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How Movements Endure: Divergent Trajectories of Pro-Palestinian Student Encampments in Italy

Sandro Nicolas Schraudolph
University of Trento

ABSTRACT: Pro-Palestine student encampments emerged across Italian universities in spring 2024 as part of a broader wave of solidarity mobilization in response to the Gaza War. Despite sharing similar demands and repertoires of action these encampments developed different trajectories. This article asks how local context and internal camp dynamics shaped divergent encampment trajectories and movement endurance. Drawing on twelve semi-structured interviews, participant observation, field notes, and activist communications, it compares four encampments in Northern Italy.
The findings show that different encampment trajectories emerged through the interaction of local contextual conditions and internal camp dynamics. While Florence achieved a negotiated closure following partial institutional concessions, Trento dissolved due to activist exhaustion, Pisa transitioned into an occupation following institutional rejection, and Milan similarly transformed its encampment into a semi-permanent occupation. Variation across cases was shaped by differences in political and institutional opportunity structures, coalition opportunities, organizational embeddedness, collective identity formation, and emotional sustainability. This paper highlights how movements employing similar protest repertoires can develop different trajectories depending on the interaction between opportunities and capacities. The article contributes to scholarship on student encampments, solidarity mobilization, and protest consequences by emphasizing the importance of movement endurance and local context in shaping contemporary protest camps.

KEYWORDS: Encampments, Movement Persistence, Palestine Solidarity, Social Movements, Student Activism

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S): sandro.schraudolph@unitn.it

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1. Pro-Palestinian Student Mobilization after October 7

On 7 October 2023, Hamas attacked Israel, prompting a large-scale Israeli military response in Gaza. The conflict resulted in extensive civilian casualties and has subsequently been described as genocidal by many states, legal scholars, and human rights organizations. The conflict produced extensive civilian casualties, with the Palestinian death toll exceeding 75,000 (Mansour, 2026). Both Israeli and Hamas leaders are investigated for war crimes and other conflict related offenses by the Prosecutor of the ICC (Khan, 2024).

The conflict quickly reverberated across university campuses. In the United States, pro-Palestinian students organized permanent encampments and occupied university buildings. Administrative responses to these protests contributed to a broader wave of encampments across Europe, including Italy. The Italian public's reaction, marked by a series of oftentimes student led protest adds a layer of complexity to the country's role in the conflict and culminated in two general strikes in September and October 2025, mobilizing millions of people in solidarity with Palestine (Zampano, 2025).

This article compares four student encampments in Northern Italy to explain why camps that shared similar demands, repertoires of action, and a common temporal origin nevertheless developed divergent trajectories. Building on scholarship on encampments, prefigurative politics, inter-organizational relations, and protest trajectories, it conceptualizes variation as shaped by the interaction between (a) local contextual factors and (b) internal camp dynamics. The research question asks:

> "How did local context and internal camp dynamics shape divergent encampment trajectories and movement endurance?"

Encampment trajectories refer to the ways camps evolved over time. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Part 2 reviews relevant social movement scholarship and develops the analytical framework. Part 3 outlines the methodology, including the author's positionality, interview design, and participant background. Part 4 presents the comparative case study, beginning with local contextual factors before turning to internal camp dynamics. Part 5 discusses the findings, before concluding by outlining avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review – Student Encampments, Local Context, and Movement Endurance

Student encampments represent an important repertoire of contention in contemporary protest movements. Although involving the physical occupation of space, encampments are more than collections of tents; they function as sites of communal living, political deliberation, learning, and collective organization. Historically, encampments have appeared in movements ranging from anti-war and anti-apartheid campaigns to Occupy Wall Street, climate camps, and anti-austerity protests (McCurdy, Feigenbaum & Frenzel, 2016; Melina, 2014; Dekker & Duyvendak, 2020). Within the current wave of Palestine solidarity mobilization, student encampments have become one of the most visible protest forms across Europe and North America.

In Tilly's (1979; 1995) understanding, repertoires of contention consist of established but evolving forms through which collective actors make claims. Student encampments illustrate how movements adapt familiar repertoires to new contexts by combining protest with everyday practices of organization and care. Recent scholarship conceptualizes them as both prefigurative and eventful forms of protest (Della Porta et al., 2026). Prefigurative politics refers to attempts to enact egalitarian and democratic relations in the present (Maeckelbergh, 2011; Yates, 2015), making encampments spaces of assemblies, teach-ins, collective care, and

horizontal decision-making. As eventful protest, they may reshape identities, solidarities, and political imagination through collective democratic experimentation.

Although student encampments often share demands, symbols, and repertoires, their trajectories vary across settings. Political opportunity approaches explain this variation through differences in institutional openness, political environments, and access to allies (Kitschelt, 1986). Although originally developed at the national level, this framework is useful for understanding variation between universities, which function simultaneously as protest targets, infrastructures of mobilization, and arenas of negotiation. Differences in political culture, university responsiveness, spatial accessibility, and coalition opportunities therefore shape how similarly motivated camps evolve.

If local context shapes opportunities, internal camp dynamics shape movements' ability to sustain collective action. Research on movement success identifies relational embeddedness and coalition-building as central explanatory factors. Based on expert evaluations, Drent and Wouters (2024) emphasize networking as a key driver of mobilization success. Similarly, Diani (1997, p. 134) argues that "previous networks of exchange and solidarity" constitute both prerequisites and outcomes of collective action, while friendship ties and social embeddedness facilitate sustained participation (Diani, 2004). Walgrave and Wouters (2022) likewise stress social approval within interpersonal networks. Student encampments exemplify these relational dynamics. Shared routines of living, organizing, and deliberating foster coalition-building, collective identity, and emotional attachment through everyday interaction. Della Porta et al. (2026) likewise show that assemblies, communal care, and political education generate relational, cognitive, and affective dynamics that sustain participation.

Focusing exclusively on institutional success risks overlooking why encampments endure and how they shape broader cultural discourse. Examining Palestine solidarity protests in Germany, Grimm, Mauthofer and Sixta (2026) argue that solidarity protest functions as a space of appeal, accountability, and belonging. Rather than merely pressuring institutions, protest also reproduces commitment and collective presence under conditions of repression or exclusion. Movement endurance depends not only on resources or political opportunities but also on movements' ability to cultivate solidarities, organizational cohesion, and meaningful participation. Scholarship on social movement consequences cautions against reducing protest outcomes to measurable policy change. Earl (2004) argues that movement consequences are often difficult to define and include cultural transformations such as shifts in discourse, collective identity, symbolic repertoires, and public meaning-making. In movements centered around moral claims and identity formation, protest matters not solely because of immediate institutional concessions but because participation itself produces solidarities and new political subjectivities. This perspective is relevant for Palestine solidarity mobilization. Grimm et al. (2026) argue that solidarity protests should not be understood only through tactical efficacy but also as practices sustaining visibility, accountability, and belonging. In contexts where institutional responsiveness is limited, protest becomes a means of maintaining presence and reproducing commitment. In Italy, this dynamic is reinforced by the relative weakness of a Palestinian diaspora, encouraging coalition-building across student, labor, peace, and leftist networks (Zarnett, 2017). This broader societal base may facilitate the diffusion of Palestine solidarity mobilization beyond university campuses and into wider public arenas (Andretta & Imperatore, 2025).

