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‘It is normal, that is, difficult’: Care obligation and solidarity in Balkan-Swiss families during the COVID-19 pandemic

ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamics of care obligations and family solidarity within Balkan-Swiss families, specifically concerning ageing parents, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through interviews with adult children residing in Switzerland whose ageing parents reside in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia, we uncover the challenges exacerbated by the pandemic’s global border closures and lockdowns. Our conceptual framework places a spotlight on family solidarity, central during our interviews in contrast to major discussions in social science literature on ageing in cross-border families revolving around moral obligation. We explore how family solidarity plays a pivotal role in the support systems for ageing parents in the interviewed families. We contextualize by the history of migration between the Balkans and Switzerland and the relevant migration

KEYWORDS

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1. By using the term 'ageing parents', we emphasize the ageing process, referring to individuals over 65 years of age, the legal age of retirement in Switzerland and most of the south-east European states where the interviewees have family.

laws before we shed light on the conditions of parents in the Balkans both before and during the pandemic. We analyse the impact of international border closures on family relationships, support structures and international travel patterns. We highlight a pattern of cooperation and unity, a solidarity as it manifests in specific relationships within families. Yet, the notion of solidarity encompasses the broader 'public' sphere and social movements. Solidary connections transcend one's immediate (family) circle, encompassing also a global dimension of solidarity. We argue that the intricate dynamics of cross-border family caregiving for ageing parents during the COVID-19 pandemic represent a contemporary social issue suitable for discussion in the context of the solidarity concept. This discussion, we believe, offers a valuable contribution to the discourses on solidarity.

'IT IS NORMAL, THAT IS, DIFFICULT': CARE OBLIGATION AND SOLIDARITY IN BALKAN-SWISS FAMILIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

When asked about his ageing mother's residence in North Macedonia, an interviewee residing in Switzerland responded, 'it is normal, that is, difficult'. The man conveys his sentiments about an added layer of complexity inherent in cross-generational, cross-border familial relationships. The fact that his mother resides abroad amplifies the intricacies of their relationship, rendering it more demanding, yet, to him, this remains commonplace. A second interviewee delves into the emotionally taxing situation concerning his grandmother: 'One thing remains unalterable. We are in Switzerland, and she resides in Kosovo. That's precisely why it's difficult; there is always something missing, rendering it always unsatisfying. In truth, we are far from being sufficiently present'. This article investigates the paradox of the normal challenges of maintaining connections from Switzerland to ageing parents¹ in the Balkan countries. Yet, we examine the obligation of care within a regional and social context distinct from the context Baldassar (2015) studied.

The first contextual shift pertains to the region because we conducted interviews with adult children in Switzerland regarding their relationships with their ageing parents in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia. The second shift relates to the time frame. Our interviews took place in 2021, one year after the global border closures and lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The social and health crisis serves as a lens, highlighting the peculiarities of transnational family ties and the ensuing action strategies for analysis.

In the realm of social science literature, discussions on cross-border family networks and the added challenges of caring for ageing parents in foreign countries often revolve around feelings of guilt or moral obligations (Attias-Donfut and Gallou 2006; Baldassar 2015; Mahfoudh et al. 2021; Merla et al. 2021). Increasingly stringent migration regulations, particularly within trans-European family networks, and incompatible social security systems complicate this care, despite the growing prevalence of such networks (Brandhorst et al. 2021).

Similar to Baldassar (2015) and Baldassar and Merla (2014) we are intrigued by the action strategies that emerge as consequences of moral commitments. However, instead of focusing on guilt, our interest is focused on the concept of family solidarity, which was central in our interviews. We explore the applicability of the notion of family solidarity (Trummer and Novak-Zezula 2017) in analysing the support provided to ageing parents in Balkan-Swiss families.

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The situations mentioned in the interviews go beyond the (partially legally defined) support obligations within the framework of a traditional nuclear family with two generations, hinting at a cooperative and solidarity-based relationship as described in family sociology (Ecarius and Schierbaum 2018: 374).

We acknowledge that, apart from familial ‘private’ solidarity, this notion typically refers to the ‘public’ sphere (Paugam 2015: 959) and social movements (Negrín Da Silva 2018; Roth 2018), perhaps because, in Roman law, solidarity already denoted ‘a specific form of mutual liability’ (Lessenich et al. 2020: 320). Alongside the axes of political-social, institutional-individual, unilateral or reciprocal, stabilizing-transforming, Lessenich et al. 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 (Lessenich et al. 2020). We start with these concrete family relationships, believing that the complexity of cross-border family care for ageing parents remains a contemporary social issue even after the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion of the concept of solidarity can thus provide a valuable contribution.

