movement shared the conviction of having to act from below to find a solution where the institutions had proved powerless or guilty. Within the movement, a large discussion emerged on the role of European institutions and the political destiny of the continent. When describing the experience of the grassroots mobilisation, an interviewee stressed the idea of rebuilding solidarity from below, the sense of belonging and the authenticity of people that were the “only real Europeans” with the following words: “All those young people who mobilised did so under the pressure of simple solidarity. They were all animated by the

7 Interview with a representative of the Diocese of Trento, 07 August 2013.

8 Interview with a representative of the association Mirni Most, 23 January 2014.

desire to reunite, rebuild relationships and communities. They were, I think, the only real Europeans. The Europeans of the institutions either sided with someone or played the game of the powerful.”⁹ One interviewee described the sense of estrangement experienced by those arriving in the Balkans as the idea of an authentic other that made history and changed the very idea of Europe: “It seemed to me that Europe as a concept was there. I came back here with the feeling of having been to Europe. (...) It was clear that that war would have dramatic consequences, it could not but change the concept of Europe.”¹⁰

In their engagement in the field, some activists became acquainted with regional international forums and organisations. The Council of Europe was the reference point for human rights protection, while the EU was not seen yet active in the field. As a respondent explained, “we participated in a European forum and organised a collection of signatures which was then presented to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, for the recognition of the right to conscientious objection in all the republics of the former Yugoslavia.”¹² Indeed, the movement of conscience objectors in Yugoslavia had applied for political asylum in European countries in order to escape conscription (Langer 2013). As stressed by Abram,¹¹ during the conflicts of Yugoslav dissolution several people from different political backgrounds and beliefs reflected upon the role and meanings of the EU institutions and disputed about the political future of the continent. In this context, the Italian Green MEP Alexander Langer launched a poignant slogan: “Europe either is born or dies in Sarajevo.” For Langer, coming from the German-speaking minority of South Tyrol, the idea that the social mobilisation of people providing relief in former Yugoslavia was an example of “European solidarity” was indisputable. He put forward a proposal for a solution to the war in BiH in 1994 that was based on the immediate EU integration of the country, as he explained: “In the spirit of solidarity that should animate the EU we strive for, the internationally recognized Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina should be invited to join the European Union fully and immediately. As a matter of fact, Europe dies or is reborn in Sarajevo.”¹² In Langer’s view, Europe was the opposite of violent nationalism, it entailed coexistence and democracy. Nonetheless, if the EU was to solve the conflict in

9 Interview with a member of the Senate of the Italian parliament, cooperating with Italian associations, 14 March 2014.

10 Interview with a representative of the association Italian Consortium of Solidarity (ICS), 21 February 2014.

11 Marco Abram, “Le voci della solidarietà internazionale in ex Jugoslavia” Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (balcanicaucaso.org) 15.05.2017.

12 Alexander Langer “L’Europa muore o rinasce a Sarajevo” 25.6.1995, *La terra vista dalla luna* <https://www.alexanderlanger.org/it/34/163>.

former Yugoslavia and in BiH in particular by integrating the successor countries, this required that the EU itself evolved towards more integration. As Langer put it, “The doors of Europe must be opened to all the successor countries of the former Yugoslavia, on condition that they choose democratic rather than ethnic coexistence instead of ethnic exclusivity (Of course, this perspective implies that hard work is being done on the construction of the common European home, and that the European Union as such is rapidly evolving in this sense).”¹³

Siding with Langer, and after the launch of his political project, the solidarity movement started to debate more deeply on the EU project. While his view of desirable European political development – which entailed pacifying the Balkans through European integration – was indeed ahead of its time, it would make headway in the following years and would become an actual EU political project by the end of the war in Kosovo in 1999. There was a widespread idea among volunteers at the time that the war in former Yugoslavia was a “European war”. As one interviewee put it, it was a question of European conscience: “There were many Europeans. I believe that the Yugoslav question really impressed the whole of Europe. In the sense that the idea that a war could have broken out in Europe, after the Second World War, was an idea, a reality that I believe has shaken all people with a civil and political conscience and with a certain personal sensitivity.”¹⁴

