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CONCEPTUAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE NOTION OF SOLIDARITY IN THE CONDITIONS OF POLYCRISIS

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Abstract. The article explores the conceptual transformation of solidarity during modern crises that expose systemic weaknesses in state institutions. The research aims to conceptualize local solidarity initiatives as effective mechanisms of political power and drivers of social transformation in times of polycrisis. Moving beyond classical views of solidarity as mere state redistribution, the study justifies the concept of «solidarity from below» – the autonomous collective action of citizens. The core thesis argues that grassroots solidarity exceeds simple charity by generating a specific political «power-with» based on coordination and trust. Through the theories of «acts of citizenship» and commoning, the article demonstrates how everyday mutual assistance builds material solidarity infrastructures. The study concludes that autonomous solidarity practices form a de facto alternative governance system «from below», capable of influencing institutions, competing with official power, and redefining the boundaries of political participation.

Key words: solidarity from below, local initiatives, power-with, acts of citizenship, commoning, polycrisis.

Introduction. In modern political science, the concept of solidarity acquires a new, critical meaning in the face of constant challenges: political instability, wars, migration and climate crises, socio-economic inequality and a general decline in trust in institutions (Laitinen, 2022; Sangiovanni & Viehoff, 2023; Tava, 2023). Modernity clearly reveals the systemic weaknesses of many state apparatuses. During large-scale disasters and pandemics, familiar social systems and bureaucratic structures often prove inadequate, in particular due to the weakening of public infrastructure as a result of previous austerity policies (Carstensen et al., 2021; Mould et al., 2022; Spade, 2020). Traditional governance mechanisms do not have time to respond in a timely manner to the sudden needs of the population, which forms a kind of institutional «power vacuum». In response to this gap and the inability of state institutions to cover all urgent challenges, grassroots networks of mutual aid are rapidly emerging and consolidating throughout Europe, combining the efforts of traditional public organizations and spontaneous volunteer initiatives (Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2021; Mao et al., 2021; Mould et al., 2022).

Research problem and purpose. Historically, solidarity has been mainly considered as a state of social cohesion or a result of institutional order (Comte, 1842; Durkheim, 1984; Brunkhorst, 2005). Modern European studies often limit this concept to state redistribution and the willingness of citizens or political communities to share risks and resources among themselves (European University Institute & YouGov, 2018 – present; Laitinen, 2022; Sangiovanni & Viehoff, 2023). However, the events of recent decades – from the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic to Russia's war against Ukraine – have demonstrated the limitations of understanding solidarity exclusively as institutional integration or the policy of the welfare state (Carstensen et al., 2021; Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2021; Mould et al., 2022). Such a classical approach is unable to fully explain those forms of collective action that arise outside or on the periphery of formal institutions.

The purpose of this article is to conceptualize local solidarity initiatives as an effective mechanism of political power and a driver of social transformations in times of polycrisis. The study seeks to

eliminate the traditional emphasis on centralized power and focus attention on autonomous practices of self-organization and «guerrilla governance» (Canelas, & Baptista, 2021).

The central research question of the article is formulated as follows: how does «solidarity from below» (Zheng, 2023) transform from an ethical, moral practice of mutual assistance into a form of political power capable of influencing institutions, social norms, and trajectories of social change? The main thesis of the study argues that grassroots solidarity goes beyond a simple reaction to suffering or a lack of state capacity. It constitutes a specific form of political power – «power-with», which is generated through coordination of actions, mutual trust, collective decision-making, and the ability of the masses to act together. Local initiatives should not be reduced to charity or temporary volunteering in times of crisis. Their true political potential lies in changing the balance of power between citizens and institutions: where formal government acts slowly, ineffectively, or selectively, grassroots solidarity networks create their own capacity to organize life, meet the needs of society, and make tough demands on the existing political order.

Materials and Methods. The methodological framework of this research is grounded in a qualitative, conceptual-theoretical approach, integrating classical sociological paradigms with contemporary political philosophy. The research design is structured to ensure the reproducibility of the conceptual analysis by clearly defining the theoretical lenses applied to the phenomena of modern polycrisis.

