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Barbara Waldis, Marta Marques
Transdisciplinary Institute of Social Work (ITTS)
University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland

SOLIDARITY IN SOUTHEAST EUROPEAN SWISS FAMILY NETWORKS DURING COVID-19

Abstract

Family solidarity in Southeast European Swiss families was challenged by the state border closures due to Covid-19. The interviewees in our exploratory study (2021, 2023) emphasize the additional geographical and emotional difficulties during the pandemic of staying connected with the seniors in the Southeast European countries, as well as the increased sense of obligation of care. For the families with senior citizens from the mentioned countries in Switzerland however, the question of family solidarity looks quite different due to the existing state social insurances. Within a situation of crisis, what happens to the much-cited family solidarity serving as a safety net in Southeast European countries in a situation of low social welfare? How can we compare these trans-European families caring for seniors across European borders with the care of those seniors within the welfare state of Switzerland? The qualitative, actor-centred content analysis of twelve family interviews is oriented by a decolonial social work perspective. The contribution therefore focuses on the action strategies of family members living in Switzerland vis-à-vis senior citizens living in Kosovo, Serbia or North Macedonia and contrasts these with the experiences of families with senior citizens from Southeast Europe in Switzerland. The experiences during the pandemic sharpen the comprehension for the challenges of a cross-border social policy, on the one hand regarding the importance of family solidarity in accordance of the family composition, and on the other hand regarding a network of solidarity rooted in public social institutions.

Keywords: Cross-border families, family solidarity, ageing parents, Covid-19, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, Switzerland

Introduction

The population of Ex-Yugoslavian or Southeast European origin living in Switzerland amounts up to ten percent of the foreign population and is thus demographically significant. Yet, there is no major research on ageing parents in these family

networks we know of, neither in Switzerland (Ciobanu et al. 2020; Mahfoudh et al. 2021) nor in Ex-Yugoslavian countries, although many social sciences research projects on ageing migrants in Switzerland (e.g., Italian, Spanish ageing populations) have been carried out in the last twenty years; although important research exists on themes like youth or transnationalism related to mobility between Switzerland and the Southeast European states of former Yugoslavia. From a decolonial social work perspective however, information and findings on these ageing populations is important to grasp how social workers can reach, understand, and inform ageing persons originally from Southeast European States. Such knowledge is a precondition for an adequate social work approach to engage with these ageing persons.

Between June 2021 and February 2023, we carried out twelve interviews with persons in cross-border family networks spanning over Kosovo, North Macedonia, Republic Srpska, Serbia, and Switzerland and having ageing parents either in one of these Southeast European states or in Switzerland. Partly these interviews were carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic, so that social and health crisis had quite some effect on the way how our main research concern, namely the caring for ageing parents in these families, was managed. Yet, the notion of solidarity emerged again and again in all interviews, beside the thoroughly analysed feeling of guilt towards parents in a cross-border family network (Baldassar 2015). However, solidarity is far from being an unproblematic notion, therefore we need to critically assess it to know to what extent it does apply to the care situation for ageing parents in cross-border family networks in the chosen Southeast European states and in Switzerland.

The first section is dedicated to the population of Kosovar North Macedonian, and Serbian origin in Switzerland, especially the ageing persons in this context and the cross-border family networks where we did our interviews. When we speak about ageing persons, we take the legal retirement age as a marker. It lies between 61 (women in Serbia), 62 (women in North Macedonia), 64 (men in North Macedonia) and 65 (men in Serbia, women and men in Kosovo and Switzerland). When we write of the Southeast European or Ex-Yugoslav population in this text, we refer to persons with Kosovar, North Macedonian, and Serbian origin, the most important extra European population group in Switzerland.

The second section deals with the notion of family solidarity and identifies its relevance for the present contribution. The inspiring Austrian project on family solidarity in Bosnian refugee families by Trummer and Novak (2017) is based on the six dimensions of solidarity used in American family sociology. Especially three dimensions of this type of solidarity, namely geographical, emotional, and functional, allow us to bridge the distinct life projects of ageing parents either in Southeast Europe or in Switzerland.

The third section presents our findings. We analyse family solidarity with the criteria of family composition, the direction of international travelling, the type of contacts possible as well as the financial implications.