What emerged was a dichotomy of a Europe from below, mobilising in solidarity with civilians and expressing trust in the European integration process, vs. an institutional Europe, unable to intervene to stop the war and to provide a reliable prospect of European integration. One of the leading figures of the movement highlights the antithesis of solidarity vs. competition, claiming that the Europe of solidarity is that of citizens, while the institutional one is that of competition, the one to which the secessionist governments of Slovenia and Croatia were attracted and in general “the chariot of the rich” to attach oneself to. As he stressed, “this vision of EU integration as a safe bet was not meant as entering a community of equals, but it was entering in the hope of hooking you up to the wagon of the rich, who would however impoverish you, because then the conditions they imposed on you were those of systematic robbery of all your common goods, as well as the fact that they took the factories (...) for pieces of bread. They have dismembered the economy in every sense.”¹⁵ With

13 Ibidem.

14 Interview with a representative of the association ADL Zavidovici, 9 January 2014.

15 Interview with a member of the Senate of the Italian parliament, cooperating with Italian associations, 14 March 2014.

the end of the war in Kosovo in 1999, Langer's idea of resolving the conflict through the European integration process found appeal to the extent that new conditions for the accession of the former Yugoslav countries were defined in the EU-Western Balkans summit of Thessaloniki in 2002. On that occasion, the EU officially declared the extension of its peace project to the Western Balkans. The solidarity that was universal gradually became fully European in the commitment to rebuilding the region and to giving it a future of peace and prosperity.

5 The Refugee Solidarity Movement along the Western Balkans Route in the 2020s and the Distrust Towards the European Union

Since the outbreak of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015 (della Porta 2018; Milan 2019), several groups and individuals alike have engaged in supporting people on the move striving to enter the EU territory. Amongst the different paths used to reach the European territory, the migratory trail known as the Western Balkans route attracted migrants from the Middle East and Africa, who got stranded in the former Yugoslav territory due to the closing of borders, coupled with their securitisation and militarisation. Since 2015, several grassroots groups have become engaged, at different nodes along the route, like border crossings and makeshift camps, in supporting people on the move by providing them with food and non-food items (NFIs). In Italy in particular, solidarity initiatives in the Western Balkans were undertaken by a variety of heterogeneous subjects that ranged from Catholic groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to militant collectives and social centres (Zamponi and Gattinara 2020; Zamponi 2017; 2018). In the 2020s, solidarity activism in the Western Balkans appeared less broadly participated in and a more isolated phenomenon (Zamponi 2017) when compared to the anti-war movement of the 1990s. Furthermore, solidarity initiatives in the 2020s took place in a generally unfavourable climate towards the reception of migrants, in particular in a context in which NGOs and humanitarian work have been widely criminalised (Cusumano and Villa 2021; Reggiardo 2019). Italian groups that got involved in the refugee solidarity movement along the Western Balkans route are located mostly in the North-East of Italy, and belong to a diverse plethora of actors, from scout groups to grassroots and independent NGOs to occupied social centres (*centri sociali occupati*). Besides establishing connections across Italy, they are embedded in transnational networks of activist solidarity that bring together groups from all over Europe and beyond (for instance Border Violence Monitoring Network and Transbalkan Solidarity Network).

Similarly to the case of the 1990s, Italy's geographical proximity to the Western Balkans facilitates the mobilisation of solidarity actors. The social profile of solidarity actors is also varied. Some features can be stressed though:¹⁶ Volunteers and solidarity activists are mostly young people with an international profile, who belong to the category that has been called "solidarians", that is to say people who contest traditional humanitarian organisations and endorse egalitarian and horizontal forms of assistance (Rozakou 2020). When asked about the values driving their engagement, the spokesperson of Bozen Solidarity explains that humanitarian and political reasons inform the commitment of volunteers and activists: "It is a set of motivations: at the base there is the political motivation because we have created a political network in North-eastern Italy; then there is also the humanitarian motivation, because we know that in those areas [the Western Balkans] activism is very low, NGOs are few and when they exist they have very complex mechanisms, so we have also brought our – ugly term – charitable part."¹⁷ Contrary to the 1990s, when the political EU in the making was seen as a peace project into which to include the Western Balkans, all the respondents in the 2020s call into question the EU integration project. While in the 1990s the EU and its enlargement process could represent hope for the future of the Western Balkans, the so-called refugee crisis of the 2020s was a great disappointment for those still believing in European solidarity.