We analyse this conceptual matter based on the everyday action strategies of adult children living in Switzerland in relation to their ageing parents residing in the Balkans, particularly during the state lockdowns resulting from COVID-19. Our focus revolves around the following questions: what was the status of parents in the Balkans prior to the COVID-19 pandemic? How did the pandemic, characterized by international border closures, impact family relationships, support for parents, and travel patterns between Switzerland and the Balkans?

To contextualize the empirical section, we first elucidate the concept of family solidarity within the context of informal support for ageing parents in cross-border family networks. We delve into the migration history between the Balkans and Switzerland, as well as the Swiss migration laws applicable to Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia. Following our methodological approach, we present the findings concerning the support dynamics before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we discuss the utility of the concept of family solidarity in the context of ageing parents in Balkan-Swiss families.

FAMILY SOLIDARITY AND CARE OBLIGATION FOR AGEING PARENTS IN CROSS-BORDER FAMILY NETWORKS

A cross-border family network constitutes a multigenerational family whose members maintain a sense of unity despite residing in different countries for extended periods. It can be described as a ‘family community across national boundaries’ (Cienfuegos et al. 2023: 3). The residence places of such families transcend national and cultural borders, necessitating a dynamic perspective to comprehend the complexity and diversity of these familial networks (Bolzman 2023: 170). The specific configuration of these families is contingent upon the birthplaces of their members, their places of residence, cultural and geographical references, social positionings and lifestyles. The network’s structure evolves as each member progresses through his or her life course.

Kosovar, North Macedonian and Serbian-Swiss family networks are characterized as ‘multi-local, multi-generational’, where ‘generational family

solidarity holds significant importance' (Ammann Dula 2019: 25). Given our emphasis on social practices and the concept of 'doing family' (Morgan 2011: 5), a dynamic understanding of family is more fitting than the historically static notion of the 'South-East European pattern of household formation' where male siblings and sometimes cousins form a solidary extended family (Aarburg and Gretler 2011: 204). A dynamic conception of family is especially pertinent as each family member, both in the Balkan countries and in Switzerland, tends to approach the traditional idea of family with varying degrees of detachment, shaped by gender and age, and develops individual perspectives on family relations.

Our primary focus lies in intergenerational solidarity as a distinct cooperative relationship within multi-local family networks, where the younger generation assumes the responsibility of caring for ageing parents in the country of origin of the latter (cf. the typology by Bolzman 2023: 172). 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 (2017: 68) at the Center for Health and Migration in Vienna. The authors use the intergenerational notion of solidarity, developed in family sociology by Bengtson and Oyama (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; (6) normative solidarity relates to the degree of commitment to other family members.

The moral obligation of migrants to care for their ageing parents often leads to feelings of guilt 'for not being physically present' (Baldassar 2015: 83). This guilt is compounded by the sense of abandonment felt towards other family members due to migration. These sentiments of guilt give rise to a moral obligation to stay in touch with ageing parents through regular and frequent communication or financial support (associative solidarity). The more dominant the normative understanding of solidarity, the more important the moral obligation becomes. Trummer and Novak-Zezula (2017) 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 only marginal (Dübgen et al. 2022). For social development, individuals require communities of solidarity, akin to the solidarity found in intergenerational living arrangements within families (or other forms of everyday cohabitation). Solidarity starts in concrete relationships within the family, neighbourhood or workplace (Lessenich et al. 2020: 322). However, as a universal principle, it must transcend one's immediate group. During the COVID-19 pandemic,

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in many regions of Switzerland, neighbourly assistance rooted in solidarity alleviated the isolation experienced by ageing persons (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 et al. 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). However, the welfare state primarily emphasizes control since contributions to social security systems are mandatory and not founded on solidarity. Moreover, no one should unduly benefit from social security.

Cross-border family solidarity is 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 et al. (2021) seek effective care strategies for ageing individuals within cross-border families. These authors 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' (Bomert and Schilliger 2021: 238) in the international care labour sector such an infrastructure could bolster social security and the care of ageing parents in cross-border family networks.

