SOLROUTES

The externalization of borders,
solidarity and smuggling between Bulgaria and
Türkiye

9 February – 20 March 2024

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Summary

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to present an overview of the scientific research conducted between February 9 and March 20, 2024 within the framework of the first caravan in the Balkan Peninsula, and more specifically, straddling the Turkish-Bulgarian border in three designated nodes: Harmanli and Svilengrad on the Bulgaria side, and the city of Edirne on the Turkish one.

The research team was composed by one researcher (Rassa Ghaffari) and a photographer commissioned by the SolRoutes project (Emanuela Zampa); when the singular person is used in the text, the point of view of the researcher is being expressed. Unless otherwise noted, all photos used in this report were taken by Emanuela Zampa while she worked on the field.

The caravan's structure and functioning were designed from the outset to be fluid and flexible, with each step determined by the circumstances on the field and in accordance with a grounded research theory (Kluge 2000; Bowen 2006; Charmaz, 2013); since the preliminary organization of the fieldwork, which scheduled through 2023 to be set in Serbia, was suddenly disrupted by the shift in migratory routes on the peninsula, Bulgaria has been identified as a new location.

Through the collection of life narratives, interviews with solidarity actors and ethnographic work within a no-border movement, in this first caravan the goal was to explore the construction and functioning of solidarity networks and practices from below among people on the move (hereafter PoM) entering the Western Balkan Route and the involvement of multiple characters such as facilitators and smugglers. More specifically, the research identified the following goals:

1. To examine the impact of Bulgaria's changing political landscape to better understand one of the lesser-studied routes across the Balkan Peninsula.
2. To analyze the formal and informal networks that guide the trajectories of PoMs entering the Western Balkans route and the multiple nuances that the concept of solidarity assumes in their journey and stay, in order to build a comparison with other emic networks traversing the same paths. More specifically: what are the spatial organization, the actual fabrication, the relational dimension, as well as the forms of material solidarity, which permeate the lives of people on the move, once arrived in Bulgaria, and while planning the prosecution of their journeys?

In order to achieve this objective, a total of nine interviews were conducted. Three individuals who were hosted at two centers in Harmanli and Pastrogor at the time of the research; one lawyer, who specializes in migration law and identifies himself as a solidarity actor; three activists belonging to different solidarity movements; one local social worker; one member of an international organization, which had withdrawn its consent for the interview to be published.

The Balkans are the beginning or a stage of important routes part of an intense network of movement and smuggling: from the Balkans through Greece and Italy to other EU countries; from Türkiye through the Balkans to Italy and Austria. Indeed, the Balkan route can be considered as a transnational entity (Mandić 2017).

Bulgaria is a case in point, being both a sending and a transit country. Unlike other Balkan states such as Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria is (almost) not a destination country (Krasteva 2013). The border separating Türkiye and Bulgaria constitutes currently one of the main land gateway to Europe: for many Asian and, increasingly, African PoM, the principal routes to Europe by land and sea, commonly known as 'the Game', originate precisely in Türkiye, after which they head westward into Greece or Bulgaria before proceeding into the Western Balkans, primarily through Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (EPRS, 2022), although it should be noted that these trajectories are constantly changing and shifting in accordance to political, material and social circumstances. Therefore, it is essential to analyze and monitor these specific routes for two main reasons. First, for a large number of people, Türkiye is the initial destination en route to entering the EU. Second, the Balkan region is a critical piece in the EU's externalization strategies, with Europe expanding eastward towards Türkiye as the most long-standing Orientalized boundary. With half of all recorded entries to the EU being through the Mediterranean sea, the Western Balkan route remains the second most active route for PoM who are trying to reach the EU (Klikaktiv 2023).

The need to delve into the Bulgarian case stems from the increase in transits witnessed in 2022, confirmed by data from the Ministry of Interior, according to which 168,378 third-country nationals attempted to cross the national borders in 2022, a number 3.1 times higher than in 2021 (55,012 persons). Recently, a new route has emerged that, passing through Türkiye, crosses Bulgaria and Serbia, and then allows to reach Western Europe, Central Europe or Scandinavia (Yıldız 2021). Statistics published by the General Directorate of Border Police confirm that the number of prevented illicitly attempts to cross the Turkish-Bulgarian border in June and July of 2023 increased by 73% compared to the same months in 2022, from 27,083 in 2022 to 46,940 in 2023. From January 1st to August 7th, 2023, the border police prevented 108,954 illegal crossing attempts, compared to 67,846 in the same period of 2022 ("Torchlight. Shedding Light on the Violent Opacity of the European Border Regime" 2023).

As Bulgaria became a partial member of the Schengen area in March 2024, its border with Türkiye has gained high priority for the European Commission: in an official letter on March 20, Von der Leyen stated that most of the 600 million Euro available for 2023 through the Frontex agency will be spent to support member countries in border control and the purchase of technological devices[1]. Article 13 of EU Regulation No. 604/2013 (Dublin III) states that the Member state of first entry is responsible for examining asylum applications. However, Bulgaria is primarily a transit country, situated at the heart of the land routes leading from the Middle East and Africa to other European countries such as Germany, France, and Italy. The transit dimension is supported by data on the abandonment of asylum procedures, indicating that many individu-

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[1] Source: https://www.statewatch.org/news/2023/june/bulgaria-and-romania-speed-up-asylum-and-deportation-procedures-with-eu-support/.

als leave the country before the outcome of their application is determined. The testimonies collected among the Syrian asylum-seeker community in the field confirm this information: for the PoM we met, it was common to change their plans in transit, postponing further movement or revising their direction, in line with what Collyer and de Haas therefore describe as a 'fragmented journey' rather than a transit migration: "Those individuals who do manage to get to Europe may not have intended to travel there when their left their homes and they may, as many are, be profoundly disappointed with what they fi nd when they arrive" (Collyer and De Haas 2012, 478). Even the stay in Bulgaria, where they apply for asylum and receive the document, is not considered an ultimate point of arrival, but rather another step in their path, as commented by a 18-year-old Syrian: "I will try to go to UK...no one of us wants to stay here in Bulgaria" [conversation n. 1].

In addition, the rejections at the border between Bulgaria and Türkiye are accompanied by the systematic use of violence; this specific piece of land results unfortunately the deadliest along the Balkan route, according to the latest Lighthouse Report[2] and Bulgaria Border Monitoring[3], with dozens of deaths in the last two years alone. According to an interview with a solidarity actor working in the area of missing persons, the forests separating Türkiye and Bulgaria are "one of the biggest open-air cemeteries no one cares about" [conversation n. 5].

Figure 1. Map of Bulgaria and its borders. Source: report Torchlight 2023, Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche Alto Vicentino

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[2] Source: https://www.lighthousereports.com/investigation/europes-nameless-dead/.
[3] Source: https://bulgaria.bordermonitoring.eu/2023/12/02/almost-100-people-died-on-their-way-through-bulgaria-within-2-years/.

Factors contributing to the high flow of people through Bulgaria include the further 'fortification' of the land border between Greece and Türkiye, which has become increasingly difficult to cross in recent years. On the other hand, the earthquake that hit Türkiye and Syria in February 2023 has exacerbated an already tragic situation; the economic crisis both in the Anatolian country and in North Africa shows no signs of ending; the policy of mass deportations implemented by the Turkish president Erdoğan and resumed in the post-election period puts the 3.6 million Syrian refugees in the country on the flight line. It is necessary not to forget the constant exodus of the Afghan population, which is also exposed to the violent institutional racism of the Turkish state and to the constant risk of being repatriated. In fact, the main countries of origin of people seeking protection in Bulgaria are Afghanistan and Syria, followed by Morocco and Iraq (Source: UNHRC, 2023). As a result, the fieldwork was conducted almost exclusively among Syrian asylum seekers who arrived in Bulgaria by crossing the border with Türkiye, where most of them stayed for anywhere from a few weeks to a year. A small part of the research also included PoM from the Maghreb region who followed the same route as the Syrians.

Moving from these premises, the report is structured as follows: the next section presents the specific methodology used in this fieldwork and analyzes its perks and perils. Paragraph 2 gives a brief overview of the situation at the Turkish-Bulgarian border and describes the Bulgarian management of the unauthorized migration. The following sections focus on the three nodes that constituted the field research: for each node, one or more lines of inquiry that emerged as particularly significant are presented. Finally, the report concludes with a description of the three Generative Narrative Workshops and some selected photographs.

In conclusion, it is crucial to emphasize that we have decided not to mention several elements of the research in this report in order to protect the privacy and safety of both the caravan partner in Bulgaria, the No Name Kitchen movement, and the PoM.

1. Methodology: volunteering, militant ethnography, and their call for a public sociology

As has been extensively analyzed in the literature, transnational migration processes require specific methodological approaches that increasingly employ multisite ethnographies (Marcus 1995, Hannerz 2002) and research methods that are indebted to different disciplinary traditions: participant observation, interviews, life histories, oral histories, documentary analysis, and, increasingly, photography and video (Queirolo Palmas and Stagi 2015). This research has been conducted recurring to volunteering and militant ethnography, understood as a politically engaged and collaborative form of participant observation carried out from within rather than outside grassroots movements (Juris 2007). In section 6, the use of photography in the implementation of a participatory methodology and the creation of Generative Narrative Workshops will be discussed in more detail.