In like fashion to what emerged in previous research investigating the visions of Europe amongst progressive youth (Milan 2020), also in the case of pro-migrant solidarity movements the criticism towards the EU and the EU integration process is marked by a deep disillusionment towards the functioning of EU institutions. As one respondent highlights, "This is a Europe that erects walls and defends itself against this fearful thing [migrants] even though the numbers [of people on the move] would be perfectly manageable."¹⁸ Likewise, another says: "Unfortunately, Europe is as divided in the 2020s as it was in the 1990s. Back then it was split into pro-Serbs and pro-Croats, and it has not been forward-looking. It follows the fear of people, so to say. What I would expect

16 For the socio economic profile of the activists in the 90s, see the report by Sebastiano Benasso (2015) 'Analisi quantitativa sulla partecipazione della società civile italiana nella mobilitazione di solidarietà verso i Balcani (1991–2000)' *Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa* <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/Dossier/Cercavamo-la-pace/Analisi-quantitativa-sulla-partecipazione-della-societa-civile-italiana-nella-mobilitazione-di-solidarieta-verso-i-Balcani-1991-2000>.

17 Online interview with a representative of Bozen Solidarity, 15 June 2020.

18 Online interview with a representative of Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche Alto Vicentino, 29 October 2020.

instead is a Europe that looks beyond and gives a slightly different perspective... which is the continent of rights, of culture.”¹⁹

Just like in the 1990s, when the European states proved unable to halt the war, also in the 2020s the EU MSs appeared holding an ambiguous attitude toward the Western Balkans. It emerges from several interviews that there is no clear prospect of EU integration of the Western Balkans, while at the same time these countries appear to suffer for the absence of coherent EU migration policies. In particular, they are tasked with controlling the EU’s borders and pushing back individuals trying to enter the EU space. Solidarity activists therefore blame the EU for resorting to the deportation of migrants as a tool of border control by entrusting this task to EU neighbours. As one respondent explains, “We do not want to stop talking about blankets, food, and donations. But we would like people to effectively question the reasons why we got here (...) to be able to articulate a discourse that makes us feel truly part of this EU, European citizens from a social and grassroots point of view, allowing us, through these actions, approaches and discourses, to change the discourse that ‘we help the migrants because we are better off than them’ because this perpetuates the emergency.”²⁰

The same person explains the disappointment towards EU policies and the EU approach to the migratory phenomenon because it consists in closing the borders and exercising violence against migrants instead of opening safe corridors to secure their passage in a safe manner.²¹ On the other hand, the idea of a Europe from below is very clear: “We do not reject the EU in the sense that our mark is European. The transnational capacity to mobilise (...) must be European. We need a European ability to mobilise. It is because I am European that I cannot certainly retreat within my own nation state to criticise the closing of the EU borders. We reject the policies but not the concept of Europe (...) A social Europe does not exist, it is merely an economic one.”²² From this and other excerpts the shared European identity emerges as grounded in a cultural rather than political idea of belonging. While there was hope in the 1990s that the process of EU integration could represent a solution for the conflicts in the Western Balkans, in the 2020s this was no longer the case. Nevertheless, as one representative of the Lesvos Calling campaign maintains, the solidarity

19 Online interview with the spokesperson of One Bridge to Idomeni, 9 July 2021.

20 Online interview with a representative of the association Open Your Borders/Lesvos Calling campaign, 31 March 2021.

21 Online interview with a representative of the association Open Your Borders/Lesvos Calling campaign, 31 March 2021.

22 Online interview with a representative of the association Open Your Borders/Lesvos Calling campaign, 31 March 2021.

engagement is still imbued with universal European values: “We want to change the discourse. (...) We want to articulate a discourse that makes us feel really part of this EU, European citizens from a social and grassroots standpoint.”²³

