



ROUTLEDGE HUMANITARIAN STUDIES

# CITIZEN HUMANITARIANISM AT EUROPEAN BORDERS



Edited by  
**MARIA GABRIELSEN JUMBERT  
AND ELISA PASCUCCI**



**“This wide-ranging volume is a much-needed intervention in the study of citizen humanitarianism. Tackling an emerging and increasingly important aspect of everyday humanitarian practice, the volume asks important questions around the political possibilities of such work forcing scholars and practitioners alike to reflect on what it means to ‘do good’.”**

*– Polly Pallister-Wilkins, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands*

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*– Katharyne Mitchell, University of California, Santa Cruz, USA*



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# Citizen Humanitarianism at European Borders

At a time of escalating conflict between states and non-governmental organizations engaged in migrant search and rescue operations across the Mediterranean, this book explores the emerging trend of citizen-led forms of helping others at the borders of Europe.

In recent years, Europe's borders have become new sites of intervention for traditional humanitarian actors and governmental agencies, but also, increasingly, for volunteer and activist initiatives led by "ordinary" citizens. This book sets out to interrogate the shifting relationship between humanitarianism, the securitization of border and migration regimes and citizenship. Critically examining the "do-it-yourself" character of refugee aid practices performed by non-professionals coming together to help in informal and spontaneous manners, the volume considers the extent to which these new humanitarian practices challenge established conceptualizations of membership, belonging and active citizenship. Drawing on case studies from countries around Europe including Greece, Turkey, Italy, France and Russia, this collection constitutes an innovative and theoretically engaged attempt to bring the field of humanitarian studies into dialogue with studies of grassroots refugee aid and, more explicitly, with political forms of solidarity with migrants and refugees that fall between aid and activism.

This book is key reading for advanced students and researchers of humanitarian aid, European migration and refugees and citizen-led activism.

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# **Citizen Humanitarianism at European Borders**

**Edited by  
Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert and  
Elisa Pascucci**



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# Introduction

## Citizen humanitarianism at European borders

*Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert and Elisa Pascucci*

For many migrants living in camps and cities at the southern borders of Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a time of both suspension and abandonment. For the hundreds of people sleeping rough in the makeshift encampments surrounding Termini railway station in Rome, Italy, the state of their existence changed from one of general precarity to extreme uncertainty and invisibility. During the country's unprecedented nation-wide lockdown, which lasted about two months, volunteers belonging to "Baobab Experience", a migrant assistance association founded in 2015, worked with the city's social services to deliver food and medical aid to the homeless, including unrecognized asylum seekers. Although the assistance available remained limited, Baobab mobilized citizens' political sensitivities and "need to help" (Malkki 2015), and used their intimate knowledge of local networks and institutions to mediate between the city's government and its most disenfranchised inhabitants. Their story is but one of the many that saw ordinary "citizens" – whether formally recognized as such or not, as many non-citizens in Europe also became involved – come together across the continent to support migrants at a time of imposed silence, isolation and distance. Many of these helpers, advocates and allies came with experience in politicized mobilization, volunteer work and membership in religious groups and institutions. Others had become attentive to the question of migration and refugees as a result of the 2015–2016 so-called "refugee crisis". Like Baobab, most of these volunteer groups worked by forging liaisons with local governments, enforcement agencies and with established, professional actors in formal humanitarian and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), although often receiving a significantly smaller share of funding than most of them (Mirshad 2020). Baobab, groups like them, and the precarious infrastructures around Rome's train stations have been the target of repressive police, judicial and governmental measures against what French activists have called "crimes of solidarity" (Taylor 2018).

This book brings together 11 stories of citizens mobilizing for migrants, written by academic researchers, student-activists and humanitarian professionals. The chapters draw on original field research on multifaceted forms of aid that developed within and around European borders, from Serbia to Belgium and from Norway to Istanbul. Taken together, these contributions

show how “citizen humanitarianism” poses a challenge to both humanitarian institutions and bounded notions of citizenship. They document how the world of international NGOs and their established practices of state collaboration, fundraising, accounting, outsourcing and being (un)accountable to beneficiaries and donors are increasingly complemented, questioned, confronted, bypassed and even replaced by grassroots movements. These movements operate in a transnational yet localized and agile manner, across spaces in which border enforcement and state repression expose the political stakes of the global endeavour of sustaining lives at risk, otherwise known as humanitarianism. The groups and initiatives examined do not always, or necessarily, identify themselves as “political”. In many cases, their operational and fundraising strategies and their trajectories of professionalization highlight proximity to the humanitarian status quo and its multiple contradictions and inequalities. Yet, these emerging forms of grassroots aid at the border show that humanitarianism can no longer hide behind its purported neutrality and distance to avoid the political questions that have in fact always been at its core.

This explains our choice of title. “Citizen humanitarianism” brings together citizenship as a lived practice of belonging, participation and reappropriation of spaces and infrastructures, beyond institutionalized polities (Amelung et al. 2020; Isin and Nielsen 2008; Kallio and Mitchell 2016; Kallio et al. 2020; Mirshad 2020; Mora Gámez 2020; Pascucci 2016) and humanitarianism as a multifaceted technology of care and control (Pallister-Wilkins 2018). Citizen humanitarianism then designates different ways how citizenship, in a broad sense, is enacted through simple acts of helping out populations in need. At the same time, the term designates the ordinariness of such humanitarian acts, as opposed to the “specialized” assistance provided by the well-established humanitarian organizations. One of the central contentions of this volume is that the border, considered as a social and political space that extends well beyond the contours of territorial demarcations and physical crossing points (Kallio et al. 2019), is a crucial site for redefining both citizenship and aid.

In this introduction, we review the recent but rapidly growing body of research on humanitarian borders and grassroots humanitarianism in Europe, situating the contributions of this edited volume within it. We subsequently outline our approach to citizen humanitarianism. Finally, we introduce the rich and varied studies that compose the three sections of the book. These investigations focus respectively on the relation between new grassroots initiatives and the professional humanitarian world, the criminalization and policing of citizens’ actions to support migrants and the various articulations of the political that characterize citizen humanitarianism.