The primary materials for this study consist of foundational texts in political science and social philosophy, contemporary academic literature on civic mobilization, and secondary empirical data documenting grassroots movements. The theoretical basis builds upon classical sociological theories of social integration (such as the works of É. Durkheim and A. Comte) (Comte, 1842; Durkheim, 1984) and modern political theories of power and citizenship (H. Arendt, G. Sharp, E. Isin, and G. Nielsen) (Arendt, 1970; Sharp, 1973; Isin & Nielsen, 2008). The empirical material, used for the contextual validation of theoretical constructs, includes secondary data regarding volunteer networks during the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe (specifically Italy) and civil society mobilization during Russia's war against Ukraine.

To achieve the research aim and ensure the logical consistency of the findings, a complex of general scientific and specific political science **methods** was applied:

- **Conceptual Analysis:** This method served as the primary tool for tracing the semantic and functional evolution of the notion of «solidarity». It was utilized to deconstruct the transition of solidarity from a purely moral bond and state-institutionalized mechanism to an autonomous political force conceptualized as «power-with».
- **Comparative Method:** Applied to systematically juxtapose two distinct models of civic integration: the top-down «organized solidarity» inherent in the welfare state, and the autonomous «solidarity from below» generated by marginalized or vulnerable groups. This comparison allowed for identifying the specific political agency of grassroots initiatives.
- **Systemic-Functional Approach:** This approach was employed to evaluate local mutual aid networks not merely as ad hoc humanitarian responses, but as structural elements of a de facto alternative governance system. Through the theoretical matrix of «commoning» and «guerrilla governance» (Spade, 2020; Mould et al., 2022, Canelas, & Baptista, 2021), the functional capacity of local initiatives to replace or compete with state institutions during a «power vacuum» was analyzed.
- **Case Study Analysis (Secondary Synthesis):** To verify the developed conceptual framework against objective reality, the study employed an illustrative case analysis based on secondary empirical data. The theories of «acts of citizenship» and nonviolent political action were used as analytical matrices to interpret documented civic mobilization processes during recent crises in Europe.

Historically, the concept of solidarity has been one of the key tools with which the social sciences have explained the possibility of social order and what holds individuals together within a community. In the classical sociological tradition, Auguste Comte linked social order to the problem of

integration, moral unity, and stability of society (Comte, 1842). In contrast, Emile Durkheim gave the concept a systemic sociological meaning, distinguishing between mechanical solidarity (which dominates traditional communities and is based on the similarity of members and shared beliefs) and organic solidarity (which arises in modern societies as a result of the division of labor, interdependence, and coordination of various social functions) (Durkheim, 1984). This classical theoretical framework solidified the understanding of solidarity as a force of social integration, the main function of which is to prevent disintegration and maintain moral order.

In political philosophy, particularly in the tradition of Jürgen Habermas, solidarity has acquired a normative meaning and has come to be seen as a necessary condition for democratic coexistence (Habermas, 1989; Habermas, 1990; Pensky, 2019). Habermasian logic suggests considering solidarity as part of justice: if justice establishes universal principles of equality and free liberties, then solidarity is responsible for supporting specific bonds of mutual responsibility between those who belong to a common form of life (Habermas, 1989; Tava, 2023).

In the process of development of modern societies, solidarity gradually lost the character of a direct moral bond between members of a local community and increasingly acquired institutionalized forms. If in traditional societies mutual support was mainly based on family, religious, class or local-social ties, then the modern state began to translate solidarity into the plane of law, citizenship and public policy (Brunkhorst, 2005; Laitinen, 2022; Sangiovanni & Viehoff, 2023). In this context, solidarity ceases to be just an ethical norm of coexistence and turns into an organizational principle of social order, which is fixed through legislation, tax systems, social guarantees, insurance mechanisms and institutions of state redistribution.