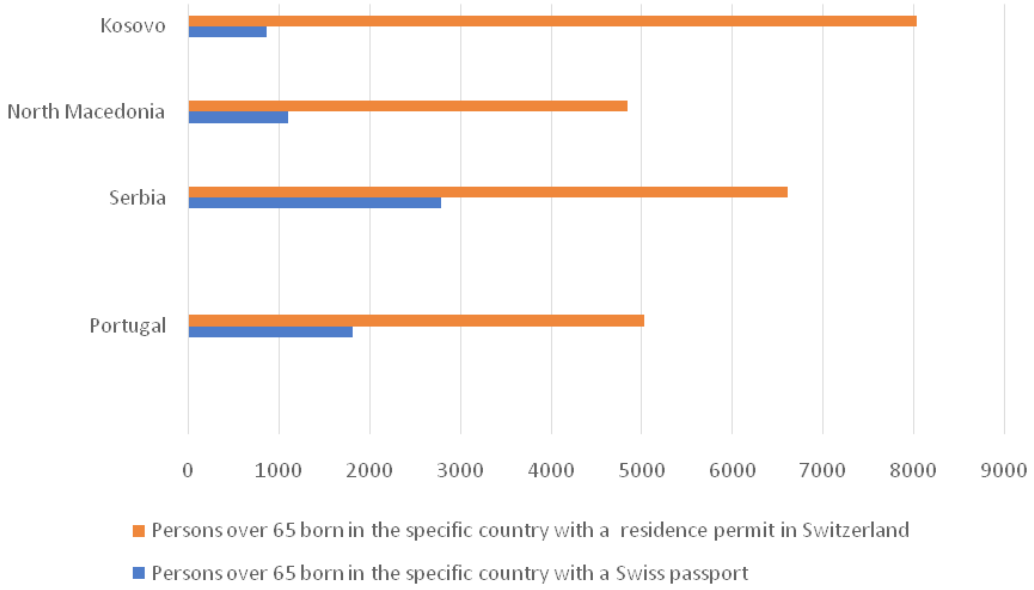
The conclusion comes back to the notion of solidarity and its potential for a decolonial perspective in social work with the ageing population in Southeast European Swiss family networks. For that, we contrast the social positioning of interviewees and interviewers with the experiences of a social worker in a project for ageing persons with migration experiences.

Ageing persons in Southeast European family networks in Switzerland

Immigration from (Ex-)Yugoslavia to Switzerland began in the 1960s. Until the 1980s, it was mainly seasonal labour migration, sometimes accompanied by family reunification (BurriSharani, Efionayi-Mäder, Hammer, et al. 2010; Dula Ammann 2019; von Aarburg&Gretler 2011). During the wars in Yugoslavia (1991 - 1999), over 200,000 people from Ex-Yugoslavia took refuge in Switzerland, often with relatives. Many left – or were forced to leave – Switzerland after the end of the wars. Nevertheless, over the last twenty years the population from Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia has accounted for around 3% of the almost 9 million people living in Switzerland and around 10% of the 2.5 million foreigners living in Switzerland. This population group is the fourth largest group of migrants in Switzerland, after persons from Italy, Germany, and Portugal, and it represents the largest non-European group of persons in Switzerland. In 2021, half of these 243,000 persons in Switzerland have their origins in Kosovo, a quarter in North Macedonia and in Serbia (Federal Statistical Office 2022).

In 2007 around 8000 persons from Ex-Yugoslavia, aged between 60 and 69, were living in Switzerland. Less than 1,000 persons were over 70 (BurriSharani, Efionayi-Mäder, Hammer, et al. 2010: 33). This suggests that most retirees returned to their country of origin, but we do not have any figures, nor do we know how many persons from Southeast Europe living in Switzerland have ageing parents in their country of origin. Ten years later, the number of these retirees had doubled. In 2017, 16,074 persons aged 65 and over were living in Switzerland (Johner-Kobi et al. 2020: 25). By 2021, this figure had risen to more than 24,000.