PERSONS FROM KOSOVO, NORTH MACEDONIA AND SERBIA IN SWITZERLAND

Migration from the Balkans to Switzerland initiated in the 1960s. Up until the 1980s, the primary influx consisted of seasonal labour migration, occasionally accompanied by family reunification (Burri Sharani et al. 2010: 25). Since the 1980s, but particularly during the Yugoslav Wars (1991–99), over 200,000 persons sought refuge in Switzerland, often to join their relatives. Many departed voluntarily or were compelled to leave Switzerland after the wars. For approximately two decades, persons from Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia have constituted roughly 3 per cent of Switzerland's population, which comprises not quite 9 million people. Moreover, they represent about 10 per cent of Switzerland's foreign resident population, numbering 2.5 million. In contrast, the Bosnian, Croatian and Montenegrin population in Switzerland is relatively smaller.

In 2021, approximately 330,000 individuals, from Kosovo (133,000), North Macedonia (100,000) and Serbia (90,000) were residents in Switzerland (Office Fédéral de la Statistique 2022). In the same year, roughly 20 per cent of this population has acquired Swiss citizenship, 60 per cent held permanent residence permits (C), while 20 per cent had annual residence permits (B). Only a few held refugee statuses. On an annual basis, an average of around 6000 individuals with origins in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia apply for naturalization, two-thirds of these naturalized persons being born in Switzerland.

In 2007, there were approximately 8000 persons aged 60–69 from Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia residing in Switzerland, along with just under 1000 individuals aged over 70 (Burri Sharani et al. 2010: 33). This suggests that most of these ageing persons may have returned to the Balkans. Although not all of the ageing parents within the interviewed families had migrated

2. <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaefte?AffairId=20190464>. Accessed 1 October 2023.

themselves, it is noteworthy that the number of people aged over 65 from the Balkans residing in Switzerland tripled within fifteen years. This points to an increasingly common scenario of adult children from the Balkans residing in Switzerland while their ageing parents remain in the Balkans. In 2017, 16,074 individuals aged over 65 from Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia resided in Switzerland (Johner-Kobi et al. 2020: 25), and by 2021, this number had risen to approximately 24,000 (Office Fédéral des Statistiques 2022).

THE MIGRATION LAW SITUATION FOR PERSONS FROM KOSOVO, NORTH MACEDONIA AND SERBIA

None of these three countries nor Switzerland, are members of the European Union. North Macedonia and Serbia have been EU accession candidates for over a decade, and their citizens, as well as Kosovars, do not require a visa for short stays in Switzerland. (This was entered in force on 1 January 2024.)

Access to Switzerland

Switzerland distinguishes between nationals of EU member states, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) (Norway, Liechtenstein, Iceland, Switzerland), and individuals from outside these regions with regards to entry and residence. Under bilateral agreements, EU and EFTA nationals have the right to enter Switzerland and reside for longer periods, subject to certain conditions. On the other hand, individuals from outside the European Union and EFTA face restrictive conditions for entry and residence in Switzerland. These restrictions also apply to trans-European families hailing from non-EU/EFTA countries (Thurnherr 2017; Caroni et al. 2022; Uebersax et al. 2021). Notably, Switzerland applies even more restrictive rules for the admission of individuals from non-EU/EFTA countries, especially in cases involving trans-European families, including those from the Balkans.

Residence permit for ageing parents

The ability to secure family reunification for ageing parents hinges on the legal status of the individuals already residing in Switzerland. Swiss nationals or foreign nationals with a (permanent) residence permit have the possibility or are entitled to, family reunification with their foreign spouses and unmarried children under the age of 18 (Art. 42, Art. 43, Art. 44 [Federal Act of 16 December 2005 on Foreign Nationals and Integration (FNIA) 2019]). However, they do not have the same entitlement for their parents (Federal Supreme Court 2012). Consequently, individuals holding Kosovar, North Macedonian or Serbian (permanent) residence permits or Swiss nationality are not eligible to bring their parents to Switzerland through family reunification, as the Swiss legal framework does not provide for this option.

