

## **Solidarity and the EU Migration Crisis; Rama-Meloni Pact Through the Media Lens<sup>\*</sup>**

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Solidarity is a complex, multidimensional and sometimes an evasive concept. Solidarity is deeply linked with the humanitarian crisis, like the one the European Union has been facing since 2015: the refugee crisis. Waves of immigrants and asylum seekers have arrived in EU countries like in Italy, Greece, etc., thus creating some serious challenges for the European institutions, citizens and politics, while also making the headlines in the European media. The importance of solidarity in a migration crisis is institutionalized in the new European Pact on Migration and Asylum, approved by the EU Parliament in June 2024. This makes it crucial to study the correlation between solidarity, migration and media. Using critical theories on media and communication, studying the significance of any text, practice or communicative element of media content, I aim to highlight how the European and Albanian media have covered the collaboration between Italy and Albania, represented by the Rama-Meloni ‘Migration Pact’, in terms of solidarity and migration. This study aims to understand of the role of solidarity in the EU migration crisis, by focusing on

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studies of solidarity, migration and media, using statistics and global indexes, as well as European and Albanian media monitoring.

KEYWORDS: solidarity / migration / European Union / media / Rama-Meloni pact

## Introduction

*The news media are a primary source of those pictures in our heads about the larger world (Lippmann, 1922).*

Solidarity is a complex and multidimensional concept, with many uses in different contexts. Solidarity, according to Hannah Arendt stems from human suffering (Arendt, 1958). In this context, we can speak in terms of solidarity in a humanitarian crisis, like the European migration crisis (since 2015) that is making the headlines of the global media. Media coverage of disasters, war or political repression has an enormous impact on public behavior and also puts pressure on decision makers, imposing the agenda setting policy. The studies on media reporting and public attitudes on immigration, have shown that the images in the media, the descriptions and the labeling of the migrants, influence public attitudes on immigrants and affect the policies on immigration. First of all, media studies and opinion polls show the impact of the media coverage of immigration on the perceptions of public opinion on immigration. Second, the media agenda setting affects policymaking in the countries of destination, especially of the sense of 'crisis' related to immigration (Kosho, 2016).

According to Stefan Wallaschek of Europa-University Flensburg (2019), we can distinguish three types of solidarity: *political solidarity*, based on the belief that we should work together in a political context to deal with an issue; *cultural solidarity* that emphasizes shared norms or traditions between the giver(s) and taker(s) of solidarity, such as the European enlightenment, religious roots or speaking the same language, and the *social solidarity* that refers to welfare and social policy issues as well as to helping in the neighborhood, supporting integration of refugees and migrants by local communities and organizations.

With a focus on solidarity and the mediatization of the European migration crisis, this study aims to show how the Albanian Prime Minister deal with the Italian homologue, is represented in the Albanian and European media. In order to understand the agenda setting of the media in

terms of solidarity and migration, I have conducted media monitoring since November 2023, and I have used primary and secondary sources and analyzed relevant studies in the fields of media, migration and solidarity.

## Methodology

I have used quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyze the Rama-Meloni deal in terms of media, solidarity and migration. Regional and global indexes and previous studies of the field were used to describe the European migration crisis. European Commission documents and relevant papers on the New European Pact on Migration and Asylum, served as a guide to realize the link between the refugee crisis and the institutionalization of solidarity. Books, studies, papers, in depth articles like “Solidarity in the Media and Public Contention over Refugees in Europe” (Cinalli et al., 2021), “All at Sea: Europe’s Crisis of Solidarity on Migration” (Fine, 2019), “The politics of solidarity in Europe’s migration crisis” (Wallaschek, 2019), etc., have provided quality data and facts on the media role in shaping the public attitudes toward migration and solidarity, and their impact on the political agenda. Previous personal papers and articles with the main focus on media and migration, as well as media monitoring and observations, were included in order to understand how the Albanian and European media have covered the Rama-Meloni pact, especially their approach to the concept of solidarity.

