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Solidarity Networks with Migrants in an Authoritarian Context and Urban Precarity on the European Periphery: the Experience of the Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi in Tarlabaşı (Istanbul)

This article analyzes the role of solidarity networks, especially those driven by migrants' direct involvement, in fostering alternative forms of coexistence in Istanbul's precarious urban settings. The EU-Turkey statement from March 2016 is a fundamental example of how the securitization of migration in Europe has made Turkey's role in the European border regime stronger and changed the cities where migrants want to live. The article builds on the idea that borders are decomposed and reproduced within cities. It uses ethnographic research conducted in Tarlabaşı, a central, marginalized area of Istanbul that has been historically marked by displacement, urban transformation, and demographic change. In this urban borderland, undocumented migrants live in unsafe places as grassroots groups set up networks for mutual aid and resistance. The analysis focuses on Maysta Yaşam Kooperatifi (Life in May Cooperative), a solidarity initiative offering Turkish language lessons and after-school activities for children. By emphasizing everyday practices, encounters, and self-organized forms of aid, the cooperative fights racism and exclusion while nurturing an inclusive urban community. These initiatives illuminate the subtle yet significant ways solidarity networks counter authoritarian pressures and reshape urban belonging.

Keywords: Solidarity networks, migrants, urban precarity, authoritarianism, Tarlabaşı

Мреже солидарности са мигрантима у ауторитарном контексту и урбана прекарност на европској периферији: искуство Мајиста Јашам Кооперативе у Тарлабашију (Истанбул)

Овај чланак анализира улогу мрежа солидарности, посебно оних које покреће директно учешће миграната, у подстицању алтернативних облика суживота у прекарним урбаним условима у Истанбулу. Споразум између ЕУ и Турске из марта 2016. године представља кључан пример како је секуритизација миграција у Европи ојачала улогу Турске у европском граничном режиму и променила градове у којима мигранти желе да живе. Чланак се ослања на идеју да се границе разлажу и репродукују унутар градова. У раду се користи етнографско истраживање спроведено у Тарлабашију, централном маргинализованом подручју у Истанбулу које је историјски обележено расељавањем, урбаном трансформацијом и демографским променама. У овом урбаном пограничју, мигранти без докумената живе у несигурним условима док самоорганизоване групе са терена организују мреже узајамне помоћи и отпора. Анализа је усмерена на Мајиста Јашам Кооперативу („Живот у мају“), иницијативу солидарности која нуди часове турског језика и ваннаставне активности за децу. Истичући свакодневне праксе, сусрете и самоорганизоване облике помоћи, кооператива се бори против расизма и искључивања, док истовремено негује инклузивну урбану заједницу. Ове иницијативе осветљавају суптилне, али значајне начине на које мреже солидарности одолевају ауторитарним притисцима и преобликују урбану припадност.

Кључне речи: мреже солидарности, мигранти, урбана прекарност, ауторитаризам, Тарлабаши

INTRODUCTION

On a Saturday afternoon, in a café tucked away on a side street off Istanbul's busy Istiklal Avenue, the Mayıs ta Yaşam Kooperatifi opens its doors for an after-school class. A group of children, most of them from African migrant families, sit around small tables covered with notebooks and crayons. Their parents, many of them undocumented and working in precarious informal jobs, stop by briefly before returning to work or going home.

In one corner, a volunteer patiently explains basic Turkish grammar to a small group of adults. In another, activists discuss how to organize activities for families facing housing insecurity, unstable employment, and the constant risk of police control.

At first glance, the scene does not seem remarkable. These are simple, ordinary acts of care, such as teaching, listening, and organizing. Yet in a city where migrants are increasingly portrayed as unwelcome outsiders and in a political climate where public criticism is closely monitored, these practices take on greater significance. They can be understood as everyday ways of creating spaces of belonging and coexistence for people who are excluded from formal rights and public recognition.

In this sense, Tarlabaşı, the area where the majority of people participating in the Turkish classes reside, provides a particularly telling vantage point for observing these dynamics. Situated just behind Taksim Square in central Istanbul, the neighbourhood has long been a space of displacement and marginalization. Over the course of the twentieth century, non-Muslim minorities were gradually pushed out. At the same time, waves of internal migration brought Kurdish families, Roma communities, and poor people coming from rural areas into the neighbourhood. Since the early 1990s, international migrants and refugees, many undocumented, have added a further layer to this demographic mosaic (Uzun 2015; Can 2020; Güngördü 2018; Tsavdaroglou 2020; Arıcan 2020; Yılmaz & Daniş 2024). Parallel to these shifts, state-led urban transformation projects, from the construction of Tarlabaşı Boulevard after the 1980 coup to the large-scale transformation plans launched in 2006 (Kuyucu & Ünsal 2010; Erkan 2022), have contributed to producing a landscape of precarious housing and deepening inequality. Today, Tarlabaşı can be read as an internal borderland: a space within the city where bordering practices intersect with classed and racialised forms of relegation.

