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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Political Urban Solidarity: A Tool for Empowerment and Social Change

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ABSTRACT:
Within the literature on migration and refugees, the concept of solidarity has consistently held a significant position. Generally, solidarity is often associated with notions of compassion, and humanitarianism towards refugees and migrants. Alternatively, it can be linked to broader movements such as radical no-border politics and coalitions formed by individuals uniting against oppression. This paper draws on Bauder's interpretation of solidarity "a productive and inventive practice that generates novel possibilities of politicization and provides opportunities to rethink ways of belonging" (2020, 11) intersecting with the concept of 'political solidarity' (Scholz 2008). Drawing upon one year of ethnographic research conducted within the solidarity network of Rete Kurdistan Roma, this study aims to explore political solidarity practices within the urban context of Rome. This argument posits that political urban solidarity can be conceptualized as the process and the practices of establishing spaces of empowerment wherein the solidarity network operates in synergy with migrants, collaborating with them rather than acting on their behalf. This definition of political urban solidarity is distinguished from the broader concept of urban solidarity by its form of overtly political group engagement, an emphasis on moral commitments, individual conscience, collective responsibility, and shared action with migrants.

KEYWORDS:
Ethnography, Migrants, Political solidarity, Rome, Urban solidarity.

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1. Introduction:

On November 26, 2022, Luigi Spera, a Sicilian activist, was apprehended in Palermo on allegations of terrorism against Leonardo S.p.a.[1], an Italian multinational army contractor. Spera's actions were purportedly motivated by solidarity with the Kurdish people, as evidenced by a statement he issued. He vehemently criticized the contractor calling it a "producer of death" [2]for his complicity in Turkey's war crimes and genocide against the Kurds in the Kurdistan regions. Spera is an active member of Antudo, a network of associations for community organizing based in Palermo, Sicily. Antudo, like many other organizations in Italy and Europe (Milan 2020), operates in solidarity with the Kurdish populations and it is inspired by the values of the Kurdish Rojava Revolution[3] and democratic confederalism—a non-state social paradigm that proposes social, economic, and political changes in contemporary society in order to establish alternative institutions for people's self-determination.

Antudo is part of the national mobilization *Defend Kurdistan* and subsequently is associated with the long-standing solidarity network for Kurdistan called Rete Kurdistan Italia (hereafter referred to as RKI)[4]. The primary objective of RKI is political: mobilize, raise awareness about the Kurdish cause and promote the political paradigm of democratic confederalism. RKI is structured via local committees and along with political mobilization it offers Kurdish migrants a platform to navigate the urban environment offering various forms of support to Kurdish refugees and migrants in Italy.

This paper focuses on the dynamic work of the RKI, in particular the local committee of Rome (RKR), which was selected for its high level of activity and its dedicated space for solidarity and political initiatives, the Kurdish socio-cultural center of Ararat. The paper argues that the solidarity system created through the synergy between migrants and Italian activists has developed an empowered strategy of urban solidarity, a 'political' one. This system provides migrants with a platform that functions as a place-making tool, fostering geographies of politicization within the city.

This study aims to examine the relationship between political solidarity (Scholz 2008) and urban solidarity practices, "a productive and inventive practice that generates novel possibilities of politicization and provides opportunities to rethink ways of belonging" (Bauder 2020, 11). It proposes a definition of political urban solidarity: the process and practices of establishing spaces of empowerment wherein the solidarity network operates in synergy with migrants, collaborating with them rather than acting on their behalf. It is a form of overtly political group engagement characterized by diverse moral commitments. The necessity of defining urban solidarity arises from the fact that using the same term indiscriminately for all forms of solidarity hinders our ability to recognize the diverse social relationships encompassed by this concept (Scholz 2008). Broadly speaking, political solidarity can be defined as a collective commitment to a political ideology or cause, uniting individuals through shared values and a common purpose.

In the following sections, I will outline the literature on political and urban solidarity focusing on grassroots forms of solidarity. Next, I briefly discuss the methodology before examining the root of the Kurdish freedom movement in Italy and Rome. Finally, I will delve into the practices of solidarity, discussing the concept of political solidarity at the local level. I argue that we can glean valuable insights about how this encounter and

[1] https://www.leonardo.com/it/home

[2] https://ilmanifesto.it/azione-dimostrativa-alla-leonardo-pompiere-accusato-di-terrorismo

[3]Democratic confederalism has been practiced in Rojava (Kurdistan region of north-east Syria) since 2011 as a social contract. (see Knapp, Michael, Anja Flach, Ercan Ayboğa, Asya Abdullah, and Janet Biehl 2016)

[4] https://www.retekurdistan.it/

collective process of placemaking and subjectivity opens possibilities for conceptualizing political urban solidarity.

1.1 Background and context: Italy's migration policies and Kurds in the '90s.

Before delving into the specifics of this paper, it is essential to address the background and context of the unique situation in which Kurdish solidarity in Italy emerged during the 1990s. Two key factors warrant consideration: first, the legislative framework for migration at that time, and second, the political landscape. It is important to note that both contexts were markedly different from those of today.

In the 1990s, there was no comprehensive organic law governing migration in Italy. Instead, the reference framework was established by the Legislative Decree 25 July 1998, n. 286, which is the current *Testo Unico* (consolidated law) on migration. The ratio behind the migration policies at that time was primarily driven by economic imperatives and employment-focused initiatives, as illustrated by the triannual programming, the Martelli Law (1990), and the Turco-Napolitano Law (1998). Although these laws introduced provisions for asylum and humanitarian protection, they mainly regulated entry based on labor market requirements and controlled migratory flows through quota systems, often in response to the need for labor and regularization measures. During 1997-1998, a significant wave of migrants from Kurdistan and Afghanistan arrived in Badolato, a small town in Calabria, Southern Italy. The mayor of Badolato viewed the arrival of the Kurds as a remarkable opportunity to repopulate the municipality and boost economic activity (Nikunen 2016). This model of "diffused hospitality" inspired the well-known inclusion experiment in Riace (Driel 2020; Li Destri Nicosia, 2018), where another influx of Kurds arrived in 1998. Today, the situation may not yield the same results, as the current focus of reception seems limited to fundamental necessities such as healthcare, food, and shelter. The current approach deprives migrants of comprehensive reception services and integration support. Furthermore, the establishment of special reception centers, as opposed to integration programs, fosters a sense of a "militarized framework" for migrant reception services, as reported in the report Centri d'Italia 2023[5] (report about the situation of migrants in Italy). In this context, solidarity in Italy emerges as a requisite force in response to a system that tends to illegalize migrants and allocate increasing resources to the expulsion, obstruction of arrivals, and rejection (Aru 2023; Aru and Mauloni 2023).