Nonetheless, Kosovar, North Macedonian and Serbian individuals holding EU/EFTA (permanent) residence permits are eligible for family reunification with their parents in Switzerland (Caroni et al. 2022; Uebersax et al. 2021). Presently, the Swiss national parliament is deliberating an amendment to the law that would allow family reunification in ascending lines for Swiss nationals and their relatives, as well as the relatives of foreign spouses.²

For ageing parents of extra-EU/EFTA nationals like those from North Macedonia, Kosovo or Serbia living in Switzerland, there are two options for applying for a residence permit. The first option is to enter and stay in

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Switzerland for visiting purposes, limited to a specified period. North Macedonian and Serbian parents visiting Switzerland for up to 90 days do not require a visa, while visas are necessary for stays exceeding 90 days (Caroni et al. 2022; Uebersax et al. 2021). Until the end of 2023, Kosovar nationals’ parents have the option of applying for a Schengen visa. This entails completing a visa application and attaching documents such as an invitation letter from one of their children. If the visa is granted, the parent can stay with their children for up to 90 days, after which they must depart Switzerland. Such a visa facilitates short-term family reunification, allowing occasional visits to Kosovo-Swiss families. Starting from 1 January 2024, such a visa will no longer be required. Nevertheless, due to administrative procedures and the uncertainty surrounding its issuance, this scenario necessitates thorough preparation (Infantino 2019).

A second option for ageing parents to reside with their relatives already living in Switzerland is to apply for independent residence in Switzerland. If parents over the age of 65 wish to stay in Switzerland with their own residence permit, they must apply to Swiss authorities for an independent permit. The FNIA Act stipulates that foreign nationals who are no longer employed, are at least 55 years old, and share a special personal relationship with Switzerland can apply for such a residence permit. The term ‘special relationship with Switzerland’ is broad; it may include the presence of family members in Switzerland, although it is not a strict requirement. Therefore, any foreigner aged 55 or older can apply for an independent residence permit. Additionally, the individual must demonstrate the financial means to sustain their stay in Switzerland, covering living expenses and insurance in accordance with Swiss standards (Art. 28 FNIA). In 2011, only 110 such residence permits were granted, and it remains unclear how many applications are made, as these permits are generally not statistically recorded (Romano 2012).

These regulations underscore that the Swiss migration framework only sparingly permits the entry of ageing parents of Kosovar-Swiss, North Macedonian and Serbian-Swiss families, with numerous limitations in place. Consequently, providing care for parents necessitates bridging geographical distances. Unless the parents themselves had migrated earlier and obtained an independent residence permit, they cannot reside in Switzerland. For Kosovar-Swiss families in particular, making swift decisions is a formidable challenge; ageing parents may require medical assistance, and the administrative complexities of visa applications for short-term visits are time-consuming, expensive and challenging to navigate (Mahfoudh et al. 2021).

Leaving Switzerland for retirement: The risk of losing the (permanent) residence permit

The risk of losing the (permanent) residence permit in Switzerland is another significant concern for Kosovar, North Macedonian or Serbian persons. Residence permits are typically granted for a limited duration, while permanent residence permits are issued for an indefinite period. However, if holders of a (permanent) residence permit leave Switzerland, such as when they retire to Kosovo, North Macedonia or Serbia, there is a risk that their (permanent) residence permit may expire. A (permanent) residence permit becomes invalid if the holder stays abroad for six months without notifying the relevant authorities. An unlimited residence permit can retain its validity for an additional four years, but only upon application (Art. 61 FNIA). Additionally,

3. We found the interviewed families thanks to the personal and professional network of the research team members. Our criteria were the following: adult children with ageing parents in the chosen Balkan region; two families from Kosovo, two from North Macedonia and two from Serbia. All families had to live in the canton of Valais, three in the French-speaking part and three in the German-speaking part. All interviewees signed an informed consent and our research project (including ethical concerns) was approved by the intergenerational research axis of the HES-SO Valais-Wallis, the funding institution.

foreign individuals who fail to report their departure intentionally may face fines of up to CHF 5000 (Art. 120 FNIA).

Consequently, the Swiss migration regime places stringent restrictions on the admission of ageing parents from third countries. Moreover, Kosovar, North Macedonian or Serbian (permanent) residents in Switzerland may risk losing their legal residency if they leave Switzerland indefinitely. Only naturalization in Switzerland, i.e. acquiring Swiss citizenship, eliminates the risk of losing the right of residence in Switzerland (Art. 24 [Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation of 18 April 1999 2000]), although the Swiss Citizenship Act (SCA) permits the revocation of acquired Swiss nationality in certain circumstances (Art. 36 SCA).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The question of caring for ageing parents within Balkan-Swiss families is intriguing because, in contrast to other migrant groups in Switzerland (Ciobanu et al. 2020; Nedelcu and Wyss 2020) – there is a lack of studies on this subject. The complex migration history between the Balkan states and Switzerland, along with the demographic and economic significance of these communities for Switzerland, their geographic proximity, and their non-European states of origin, which translates into a restrictive migration regime, are the primary motivators behind our research interest.