These local dynamics unfold within the wider framework of migration control, as Turkey has assumed a central role in the European Union's border regime since the 'long summer of migration' in 2015, formalized through the EU–Turkey Statement of March 2016. While European borders are externalized beyond EU territory, they are also reproduced internally within Turkey. Migration control does not end at the national border; it continues within cities, shaping how urban space is governed. In neighbourhoods such as Tarlabaşı, this is visible in migrants' restricted access to formal housing, education, and stable employment, which pushes many into informal arrangements and dependence on solidarity networks. This internalization of border control unfolds alongside a

broader reconfiguration of civil society. As Yabancı (2019) argues, under competitive authoritarianism, the AKP has not eliminated civil society but restructured it through a dual strategy of containment and appropriation. Rights-based and critical organizations face repeated audits, legal threats, and the risk of closure, whereas pro-government associations are granted financial support and direct channels into policy-making. The result is an uneven civic landscape in which some actors operate under constraint while others are institutionally reinforced.

It is in this context that initiatives such as the Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi acquire particular importance. By providing Turkish language lessons, after-school activities, and spaces of mutual support, the cooperative offers more than basic assistance: it constitutes a laboratory of urban solidarity in authoritarian conditions. Following scholars who emphasize the political significance of solidarity in migration contexts (Bauder 2020, 2021, 2022; Della Porta 2018; Kron & Lebuhn 2020), this article argues that these practices represent discreet but meaningful forms of resistance (Scott 2009; De Certeau 1990; Chatterjee 2006). They help reconfigure urban life by enabling encounters across differences and by contesting, however subtly, the racialised hierarchies of belonging imposed by bordering processes (van Houtum & van Naerssen 2002).

The article is divided into five sections. The initial section delineates the methodological framework of the research. The second contextualizes the analysis within the shifts of the European border regime and their local effects in Istanbul. The third examines Tarlabaşı as an urban borderland, shaped by its complex history of displacement and exclusion. The fourth section examines the Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi and its mutual aid practices, while the fifth section analyzes the ambiguities and constraints of solidarity inside an authoritarian regime. The conclusion examines how solidarity networks like this one foster the conceptualization of novel forms of urban belonging under precariousness and repression.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This article draws on six months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Tarlabaşı, Istanbul, between 2022 and 2023 as part of my doctoral research project. The fieldwork focused on the activities of the Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi, an active solidarity initiative in the neighbourhood. A total of thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted, including seventeen with migrants living in the neighbourhood, ten with Turkish citizens residing in the area (the majority of whom are Kurdish and Roma), and three with activists. These interviews were complemented by numer-

ous informal conversations and participant observation. Most interviews took place face-to-face in the neighbourhood, either in participants' homes or in public spaces, such as cafés and bars, while some interactions continued online via platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram. Interviews were conducted primarily in Turkish, English, and French. In some cases, interactions with Arabic- or Persian-speaking participants involved informal translation support from community members already known to me. With participants' informed consent, some interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed, while others were documented through detailed notes taken during the conversation. All participants have been anonymised through pseudonyms, and the interview excerpts cited in the article are the author's translations.

Image 1: Streets of Tarlabaşı. Source: Cosimo Pica. November 2023

Participant observation was central to this research. I accompanied activists in their daily activities, attended community meetings, joined guided walks, and took part in meetings and mutual aid initiatives. These engagements provided insights not only into the organizational practices of Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi but also into residents' everyday experiences navigating precarious urban life in Tarlabaşı. Informal and unstructured interactions often revealed dimensions of intimacy and belonging that would not have emerged in formal interviews. Detailed field notes complemented recorded material, helping to situate narratives within broader neighbourhood dynamics.

Access to Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi and to the wider community was made possible through the support of a young activist, who became both a key gatekeeper and a close companion throughout the research. His strong involvement in Tarlabaşı and trusted ties with migrant residents, particularly among African communities, were crucial in facilitating my integration into the cooperative's activities. This relationship exemplifies how fieldwork is rarely the result of the researcher's effort alone but often depends on the trust and generosity of interlocutors who literally open doors to spaces of daily life.

This ethnography aimed to document the everyday practices through which solidarity takes shape in Tarlabaşı, paying close attention to the social and symbolic contexts in which the relationships of marginalisation and resistance unfold. The focus was on how ordinary interactions, and local support networks negotiate these dynamics. At the same time, the research process itself was shaped by questions of positionality and power. As a white European male researcher, my presence in Tarlabaşı was sometimes met with ambivalence: at times I was misunderstood or approached with suspicion; at others I was welcomed as an opportunity for residents to share experiences beyond the confines of the neighbourhood. These encounters informed an ongoing reflection on the asymmetries inherent in the research relationship. To address them, I engaged in dialogue with interlocutors throughout the research process, discussing how their perspectives were represented and seeking to ensure that the restitution of their accounts remained a shared process rather than solely the product of my interpretation.