In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in studying and applying volunteering as a research technique with its own unique characteristics and guidelines. Sociologists and political scientists increasingly view volunteering as an expression of core societal principles, such as solidarity, social cohesion, and democracy (Hustinx, Handy, and Cnaan 2010). Notwithstanding, volunteering remains a complex phenomenon that is not clearly defined and often spans a wide range activities, organizations, and sectors. The definition of volunteering is difficult to pin down, and it is challenging to generalize findings from studies. However, the various perspectives and approaches demonstrate the richness and versatility of volunteering scholarship. Wilson and Musick (1997), as instance, propose an 'integrated theory of volunteering' based on three assumptions: that volunteering requires human, social, and cultural capital; that is productive work done collectively; and that it is guided mainly by ethical principles. Militant ethnography, on the other hand, aims to address some of the objectivist shortcomings common in traditional research approaches (Juris 2007). To grasp the concrete logic generating specific practices, researchers must become active practitioners; this usually involves assisting in organizing events and workshops, facilitating meetings, contributing to strategic and tactical discussions, taking political stances, and participating in mass direct actions. The work can also be interpreted within the framework of 'action-research', in which the researcher is actively involved in the field and other actors are seen as subjects rather than objects of research, and the research is aimed at achieving micro-social change, often within a group, rather than merely increasing knowledge (Cannarella in Queirolo Palmas and Stagi 2015).

For this specific fieldwork, I chose to approach the field by becoming member of the No Name Kitchen Movement[4], an independent association working alongside the Balkans and Mediterranean routes to promote humanitarian aid and political action for those who suffer the difficulties of extreme journeys and violent pushbacks implemented by European authorities. Considering the increasing waves of border crossings and the reports of violence in this particular area, the movement decided in the summer of 2023 to open a new mission in the town of Harmanli, in the province of Haskovo, in south-central Bulgaria[5]. The city holds particular relevance as it hosts the biggest Reception and Registration Center in the country. The last week of the fieldwork was dedicated to following autonomously a specific line of inquiry suggested by one of the research participants in Edirne, Türkiye.

This decision to eventually join the association as a full-time activist was based on a number of factors: first, No Name Kitchen is a highly organized movement with a consolidated presence along the Western Balkan route, and its experience was considered decisive in terms of social capital necessariry for accessing such a complex field. Second, engagement with solidarity actors proves to be an effective way of producing and disseminating analysis and reflection, as such

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[4] Source: https://www.nonamekitchen.org/.
[5] Source: https://www.nonamekitchen.org/where/.

practices break down the traditional divide between participant and observer, posing a significant challenge to traditional academic approaches to the circulation of knowledge. Indeed, this collaborative and participatory methodology (Lassiter 2005), reveals itself crucial for the intent of pursuing a public and reflexive dimension (Burawoy 2005) that constitutes one of the foundational pillars of the SolRoutes project. Within the frame of a qualitative social research that is becoming increasingly self-critical, self-conscious and self-reflexive (Fine 1993), this approach significantly contributed to the increase of the perceived usefulness of the research and to the reshaping of the relationship between researchers, participants and the other actors in the field (Becker 1998), thanks also to the cooperative production of images, languages, practices and activities. As Juris (2007) highlights, politically engaged ethnographic practice not only allows researchers to remain active political subjects, but also generates better interpretations and analyses. The sensitivity of the research field - exposed to vulnerability, violence, uncertainty regarding legal status, criminalization, and surveillance - proved this type of ethnography the most capable of coping with such risks, assuming perceived and objective threats directly from the perspective of actors participating in the research.

The use of the body as a research tool is an asset of the activist ethnographer, and the role of the researcher body, especially if it is white, female, young, and solidaristic, as it was in our case, played a critical role in determining their positioning in relation to different situations and actors. During an interview conducted on the field, members of the Rotte Balcaniche Collective, another solidarity movement who focuses on the Balkan region[6], discussed their use of the privilege conveyed by their bodies to stand in solidarity with marginalized people, to act as shields in distressing situations, or as megaphones to amplify stories and testimonies. In some cases, we have observed that our bodies drew the attention of the authorities and police, while the PoM were negatively impacted and deprived of the same privileges as us. Finally, although the research project primarily focuses on the set of practices and relations labelled as 'migration industry from below,' the local solidarity network in Bulgaria also proved to be of interest and became an integral part of the observation. Indeed, the experience permitted us to observe and to put into dialogue two different forms of solidarity: the emic one, carried out by the networks of PoM before and during the journey, mostly explicit through a multiplicity of micro-acts of cohesion and resistance; the white, western one, embodied by movements such as NNK and Rotte Balcaniche and their predominantly European activists. Part of the aim was therefore to examine whether and how volunteers can play an important role in promoting trajectories of advancement, autonomy and inclusion. Through relationships that are both parallel to and distinct from professional ones, they help to animate different visions and practices of care, and mediate access to resources of particular relevance (Bonizzoni 2023).

Becoming a volunteer of No Name Kitchen in one of the field missions is accomplished through a multi-step process, including an online written test on the rules and principles of the

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[6] https://www.facebook.com/p/Collettivo-Rotte-Balcaniche-Alto-Vicentino-100078755275162/.

movement and a colloquium. Personal motivation as well as technical skills are evaluated in order to determine the best role among the different ones foreseen in each team. In this particular case, a negotiation process was carried out to assess the compatibility of the movement and the needs of the research project. Indeed, it should be recognized that volunteering is an inherently multidimensional phenomenon (Hustinx, Handy, and Cnaan 2010) where being an active member of a structured movement involves a number of daily tasks and duties, as well as limitations on the activities that can be implemented. Navigating these parameters and recognizing the constraints is the first challenge to creatively deal with when approaching the field. In one notable case, frictions arose due to the presence of the camera during one of the daily activities with PoM.

Figure 2. Preparing Ramadan gifts to give to PoM during distribution

The team's collective discussion highlighted the importance of appropriate temporalities for collaborative ethnography and revealed the coexistence of different timing on the field: the slow, routine, and carefully planned movement of volunteering, and the contingent and often unintentionally extractive timing of the research.

More specifically, the daily organization of the activities was as follows: five days a week were dedicated to collecting the requests of the PoM hosted in the Harmanli camp (Syrian men, women, and families) and Pastrogor transit centre in the municipality of Svilengrad (Maghreb men) and organizing the distribution of non-food items and medicines. The organization of the 'orders' and the preparation of the items followed a carefully organized procedure based on the use of technology and social networks, which proved to be a crucial element of the solidarity network on the ground. Sociability and the establishment of friendly relationships were a fundamental asset, as the movement, in addition to distributing aid, sought to create safe spaces for fun, sharing and conviviality.

Digital devices and social media facilitated the establishment of meaningful personal relations with the PoM, a process that continued even when the research field was concluded. This conclusion was prompted by Marcus's recommendation to move beyond the limitations of conventional ethnographic research, examining trajectories across and within multiple sites and becoming embedded in discontinuous, multi-sited objects of study (Marcus 1995).

2. Bulgaria's management of borders and migration
2.1 The political background

From a closed to an open State, from asylum seeking to labor emigration, from a sending to a destination country, from a Balkan to a European migration profile – numerous and radical changes have occurred in Bulgaria in just four decades (Krasteva 2013).

The role of migration in the politics of belonging in Bulgaria is shaped by the country's loaded ideas about Muslims and the Middle East. While Muslims were a privileged group during the Ottoman era, which lasted from 1396 to 1878, they were excluded from the modernizing nation-building that followed Bulgarian independence in 1908 (Neuburger 2019). The reconstruction of the religious boundary between Christians and Muslims along linguistic lines during post-Ottoman nationalization produced a Muslim, Turkish speaking 'Other' in the then young nation; an 'Other' in the then fledgling nation-state where Bulgarian was the official language and Orthodox Christianity the state religion (Carlsson 2022).

The refugees who arrived in Bulgaria during the past two decades, predominantly Muslim, have added another layer to the existing struggles over nationhood. This has further politicized national narratives on Islam, the Turkish border, and Europeanness. The complex post-imperial nation-building of Eastern Europe makes questions of bordering particularly poignant, as its imagined position constitutes the border between the Orient and the Occident, while being characterized by 'multiple layers of imperial, national, regional, and linguistic boundaries' (Kulawik 2019). In order to assert the Europeanness of the region, an unspoken and invisible insistence on whiteness coexists with Islam and the Ottoman Empire as boundary markers to determine what Europe is and what it is not, where its borders pass, and who belongs within them (Boatcă 2015).

The change of political regime in Bulgaria after 1989 also brought changes to the picture of migration. While the communist Bulgarian state strictly controlled who entered and left its territory, and controlled mobility even within its own borders, emigration proved to be one of the defining social phenomena in the years of democratic change. A significant reversal of the long-term trend in the number of refugees occurred when Bulgaria was found to be on the Balkan route for PoM during what was described as the largest 'migration crisis' in Europe since World War II. There were numerous predictions that Bulgaria would attract waves of refugees after the country joined the EU in 2007. This did not materialize in the years leading up to 2010, with numbers remaining below 1,000 per year. However, the number of applications increased sixfold between 2012 and 2013. The peak occurred in 2015, when 20,391 people applied for asylum, an unprecedented number for the country. The following year saw a halt in the increase and even a slight decrease of asylum seekers, although the numbers remained much higher than before the peak. Since then, the records have fallen as quickly as they rose, to a level just above the long-term number (Otova 2020).

Bulgaria's membership in the EU made the country part of the core European institutional space, reshaping its mobility regimes. While its citizens gained access to free movement within

the European single market within a few years, Bulgaria also became part of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and began to control the EU's external border (Carlsson 2022). As a result of the political turmoil that has been particularly acute in some of Türkiye's neighboring countries, Bulgaria has moved from being primarily an emigration country to also being an immigration country. Indeed, due in part to its economic precariousness, Bulgaria can be described as a transit country where migrants are "expected and encouraged to migrate again" (Erolova 2017, 362). Those who stay include those who have settled after receiving asylum, as well as those who are stuck in 'gray zones,' awaiting status, awaiting deportation, or deported back to Bulgaria from other EU countries under the Dublin system. At the same time, old and new migrations, settled and new minorities are discursively linked in multiple ways.