Figure 1: Pensioners from Southeast Europe in Switzerland in 2021



Source: Federal Statistical Office, 2022

The graph shows that among the pensioners from Southeast Europe in Switzerland, the largest number of pensioners with a residence permit are from Kosovo, but more Serbian pensioners have a Swiss passport. This is probably due to the fact that migration from Serbia or this part of Yugoslavia began earlier than from the region of Kosovo. Overall, for the three countries of origin, around 20% of pensioners have a Swiss passport, while the rest - with a few exceptions - have a permanent residence permit. There are now more pensioners from Southeast Europe than from Portugal, although the Portuguese population in Switzerland is larger in number than the immigration from Southeast Europe.

None of the three chosen states is a member of the European Union. North Macedonia and Serbia have both been candidates for EU membership for over ten years, and their populations do not require a visa for a short 90-day stay in Switzerland. Until the end of 2023, persons from Kosovo still need a visa to enter the Schengen area and therefore also Switzerland.

We carried out twelve family interviews (between one and three interviewees per interview and sometimes some more family members listening), in two sets of six interviews, the first one between June and September 2021, the second one between January and February 2023.

For the first set of interviews we chose adult children of retired parents living in Kosovo, North Macedonia or Serbia (Ajeti& Carlen 2022) . In the second set, we interviewed retired parents with origin the chosen Southeast European States living in Switzerland; sometimes with their adult children. During the first interview period, the Covid-19 pandemic was still ongoing, while during the second interview period, this experience was already more distant.

Inspired by qualitative research methods in healthcare, we chose to apply family interviews (Bell 2014). These semi-structured interviews involved relevant family members and were influenced by the systemic family approach to care (Furrer-Treyer and Lehmann-Wellig 2012; Mahrer-Imhof et al. 2014). This approach assumes that caring for ageing individuals is a family endeavour, while 'family' need not necessarily be limited to biological ties or to a strict two-generation nuclear family concept (Ecarius and Schierbaum 2018). Following the family interview strategy, we created a family genogram during the interviews to gain insights into the caregiving situation. This allowed us to ascertain who was providing what kind of support and who had the closest relationship with the ageing parents. To a further understanding of the situation of ageing parents in these cross-border family networks, we conducted three interviews with social workers leading a social project for the care of ageing persons with migration experience. These interviews provide us with precious data for interpretation.

To compare family solidarity in the two specific cases, we distinguish the interviewed families by migration experiences, marital status, place of residence, and economic situation. Noteworthy is that six families we interviewed were ethnically and nationally mixed, consisting of Kosovar-North Macedonian, Bosnian Serbian-Montenegrin or Serbian-Slovenian families.

Among the adult children of the six families whose ageing parents reside in Kosovo, North Macedonia, or Serbia, there was a mix of first- and second-generation migrants; migration motives included flight, labour migration, and immigration as children with their parents. As for the retired parents living in Switzerland, they all migrated first as seasonal guest workers in the 1970s and 1980s before they settled definitively. In one family, the retired father has a refugee status.

As for the marital status, the situation is the following. The adult children with ageing parents in Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia spoke of the husband's parents; only in one family, the wife's' parents were paramount. In three families, the widows live in Kosovo and North Macedonia; in the other three families, the retired couples live in North Macedonia or Serbia. In all families with retired parents living in Switzerland both partners were still alive, in one case the couple is not married.

Of the ageing parents in Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia, the men with higher education or a continuous professional employment manage economically

quite well, whereas the widows are paid only a small pension between 60 and 200 Euros and they depend highly on the financial support by their children. All the interviewed families with ageing parents in Switzerland live in a comfortable economic situation, except the one family where the ageing father is a political refugee.

Family solidarity in a migration context

As in the first set of family interviews with ageing parents live in Southeast Europe the concept of solidarity was paramount, we thought it important to compare the two situations of retirement relative to the country of residence. We therefore explore the applicability of the notion of family solidarity Trummer and Novak-Zezula (2017)in analysing the support provided to ageing parents in the family networks between Switzerland, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The situations mentioned in the interviews reach beyond the (partially legally defined) support obligations within national, legal frameworks of a nuclear two generation family, hinting at a cooperative and solidarity-based relationship as described in family sociology(Ecarius and Schierbaum 2018: 374).