In this way, the methodology was not only a means of collecting data but also an exercise in practicing solidarity within the research process itself. The combination of interviews, observations, and sustained relationships allowed for a deeper understanding of how Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi operates within an authoritarian and precarious urban context,

while also questioning conventional notions of the "field" as a place one enters and exits. Rather, fieldwork unfolded as a set of ongoing and situated engagements, co-constructed with participants whose practices and voices are at the centre of this article.

FROM THE EUROPEAN BORDER REGIME TO ISTANBUL'S STREETS

> The European border is closed, but the border is also here in the city. When the landlord treats me badly because he rented me the house without a contract since I don't have papers, when I am scared to go to the hospital, when I work and the owner pays me less than we agreed… it feels like the border, its control, its police, and its repression follows me everywhere. (Interview with E. undocumented Nigerian migrant, Tarlabaşı, October 2023)

The European border regime is today best understood not as a fixed territorial perimeter but as a heterogeneous and dispersed dispositif of control that simultaneously extends outward, beyond the EU's geographical frontiers, and inward, into urban and social spaces (Walters 2002; Bigo & Guild 2005; Hess & Kasparek 2017, 2019). This multiplication of borders reflects what Huysmans (2000) has termed the securitization of migration: the framing of human mobility as an existential threat that legitimates extraordinary measures of surveillance, policing, and containment. Within this architecture, Turkey has emerged as a pivotal hinge, particularly since the "long summer of migration" in 2015. The EU–Turkey Statement from March 2016 was the most recent step in a long-term plan to outsource European border controls (Andrijasevic & Walters 2010; Bialasiewicz 2012; Panebianco 2022). It turned Turkey into a kind of buffer zone that stops and filters migrants in exchange for financial assistance, diplomatic advantages, and recognition on the worldwide stage. This externalization of borders reverberates deeply within Turkey's urban fabric. Migrants who once imagined Europe as their destination often find themselves immobilized within Turkish cities, "stuck in mobility" (Genç, Heck and Hess 2018). Istanbul, as the country's economic and symbolic center, concentrates these dynamics, functioning simultaneously as a transit hub, a place of temporary refuge, a site of forced settlement, and, more and more, a place of long-standing where life and desires are built.

In line with Balibar's (2002) insight that borders are everywhere and nowhere, the European border materializes in Istanbul's everyday life:

in bureaucratic encounters with municipal administrations, police document checks, stigmatized housing, and precarious employment conditions.

These urbanized bordering practices resonate with Mezzadra's (2006) concept of differential inclusion. Migrants are not simply excluded from national or European space but incorporated under hierarchized and precarious conditions: tolerated as workers in segmented labor markets, or as tenants in marginalized neighbourhoods, while denied full rights and recognition. What Bigo (2002) terms the "governmentality of unease" thus stretches across scales, from the Aegean Sea and Turkey's militarized frontier zones to the alleyways and apartments of Istanbul, where especially undocumented migrants navigate constant surveillance, the threat of deportation, and the arbitrariness of everyday encounters with landlords, employers, and police. Such dynamics exemplify what Andrijasevic & Walters (2010) describe as an international government of borders: a dispersed regime in which supranational institutions and states collaborate to manage mobility, combining humanitarian discourses with securitarian practices that immobilize, filter, and discipline migrants.

The result is a multilayered bordering process that does not simply exclude or expel but rather incorporates migrants into hierarchies of legality, temporality, and labor precarization (Huysmans 2000; Bello 2022; Léonard & Kaunert 2022). In this sense, Istanbul operates as a laboratory of bordering where EU-driven logics of control intertwine with Turkey's authoritarian turn. The geopolitics of migration is thus inscribed into the very fabric of the city: migrants are tolerated as disposable labor and temporary residents yet remain perpetually surveilled, immobilized, and denied full political membership. In places like Tarlabaşı, the intersection of EU-driven bordering practices and Turkey's authoritarian governance produces spaces of conditional toleration: migrants are allowed to remain, but only under precarious, surveilled, and subordinated conditions. For many, this neighbourhood represents both a refuge and a trap, one of the few areas where undocumented life remains possible, even as the city grows increasingly hostile to their presence.