According to the figures provided by the Bulgarian authorities, Syria is currently the second country of origin for refugees and asylum seekers in the country, after Afghanistan[7]. At the time this fieldwork was conducted, Syrian refugees had two options for reaching Europe: one was legal, through venues such as resettlement programs, family reunification, university fellowships and scholarships, training programs, and private sponsorships. The alternative route, however, represented an arduous and perilous journey across two continents and several countries (Türkiye, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia), which constituted a significant challenge for those attempting to traverse this route. The former was, in fact, the most secure and straightforward option. Nevertheless, the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to EU Member States remained a distant possibility for the majority of Syrians (Achilli 2018). The so-called 'refugee crisis' in Bulgaria began in 2013, when the influx of refugees increased sixfold: from 1,387 in 2012 to 7,144 in 2013. It continued to grow over the next two years, reaching 11,081 in 2014 and an unprecedented 20,391 in 2015. Unlike in the countries of former Yugoslavia, where the influx decreased radically after the closure of the Balkan refugee route, it remained high in Bulgaria, as highlighted in the figure n. 3. Krasteva (2020) posits that two temporal condensations characterize the Bulgarian context: the first is the rapid transition from a closed, fenced-off country at the time of the Iron Curtain to a closed, fenced-off country at the time of the 'refugee crisis'. This has led to an increased semantic proximity of wall and fence. The second spatio-temporal condensation concerns Schengen. Even before its admission as a full member, thus, Bulgaria has already moved from no borders to borders as fences.

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[7] Source: https://aref.government.bg/en/statistics-and-reports.

Table 1. Refugee flow in Bulgaria, 2010–2016.

Year	Number of asylum seekers
2010	1025
2011	890
2012	1387
2013	7144
2014	11,081
2015	20,391
2016 (Till July 2016)	9388

Source: Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees.
http://www.aref.government.bg/?cat=8

Figure 3. Source: Krasteva, 2020

As far as asylum seekers are concerned, the Bulgarian reception system is managed by the State Agency for Reception (SAR) and consists of the RRC (Registration and Reception Center) camps in Voenna Rampa (Sofia), Ovcha Kupel (Sofia), Vrajdebna (Sofia), Banya (Nova Zagora) and Harmanli, as well as the Pastrogor transit center (in the municipality of Svilengrad), where accelerated asylum procedures are carried out. In addition, the SAR is responsible for asylum-seekers detained in the Busmantsi close detention center (Sofia) and the Lyubimets one in the Haskovo province[8]. With the exception of asylum detention, the detention centers are under the control of the Ministry of Interior and, according to Article 44(6) of the Aliens Act (LARB), concern persons from third countries (1) whose identity is uncertain, (2) who prevent the execution of the deportation order, (3) who may be in hiding. However, people are systematically detained by order of the Border Police after entering the country illegally ("Torchlight. Shedding Light on the Violent Opacity of the European Border Regime" 2023).

Different patterns of mobility are observed: while many of the Afghans and Maghrebi PoM are rarely granted asylum and thus are not allowed to settle in Bulgaria, Syrians, in particular, are identified as a group that is granted asylum with the purpose of enabling intra-EU mobility, thus allowing them to leave Bulgaria within a legalized framework of mobility.

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[8] Detention is implemented both in pre-removal immigration detention centres and, more recently, in 'closed reception centres' where asylum seekers are detained for the purpose of the status determination procedure. Although designed for the return of irregular migrants as pre-removal centres, these are also used for the detention of undocumented asylum seekers who have crossed the border irregularly but were unable to apply for asylum before the Border Police officers and therefore apply for asylum only when they are already in the detention centres. The testimonies collected indicate that the living conditions in these centers are severely substandard. The possession of personal items such as mobile phones is prohibited, and individuals have no right to enter or exit freely.

Figure 4. View of the city of Harmanli with the containers of the Registration and reception center. Bulgaria, 2024.

The vast majority of Syrians interviewed are carefully considering their options to leave Bulgaria permanently once they receive their documents. Mobility towards more prosperous EU countries can thus be seen as a structure that permeates Bulgarian society, adding a layer of temporality and transit, rather than as a question of specific refugee preferences. As a phenomenon, this mobility is multifaceted and provokes emotional reactions that put pressure not only on minorities struggling against a decline in their numbers, but also on majority-minority relations (Carlsson 2022). The majority of asylum seekers have no prior ties to Bulgaria and initially sought to settle in other EU countries, mainly Germany and France, where they may have had prior contacts through family and friends who had previously settled in these countries. In Bulgaria, amid similarly tough economic conditions, the small size of the diaspora and Muslim communities may have contributed to the willingness to move on to countries with larger diasporas and friends and relatives, as suggested by interviewees.

Indeed, due to a lack of planning and a number of other institutional setbacks, which crystallized in the process of the rather formal use of European funds and the apparent synchronization of legal acts and practices rather than in the essential upgrading of administrative capacity and investment in a stable system, Bulgaria was caught completely unprepared for the post-2012

situation. The subsequent changes were certainly related to the dynamics of migration flows, but they were nevertheless belated and clearly not initiative-taking. One of the main drawbacks of these measures is that they were intended to meet certain public expectations in response to events arising from the political process, and not with the aim of establishing effective policies and a stable system. The most striking embodiment of the security aspects of this process is a physical one: the construction of a fence along the Turkish border, which began in October 2013 and was completed in 2017. In the intervening years, this has become a constant source of political scandal, which, far from addressing the question of whether the fence should exist at all, has focused on issues such as the prohibitive cost of construction, its compliance with quality standards, and suspicions of corruption and inadequate efficiency. In October 2017, the deputy Prime Minister publicly stated that PoM continue to enter the country through the fence using climbing devices, and that the ongoing smuggling and trafficking is exacerbated by corruption among the staff of Bulgaria's border law enforcement agencies (Dimitrov and Pavlov 2023; Koroutchev and Peev 2022). The PoM interviewed and, according to the literature, even some official institutional representatives, have reported in numerous conversations about smugglers hanging around the accommodation centers, and all this with the full awareness of the authorities.

2.2. The Schengen entrance

The comprehension of Bulgaria's border and migration management cannot be separated from the country's recent political past as well as its upcoming partial entry[9] into the Schengen area, which occurred the 31st of March 2024. The Schengen provisions abolish checks at EU's internal borders, while providing a single set of rules for controls at the external borders applicable to those who enter the Schengen area for a brief period of time (up to 90 days). According to the European Council, countries willing to join the Schengen area must undergo a series of evaluations to determine whether they fulfil the conditions necessary for the application of the Schengen rules and fulfil a list of pre-conditions, including:

1. the application of the common set of Schengen rules (the so-called 'Schengen *acquis*'), e.g., regarding border controls, visa issuance, police cooperation and protection of personal data.
2. the responsibility for controlling the external borders on behalf of other Schengen countries and for issuing uniform Schengen visas.
3. an efficient cooperation with law enforcement agencies in other Schengen countries so as to maintain an elevated level of security once internal border controls have been abolished.
4. the connection to and use of the Schengen Information System (SIS).

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[9] The controls at the internal air and sea borders have been lifted, while those at land-based borders remain in place.

Once the evaluation confirms the readiness of a member state to join the Schengen area without internal border controls, all other member of the Schengen area has to approve the decision unanimously, after consulting the European Parliament.

Bulgaria entry into Schengen has had visible consequences on the management of unauthorized migration within the framework of European externalization policies. This agenda is particularly visible in the relationship with external partners that have EU candidate status, although its success has been greatly varied. As part of the EU's enlargement strategy, candidates are expected to meet the Copenhagen accession criteria of stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities. The transformation of migration and border policies is considered a key element in achieving these goals. Thus, migration policies, which are generally designed as short-term, responsive solutions, became part of the Europeanisation of domestic politics and long-term security in external states (Augustova, Farrand-Carrapico, and Obradovic-Wochnik 2023).

It has long been observed by scholars that the distinction between inside and outside, when considered in the context of policies designed to facilitate externalisation, is not as clear-cut as it might appear. Indeed, the Bulgarian case appears to illustrate an instance of Intra-European externalization, also referred to as internal externalization, intended as the outsourcing of border control across the EU's core- periphery geography (Cobarrubias et al. 2023). Despite the EU's liberal and humanitarian rhetoric, a large body of academic evidence suggests that externalization produces a set of illiberal practices on the ground and insecurities for migrants. Namely, externalization enables EU security actors and their partners to apprehend migrants, which is commonly followed by physical violence and pushbacks (Isakjee et al. 2020). It also exposes people who are moving to hazardous environments and deadly situations when crossing borders (Schindel 2019), and encloses them in precarious places. Ultimately, it limits people's capacity to claim asylum in the EU (Léonard and Kaunert 2022). In fact, whilst this report focuses on the Bulgarian situation, we would like to emphasize that the practices we have observed are fully consistent with the overall European approach to migration and asylum. Insights stemming from the literature on practices of EU external measures suggest that criminalization, armed surveillance, violence and containment are at the center of delegating responsibility over migrants to external states (Augustova, Ilbiz, and Carrapico 2023). As discussed in the following sections, the literature findings have been extensively supported by empirical research in the field.

For instance, based on information from Iranian digital networks, Iranian smuggling networks have not included Bulgaria in their services due to the country's reputation as a difficult and dangerous route for migrants, as well as its non-membership in the Schengen area, leading

PoM to avoid what has been described as 'Bulgarian hell.' "We don't work in Bulgaria," one facilitator commented; "The route is too dangerous, the country's situation is not good, and the border police is the meanest in the region. We prefer safest routes, such as the Greek one"[10].

Moreover, while most literature on externalization focuses on EU-led migration policies and their reach, recent critical border studies reverse such perspective and analyze the local dynamics and agency of domestic security (Cuttitta 2022; Léonard and Kaunert 2022). Ould Moctar (2022) argues that externalization does not happen in a vacuum, but rather intersects with regional histories and situated social and political dynamics, which are crucial in allowing us to move away from the EU- centric viewpoints of the externalized border regime. In contexts of pre-existing insecurity, indeed, it is common to observe domestic security practices taking place alongside externalization practices. This renders the geographical area of the domestic conflict and oppression an even more insecure site.