Between June and September 2021, we conducted research interviews with six families³ whose ageing parents reside in Kosovo, North Macedonia or Serbia (Ajeti and Carlen 2022). We specifically focused on their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The empirical data used in this article is derived from these interviews. Additionally, between January and June 2023, we conducted six further interviews with ageing persons from the Balkans living in Switzerland, along with three interviews with social workers responsible for the care of ageing persons from the Balkans. Those interviews only provide contextual data for this article.

The six families we interviewed in 2021 were partly of multiple heritage. The six previously mentioned families' ethnicities consist of two Kosovar, one North Macedonian, one Serbian, one Kosovar-North Macedonian and one Bosnian-Serbian-Montenegrin. Among the adult children in these families, there was a mix of first- and second-generation migrants, with migration motives including flight, labour migration and immigration as children with their parents. Four of these families have been naturalized, one family holds permanent residence permits, and one family has an annual residence permit. Of the twelve pairs of ageing parents in these families, three reside in Switzerland, three are widows living in Kosovo and North Macedonia and six parental couples live in North Macedonia or Serbia.

Inspired by qualitative research methods in healthcare, we chose to carry out family interviews (Bell 2017). 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 parents is a family endeavour, with the definition of 'family' not necessarily limited to biological ties or 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

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relationship with the ageing parents. The interviews were primarily conducted with the adult children. Two interviews involved married couples, three interviews were with adult daughters (one also included an adult granddaughter), and one interview featured an adult son.⁴

In four interviews, the focus was on the parents of sons, while in two interviews, daughters discussed their parents’ situations. We have collected data pertaining to five situations of ageing parents in a Balkan country (in the case of the family who fled, the parents reside in Switzerland). Henceforth, we shall exclusively refer to the parents in the Balkans being paramount in the interviews, thus comprising three widows and two couples.

Subsequently, we present the life situations in terms of the support services provided by adult children for their parents. Based on this, we will highlight how the support setting changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the final discussion, we will analyse the differences in the context of the concept of family solidarity.

THE CARE SITUATION OF AGEING PARENTS IN THE BALKANS BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

Conducting content analysis regarding support arrangements has proven to be a challenging endeavour, owing to the myriad factors involved. The criteria of health, the management of everyday life, the financial circumstances, housing arrangements, places of residence and marital status all proved to be pertinent.

The two ageing married couples are in good health and are largely self-sufficient. The widows, on the other hand, require daily care assistance. One couple enjoys a comfortable financial situation, while all other parents receive financial support from their children. One couple and one widow reside in an urban setting, whereas one couple and two widows live with their other adult children in rural areas. However, the most significant disparity lies in their marital status. Consequently, in the following two sub-chapters, we shall first present the situation of the three widows. Thereafter, we will expand on the circumstances of the two couples.

Ms E. resides in her own house in a rural area of Kosovo. She lives with her daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. The husband of the daughter-in-law, Ms E.’s son, resides in Italy with two other children, which means that this nuclear family of an adult child is permanently living apart. Ms E., who faces mobility challenges, requires assistance with tasks such as getting into and out of bed. To aid her daughter-in-law in caregiving, one of Ms E.’s four daughters, who all live nearby, always and alternately sleeps in Ms E.’s house. Ms E., who is approximately 70 years old and has experienced declining health over the past two years, receives weekly check-ups from a nurse, a doctor and a physiotherapist. Despite her children’s suggestions to hire a professional nurse, she rejects the idea. The primary responsibility and burden of care remain with the daughter-in-law, who manages all aspects of caregiving. Financial support for Ms E. is provided by her son in Italy and two sons in Switzerland.

Ms A. resides in a rural area in North Macedonia and receives a pension of 200 euros. As a pensioner, she is entitled to free medical care, which is advantageous, as Ms A. requires a specialized diet and fixed meal times. Ms A.’s son in North Macedonia provides her with a flat in his self-built house, free of charge. However, Ms A. minimizes her interactions with her daughter-in-law,

4. The research assistant met for the six family interviews ten persons in total. One interview was carried out with an adult child, her sister and her adult daughter; two interviews were carried out with a couple of adult children; three interviews were carried out each with one adult child. The age of the persons interviewed ranged between 20 and 50. We were looking for adult children with ageing parents in one of the three Balkan countries, two of each country of origin. All the interview partners signed an informed consent. As we guaranteed anonymization, no specific names nor places or other items that may identify the interview partners are used.

with whom she does not get on well. To compensate for the lack of contact, her son from Switzerland visits Ms A. approximately four times a year, staying for ten days each time, either alone or with his family. During the summer holidays, the entire family from Switzerland visits for a longer period. The son from Switzerland covers all additional expenses and provides support to his mother during his visits.