TARLABAŞI: AN INTERNAL BORDERLAND

> For someone like me without papers, Tarlabaşı is the only place I can stay in Istanbul. Nowhere else would accept me. Life here is hard, the houses are old and expensive, and the city feels more and more dangerous for people like us. But at least here I can find a room, some work, and people who understand. Outside this neighbourhood, I feel

> like I don't exist, or worse, that I am not allowed to exist. (Interview with S., undocumented Ugandan woman, Tarlabaşı, November 2023)

If Istanbul as a whole embodies the reproduction of the European border regime within urban space, Tarlabaşı represents one of its most condensed and visible expressions. Situated only a few meters from the monumental square of Taksim yet socially and symbolically worlds apart, Tarlabaşı has long functioned as what Wacquant (2006) terms a "territory of relegation": a stigmatized area where those displaced, excluded, or rendered undesirable elsewhere in the city are concentrated. Its history encapsulates successive waves of displacement and marginalisation. Established in the sixteenth century, the neighbourhood was historically inhabited by Armenians, Greek Orthodox Christians (Rum),[1] and Levantines, mirroring the cosmopolitan fabric of Beyoğlu. This configuration began to unravel with the transfer of the capital to Ankara, but demographic ruptures became more pronounced through two key events tied to nation-building and identity politics: the 1942 wealth tax (Varlık Vergisi), which disproportionately targeted non-Muslim minorities (Erkan 2022), and the Istanbul pogroms of September 1955, which ravaged the Greek Orthodox community (Kuyucu 2005). These expulsions triggered profound demographic shifts, later reinforced by rural-to-urban migration that reconfigured central districts and fueled the rise of gecekondu on the urban periphery.

The 1980 military coup inaugurated a new phase in Tarlabaşı's marginalisation. Historic buildings along its main artery were demolished to construct Tarlabaşı Boulevard, physically severing the neighbourhood from the rest of Beyoğlu and deepening its spatial and social isolation. In the 1990s, large numbers of Kurds displaced by village burnings during the armed conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK resettled in Tarlabaşı (Jongerden 2007). Since the 1990s, the neighbourhood has absorbed new waves of international migrants from Africa and the Middle East (Yılmaz 2006, 2008), consolidating its role as a receptacle for those at the urban and national margins.

Yılmaz & Daniş (2024) describe the neighbourhood as both an "invisible city," evoking Calvino, and a "waiting room," drawing on Sema Erder's metaphor (Erder 2015). They argue that Tarlabaşı functions as a thresh-

[1] The term "Rum" is a historical designation from the Ottoman Empire referring to Orthodox Christian communities linked to the Byzantine legacy. It reflects a religious-imperial classification rather than an ethnic identity, still relevant in Turkey today.

old space where migrants and marginalised populations find refuge even amidst relentless transformation. The "waiting room" metaphor captures the temporality of migrant lives: a condition of suspension, uncertainty, and not yet, in which futures remain unsettled and provisional. Yet they also stress that Tarlabaşı is not solely a site of waiting but also one of living together, where everyday solidarities persist despite precarity and exclusion.

The successive layers of displacement configure Tarlabaşı as an urban borderland (Iossifova 2013, 2015): a porous yet stigmatised zone where belonging and estrangement, inclusion and exclusion, constantly intersect. Urban borderlands are sociomaterial spaces located between adjacent but sociospatially dissimilar parts of the city. They function as dynamic contact zones that enable interaction between otherwise disconnected groups, while also generating hybrid practices, identities, and meanings. Far from being static or merely peripheral, they are shaped by ongoing processes of transition and negotiation, embodying both stigma and fluidity. In the case of Tarlabaşı, this borderland quality emerges not only from its physical proximity to more affluent districts but also from its history of displacement and resettlement, which has turned the neighbourhood into a site where exclusionary urban imaginaries, everyday solidarities, and alternative forms of belonging continually collide.

Fieldwork conducted between 2022 and 2023 confirmed this duality. Residents frequently described Tarlabaşı as both refuge and trap, "a place for the unwanted", simultaneously offering otherwise inaccessible housing opportunities and exposing them to insecurity and stigma. Children retreated at the sight of police, migrants avoided main roads to reduce the risk of document checks, and families relied on word-of-mouth networks to secure informal housing. Bordering here is enacted less through walls than through policing, zoning, stigmatisation, and the looming uncertainty of eviction.

Urban transformation has further reinforced these bordering dynamics. The large-scale regeneration projects launched in 2006 framed Tarlabaşı as a space of crime and deviance, legitimising demolition and forced displacement. In this area urban transformation projects not only reconfigure the physical space but also reproduce bordering logics within the city, reinforcing hierarchies of belonging and exclusion (Kuyucu & Ünsal 2010; Ünsal 2015). Although the Third Administrative Court annulled the project in 2017 after years of legal challenges and mobilisation, the demolitions and forced evictions of 2010 left indelible scars.

Image 2: Areas of Tarlabaşı where urban transformation remains incomplete. Source: Cosimo Pica. October 2023

The ongoing threat of eviction and policing continues to shape everyday life in ways that exemplify the neoliberal politics of urban governance, in which regeneration projects reconfigure land use while erasing oppositional and marginal socialities (Ünsal 2014). Ethnographically, Tarlabaşı reveals how these dynamics are enacted through diffuse practices regulating access to housing and services, simultaneously producing categories of insiders and outsiders. Residents frequently reported that humanitarian initiatives were constantly overshadowed by sudden police raids, arrests, and deportations, illustrating how support and control coexist in shaping daily life.