At the same time, the political landscape surrounding the Kurdish cause during the '90s was shaped not only by civic and grassroots movements—especially those mobilized around events in Rome—but also by significant, but limited, political endorsements. Some historians argue that segments of the left-wing political spectrum laid the groundwork for facilitating Abdullah Öcalan's, the leader of the Kurdish freedom movement, arrival in Italy (see more in Alboni and Pioppi 2000). At the governmental level, led at the time by a center-left party, a member of the Communist Party (Rifondazione Comunista) successfully passed a resolution in the Chamber of Deputies in 1997 that recognized the need for international mobilization in the Kurdish-Turkish region, it was the first time in Europe. This resolution, along with other related political efforts, helped create an environment where Kurdish aspirations could flourish. Consequently, Öcalan's bid for asylum in Italy gained traction; indeed, after his detention in Turkey—following his arrest on February 15, 1999—Italian authorities approved his asylum request: on October 1, 1999, Judge Paolo De Fiore of the Rome tribunal underscored the systemic suppression of fundamental freedoms in Turkey for the Kurdish population. Citing Article 10, paragraph 3 of the Italian Constitution, he provided the legal rationale for granting political asylum to Öcalan, thereby reinforcing the intertwining of political support and legal endorsement in this case, it was too late, Öcalan was already detained in İmralı where he still is today. This notable political engagement, which

[5] https://migrantidb.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/rapporti_pdf/centriditalia_un_fallimento_annunciato.pdf

continues to resonate among certain left-wing parties, marked a unique moment in Italy's political and legislative history, even though no further institutional or political measures were subsequently targeted at the reception of Kurdish migrants.

2. Political Solidarities for Migrants in Urban Contexts:

Solidarity is a complex and contested term, encompassing a range of theoretical foundations and applications in academia, as well as among activists and politicians.

In the literature on social philosophy, scholars examine the rationale behind individuals uniting in solidarity. They focus on the form of solidarity 'that carries self-imposed moral requirements' (Scholz 2008, 36) and 'highlights individual conscience, commitment, group responsibility, and collective action' (ibidem, 33). Bayertz (1998, 1999) identifies a form of solidarity within ethnic-political diversity, particularly in feminist and racial justice movements. Bayertz argues that this solidarity stems from a unified interest in liberation, emphasizing its oppositional nature and tracing the roots of this form of solidarity to socialism. Rippe (1998) identifies the 'project-related' solidarity that places emphasis on the goal of such movements rather than interpersonal relationships. He argues that this empathy of concern is, in fact, one of the factors that distinguishes this solidarity from charity. Mohanty defines solidarity "in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests the *common context of struggles against specific exploitative structures and systems* that determines our potential political alliances" (2003, 49, emphasis in original). Shelby (2005) identifies a form of solidarity that is spontaneous, nonhierarchical and voluntary of people unite for social reform.

According to Scholz in the work of all the above-mentioned theorists—Bayertz, Rippe, Mohanty, and Shelby—we can underscore "something unique about the form of solidarity that emerges in opposition to oppression and injustice" (2008, 38), that she calls 'political solidarity'. To theorize political solidarity, she articulates a taxonomy of solidarity, distinguishing between social solidarity, civic solidarity, and political solidarity. In her work, she defines political solidarity as a "solidarity that emphasizes the moral relationships and positive duties of individuals and groups united in solidarity for social change" (2008, 12). Scholz argues that political solidarity possesses a distinct impetus, social structure, and moral content compared to civic or social solidarity. This commitment, she asserts, shapes relationships among members of solidarity and, depending on the political cause and the depth of commitment, has the potential to transform individuals' lives and lifestyles. Moreover, political solidarity is highly characterized by an oppositional nature, unity based on an objective of liberation, and the implication of strong moral obligations as determining the nature of the solidarity bonds.

Building upon this definition of political solidarity, this paper aims to intersect with the concept of urban solidarity as defined by Bauder (2020) a transformative and politicization process. The aim is to add to the existing literature, through the presentation of the case study, an additional form of solidarity practices, a 'political' one, particularly concerning migration issues.

The interplay between solidarity, migration, and urban settings has been examined across various disciplines, recognizing migration as a significant catalyst for social mobilization (Bauder 2020). The urban environment is a critical area of inquiry for researchers examining contemporary societal processes, their implications, and policy results (Boudreau 2016; Enright 2020; Kaufmann and Sidney 2020; Magnusson 2011). Nation-states and supranational entities like the European Union have shaped the conditions that give rise to international migrant and refugee solidarity at different scales (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019). In recent years there has been a shift in focus within the literature about solidarity and migrations that moves from a nation-state perspective, models of solidarity that promote a unified national identity (Kelz 2015), to a more