The emergence of the welfare state played a particularly important role in this process (Brunkhorst, 2005; Sangiovanni & Viehoff, 2023). It proposed a model within which responsibility for basic social risks – illness, unemployment, old age, disability, poverty or loss of working capacity – ceased to be considered as a private problem of an individual or his family. Instead, these risks were recognized as socially significant, and therefore as requiring a collective response. Through the systems of social insurance, pensions, health care, unemployment benefits and social support, the state institutionalized the principle of mutual responsibility of citizens for each other (Brunkhorst, 2005; European University Institute & YouGov, 2018 – present).

It is in this sense that we can speak of the formation of a model of «organized solidarity». Its essence lies in the fact that mutual support between members of a political community no longer depends exclusively on personal ties, voluntary charity or direct moral proximity. It is implemented through stable institutional mechanisms, primarily through the state, law and public administration. Taxes, social contributions, insurance funds and budget programs become instruments through which society redistributes resources between different population groups, generations, regions and social classes.

Within such a model, solidarity acquires a dual character. On the one hand, it is a normative principle, as it expresses the idea of justice, social responsibility and mutual dependence of citizens. On the other hand, it is an institutional practice, as it is embodied in specific mechanisms of state policy: social insurance, support programs for vulnerable groups, labor law, health care, education and social protection systems. Thus, solidarity in modern society becomes not only a moral requirement, but also part of the political and legal architecture of the state.

At the same time, the institutionalization of solidarity has ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, it ensures stability, predictability and universalization of social support, making it less dependent on random charity or local resources. On the other hand, such solidarity can become bureaucratized, distanced and passive. Citizens in this case often act not as active participants in mutual support, but as taxpayers or recipients of social services. As a result, solidarity risks turning from a living practice of collective action into an administratively organized mechanism for compensating for social risks.

The idea of the so-called «organized solidarity» has been formed, where mutual support is implemented through state mechanisms of redistribution and risk sharing. Modern European research (for example, the EUI-YouGov project «Solidarity in Europe») mainly interprets solidarity as the willingness of citizens and political communities to share burdens, risks, and resources among themselves.

However, the events of recent decades – the financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the migration crises, the housing crisis, and Russia's war against Ukraine – have clearly demonstrated the limitations of understanding solidarity solely as institutional integration or state redistribution (Carstensen et al., 2021; Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2021; Mould et al., 2022; Spade, 2020). This approach is effective for analyzing the welfare state, but it is not able to fully explain those forms of effective solidarity that spontaneously arise outside the boundaries of formal institutions. If we limit the concept of solidarity only to institutional cohesion, we miss out on those practices through which people without formal power create real political action. It is this tension between institutional and grassroots forms of solidarity that is fundamentally important for modern political science (Carstensen et al., 2021; Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2021; Mould et al., 2022; Spade, 2020). Institutional solidarity undoubtedly remains a key condition for the functioning of the welfare state and democratic citizenship. However, in conditions of polycrisis – when state institutions often do not have time to respond to rapid, complex and multi-level challenges – informal, local and civic practices of solidarity are becoming increasingly important. They do not deny the importance of the state, but demonstrate that solidarity cannot be completely reduced to institutional redistribution. It also exists as a living political practice of self-organization, mutual assistance and collective action «from below».

That is why modern political science needs a broader conceptualization and transition to the concept of «solidarity from below» (Spade, 2020; Mould et al., 2022; Laitinen, 2022). According to the philosophical approach of R. Zheng, solidarity from below is defined as «the collective ability of underprivileged people to organize for the sake of transformational change» (Zheng, 2023). That is, it is about uniting people (often from marginalized groups) who are able to act together to solve urgent social problems autonomously from the state.

This conceptual shift allows us to view solidarity not as a passive state of social unity, but as an active process of self-organization. In this process, citizens and local initiatives do not simply respond to a crisis or fill the gaps of bureaucratic systems, but collectively create alternative channels of support, produce new practices of mutual responsibility, and shape new forms of political subjectivity.