> There are associations, linked to the state or international organisations, in this area that bring food, clothes, and social assistance. These things are important because a lot of us wouldn't be able to live without them. But you never feel safe at the same time. The police can show up out of nowhere, go into homes, check papers, and take people away. So, even when you get help, you know it's only for a short time and that you could lose your home or be sent back to your home country the same day. They give with one hand and take with the other. (Interview with Y., undocumented Nigerian migrant, Tarlabaşı, October 2022)

This paradox exemplifies Walters' (2011) humanitarian–security nexus: assistance and repression operating simultaneously, producing both conditional support and permanent vulnerability.

Viewing Tarlabaşı as an internal borderland thus reveals how the European externalisation regime and Turkey's authoritarian governance take concrete form within the spatial and social dynamics of a single neighbourhood. Yet bordering is never absolute. Alongside mechanisms of exclusion, practices of solidarity and resistance emerge. As Tsavdaroglou (2020) notes, struggles against gentrification intersect with practices of commoning and urban solidarity. My fieldwork documented diverse everyday practices among long-term residents and migrants, including neighbours sharing food across ethnic lines and migrants exchanging strategies to avoid police controls or navigate administrative regulations. These informal practices often arise from necessity and interdependence rather than from formal political organisation. Bayat (2013) refers to "quiet encroachments of the ordinary" as ordinary, mostly uncoordinated actions that marginalised groups take to make a living and stay in the city. These are similar to what they do. These practices can also be seen as forms of everyday solidarity that emerge in contexts where migration control and bordering regimes are in place (De Genova 2017; Mezzadra & Neilson 2013). In addition to these informal interactions, activists from the Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatif organised Turkish language classes and social events on significant occasions such as May 1, providing residents and migrants with opportunities to convene and discuss matters of importance to them. These initiatives are more in line with politically articulated forms of solidarity that civil society alliances focused on migration have worked to build (Agustín & Jørgensen 2016). While analytically separate from the discreet practices identified by Bayat, these initiatives played a role in sustaining networks of mutual support and engagement within the neighbourhood. In this context, solidarity ought not to be re-

garded as a fixed identity or a stable alliance; instead, it should be understood as a relational process emerging from particular interactions and collective struggles, often marked by disparities between activists and marginalised groups, as emphasised by Balibar's (2024) reflections on subaltern solidarity and political engagement. Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how everyday urban life in Tarlabaşı becomes a terrain of negotiation and contestation, where both informal practices and organised initiatives participate, albeit in different ways, in shaping claims to presence and belonging in the city.

While interlocutors often described Tarlabaşı as a place of constraint, immobilised by police checks, insecure housing, and the threat of deportation, they also highlighted the support and coexistence that made the neighbourhood livable.

Migrants spoke of neighbors who shared food, guided them to affordable housing, or cared for children while parents worked. Activists at the Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi built upon these solidarities, providing not only practical aid, it is precisely within waiting and invisibility that subtle practices of commoning and mutual aid reconfigure the border from below.

> Life here is not easy. The police check your papers, houses are unsafe, and we always worry about deportation. But neighbors help each other, sharing food, showing where to find affordable housing, or caring for children while parents' work. Groups like the Kooperatifi strengthen these networks of solidarity and connect people to each other. Before, I didn't know many other African families living here, but now thanks to them we are friends and help each other. It is in these everyday practices that you feel you belong and can survive. (Interview with Z., undocumented Zimbabwean migrant, Tarlabaşı, November 2023)

THE MAYISTA YAŞAM KOOPERATIFI

Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi ("Life in May Cooperative") was founded in the aftermath of the 1999 earthquake by five students from Boğaziçi University under the motto "Solidarity for education". Their goal was to provide free education in subjects such as Turkish, mathematics, geometry, English and university exam preparation to students excluded from the public system due to financial constraints. Based in the 1 Mayıs neighbourhood of Ataşehir, on Istanbul's Asian side, the association became official in 2002 and gradually expanded to nearby working-class areas such as Sultanbeyli, Yenibosna, and Aydınlı.

Over the years, the cooperative's mission expanded beyond providing educational programs to encompass broader struggles over the 'right to the city,' seeking not only to fight exclusionary urban policies, but also to assert claims to shared space, and create conditions for collective belonging and participation in the life of the neighbourhood. In 1 Mayıs, it became a hub of mobilisation against urban transformation, organising earthquake preparedness and emergency relief campaigns in collaboration with neighbourhood assemblies and grassroots organisations. Following the pandemic, however, most branches were forced to close, leaving only the main office in 1 Mayıs and a collaboration with the Kıvılcım Cultural Center.[2]

A decisive turning point came after the violent anti-migrant riots in Altındağ, Ankara, in 2021 (Ayaşlıoğlu 2021). For the cooperative, which had emerged in a historic gecekondu neighbourhood long marked by revolutionary leftist organising, where student activists once came to mobilise the working class, these events posed the urgent question of how to build solidarity with migrants, whom they conceptualised as 'the lowest segment of the working class', within a vision of class unity among the exploited, moving beyond mere condemnation of the attacks.