At the same time, support for Palestinian rights frequently encounters delegitimization through the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism, shaping protest environments and public discourse through moral panics (Cohen, 2011; Della Porta, 2024; Gordon, 2025; Grimm et al., 2026).

Taken together, the literature suggests that student encampments should be understood not only as protest repertoires directed toward institutional outcomes but also as relational and prefigurative spaces capable of sustaining collective action. Building on these insights, this article explains variation in encampment trajectories through the interaction of a) local context factors and b) internal camp dynamics. Local context

refers to political and institutional environments, including university openness, political culture, spatial setting, and coalition opportunities. Internal camp dynamics refer to coalition-building, collective identity formation, organizational cohesion, and emotional processes sustaining participation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Methods & Self-Positioning

This paper employs a qualitative research design combining 12 semi-structured interviews with activists involved in four student encampments, participant observation during fieldwork, and qualitative analysis of activist social media. Instagram constituted one of the primary arenas through which protest activities, political claims, and organizational practices were communicated. Activists were initially approached through social media and subsequent snowball sampling before interviews were arranged on site.

Fieldwork was conducted at the encampments in Florence, Pisa, and Milan, while observations for Trento are based on interview notes because the encampment had already been dismantled beforehand. During site visits, participants were interviewed, photographs were taken, and field notes documented camp organization, protest practices, spatial arrangements, interactions among participants, etc. Throughout the analysis, interview material was triangulated with field notes, photos and publicly available social media content to reconstruct the trajectories of the four encampments. Social media material was used qualitatively to contextualize activist narratives, reconstruct protest repertoires and organizational developments, trace public framing, and compare interview statements.

Fieldwork further requires reflexivity regarding the researcher's positionality. In this case, the author's German background and limited Italian language proficiency shaped both access to the field and the interview process. Initial contact with activists was at times complicated by perceptions of Germany's political position on the conflict and concerns about being framed as antisemitic, which was common in journalistic coverage during the summer of 2024. Consequently, case selection was influenced not only by geographical accessibility and practical time and resource constraints, but also by activists' willingness to participate.

Twelve semi-structured interviews (three per encampment) were conducted in English between 24 May and 23 November 2024 with eight male and four female participants. Participants were selected to represent different organizational and political currents within each encampment and always included at least one female or male participant per site. Conducting interviews at different stages of the encampments' trajectories meant that participants' emotional framing ranged from enthusiasm shortly after mobilization to frustration following camp dissolution. To mitigate this limitation, interview accounts were systematically cross-referenced with social media communication collected over a longer period.

3.2 Interview Design

The semi-structured interviews followed seven common themes: self-description, recruitment, protest goals and repertoires, trigger events, media practices, interaction with opponents, and solidarity with comparable movements. Interviews lasted between 15 and 45 minutes and generated approximately 100 pages of transcripts. The empirical analysis is organized around two analytical dimensions derived from the literature: (a) local contextual factors and (b) internal camp dynamics.

3.3 Participant Backgrounds

Participants across the four encampments displayed diversity in national background, academic level, and field of study. While most interviewees were Italian students, several participants in Florence and Trento had international backgrounds or reported prior significant protest experiences abroad. Interviewees ranged from undergraduate students to PhD candidates and represented a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, including the social sciences and STEM fields. Across cases, participants generally described their activism as connected to broader political, ethical, or academic commitments regarding Palestine, war, and social justice.

Table 1 - Interview Participant Characteristics by Case

Case	*Interviews (n)*	*Academic Level*	*Field(s) of Study*	*Background*
Florence	3	PhD	Social Science	Italian, MENA region
Trento	3	BA, MA, PhD	Social Science	Italian
Pisa	3	BA & MA	Social Science & STEM	Italian, Former Yugoslavia
Milan	3	BA, BA, MA	Social Science & STEM	Italian

***Source**: Interviews*

4. Case Study: Divergent Encampment Trajectories in Northern Italy

4.1 Comparative Overview of Encampment Trajectories

Italian pro-Palestine encampments emerged in May 2024 as part of a nationwide student mobilization linked to the anniversary of the Nakba and inspired by the broader wave of Palestine solidarity protests across university campuses internationally. Although the four encampments shared similar demands, repertoires of contention, and organizational principles, they developed different trajectories over time.

Participants were almost exclusively students whose demands were directed primarily at their respective academic senates. Across all four sites, activists employed horizontal decision-making structures, organized daily assemblies, educational activities, and demonstrations, and sought to pressure universities into severing ties with Israeli institutions and the arms industry (Field Notes, Florence, 24.05.2024; Field Notes, Pisa, 09.07.2024; Field Notes, Milan, 23.11.2024, Interview Notes, Trento, 29.06.2024-01.07.2024).

Despite these similarities, the encampments differed in duration, organizational development, relationships with university authorities, and outcomes.

Table 2 - Comparative Overview of Encampment Trajectories

Case	*Duration*	*Trajectory*	*Endurance Outcome*
Florence	10 days	Negotiated closure	Committee established, camp demobilized
Trento	2 weeks	Organizational fatigue	Encampment dissolved
Pisa	1 month+	Escalation into occupation	Sumud occupation
Milan	5 months+	Institutionalized occupation	SOCS occupation

***Source**: Interviews*

The Florence encampment, established on 15 May 2024 (Studentxperlapalestina_fi Instagram, 15.05.2024), developed into a coordinated inter-university initiative involving students from the University of Florence (UniFi), the European University Institute (EUI), and the Scuola Normale Superiore (SNS). Following negotiations with the University of Florence, activists voluntarily dismantled the camp after the academic senate agreed to establish a committee to discuss their demands (Field Notes, Florence, 24.05.2024). Florence thus represents a trajectory of negotiated closure following partial institutional recognition.

The Trento encampment was established one day later in the courtyard of the Economics Department (Interview Notes, Trento, 29.06.2024–01.07.2024). Although participants organized demonstrations, assemblies, and negotiations with university authorities, they perceived institutional responses as largely symbolic and unresponsive. Combined with declining participation and activist exhaustion, the encampment dissolved without achieving its principal objectives, representing a trajectory of organizational fatigue and burnout.

In Pisa, activists built upon an already vibrant Palestine solidarity movement that had gained visibility through earlier protests and confrontations with police (Kaval, 2024). After university authorities rejected student demands, part of the movement occupied an abandoned university building adjacent to the encampment, renaming it *Sumud* (Field Notes, Pisa, 09.07.2024; StudentxPalestina_Pisa Instagram, 19.06.2024). Rather than ending with the dismantling of the camp, mobilization evolved into a more durable occupation, representing a trajectory of organizational escalation following institutional pushback.

Milan displayed the most complex trajectory. Several encampments emerged across the city's universities; some dissolved after a few weeks, while others evolved into longer-lasting occupations. The most durable initiative, the Settore Occupato Città Studi (SOCS), became a semi-permanent occupied space combining Palestine solidarity activism with broader critiques of university governance, dual-use research, and militarization (Field Notes, Milan, 23.11.2024). Milan represents a trajectory of institutionalized endurance through occupation.