## **Europe’s humanitarian borders**

After the European Union (EU)–Turkey statement on refugees in March 2016 (better known as the “EU–Turkey deal”), the so-called “European refugee crisis” seemed to fade away from public attention. In March 2019, in its annual report

on migration, the European Commission (EC) went as far as to declare the crisis officially over (Elbers 2019). A year later, the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on societies and economies in southern and eastern Europe and the Balkans rendered migrants and refugees all the more invisible, to EU governments and the broader public alike. On the ground, however, the multiple, protracted “crises” – for lack of a better term – of Europe’s borders and reception regimes continued to unfold. Soon after the EC issued its premature declaration in 2019, arrivals to Greece’s Aegean Islands began to increase again. In February 2020, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, seeking the EU’s help in Syria, again threatened to “open the gates” to Europe, this time followed by a few thousand migrants being bussed to the border and attempting to cross the short, but risky, sea stretch between Turkey and Lesbos. The hotspot system, introduced in the Autumn of 2015, with the aim of pooling together EU agencies in one location in order to speed up reception and asylum procedures, then compounded by the EU–Turkey deal, has since 2016 confined migrants to the islands’ refugee camps, in ever more precarious conditions (Pallister-Wilkins 2018), epitomized by the fire that destroyed much of the Moria hotspot in September 2020, just a few days after the first cases of COVID-19 were detected in the camp (Tazzioli 2020). Meanwhile, in the central Mediterranean, migration via Libya and southern Italy continued and so did deadly shipwrecks, even though these events drew only intermittent media attention. The summers of 2018 and 2019 were marked by yet another escalation of conflict between states and NGOs engaged in search and rescue activities. This tension highlighted the struggle of the EU and its member states to govern the many emerging manifestations of compassion and solidarity towards migrants at their borders (Pallister-Wilkins 2018). As this volume will show, this struggle precedes and exceeds the temporal and geographical limits of what is commonly known as the “EU refugee crisis”.

The intimate relation between humanitarian aid, migration and border enforcement that characterize European geographies is captured by Walters’s (2011) seminal definition of “humanitarian borders”. He writes that such border spaces are characterized by the confluence of security mandates of “control” and humanitarian concerns of “rescue”. Over the last few years, an important body of social scientific literature has examined the growing, multifaceted manifestations of humanitarian borders in Europe and beyond (inter alia Jumbert 2018; Kallio et al. 2019; Pallister-Wilkins 2015, 2017; Stierl 2018; Williams 2016).

This body of literature provides some of the main theoretical premises of this book. In particular, the contributions to this volume take as their point of departure three dynamics characterizing humanitarian borders:

- 1 Whereas humanitarian regimes of intervention have historically responded to situations where the state is unable or unwilling to assist crisis-affected communities, the emergence of what we call *citizen-humanitarian spaces* in Europe unfold as a result of an expanding security apparatus set up to “protect the borders” (see Jumbert 2018). This form of humanitarianism also unfolds in spaces traditionally understood as able and/or willing to secure protection for

- vulnerable lives, yet where the securitized borders and migration politics puts this idea into question. This in turn requires appropriate analytical tools to understand responses unfolding within them.
- 2 We adopt a *relational geographical approach* that considers borders as a “constellation of regulations, techniques, tactics and (counter)practices that has emerged and keeps evolving” around mobilities and their government (Kallio et al. 2019, p. 1260; see also Paasi et al. 2018). In doing so, we acknowledge the continued importance of territorial border zones. Indeed, some of the contributions to this volume focus on areas like Melilla, Aegean Greece, the Calais camps and the central Mediterranean. Yet we see European borders as spaces made of relations of control, social sorting and relief and care that span well beyond these bounded territories, extending – transnationally and translocally, and with countless frictions – to community and volunteer centres in metropolises as different as Brussels and Saint Petersburg, passing through Istanbul.
  - 3 We consider the space of *humanitarian borders as characterized by a proliferation of actors*. As Pallister-Wilkins (2017, p. 100) notes in her writing on what she calls “humanitarian borderwork”, these actors often exist in a complementary relation with migration control and “reproduce existing borders” through humanitarian practices that have developed specifically to be deployed in border zones.

The emerging humanitarian spaces examined in this volume underscore the increasingly pervasive and restrictive character of European border regimes, but they also expose their inherent limits. Characterized as they are by complexity, heterogeneity and polymorphism (Kallio et al. 2019), European humanitarian borders – both external and, increasingly, although with due distinctions, internal – are not merely instruments for the control of mobile bodies. As recent research highlights, borders are also sites of solidarity, aid and activism, as well as spaces of discipline, policing and repression against these forms of political agency (Kallio et al. 2019; Mitchell and Sparke 2020; Pallister-Wilkins 2018).

### **Conceptualizing citizen humanitarianism**

Like the 2015 crisis of refugee reception itself, the forms of aid and solidarity that flourished within were subject to intense academic scrutiny. Qualifiers including “solidarity” (Rozakou 2017), “volunteer” (Sandri 2017), “contentious” (Della Porta 2018) and “subversive” (Vandevoort and Verschraegen 2019; see also Vandevoort, Chapter 6 this volume) were used to describe these new humanitarianisms. Although these studies highlight the agency of individuals and groups that do not belong to established aid organizations, they vary greatly in their appraisal of these phenomena. In some cases, emerging initiatives to help migrants at European borders are seen as “alternative” to formal humanitarian aid, and, in some cases, articulating a critique of the neoliberal governmentality of border governance and humanitarian relief provision (Sandri 2017). Other

writers perceive a more nuanced coexistence of formal and informal aid to migrants in the so-called “European refugee crisis”. Rozakou (2017, p. 103) summarizes the encounter of these worlds as “an uncomfortable symbiosis of diverse and antagonistic actors”.

All these analyses are useful, as they all point to different aspects of grassroots aid that should be carefully considered for their implications. However, our attempt to theorize citizen humanitarianism takes a position that recognizes that terms such as “solidarity”, “subversion” “collaboration” and even “humanitarianism” are used performatively and strategically by actors on the ground. In the lived reality of grassroots aid, these terms are shifting and contingent labels that take on different meanings in different contexts – and people negotiate their contradictions as they go along. Rather than preoccupying ourselves with classifying the political nature of these phenomena, we set out to explore in depth the practical, ethical and geopolitical implications of these emerging encounters between humanitarianism and citizen politics with keen attention paid to their frictions and ambivalences (Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019).

Similar to the term “citizen journalism”, “citizen humanitarianism” is a craft, a patchwork of practices. Nevertheless, it is also about participation in public matters and presence in public spaces. The words “citizen” and “citizenship” point to the fact that people mobilizing and coming together to help migrants bears profound political consequences. Citizen humanitarianism exposes and questions the limits of states’ responsibility toward people in distress and danger, while reshaping the ethical and civic responsibilities of ordinary citizens. New configurations of border enforcement and migration containment within the European space recast the relation between people and political power.