Ms I. resides in a city in Kosovo and receives a pension of 70 euros. Her pension is mainly allocated to purchasing medicines and cigarettes. Three of her sons are war veterans and possess a UÇK card, which grants them access to free medical treatment. Ms I. also avails herself of this offer, particularly as her health is deteriorating. Following her husband's passing two years ago, she has been living in the house of her second son. The three older sons financed the construction of three houses adjacent to each other, each with a room for their mother, allowing her to choose where she wants to live. Her fourth and youngest son resides in Norway, while her four daughters live elsewhere in Kosovo. The third son, who lives in Switzerland, occasionally sends money for special expenses and fully supports Ms I. during his visits, covering all costs, including outings and trips.

Mr and Ms V. reside in the countryside in Serbia in the house inherited from Mr V.'s parents. They have their own flat, but their son and his family reside in the same house, and they usually eat together. Apart from Mr V.'s elevated blood pressure, both Mr and Ms V. are in good health. Their son manages a farm on the side. While Ms V. looks after their three grandchildren, Mr V. assists his son on the farm. Mr V. receives a pension, having previously worked in the village agricultural cooperative. Their daughter, who resides in Switzerland with her husband, occasionally purchases clothing for her parents, which she then brings with her on her visits. Furthermore, she provides her parents with a few hundred euros during each visit. While their son in Serbia would prefer to have a house of his own without his parents, the daughter feels that she has 'no family' in Switzerland, only her husband and their two daughters. She acknowledges this contradiction, as placing her parents in a nursing home would be akin to treating them as if they were deceased, yet she herself would not want to be cared for by her daughter.

Mr and Ms D. live in a city in North Macedonia and are in good health, aside from Mr D.'s stents. Mr D., a retired teacher, receives a pension that allows the couple to lead a comfortable life. They have sold a portion of their land to purchase a small flat in the city centre, which is conveniently situated near shops and medical facilities. Mr D.'s sister operates the town's emergency room, ensuring that Mr and Ms D. have access to prompt medical care if required. Additionally, the couple owns a house by the sea in Albania, a four-hour drive away in their own car. This serves as a meeting point for the extended family and is the summer residence for everyone. The sons in Switzerland and the daughter, who resides in Germany with her family, rent houses in the same area during the summer months. Even the parents of Mr and Ms D.'s daughter-in-law, along with her two brothers, who reside in North Macedonia, join the gathering in Albania. The daughter-in-law considers these collective summer holidays as an obligation, noting,

The problem is that we never change the destination; we have to go there. We feel obliged to go there. The children inquire, we discuss other destinations, but when the time comes to decide, we choose Albania. It is difficult for us; they are often alone, and they don't see their

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grandchildren grow up. That is our fate; they have to live there, and we can live here.

THE CHANGES IN SUPPORT FOR AGEING PARENTS AND TRAVEL DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

To present the support services, strategies implemented to ensure the care of ageing parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to analyse the alterations in travel patterns and the relevance of the concept of solidarity, it is crucial to revisit the situation as of March 2020. For everyone in Europe, including those with Kosovar-Swiss, North Macedonian-Swiss and Serbian-Swiss backgrounds, mid-March 2020 marked a significant turning point. Due to COVID-19, international airports closed, and countries shut their borders to foreigners, imposed curfews, and, in some cases, declared a state of emergency. Serbia closed its borders on 10 March 2020, declared a state of emergency on 15 March, and implemented a night curfew on 18 March, subsequently imposing a total curfew for individuals aged 65 and above. Kosovo closed its airports on 16 March 2020. North Macedonia shut its airports and borders to all foreign nationals on 18 March 2020, and declared a national state of emergency for 30 days. Switzerland initiated a six-week closure of all non-essential businesses on 16 March 2020, followed by border and airport closures on 25 March. Kosovo introduced a night curfew and closed all non-essential businesses on 28 March.