## The Shades of Solidarity

The word solidarity comes from French. It harks back to Latin, which means sturdy, firm and undivided. This is the sense of the French word *solidarité* in the Encyclopedia of 1765. “Solidarity” appeared in Code civil, Napoleon’s famous statute book of 1804 (Liedman, 2002). The term appears as widespread as it is nebulous, and it is often perceived as worn out and evasive. Solidarity is a very broad and multifaceted notion with multiple semantic layers and practical implications. Its ordinary meaning can refer to the idea of social cohesion, human brotherhood, compassion, or political alliance (Volpe, 2023). In the relatively short history of the notion of solidarity, it has been described as a political principle, a moral obligation, a civic value, a collective sentiment, and more. At the same time, in everyday language, the term solidarity is often understood in a purely descriptive way as a kind of fellowship that can emerge among

individuals or social groups on the basis of their convictions, regardless of whether these convictions are morally and politically desirable (Tava, 2021).

At the simplest level, solidarity is about readiness to share resources with others (Lahusen, 2020; Stjernø, 2005). The distinctive features of solidarity have been listed in many ways. The social philosopher Larry May (1996, p. 44), has proposed that solidarity consists of five elements: 1) conscious identification with the group, 2) bonds of sentiment, 3) common interests in the group's well-being, 4) shared values and beliefs, and 5) readiness to show moral support. According to May, identification with a group and the thought that the group's well-being is part of each member's well-being is central and constitutive of solidarity. This way solidarity is, to a great extent, built on similarity, uniformity with members, shared values and beliefs. Readiness to show support to others when faced with adversity is also essential: solidarity is not mere passive feeling but also includes practical dispositions to act (Laitinen, 2014, p. 4).

As in a local level, global solidarity is linked with emotions and empathy. As Lenard, Straehle and Ypi argue (2010), solidarity necessarily contains an 'affective' element, that is, empathy, that allows us to 'understand the specifics of others' concrete situation, and to imaginatively construct for oneself their feelings and needs'. We can, therefore, understand solidarity as, in part, the social counterpart to empathy'. In terms of global solidarity, there are two broad approaches taken – one focuses on the motivating power of sentiment, and one focuses on the motivating power of our complicity with injustice (Lenard, 2010, p. 104).

Apart from domestic and global solidarity, there is room for political solidarity. Its historic relation to charity and/or dominance by the nongovernmental organization sector aside, the political origins of solidarity are especially found in struggles of the civil rights, antifascist, anticolonial, and antiapartheid movements. By allowing solidarity to inhabit both the tactics of survival and strategies of shared resistance, it is also a principle that can guide action, as famously noted by Hannah Arendt (Sajir & Aouragh, 2019). Arendt argues that solidarity among people stems from human suffering. What she refers to here is not a generic notion of suffering, but the peculiar pain that people feel whenever they endure oppression and exploitation. When humans experience, either directly or indirectly, such injustices, they tend to establish a 'community of interest' with the oppressed and exploited (Arendt, 1990, p. 88). In other words,

when people are faced with an unjust situation, they can decide to act in solidarity in order to defend themselves or whoever is suffering from this injustice (Tava, 2021).

### **Solidarity and the EU Migration Crisis: The New Migration Pact**

Shoshana Fine (2019), of the European Council on Foreign Relations, (specialized in EU refugee and migration policies), argues that the European Union's approach to migration has created a crisis of solidarity. According to Fine, Member States on the EU's southern border, call for the institutionalization of relocation quotas and greater shared responsibility for migrant arrivals, but the members of the Visegrád group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) refuse to support any form of solidarity mechanism. The so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015 and 2016 has fueled discussions on European solidarity, dividing public opinion about immigration and triggering political conflict on local, national and the EU levels. Within and between EU member states, there is contestation about how to apply, on the one hand, the principle of international or humanitarian solidarity towards individuals in need of assistance and, on the other hand, the principle of reciprocal solidarity among Member States, especially exemplified in the 'Dublin rules' which regulate burden-sharing when it comes to forced migration (Brändle et al, 2019).