How do these new humanitarianisms challenge established conceptualizations of membership, belonging and active citizenship? Is humanitarianism re-politicized by its proximity to securitized border spaces? Can it become something akin to a social movement? Our approach to these questions is inspired by conceptualizations of citizenship that include practices and subjects that are traditionally excluded from institutionalized representation and formally defined polities (Isin and Nielsen 2008; Kallio and Mitchell 2016; Staeheli et al. 2012). While the definition of citizenship includes “status, identity and practices” (Odasso 2020, p. 3), this volume is especially attentive to citizenship as produced through acts and practices. In Isin and Nielsen’s (2008, p. 39) well-known theorization, an “act of citizenship” is one through which “citizens, strangers, outsiders and aliens” advance claims to the political realm “emerg(ing) not as being already defined but as beings acting and reacting with others”. As an act of citizenship, humanitarianism from below pushes the limits of membership and participation socially, geographically and temporally. As the chapters in this volume show, it does so by involving forms of commemoration and memory politics, putting the young – and often, the unemployed – at the forefront of spontaneous aid and solidarity initiatives, thus allowing performances of contentious and active citizenship that are transnational in scope and modality.

Nevertheless, the concept of citizenship is also about membership, belonging, boundaries and exclusions. The “ordinariness” of citizenship, reflected here in the ordinariness of acts of aid, holds emancipatory but also disciplinary and repressive potential. Although it often constitutes a disruptive and contentious phenomenon, citizen humanitarianism can also more or less directly support practices of bordering, reinforcing humanitarian regimes that are essential to the reproduction of the (inter)national order. Citizens approaching mobile “others” help articulate a critique and even threaten national state orders. Citizen humanitarians can also reinforce the racialized and classed divides ingrained in the institution of liberal, “white” citizenship (Beltrán 2020). At the same time, the ordinariness of citizen humanitarianism highlights the expansion of bordering rationales through temporal and spatial dimensions that reach into everyday life.

The ordinariness of acts of help also contrasts with professional humanitarian aid. How do citizen-humanitarian initiatives relate to established humanitarian organizations and principles? Most of the stories in this volume, if not all, in some way or another emerge in a reaction to a perceived lack of response from relevant authorities. When “ordinary citizens” saw migrants left to care for themselves in their cities, on the sea shores or at train stations, a sense of “a need to help” was awakened (Malkki 2015). A central theme in many narratives is the absence of state authorities that are either overwhelmed or unwilling to provide appropriate assistance. Seeing this lack of response, citizens then look for the actions of established humanitarian organizations, but they are also absent. At this point, ordinary citizens respond.

Despite few resources and little to no experience, citizen humanitarians highlighted in this volume understand their strengths to be rapid response, lean structures and the ability to “get things done”. Once they evolve from spontaneous acts of helping (e.g. through food distribution, shelter provision, local guidance), they see continuing needs of migrants and meet other concerned citizens and realize that more formalized structures are needed. In this process of formalization volunteer-based organizations have sought to find the right balance: maintaining their flexibility and ability to respond quickly, and proximity to those they are helping, while also creating more formalized processes, ethical guidelines and divisions of labour with fellow organizations to ensure efficiency and completeness of services. These volunteer organizations express a resistance to “becoming the system” – that is, too much like the large humanitarian organizations they have criticized for being too slow and bureaucratic. Several chapters in this volume present examples of individuals and organizations confronting this dilemma.

The organizations highlighted in this book reflect many different trajectories since they sprang into action in 2015. While some grew out of existing local or national solidarity networks to focus specifically on refugee assistance and advocacy, others were created spontaneously through the encounters of concerned persons who met in their localities, on social media or on the Aegean shores in Greece. As more actors have come to play a role in various locations across

Europe, citizen-led initiatives strive to maintain a visible “community” or volunteer-based identity while also veering, necessarily, along different paths of specialization to meet internal and external needs, such as humanitarian advocacy, political lobbying and professionalizing humanitarian actors. A humanitarianism that is non-professional and ordinary can also become a space in which compassion is regulated and re-embedded in border complexes by virtue of state repression or co-optation, but also due to a lack of expertise, awareness and accountability by the sometimes-improvised helpers.

While professional humanitarian aid work is normally arranged through stringent recruitment procedures in which highly educated and well-experienced professionals are brought in, the new humanitarian aid has changed over the past few years. In Calais, on the Greek islands, and in different localities across Europe, numerous organizations have formed through the volunteer efforts of experienced and unexperienced persons. While for many years international volunteering has been a channel for young people seeking a first international experience, today engaging with volunteer organizations in Greece has become much more accessible for young Europeans. As told in these chapters, some youth travel to Greece for this experience, while others have found the opportunity to contribute in their own cities and neighbourhoods.

Demographically speaking, volunteers are quite heterogenous, but some features stand out. Most volunteers come from two age groups: 20–30 years old and 50 plus (see Jumbert 2020). Some have backgrounds in local networks and neighbourhood volunteering, while for others assisting refugees was their first volunteer experience. There also appears to be a gendered dimension in this form of mobilization. While the sex balance was more even in the earlier phase of the migration response, the latter years for many organizations have seen predominantly female volunteers engaging (briefly mentioned by Mogstad, Chapter 1 this volume and Denniston, Chapter 4 in this volume). While these demographic aspects merit further academic enquiry, there may be elements of socialization and social reproduction here. Beyond the initial mobilization of many volunteers in 2015, those who have continued with the relief efforts may tend to recruit other volunteers similar to themselves, thereby reproducing familiar social and gendered dynamics.

The contributions to this volume also show how citizen-led forms of humanitarianism at the border have specific geographical dynamics. As Pallister-Wilkins (2018) highlights, the 2015–2016 “refugee crisis” has unsettled the geographies of humanitarianism, previously understood as help to distant others. As the borders of Europe and the EU asylum system temporarily collapsed to allow mass movement, the “others” (refugees) suddenly became much closer to those who were searching for meaning, morality, ethics and community through acts of aid. Suddenly, refugees were present in volunteers’ neighbourhoods, streets, schools and churches. In this context, migrants were “on the move” to distant locations, far from their aggrieved homelands, creating an image of refugees much at odds with the frequently imagined, docile figures who wait for assistance in camps of the Global South (Hyndman and Giles 2011). In this context, the concept of

citizenship guides through the exploration of a humanitarianism that is very far from the proclaimed neutrality and universality of the earlier modern era. Rather than providing help to distant others, citizen humanitarianism often occurs close to home, involving emotional intimacies and leading to particular solidarity alliances that, like citizenship itself, are practised through the everyday.

While proximity and movement introduce elements of novelty in the geographies of humanitarianism as performed by ordinary citizens, the relation between northern and southern Europe that characterize this phenomenon reproduces divisions and tensions seen in other, simultaneous crises, from Eurozone sovereign debt to the COVID-19 pandemic. Volunteers flocking from northern Europe to Mediterranean Europe and eastern post-socialist countries (often framed as mere “transit spaces”) mark another discontinuity in the social, cultural and political geographies of humanitarianisms that this collection sets out to explore.