The reopening of shops, services, restaurants and public spaces for social, cultural and sporting activities unfolded at varying paces in each country. It commenced gradually, starting in Serbia in May 2020, followed by Kosovo, North Macedonia and Switzerland in June 2020. By the end of July 2020, nearly all borders and airports had reopened. However, restrictions were reintroduced from October 2020, coinciding with a surge in COVID-19 cases, until mass vaccination efforts began to show results in February 2021. International travel gradually resumed in March and April 2021 but faced another threat in August 2021 due to a surge in COVID-19 cases and the emergence of a new virus variant in November 2021.⁵

This period of a state of emergency and curfews evoked memories of the 1990s Yugoslav Wars for persons in the region. The fear and sense of isolation during this key period of the COVID-19 pandemic were palpable especially for people living in the Balkans, a social worker counselling person from the Balkans in Switzerland recalls. For the adult children, it was the fear of their parents contracting the virus and suddenly dying of it that weighed heavily on their minds.

Ms E., who was well cared for and supported by her daughter-in-law and daughters in Kosovo, did not fear the coronavirus. She viewed it as a minor issue and opted not to get vaccinated. Remarkably, she did not fall ill until the summer of 2021. The caregiving arrangement for Ms E. remained unchanged during the pandemic, with her daughter-in-law and daughters continuing to provide care, while her children living abroad provided financial support. As soon as international airports reopened at the end of June 2020, her son in Switzerland resumed his regular visits to see his mother, disregarding the COVID-19 pandemic. The only interruption was the absence of the family’s summer vacations in Kosovo for one year.

In contrast, Ms A., who had a strained relationship with her daughter-in-law living in the same house, struggled during the national emergency

5. It is not possible to enumerate all measures within the scope of this text; the database of the project by Piccoli et al. (2021) provides a global, interactive statistical insight into border closures and travel restrictions: <https://nccr-onthemove.ch/publications/citizenship-migration-and-mobility-in-a-pandemic-cmmp-a-global-dataset-of-covid-19-restrictions-on-human-movement/>, Accessed 30 November 2021.

with curfews in Kosovo. She rarely ventured outside her home and, when she did, took extra precautions, wearing two face masks to protect against COVID-19. Loneliness engulfed her, exacerbated by the inability of her family from Switzerland to visit for over a year. Her son and grandchildren from Switzerland maintained contact, making three or four video calls daily via Skype, FaceTime or WhatsApp. The planned minimum of four one-week visits per year and a longer visit during the summer holidays were cancelled in 2020. In an effort to bridge the gap, the family in Switzerland attempted to invite Ms A. to visit them, which would have been possible with a more than 500 euros additional health insurance coverage in Switzerland. However, Ms A. hesitated to travel by plane, as no health insurance would cover potential COVID-19-related costs during the trip. Finally, in March 2021, the entire family travelled to North Macedonia for a few days, marking a moment of relief. In August 2021, when the pandemic situation seemed less desolate, the family eagerly spent their holidays in North Macedonia again.

In the case of Ms I., the travel behaviour of her son in Switzerland during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the importance of being anchored not only in a three-generation family, but in a widespread family network. Throughout the interview, it became clear that the whole family, including cousins and aunts, do pitch in, e.g. to build a house or buy a car. Ms I.'s son travelled by car, even when it was actually not allowed, the daughter-in-law reports:

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.

The quote underlines the crucial importance of financial support from relatives abroad. This became even more evident during the pandemic. The couple explains that they had to take care of family members despite the geographical distance, because the strict Swiss migration laws almost prohibit visits by people from Kosovo. The visa procedure, and health insurance process take three to four months and the financial guarantees for five years required by the Swiss authorities to cover all possible costs for one person are not affordable for 'normal' earners.

Ms and Mr V.'s son was the first who contracted COVID-19 in the village, followed by Ms V. and then Mr V. Their daughter from Switzerland visited her parents in Serbia in spring 2020, immediately after borders reopened. She stated,

When Covid-19 hit in March, I continued visiting my parents in May and June, even when they had 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.

To see her parents, the daughter willingly took unpaid leave on each visit and endured an additional ten days of unpaid leave for quarantine upon her return to Switzerland. She remarked, '[i]t doesn't matter; you do it for your parents'.