nuanced understanding of solidarities that emerge in the diverse spatiotemporal contexts and can bridge different geographical and political contexts (Oosterlynck et al. 2016). Solidarity among and with migrants connects individuals across diverse settings and scales, ranging from homes and places of worship to educational institutions and transnational networks, uniting them in common political struggles related to free mobility and access to rights and dignity (Agustín and Jørgensen 2016; Bauder 2021; Mezzadra 2016; Paik et al 2019; Squire 2018; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). As suggested by Agustín and Jørgensen (2019) urban solidarity practices are nodes that foster connections that can defy national interests forging connections between places and across transnational spaces (Featherstone 2012); urban and grassroots perspectives of solidarity frequently challenge the territorial political frameworks that seek to regulate migration and refugee mobility (Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020). Ladd argues that solidarity needs "real problems" (1998, 7) that can trigger profound and long-lasting mobilization. Solidarities around particular issues in specific places and spaces can effectively challenge state policies related to social benefits, education, and labor markets, as well as the structural mechanisms of exclusion embedded within them. Amin (2002) argues that recurring interactions within these spaces disrupt the simplistic labeling of the stranger as an enemy, fostering new relationships. These interactions serve as moments of cultural destabilization, allowing individuals to transcend fixed notions and engage in transformative social dynamics. This perspective aligns with Featherstone's (2012) conceptualization of solidarity as a relational dynamic designed to challenge oppression and foster political engagement. Stressing the spatial and relational dimensions of urban solidarity, Agustín and Jørgensen (2019) conceptualize 'autonomous solidarity' as a form of solidarity that "implies relations and practices that are produced in self-organized (mainly urban) spaces. This kind of solidarity is based on forms of horizontal participation such as direct democracy and assemblies to invigorate the equality among their members" (2019, 40).

In these works, a common understanding of urban solidarity, in relation to migrations, can be underscored. Urban solidarity is a tool for re-politicization and has a place-making force. Although those works primarily focus on the practices of solidarity on the ground and connect the practices on the ground with political elements, less attention has been given to the reasons why individuals come together and act in solidarity within this context. For some scholars, solidarity in the urban context pursues shared struggles without the need for a singular political identity (Kelz 2015). This paper confronts this position and aims to examine the possibility for an already politicized group to create spaces of belonging (Harald 2016) for migrants and refugees, defining political solidarity in urban spaces.

In focusing on the concept of 'political solidarity' at the intersection with urban solidarity practices, we refer to 'political' not as governance structures but people's relationships with different social and political policies and practices.

This research suggests that the underlying logic of moral obligations of political solidarity seems crucial to perpetuate long-standing practices of support and empowerment, in order to move from the humanitarian understanding of solidarity as an intrinsic aspect of human nature, and acknowledge the double standards of solidarity (Bolzoni, Donatiello and Giannetto 2023) and its inherent lack of impartiality. As observed by Bolzoni et al. (2023) in a special issue of this Journal "Ma(r)king solidarity boundaries towards migrants. Individual, local and transnational experiences" edited by Tina Magazzini and Amandine Desille, solidarity can have a 'dark side', often directing support towards exclusive groups.

Furthermore, the paper emphasizes the empowering characteristic of solidarity practices, which has previously been acknowledged by Arampatzi (2017) in her analysis of solidarity-making processes in 'urban solidarity spaces' in Athens.

Empowerment, in this context, refers to the shift by which migrants stop being treated as passive recipients of humanitarian aid and instead assert their own cultural and political agency, forging alliances with solidarity

networks that contest dominant ideologies and the patriarchal split between political mobilization and mutual support (Santamarina 2024). The paper argues that reconceptualizing urban solidarity practices through political solidarity emphasizes, even more, the empowering characteristic of those practices, acknowledging that solidarity is a mechanism for activating and empowering those who receive support. This approach underscores the capacity of political urban solidarity to generate spaces, physical and relational, in which migrants are not merely passive objects of political discourse, but active political agents. This exploration is particularly pertinent to discussions surrounding migration and political movements, as it underscores the pivotal role of political theory in shaping urban spatial politics.

3. Methodology:

This paper draws from an extensive ethnography conducted in Rome from July 2023 to July 2024. The research employed two primary methods: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation entailed active involvement in the work of Rete Kurdistan Roma – (hereafter referred to as RKR) Rome local committee of RKI - which included participating in weekly meetings and the organization of events and demonstrations. RKR organized 35 events in Rome during the participant observation period. These events varied in focus, ranging from those promoting the Kurdish cause to fundraising events supporting Kurds living in Rome. Active engagement with the work of the network facilitated the acquisition of an insider perspective on decision-making processes, interpersonal interactions, and the priorities of the group. Additionally, it provided insights into the relationships with associations that are not official members of the network but frequently collaborate with it, as well as the involvement of Kurdish refugees and migrants, particularly in the decision-making process. My fieldwork began with volunteering directly with migrants, assisting them with practical needs such as navigating bureaucratic complexities, finding legal support, and teaching Italian. Later, I became more involved in political mobilization, actively collaborating with the initiatives of RKR: organizing protests, lobbying for policy changes, or disseminating information about the principles of the Kurdish revolution and democratic confederalism. By actively participating in these initiatives, I gained a firsthand understanding of the strategies employed by the network. Through these interactions, I witnessed the transformative power of solidarity at the grassroots level on myself. The encounter, as a source of solidarity (Simmel 1950), fostered a sense of comradeship, where individuals from different circumstances come together to support one another for the sake of a common cause. By actively participating in both aspects of Rete Kurdistan's work, direct support and political mobilization, I gained a profound understanding of the central argument underpinning this paper, political solidarity. This research is situated within the framework of 'activist ethnographies' (Chatterton et al. 2008), wherein solidarity transcends a unidirectional flow of aid from individuals with legal status to those who have been illegalized, and fosters a horizontal relationship where individuals collaborate to challenge power structures and empower marginalized individuals. The firsthand experience among RKR group, emphasized the centrality of actively engaging alongside communities in their struggles, rather than merely assisting.