### **Outline of the volume**

The following 11 chapters address these questions by examining the “do-it-yourself” character of aid performed by non-professionals who come together to help in informal and spontaneous manners, often with limited and unsophisticated resources. The authors consider the trajectories of these phenomena, including “NGOization”, politicization, criminalization or fast disappearance of such groups. The volume thus advances empirical knowledge by bringing together rich, in-depth qualitative studies of humanitarian actors operating in different European countries, across the north–south and east–west divides. The authors draw on qualitative field research based primarily on ethnographic methods, yet they move from various disciplinary backgrounds including media studies and journalism, international relations and development, political theory, human geography and anthropology, among others. The variety of writing styles reflects the heterogeneous backgrounds of our authors and offers appealing and engaging cues to a wide range of readers. The contributions also mobilize heterogeneous conceptual tools that span a range of fields focused on critical citizenship, organizations, memory, cultural, humanitarian and border studies. They offer new ways of understanding grassroots humanitarianism as representing the ambivalent space between aid and politics in its complexity. They acknowledge the potentially disruptive power of the lived encounters that take place in this space, but also the unclear responsibilities, lack of accountability to migrants and complexities with border enforcement that citizen humanitarianism entails. While most collections of essays on grassroots humanitarianism and citizens mobilizing for migrants have focused on the frantic years of the 2015–2016 “crisis” (see, for one important example, Della Porta 2018) many of the contributions to this volume examine the unexplored aftermaths of the crisis and its understudied peripheries.

Part I, “Resisting or Becoming ‘the System’?” Humanitarianism between citizenship and the NGO world”, features four chapters that explore, through different perspectives, the relation between citizens’ engagements with refugee aid and

established, professional humanitarian institutions, particularly international or non-governmental actors. Drawing on extensive, multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, in Chapter 1 Heidi Mogstad studies the Norwegian organization *Dråpen i Havet* (A Drop in the Ocean) along its trajectory from spontaneous volunteering to “NGOization” and its controversial work in the Moria hotspot. Mogstad follows the group as it attempts to “fill the gap” left by international aid and professional humanitarian delivery in a Greece struck by multiple crises. She examines how the organization negotiates, not without difficulties and ethical dilemmas, access and legitimacy with NGOs, international organizations (IGOs) and the Greek state. With great ethnographic sensitivity, she describes the uncertain and ever-shifting humanitarian efforts of A Drop in the Ocean, and relates the fear, confusion and mistakes of inexperienced Nordic volunteers confronted with an incomprehensible hotspot system. Her chapter asks difficult questions about citizen humanitarianism’s accountability, responsibility and complicity with a humanitarian border regime that produces extreme precarity. The answers, rooted in a nuanced analysis, are often uneasy.

Chapter 2, Tsjalline Boorsma’s ethnography of the Istanbul-based Almond Tree, also looks at the question of professionalization of volunteer aid at European borders. Almond Tree started its work in 2012, as an informal network of international volunteers running a community centre for refugees in the Turkish metropolis. In the space of a few years, the centre became one of the many NGOs relying on government authorization and international funding in the complex landscape of Turkey’s refugee governance, which was closely linked to the European border regime. Boorsma details a process of institutionalization and professionalization that is marked by organizational conflicts and ethical dilemmas, and remains somewhat incomplete and precarious because of the tight government grip. In doing so, the chapter shows how citizen humanitarianism can encounter and merge into border externalization – in this case, the externalization of European borders to Turkey.

In Chapter 3, Svetlana Stanarević and Vanja Rokvić’s work on citizen humanitarianism in Serbia provides a comprehensive account of the role citizen-led groups play in the complex institutional and geopolitical landscape that marks transit and asylum migration to Serbia. Much has been written on the often romanticized “Balkan route”, the major path for migrants on their way to Europe and a route fraught with obstacles and challenges (for a recent, comprehensive overview, see Minca et al. 2019). Yet we have rarely heard the voices of local researchers and practitioners (with the exception of those involved in research projects based at western European or Anglo-American institutions). The chapter explores the relation between national and local authorities and volunteers in a country that constitutes another piece in the mosaic of EU border externalization. Sensitive to local variations across the country, the authors highlight the complexity of Serbian geographies of migration and humanitarianism. Citizen humanitarianism is more than a mere “export” of well-meaning volunteers from the north to the south and east of Europe. Variegated and multilayered geopolitics of citizenship are at work in mobilizations for migrants across the continent. In a country like Serbia, engaging in refugee assistance while also acting in

accordance with state policies (and exposing their weaknesses) can work to articulate a claim to European citizenship for a society still haunted by direct memories of recent violent conflicts.

The aspirational neutrality of phrases like “just trying to help” are eventually confronted by the intricacies and violence of policing and humanitarianism in border zones. Every spontaneous act of aid has consequences and assumes meanings beyond what the helpers may have intended. As an aid worker, in Chapter 4 Leila Denniston approaches citizen humanitarianism in Calais having experienced and witnessed these dynamics. The result is an in-depth, exacting interrogation of practices of accountability and responsibility among non-professional humanitarians. Caught between commitment and many ethical tensions, her participants describe their work as funded through spontaneous donations and making room for exchanges based on proximity to beneficiaries, and shared sociality and affects. Yet, Denniston argues, many questions remain unanswered, as leadership in grassroots groups is often unaccountable, lack of organization looms large and social encounters between volunteers and migrants exacerbate power imbalances and inequalities in aid delivery. Like Mogstad, Denniston offers an analysis of the relationship between the world of professional aid and citizen humanitarianism that is still rare in the literature.

Through Clara Miralles Vila’s “Melilla: Fight and Survival of Activist Humanitarianism” in Chapter 5, we move to a landscape of opposition, conflict and heightened politicization of humanitarian aid to migrants on the move. Her chapter opens Part II of the book: “Criminalization and Violence Against Citizen Humanitarianism”. The contributions in this section focus on the politicization that follow in the wake of governmental acts, penal and administrative provisions and procedures and the affirmation of right-wing anti-immigration rhetoric, movements and policies. In Chapter 5, Miralles Villa explores how, in the Spanish enclave of Melilla, Morocco, the securitization of migration and its militarized control through externalized borders take a brutally violent form. Before that, citizen humanitarianism saw its space shrunken and its actions hindered. The repression is such that aid to migrants cannot avoid but turn into “activist humanitarians”, adopting a set of tactics characterized by adaptability and spatial fluidity. In this chapter, we are very far from the trajectories of professionalization encountered in Part I, yet, Miralles Vila’s contends, we remain within a humanitarian matrix, as helping migrants, rather than just engaging in political struggles alongside them, is still central.