The idea of solidarity back then, as well as now, is also informed by a notion of universal rights. The harsh critique of European power politics or of the “European fortress” in both cases calls into question any Eurocentric notion of Europe. A quid of Balkanism and Orientalism informs some of the views of the activists that one can encounter in the field. However, in 2020s the notion of solidarity in the field is formulated in terms of care that the movement in the 1990s described as “concrete”, theorizing the importance of supplying humanitarian aid as a political act. Moreover, in the 2020s solidarity is conceived in an anti-hegemonic and subversive way, as the following excerpt elucidates: “One aspect of care [*la cura*] is that, when it becomes something pursued by law, when it becomes forbidden, a ‘bad thing’, then it becomes a political choice, it is a political choice, perhaps even a forced one. Therefore, disobeying the impositions led us and has always led us to go to those places [makeshift camps and border crossings] and to do things that should not be done, from repairing the squats [where migrants live] to living in the squats, staying with them [people on the move] and therefore fixing their shelters, warming them up, talking to them...”.²⁴ In both cases solidarity activists and volunteers motivated their intervention as an attempt at replacing the institutions that did not promptly intervene to solve the issue at stake.

A difference underscored compared to the 1990s movement is that the political context in the 2020s appears hostile to the activists’ political action, while in the 1990s solidarity activism was generally publicly praised, and criticism emerged only when volunteers’ personal safety was under threat. Today there is more awareness also of the local political situation amongst solidarity actors than there was in the 1990s, when social media did not exist and therefore the news related to the war in the Balkans was diffused only on TV. As argued in the following excerpt by one of the funders of the association “One Bridge to Idomeni”, who organised solidarity actions both in the 1990s and in the 2020s in the Western Balkans, the environment in which solidarity actors mobilised changed over time: “Your generation is much more aware of what is happening [than we were]. I remember the “March of the 500” to Sarajevo... I do not want to say they were considered aliens, but there was no awareness of what was

23 Online interview with a representative of the association Open Your Borders/Lesvos Calling campaign, 31 March 2021.

24 Online interview with a representative of Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche Alto Vicentino, 29 October 2020.

going on. (...) Some volunteers were killed in the solidarity actions. (...) there was neither action like today, nor today's awareness. (...) But unlike today, back then a movement was born that got the whole country involved (...) and it arrived to protest the G8 in Genoa in 2001. Now there is not such a drive, such a tide".²⁵

On the one hand, the tide that existed from the peace movement up until the early 2000s today appears to be missing. The European solidarity from below is not on TV every day, and it is not an experience involving many thousands of people, but rather a minoritarian political phenomenon that nonetheless operates in contrast to the dominant tide of sovranism and securitization policies. On the other hand, today the activists in the field show familiarity with the EU and its decision-making process. As they deal with the field of the asylum system, where common European policies have been introduced overtime, they show some capacity for political initiatives mobilising their representatives in the European Parliament.²⁶ This is the case of the campaign Europe Must Act (EMA), which strives to mobilize both at the European and the local level, where the national branches of EMA are active in the advocacy field to elicit pledges from local authorities to welcome refugees and asylum seekers stranded on the Greek islands.²⁷ Moreover, today solidarity activists prove capable of using the legal means at their disposal to promote migrant rights at the national and European level. Recently there have been a few successful cases of strategic litigation used to halt illegal practices in use, such as pushbacks of asylum seekers. European solidarity in these cases takes the form of grassroots networks that work at the transnational level to gather evidence and take to court public actors and institutions, fighting for migrants' human rights.²⁸

6 Conclusions

In this article we have investigated the visions of Europe and the notion of European solidarity as it has been elaborated by activists and volunteers

25 Online interview with the spokesperson of One Bridge to Idomeni, 9 July 2021.

26 The EP set up the Frontex Scrutiny Working Group in February 2021 to carry out an inquiry into the work of the European Borders Agency: <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Balcani/Violazioni-dei-diritti-umani-Frontex-sapeva-e-non-ha-reagito-211819>.