In the Bulgarian case, policy measures against unauthorized migration seem to coincide with a rise in anti-migrant attitudes among the population, which has been observed on various occasions, the most glaring examples being a series of popular protests in front of the Harmanli Registration and Reception Center (RRC), the largest in the country, and an increasing militarization of public spaces that has led to the criminalization of solidarity towards PoM.

> Just when we were convinced that they had stopped coming to visit us, the gendarmerie reappeared.: they had already stopped briefly once to fill some water canisters, but now they got out of the car and asked us for our papers. The music stops, the boys whisper nervously 'police, police', but the check takes very little time. Ironically, the two officers turn to us and ask, "Is there a problem? Is everything OK?" I know that the instinct of all of us is to shout at them: "You are the problem! Everything has been fine so far!". But we just nod and wait for them to leave. The mood had suddenly changed, I took out some tangerines I had bought for myself and threw them around, hoping to lift the general mood, but the boys decided to leave. It's almost curfew anyway [extract from the field diary, 9/03/2024].

*Figure 5. Harmanli's police station. Bulgaria, 2024*

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[10] Evidence from the author's digital ethnography work among Iranian facilitation digital networks.

3. Harmanli: The Syrian community and solidarity networks

Harmanli is the city where most of the fieldwork has been done. Its Reception and Registration Center is located on the way of PoM coming from Türkiye to Western Europe and mainly to Germany.

Harmanli is a typical illustration of a small post-Soviet town. The population is predominantly composed of children and elderly individuals, as the local economy is in a state of decline and the working-age population has migrated elsewhere. While there are some 21st-century amenities, such as cafes and restaurants, the town's infrastructure is visibly deteriorating, as evidenced by the closure of the public library during the day and the visible state of disrepair of the surrounding buildings. The parks and playgrounds are in a state of disrepair, and the architectural style is reminiscent of the Soviet era. Monuments to the socialist experiment are still visible, though they have lost their original luster and are now adorned with crumbling stars that have lost their red paint. Compared to the bustling cities of Sofia and Plovdiv, Harmanli feels like a different country [extract from the field diary, 11/02/2024].
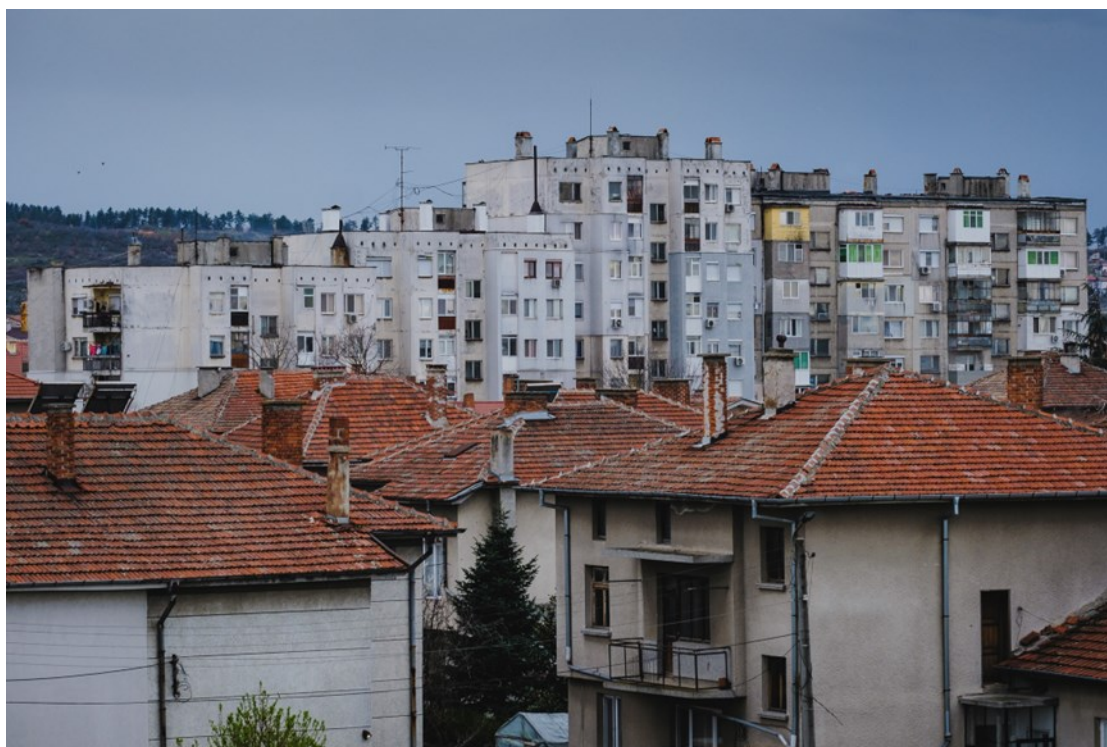
Figure 6. View of Harmanli's city center and the architectural heritage from soviet era. Bulgaria, 2024.

Especially since the summer of 2013, there has been a systematic arrival of thousands of Syrians to Bulgaria who have been moved mostly to Harmanli, highlighting quickly that the European so-called migration crisis was increasingly reaching Bulgaria, which was not and still is not prepared for the influx of migrants (Sienko 2020).

According to the data of October 2021, a total of 1,132 people, mostly from Syria and Iraq, are accommodated in the center for refugees in Harmanli. However, at the time of the research, the center housed only Syrians: after a major dispute among the PoM inside the center in 2016, the authorities' decision was to separate the camps on the basis of people's nationalities.

The Harmanli incidents led to no fewer than three innovations: the ethnic principle of accommodating asylum seekers in view of avoiding conflicts between different nationalities; the possibilities of establishing closed-type centers under the jurisdiction of the State Agency for Refugees after 2016; and the enforcement after 2017 of so-called statutory movement zones restricting the right of movement for asylum seekers within limited geographic boundaries.

At the end of October 2021, there were demonstrations of the local population against the people hosted in the RRC Harmanli, demanding the closure of the refugee center and a stricter regime for foreigners. The main complaints were related to the unsafe nightlife and the dirty streets of Harmanli due to the foreigners and alleged harassment by PoM (Koroutchev and Peev 2022). After other demonstrations by the local community, the curfew for PoM housed in the center was anticipated and is currently at 5 pm. The interviews conducted with the PoM, the solidarity actors, and the time spent in the field confirmed the presence of an atmosphere of latent tension in the city. Collateral effects observed were the increased militarization of public spaces in the country as a whole and at the border in particular, and the criminalization of solidarity towards PoM, most visible in the surveillance of everyday public spaces. Examples that we have personally witnessed and experienced were the regular presence of police machines patrolling the association's activities and disrupting the socialization moments created by NNK with PoM; the request of the police to register the documents of all the volunteers hosted in the community house; the random control at the train station following a racial profiling. The most notable incident with the Border Guard ended with some of the volunteers receiving an official warning paper. While the official justification for this stop was the alleged proximity to the border zone, the volunteers believe that it was an act of intimidation aimed at 1) avoiding witnesses to the subsequent repression 2) discouraging acts of solidarity with PoM.

> During the distribution, Bulgarian gendarmerie cars passed by twice. Although the guys whispered, 'police is coming', it appeared to be a routine scene. We assured them that there was nothing to worry about: "*we're just drinking chai: that's ok, isn't it? just drinking chai*". The cars passed us at a walking pace without stopping. Later, we considered it a success. The instructions provide a detailed protocol in case the police stop us and ask questions. The police have no right to see our phones. We are a group of friends on holiday who have heard about the migrant situation and want to make ourselves useful. Play dumb, the instructions say, because police is dumber. The area is already highly militarized and has recently undergone further securitization. One boy confirms that today there were two police cars stationed outside the camp [extract from the field diary, 10/04/2024].

Because of this insecure atmosphere and a strong language barrier, locals preferred to avoid PoM and volunteers alike. In one conversation, a Syrian man confessed his feelings of loneliness in the city by arguing: "You [volunteers] are the only non-Syrian people with whom we have contact. I feel like I am in a shell here. No one talks to us." [Interview n. 5]. A primary observation that emerged immediately was the limited network of solidarity on which PoM relied in the center. This led us to investigate the emic, inner practices of solidarity and resilience among PoM

themselves and within the camp. Could such a hostile environment allow for the rise of resistance, hope, and projectuality? This question influenced our subsequent analysis during the fieldwork.

The local solidarity network of Harmanli is indeed very small albeit active: the different activities of distribution of goods, the sociability, legal and medical assistance as well as advocacy on human rights violations and missing people are coordinated between No Name Kitchen, Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche Alto Vicentino (although not always present on the ground), the local NGO Mission Wings and the Syrian-Turkish NGO CRG. Other more or less institutionalized actors, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, IOM, the Red Cross, and independent associations with varying degrees of autonomy and politicization, operate around and within the camp. Collaboration and communication between the different actors used to follow different rules based on trust and reliability; although none of the initiatives of No Name Kitchen are against the Bulgarian law, we came to observe the discretionality of the police and the authority rather than official guidelines dictating the freedom of maneuver on the field.

The fieldwork here consisted of combining the activities with the No Name Kitchen with research: through the contacts already established by the movement, it was possible to fully grasp the dynamics in place around the reception and registration center and to contact local solidarity actors and Syrian PoM.