Interviews were conducted at different stages of the encampments' trajectories: some within active camps, others following their dissolution, and several in occupied spaces that emerged from the original encampments. This variation provides insight into how activists interpreted the successes and limitations of their mobilization, while strengthening the comparative analysis of divergent encampment trajectories.

Part I: Local Context Factors

4.2 Local Opportunity Structures

Although the four encampments emerged from the same national mobilization wave, they developed within different local contexts. Building on political opportunity approaches (Kitschelt, 1986) and recent research on pro-Palestinian student mobilization (Andretta & Imperatore, 2025; Della Porta et al., 2026), the analysis distinguishes four dimensions of local context: (1) political-institutional context; (2) local subculture; (3) university context; and (4) social movement context.

Florence benefited from a favorable local context shaped by a longstanding tradition of left-wing activism. This tradition was reflected in a dense network of student organizations, labor unions, feminist collectives, and Palestine solidarity groups that provided coalition partners throughout the encampment (Studentxperlapalestina_fi Instagram, 30.05.2024). The encampment's location in a public square in the city center further facilitated interaction with the broader public and civil society actors, reinforcing these coalition-building opportunities (Field Notes, Florence, 24.05.2024). The broader political environment also proved favorable. During the encampment, police adopted a largely restrained approach, which activists interpreted as a deliberate strategy to avoid escalation. As one participant reflected, "The Italian police has been wise enough [to not violently confront us] or maybe that was a tactic to ignore us in the hope that we're gonna just get tired and bored and go back home" (Interview Florence 1). Restrained policing occurred in the run-up to the June 2024 municipal elections, when confrontations with students occupying a central public square could have carried political costs for local authorities. While university authorities did not accept the protesters' core demands, they agreed to establish a committee dedicated to examining their demands. Activists interpreted this decision as a partial victory because it institutionalized further negotiations and prevented the immediate

dismissal of their concerns. Florence combined broad coalition support, a favorable political environment, and partial institutional openness.

Pisa also benefited from a longstanding tradition of student activism, yet the defining feature of its local context was the violent police repression of a demonstration by pro-Palestinian high-school students marching on 23 February 2024. Videos of officers striking minors spread rapidly across social media and national news outlets (Middle East Monitor, 2024), generating widespread public outrage. Interviewees consistently described the event as a turning point for both local mobilization and the city's broader political climate. One activist recalled that the repression triggered "a big emotional reaction by the city of Pisa, with 10,000 people protesting [...] and many political figures condemning the repression" (Interview Pisa 3). What had previously been a student issue became city-wide outrage, creating new opportunities for coalition-building and public support. Subsequent collaborations with organizations such as the No Base movement reflected this broader coalition-building beyond the university (StudentxPalestina_Pisa Instagram, 04.06.2024). Several interviewees directly linked the subsequent growth of the movement and the establishment of the encampment to the legitimacy generated by the backlash against police violence. Following the public outcry, authorities adopted a less confrontational policing strategy. As one activist recalled, "After that, the police […] never brought the *celere* (riot police)" (Interview Pisa 1). Despite this supportive external environment, the university administration remained unwilling to discontinue collaboration with military contractors. As one participant summarized, university authorities "asked for proof […] got the proof […] and then ignored it" (Interview Pisa 3). Pisa combined a favorable political and social environment with a largely closed university context.

Trento presented the least favorable local context of the four cases. Although the city and university had a longstanding reputation for student activism and left-wing politics, interviewees consistently described a political environment that had become less supportive in recent years. Following the 2023 provincial elections, which resulted in an absolute majority for the center-right coalition (Provincia autonoma di Trento, 2023), activists perceived a marked shift in the broader political climate (Pallaver, 2023). At the same time, the encampment lacked the network of external allies that characterized Florence and Pisa. Established within the courtyard of the Economics Department and inhabited primarily by Sociology students, it received limited support from other university constituencies and local civil society actors. This location itself reflected the movement's constrained opportunities, as the more visible Piazza Dante remained occupied by a non-student protest camp that activists chose not to join. Students further emphasized the reluctance of both university administrators and elected student representatives to support their demands. The rector's position within the Med-Or Foundation became a focal point of contention because activists stressed the organization's connection to Leonardo SpA and the broader Italian arms industry profiting from the war. This demand also featured in public statements following the Senate decision (Intifada Studentesca Instagram, 04.07.2024). Yet repeated meetings with university authorities produced few tangible results. One participant summarized the experience bluntly: "We asked him to move out [of the Med-Or Foundation] […] because we said Leonardo is selling weapons to Israel. He said that is not true." (Interview Trento 3). While activists reported extensive police surveillance throughout the encampment, they described no direct intervention. As one participant observed, "We experienced very little repression […] They were just waiting for us to grow tired" (Interview Trento 2). Another interviewee similarly recalled that "They did not talk with us, but they followed us during the march […] they made a lot of photos and videos" (Interview Trento 3). Combined with limited external support and a largely closed university administration, this left activists with few opportunities to convert protest into political influence.

Milan presented the most complex local context of the four cases. Building on a longstanding tradition of occupations and student activism, pro-Palestinian mobilization emerged across several universities, producing four separate encampments. This dense activist environment enabled cooperation between student groups, particularly between the Settore Occupato Città Studi (SOCS) occupation and the nearby Politecnico

encampment, while the city's fragmented campus locations and multiple activist organizations limited coordination across all encampments. The institutional response likewise varied across campuses. While the encampment at Via Festa del Perdono dissolved after violent clashes with members of Lotta Comunista, the later SOCS benefited from a permissive university environment. One activist recalled the earlier attack: "One day they went to that university to give away flyers […] then the next day they came back with 30 people and they started beating up people" (Interview Milan 2). In contrast, university staff and security personnel at SOCS developed cooperative relationships with activists and on several occasions helped shield them from police intervention. The occupation was further facilitated by the university's planned relocation of the department, reducing immediate incentives for eviction. These conditions allowed activists to transform the encampment into a longer-term occupied space while gradually expanding their agenda from solidarity with Palestine to broader questions of dual-use research, university governance, and academic responsibility (Field Notes, Milan, 23.11.2024). This broader agenda was also reflected in their public communication, which questioned scientific neutrality and highlighted the military applications of research (SOCS26 Instagram, 06.10.2024; 09.10.2024).

Taken together, the four cases demonstrate how different configurations of local opportunity structures shaped mobilization differently. Florence combined a supportive activist tradition, broad coalition networks, a favorable political environment, and partial institutional openness. Pisa benefited from strong public support and expanding coalitions but faced a largely unresponsive university administration. Trento confronted an unfavorable political climate, limited external support, and a largely closed university context. Milan possessed the richest social movement environment but also the most fragmented protest landscape. Although these contextual differences did not determine protest trajectories, they shaped the opportunities and constraints within which activists built coalitions, negotiated with university authorities, and sustained mobilization.

4.3 Spatial Opportunity Structures

Although local political and institutional contexts created different opportunities and constraints, they cannot fully explain why similarly situated encampments developed divergent trajectories. This requires examining the encampments as social and organizational spaces.