Usually the notion of solidarity, instead of referring to familial "private" sphere, relates to the "public" sphere (Paugam 2015: 959) and to social movements (Lessenich, Reder, and Süß 2020: 320; Negrín Da Silva 2018; Roth 2018). Alongside the axes of political-social, institutional-individual, unilateral-reciprocal, or stabilizing-transforming, the authors Lessenich, Reder, and Süß (ibid.322s) describe solidarity as ranging between particularism and universalism. Particularism refers to solidarity in concrete relationships within the family, neighbourhood, or workplace, while universalism refers to solidarity that transcends one's own group to encompass global solidarity. In our reflexions, we start with the concrete family relationships, being convinced that the complexity of cross-border family care for ageing parents is a persisting contemporary social issue, although during the Covid-19 pandemic it was of particular importance. To discuss the concept of family solidarity for this specific period can thus provide a valuable contribution for the discussion about caring for ageing parents in cross-border families.

A more precise definition of the concept of family solidarity in the context of migration emerges from the study on Bosnian-Herzegovinian refugee families in Austria by Trummer and Novak-Zezula at the Center for Health and Migration in Vienna (2017: 68). The authors use the intergenerational notion of solidarity, developed in family sociology by Bengtson and Roberts (2007)including six dimensions: (1) structural solidarity denotes geographical distance, which can either limit or enhance interaction between family members; (2) associative solidarity pertains to the frequency of social contact and joint activities among family members; (3) affective solidarity signifies emotional closeness or distance between

family members; (4) consensual solidarity concerns actual or perceived alignment in opinions, values, and lifestyles; (5) functional solidarity involves practical and financial assistance and support among family members; and (6) normative solidarity relates to the degree of commitment to other family members.

In the context of migration, Trummer, and Novak-Zezula (2017: 79f.) observe that structural and associative solidarity, that is, geographical distance and the frequency of encounters, undergo transformations as a consequence of migration, albeit mitigated by new communication technologies. Instead of regular but less frequent visits, virtual conversations take place, although without joint on-site activities. Functional and normative solidarity, on the other hand, persist at high levels; financial support, particularly for the care of ageing family members, and shared family values remain intact.

The experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic poignantly underscored the necessity, as well as the limitations, of solidarity. While neighbourhood assistance was effective, broader international solidarity was quasi inexistent (Dübgen, Kersting, &Reder2022). For social development, individuals require communities of solidarity, akin to the solidarity found in intergenerational living arrangements within families. As mentioned above, solidarity starts in concrete relationships within the family, neighbourhood, or workplace, however, as a universal principle, it must transcend one's immediate group. During the Covid-19 pandemic, in many regions of Switzerland, neighbourly assistance rooted in solidarity alleviated the isolation experienced by ageing individuals (Perrig-Chiello 2021: 44). Nevertheless, the boundaries of solidarity became evident through the predominantly symbolic appreciation of "essential" professionals in care institutions and the mostly national closure of solidarity spaces (Lessenich, Reder&Süss 2020: 323). In Western European welfare states, the term "social solidarity" finds application, for instance, in trade union labour movements or in new social movements such as the "infrastructure of solidarity" within the international care labour sector (Bomert and Schilliger 2021; Schilliger 2020). Yet, the welfare state primarily emphasizes control since contributions to social security systems are mandatory and not founded on solidarity. Moreover, the dominant idea is that no one should unduly benefit from social security.

Transnational family solidarity is also undergoing transformation not only during the Covid-19 pandemic but more broadly in the wake of nationalist and exclusionary policies, coupled with divergent international social welfare systems. Merla, Kilkey, Baldassar and Wilding (2021)seek effective care strategies for ageing persons within cross-border families. They advocate for the dissemination of information concerning mobility and securing residence permits, promoting information and communication technologies, remote care solutions, reconfiguring care arrangements, and mobilizing resources for social protection.

Analogous to the "infrastructure of solidarity" (Schilliger 2020) in the international care labour sector such an infrastructure could bolster social security and the care of ageing parents in cross-border family networks.