Through the personal connections of activists like H., whom I met through a mutual friend and who became my key resource for learning about the group's activities and meeting migrants in Tarlabaşı, the cooperative established ties with migrant families, particularly from African countries, who soon began requesting access to educational programs for their children. As he explained:

> At first, we thought offering education to migrants would only mean include them. But after entering into dialogue, this view changed. They already had their own networks of solidarity. We did not create something out of nothing, rather, we wanted to be part of their struggle. (Interview, Tarlabaşı, October 2023)

This process led to the development of joint activities in Tarlabaşı. There, the cooperative worked with approximately 200 migrant families,

[2] The Kıvılcım Kültür Merkezi (KKM), situated in a narrow street off İstiklal Caddesi, is a cultural space and a community café hosting workshops, discussions, and artistic activities. It was notably used by the Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi to organise Turkish language classes for migrants. See the official page: https://www.instagram.com/kivilcimkulturmerkezi.

of whom around 100 were Nigerian, alongside Ghanaian, Senegalese, Sierra Leonean, Ugandan, Kenyan and Cameroonian families. Most were undocumented, an estimated 90%, and faced the double precarity of irregular status and urban marginalisation. Although only around 20 families participated regularly (mostly Nigerian, with a smaller group from Zimbabwe), many more remained loosely connected through WhatsApp networks, seeking assistance with education and basic needs. The cooperative's main activities consisted of after-school support for children and weekly Turkish lessons, held in the Kıvılcım Cultural Center.

Image 3: After-school activities at Kıvılcım Cultural Center.
Source: Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi. September 2023.

Beyond these formal sessions, activists visited families in Tarlabaşı daily, assisting with school enrollment, guiding children through educational and extracurricular activities, and responding to a wide range of everyday needs, from health and food to clothing. On several occasions, I accompanied an activist to bring children to school, such as the Don Bosco Institute of Caritas in Harbiye, or to meet and talk with people at the Church of Pentecost in Dolapdere, a central gathering place for many African migrants from Tarlabaşı. Through these everyday practices of sup-

port and presence, the cooperative gradually built trust and a strong network of solidarity with migrant families.

The everyday accompaniment and exchange, together with an organisational form largely based on informal networks, repeatedly came up against the harsh realities faced by African migrants in Tarlabaşı, especially those without documents. This situation affected the group's activities and the future of its work in the area. During the weeks in autumn–winter 2023, when I closely followed one of the activists in particular, we learned together of the deportation of members of two undocumented Nigerian families who had been attending the after-school program. Indeed, 2023 marked a significant tightening of migration governance, with intensified control and repressive measures[3] particularly affecting undocumented migrants. G., a young undocumented Ghanaian who left Turkey because he was scared of being deported, said:

> Every day I lived with the fear that the police would stop me in the street. I stopped going out unless I had to because even walking to work or to get food felt unsafe. I couldn't sleep at night because I was always worried they would come to the house. I finally understood that I couldn't live here in constant fear. The only way to keep myself safe was to leave. (Interview, online, February 2024)

When we add to this the problems that the repression of political activities caused for the organisation, such as those of Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi, whose activists were later attacked by racist campaigns that said they were helping migrants who were not wanted in the country, it becomes clearer why the group's activities had to change. Because of these pressures, both migrants and activists adapted their work in different ways, sometimes changing its meaning and other times giving it up altogether. In this kind of environment, organising is getting more uncertain and riskier. As one activist said:

> I don't go there as often anymore and the activity is almost finished, except for a few families. Remaining undocumented is extremely hard,

[3] Among the most notable measures was the implementation and expansion of the *"dilution plan"* (*seyreltme planı*), which set a maximum threshold of 20% foreign residents in neighbourhoods and led to the closure of more than 1,100 neighbourhoods to new foreign registrations (PMM 2023). This policy was accompanied by intensified identity checks, increased detention and deportation practices targeting undocumented migrants, and growing political salience of migration during the 2023 electoral period.

> most try either to move on to another country or return home. Last year, even those who participated regularly said they were only staying long enough to save money to leave. Since there is no real asylum framework for non-European migrants in Turkey, it is not easy to remain irregular here. The controls are still frequent, maybe less intense than during the peak of summer 2023, but it is never safe to stay without papers. (Interview with H., Tarlabaşı, October 2023)

These structural pressures have reshaped the cooperative's activities. Over the past year, many of its initiatives with migrant families have either slowed down or been absorbed into new forms of collaboration. One significant development has been the unification of Mayısta Yaşam's educational programs with those organised by DEM Party,[4] which already provided community-based education for Turkish and Kurdish children in Tarlabaşı. While some of the original activists have stepped back, DEM Party networks have sustained the initiative, bringing together African migrants with local Turkish and Kurdish residents.