In order to better understand the relevance of the refugee crisis in the EU borders, it is important to have a look at some indexes and data. Total irregular arrivals to the EU in 2015 were 1.04 million. In 2022, 5.1 million immigrants came to the EU from non-EU countries and 1.5 million people previously residing in one EU Member State migrated to another Member State (Eurostat, 2024). According to Frontex, irregular entries have been on the rise since 2020. The number of irregular border crossings at the EU's external border in 2023 reached a total of approximately 380 000, driven by a rise in arrivals via the Mediterranean region, according to preliminary calculations by Frontex. This marks the highest level since 2016 and constitutes a 17% increase from the figures in 2022, indicating a consistent upward trend over the past three years. The Central Mediterranean was the most active migratory route into the EU, accounting for two out of every five irregular crossings (41%) in 2023, followed by the Western Balkans (26%) and Eastern Mediterranean (16%) (Frontex, 2024).

As a response to the refugee crisis, the EU institutions adopted a new Pact on Migration and Asylum. This pact is a set of new rules managing migration and establishing a common asylum system at EU level. The rules are designed to manage and normalize migration, providing EU countries with the flexibility to address the specific challenges they face, and necessary safeguards to protect people in need. The Pact on Migration and Asylum strikes a balance between clear rules for all Member States to take up their share of responsibility for managing migration whilst ensuring none are left alone to cope with disproportionate pressures (European Commission, 2024). The Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management establishes a solidarity system for distributing the burden that Member States face in discharging their duties in this area. While solidarity remains compulsory, it is flexible in the way it takes effect: any Member State may receive its annual quota of asylum seekers, or pay €20,000 for each non-admitted asylum seeker, or spend the same amount on immigration-related projects in the countries of origin, or on helping to manage the return of unsuccessful applicants, or providing technical measures or personnel to the countries that need it (Enríques, 2024).

The European pact on migration and asylum faces many challenges. The new rules risk making the management of migratory flows more difficult for refugees, who will be locked up in isolated places for three months (including families with children), while their requests for asylum are examined; they will be monitored and surveilled, and if their request is not approved they can be sent to a “safe third country”, where the EU authorities will see fit, alarming human rights organizations. Even its solidarity mechanisms seem not working properly; because the most probable solution for the member states which are not at the EU borders, will be choosing financial solidarity instead of accepting asylum seekers on their territory (Kosho, 2024).

### **Rama-Meloni Pact Mirrored by Media: An Act of Solidarity?**

The Rama-Meloni pact, signed on 6 November 2023, envisages Albania hosting disembarkation platforms for migrants with unauthorized border crossing and rescued at sea by the Italian Coast Guards, Customs Police, and Navy (Millona, 2024). The core of the agreement allows Italy to establish and operate migration centers within Albania. These centers are under Italian jurisdiction, with Italian laws applying inside the fences

and Italian authorities managing the operations. This means Albania has ceded a portion of its territory to Italy, creating a unique situation where technically Italian sovereignty exists within Albanian borders. Italy has committed to welcoming migrants granted international protection and organizing the deportation of those who do not qualify. However, the list of countries Italy deems safe continues to expand, complicating the process for asylum seekers. According to the agreement, only men will be sent to the Albanian facilities, with vulnerable groups such as minors, women, and the elderly excluded (Izzo, 2024). Under the five-year deal, Albania would shelter up to 3,000 migrants. With asylum requests expected to take around a month to process, the number of asylum-seekers sent to Albania could reach up to 36,000 in a year (Millona, 2024).