Two main issues were discussed during the periodic informal meeting of solidarity actors: the gradual decrease in the number of PoM housed in the different centers, which leads us to suspect a parallel increase in the number of pushbacks at the border; the issue of missing PoM trying to cross the border and the role of the police and morgues in the process of identifying the bodies and returning them to the families. Concerning the first issue, we registered suspicions about the increase of violence against PoM at the border in close correlation with Bulgaria's attempts to conform to European migration management, together with an apparent informal cooperation between Bulgarian and Turkish border polices, and local smugglers. The systematic use of trained dogs by the Bulgarian border police is a recurring fact; they are used not only as an element of intimidation, but also as a direct 'weapon,' as witnessed by the experiences of several PoM. Moreover, the testimonies we received shed light on the poor conditions in both camps we observed, including inadequate hygiene products for personal and communal spaces, the use of arbitrary force by the camp police, and difficulties in accessing medical care.

Interviews with Syrians in Harmanli confirm a consistent pattern: an most cases, men are the first to migrate, while women and children typically attempt to reunite with their families through the legal process in a subsequent stage. After leaving Syria for a combination of economic and political reasons ("nine years that we have nothing. No right to marriage, find a job, doing something properly," conversation n. 2), most interviewees spent varying amounts of time in Türkiye, moving between Istanbul and Edirne, from where a smuggler was paid to take groups across the border.

Although their use is considered necessary, smugglers appeared to be highly deplorable among our participants, in contrast to the evidence collected by other research among Syrian PoM (Achilli 2018; Mandić 2017). This does not mean that PoM will avoid returning to them: for example, for 18-year-old H., "smugglers are all bad. They do not care about us, they only care about money. But I will pay them to go to the UK: they charge a lot of money, but they will take care of me and my documents to get a visa. I am afraid of being deported from the UK, but I have to take the risk in order to succeed" [conversation n. 1].

> The importance of emic networks in shaping the image of smugglers and the functioning of their organisations is once again confirmed by this last interaction. None of the Syrians I have met so far has said a single positive word about the practice of smuggling or the people they use; ironically, this sharp contrast is even more apparent when I have the opportunity to meet and speak with M., an Iranian asylum seeker currently in Greece. During one of our conversations, I specifically asked him for his opinion on the smugglers he used to leave Iran and reach Greece, and even if he was not entirely sympathetic, his words underlined the need for such people to exist and to work. I wondered about the comparison between my work and the research of Luigi Achilli, one of the greatest experts on smuggling in the Middle East and among Syrians in particular. I also wonder how relevant the social desirability of my informant is and whether the youngest are afraid of being judged for resorting to paid illegal networks [extract from the field diary, 19/03/2024].

In one particularly significant interview, a PoM told us about the extensive networks of his smuggler, a Syrian man with European citizenship who has powerful connections with the Turkish authorities and who, according to the interviewee, is guilty of offences amounting to crimes against humanity. Even though "we need these services in order to leave Syria," he added, "these men need to be stopped and arrested" [interview n. 5]. The following extract is deemed significant as it gives us a glimpse into the situation when he took the decision to leave Syrian, and some of the dynamics that directed his decision-making:

> "But in recent years Türkiye's threats have increased, Türkiye's war on our areas through missiles and indiscriminate bombing of certain areas or the so-called PKK leaders... So the activity stopped completely, even those who were abroad were no longer sending money to their families because everything they had put in this area was threatened by the Turkish invasion, there was no stability and as a result the work stopped, we could not make a living [...] I thought about migration (*hijra*). Before then I did not think about migration. I sold my car. I had a piece of farmland. I had some of my wife's gold and her jewelry. I sold those too and looked for someone to smuggle me out. Meanwhile, my cousin had emigrated before me, traveled to Türkiye and arrived in Germany. And there and there were migrants in Türkiye who decided to act and get together and do what is called the Caravan of Peace and do a mass migration to Europe [...] We found a smuggler, who took us to the Free Army areas belonging to the Turkish state, and on the basis of this smuggler the road is 100 percent guaranteed. Some people from the neighboring village traveled with this smuggler, they traveled for 17 days until they reached Germany. But unfortunately for us it was a mistake" [interview n. 5].

The extract corroborates another point highlighted in the literature, namely the role of familiar networks and broader community abroad as the primary sources of information in shaping the decision of the country of destination and the use of the smuggler.

Within this peculiar framework, we decided to take a closer look at the ways in which the concept of solidarity could take shape in the experience of our main interlocutors, the Syrian PoM, both during their journey and their stay in the camp.

As the journey from Syria to Bulgaria is a dangerous one, usually taking months and months with a prolonged stay in so-called transit countries like Türkiye, practices of solidarity, according to our participants, are mostly developed in micro-acts of care and resilience. The interview with K., a 24-year-old man, provides some examples of such practices at different stages of the journey: both within their community in the camp, giving support and comfort to younger and more vulnerable people, and while crossing the border, putting their own journey at risk to help another PoM in need:

> **R.** What do you do to endure that [the difficulties]? I mean, there are ways you help each other in the camp. You stay together, practice solidarity...
>
> **K.** Yeah. You know, small Mahmud...
>
> **R.** I know, the young guy who came yesterday with us.
>
> **K.** Yeah. He don't have anything. He don't have, money. He don't have... he was in Germany, but he... Because he have...
>
> R. Fingerprints?
>
> K. Yes. He was sick, you know. He was sick. I said, "you go to doctor, you. Maybe you see what he has." Very bad. He tried to doctor in the camp, but he didn't do anything. Yeah. And then I bring him to J. [NNK health volunteer]. Yeah. It's no good. Like Mahmud, a lot of people, you know. When we come in the jungle, I tell you, we walked five day. When we come, we found a man in the jungle. He was abandoned by his group, he could not walk. So I said, I take him with me. He said "my group, they left", because a problem, and then he will be dead. You know, if we don't take him. So I take him on my shoulder and we walked [interview n. 3].

Asked how they faced adversity during what he called "the most dangerous adventure of our lives," 19-year-old M. replied: "When we walked among the trees, we held hands and climbed the mountains together, and at night we were close to each other. The only way was to do it together" [conversation n. 3].

The idea around which our first GNW revolved - cooking - also provided an example of these practices. As cooking is forbidden in the camp and living conditions are generally poor, the PoM create small networks of cohesion and care by managing to share food and prepare simple meals together. By creating a chain in which everyone has a specific role – going to the market, calling relatives at home to ask for receipts, and cooking - the community gathers in the evening to spend time together, sharing memories and discussing the day. This moment becomes even more relevant when we consider that the PoM in Harmanli have a curfew of 5 p.m., a time after which their connections to the city are cut and their isolation from the surrounding community becomes even more pronounced.

4. Svilengrad and the shifting routes of *harragas*

The town of Svilengrad, where part of No Name Kitchen's activities is carried on, is an emblematic place with regard to accepting PoM coming from the Maghreb. Due to its border location, the city has historically functioned as a migrant depot. However, there has been little research into the process of welcoming and integrating migratory currents in this area, as well as into the recent shift of flows coming from North Africa into Türkiye and Bulgaria.

Whereas in the 1980s a Moroccan PoM would try to sneak into the holds of a cargo ship bound for Spain, Italy, or the Canary Islands, now that the migratory routes for Maghreb PoMs have multiplied, Türkiye, the Western Balkans, and other routes being increasingly crossed under similar conditions for those who try to 'burn' through borders. According to Oubad (forthcoming), Moroccans, faced with obstacles in obtaining Schengen visas for direct travel to Europe, skillfully navigate their way to purchasing flights to Türkiye, where visa requirements are more lenient, which serves as the embarkation point for their journey to Europe. Whether in Türkiye, traversing the Balkans, already in Europe, or contemplating the challenging Balkan route through digital channels while still in Morocco, they collaboratively construct assemblages of information and logistical infrastructures shaped by the unique opportunities and constraints of this migration route. For a brief period, Algerians and Moroccans were among the top five nationalities detected on the Western Balkan route, and by 2012, the number of Algerians and Moroccans apprehended in the Western Balkans exceeded those apprehended in the Central and Western Mediterranean (Herbert 2016). The exact routes used and their popularity change rapidly in response to changing levels of security enforcement and changing social, political, and economic conditions in the countries of transit and embarkation. Understanding how and why North Africans migrate, the routes they use, and how these are changing provides insights into how unauthorized migration methods and routes in general may change in the coming years.

No Name Kitchen chose Svilengrad as the ideal place to reach out to the PoM housed in the Postrogor camp, a transit center in the middle of the Haskovo countryside with difficult access

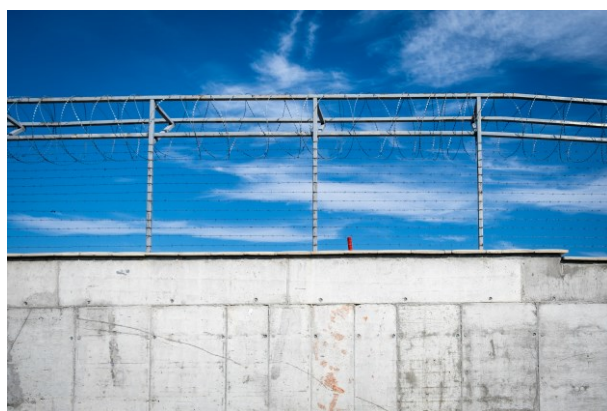Figure 6. A wall in Svilengrad, Bulgaria, 2024.

Figure 7. The wall of Pastrogor camp, Bulgaria, 2024.

to any kind of amenities, where mostly people from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia are placed

with little chance of obtaining asylum. As a result, the dynamics here are quite different from those in Harmanli. Since the PoM are very aware that they will not be granted asylum, they all stay in the camp for a very short time. The turnover is so high that the risk of losing all contacts within the camp is dangerous for the movement's activities. Most of the people we talked to left the camp after a few weeks and continued their journey to the capital Sofia and then to Serbia, some of them autonomously, some of them returning to a local smuggler.