Polletta (1999) argues that protest spaces matter not simply because they provide physical gathering sites, but because they strengthen associational ties, make previously marginalized claims discussable, and provide tangible evidence of collective presence. Similarly, Pickerill and Chatterton (2006) conceptualize autonomous protest spaces as sites of everyday self-management where resistance is reproduced through collective practices of organization, care, and experimentation. Encampments are more than visible protest repertoires: they function as political symbols, organizational infrastructures, and social environments that sustain participation.

The four encampments differed in spatial positioning and accessibility, shaping visibility, coalition-building, identity formation, recruitment, collective living, and long-term endurance.

Florence occupied the most publicly accessible location of all four cases. Situated off-campus in Piazza San Marco, renamed by activists as "Shireen Abu Akleh Square," the encampment functioned as a highly visible meeting point connecting students from UniFi, EUI, and SNS (Field Notes, Florence, 24.05.2024; Studentxperlapalestina_fi Instagram, 15.05.2024). Its location facilitated interactions with passersby, journalists, civil society organizations, and supporters beyond the university. The square provided a neutral meeting place where activists from different institutions coordinated activities and negotiations, linking multiple strands of local Palestine solidarity activism.

Trento represented the opposite configuration. The encampment was located within the inner courtyard of the Economics Department, away from major pedestrian routes and disconnected from the city's public spaces

(Personal observation and Interview Notes, Trento, 29.06.2024–01.07.2024). Interviewees contrasted their situation with the visibility enjoyed by encampments elsewhere. Although activists maintained a continuous presence on campus, the location limited spontaneous encounters with the broader public and opportunities for recruitment and alliance-building. Combined with the less favorable political environment, this spatial isolation reinforced activists' perception of operating at the margins of both the university and the city.

A second distinction concerned opportunities for spatial expansion. Pisa and Milan both benefited from adjacent spaces that enabled the transformation of temporary encampments into more durable occupations. In Pisa, activists established their camp beside the Antichistica Library. Following the rejection of their demands by the university senate, part of the movement occupied a nearby abandoned university building that became known as "*Sumud"* (Field Notes, Pisa, 09.07.2024; StudentxPalestina_Pisa Instagram, 19.06.2024). Rather than ending with the encampment, activists transferred organizational resources, participants, and collective identity into the occupied building. As one interviewee described, the occupation emerged as a "muscular, emotive reaction" to the university's refusal to accommodate student demands (Interview Pisa 1).

Milan displayed a similar dynamic under different conditions. Several encampments emerged across the city, yet the most durable trajectory developed through the occupation of SOCS within the lower floor of the Biochemistry building. Unlike conventional protest camps, SOCS provided access to infrastructure necessary for long-term occupation, including water, electricity, internet access, storage space, electronics and furniture workshops, and areas for meetings and political workshops (Field Notes, Milan, 23.11.2024). Occupants built furniture, organized educational events, and created semi-permanent communal living arrangements. Public announcements advertised workshops on artificial intelligence, ethics, and military research, illustrating how the occupation functioned as both living space and educational infrastructure (SOCS26 Instagram, 09.11.2024). The occupation evolved into an enduring organizational space embedded within university life.

Spatial positioning also influenced relationships with institutional actors. Florence's central location increased visibility and made repression politically costly, while Milan's integration into university infrastructure facilitated cooperation with sympathetic staff and security personnel. Trento's more secluded setting next to a less supportive student body in the Economics Department limited external support and institutional pressure. Pisa combined high visibility with the availability of an adjacent occupiable building, allowing activists to transform an encampment into a more durable occupation when negotiations failed.

Spatial positioning influenced protest trajectories through three mechanisms. First, visibility affected opportunities for recruitment, coalition-building, and public legitimacy. Second, accessibility shaped encampments' capacity to connect activist communities. Third, the availability of occupiable spaces determined whether temporary camps could evolve into more durable organizational infrastructures. Spatial positioning shaped encampments' capacity to sustain participation, adapt to institutional setbacks, and endure.

Part II: Internal Camp Dynamics

4.4 Coalition-Building and Organizational Embeddedness

The encampments differed in their ability to build and sustain relationships beyond their immediate activist core. Diani (1997; 2004) conceptualizes social movements as networks whose strength depends on organizational embeddedness within broader social and political relations. The Northern Italian encampments illustrate this dynamic: while some became deeply embedded within civil society, academic institutions, and transnational activist networks, others remained isolated, shaping recruitment, legitimacy, and movement endurance.

Florence represented the strongest case of coordinated organizational embeddedness. The encampment functioned as a joint effort between students from UniFi, the EUI, and the SNS. Rather than organizing in

parallel, activists coordinated negotiations, assemblies, and protest repertoires collectively across institutions. Delegations from all three universities attended negotiations with their respective academic senates, allowing lessons from one institutional encounter to be transferred immediately to the next. As one activist explained: "Each group from the three universities dealt more directly with their own universities, but always with somebody, some small delegations from the other. So, we were always together." (Interview Florence 2). This approach provided a strategic advantage over more fragmented encampments. Successful arguments, negotiation tactics, and institutional responses were rapidly adapted across universities. Coalition-building also extended beyond academia. Florence activists maintained close ties with local collectives and organizations, including Non Una di Meno, GKN, S.I. Cobas, the BDS movement, and the Young Palestinians. These collaborations were reflected in the movement's public communication, which regularly announced joint mobilizations and activities with external actors (Studentxperlapalestina_fi Instagram, 17.05.2024). Exchanges with encampments abroad—including activists from Columbia, Yale, Leeds, and Duke—further reinforced the sense of belonging to an international movement while providing tactical inspiration. Piazza San Marco facilitated these interactions by functioning as a visible meeting place for students, trade unionists, activists, and passersby (Field Notes, Florence, 24.05.2024). Florence combined institutional coordination, broad civil-society alliances, and transnational exchange into a dense organizational network.

Pisa displayed similarly high levels of embeddedness, though these developed more unevenly and were strongly shaped by the political momentum generated after the February 2024 police violence. The formation of Studenti per la Palestina in January 2024 established a cross-university structure linking students from the University of Pisa (UniPi), the Scuola Normale Superiore (SNS), and Sant'Anna. After the police repression of high-school demonstrations in February, public support expanded, broadening opportunities for coalition-building and recruitment. Activists described the movement connected to local civil society, academics, and public figures. This broader organizational embeddedness was also reflected in public collaborations with local anti-militarist initiatives such as the No Base movement (StudentxPalestina_Pisa Instagram, 04.06.2024). Encampment events featured interventions by the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Francesca Albanese, herself a UniPi alumna, as well as prominent pro-Palestinian Jewish activist Moni Ovadia, alongside exchanges with Muslim community representatives. Pisa activists also participated in national coordination efforts, including meetings in Rome designed to connect encampments across Italy and coordinate protest strategies. International networking occurred simultaneously through exchanges with student movements abroad.