As part of my participation in RKR, I assisted in the establishment of an archive documenting the creation of Ararat and the associated mobilization efforts. This archive was inaugurated during the 25th anniversary of the center, celebrated in May 2024. The archival material was contributed by three primary associations: Villaggio Globale, Stalker, and Senza Confine. The archive is now accessible for visitation and is permanently displayed in a room in Ararat. The collaborative reconstruction of the archive offered valuable insights into the history and diverse narratives of the association concerning the origin of the place. Treating it as a discursive material (Gnes 2016) it facilitated the creation of a narrative from the perspectives of the various associations. Along with the constitution of the archive, I was part of the weekly meeting of the RKR, and I

carried out semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of actors, including migrants met at Ararat, activists, municipality administrators, and mediators. According to participants, the Kurdish community settled in Rome is not extensive. There are reportedly larger communities near Grosseto (Tuscany). Upon arrival, they are often classified by citizenship, and their Kurdish ethnicity is rarely documented. Informal reports suggest there are about 2,500 Kurdish people in Italy, with 200 settled in Rome and around 10 residing at the center at the time of the ethnography.[6] I interviewed a total of 27 people, 16 Kurdish migrants and 11 Italian activists. These last include two municipality administrators - one part of the solidarity network and the other external - and a lawyer for migrants' rights, who works specifically with Kurdish migrants in Rome (see Methodological Appendix). Moreover, the interviews with municipality administrators and the lawyer helped me understand the limitations of solidarity in practice, and the boundaries that practitioners on the ground must observe to avoid their actions being considered illegal when assisting undocumented migrants in Italy and Europe[7].

4. The roots of RKI:

The chain of events between 1997 and 1999—the arrival of Abdullah Öcalan in Italy and the arrival of Kurdish migrants in Badolato and Riace (two small towns in Calabria)—laid the foundations for a broad, decentralized network of solidarity. From its inception, this network sought to re-imagine solidarity, grounding it not only in humanitarian assistance but in an explicitly political commitment. Mimmo Lucano, then mayor of Riace, recalled that moment:

> It could not be reduced to mere mechanical gestures and volunteerism. In the end, we resonated with the claims of so many people who had arrived in Riace and Badolato, with the claims of a Population [...] The Kurdish issue in the Middle East is dominated by global scenarios, it's not just a problem of that geographical area [...] Our ideals are in open contradiction, antithetical to the logic of neoliberal society. Humanity is the greatest enemy of neoliberalism. (Interview with Mimmo Lucano by Francesca Patrizi, from the book *In Cammino con gli Ultimi,* 2023 Author Translation)

Rete Kurdistan—with its local branch Rete Kurdistan Roma (RKR)—and the Ararat Socio-Cultural Center, founded in May 1999, can be read as the enduring legacy of those earlier upheavals. Their emergence was foreshadowed by the first large-scale Italian-Kurdish mobilization in 1998 when hundreds of refugees and Italian activists mobilized to find a housing solution for the hundreds of Kurds gathered outside Rome's Celio Hospital on Celimontana Square, just beside the Colosseum. The Kurdish community built what was called Cartonia (carta means paper, literally 'paper town') they turned the space into a self-run enclave complete with a barber, a corner shop, and other improvised services (Careri and Romito 2005). Later it was renamed 'Piazza Kurdistan' to show the profound support of the Italian activist with Kurdish migrants. Details that are well described by the activists:

> We stumbled upon it by chance one evening while walking. Unexpectedly, I had no idea... I may have heard something about them arriving, but you know those things you hear and then don't really pay attention to? It was, I don't know... nothing like that had ever happened in Rome before. It was one of those things where you think, 'How is this possible? What's going on? How is it possible?' The Kurds? [...] When he told me about this whole thing, I was completely dumbfounded. I had never heard the word Kurdistan or Kurd before, so that time, it was raining,

[6] http://www.romamultietnica.it/aree-geografiche/paesi-arabi-e-medio-oriente/kurdistan/

[7] See file:///Users/ang/Downloads/web_theshrinkingspace.pdf.

> we stayed inside Cartonia for hours. […] there were, indeed, the barber, a makeshift food market. It was a *shantytown* among the Roman ruins on the Celio hill, right there in Colle Oppio, where they had reorganized themselves. A *Kurdish village at the Roman Colosseum* that functioned perfectly. (Interview8_Italian Male Activist)

The mobilization was big, well-organized and organic, as one of the activists present at the moment explained:

> We coordinated all the social centers and associations affiliated with Rome social center network, including Azad, Forte Prenestino, Corto Circuito, and Mabasta, which had a longstanding commitment to Chiapas. Together, we launched a campaign to establish a refugee home in Rome [later Ararat]. All of this took place, of course, within a context of political mobilization arising from international solidarity. Therefore, it is difficult to separate the issue of international solidarity for the Kurdish cause from what happened. In other words, we had a strong political motivation, even though there was also a social welfare component linked to human rights. So, there was the issue of providing assistance, the issue of human rights policies, and the issue of our vision for future society. And what kind of society? One that is inclusive, anti-racist, and egalitarian. So, this initiative was deeply rooted in a broader context of international solidarity, particularly with the Kurdish people and their leader, Abdullah Öcalan. In fact, most of the people who created the Observatory on Refugees and Migrants were involved in the campaign to remove those people from the segregation and discomfort of the street. In Rome, on Colle Oppio, there was an actual paper town, cardboard houses where hundreds of people lived. These, the same people who proposed a solution to the municipality through the creation of reception centers and individual projects on inclusion, work, training, and regional permits for Kurdish people there, are the same ones who then fought for the citizenship and welcome of Abdullah Öcalan. So, all these things are connected. (Interview 5_Italian Male Activist and former Politician)

As expressed by the interviewee the international dimension is crucial in the story of RKI. Notably, Rete Kurdistan isn't just a national network; it collaborates with transnational actors to raise awareness about the situation of Kurds, particularly in Turkey and Syria. It has direct connections with Kurdistan and other Kurdish solidarity movements around the world. The solidarity ties within this network are built around the ideals of the Kurdish revolution and the political ideology of democratic confederalism and democratic modernity[8]. They are also engaged in disseminating humanitarian reports that evaluate the humanitarian crisis in Kurdistan resulting from Turkish persecution to garner support for the Kurdish population and spread the message of the Kurdish liberation movement internationally. Today, the primary activities of Rete Kurdistan involve organizing various events such as concerts, demonstrations, and fundraising initiatives at both local and national levels. For instance, they annually organize the national conference of Rete Kurdistan Italy, which in 2023 was held in Bologna.