Family bonds, sense of national belonging and Covid-19 pandemic

We present family – or international – solidarity through the indicators of family composition, the direction of international travelling, the type of contacts possible as well as the financial implications, because analysis of the interviews revealed them as relevant. Our interview questionnaire included migration history; life projects of parents after retirements and residence preference; caring arrangement for ageing parents before and during Covid-19 pandemic; different types of mobilizations of family members, friends, health, and social professionals for support; and travel habits before and during Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, the two most important indicators regarding family solidarity were in fact the reactions to the questions of who belongs to the family and the sense of belonging between different places of residence within the Kosovar, North Macedonian, and Serbian family network. These two indicators allowed us to distinguish two tendencies of structural, associative, or functional family solidarity and how it affected travelling habits during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1: Indicators for solidarity in Balkan Swiss families during Covid-19 pandemic

Source: Adapted from Bolzman, 2023.

It is important to note that the distinctions drawn based on family conceptions and the sense of belonging are preliminary and do not constitute rigid divisions. They serve as attempts to distinguish tendencies. Nevertheless, the distinctions represent the initial framework for shedding light on how solidarity functions within Balkan-Swiss family networks, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Importantly, they align with the framework proposed by Bolzman (2023: 172) regarding transnational caregiving for ageing parents. Bolzman's framework, published in Cienfuegos, Brandhorst, &Bryceson (2023), distinguishes between generational perspectives (caring for aging parents or offspring) and intentions behind mobility patterns (no mobility, temporary, permanent).

A first identified tendency concerns families with ageing parents in a Southeast European state. They tended to an explicit three-generation family conception. Vesna (all names are fictitious), for instance, is Serbian and lives with her husband and her two daughters in Switzerland, yet she felt she had "no family" in Switzerland, referring to her nuclear family. "When Covid-19 struck in March, I continued visiting my parents in May and June, even when they had contracted Covid-19; one could lose someone so quickly. In November, I visited again. (...) For me, not seeing my parents for a year would be distressing." Vesna did take unpaid leave to visit her parents and endured an additional ten days of unpaid leave for quarantine upon her return to Switzerland. She comments, "it doesn't matter; you do it for your parents."

Conversely as a second tendency, in families where children and ageing parents all live in Switzerland, without ageing parents in Southeast Europe but maybe a global family network, a nuclear two-generation family conception was more common. The decisions are taken together by parents and children. When asked about support of the family members in his country of origin, Dragan said: "We sent money to the family during the war (meaning the Yugoslav wars), but now no more."

A third tendency pertains to persons with a sense of extended familyhood. They were more inclined to use a "we" when speaking of their country of origin. Luana reports the migration motives of her father the year she was born, stating "we were a family under police scrutiny, we were a political family" and she remembers many of her cousins hosted by her father in Switzerland, "our home was always crowded". Luana also refers to «going home», when evoking summer holidays with her cousins in her country of origin. Moreover, this group of persons demonstrates a sense of solidarity clearly extended beyond the immediate family network, particularly during the pandemic. Zaco travelled to Southeast Europe by car even when it was discouraged. His wife recounts, "No one else went, but we did. (…) When we entered a shop, they treated us like royalty because they saw we were from abroad. They said, 'I can't believe you came, without you, we would be in so much distress.' Everything was closed. And if tourism doesn't work, you can be sure that many families will suffer. They lack the reserves we have here. (...) Summer

[2021] was a boon for the local economy because many people came from abroad and spent money." This quote underscores the vital importance of financial support from persons living abroad, which became even more apparent during the pandemic. The couple emphasized that they needed to support family members despite the geographical distance, as stringent Swiss immigration laws made visits from Southeast European states nearly impossible.

The fourth and last identified tendency relates to a nuanced migration trajectory. These families simultaneously appreciate the language and traditions of their country of origin and consider Switzerland their primary centre of life. These families have often a global family network, they have travelled extensively. Zeljko sums up: "The previous generation was here to work but lived down there. (…) For them, Switzerland was a financial source. (…) It's not like that with me. Sure, I stress again I love my country of origin. (…) But I work and live here in Switzerland. That is a huge difference." During the Covid-19 pandemic, for these families, the primary focus shifted to their neighbourhood in Switzerland, with travelling as a curtailed activity. Borka, Zeljko's aunt, describes her post-retirement activities during Covid-19, saying, "There is an elderly lady, a neighbour, she is around 88, I do a lot of things for her when she needs assistance. Putting newspapers out, taking out the trash, and helping her with the door in the cellar when she can't close it. Sometimes, for another neighbouring family, I babysit their three children for an hour or two when they have commitments; that's also volunteering."