Some EU Member States and the European Commission, as well as the UK prime minister Keir Starmer, have welcomed the agreement. According to Meloni, this will reduce the number of undocumented migrants coming to Italy and has the potential to become “part of the solution” for the EU. Citing Italy’s new arrangement with Albania as a model, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen has called for an exploration of “return hubs” in countries outside of the EU. Arrangements of this kind are known as the “externalization” of migration – when a country’s migration processes take place outside of its borders. This approach is gaining traction throughout Europe, but it is controversial (Hoxhaj, 2024). Rama-Meloni deal is faced with criticism: the UN refugee agency has raised concerns about its impact on human rights, while the opposition in Italy has called the centers “Italy’s Guantanamo” (MacGregor, 2024). This deal has been seen as experimental and controversial from many Italian and European officials and journalists. In October 2024, the Court of Rome has ruled against this agreement and has announced that the transfer proceedings of seven more migrants have been suspended (Morucci, 2024).

Meanwhile the European Union is preparing to implement its Pact on Migration and Asylum, among new challenges in the field of human rights and the lack of solidarity among the Member States, Albania has offered its solidarity to Italy, repaying for the support this country has given to Albanians who migrated to the neighboring country in the 1990s. In order to understand the mediatization of the Rama-Meloni deal and the way media has used the term ‘solidarity’ and its context, using media monitoring since November 2023 – when the deal between Rama and Meloni was signed, I have listed below, some of the articles published by

the mainstream and social media, analyzed in terms of political, cultural and social solidarity.

Global and European media has mainly highlighted the political dimension of solidarity, followed by the cultural dimension, in order to cover the Rama-Meloni deal. For example: *“Italy’s Meloni to visit Albania to discuss migrants”*, (The Jordan Times, By AFP – Jun 03, 2024). In an interview aired on Italian television on Sunday evening, Rama defended the deal saying Albania, which is seeking to join the 27-nation EU, was “showing solidarity over the demographic problem facing Europe today”.

The reportage: *“Italy’s Plans to Process Migrants in Albania”*, (New Lines Magazine, 7 January 2025). “Rama and Meloni sold this as an act of solidarity. Rama said Albania owed Italy for taking in Albanians who fled in the years after the tumultuous end of communist rule in 1991. This is the official public line. In private, people bristle at this propaganda”.

The article: *“Solidarity or rejection: Albanian migration to Italy”*, (France 24, 20 February 2024). “On February 20, 1991, demonstrators in Tirana pulled down the immense statue of Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha, marking the end of the communist regime and sparking an emigration wave towards Italy. Three decades later, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama says the “solidarity” Italy showed to his compatriots at the time is why he signed up to a controversial migration deal with Rome in November”.

It is important to underline the negative bias shown in most of the Italian news media when covering the Rama-Meloni pact. For example: *“Immigrants, Meloni-Rama pact, a report from Albania”*, (La7d, 17 November 2023). In this reportage, the show ‘PiazzaPulita’, of the Italian channel La7d has interviewed Albanian citizens and politicians, some Italian businessmen, and the Albanian opposition leader, Sali Berisha. This report openly criticizes the Rama-Meloni deal, build on a false sense of solidarity.

The reportage: *“Report (Hot)Spot Albanese”*, (Giorgio Mottola, Rai 3 Report, 21 April 2024). This feature asks who will really benefit from this agreement? “Report” found some unexpected and disturbing responses in Albania, defined by many international observers as a “Narcostate” due to the strong influence of the Albanian mafia cartels on the government’s activities.

Meanwhile, the Italian media close to the government, praised the deal and underlined the political solidarity between the two leaders. For

example: “*Praise, agreements and that invitation for Mid-August: Edi Rama and the solidarity with Meloni to push Albania towards the EU*”, (La Republica, 07 November 2023).

The article: “*Migrants: Meloni and Rama defend the Italy-Albania agreement, the two centers will be operational from August 1<sup>st</sup>*”, (Agenzia Nova, 05 June 2024) “Albania would not have been a friendly country, an ally that is ready when a great friend, like Italy, asks us for a hand”, said Rama, recalling that Albania also showed solidarity with the Jews in during the twentieth century, as well as with Afghan refugees after 2020”.