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In the case of Ms and Mr D., the fear of contracting COVID-19 weighed heavily on their minds, exacerbated by strict curfews in North Macedonia. They felt isolated and confined within their home. Only Mr D. ventured outside to go grocery shopping. Although their daughter, who lives nearby, occasionally visited, the children and grandchildren from Switzerland called, texted or video-called multiple times each day. Similarly, the rhythm of their collective summer holidays in Albania was disrupted until the summer of 2021, marking over a year without visits from their family in Switzerland. The daughter-in-law also found this period particularly challenging, noting, '[w]e couldn't go, and they didn't want to come'. She had hoped to invite her own parents, who had returned to North Macedonia after living in Switzerland for 30 years. Flight tickets had been purchased by the family in Switzerland for June 2020 but could not be utilized due to the delayed reopening of international airports and borders at the end of June 2020. In addition to the financial loss incurred from unused flight tickets, her parents would have been subjected to stringent border control measures, despite their three decades of residence in Switzerland.

CONCLUSION: EXCLUSIVE, DISTINCT FAMILY SOLIDARITY IN THE MIGRATION CONTEXT AND ITS FUTURE

By and large, the concept of solidarity among the individuals interviewed, who have ageing parents in the Balkans, appears to revolve around particularism, specifically oriented towards their own family network. This notion of solidarity stands apart from the state structures of social security in Switzerland. One might question whether this perspective is influenced by the rural Swiss context where all the persons interviewed in 2021 reside, and where family solidarity in general appears to hold significant importance.

Firstly, the reported situations align with the six dimensions of family solidarity in the migration context, as outlined in the pilot study by Trummer and Novak-Zezula (2017). However, taking up the six conceptual terms used by Trummer and Novak-Zezula for the dimensions of family solidarity the following specifications can be made.

Structural solidarity, which encompasses geographical distance, indeed restricts joint activities, with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating these limitations. It is important to note that the rigid Swiss migration laws also play a role in constraining family interactions.

Associative solidarity, referring to the frequency of contacts and joint activities, underwent a paradoxical evolution during the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual contacts surged exponentially, primarily driven by concerns over loneliness and the fear of losing parents suddenly. Joint activities were nearly halted due to border closures, lockdowns and curfews but swiftly resumed whenever feasible.

Affective solidarity, denoting emotional closeness, faced severe challenges during the pandemic as expressions of emotional closeness were constrained to virtual interactions.

Consensual solidarity, which pertains to agreement on opinions, values and lifestyles, exhibited a surprisingly high level of alignment among the interviewed families. Traditional patriarchal family values and inter-generational patterns of cooperation still hold sway, emphasizing the enduring expectation that children should express gratitude to their parents throughout their lives and actively demonstrate this by care and financial support.

Functional solidarity tends to be divided along gender and place of residence lines, with women primarily responsible for caregiving, while financial support being provided by local men and both men and women residing abroad.

Normative solidarity, signifying the sense of obligation, is prominently pronounced among the interviewed families. This sense of obligation was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic as support options dwindled to remote forms of assistance.

Secondly, the support situations described by the interviewees for their ageing parents align with the concept of solidarity characterized by a feeling of obligation, as described by Baldassar (2015). The physical absence resulting from migration hinders the possibility to provide daily care for parents, leading to feelings of guilt, as the responsibility to care for parents is considered a duty by the offspring. The geographical distance remains a persistent challenge, and the feeling of never doing enough lingers, creating a constant source of emotional strain.

However, it is worth noting that compared to Baldassar's empirical data, the individuals from the Balkans in Switzerland are not solely lifestyle and labour migrants; they also include refugees and exiles. Moreover, the cross-border context between the Balkan countries and Switzerland is shaped by the norms of extended family networks as well as nuclear families. The sense of obligation, as accurately depicted by Baldassar, is present in all the interviewed families. The situation of flight and exile adds to the sense of gratitude towards Switzerland, which has 'done so much for us'. Consequently, as reports the interviewed social worker, it becomes challenging to make claims for entitlements, even when people are eligible for pension credits. They either hesitate to request these benefits or are unaware of their eligibility.

Solidarity, in this context, exhibits a collective orientation that begins within one's own affiliation group, the family network and extends beyond family-bound duty to encompass broader social contexts. This social, public dimension of solidarity enables the conceptualization of solidarity between the migrant and non-migrant populations in Switzerland. Recognizing the contributions made by migrants in general and here in particular in cross-border family networks, rather than adopting a deficit-oriented perspective, serves as the foundation for a solidarity infrastructure (Bomert and Schilliger 2021). In such an infrastructure, individual fates and disadvantages resulting from the migration situation would not only be considered at an individual level but also within a broader societal framework. This perspective opens avenues for the study and development of new forms of structural solidarity concerning social insurance for cross-border family networks and the removal of obstacles imposed by migration regimes.

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