Unlike Florence, however, Pisa experienced internal tensions. Following the rejection of student demands by the academic senate, activists debated whether to occupy a nearby abandoned university building adjacent to the encampment. The eventual occupation of Sumud enabled the continuation of mobilization after institutional defeat. At the same time, the decision exposed tensions within the coalition. While one faction embraced autonomy and permanence through occupation, another raised concerns regarding legality and safety because the building was considered structurally unsafe. Several core activists chose not to participate, weakening internal cohesion even as the movement secured a more durable organizational base. Pisa illustrates how coalition expansion can strengthen movement endurance and generate centrifugal pressures.

Milan reflected a different organizational logic characterized by dense but fragmented embeddedness. Rather than a single coordinated encampment, several Palestine solidarity initiatives emerged across different universities. Bicocca, Politecnico, and multiple sites at the University of Milan created a dispersed protest environment in which activists moved between locations despite limited coordination caused by geographical distance and divergent organizational priorities. These networks became particularly important after the dissolution of the Via Festa del Perdono encampment following violent clashes with members of Lotta Comunista, who physically attacked activists after condemning their national-liberation framework. Rather than dissolving activism entirely, some displaced participants subsequently joined the SOCS, reinforcing the

movement elsewhere. SOCS represented Milan's strongest example of coalition-building. Rather than focusing exclusively on Palestine solidarity, activists linked the Gaza issue to broader university concerns regarding dual-use military research, precarious employment, and university governance (SOCS26 Instagram, 06.10.2024; 09.10.2024). This broadened the movement's coalition beyond student activism and fostered informal cooperation with academic employees, researchers, and campus security staff who shared frustrations over planned departmental relocations. Interviewees described situations in which guards shared meals with the students and subsequently shielded activists during attempted police raids, reflecting an unusually cooperative relationship between occupiers and sections of the university community (Field Notes, Milan, 23.11.2024; SOCS26 Instagram, 30.10.2024). By linking Palestine solidarity to wider grievances affecting everyday university life, SOCS transformed the encampment into a tolerated, semi-permanent occupation embedded within the institution itself.

Trento constituted the clearest example of organizational isolation. Compared with the other encampments, activists encountered limited opportunities for coalition-building beyond the small student network. Public communication during the encampment similarly focused primarily on assembly procedure, communal activities, and educational events rather than the broader coalition initiatives (Intifada Studentesca Instagram, 21.05.2024). Interviewees emphasized the absence of sympathetic NGOs and the difficulty of generating resonance within the broader, more conservative city. The location of the encampment at the Economics Department, combined with a less supportive economics student body and limited engagement from other faculties, further constrained expansion (Personal observation and Interview Notes, Trento, 29.06.2024–01.07.2024). The main opportunity for coalition-building involved the non-student-led encampment in Piazza Dante. Yet attempts at cooperation ultimately failed. Interviewees referred both to sexual-abuse allegations involving a member of the group and concerns that cooperation would undermine student autonomy and make assemblies difficult to manage. One activist summarized their concern as follows: “People — not students — would come to the assembly, say things in the assembly, take their space in the assembly” (Interview Trento 1). Internal fragmentation compounded these constraints. As university authorities remained unresponsive, disagreements emerged regarding repertoire escalation. More moderate participants eventually abandoned the encampment over pressure to escalate strategies. Unlike Florence or Milan, Trento lacked the organizational reserves necessary to compensate for declining participation and institutional frustration.

Table 3 - Organizational Embeddedness Across Cases

Case	*Coalition Resources*	*Key Allies*	*Main Organizational Challenge*
Florence	Inter-university coordination	NGOs, labor groups, BDS, Young Palestinians, international camps	Maintaining coordination across institutions
Trento	Limited coalition opportunities	Few external allies	Isolation and activist attrition
Pisa	Inter-university coalition, public support	Academics, Albanese, Ovadia, national coordination networks	Internal split over Sumud
Milan	Dense activist Ecosystem	Staff, guards, occupations, activist networks	Fragmentation and Lotta Comunista attack

***Source**: Interviews*

Taken together, the four cases suggest that coalition-building and organizational embeddedness shaped movement endurance. Florence and Pisa developed extensive ties with external organizations, academics, and broader publics, while Milan combined fragmentation with dense institutional and activist networks capable of absorbing shocks. Trento, by contrast, remained isolated and struggled to move beyond a narrow activist

core. Although organizational embeddedness did not determine protest trajectories, it strongly influenced movements' capacity to adapt to institutional setbacks, sustain participation, and endure internal conflict.

4.5 Collective Identity, Framing, and Political Meaning

Beyond organizational embeddedness, the encampments also functioned as spaces of collective identity formation and political meaning-making. Social movement scholarship emphasizes that movements shape cultural outcomes not only through institutional change but also through the production of shared identities, beliefs, and solidarities (Earl, 2004). Similarly, Polletta (1999) argues that protest spaces reinforce associational ties, make previously marginalized claims discussable, and provide tangible evidence of collective existence. Activists described participation not merely as protest but as a transformative political and social experience that shaped identities, relationships, and future political engagement.

A central feature of collective identity formation involved framing Palestine through anti-colonial, anti-militarist, and justice-oriented narratives. Interviewees frequently described the Gaza genocide not as an isolated geopolitical conflict but as part of broader structures of colonial domination, militarism, racism, and global inequality. Activists connected Palestine solidarity to feminist struggles, anti-racist mobilization, labor politics, migration, and critiques of neoliberal governance and militarization. Particularly in Milan and Florence, Palestine became a symbolic entry point for wider political grievances surrounding dual-use research, labor precarity, academic governance, and institutional complicity (SOCS26 Instagram, 06.10.2024; 09.10.2024).

At the same time, interviewees emphasized the need to defend the legitimacy of their activism against accusations of antisemitism and extremism. Rather than engaging with activists' substantive claims, anti-Zionist positions were frequently equated with antisemitism. In Pisa, participants described particularly strong delegitimization attempts, including accusations by national-level political actors unfamiliar with the university context claiming that students were influenced or financed by "Hamas and the Qatari government." Participants sought to distinguish criticism of Israeli state violence from hostility toward Jewish communities. This framing was reinforced through public educational material explaining the campaign to boycott the Hebrew University of Jerusalem as a response to institutional complicity in occupation and militarization (StudentxPalestina_Pisa Instagram, 10.06.2024). Public events often incorporated Jewish voices critical of Israeli policies and emphasized anti-racist and anti-discriminatory principles. In Pisa, for example, encampment activities included interventions by Moni Ovadia and exchanges with Muslim and Jewish representatives, while Florence participants, together with a prominent anti-Zionist Jewish EUI representative, emphasized grounding the movement in human rights and international law rather than ethnic or religious antagonism (Studentxperlapalestina_fi Instagram, 15.05.2024).