> V. did not come today, as the other guys informed us that he had departed for Sofia. I sent him a text message via Instagram, and he replied that he was staying at a friend's house until he could leave again. Y. stated that he was using a smuggler, and that he was making a mistake because he, like many others, "does not know his smugglers and trusts the wrong person" [extract from the field diary, 18/02/2024].

5. Edirne: the land gateway to Europe

> "We stayed in Edirne for a month, waiting to cross the border. The city is full of cafes and shops where exiles and smugglers sit together [...] When they arrested me at the border, they [the Turkish border police] beat us and hurt us a lot. They did not give us any food, they expected a small piece of biscuit. They said they were Muslims like us, but Islam forbids torture. A Muslim does not starve people for several days and does not torture. We stayed in a place where it is forbidden to enter, on the border of Edirne, where they gather Syrians and beat them. I wish I had a phone to film what they were doing." [conversation n. 1].

This testimony, from an eighteen-year-old Syrian man interviewed in Harmanli, coupled with several other accounts of the routes taken by Syrian – but not exclusively - PoM trying to reach Europe from Türkiye, and the violence experienced at the hands of both the Bulgarian and Turkish border police.

The decision to extend the caravan to Edirne was made for a number of reasons that emerged during the fieldwork in Bulgaria: first, to witness firsthand this particular border zone through which many interviewees entered Bulgaria; second, to follow the story of a particular interviewee whose former activity as a smuggler took place in Edirne.

Türkiye has emerged as a crucial intermediary for Syrian PoM seeking to reach Europe, and, as previously noted, is also becoming a significant conduit for PoM originating from North Africa. Historically known as the gate to the Balkans, Edirne can be considered as one of the external borders of the EU and is currently a border city neighboring two EU member states: Greece to the west and Bulgaria to the north. As an actual border city, it is subject to irregular border crossings and serves usually as a short-term transit city. Opaque in length and meaning, yet PoM's stay in the city shifts from the usual practice of legal temporary presence as the last stop before crossing the border to an illicit place of refuge because it is the furthest point in Türkiye from the Syrian border and the closest to the EU border. According to the data discussed by Erensu and Kaşli (2016), it is the top province where almost half of the total arrests were made in Türkiye's border cities, namely 155,628 out of 392,545 between 1995 and 2010. The city has taken on a new role in European border control, especially after the 2001 readmission agreement between Greece and Türkiye. Although not strictly implemented by either party, cooperation

between Greek or Turkish authorities in the area of border control became part of a broader neighborly rapprochement in 1999. Following the actions of Frontex and the implementation of stricter and joint border controls as a result of regular monthly meetings between Greek and Turkish local authorities since 2013, migratory routes have shifted back to the Aegean Sea in the south and more recently to Bulgaria in the north, where the construction of new fences took place.

I fathom the Telegram chats where Iranian citizens collect information about the game in search of some news about Edirne, and all I find are newspaper articles about massive arrests of PoM... the city is really making efforts to secure its borders, yet we see no police on the streets. I know that many groups are organizing car passages from Istanbul to here to try to cross the border with Greece. I read in a chat: "From Edirne to the border point, 15,000 Liras for 1-4 people". That's about 400€ [extract from the field diary, 19/03/2024].

Figure 8. Message sent by a Syrian PoM

As part of the existing cooperation between Türkiye and the EU, the construction of a new detention center in Edirne has been funded by the EU, while reception centers for asylum seekers and refugees are being rebuilt in seven cities, including Kayseri and Kiklareli, a neighboring city of Edirne, with EU IPA funds. Although the detention center in Edirne is not designed to be one

of these seven reception and accommodation centers, it is still possible to apply for legal aid to seek asylum (Erensu and Kaşli 2016).

Arbitrary expulsions in Türkiye and the violence associated with them are not episodic, but a systematic and normalized practice, as other reports also show ("Torchlight. Shedding Light on the Violent Opacity of the European Border Regime" 2023). The high number of repatriations is also confirmed by the multiple attempts to cross the border that almost all of the people we met experienced. For example, a young Syrian man described how he "tried to cross the border six times: four times from Türkiye to Greece and twice to Bulgaria. Each time I was pushed back by the police with extreme violence" [Interview n. 3]. Talking about his own experience of being pushed back from Bulgaria and detained in a Turkish camp at the border, another man added:

Figure 9. Edirne Removal Center, Türkiye, 2024.

"We needed water but they wouldn't give it to us. There was a little boy about five years old who went to fill bottles from a tap near the cars . They were giving us water in a limited way, no food, no bath, no shower. We had to go to the bathroom every 12 or 15 hours, it was very difficult. They made us go in a single line that took us every ten people we only went to pee on the stall. There was nothing else" [interview n. 5].

An interview that we indirectly had in our possession, but whose author agreed to make it public, provided another particularly significant testimony. The protagonist of the vicissitudes, a young Iraqi man, put special emphasis on the violence and brutality he experienced at the hands of the Turkish border police after he was pushed back from Bulgaria. What follows is an extract of the interview:

"I spent about 3 or 4 hours, after which the immigrants were gathered in large army vehicles and sent outside the border. Take us out through the main door of the Bulgarian border. A direct road in front of you through the Turkish forests when they took us out of the Bulgarian border [...] My group and I were deprived of water and food. We walked for about 4 hours until sunrise, and then we surrendered ourselves to the Turkish army. They said, "Do not be afraid. We did not harm you", but they were very liars. There, I and many groups of people were imprisoned at a point on the border . They recorded the names, and the immigrants were imprisoned, and the weather was very cold, and they did not give us anything. The immigrants were sleeping in the street at the military point, and they tortured us constantly" [extract from the field diary, 09/03/2024].

During this short trip, we also had the opportunity to verify firsthand the information provided by a young Tunisian man who used to work as a smuggler in the city, bringing people to Bulgaria

[interview n. 4]. The information he gave us included the location of a café frequented by local smugglers, where we actually met a person, our informant described as 'the boss of local smuggling,' and a site where he used to hide PoM before their journey began. Verification of the informant's information was considered critical to producing a validated report given that the informant specifically requested that his story be published in order to 'discourage other people from paying smugglers and cross the borders illegally.'

> Once again, our gender proves to be a crucial component in the definition of our positionality in the field: would access to this microcosm have been as easy if it had been two men who had come to the table with a camera around their necks? I think back to what Goli Rezai-Rashti, whom I always remember fondly for the meeting she granted me in 2017 in Toronto, wrote about the greater accessibility that female researchers often enjoy in contexts that can be defined as 'hostile', and the game of mirrors that is created when the supposed inoffensiveness of the female gender becomes a tool to be used at our discretion to gain advantages that are otherwise difficult to achieve [extract from the field diary, 18/03/2024].

6. The Generative Narrative Workshops

The two Generative Narrative Workshops developed in collaboration with Syrian PoM in Bulgaria focused on the concept of counter-visuality. The term was introduced by Mirzoeff (2011) to describe the visualizations of rebellion created by indigenous, oppressed, colonized, and subaltern communities who demanded the right to produce their own forms of visuality, which were often deemed unacceptable to the Western gaze. Following this line, the aim of the workshops, set in the liminal border spaces of Harmanli and Svilengrad, was to ask PoM to create moments that challenge Eurocentric visualizations of their images and lives at the border. The significance of photography as the primary medium, and of photographs as cultural objects, is crucial in this context. European media tend to depict border-crossings and PoM subjectivities in one of two ways: either as a humanitarian crisis or as an invasion that threatens to destabilize the social and economic order of the Global North. This view of migrants and refugees has been long-established and is often reiterated by those seeking to pass anti-immigration policies and demonize migrants. Unlike journalistic, humanitarian, or surveillance-oriented visual images produced from above or from a safe distance, these initiatives allowed PoM to put their own narratives at the center of visualization (Bayramoğlu 2022). While most common visualizations of migration and borders widespread by western medias aim to elicit affects and emotions such as pity, empathy, fear, or panic, PoM decided to portray emotions such as self-affirmation, sharing, pride, and happiness, by avoiding simplistic representations of their identity as either victims or invaders, by incorporating affective elements.

One of the outcomes of this kind of exercise, thus, has been the construction of a counter-visuality of migration, what Foucault has termed a 'reverse discourse' (1978), or Judah Schept's 'counter-visual ethnography', which he describes as a methodological "commitment to see with historical acuity the relations of production and processes of representation that have structured the present empirical moment...and [which] mobilizes the unseen for the purposes of a right to

see" (2014, pp. 216–17). Indeed, we argue that this counter-visuality created through the workshops is an effect of the witnessing gaze from the viewpoint of undocumented PoM, which stands in contrast to the external, distant surveillant gaze that more usually defines how they are seen. By disseminating a counter visuality of their identity and every-day life, PoM position themselves as political subjects center stage. The activities of cooking food together and posing for portraits generate a counter-visual representation that aspires to overturn the power dynamics between refugees and other actors in everyday life in Bulgaria, as well as their power of representation.

Initiated by the PoM themselves and later framed as part of the project, the workshops emerged as a natural outgrowth of the personal and intimate relationships that developed between researchers, activists, and PoM. Within the challenging and somewhat hostile Bulgarian environment, every activity organized and carried out within the SolRoutes project has been the result of daily and intense labor of trust and care. From the very beginning, it was clear that in order to gain people's trust and collect their stories without perpetuating extractive dynamics of epistemic violence, we needed to engage with their daily lives and become a part of their routines.

6.1 "Let us cook for you": food as a site of political resistance

Lévi-Strauss has pointed out that: "Cooking, it has never been sufficiently emphasized, is with language a truly universal form of human activity: if there is no society without a language, nor is there any which does not cook in some manner at least some of its food" (1978, 471).

The workshop idea, which revolves around food and cooking, originated from Emanuela Zampa's project to create a cookbook that collects recipes from PoM across different borders. Titled 'The Illegal Cookbook', this project explores the idea of food as an empowering tool.