Repression and criminalization of migration and aid to migrants are not only present along Europe’s territorial borders. As already observed, their expansion follows that of borders as social relations and political spaces that exceed and defy traditional topographies. In Chapter 6, Robin Vandevoordt introduces us to the escalation of control and forced removals that has characterized Belgian federal migration policies over the last few years. In this context (as in Melilla), aid to migrants is forced to adhere to a different repertoire of values and strategies than aid from professional humanitarians. Vandevoordt sees this repertoire as characterized by two peculiar dimensions: a “particularistic” form of solidarity,

engaging specific people in specific contexts and challenging the abstract universality of humanitarianism, and a constant, double feedback between humanitarian actions and political strategies. Aid to migrants becomes here a form of “presence” on the ground that informs political action. This presence appears “subversive” when confronted with the growing tendency of professional humanitarian actors to operate through remote management, geographical information and datification (Duffield 2018), as opposed to immersion in the scene and proximity to those in need.

Repressive and violent policies targeting refugee migration, refugee aid and the practices through which citizen humanitarians attempt to counter those policies are also central in Chapter 7 by Johanne Kalsaas. The Civic Assistance Committee – the organization studied by Kalsaas – is the most prominent example of refugee aid led by citizens in Russia. Yet, in a polity that is turning increasingly self-referential, the committee finds support primarily through transnational networks and its activities are carried out mostly in digital space. Kalsaas’s contribution highlights the role transnational connections play in situations where aid to refugees meets activism – and both clash with state repression – a role long highlighted in the literature on protest movements and grassroots activism involving migrants (Brown et al. 2018; Pascucci 2018). The chapter reflects the collection’s choice to unsettle European geographies, bringing to the fore and exploring previously overlooked peripheries through less common voices and narratives. Long neglected in studies that map the geographies of the European migration “crises”, the Russian Federation tops global statistics for the number of immigrants and continues to be a significant refugee-producing country (International Organization for Migration 2020; see also Tkach and Brednikova 2016). As the EU shares one of its longest external land borders with Russia (the Finnish–Russian border), the post-Soviet country is a crucial space for investigating European geopolitics, including humanitarian ones.

Questions of politics, politicization, solidarity and political agency run through the whole volume, but in Part III especially – entitled “The Multifaceted Politics of Citizen Humanitarianism” – our authors explore deeply the varieties of possible “citizenships”, “solidarities” and “resistances” at play in emerging humanitarian movements. Here the potentialities of the encounters between helpers and people on the move – and in the spaces and landscapes they dwell or traverse – are illuminated through four chapters that look at well-known places in Mediterranean Europe – from southern Sicily, Lesbos and Chios to the French–Italian border and Paris.

In Chapter 8, Janina Pescinski explores the question of hospitality in an unlikely place: the Roya Valley along the French–Italian border. Border enforcement and ecological obstacles make crossing the valley fraught, dangerous, disrupted and sometimes lengthy. The act of providing a safe shelter, even when confronted with police repression, becomes an act of solidarity that exceeds the rules of humanitarian governmentality. Pescinski’s chapter reminds us there is a fundamental tension between humanitarian care of attending to distressed people who are temporarily immobilized – in camps, migration detention facilities or reception centres – and the provision of help to people on the move (Pallister-Wilkins

2018). The latter act – particularly when criminalized – pushes the boundaries of citizenship, participation and care in ways that humanitarian paradigms only are not able to capture.

In Chapter 9, Vera Haller introduces us to a setting where politics take centre stage. In this chapter, the citizens of Syracuse, Italy, protest loudly and publicly, supported by the mayor, local Catholic clergy, members of parliament and Sicilian NGOs and charities. They oppose Rome’s government policy of “closed ports”, implemented by the then minister of interior, far-right politician, Matteo Salvini. Yet, at a closer look, this protest appears only fleeting and spontaneous (rather than articulated and strategized), animated by moral sentiments rooted in the emotional experience of seeing a rescue ship – *Sea-Watch 3* – stranded off the shores of Syracuse. Quickly, the protests give way to a renewed sense of dissatisfaction among the population with the arrival of irregularized migrants via the sea. The anxiety produced by their arrival is compounded by ingrained structural problems like high unemployment rates. Haller’s chapter relates this story in an accessible and engaging style, forged by years of international reporting. In doing so, she shows how humanitarianism is changed and reshaped by politics, and how politics can become “humanitarian” when moral and emotional motivations to barely “save lives” are not combined with sustained engagement. Like Chapter 3 by Stanarević and Rokvić, Haller’s contribution illustrates that citizen humanitarianism has variegated regional and subnational dimensions, and is often shaped by specific relations between local political geographies – particularly relevant in the case of Sicily – and central governments.

Indeed, places and landscapes matter in citizen humanitarianism. Over the last few years, iconic places like the “Life Jackets Graveyard” in Lesvos, Greece, have become memorial sites. The graveyard is an abandoned landfill where the life jackets and rubber dinghies of migrants crossing the Aegean are collected. In Chapter 10, Giovanna Di Matteo explores how “civil pilgrimages” to the site can become enactments of transnational citizenship for international volunteers in Lesvos. Di Matteo delivers a frank discussion of the limits of volunteer tourism as “an individualistic, narcissistic, and incredibly limited approach to politics” (Butcher 2011, p. 75). Drawing on extensive fieldwork featuring the voices of many volunteers, she guides us through the complexities of citizen humanitarianism as an embryonic political subjectivity, as it emerges through this memorial site.

Another glimpse of these subjectivities emerges in Luděk Stavinoha and Kavita Ramakrishnan’s analysis of encounters between refugees and volunteers in Chapter 11. Focusing on the emotional and ethical intimacies of these encounters, the authors discuss what they call exchanges of “biographical life”: past, shared experiences, mutual acts of care that happen at the personal level. The politics of biographical life, Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan argue, have the potential to open spaces of equality in humanitarian governmentality. Will the politics of these encounters survive the fleeting effects of the so-called mediatized “refugee crises”? The authors leave us to ponder this important question.

In the concluding chapter, we the editors link this important question with the many others raised by authors in this volume to sketch out a tentative agenda for future research on the interplay between humanitarianism and citizenship.

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## **Part I**

# **Resisting or becoming “the system”? Humanitarianism between citizenship and the NGO world**



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# 1 Filling the gaps

## Citizen humanitarianism in the context of crisis, abandonment and criminalization

*Heidi Mogstad*

### Introduction

In the late summer of 2015, the Greek island Lesbos was thrust into the world's spotlight as the epicentre of what became misguidedly labelled the "European refugee crisis" (Cabot 2019).<sup>1</sup> Moved into action by images of suffering and rescue, "ordinary citizens" from foreign countries flocked to the scene to assist the incoming boat refugees<sup>2</sup> and "volunteer at the frontline of history" (Papataxiarchis 2016, p. 8). Crucially, while the situation on the island was dramatic due to sharp increases in sea arrivals and deaths, it was neither completely new nor unprecedented (see e.g. Hirschon 2003; Papailias 2004; Rozakou 2017). Indeed, what was new and unprecedented on Lesbos in 2015, was neither the arrival of boat refugees nor the care and assistance provided to them, but the *scale* and *pace* of the arrivals and the surge in global attention and people arriving from the North Atlantic to offer assistance (Cabot 2019; Knott 2017).