The encampments further functioned as spaces of political socialization and activist transformation. Interviewees across all four sites described participation as politically formative. In Pisa, collective identity was forged under conditions of confrontation and rapid politicization. The encampment brought together experienced anti-military activists (StudentxPalestina_Pisa Instagram, 19.06.2024) and newly politicized students radicalized by the February 2024 police violence. Pride in being among the first encampments mixed with inspiration drawn from Columbia University's protests and earlier Italian student mobilizations such as the Sessantotto and Pantera movements. One participant described the experience in strongly communal terms: "We were a community […] doing things for others, for the purpose. It was beautiful because in our society [outside the encampment] everyone fights for themselves." (Interview Pisa 3). This collective ethos extended into consensus-based assemblies, intersectional inclusivity, and emotional care: "There was a space of care […] an emotive assembly […] something really innovative" (Interview Pisa 1). Relations with university authorities reinforced a collective identity rooted in frustration and opposition. As one activist summarized:

"There was a wall between them and us" (Interview Pisa 2). External delegitimization, including accusations of antisemitism following the February protests, further constrained negotiations and contributed to the senate's rejection of student demands, producing only symbolic anti-war statements.

Across all cases, living together, sharing responsibilities, participating in grassroots democratic assemblies, and collectively navigating institutional confrontation fostered strong interpersonal bonds and heightened political commitment. Several participants described the camps as spaces where political ideas became lived experiences rather than abstract convictions. Even activists with limited prior organizational experience reported being transformed through communal life and collective struggle. As interviewees framed it, collectively "fighting for a just cause" strengthened identification with both the Palestinian cause and broader oppositional politics.

Milan's activists similarly framed their occupation as a democratic counterculture within the university system. Most participants had prior experience with self-managed living spaces, shaping an organizational culture that prioritized autonomy, communal living, and participatory decision-making. Community building was understood as both political method and political objective. As one activist explained: "The core of the occupation was also to live together and grow together […] to talk about Palestine, but also about scientific research and how weapons were being used in Gaza […] and all conflicts." (Interview Milan 2). Influenced by movements ranging from Occupy Wall Street and Spain's 15-M to the Athens Polytechnic occupation, SOCS activists framed the encampment as a democratic experiment within the university system. Public announcements regularly advertised workshops and discussions on artificial intelligence, ethics, and military research, illustrating how political education became an integral component of the occupation (SOCS26 Instagram, 09.11.2024).

Importantly, these transformations extended beyond Palestine solidarity itself. Interviewees consistently described the encampments as spaces where fragmented sections of the Italian left re-established connections during a period of pronounced rightward political change. Across all cases, activists emphasized that relationships created through encampment life exceeded the immediate protest cycle and would continue to shape future mobilizations. Florence activists described lasting collaborations between student organizations, labor collectives, and solidarity groups. Milan participants emphasized how connections established through SOCS linked Palestine solidarity to longer-standing struggles surrounding labor, university governance, and militarization. Even in Trento, where mobilization remained isolated and relatively short-lived, interviewees described the networking dimension of the encampment as politically meaningful and personally transformative. Palestine solidarity served as a protest cause and a catalyst for rebuilding broader political infrastructures of opposition.

Collectively, these experiences reveal a dynamic interplay between identity formation and institutional context. Where universities displayed partial openness, as in Florence and Milan, activists developed inclusive, community-based identities compatible with negotiation and collaboration. In contrast, Trento's and Pisa's more adversarial university relations fostered solidarities rooted in frustration, opposition, and collective resilience. Even where institutional demands remained unmet, participation frequently reshaped political subjectivities and generated networks that outlived the encampments. Their endurance rested not only on immediate institutional outcomes but also on the identities, solidarities, and oppositional political infrastructures they helped create.

4.6 Emotional Sustainability and Activist Endurance

Sustaining mobilization requires continuous emotional and material reproduction. Scholarship on prefigurative politics and autonomous protest spaces emphasizes that movements endure not simply through ideological commitment but through the everyday practices that reproduce participation and solidarity over

time (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). Similarly, Polletta (1999) argues that protest spaces reinforce associational ties and sustain mobilizing identities through everyday interaction, while Earl (2004) highlights movements' enduring cultural effects through shared beliefs, solidarities, and transformative experiences. The encampments were not simply protest repertoires but temporary living arrangements whose endurance depended on activists' ability to sustain participation physically, emotionally, and socially under demanding conditions.

Encampment life was physically exhausting and emotionally demanding. The camps emerged in late spring and, in some cases, persisted through the summer, exposing activists to prolonged heat while requiring weeks of sleeping outdoors with limited access to showers, electricity, and cooking facilities. Everyday participation involved preparing meals, cleaning communal areas, organizing assemblies, engaging in outreach, and maintaining a permanent protest presence (Field Notes, Florence, 24.05.2024; Field Notes, Pisa, 09.07.2024; Field Notes, Milan, 23.11.2024; Interview Notes, Trento, 29.06.2024–01.07.2024). Activists consumed a constant stream of images and videos documenting destruction and civilian casualties in Gaza through social media, producing a combination of moral urgency and emotional exhaustion. One participant described sustaining everyday camp life while continuously witnessing violence online as emotionally draining because "you felt guilty stopping" (Interview Pisa 1).

Sustaining participation depended heavily on practices of collective care and organizational adaptation. Interviewees repeatedly emphasized rotation systems that allowed activists to return home temporarily, sleep properly, shower, and recover before rejoining the encampment. Yet the feasibility of these practices varied across cases. Florence's short occupation benefited from its broad activist base spanning three universities, allowing responsibilities to be distributed widely. Pisa similarly relied on a large pool of supporters, enabling stable rotation. Milan's dispersed activist ecosystem and multiple occupations created opportunities for participants to shift between spaces and responsibilities. Trento, by contrast, struggled to maintain such routines because of its smaller activist base and organizational isolation. Responsibilities became concentrated among a limited number of activists while opportunities for recovery remained scarce. As one participant summarized, "We experienced very little repression […] They were just waiting for us to grow tired" (Interview Trento 2). Rotation practices were further constrained by fears that reducing activist numbers would expose encampments to dissolution or police intervention. Activists described sleeping lightly and remaining attentive to rumors of police action, fearing that a weakened camp might be dismantled overnight. This pressure was reinforced by police surveillance. As one Trento participant recalled, "They did not talk with us, but they followed us during the march […] they made a lot of photos and videos" (Interview Trento 3).

The material and emotional costs of endurance accumulated unevenly across cases. Where movements created more sustainable infrastructures, endurance became materially easier to maintain. Milan provides the clearest example. The transition from temporary encampment to SOCS altered everyday protest conditions by providing access to electricity, kitchens, internet, sleeping facilities, workshops, and indoor meeting rooms (Field Notes, Milan, 23.11.2024). Interviewees described shared meals, collective maintenance, and informal interaction as essential to sustaining morale. Particularly important were spaces for rest and decompression where activists could temporarily withdraw from collective life and the emotional burden of constant exposure to the war footage (Field Notes, Pisa, 09.07.2024 and Field Notes, Milan, 23.11.2024). One participant described such a decompression room as a place where people could "take a moment, breathe, and then return" rather than being expected to remain constantly politically and emotionally available (Interview Milan 1).