One of the main peculiar characteristics of the solidarity network, is the synergetic work with Kurdish refugees in Italy, as evidenced by their mission statement on their website: "organize conferences, cultural activities, and political initiatives to raise awareness about human rights violations and advocate for a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question, *in collaboration with Kurdish refugees present in Italy*" (Author cursive).

In Rome, the network is composed of both individuals without any affiliation and associations. It is open to anyone; the number of participants fluctuates according to periods of relative calm and those of greater urgency. For example, as reported in multiple interviews, during the war against ISIS in 2015-2016[9], attendance at weekly meetings exceeded 100-150 people.

[8] https://democraticmodernity.com/

[9] Toivanen, Mari. *The Kobane Generation: Kurdish Diaspora Mobilizing in France*. Helsinki University Press, 2021.

The network's core is made up of organizations whose roles complement one another. At the political front sits UIKI, the Kurdish Information Office in Italy, whose direct links to the Kurdish movement make it the driving force behind much of the network's advocacy. Day-to-day support is anchored by Senza Confine—founded in Rome by Dino Frisullo—which guides refugees and asylum seekers through the legal maze of documentation and status claims. Several groups address conditions in Kurdistan itself: Staffetta Sanitaria partners with the Kurdish Red Crescent to rebuild health-care infrastructure in war-torn Rojava, while Un Ponte Per, a long-standing "no-border" NGO, fosters peace-building and social-justice projects across the broader Middle East. These four associations form the backbone of Rete Kurdistan, yet the coalition remains deliberately porous, regularly working with Non Una Di Meno Roma, Mediterranea Saving Humans, left-wing unions, and any other organization committed to Kurdish solidarity.

5. Rete Kurdistan solidarity context and practices:

The first solidarity practice of the political mobilization for Kurdish migrants can be considered the establishment of Ararat, the Kurdish socio-cultural center in Testaccio, a central neighborhood of Rome. Today the space is the solidarity network's hub, it is the result of a 25-year collaboration among artists, human rights defenders, volunteers, refugees, and political activists. As one activist observed, Kurds in Rome are considered "the lucky ones" (among the migrants) due to the presence of Ararat and Rete Kurdistan, described as a "self-built support system more effective than state services" (Interview2_Italian Woman Activist).

From interviews with Kurdish migrants, three components emerge as central in the hospitality system: language, mobility, and work. Migrants in a foreign country without knowledge of the local language find it challenging to navigate the city and locate resources where individuals are willing to assist them in understanding their rights. Also drawing from the first-hand ethnographic experiences in Rome, the language barrier emerges as a significant obstacle. Social workers emphasize the exclusionary nature of the system for non-Italian speakers. The inability to understand regulations, documents, and rights significantly limits opportunities for migrants. As highlighted by many interviewees, language courses should be considered as fundamental as food and healthcare. Language proficiency empowers migrants to navigate their surroundings, understand their rights, employment opportunities, and access essential services such as healthcare. For those reasons, voluntary work becomes crucial in such a highly unwelcoming context. Voluntary associations often serve as primary means for migrants to learn about their rights and navigate the bureaucratic maze to access services, job opportunities, Italian lessons, and so forth.

The European Union's Dublin Regulation adds another layer of complexity to the Italian reception system. For many migrants, Italy serves primarily as a transit point on their migratory journey. This transient nature makes it difficult to establish lasting connections or engage in long-term integration processes. Furthermore, to increase their chances of reaching preferred destinations in other European countries, some migrants intentionally avoid registering fingerprints in Italy, often with tacit state complicity, as illustrated by Mauloni in his account of the migrants' conditions surrounding Tiburtina station in Rome: "By not disrupting the spatial infrastructure supporting migrants' informal mobility, the state may facilitate migrants' passage through the territory, aligning with migrants' desire to escape the fixation process of the Dublin regime" (2024, 164).

This transient state creates a challenging environment for building support networks. Solidarity-based organizations often focus on long-term integration, hindering their ability to address the immediate needs of these short-staying migrants. Consequently, these individuals navigate the system as ghosts, ineligible for formal institutionalized assistance due to their undocumented status.

Many migrants also choose to avoid institutional or religious structures due to the restrictive rules. This can lead to reliance on informal support networks and street life, where new power dynamics emerge among

migrants themselves and with law enforcement. These factors contribute to diverse spatializations of migrants within the city, with makeshift camps and encampments forming near major infrastructure hubs like Roma Termini and Roma Tiburtina (Mauloni 2024).

Within this intricate context, solidarity emerges as one of the few viable options for migrants to inhabit urban spaces. This paper delves into the practices of solidarity employed by the RKR network and its crucial interactions with the Kurdish migrant community in Rome. In the subsequent sections, I will examine the practices on the ground to help migrants and the political reasons behind it.

5.1 Practices 'on the ground':

Despite its highly political goal, Rete Kurdistan operates as a mesh of everyday practices that converts activism into material support for migrants navigating Italy's restrictive asylum regime. They organize in order to allow some Kurds, typically those who have recently arrived and are awaiting documentation, to sleep in Ararat. While over 100 people slept in the small rooms of the center years ago, today the number is around 10, though it fluctuates. Due to a tacit agreement supported by the fact that refugees lived there peacefully for 30 years, the police allow people to stay, albeit for limited periods. Stays can last from two to three days up to three months (due to the unofficial agreement with the police limiting stays to a maximum of three months). Some refugees take advantage of this 'good reputation' of Ararat to speed up their paperwork but some, once they obtain their documents they stop engaging in the center's activities.