One of the ways in which PoM and diasporic communities cope with the dislocation and disorientation they experience in new and unfamiliar spaces is by recreating a sense of place around the production, preparation, and consumption of food, both at the personal and interpersonal levels (Parasecoli 2014). Food embodies the essence of home, survival, culture, communication, and community. Along the Balkan route, amidst the challenges of migration, acquiring and preparing food becomes a constant struggle. Sharing food, however, remains one of the few sources of joy in these circumstances. Food represents an assertion of self-determination, allowing individuals to cook their own meals on the move, free from the constraints of 'official' hospitality. In addition, food serves as a conduit for culture, a mean of sharing stories, culture, and humanity at the intersection of migration and solidarity. While the experience of being on the move and the status of refugees often somehow act as an eraser of individual and collective subjectivities, cooking and eating outside can become a way to share with us through food the memories of their homeland, the bonds they maintain with their families, and the pride they feel for their roots and culture. Food serves to fulfill what Srinivas (2006) calls 'gastro-nostalgia'; food can be a marker of group belonging, and Syrian food was part of the nostalgia these individuals had for 'home' and a connection to a place and time that no longer exists, as well as a real connection to

Figure 10. Leftovers from the first GNW. Bulgaria, 2024

others like them - it contributed to belonging (D'Sylva and Beagan 2011). The rediscovery, protection, and promotion of 'traditional' foods and foodways, along with the construction of historical narratives around them, actively contribute to the creation of a sense of shared experience among PoM (Parasecoli 2014). In a world often divided by borders, 'The Illegal Cookbook' emerges as a visual journey that transcends geographical confines and delves into the heart of migration. This project, driven by a vision to narrate migrations through a non-pietistic lens, sets out to create empathy through an alternative perspective. The project's restitution will take the form of triptychs, with each triptych comprising:

1. A portrait (with or without identifiable subjects, depending on their preferences).
2. A contextual image representing the border/game environment - squat, border, forest, etc.
3. A photograph of the prepared food.

Each triptych will incorporate text reminiscent of traditional cookbook elements, enriched with research related content, including:

1. Historical background of the dish and its origins.
2. Biographical information about the person featured in the portrait, detailing their origin, current location, border crossings, and reasons for leaving their home country.

These triptychs are more than mere visuals; they aspire to be a storytelling platform. The project has two main goals: to communicate the complexities of migration to a wider audience and to promote empathy and connections between diverse communities. By highlighting the common rituals and experiences of everyday life, particularly the act of cooking, the project focuses on what unites us rather than what divides individuals. To evaluate the success of this undertak-

ing, a multifaceted approach is proposed, which may involve creating fanzines, publications, editorials, exhibitions, and establishing a dedicated social media presence. The use of a narrative approach, which employs humor and sarcasm, can encourage critical thinking and a deeper understanding of migration realities.

Setting up the project seemed a challenge at first, as No Name Kitchen informed us that Bulgaria is the first and only country where they do not distribute food; the people hosted in the various camps are provided with meals by the camp authorities and are not allowed to cook inside the reception structures. Though discouraged, we quickly found out that this was exactly one of those cases where patiently building relationships and a deep presence in the field would have led the way to finding a creative solution. Through our daily conversations and activities together, we found out that the preparation of food with improvised utensils, although illegal, was widely practiced in the camp, with the authorities sometimes harshly repressing it, sometimes turning a blind eye to it. When we expressed our interest in this activity, our participants began to send us photos and videos of their cooking, creating a small archive or concrete 'illegal' receipts. The idea of sharing a meal came naturally and we started looking for a place where we could cook: in fact, our participants expressed the desire to share with us not only the food and its preparation, but also the stories, emotions, and bonds behind such an activity. Some of them, for example, learned to cook on the move, away from their families, where their mothers were responsible for the food, and they used to ask their female relatives for instructions through Instagram and WhatsApp. This latter aspect is particularly interesting because women are likely to be in charge of cultural reproduction through food, trying to meet expectations that certain dishes and meals maintain similarities with pre-existing customs (D'Sylva and Beagan 2011). In their physical absence, the men are forced to bring their customs and habits back into play,
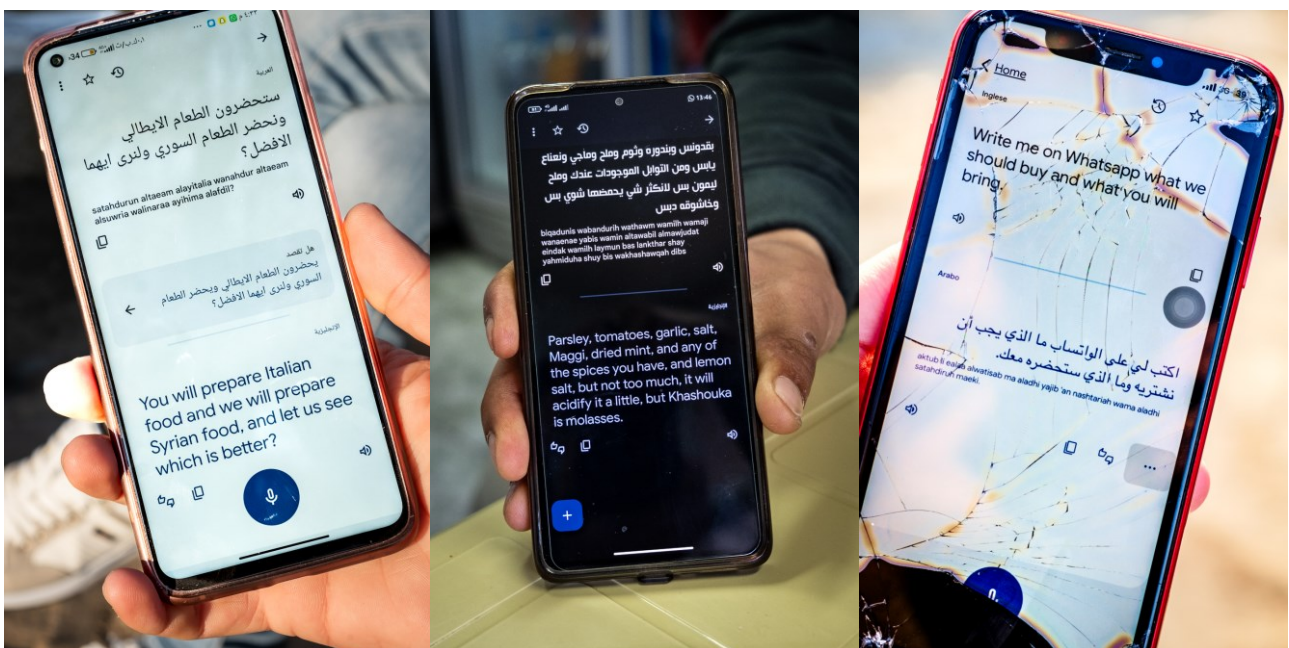

Figure 11.. Receipts shared by Syrian PoM. Bulgaria, 2024

but the women continue to occupy a vital role. In fact, memories of the past and/or considerable experience, like border-crossing, can contribute shaping PoM's new culinary competences in new physical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions.

This initiative proved to be relevant from many perspectives: as a moment of sociability outside the framework of the movement's organization (*let's do something other than the distributions, let's meet earlier at the park!*); as a transgression of the camp's structural regulation, which forces the PoM to accept only the food provided by the authorities and to buy ingredients from their internal market (*we are so sorry you cant' come to eat with us, but we will eat together anyway*); as an opportunity for the PoM to share anecdotes and experiences, which in many ways contributed to restructuring the dynamics of power that had determined our relations until that moment (*Italian food is ok, but let us explain you why Syrian food is better and what our stories are*). The tales shared before, during and after the meals allowed us to observe the ways in which certain food objects, behaviors, norms, and values from places of origin are maintained, more or less transformed, to become important points of reference in the formation of a sense of community and belonging (Parasecoli 2014). In addition, the sharing of Italian and Syrian food gave rise to the idea that culinary cultures are influenced not only by the past, often interpreted, and practiced as tradition, but also by new events that result from both internal dynamics and the incorporation of external elements. As a result, the meanings attributed to food are never fully defined once and for all, but are constantly negotiated and transformed through practices, discourses, and representations (Parasecoli 2014).

Figure 12. Talal, Mahmood, Julian and Leona sharing the food prepared for the GNW, Bulgaria, 2024.

6.2 (Self)portraits

The second generative narrative workshop came about as spontaneously as the first one, as the concrete object of the photographic camera had been taken out of the first activities with the PoM. Actually, this idea was not fully planned beforehand, but emerged as an entire process when we noticed the great curiosity and attention that the camera attracted among the PoM. In this case, too, the activities were made possible only through the establishment of relationships of trust and complicity between the researcher, the photographer, the activists and the PoM, thus overcoming some of the obstacles of privacy (*PoM won't allow you to shoot them, they are afraid for their status*) and intrusiveness (*the camera will disrupt our everyday routine*) that we had feared at the outset. In this case, we used photographic portraits of PoM made by a professional photographer as an aesthetic practice of self-representation (Chouliaraki 2017). The workshop evolved as a series of encounters in which the traditional dynamic between the photographer - the commissioner who usually holds the power and directs the gaze - and the subjects of the photograph - usually voiceless and exoticized migrants - was creatively overturned and recreated.