Intervening in the gaps resulting from the absence, or inadequate support, of public authorities, European Union (EU) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), engaged citizens from all over the world worked alongside more experienced local actors to improvise ad hoc assistance on Lesbos (Guribye and Mydland 2018; Hernandez 2016; Papataxiarchis 2016). In addition to patrolling the coast and assisting with boat landings, volunteers helped meeting basic needs such as clothing, water and food, transport and even medical support and rescue (Kitching et al. 2016; Papataxiarchis 2016). During the fall of 2015, some volunteers established more robust organizations to provide better structured and more sustainable humanitarian responses (Hernandez 2016). While some of these organizations were dissolved or co-opted in the years that followed, others survived by formalizing or reinventing themselves and assuming new roles and responsibilities. This chapter discusses the trajectory of one of these citizen-led humanitarian initiatives: a Norwegian non-governmental organization (NGO) called Dråpen i Havet (A Drop in the Ocean, hereafter DiH). During my fieldwork, DiH worked inside two official refugee camps on the Greek mainland and the notorious Moria camp on Lesbos island. The organization also provided safe spaces and recreational activities to refugees outside the camps on Samos and Lesbos.

The chapter addresses two interconnected questions. First, how has DiH's work and rationale developed in response to shifting humanitarian needs, criminalization and abandonment by the EU and the international community? Second, how has the organization navigated its identity and relationships vis-à-vis more powerful and established actors in the field, specifically the Greek state and INGOs?

## **Methodology**

The arguments presented in this chapter are based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Greece and Norway conducted primarily between June 2018 and January 2020. Briefly summarized, I adopted an extended case-study methodology where I followed DiH and individual volunteers across time and space to explore the moral economy of volunteer humanitarianism at home and abroad. My first encounter with DiH took place nearly two years earlier, on Chios island in 2016, when I volunteered for the organization for three weeks before starting my doctoral degree. Since this “pilot study”, I have maintained a relationship of ongoing rapport with the organization's management, who generously provided me with unique access and insight. From June 2018 to December 2019, I conducted nine months of participant observation in Greece as a full-time volunteer. As a cultural and organizational “insider” (cf. Narayan, 1993), I had privileged access to volunteers' “front-stage” and “backstage” performances (Goffman 1958), including internal debates and controversies. My fieldwork in Norway (intermittently from March 2018 to January 2020) entailed following and participating in DiH's logistical work and political engagement at home and visiting and “hanging out” with volunteers across the country. While participant observation was my key method, I also employed semi-structured interviews and document/media analysis.

Besides providing me with deep insight and unprecedented access, my close and long-term relationship with DiH had ethical bearings on my research. In line with feminist methodologies, I approached research ethics as an ongoing and interactive process involving both the leadership of the organization and individual interlocutors. My dual role as an insider/outsider also made me sensitive to the importance of “not merely enacting critique [of citizen-led humanitarian organizations] for its own sake but rather to document the ethical-moral, bureaucratic, and political complexities of such worlds” (Cabot 2019, p. 271). This chapter is written in this spirit.

The chapter proceeds as follows. It starts by providing a brief account of DiH's birth and trajectory, before examining the organization's rationale of “filling humanitarian gaps”. It thereafter discusses DiH's efforts to negotiate access and legitimacy vis-à-vis the Greek state and more professional INGOs, and explores two key dilemmas the organization has grappled with in light of these negotiations. The chapter concludes by suggesting that the case of DiH is telling of the increasingly fluid and fragmented humanitarian landscape on Europe's southern border and highlights issues of knowledge and accountability. The political and ethical dilemmas DiH face also illustrate the perhaps inevitable “impurity” of

humanitarian assistance in a field where responsibility is outsourced to volunteers and care becomes easily entangled with the politics of containment.

### **The birth of a humanitarian organization**

One afternoon in late August 2015, Trude Jacobsen, a 44-year-old Norwegian mother of five, was sorting her youngest daughter's wardrobe while listening to the radio about the large number of refugees who were risking their lives crossing the Mediterranean in overcrowded dinghies. While standing in her daughter's bedroom, amid her family's physical and economic comforts, Jacobsen suddenly realized that she "had to do something". Not only did she feel called into action as a mother of young children living in comparative ease and luxury, but as a European, and as someone who had lived and worked in Greece for eight years, Jacobsen also felt obliged to understand what was happening at the borders of her "second homeland".

Eight days after her epiphany, Jacobsen was on a plane to Lesvos with 14 suitcases of clothes and blankets donated by her family and friends. Jacobsen, who had no previous experience with humanitarian work, had not planned to get involved with boat landings, nor did she have any intention to "rescue people". However, after driving to the north coast of the island, where thousands of boat refugees were arriving on a nearly daily basis, Jacobsen was shocked to witness the lack of organized and professional assistance. Realizing she could not simply stand there and watch, Jacobsen spent three days and nights helping to receive boats and distributing warm clothes and blankets to people arriving onshore. Transformed by this experience, she then returned to Norway and resigned from her job as a production manager for a Nordic television service provider. With support from a group of female friends, Jacobsen established DiH with the purpose of helping ordinary citizens, like herself, assist refugees in Greece in an effective and responsible manner.

Driven by a clear sense of moral urgency, DiH started working immediately. Only three days after Jacobsen returned to Norway on 2 September 2015, a team of 16 self-recruited volunteers travelled to Lesvos, representing the first "drops" in the field. Since then, DiH has coordinated more than 7,000 self-funded volunteers from across the world, most of whom had no prior experience with humanitarian fieldwork. While DiH's humanitarian projects are run by selected volunteer-coordinators in Greece, Jacobsen also put together a small team of volunteers to run the administration in Oslo. In addition to assisting coordinators in the field, these domestic volunteers were tasked with recruiting new volunteers, creating guidelines, raising and managing funds and providing regular updates on social media. To gain credibility and provide more comprehensive and sustainable assistance, DiH also quickly undertook several measures to formalize the organization's structure, including the establishment of a board, local chapters and recruitment of regular members and donors.

Jacobsen also recruited a human resources (HR) and emergency manager, a woman in her fifties who, like Jacobsen herself, had no experience with

humanitarian work but ample experience from working in the private sector. A discussion of the gendered dynamics of the organization is beyond the scope of this chapter, however it is noteworthy that women are over-represented among volunteers and staff in both Greece and Norway.