Pisa experienced a comparable, though more conflictual, transition after the establishment of Sumud (StudentxPalestina_Pisa Instagram, 19.06.2024). While the occupation generated tensions regarding safety, it reduced some of the vulnerabilities associated with outdoor encampment life and enabled continued activism after institutional rejection. Florence relied less on infrastructural transformation, compensating instead through organizational density and coalition support (Studentxperlapalestina_fi Instagram, 30.05.2024). The

availability of activists across three universities and extensive external alliances distributed burdens more broadly and reduced pressure on individual participants. Even in Trento, where institutional support and activist reserves remained limited, interviewees described attempts to sustain morale through collective routines, assemblies, and mutual support despite mounting exhaustion (Intifada Studentesca Instagram, 21.05.2024).

At the same time, endurance remained fragile. Participants across cases described emotional strain resulting from institutional indifference, accusations of extremism or antisemitism, internal disagreements, and fears of repression. Milan activists recalled the destabilizing effects of violence associated with Lotta Comunista, after which the Via Festa del Perdono encampment dissolved the following day (Interview Milan 2). Pisa interviewees emphasized the struggles surrounding the transition to Sumud, while Florence participants described frustration with prolonged negotiations and perceived institutional unwillingness to respond meaningfully to student demands. In Trento, prolonged uncertainty and limited external support accelerated activist exhaustion and contributed to declining participation.

Yet interviewees also emphasized that enduring hardship together generated powerful solidarities. Shared exhaustion, collective care, and sustaining protest under difficult conditions fostered strong interpersonal bonds and enduring commitments. Several interviewees emphasized that although the camps eventually disappeared, the relationships, political skills, and networks created through shared endurance persisted.

Taken together, the four cases suggest that movement endurance depended not solely on ideological commitment or favorable political opportunities but on activists' ability to reproduce participation materially and emotionally. Larger activist pools, coalition support, and sustainable infrastructures reduced exhaustion and facilitated longer-term mobilization, while organizational isolation accelerated burnout and constrained recovery. Endurance emerged not as a fixed property of protest movements but as a fragile social accomplishment requiring constant care, adaptation, and collective reproduction.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Explaining Divergent Encampment Trajectories

The central finding of this study is that divergent encampment trajectories emerged through the interaction of local contextual conditions and internal camp dynamics. Although the four encampments shared similar demands, protest repertoires, and a common protest cycle, they developed along different paths. Florence achieved a negotiated closure following partial institutional concessions, Trento dissolved through activist exhaustion, Pisa transitioned into the Sumud occupation after institutional rejection, and Milan transformed its encampment into the semi-permanent SOCS occupation. These contrasting outcomes reflect the interaction between local opportunity structures and movements' capacity to generate and sustain organizational, relational, and emotional resources.

Table 4 summarizes the comparative findings. Rather than reflecting either favorable contexts or effective internal organization alone, the cases suggest that both dimensions interacted. Local contextual conditions included university responsiveness, local political culture, coalition opportunities, policing practices, and the spatial positioning of encampments. Internal camp dynamics encompassed organizational embeddedness, collective identity formation, emotional sustainability, and sustained participation.

Florence and Milan occupied the quadrant characterized by favorable contextual conditions and strong internal camp dynamics, yet followed different trajectories. Florence benefited from inter-university coordination, supportive civil-society networks, and sufficient institutional openness to facilitate negotiations with university authorities, resulting in a negotiated closure after activists secured procedural recognition. Milan, by contrast, combined similarly strong internal dynamics with greater autonomy from institutional

actors. Alliances with staff, guards, researchers, and neighbouring encampments enabled the movement to evolve into the semi-permanent SOCS occupation.

Table 4 - Explaining Divergent Encampment Trajectories

	Strong Internal Dynamics	*Weak Internal Dynamics*
Favorable Local Context	Florence (Negotiated Closure) Milan (Institutionalized Occupation)	—
Constrained Local Context	Pisa (Escalation into Occupation)	Trento (Organizational Fatigue)

***Source**: Interviews*

Pisa illustrates strong internal camp dynamics under constrained contextual conditions. Despite police violence, political intervention by external actors, and the rejection of all proposals by the academic senate, activists maintained organizational cohesion, coalition-building, and emotional commitment. Mobilization following police violence expanded the activist base and strengthened collective identification, allowing institutional closure to produce a transition from encampment to occupation rather than demobilization. Pisa demonstrates how strong internal dynamics can sustain mobilization even under adverse political and institutional conditions.

Trento represents the case with the most constrained combination of contextual conditions and internal camp dynamics. Limited coalition opportunities, spatial isolation, and an unresponsive university administration coincided with a small activist base and limited organizational reserves. The resulting concentration of responsibilities accelerated exhaustion and reduced opportunities for recovery. Unlike Pisa, Trento was unable to compensate for unfavorable contextual conditions through broader organizational networks or a sufficiently large activist base, resulting in organizational fatigue and eventual dissolution.

Taken together, the cases suggest that movement trajectories were shaped by the interaction of local context and internal camp dynamics rather than either dimension alone. Favorable contextual conditions facilitated endurance and institutional access but did not automatically produce sustained mobilization, while strong internal dynamics could compensate for institutional closure only to a point. This interaction helps explain why movements employing nearly identical protest repertoires developed different trajectories and highlights the importance of examining both contextual conditions and internal movement processes when explaining contemporary protest camps.

5.2 Beyond Institutional Outcomes: Broadening the Understanding of Protest Consequences

The findings also have implications for how protest consequences are understood. Research on social movement outcomes has long focused on institutional responsiveness, policy change, and the ability of movements to achieve their demands. While these dimensions remain important, scholars emphasize that protest generates a broader range of consequences extending beyond interactions with formal institutions (Earl, 2004). The Northern Italian encampments illustrate the value of this perspective.

Viewed exclusively through the lens of institutional outcomes, the encampments appear to have achieved only limited success. None of the four universities fully adopted the activists' demands. Florence secured partial procedural recognition through the creation of a committee and, the following year, cut departmental ties with Israeli universities (BDS Movement, 2025b), while Trento, Pisa, and Milan received little or no

substantive institutional concessions[1]. Yet this captures only one dimension of the consequences generated by the encampments.

Encampments produced outcomes on multiple levels. At the organizational and relational levels, they generated new coalitions linking students with labor groups, NGOs, academics, local collectives, and transnational solidarity networks. Recent scholarship argues that such relationships should be understood not merely as resources for collective action but as movement outcomes in their own right (Piccolo & Stagni, 2025). Across the cases, these alliances strengthened legitimacy, facilitated negotiations, supported organizational continuity, and created networks that endured beyond the encampments.

The encampments also formed identities. Interviewees described participation as a transformative experience that reshaped political commitments, social relationships, and understandings of activism. Activists emphasized that the encampments created communities extending beyond Palestine solidarity and strengthened broader left-wing networks during a period of rightward political shift in Italy. These findings are consistent with Earl's observation that social movements often generate enduring changes in collective identities, communities, and patterns of participation.

Finally, the findings point toward possible cultural and discursive consequences. Earl argues that movements influence public discourse through the diffusion of new ideas, frames, and language. The encampments sought to challenge dominant narratives surrounding the war in Gaza and promote alternative interpretations centered on concepts such as genocide and complicity. While this study cannot establish causal relationships between encampment activism and broader shifts in public discourse, activists consistently viewed framing struggles and the production of alternative narratives as central objectives of their mobilization.