Inextricably linked to this are the discursive 'framings' (Butler 2009) of these photographs — what is visible within certain frames and what is cropped out of the frame. These photographs have allowed us to address some fundamental questions of reflection, on which some questions are grafted: what discourse do images carry? What is our responsibility in maintaining or not maintaining certain discourses or generating new ones? What are our discursive references? What is the discursive charge of the images that we make? (Queirolo Palmas and Stagi 2015). As in the case of the cooking session, the narratives that PoM wanted to convey by posing for the camera were mostly about pride, ability, and prowess. Random objects like guitars and sunglasses, often owned by volunteers, were used as scenic elements in the performance. After being processed by the photographer, the portraits were sent to the subjects, most of whom shared them on their personal social media profiles. The body served as a stage to reassure their families back home, but also to assert an autonomy and identity that would not be revoked by the experience of imprisonment and violence. The role of photographs in this regard was extraordinary and surprising. In several cases, PoM asked the volunteers to pose with them in the pictures. In one noteworthy case, a young boy asked us to pose in a photo with a written message for his brother, who was still in Syria, and share it on Instagram. It is possible here to witness the contemporary presence of more than one medium used by this subject to vehiculate his message: the piece of paper with its message, the photograph, and the social media, through which he can edit, personalize, and transmit the image transnationally.

Quoting Barthes (1982, 15):

> "The portrait-photograph is a closed field of forces. Four image-repertoires intersect here, oppose and distort each other. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. In other words, a strange action: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this,

each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture (comparable to certain nightmares). In terms of image repertoire, the Photograph (the one I intend) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a microversion of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter. The Photographer knows this very well, and himself fears (if only for commercial reasons) this death in which his gesture will embalm me."

And Sontag (2014, 10) stated:

"Still, there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder
- a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time".

Figure 13. Some of the portraits from the second GNW. Bulgaria, 2024

The ideas put forth by Barthes and Sontag represent one of the fundamental pillars for those studying photography. They require a deep understanding, as well as acceptance, of the violent, inauthentic, extractive, and predatory aspects inherent in the photographic act. However, our GNW aimed to challenge these conventions and develop a photographer-subject relationship in which the subject guides the photographer's eye. In this dynamic, the subject assumes the role of Barthes' 'third force,' representing what he wants others to believe he is, while the photographer assumes a position similar to the 'fourth force,' where her art consists in being guided by the subject towards an image he wants to project of himself. In this context, the photographer attempts to become a mere instrument, endeavoring to suspend her own point of view as much as possible to allow the subject to self-objectify in front of the lens. The subjects themselves spontaneously expressed their vision, highlighting the distinction between self-representation and representation mediated by third parties. This awareness is facilitated by new media, which offer

new possibilities for self-representation. Frisina (Frisina and Kyeremeh 2021; Frisina 2016) notes that contemporary media representations of immigration often incorporate elements from a colonial imaginary. These representations can and should be challenged through a counter-narrative and counter-visualization by those who have been deprived of full autonomous subjectivity. According to the author, subalterns have spoken and continue to speak, but the dominant discursive regimes are unable to listen because of their selective conceptual apparatuses. Borrowing from Mirzoeff's theorization of counter visuality, we emphasized the political significance of these self-portraits as a means of reappropriating one's own history and image. In contrast to

the visuality of migration and border crossing that dominates Western journalism, the counter-visuality of these portraits is shaped by the position of their commissioner as the author of her own story, as well as by the representation of affects and emotions that do not convey tragedy (Bayramoğlu 2022). By autonomously choosing the pose, the background, and the purpose of the photograph, the individuals are actually promoting an alternative way of seeing, a counter-visuality that transcends the familiar boundary between 'our' gaze and 'theirs.' The recognition of the impossibility of encountering migrant faces in our media as staged and photographed by themselves, that is, as sovereign acts of self-representation rather than as forensic material for the study of digital authenticity, emerges as the most important insight of this analysis (Chouliaraki 2017).

The photographer intervention was limited to a slight management of the light, as the essence of the project required. Also the language barrier forced her to let go of the fear of the 'embalming' process that Barthes speaks about, which is however evident in the final images. Upon reflection, it became evident that the empowering dynamics inherent in the process were not as readily apparent in the result. Indeed, the entire operation takes on an almost contradictory character when the subjects request ownership of the image or to be immortalized in their personal and self-imposed "death". This leads to more complex ethical considerations regarding the presentation of the final result in order to avoid diluting the empowering essence of the event.

This experience was particularly significant also because it disrupted some of the initial assumptions that had been conveyed in part by the movement's activists; while some of them expressed concern about the idea of immortalizing PoMs waiting for their documents, the final decision about their own image and the initiative ultimately rested with the PoMs themselves, who exercised considerable empowerment in negotiating their own image.

6.3 About privilege and discomfort: the GNW with activists

Figure 14.. A shot from the daily activities with PoM, Bulgaria, 2024

Reflecting on the path taken can be liberating, but it is not necessarily an easy task. The final moment of collective reflection and sharing was developed in collaboration with the No Name Kitchen activists and volunteers who were present in Harmanli during the last few weeks of fieldwork. The reasons for involving volunteers in a creative workshop are numerous. During the time spent together, valuable insights emerged that required further attention and exploration. Additionally, a general sense of fatigue and burden made creative activities the ideal tool for coping with this type of experience, while traditional strategies such as debriefing and counseling were not as effective; the creation, over time, a climate of friendship and familiarity developed among the activists who were deemed safe enough to experiment with new languages and strategies. In addition to us, the group included three female Italian volunteers who came from diverse cultural, generational, and social backgrounds and had diverse ways of embodying and experiencing activism in the field.

Emanuela Zampa's photographs of the group's daily activities were used as eliciting tools to stimulate the conversation, based on hints, cues, and reflections from the previous week's activities with PoM. The use of photography as a medium was particularly suitable for examining one's own gestures and non-verbal language, allowing for the emergence of experiences that are not always fully conscious and, more importantly, permitting for collective reflection on these experiences through easier processing.

And then I can say one thing about this picture, because I don't really remember, I felt super embarrassed at that moment because on the one hand I started tearing my handkerchief off dancing because I felt this need that it was something that they only were doing and I said to myself "we do it too". As soon as I got into it I said "maybe I'm invading something that maybe it's just them", because I'm the only woman in the middle that's dancing and the fact that it's so fun for them that I'm doing it may be because it's something that's okay or because they find it fun [extract from the GNW transcription].

Figure 15. Photographs from the third GNW, Bulgaria, 2024

Examining a portrait of herself with crossed arms and a closed posture towards those around her, for example, one of the activists expressed her perplexity regarding other volunteers' decision not to smoke in front of the PoM during Ramadan as a sign of respect. This seemingly trivial incident prompted the entire team to collectively contemplate the various emotions - discomfort, curiosity, challenge, tolerance, submission - that arise when encountering and interacting with cultural and religious differences, as well as the activist's positionality in relation to these dimensions. The following extract from the meeting's trascription is significant as it exemplifies some exchanges between the participants:

R. This picture here, for example, we chose it because it was the moment when one of the guys had expressed a little bit his discomfort at the idea that we had smoked. I personally started smoking because I had seen one of them doing it...

A. He was smoking...

R. And so there was this succession between "I don't smoke because it might bother them" and "I see they are smoking too". But then I'm told that it's something that disturbs them so...

Z. Then he said it was a joke actually.

A. And then they said it was a joke, yeah.

R. A joke. So yes, I saw them too, the problem in my opinion is that we tend to see them as one thing, I don't know how to say. I was saying there's one guy who smokes so you assume it's okay for everybody that he smokes, or like the guitar, that one said no to music. So yes, I see the problem, for me we tend to see them all as a unique thing, I don't know how to say it. So I believe we tend to consider them all as a unique group, as they are a monolithe. But we should remember that they're anuway single individuals from the same culture...but what does it ean? We are from the same culture too, but we're very different, so even there, it's completely random, one smokes, one is bothered by smoking...[extract from GNW recording].

Through the review and commenting of their pictures, the group has had the opportunity to practice reflexivity (Nuzzaci 2011) about themselves, the group, and the PoM.

The workshop took place over an hour and a half, and no tangible 'cultural artifact' was produced; the conversation remained largely verbal, but with the consent of the participants, it was recorded. Photos were taken at various times, creating a small but valuable collection of shared material and information.

Figure 16. Photographs from the third GNW, Bulgaria, 2024

Conversations, interviews and GNW

Interview	Name	Gender	Age	Status	Nationality	Location	Date	Notes
1	E.	F	-	MSF operator	France	Harmanli	16/02	Consent to share the interview retired
2	H.	M	41	Former pom and current social worker	Iran	Harmanli	17/02	
3	K.	M	24	Pom	Syria	Harmanli	26/02	
4	Y.	M	33	Pom	Tunisia	Svilengrad	26/02	Wants his story to be published and work on a documentary
5	M.	M	50	Pom	Syria	Harmanli	29/02	Wants his story to be published to denounce his smuggler
6	D.	M	51	Lawyer	Bulgaria	Burgas	07/03	
7	L.	M	30	NNK reference person	Spain	Online	11/03	
8	S.	F	24	Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche Alto Vicentino	Italy	Harmanli	02/03	
9	F.	F	22	Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche Alto Vicentino	Italy	Harmanli	02/03	
Conversation /GNW	Name	Gender	Age	Status	Nationality	Location	Date	Notes
1	H.	M	18	Pom	Syria	Harmanli	12-15-22-24-29/02-02-03-05-10/03	
2	A.	M	-	Pom	Syria	Harmanli	10-16-28/02	

3	M.	M	19	Pom	Syria	Harmanli	12-14-22-2429/02-02-03-05-10/03	
4	B.	M	21	Pom	Syria	Harmanli	11/02	
5	CRG	-	-	Solidarity group	Syria	Online	03/03	Collective meeting with the solidarity team of Harmanli
6	M.	F	35	NNK volunteer	Italy	Harmanli	13/03	
7	Z.	F	22	NNK volunteer	Italy	Harmanli	13/03	
8	A.	F	26	NNK volunteer	Italy	Harmanli	13/03	
9	V.	M	27	Pom	Iraq	Svilengrad	19-21/02	
10	T.	M	-	Pom	Syria	Harmanli	24/02	
11	J.	M	-	Pom	Syria	Harmanli	01/03	

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