### **Organizational trajectory**

Motivated by a desire to fill humanitarian gaps, DiH has relocated and reinvented its operations many times during the last five years. Initially, the organization focused primarily on assisting boat refugees arriving on the Greek islands Lesbos and Chios. Recognizable by volunteers' yellow vests and drop logo, DiH became a well-known actor on the islands and was awarded "winner of the best volunteer group" by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Aegaeon University on Chios in December 2015. In 2016, after European countries started to close their national borders, sealing off migration routes, DiH also started to work in various unofficial refugee camps on the Greek mainland where help was needed. During my fieldwork (2018–2020), DiH worked inside two official refugee camps on the Greek mainland: Skaramagas (on the outskirts of Athens) and Nea Kavala (in northern Greece). As a consequence of the EU's policies of containment, and Greece's overburdened asylum system, these camps became long-term residences for tens of thousands of asylum seekers stuck in limbo on the doorstep to Europe. Working alongside more established organizations, DiH assumed responsibility for various tasks including distribution of clothes and food. Like many other volunteer organizations, DiH also responded to the longevity of the crisis by moving beyond the traditional humanitarian tasks of responding to emergencies and covering necessities, and focused increasingly on providing psycho-social support and empowerment by organizing various recreational activities like sports and arts, cafes, computer and language classes and bike rentals. In 2018, DiH also returned to Lesbos, where the organization ran an activity and educational centre in Moria village from May 2018 to February 2020. During the spring of 2019, DiH started to work on Samos and inside the notorious Moria camp on Lesbos, providing recreational activities to youths and unaccompanied minors.<sup>3</sup> In parallel with assuming more responsibilities in Greece, DiH also responded to tightening asylum regulations and growing anti-immigrant sentiments in Norway (Hagelund 2020) by following a common trend among contemporary volunteer organizations in Europe, namely engaging in political advocacy (Kynsilehto 2018). In 2018 DiH's board voted for an amendment to the organization's statement of purpose, adding "spreading information about the plight of refugees" to the initial aim of "providing aid to people on the run". Subsequently, DiH increasingly emphasized the organization's and volunteers' responsibility to witness and speak truth to the power of the Norwegian state. The organization has also mobilized for more positive public orientations to refugees through campaigning and storytelling.

## Filling “humanitarian gaps”

As suggested, DiH’s organizational trajectory has developed in response to shifting humanitarian gaps and needs. That said, humanitarian gaps and needs are not objective facts, but social constructs that must be identified and declared. In many cases, DiH’s decision to start a project was influenced and legitimized by the absence or withdrawal of more established and professional actors in the field, particularly INGOs. Indeed, the very premise for establishing the organization in the first place was what Jacobsen described as a “shocking absence of large, professional humanitarian organizations” on Lesbos in 2015. Similar considerations led DiH to send volunteers to other locations in Greece, including Chios and Samos, northern Greece, Cape Sounio, the port of Piraeus and Athens.

It is worth dwelling on the notion of “the absence of the big humanitarian organizations”. Of relevance is not only its truthfulness, but also the assumptions embedded in this statement and its performative effects. Like the interview respondents in Kitching et al.’s (2016) study, my interlocutors were generally harsh in their criticism of the perceived inadequate INGO and UNHCR response in 2015. Similar critiques were reiterated by staff and volunteers during my fieldwork, specifically concerning the chronically overcrowded and unsanitary Moria camp on Lesbos. During 2016 and 2017, many big INGOs suspended their operations inside Moria, either in protest against the harshening border regime, or as a result of changes to EU funding leaving the Greek government in charge. Thenceforward, the daily operation of the camp increasingly depended on volunteer organizations providing goods and services including medical assistance and protection (Kalir and Rozakou 2016; Rozakou 2019). In the wake of the violent death of an unaccompanied minor inside Moria camp in August 2019, Jacobsen expressed her disapproval of the situation in a Norwegian newspaper:

When refugee camps at our own continent are described as some of the worst in the world, you expect that all the big established humanitarian organisations turn up. This is unfortunately not the case. It [Greece] is geographically so close and it should be possible to come. IRC [International Rescue Committee], NRC [Norwegian Refugee Council], Save the Children and other humanitarian giants are sorely missed.

(Jacobsen 2019, translated from Norwegian)

This and similar statements convey two different messages. First, and most obviously, the statement is a critique of the larger and more established humanitarian organizations for not being present. However, the statement is also a legitimacy claim. By deploring the absence of the “humanitarian giants”, volunteer organizations like DiH are simultaneously saying that “we are here, and we need to be here, because *they* are not”. It is further interesting to note that it was primarily INGOs and UNHCR, and not the Greek state or the EU, which were criticized for being absent, although the latter also occurred. As Rozakou (2017, p. 14) notes, this rhetorical change reflects a “shift in authority”. Yet, perhaps it

also reflects a more general disregard of national sovereignty, and particularly the sovereignty of the Greek state, which remains politically, legally, financially and symbolically marginalized within the EU (Cabot 2014; Herzfeld 2002, 2016). As illustrated by Jacobsen's statement, staff and volunteers also commonly appealed to Norway's geographical (and emotional) proximity to Greece, and the fact that the suffering of refugees in Moria and other Greek refugee camps took place on *European soil*. Whether stressing their responsibility as Europeans, Norwegians or "fellow human beings" (*medmennesker*), staff and volunteers rarely problematized the organization's "right to act" or to transgress Greek sovereignty. Conversely, DiH's humanitarian efforts were typically framed as a display of both humanity and intra-European solidarity.

In other contexts, DiH did not fill humanitarian gaps left by the absence of states or INGOs, but rather identified and constructed new gaps and needs, in dialogue with their target group (the refugees) and other stakeholders. As mentioned, DiH responded to the increased encampment of refugees by creating projects to meet shifting needs including psycho-social support, access to technologies and education. In line with the recent humanitarian turn to innovation (Sandvik 2017), DiH also experimented with new technologies and humanitarian designs to run their projects and distributions in a more effective, fair and dignified manner. In the process, the organization embraced a new vocabulary. While previously emphasizing the need for "direct and immediate assistance", DiH increasingly employed new buzzwords such as "dignified distribution", "safe space" or "breathing space" (*pusterom*), "empowerment" and "building bridges". As Sandvik (2019) explains, humanitarian buzzwords work by "singling out" and "framing problems", thereby providing the legitimacy humanitarian actors need to justify their efforts. DiH's emphasis on innovation and use of the aforementioned buzzwords were also used to distinguish the organization's work and profile from other NGOs in Greece, who were engaged in similar efforts of branding and boundary-making.

### **Gaining access**

As just described, DiH has demonstrated impressive flexibility and willingness to embrace new projects and directions. Yet, far from being a fully self-controlled process, the organization's humanitarian space has largely been controlled by more powerful actors in the field. Various agencies of the Greek state and more established INGOs have functioned as "humanitarian gatekeepers" (Rozakou 2019) for many humanitarian projects and locations in Greece, specifically refugee camps. Before the closure of the Balkan route, DiH provided basic assistance to people residing in temporary makeshift camps along the migrant trail such as the port of Piraeus and Idomeni. After ending boat spotting on Chios in 2016, DiH also organized children's activities and distributed food to refugees in unofficial camps on the island. For better or worse, gaining entry to these unofficial camps was not difficult and volunteer organizations like DiH worked next to independent volunteers and professional humanitarian organizations that declared their resources were being overstretched (IRC 2016; Kynsilehto 2018).