Taken together, the encampments demonstrate the adoption a multidimensional understanding of protest consequences. Institutional responsiveness remains one indicator of movement impact but captures only part of the effects generated by collective action. Organizational development, coalition-building, identity transformation, community formation, and discursive intervention emerged as additional outcomes. A broader perspective reveals how the encampments continued to shape activists, organizations, and local political environments long after the tents disappeared.

5.3 Encampments as Social, Organizational, and Emotional Infrastructures

The encampments cannot be reduced to protest repertoires. While tents, occupations, assemblies, and demonstrations constituted visible forms of contention, their significance lay in the social relations they enabled. In line with Polletta's (1999) argument that mobilization depends not merely on gathering places but on the associational ties formed within them, the encampments functioned as environments in which new networks, identities, and solidarities emerged. Participants emphasized the relationships, communities, and political connections developed through collective living, organizing, and protest.

Recent scholarship conceptualizes encampments as prefigurative and eventful forms of protest. Della Porta et al. (2026) argue that student camps function not merely as sites of disruption but as spaces where alternative forms of social and political organization are rehearsed. The encampments similarly operated as temporary experiments in democratic participation, collective decision-making, and mutual care. Daily assemblies enabled horizontal deliberation, while communal living required participants to address labor, conflict, well-being, and resource distribution collectively. In this sense, the camps prefigured not only justice for Palestine

[1] About a year later the University of Pisa would cut cooperation ties with Reichman and Hebrew University referencing their involvement in military action in Gaza (BDS Movement, 2025a).

but also alternative understandings of the university organized around solidarity, participation, and social responsibility.

The findings further support Della Porta et al.'s (2026) argument that encampments become eventful protests transforming identities, relationships, and political horizons. Interviewees described participation as a formative political experience that reshaped activism, collective action, and political identities. New coalitions emerged between students, academics, labor organizations, local collectives, and civil-society actors, while existing political boundaries were often suspended in favor of broader solidarity networks. Rather than advancing specific demands alone, the encampments became spaces where new political communities were produced.

The findings likewise align with Grimm, Mauthofer, and Sixta's (2026) argument that Palestine solidarity protests operate through the logics of appeal, accountability, and belonging. The encampments appealed to wider publics by highlighting the humanitarian consequences of the Gaza War and challenging dominant narratives surrounding the conflict. They functioned as spaces of accountability by questioning university partnerships, research practices, and institutional silence. At the same time, they generated powerful experiences of belonging. Particularly where activists perceived institutional actors as unresponsive or hostile, the encampments transformed feelings of isolation, frustration, and helplessness into collective identities rooted in solidarity and shared purpose. The persistence of networks created through the camps suggests that belonging constituted one of the mobilization's most enduring consequences.

These relational, cognitive, and emotional processes also point toward broader cultural consequences. Encampments were not only spaces of protest but also of political education and knowledge production. Teach-ins, workshops, public lectures, and exchanges with activists and scholars from other countries challenged dominant understandings of the conflict and promoted alternative interpretive frames. Activists consistently described these activities as central to their objectives, viewing struggles over public understanding as inseparable from institutional change. The encampments sought not only to influence university policies but also to reshape how the war in Gaza was understood.

Ultimately, the encampments are best understood as social, organizational, and emotional infrastructures of solidarity rather than simply protest camps. By creating spaces for coalition-building, identity formation, political learning, and collective care, they generated capacities that outlived the encampments themselves. This perspective helps explain why activists evaluated the camps not only through institutional concessions but also through the communities, solidarities, and political possibilities they created.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. Focusing on four cases within a single national context limits the generalizability of the findings, while the comparative design cannot establish definitive causal hierarchies among local context, internal camp dynamics, and movement trajectories. Future comparative and longitudinal research could examine whether these dynamics extend to other protest waves and whether the identities, networks, and organizations generated through encampments endure.

5.5 Conclusion

This article examined how local context and internal camp dynamics shaped divergent encampment trajectories across four pro-Palestine student encampments in Italy. Despite sharing similar demands, protest repertoires, and a common protest cycle, the encampments followed different trajectories, ranging from negotiated closure and organizational fatigue to occupation and long-term institutionalization.

The findings demonstrate that these divergent trajectories emerged through the interaction of local contextual conditions and internal camp dynamics. Political and institutional opportunity structures, spatial

positioning, and coalition opportunities shaped the environments in which activists operated, while organizational embeddedness, collective identity formation, and emotional sustainability shaped their capacity to adapt, endure, and transform mobilization.

Beyond explaining variation between cases, the study contributes to broader debates on social movements, protest outcomes, and solidarity mobilization. Encampments are best understood as social, organizational, and emotional infrastructures that generate communities, identities, networks, and enduring relational outcomes beyond their immediate institutional demands. By focusing on trajectories and movement endurance rather than institutional responsiveness alone, the article highlights dimensions of protest consequences often overlooked in analyses of collective action.

Although the Northern Italian encampments emerged in response to a specific political moment, the processes identified here extend beyond this protest wave. As universities increasingly become sites of contention over global conflicts, understanding the interaction between local context, internal movement dynamics, and struggles over solidarity and public discourse will remain essential for future research.

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Interviews

Florence Interviewee 1 (Omar), SNS activist, 24.05.2024, Florence, Piazza San Marco.

Florence Interviewee 2 (Francesco), EUI activist, 24.05.2024, Florence, Piazza San Marco.

Florence Interviewee 3 (Giulia), UniFi activist, 24.05.2024, Florence, Piazza San Marco.
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Pisa Interviewee 3 (Silvia), UniPi activist (f), 09.07.2024, Pisa, occupied building "Sumud".
Trento Interviewee 1 (Giovanni), UniTi activist (m), 29.06.2024, online interview.
Trento Interviewee 2 (Paolo), UniTi activist (m), 1.07.2024, Trento, garden behind Philosophy Department.
Trento Interviewee 3 (Alessia), UniTi activist, 1.07.2024. Trento, SIS PhD office.

Ethical statement

Verbal informed consent was obtained before each interview. Participants received an overview of the interview topics in advance, and interview transcripts were returned to them for review, allowing them to remove any information they did not wish to be included in the study. Participants were informed about the academic purpose of the research and the intention to use the data in scholarly publications. Written consent was intentionally not collected because participants were political activists mobilizing against their own universities and expressed concerns that signed consent forms could expose them to reputational or professional risks. To further protect participants, no surnames were recorded, and all first names used throughout the article are pseudonyms assigned by the author. Where requested, interviewees were identified only by aliases.

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Notes on Contributor

Sandro Nicolas Schraudolph is a PhD student at the School of International Studies of the University of Trento. His research interests include conflict studies, international security, and political violence in both domestic and international contexts. Specifically, his doctoral research focuses on the connection of international conflict and domestic dissent in initiator states. He holds an MA (1,62) in Political Science from the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen/Nürnberg with a final dissertation on the relationship of domestic terrorism and external conflicts. He took part in the academic exchange year program of the DAAD and spent two semesters studying at the Duke University Graduate School in North Carolina, USA focusing on security, peace, and conflict studies. He further holds a BA from the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen/Nürnberg in Sociology/Political Science.