This transformation illustrates both the fragility and the resilience of grassroots solidarity in an authoritarian, exclusionary context. On the one hand, repression, irregularity, and forced mobility continuously undermine sustained organising. On the other hand, adapting activities to new political and community infrastructures opens up alternative horizons. The convergence of migrants with Kurdish and Turkish residents in Tarlabaşı has given rise to emerging practices of commoning, understood as collective processes through which communities self-organise to share resources, knowledge, and spaces for mutual well-being and resistance. In this sense, everyday practices observed during fieldwork, such as the exchange of food between neighbours, accompanying children to school, or assisting others in navigating administrative procedures, sometimes bring into contact long-term residents (including Kurdish and Roma families) and recently arrived migrants. While these forms of mutual aid remained situational and uneven, they illustrate how everyday cooperation could emerge around practical needs. In such moments, these gestures went beyond strategies of individual survival. They functioned as forms of collective care and responsibility that privileged relational ties over strictly individual or market-based logics.

Even as precarious conditions push many to leave, the cooperative's legacy endures as part of a broader ecology of grassroots initiatives that persist, adapt, and recombine in the face of authoritarian bordering.

[4] Pro-Kurdish left-wing party that still has its main city branch in the Tarlabaşı area.

NAVIGATING SOLIDARITY IN A PRECARIOUS AND AUTHORITARIAN URBAN CONTEXT

Despite these structural constraints, residents and grassroots actors engage in multiple tactics to sustain solidarity. Migrants rely on informal networks to access housing, share resources, and navigate administrative and policing systems, while community organisations like Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi provide educational and social support, and spaces of recognition. The cooperative's work demonstrates how solidarity is both a practice and a negotiation: it emerges through dialogue with migrant communities, adapts to shifting political and social pressures, and often requires collaboration with other organisations, such as political parties or neighbourhood associations, to remain viable.

The cooperative's recent collaboration with the DEM Party demonstrates how solidarity adapts under authoritarian conditions. Even as some activists have withdrawn, the ongoing educational programs for Turkish, Kurdish, and African children show how grassroots initiatives can endure by forging alliances and navigating political constraints.

Navigating these dynamics also requires managing the temporal and spatial uncertainties inherent in precarious urban contexts. As one activist reflected, many migrant families are caught in a cycle of impermanence, moving between countries or returning home due to the absence of documents, limited resources, and lack of asylum protections. These constraints shape who can participate in collective activities and for how long, making solidarity episodic, fragile, and constantly renegotiated.

For African migrants in particular, navigating everyday life involves constant negotiation of visibility, legality, and spatial movement. Drawing on the literature on "passing" and spatial strategies, migrants employ tactics to remain in or move through spaces with minimal detection (Anderson 2015; Bachellerie 2024; Besteman 2019; Casella Colombeau 2015; Guenebeaud 2017, 2023; Le Courant 2022). These strategies include avoiding main roads or public offices, coordinating movements through trusted networks, and relying on word-of-mouth guidance to minimise exposure to police or administrative scrutiny. Such practices are shaped by the negotiation of white and racialised spaces (Anderson 2015), as migrants navigate zones where their presence is contested or criminalised. Similarly, Bachellerie (2024) highlights the use of visual and spatial tactics to resist surveillance, while Guenebeaud (2017, 2023) and Casella Colombeau (2015) document how migrants in European border contexts continuously adapt to the discretionary practices of state agents. In Tarlabaşı, these dynamics are visible in how residents carefully navigate

neighbourhood routes, schedule school and work activities, and choose clothing that allows them to move unnoticed, everyday tactics that enable survival under precarious conditions and police control.

> I have to meticulously plan my day every day. I make sure my kids leave for school on time, avoid the police by taking different streets, and dress properly, looking like a tourist to avoid drawing unwanted attention to myself. We could be stopped or even deported if I make a mistake. Just to live here, we must exercise extreme caution. (Interview with Y., undocumented Nigerian migrant, Tarlabaşı, November 2022)

Precisely because of these constraints, acts of solidarity take on particular significance. Shared meals across ethnic lines, tutoring sessions, and small-scale community events become more than practical interventions: they are expressions of belonging and mutual care. Even in highly regulated, stigmatised, and precarious urban spaces, residents and migrants find ways to carve out everyday zones of coexistence and negotiation (Bayat 2013).

Tarlabaşı, Haciahmet, and Dolapdere form an interconnected urban area where the lives of migrants and residents intersect daily. I once accompanied an activist from Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi to Pirireis Ortaokulu and Hüviyet Bekir İlkokulu in Haciahmet, often considered part of the Tarlabaşı area, where children from diverse backgrounds, including Kurds, Syrians, two Nigerians, and others, attend school together. In the streets, the bouncing of balls, children calling to friends, and parents exchanging information and warnings create a lively urban soundscape.