Conclusion: Creating an infrastructure of solidarity for a decolonial social work perspective

The interviewees presented themselves in a manner consistent with societal expectations, particularly concerning adult children caring for their elderly parents. However, it is essential to acknowledge the interviewers' roles in shaping these narratives. The first six interviews were conducted by a social work research assistant of third-generation Southeast European descent in Switzerland. Four interviews were conducted by a sociological research assistant of Portuguese origin with a spouse from a Southeast European state. Two interviews were conducted by an ageing Swiss anthropologist. Evidently, there existed varying degrees of trust based on the interviewers' age, regional background, migration status, or lack thereof. In a decolonial research perspective, local knowledge plays a pivotal role and unintended power asymmetries frame research narratives and outcomes to quite some extent (Waldis & Duff 2017). We would have had more difficulties in finding interview partners for this exploratory research without local knowledge and we would been missing accounts on experiences of racism for example. Such information let us follow the decolonial thread further, and to consider the power relation in the societal context of Switzerland, the immigration country of the interviewees, and

especially the way in which social work sets out to integrate people into dominant societal norms through state policies. In this regard, Meriam's experience, a social worker in Switzerland of Southeast European origin and a comparable migration experience, is key.

Decolonial social work proposes to critically examine the oppressive nature of structures and practices, also beyond national frameworks and is grounded in the recognition that collective responsibility, accountability, and emancipatory social work should be the starting point (Clarke & Yellow Bird 2021). Thus, the reflection of power relation in research together with a critical examination of the social policy context and the way social work positions itself leads to a starting point we deem inspiring for further cross-border social work projects in tune with a decolonial social work perspective.

Meriam is part of a social work project focusing on and counselling ageing migrants mainly from Southeast Europe and accepted an expert interview. Her insights contrasted with the relatively smooth accounts provided by the interviewees. They not only uncover another layer of trust possible with a longstanding professional relation as a social worker compared to a short-term research relation between interviewees and interviewer, but also reveal the consequences of the positioning within a specific state context.

Regarding the Covid 19 pandemic and ageing persons from Southeast Europe, Meriam emphasized two major points. The first refers to state-ordered lock downs. While Switzerland and the Southeast European states all experienced lockdowns, closed borders, curfews, and states of emergency between March and June 2020, for the people with Southeast European background these experiences evoked memories of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. The fear and sense of isolation during the early stages of the pandemic weighed heavily on people not only in Southeast Europe, but also in Switzerland. For the adult children in Switzerland, the predominant fear revolved around their ageing parents in Southeast Europe contracting the virus and potentially succumbing to it.

The second point refers to Switzerland. Ageing persons with a migration background faced isolation, primarily due to the lack of media information in their native languages and the cessation of in-person visits or consultations. Debates over vaccination and instances of domestic violence among ageing couples exacerbated their difficulties. Social workers managed to maintain contact through podcasts, accessible to all via SMS. These podcasts featured music from the Balkans, stories, and information in various mother tongues, thereby reconnecting individuals with their cultural heritage.

Scholars like Merla, Kilkey, Baldassar& Wilding (2021), especially in the wake of nationalist and exclusionary (social) policies, insist on the importance of the dissemination of information concerning mobility and securing residence permits,

promoting information and communication technologies, remote care solutions, reconfiguring care arrangements, and mobilizing resources for social protection. Yet, it is Bomert and Schilliger (2021) who have sketched out for the international care labour sector how such an information infrastructure could bolster social security for the employees. In an analogue way, the project "age and migration", of which Meriam is one of the persons in charge, such an "infrastructure of solidarity" is made available for the care of ageing parents in cross-border family networks. The reason for which we take it as an example for a decolonial social work perspective is, that the form of social work practiced there, recognizes persons with migration experiences in a subdominant position as valuable subjects with unique ways of life. The social worker proposes, based on her reflected, intimate, and solid knowledge, a counselling considering the specific cross-border migration experience, the different national social and migration policy and social security systems. With this perspective in social work, far from being a commonly possible and adopted because of political constraints (Borrelli, Kurt 2023), the project "age and migration" contributes to a framework of solidarity beyond national power relations.

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