In the Albanian media, solidarity is used in all of its shades, but the political dimension is the one that prevails in all the news media. For example: “*Immigrants, Scholz supports the Rama-Meloni agreement: Challenges are not overcome alone! A solidarity mechanism is needed*”, (JavaNews, 11 November 2023). “*Solidarity or advertising? Albanian immigrant for “France 24”: They want to mask the incompetence of the Italian government*” (Politiko, 20 February 2024).

## Results

In their book, “Solidarity in the Media and Public Contention over Refugees in Europe” (2021), Cinalli, Trenz, Brändle, Eisele and Lahusen have conducted a cross-country comparison of public claims-making in the news media, about the dramatic events that accompanied the refugee crisis of late summer 2015. In their analysis of news covering the refugee crisis in eight countries (Denmark, Germany, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, the UK and Switzerland), they found converging patterns of debate. According to the authors, the media played a fundamental role in placing justice high on the public agenda. The solidarity agenda addressed by public debates transcended questions about the immediate engagement with refugees in need of assistance and expanded into a discourse about common challenges, shared obligations and joint affairs among all Europeans and their humanitarian commitment in the world (Cinalli et al., 2021, pp. 168–172). Their cross-country comparisons and analyses did confirm the news media impact at the public sphere in terms of solidarity in a migration crisis.

In this context, I have monitored the Albanian and European media, to analyze the link between media, migration and solidarity. The key study is the Rama-Meloni pact that has been served as an act of political, social and

cultural solidarity between the two leaders and the two nations: Albanians and Italians.

The deal between Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama and his Italian homologue Giorgia Meloni, is seen as controversial, having created many debates in favor and against it, in many political circles, in local, regional and European levels (OBCT, AP, BiEPAG, Adu, 2024). Many important political actors as the Prime Minister of England, Starmer, or the German chancellor, Scholz, have been very supportive of this deal, looking for other countries to expand this scheme of solidarity (Euronews Albania, 2023; Tondo et al., 2024). On the other hand, all human rights NGOs and many Italian and Albanian political circles have expressed their deep concern for the legitimacy and the financial cost of this endeavor (MacGregor, 2024).

From the analysis of several articles, reports, statements, and reportages in the mainstream media since November 2023, I have observed that the international media has been rather balanced when covering this pact and its consequences, citing the sources correctly and not engaging deeply with the issue. The European media was more engaged, creating some polarizations, between the parties in favor of the deal and those who were against it. The European media mirrored the interests of the Member States and the EU institutions toward this deal, their skepticism or their support. The Italian and Albanian media were on fire; very polarized and bold when covering the purpose and the way this deal will be implemented. The Italian media were concerned more on the financial bills of the pact and the legal framework; meanwhile the Albanian media was interested in the consequences this deal will have in the safety of the people who live near the detention camps, the political maneuverings behind the scenes, and the human impact of this experimental political move.

The term (concept) of solidarity was used in all three contexts: political, cultural and social. This concept was used mainly by the sources who were in favor of this pact, especially the main actors that agreed on the deal. The traditional and the social media was a mirror, or a tool for the political actors that made the deal possible, to impact the public opinion and gain their support for the migrant camps in Albania. On the contrary, the term 'solidarity' wasn't used in the news articles or the features that had a negative bias toward the Rama-Meloni pact. Overall, the concept of solidarity is used in most of the public statements (in the media content) of both leaders and all personalities that did agree with this pact. For example,

the statement of the Prime Minister Rama, that underlines the friendship and solidarity Albanians have shown to other nations in the course of history, and they are also showing to Italy nowadays, in order to justify a controversial and contested deal: “Albania would not have been a friendly country, an ally that is ready when a great friend, like Italy, asks us for a hand”, said Rama, recalling that Albania also showed solidarity with the Jews in during the twentieth century, as well as with Afghan refugees after 2020”, (Agenzia Nova, 05 June 2024). From my analysis, I have concluded that the concept of solidarity is used as a warhorse to justify political alliances or agreements in the eyes of the public. The concept of solidarity has been a good justification and a rhetorical umbrella of the Prime Minister of Albania and some other European Leaders who do agree with the deal. The media have been used to spread the idea of ‘friendship and solidarity among two nations’, or ‘a good model of solidarity in a European level’, in order to appease the opposing voices. Mainstream and social media are just leverage for this purpose.