In Dolapdere, the Church of Pentecost functions as another focal point for community interaction, and on the same floor, a laundromat hums with activity: clothes being hung, machines clattering, and workers from multiple nationalities coming together.

Despite numerous constraints, over the years, a sense of belonging has emerged, along with the possibility of organising collectively to improve living conditions. E., who lived in Istanbul for a while and has since returned to his country, recounts:

> I had to leave Turkey…but during these years I participated in social life, played music, and tried to build networks of solidarity. That's where I felt I could do something for other migrants. (Interview, online, December 2023)

Children also demonstrate their own creative ways of situating themselves within the neighbourhood. When asked "Where are you from?", a Cameroonian child jokingly replies, "Tarlabaşı" signaling that his daily experience is deeply rooted in the narrow streets and vibrant life of the area.

Amid the noise of vehicles, the smell of food cooking in courtyards, and conversations in multiple languages, this interconnected area emerges as a space of intense coexistence, solidarity, and everyday tactics of adaptation and subtle resistance.

In Tarlabaşı, navigating solidarity involves more than providing services or aid: it requires constant negotiation. Grassroots initiatives operate at the intersection of need and risk, mediating the pressures of authoritarian governance while creating everyday spaces where difference, coexistence, and collective action can take root. The cooperative's work, along with the larger support networks it works with, shows how solidarity can be both limited and productive: it can be fragile but still have an impact, it can be short-lived but still last, and it is always closely tied to the political and spatial realities of the urban borderland.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of migrants in Tarlabaşı, together with the interventions of the Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi, show how solidarity is practiced and negotiated within urban spaces shaped by authoritarian governance, spatial marginalisation, and legal precarity. These neighbourhoods' histories as urban borderlands, where policing, stigmatisation, and the constant threat of eviction structure daily life, render conventional forms of organising difficult and contingent. Within this environment, migrants, particularly African and undocumented ones, employ subtle tactics of passing (Bachellerie 2024; Guenebeaud 2017, 2023), navigating controls, and managing visibility, demonstrating agency despite restrictive legal and social conditions. These tactics are reinforced by intra-community networks and inter-community alliances fostered by grassroots initiatives, providing educational support, mutual aid, and avenues for collective practice.

The case of Tarlabaşı and the Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi illustrates the complex terrain of solidarity in neighbourhoods experiencing urban transformation, social marginalisation, and authoritarian control. Overlapping forms of exclusion make participation in collective initiatives contingent on legal status and the capacity to navigate both material and symbolic precariousness. Within this context, questions arise about the kinds of solidarity networks that can exist in contemporary Turkey.

Citizenship and legitimacy remain largely defined through Turkishness, constraining spaces for migrant agency. Yet urban struggles have historically been central: from the mid-20th century, gecekondu neighbourhoods inhabited by internal migrants from disadvantaged regions, particularly the Kurdish-majority Southeast, developed strong traditions of self-organisation, often supported by leftist movements in the 1970s and later by various associations. Since the Gezi protests, international migrants have increasingly participated in these practices, particularly in metropolitan areas such as Tarlabaşı. However, Turkey has not witnessed large-scale, self-organised migrant movements demanding documentation or broad networks of associations comparable to other contexts. Instead, since the late 2010s, a proliferation of migrant-focused associations has emerged, yet migrant agency within these organisations often remains uncertain. Nonetheless, some initiatives, mainly led by Turkish citizens, have sought to create locally grounded, self-managed forms of solidarity that transcend national borders. Even in the absence of large-scale migrant-led movements, subtle practices of negotiation and resistance continue to emerge in neighbourhoods and workplaces, enabling migrants to assert themselves against increasingly repressive conditions.

The work of the Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi exemplifies the adaptive nature of such solidarity. By combining structured educational activities with neighbourhood-based engagement, often in collaboration with local actors such as political parties, churches, and cultural centers, the cooperative simultaneously addresses immediate material needs and fosters conditions for migrant participation, socialisation, and mutual support. This dual approach highlights the relational and negotiated character of solidarity: it responds to structural constraints while generating new social and spatial arrangements within marginalised urban spaces.

Ultimately, the case of the Mayısta Yaşam Kooperatifi demonstrates that under conditions of heightened precarity and authoritarian regulation, solidarity is not merely reactive or charitable. It constitutes a form of situated agency that transforms migrants' everyday experiences, strengthens collective capacities, and incrementally reshapes the neighbourhood's social and spatial dynamics. By examining these processes, this study contributes to broader debates on urban precarity and migration, as well as on the capacity of grassroots initiatives to foster spaces of coexistence and mutual support. It highlights how solidarity networks operate, adapt, and endure Europe's periphery under authoritarian conditions.

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