> We, Akar and I, were outside under the porch on a typical afternoon in Ararat Akar is a young man who speaks Italian, was one of the participants with whom I had developed a significant relationship over time. He had been residing at Ararat for a few months, until he was assigned to a reception center (in a room shared with six others, located one and a half hours away from the center in a small town near Rome). Given our connection, I felt comfortable posing complex questions to him, including inquiries about other individuals. I asked about some participants who were no longer present at recent RKR events or at the center. He responded with pride, stating, "I don't know, probably work…but I'm not like them, they got assigned a place and never come back to help! I'm always here, I don't forget what *this place* did for me" (fieldnotes April 2024).

Luckily, most migrants share Akar's sentiment. For them, Ararat represents a landmark and a safe space, as succinctly expressed by another migrant: "Ararat helped me with everything—documents, work, language, a place to sleep. Here, it's like our home, which is why everyone is here". (Interview7_Male Migrant)

Keeping the center open in that specific location can be read as one of the main solidarity practices 'on the ground' - the location in a central Rome neighborhood with convenient access to transportation and services is a significant advantage. Moreover, it is situated in a discreet area of the neighborhood, providing a sense of security and the proximity to Senza Confine, as an association dedicated to giving support for residency permits, and asylum claims. Beyond legal aid, the center fosters everyday acts of mutual support. Associations and activists provide material resources such as food, clothing, and bicycles to move around, embedding solidarity within the space of Ararat as the material hub to collect help. These practices underscore how migrant communities reshape cities by transforming marginal spaces into sites of resistance and communal organization. Additionally, language lessons, cultural exchange, and collaborative activities—including gardening, communal cooking, and recreational engagements—strengthen cross-community ties, illustrating how solidarity is cultivated through sustained interpersonal and collective efforts. These dynamics challenge

exclusionary urban frameworks, demonstrating that solidarity is not just reactive but actively constructs alternative spaces of belonging (Bauder 2020) and political agency.

Food and the kitchen space play a central role in these practices, serving as the setting for what we might call a process of "cooking up solidarity."

> As I turned into the narrow, deserted street bordering the ExMattatio, a cacophony of sounds assailed my senses. The air was thick with the aroma of spices, punctuated by the boisterous laughter and lively chatter of the people within. The anticipation of Newroz (the Kurdish Spring Equinox festival) was palpable. Though the festival was still three days away, preparations were already underway. Peering through the kitchen window, I observed the frenzied activity within, a testament to the joy and excitement that permeated the space. Upon entering the kitchen, I was greeted with warm smiles and enthusiastic welcomes. Not only were the residents of Ararat present, but also Izmir, Farat, and others (also Mazir from Milan was there!). People I hadn't seen for a while, who had made the hour-long journey from the refugee camp. The allure of the upcoming celebration, and the opportunity to generate income for the center through food sales, had drawn Kurds from all corners of Rome. (fieldnotes March 2024)

Newroz isn't the only occasion food is prepared to sell in Ararat, it plays a crucial and significant role, serving as a means of fostering community and supporting the center's operations. The synergy between Rete Kurdistan activists and Kurds has led to a system where food is sold at events organized or booked by the local activist group (Figure 1 about here).

This practice doesn't come without its challenges. Some Kurds prefer to sell food only at Ararat events, fearing that it might be perceived as a catering service and detract from their primary goal of raising awareness about the Kurdish cause. While there are debates about the effectiveness of food sales, they are a crucial source of income alongside direct donations, which are limited. This approach also helps to keep the Kurdish cause visible and spreads awareness throughout the city. Throughout my observations, Ararat participated in approximately 20 events where food was sold. The preparation and sale of food are predominantly managed by the Kurdish residents of Ararat. This collaborative approach benefits both the activists and the Kurds as they unite towards a shared objective. A recurring theme in my observations of Rete Kurdistan meetings was the strong emphasis on close collaboration with Kurdish refugees in Italy (Figure 2 about here).

This synergy is regarded as a unique and powerful element of the network's solidarity efforts. An experienced activist from Ararat, who teaches Italian at a school for migrants and has years of activism experience, exemplifies this collaborative spirit in her interview. She particularly emphasized the importance of this collaboration as a distinctive feature of Rete Kurdistan's work, stating: "Ararat is one of the few places where they say they work with migrants and actually do. They are not just objects or slogans." (Interview4_Italian Woman Activist)

5.2 The Politics of the Solidarity Groups:

As emphasized repeatedly, one of the characteristics of political solidarity is both to provide and to protest. In the definition of political solidarity at the urban scale, providing support must align with a strong component of opposition and resistance. As articulated in the interview with one of the members of RKR, after being for years in the reception system, she stated:

> I am also quite critical of these forms of *privato sociale* (private company working in social services) where I used to work, because sometimes boundaries are not recognized. Sometimes they become a crutch for a sick system, for a welcome system that exploits and uses them [migrants]. This does not happen, did not happen with Ararat [...] my

> fear is that over time, while twenty years ago, thirty years ago, it was very clear that we had to denounce and then give support at the same time, now I don't think it's as clear that we must denounce it now, and even strongly than years ago. (Interview4_Italian Woman Activist)

As observed, the political horizon followed in RKR comes from the principles of democratic confederalism and the Rojava revolution. However, the understanding of the political ideology within Rete Kurdistan appears to extend beyond the dogmatic interpretation of the concept; it is utilized more as a critical tool to reflect upon and engage in profound discussions regarding the current political panorama emerging in Italy and, more broadly, in the West. As stated during an interview with a district president of Rome, he argued that:

> To support the political cause […] means also trying to mature a reflection on general political models and on what are the political paradigms that are proposed. In this sense, the paradigm of Democratic Confederalism has entered the international political debate as a paradigm of reflection on the forms of democracy and on the crisis of intermediate institutions within advanced democratic systems. Also questioning some, and in some way, some styles of public administration, of state architecture, of reorganization in terms of management, of bottom-up sovereignty of relations between institutions and society, fundamentally, and this within the logic, for those who in some way come from social movements like me, of trying to live political commitment, also trying to cultivate a plural gaze and a political grammar that updates itself, that confronts itself, that puts itself in contradiction. Over the years, Öcalan's thought has been stimulating for much of the left at the international level. (Interview7_Italian Man Activist and Politician)

From the interviews with the Italian actors emerges that the Kurdish question, its political claims and values intersect with a wide range of international political mobilizations. The global mobilization to expose and denounce the capitalist system and overcome it via practices that openly address and subvert the imperialist hegemony of capitalism in various ways across different geographies. Appears that the political values and ideology proposed by the Kurdish revolution resonate with most movements around the world calling for an end to perpetuated racial capitalism practices. The element of connection with a much broader fight against capitalism emphasizes the transnational nature of political solidarity, which spatializes and materializes in different manifestations around the globe. This perspective, the connection with a wide range of injustices that are perpetuated in the world and find their central connector in the capitalist system, is reported by one of the most experienced activist figures in Rome, who has been part of various movements in Rome and Italy for more than 60 years. He was one of the founders of Ararat through his work in another occupied social space widely known in Rome, Villaggio Globale. He stated:

> Fundamentally, more clearly, I am an anti-capitalist, fundamentally I am a non-violent pacifist, *questo è* (Italian expression for 'that's what it is'), all those situations of regime oppression or wars. People fleeing for reasons of war, they need our help, there is no doubt! […] For example, I have never been a member of a party, I have never had a party membership card, but for sixty years, I've been involved in movements fighting for fundamental human rights, migrants' rights, which are basically the same thing. (Interview6_Italian Man Activist)

Another element that emerges as constitutive of 'the political' for those who engage with the work of RKR is its reproducibility. Political mobilization requires patterns of reproducibility that can be applied both at a policy level and in the creation of spaces. It is a system that can be reproduced over time and across geographies that embrace the same political values to mark progress and provide individuals with a tangible and concrete

form to validate the collective work and effort that the movement has mobilized. This concept is emphasized by a member of RKR, an expert in migration and former politician, who stated:

> We need to be concrete because all mobilizations need to be reproducible. And reproducibility is linked not only to the ideal dimension of activities, which is fundamental. We need to create suggestions, but it is also linked to the result, what you leave as an example, you must win, then we have learned to win because when we win… When the piece of society that we mobilize wins, I think we leave a little bit of justice as sediment, like Ararat is sedimented justice if I think about it. (Interview5_Italian Man Activist and Politician)

As reported in the interview, Ararat represents the materialization of a broad and interconnected network of mobilization that constitutes, for many in Rome, a political landmark, an outpost of ethic-political mobilization. Along with Ararat, there are numerous other spaces in Rome where similar anti-capitalistic mobilizations are experimented. This collaboration with different networks and associations, not Kurdish-related aims to disseminate information, foster reflection, and create opportunities for exchange between different groups sharing similar political inclinations. Many of these spaces also provide support services to migrants and refugees. However, Ararat stands out as the unique space within this network that is entirely organized and managed by the migrant community itself. Although grounded in a specifically Kurdish political project, Ararat consistently translates its principles of hospitality, respect, and mutual connection into concrete support for asylum seekers of every background. This inclusive ethos can strain the center's limited resources, yet it remains non-negotiable. When a fire gutted a nearby shelter housing African migrants, Ararat responded immediately, offering beds and meals until alternative accommodation was found. The center also allies with other organizations: it co-hosts Mediterranea's fundraising lunches and public rallies and organizes simpler but crucial drives to collect shoes and basic supplies for partner groups. Even the recurrent visit of a mobile healthcare unit is promoted as a city-wide service—anyone, regardless of affiliation with Ararat, can receive medical attention. Through these practices, Ararat embeds itself in a broader urban pattern of solidarity that extends well beyond the Kurdish community.

6. Discussion and Conclusion: framing a tool for empowerment:

The case of RKR prompts a reflection on how forms of already strongly politicized solidarity groups influence and create spaces for refugees and migrants. To define political solidarity at the urban scale, it is necessary to acknowledge some central characteristics that can lead to the definition of such relationships.

Political solidarity, like urban solidarity, demonstrates its inherent capacity for place-making and re-politicization. As observed, the political solidarity movement has been actively involved in creating and reclaiming spaces for refugees, such as Ararat. As demonstrated by the Kurdish solidarity movement, political solidarity is inherently tied to place-making. The initial mobilization to find accommodation for refugees in Piazza Kurdistan highlights the constitutive role of urban spaces in political action. Solidarity possesses both spatial and relational dimensions (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019). The spatial dimension is evident in physical spaces like Ararat, while the relational dimension manifests in practices like selling food across the city, which fosters encounters and negotiations between diverse groups (Amin 2002).

Moreover, the movement's efforts to extend beyond the confines of Ararat and engage with a broader geography of spaces demonstrate a commitment to re-politicization. By generating discussions, reflections, and potential alliances with other political movements involved in hospitality and migrant support, the movement seeks to shape a shared vision for the future.

While there are commonalities between the general definition of urban solidarity and political urban solidarity, they diverge primarily in two respects.

First, political urban solidarity generates practices of solidarity aimed at empowering participants. For example, the food-selling practices reveal how this simple gesture fosters both active involvement of migrants who, with the support of the solidarity network, can self-create a means to sustain themselves and the center in which they reside. This form of empowerment, as suggested by Arampatzi (2017) is a vital component of solidarity. It can be argued that the practices of political solidarity in urban contexts aim to empower migrants and learn from them. The case of RKR underscores how political mobilization can also generate long-standing initiatives that foster new models of inclusion and empowerment, overcoming the patriarchal division between direct support and political mobilization (Santamarina 2024).