Local initiatives acquire political subjectivity through a specific construction of power relations, where the concept of «power-with» plays a key role (Arendt, 1970; Mori, 2003). This dimension is fundamentally different from the traditional hierarchical «power-over» based on control and coercion, since it arises exclusively from cooperation and mutual support. According to Hannah Arendt, political power is not the property of a single individual or institution, but arises as a result of the joint concerted action of people; it exists as long as this interaction is maintained, and disappears as soon as the joint action collapses (Arendt, 1970; Mori, 2003). Accordingly, «power-with» is generated through coordination, mutual trust and collective decision-making. Its transformative potential is based not on the ability to use force, but on the number and ability of the masses to refuse passive consent to the existing order. According to Gene Sharp's theories of nonviolent action, political systems depend critically on the cooperation and tacit consent of the population; when such consent is withdrawn, a powerful political lever is formed (Sharp, 1973). Thus, even small local initiatives are transformed into a form of political power for otherwise powerless people, capable of putting pressure on institutions and changing the logic of political responsibility.

A second mechanism for the politicization of solidarity networks is the rethinking of the concept of citizenship. Usually, citizenship is associated with formal legal status and legal affiliation to the state. However, modern theory, in particular the concept of «acts of citizenship» by E. Isin and G. Nielsen, suggests considering it as a dynamic process: subjects «become» citizens directly

through their actions and demands (Isin & Nielsen, 2008). By engaging in dialogue with the authorities or organizing mutual aid infrastructures, residents independently declare their needs, transforming themselves into active subjects of public power with their own political agency. Importantly, such practices allow effective citizenship to be asserted «from below» even by groups that are deprived of official status, such as migrants or refugees, since civic participation in this case is legitimized not through a passport, but through everyday solidarity activities and shared values (Isin & Nielsen, 2008; Spade, 2020; Mould et al., 2022). The third tool is the practice of creating commons (commoning) and the formation of «guerrilla governance» (Canelas, & Baptista, 2021). According to the approach of M. Hardt and A. Negri, commoning goes beyond simple collective access to resources and is aimed at directly constructing new forms of political organization (Hardt & Negri, 2009). Through everyday practices of caring for the commons – such as creating community kitchens, arranging shelters, or restoring housing – residents form new political communities and produce alternative models of governance (Spade, 2020; Mould et al., 2022; Carstensen et al., 2021). These joint actions generate material infrastructures of solidarity that allow communities to meet basic needs on their own. In crisis situations, when activists take on volunteer provision of critical areas, they effectively perform the functions of the state. This phenomenon is conceptualized as «guerrilla governance» (Canelas, & Baptista, 2021): a state in which residents initiate decisions, allocate resources, and transform urban space without waiting for permission from central authorities. (Spade, 2020; Mould et al., 2022) Collaborative networks do not simply respond to humanitarian challenges, but also build horizontal governance mechanisms and their own rules, creating viable institutions of power literally «from below».

Empirical measurements. Local initiatives not only unite people around shared values, but also generate effective material «solidarity infrastructures». (Spade, 2020; Mould et al., 2022; Carstensen et al., 2021) Rather than providing abstract support, such community-based approaches allow for the direct creation and re-creation of public goods, such as food or care services, by mobilizing communities beyond traditional institutions. Research confirms the political relevance of these processes. For example, Fiore et al. (2025), analyzing grassroots initiatives in the field of food policies, argue that they act as full-fledged political actors. (Fiore et al., 2025) These initiatives have their own political agency and power, with the ability to scale their practices on multi-stakeholder platforms and influence decision-making processes and socio-political change. In this way, local groups go beyond simple ad hoc assistance «on the spot» to form new, sustainable models of participation in political processes.