## Conclusions

Solidarity is a multidimensional concept. Solidarity is linked with emotions, humanity, suffering, collectivity, empathy, collaborations and many other notions. Solidarity can be seen on a local level, or in a global one, being linked with civic rights, human suffering or social movements (Arendt, 1990; Sajir & Aouragh, 2019). We can distinguish political, cultural or social solidarities (Wallaschek, 2019), with a special focus in the mediatized version of solidarity – a *sui generis* form used and mirrored by the media. We can all agree that solidarity is a complex concept that can be linked with controversial themes and events, like the new European Pact on Migration and Asylum, or the other new pact signed between the Prime Ministers of Albania and Italy on the externalization of illegal migration. European Union has institutionalized solidarity in its Migration and Asylum Pact, obligating the Member States to assist the countries that are the first entry of asylum seekers. The solidarity as a pillar of this new European pact is a controversial one, because the Member States can “buy their way out” of it, by paying a sum of 20,000 euros for each asylum seeker, that they refuse to take on their soil (Kosho, 2024).

In the name of ‘solidarity’ the Prime Minister of Albania has signed a deal with his Italian homologue, Meloni, to build two facilities for the asylum seekers who arrive in the Italian soil. The global, European and the

local media have covered carefully this event, showing polarization while representing the voices in favor and against the deal. The concept of solidarity was included in the most part of the media content with a positive bias for the Rama-Meloni pact, disappearing in all the news and features with a negative bias. In a few articles that voiced the attitudes against the deal, we can find some commentaries that see the solidarity of this deal for what it is: a political leverage, (for example, the reportage: “*Italy’s Plans to Process Migrants in Albania*”, New Lines Magazine, 2025; cited in this reportage: ‘Rama and Meloni sold this as an act of solidarity). From all the media monitoring, analyses and personal observations, it is clear that the notion of solidarity was a warhorse for all the media subjects who wanted to establish a particular agenda and influence positively the public opinion and the political circles in the European Union, in order to support the Rama-Meloni deal.

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## **Solidarnost i migrantska kriza u Evropskoj uniji; Rama–Meloni pakt kroz medijsku prizmu\***

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Solidarnost je složen, višedimenzionalan i ponekad nedovoljno određen pojam. Solidarnost je duboko povezana sa humanitarnim krizama, poput one sa kojom se Evropska unija (EU) suočava od 2015. godine – izbegličke krize. Talasi migranata i tražilaca azila pristigli su u zemlje EU poput Italije, Grčke i dr., stvarajući ozbiljne izazove za evropske institucije, građane i politiku, dok su istovremeno punili naslovne strane evropskih medija. Značaj solidarnosti u migrantskoj krizi institucionalizovan je u novom Evropskom paktu o migracijama i azilu, koji je Evropski parlament usvojio u junu 2024. godine. To čini nužnim proučavanje odnosa između solidarnosti, migracije i medija. Koristeći kritičke teorije medija i komunikacije, proučavajući značaj svakog teksta, prakse ili komunikativnog elementa medijskog sadržaja, nastojim da istaknem na koji način su evropski i albanski mediji prikazali saradnju između Italije i Albanije, oličenu u Rama–Meloni „migrantskom paktu“, u kontekstu solidarnosti i migracija. Ovo istraživanje ima za cilj razumevanje uloge solidarnosti u migrantskoj krizi u EU, sa fokusom na studije solidarnosti, migracije i medija, koristeći statistiku i globalne indekse, kao i monitoring evropskih i albanskih medija.

**KLJUČNE REČI:** solidarnost / migracije / Evropska unija / mediji / Rama–Meloni pakt

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