Second, the capacity to foster a sense of belonging while acknowledging the exclusionary nature of solidarity (Bolzoni et. al. 2023). This oppositional nature, characteristic of political solidarity (Scholz 2008) can inadvertently lead to the exclusion of groups that do not align with the specific political agenda of the solidarity movement. While the movement is strongly politically driven, Italian activists use the Rojava model as a tool for interpreting contemporary democratic challenges, rather than strictly adhering to its praxis. The political aims of the Kurdish movement and the ideology of the Rojava Revolution have not only impacted the lives of Kurdish migrants in Rome but have also contributed to the formation of a collective subjectivity among the solidarity group. However, within these exclusive spaces, a strong sense of belonging can emerge. For instance, belonging to Ararat not only signifies a shared political identity but also represents a form of mediation within the urban environment. This sense of belonging is rooted in the recognition of shared values and political understandings, offering a sense of place and community within the broader urban context. *Belonging to Ararat* becomes a way for migrants to confront the city. This element is closely connected to the political ideologies that the space represents. This collective subjectivity is reproduced across different geographies and spaces of mobilization, starting with Ararat and extending to other urban and national contexts, influencing the creation of a network of small-scale political laboratories. The ongoing relationship between urban and political solidarity is evident in the daily work of maintaining the Kurdish space open and collaborating with refugees. This practice is rooted in the foundational values of the political ideology that underpins the movement.

Regardless of the specific political ideology analyzed, political urban solidarity can be defined as a relationship between local activists and migrants based on shared values and a vision for the future. This relationship aims to empower both participants and foster a sense of belonging through collaborative action. In conclusion, the interest in integrating urban solidarity into the broader framework of political solidarity arises from the imperative to reconceptualize political alternatives from a grassroots perspective. As Saleh and Landau-Donnelly assert, "progressive urban change can simultaneously be oriented towards future alternatives and credibly grounded in existing political practices in the here and now" (2023, 3). This approach seeks to explore emergent forms of contestation and resistance, as exemplified by the experiences of Kurdish migrants in Italy. In this context, solidarity-making becomes a dynamic process rooted in embodied interactions, where individuals and communities collaborate to address shared challenges and needs.

To establish practices of acceptance, integration, and belonging (Bauder 2020) for migrants within the city, the research prompts reflection through a case study of already politicized group action 'on the ground,' transitioning from humanitarian, civic solidarity driven by 'human nature' to overtly political group engagement, with a focus on moral commitments, individual conscience, collective responsibility, and shared action (Scholz 2008).

In summary, the research sought to investigate the notion of political urban solidarity practices, characterized as a shared dedication to the fight for empowerment, bringing people together through common ideals and a unified political view.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this case study: the specific conditions of Italy's reception system and the pre-existing political networks of the Kurdish community significantly influence the potential for solidarity-building. Nonetheless, the practices demonstrated by Ararat highlight the transformative power of political solidarity in urban settings. By fostering inclusive spaces, empowering marginalized communities, and re-politicizing urban landscapes, political solidarity challenges traditional paternalistic approaches to migrant reception. It underscores the inherently political nature of solidarity and moves beyond humanitarian frameworks to emphasize how solidarity shapes spaces of empowerment and politicization. Political solidarity emerges as a vital force for reshaping urban spaces and advancing social justice. By understanding its dynamics, recognizing its challenges, and harnessing its potential, we can work towards building more inclusive and equitable cities for all.

Figure 1 - Members of Ararat offer food for free donations during the "JIN JIYAN AZADÎ - A Philosophy of Life Transformation" conference at the University of Roma Tre on February 17, 2024.

Source: Author's picture



Figure 2 - Members of Rete Kurdistan and Ararat collaborate on the set-up of the Archive reconstruction of Ararat's story on May 2024

Source: Author's picture



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Methodological Appendix

Id Interview	*Citizenship*	*Role*	*Gender*	*Age* *(Age range)*
Interview1_Italian Woman Activist	Italian	Activist / Social worker	Woman	25-30
Interview2_Italian Woman Activist	Italian	Activist / Social worker	Woman	--
Interview3_Italian Man Activist	Italian	Activist	Man	30-35
Interview4_Italian Woman Activist	Italian	Activist / Social worker	Woman	35-40
Interview5_Italian Man Activist Politician	Italian	Activist / Former Politician	Man	55
Interview6_Italian Man Activist	Italian	Activist / Social worker	Man	78
Interview7_Italian Man Activist Politician	Italian	Activist/ Politician	Man	35-40
Interview8_Italian Man Activist	Italian	Activist	Man	59
Interview9_Italian Man Politician	Italian	Politician	Man	59
Interview10_Italian Man Activist	Italian	Activist	Man	--
Interview11_Italian Woman Lawyer	Italian	Migrants Rights Lawyer	Woman	--
Interview12_Kurd Man	Kurd - Turkey	--	Man	--
Interview13_Kurd Man	Kurd - Iraq	--	Man	--
Interview14_Kurd Man	Kurd - Turkey	--	Man	--
Interview15_Kurd Man	Kurd - Turkey	--	Man	--

Interview16_Kurd Man	Kurd - Turkey	--	Man	--
Interview17_Kurd Man	Kurd - Turkey	--	Man	--
Interview18_Kurd Man	Kurd - Turkey	--	Man	--
Interview19_Kurd Man	Kurd - Turkey	--	Man	--
Interview20_Kurd Man	Kurd - Turkey	Former co-chair of Ararat	Man	--
Interview21_Kurd Woman	Kurd - Turkey	Activist	Woman	--
Interview22_Kurd Man	Kurd - Turkey	Activist	Man	--
Interview23_Kurd Man	Kurd - Turkey	--	Man	--
Interview24_Kurd Man	Kurd - Turkey	Co-chair of Ararat	Man	--
Interview25_Kurd Woman	Kurd - Turkey	Activist	Woman	--
Interview26_Kurd Man	Kurd - Turkey	Activist	Man	--
Interview27_Kurd Man	Kurd - Turkey	--	Man	--