This is clearly demonstrated empirically by the unprecedented civic mobilization during recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine. In particular, during the pandemic between February and May 2020, a dense network of solidarity practices emerged in Europe, uniting both traditional civil society organizations and spontaneous volunteer groups. (Carstensen et al., 2021; Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2021; Mao et al., 2021) In Italy, volunteer networks took on the responsibility of organizing food distribution and providing humanitarian aid to vulnerable groups that had been «forgotten» by the official state system (Carstensen et al., 2021; Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2021). Some local European experiences are illustrative: there, volunteer movements not only addressed basic humanitarian problems, but also created spaces of social and political participation, where even migrants and refugees were able to feel, live, and act as full citizens. They proposed an alternative model of citizenship based on an ethic of mutual care and the common good. The Ukrainian experience also highlights the critical role of civil society, which, through informal networks of mutual aid, demonstrates solidarity «from below», working autonomously from the state and filling gaps in bureaucratic responses to the crisis. It is important to note that such initiatives are not simply an auxiliary resource or an addition to the state apparatus, but act as an autonomous political mechanism. The nature of the interaction of these grassroots networks with state institu-

tions is multivariate and depends on specific conditions (Carstensen et al., 2021; Mould et al., 2022). Three main formats of such interaction can be distinguished: complementary, substitute, and conflict. Complementary interaction occurs when initiatives fill existing gaps in state policy, supplementing the actions of the authorities. The substitutive approach manifests itself in cases where volunteer or local movements temporarily replace completely absent state services. Finally, the conflictual format occurs when solidarity practices develop in opposition to the official actions of the authorities, exposing their incompetence and forming strict demands for policy change. Ultimately, regardless of the format chosen, these autonomous practices form a *de facto* alternative system of governance «from below» on the ground, capable of competing with official authorities and creating real opportunities for large-scale social transformations.

Discussion. The analysis presented above makes it possible to distinguish three analytical models of solidarity that clarify the conceptual transformation examined in this article. These models should not be understood as mutually exclusive stages or rigid categories. Rather, they represent different dimensions through which solidarity operates in modern political life: as a value, as an institutional mechanism, and as a discursive-political practice that can generate collective agency from below. Their comparison helps to explain why solidarity in times of polycrisis cannot be reduced either to moral compassion or to state redistribution alone.

The first model is normative solidarity (Comte, 1842; Durkheim, 1984; Habermas, 1989; Laitinen, 2022). In this sense, solidarity appears as a moral and political value that supports the idea of social cohesion, mutual responsibility and democratic coexistence. This model is rooted in the classical understanding of solidarity as a condition of social order. From this perspective, solidarity answers the question of why members of a community should recognize obligations toward one another. It provides the moral grammar through which mutual assistance, care and responsibility become politically meaningful. However, normative solidarity remains limited if it is not translated into practices, institutions or collective action. As a value, it may justify support, but it does not by itself explain how such support is organized, who participates in it, or how it transforms power relations.

The second model is functional or institutional solidarity (Brunkhorst, 2005; European University Institute & YouGov, 2018 – present; Sangiovanni & Viehoff, 2023). Here solidarity is understood as a mechanism of redistribution, risk-sharing and coordination. This model is most clearly embodied in the welfare state and in systems of organized solidarity, where social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty or disability are no longer treated as purely private problems. Instead, they become matters of collective responsibility, addressed through taxation, social insurance, public services and administrative mechanisms. Functional solidarity therefore transforms moral responsibility into institutional practice. Its strength lies in stability, predictability and universalization of support. At the same time, its weakness is the risk of bureaucratization and passivity: citizens may become primarily taxpayers or recipients of services rather than active participants in mutual support.

The third model is political (discursive) solidarity (Pensky, 2008; Pensky, 2019; Spade, 2020; Mould et al., 2022). In this model, solidarity is not only declared or institutionally organized, but also articulated, claimed and performed through collective practices. It is produced through public narratives, civic demands, acts of citizenship and everyday practices of commoning. This model is especially important in times of polycrisis, when formal institutions often respond too slowly, selectively or inadequately. In such situations, solidarity emerges not merely as support for vulnerable groups, but as a form of political subjectivation. People become political actors by organizing aid, creating infrastructures of care, distributing resources, defending common goods and making claims on public authority (Table 1).