27 Online interview with the spokespersons of Florence Must Act and Europe Must Act, 7 May 2021.

28 It was the case of the trial in a Rome tribunal for the Italian pushbacks at the border with Slovenia: <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/Tutte-le-notizie/Un-ordinanza-storica-illegali-i-respingimenti-dell-Italia-verso-la-Slovenia-207912>.

mobilising in support of migrants and asylum seekers in the Western Balkans during the 1990s Yugoslav secession wars and the 2020s so-called refugee crisis. Our findings suggest that a cosmopolitan attitude characterised volunteers and activists, informing their engagement in helping migrants and refugees in the region. However, the visions of Europe and of European solidarity changed from the 1990s to the 2020s. Solidarity groups in the 1990s were informed by an idea of Europe and of European solidarity that envisaged hope in the role of the EU in the making. The EU itself was seen as a peace project that could address and solve the conflicts that were provoking human sufferings, like the Yugoslav wars of dissolution. Back in the 1990s, solidarity actors and their leaders conceived of the EU as an alternative to the member states' power politics, that they claimed were worsening the conflict developments in the Western Balkans. Since the European states did not intervene, grassroots solidarity and mobilisation of civil society was identified as a valid alternative, capable of halting the conflicts thanks to political action and at the same time replacing the (unaccountable) EU. By contrast, individuals mobilising in the second decade of the 2020s expressed a disenchanted vision of the EU, informed by rage, disillusionment, and disappointment towards its capacity to protect refugee rights. They denounced the EU's hypocrisy for betraying the basic but contradictory common legal provisions that the EU had elaborated in the field of asylum over the decades. Yet, in spite of the high level of disenchantment towards the possibilities (and willingness) of the EU intervention to solve the humanitarian crisis, in the 1990s many Italian activists lived through their first "European" experiences and became acquainted with regional and international forums and organizations. With their engagement in the field, people from different political backgrounds and beliefs reflected upon the role and meanings of the European institutions and disputed about the political future of the continent.

This occurs even more so in the 2020s when, as a consequence of the presence of a common European asylum system, active civil society groups appear more aware of the role of EU institutional actors, more competent when interacting with EU institutions to bring support to their cause, and capable to scale from the national to the European level in their attempts to bring attention to and advocate for their cause. Unlike in the 1990s, in the 2020s the European sphere can be a true arena of grassroots intervention, as it offers the possibilities to make EU institutions and/or EU member states accountable by legal means, such as by resorting to the instrument of strategic litigation. In both periods, solidarity actors argued for mobilising in support of other human beings regardless of them being outside of Europe – and thus not formally fellow EU citizens. Hence solidarity actions emerge as an expression

of a common vision of European values as protecting universal rights rather than strictly European citizenship rights. Volunteers hold a cosmopolitan orientation and internationalist background that encourage them to engage in solidarity actions across borders to support other human beings in need.

The failure of the EU to address (and solve) both the crisis in 1990s and that in the 2020s appears to have encouraged people to get involved in supporting refugees and migrants in the Western Balkans, in order to replace what they regard as failed approaches – thus promoting European solidarity from the grassroots, assuming that interstate cooperation has failed in both cases. This new transnational network of solidarity activists that emerged from the bottom up in the 2020s represents an alternative model to grassroots European solidarity as it has thus far been conceived and articulated in literature. We thus argued that this new type of European solidarity that emerged from our analysis rests on the notion of a shared humanity, has a European cultural – rather than political – dimension, and that it is imbued with a cosmopolitan feeling.

While this article has focused on Italian solidarity movements active in the Western Balkans region, further research should explore and compare the visions of Europe and of European solidarity expressed by solidarity groups engaged in other areas of the world and along different migratory routes. Furthermore, it would be interesting to analyse how the visions of grassroots solidarity groups towards the EU changed after the war in Ukraine, which erupted in February 2022, and whether the different behaviour that the EU adopted towards the refugees escaping from the country affected the discourse on European solidarity. This could advance further the research on how visions of Europe and of European solidarity change over time and depending on the different crises that the EU faces.

Author Contributions

The authors have contributed equally to this article, but each author has contributed to specific sections. Chiara Milan has written the section “The refugee solidarity movement along the Western Balkans route in the 2020s and the distrust towards the European Union”. Luisa Chiodi has written the section “The solidarity movement during the wars in the 1990s and the hope in the European integration process”. The authors wrote together the sections “Introduction”, “Data collection and methods”, “Italian solidarity activism in the Western Balkans in the 1990s and 2020s: redefining the notion of European solidarity from below” and “Conclusions”.

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