These three models reveal that the conceptual development of solidarity involves more than a shift in terminology. It reflects a deeper transformation in the relationship between citizens, institutions and political power. Normative solidarity explains the moral basis of mutual responsibility; functional

Table 1

Three analytical models of solidarity

Model of solidarity	Core meaning	Main political function	Limitation
Normative solidarity	Solidarity as a value, moral obligation and principle of social cohesion	Provides moral legitimacy for mutual responsibility and democratic coexistence	May remain declarative if not connected to institutions or collective action
Institutional solidarity	Solidarity as redistribution, risk-sharing and coordination through public institutions	Stabilizes society by transforming social risks into collective responsibilities	May become bureaucratic, passive and dependent on state capacity
Political solidarity	Solidarity as public claim-making, civic agency, commoning and collective action from below	Produces political subjectivity and transforms mutual aid into power-with	May remain fragmented if not connected to broader structures of coordination

solidarity explains how this responsibility is institutionalized through the state; discursive-political solidarity explains how citizens can reappropriate solidarity as an active practice of self-organization.

This last model is particularly important for understanding solidarity from below. Grassroots initiatives do not simply supplement institutional solidarity (Spade, 2020; Mould et al., 2022; Carstensen et al., 2021). They demonstrate that solidarity can become a direct source of political capacity. When citizens organize shelters, food distribution, care networks, reconstruction efforts or local systems of mutual aid, they do not merely compensate for state failure. They create material infrastructures of solidarity and generate new relations of trust, coordination and collective decision-making. In this way, solidarity moves beyond charity and becomes a practice of power-with (Arendt, 1970; Mori, 2003; Mould et al., 2022).

The proposed typology therefore helps to clarify the main conceptual movement of the article. Solidarity first appears as a foundation of social cohesion; then it becomes an institutional principle of organized redistribution and risk-sharing; later, under the pressure of polycrisis, it re-emerges as solidarity from below; and finally, it becomes a form of political power. (Comte, 1842; Durkheim, 1984; Brunkhorst, 2005; Sangiovanni & Viehoff, 2023) This transformation is crucial because it shows that solidarity is not only a response to crisis, but also a mechanism through which citizens redefine the boundaries of political participation and the meaning of democratic agency.

Thus, the political significance of solidarity from below lies not only in its humanitarian effectiveness, but in its capacity to transform the structure of power itself. Where institutional solidarity is delayed, insufficient or selective, grassroots solidarity creates alternative channels of coordination and support. Where formal citizenship excludes or marginalizes certain groups, acts of solidarity allow them to appear as political subjects. (Isin & Nielsen, 2008; Spade, 2020) Where the state fails to provide adequate care, commoning practices create new forms of collective governance. In this sense, solidarity becomes a bridge between social cohesion, institutional responsibility and political transformation.

Conclusion. The theoretical evolution of the concept of solidarity, considered in this article, can be described as a fundamental movement in three interrelated directions. The first vector demonstrates the transition from understanding solidarity as a basic social cohesion to its interpretation as an institutional principle of justice and risk sharing within the state. The second vector reflects the shift from purely institutional solidarity to «solidarity from below», which directly originates in local practices of self-organization. Finally, the third and most important vector captures the transformation of solidarity from simple moral support to a full-fledged form of political power. In the conditions of modern polycrisis, it is this third dimension that acquires critical importance, because it allows us to explain how local initiatives are able not only to mitigate the consequences of disasters, but also to

profoundly change social relations, political expectations and expand the boundaries of democratic participation.

The final thesis of our research is that the phenomenon of «solidarity from below» convincingly proves: local initiatives should not be reduced exclusively to charity, volunteering or temporary humanitarian aid. They constitute a much more powerful phenomenon – a specific political form of «power-with», which fundamentally changes the balance of power between citizens and official institutions. Where formal government acts slowly, ineffectively or selectively, grassroots networks create their own independent capacity to support the life of society and make strict demands on the existing political order. Thanks to the practices of commoning and the development of material support infrastructures, these autonomous initiatives form a de facto alternative system of governance «from below». Such a system is able not only to complement the state, but also to compete with official power structures, creating effective opportunities for social transformations on the ground. Ultimately, solidarity from below acts as an effective mechanism for social change, shifting the public agenda and redefining the very boundaries of the political, proving that full civic subjectivity can be constructed outside of traditional institutions.

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