However, during 2016 and 2017, Greek authorities responded to the prolonged crisis by closing and evacuating most of the provisional camps and replacing them with official camps, typically located in spatially isolated and socially marginalized spaces (Kandylis 2019). For volunteers, gaining access to these camps became more difficult. Still, on the Greek mainland, DiH was invited to work inside Skaramagas (Athens) and Nea Kavala (northern Greece) by the INGOs that were de facto running the camps. According to DiH's understanding, these invitations were a direct result of the good impressions volunteers had made while working alongside these more professional actors in Piraeus and Idomeni. A similar "vetting process" took place on Lesbos. In the spring of 2019, a representative of a well-established humanitarian NGO acting on behalf of Greek migration authorities asked DiH to provide recreational activities for unaccompanied minors living in designated "safe zones" in the Moria camp. While DiH was not the only volunteer organization tasked with providing services inside Moria, the request was first made after the NGO employee had visited the organization's activity centre and successfully collaborated with the "drops" on a project to distribute sleeping bags. The camp management also required DiH to document that they had been officially approved by Greek authorities to work with refugees in Greece, a process that took more than two years.

### **Policing and criminalization of aid**

By performing responsibly, gaining official documents and approval and developing personal and professional relationships with INGOs, DiH managed to gain entry into several official refugee camps and assumed increasing responsibilities. However, not infrequently, DiH's efforts to aid refugees were also met with considerable resistance. In 2017, Greek authorities closed two refugee camps centrally located in Chios town (Souda and Dipithe) and transferred all asylum seekers to the aloof and isolated camp Vial run by the Greek army. While DiH had played a significant role in Souda and Dipithe, distributing food three times daily and arranging children's activities, all foreign NGOs were refused access to Vial, and at one point even officially requested to leave the island.<sup>4</sup> On Samos, DiH and other foreign NGOs were similarly denied access to the overcrowded and under-resourced camp. In Athens, DiH was invited by an intergovernmental organization (IGO) to come and work in a second refugee camp, and did so for a while, but was later requested to leave to make space for Greek organizations that allegedly never showed up.

In interviews and conversations, DiH staff often emphasized that it was not a problem to relocate or discontinue a project if they were replaced by local or more professional actors. While sometimes tiring, they also understood why volunteer organizations must prove their worth and relevance. What they found troubling, however, was having to navigate an unpredictable and largely incomprehensible humanitarian regime that often appeared to make arbitrary and even harmful decisions. Both staff and volunteers also expressed frustrations over how "politics get in the way of assistance", as one coordinator put it. The clearest

example of this was on Lesbos, where DiH resumed boat spotting on the southern coast of the island in 2018. At that time, the volunteers' relationship with the Greek coastguard was largely civil and cooperative. We were told by our coordinators to call the coastguard immediately if we saw any boats in distress, as they were reliable and much better equipped to provide rescue. However, the volunteers' relationship with the Greek police was significantly more tense. When patrolling the coast at night, we were regularly followed or stopped by police officers, who typically demanded that we show them all our equipment or drive faster, which made it impossible to spot boats on the water or hear the sound of an engine. In August 2019, following increasing efforts to criminalize humanitarian assistance across Europe (Carrera et al. 2019; Fekete et al. 2017), we woke up to the news that several members of one of the organizations we collaborated with were arrested. The volunteers were accused of aiding human smugglers and eventually charged with people smuggling, espionage, forgery and membership of a criminal organization (for a discussion on this and similar cases, see Vosyliute and Conte 2019). After a few days of internal debate, DiH decided to resume boat spotting, but with greater vigilance. Acting pre-emptively, one of our coordinators visited the local police to ensure them that we did not use any prohibited equipment and that we were not doing anything illegal. However, questions of what constitutes humanitarian aid vis-à-vis migrant smuggling are legally uncertain and incoherent (Vosyliute and Conte 2019), which made it difficult for volunteers to know their rights and obligations. By late September, DiH's leadership decided that they could not continue to expose volunteers to the risk of being arrested and to put boat spotting on hold.

### ***Negotiating with the state***

In Greece and elsewhere in Europe, volunteers assisting migrants have not only been policed through formal criminalization, but also in more subtle ways, ranging from harassment and intimidation to legal restrictions and administrative penalties (Carrera et al. 2019; Fekete et al. 2017). In the case of DiH, several coordinators and volunteers have been interrogated by the Greek police, causing anger and distress. The organization's humanitarian space has also been constrained by bureaucratic measures imposed by the Greek state. For instance, it took DiH more than two years to be officially approved as an NGO assisting refugees in Greece due to what several staff members described as unnecessary and unreasonable requests and delays. While some attributed such bureaucratic hurdles to the overburdened Greek state, others interpreted them as strategic acts to delimit the influence of foreign NGOs. An alternative way of understanding these bureaucratic measures is to view them as tactics in *humanitarian negotiation* (i.e. activities undertaken to gain humanitarian access and/or offer protection or assistance) (Grace 2020).

When discussing DiH's relationship with the Greek state, it is, however, important to remember that states are not bounded and coherent entities with consistent and uniform attitudes and motivations (Mitchell 1991). Conversely,

states consist of different organs and factions, and therefore exercise many, and sometimes conflicting, forms of agency (Herzfeld 2016). In addition to DiH's official negotiations with Greek bureaucrats, most of the organization's negotiations with the Greek state were also everyday personal encounters between coordinators or volunteers in the field and various representatives of the Greek state such as local police officers, members of the coastguard or camp personnel – reflecting how individual behaviour and personal relations played a role in the liaisons between DiH and Greek institutions. The different factions and faces of the state help explain volunteers' various attitudes towards and experiences of Greek authorities, and DiH's mixed success in negotiating access and legitimacy. However, coordinators' agency should also be recognized. When accompanying coordinators at work, I saw them negotiate trust and access through various means, ranging from expressions of heartfelt sympathy with the plights of Greek people, to what Hilhorst (2016) calls “ignorancy”: a deliberate feigning of ignorance or display of naivety as a tactic to smoothen relations or appease audiences. Like the bureaucratic measures imposed by the Greek state discussed earlier, these behaviours should also be recognized as tactics in everyday humanitarian negotiation.

Finally, the Greek state not only appeared in different guises but also often seemed remarkably elusive. Greek scholars have written about the common and widespread “there is no state” discourse, arguing that it reflects local discontent with national authorities (Kalir and Rozakou 2016) or a “deep legitimization crisis” (Kallianos 2018). From the perspective of DiH volunteers, the elusiveness of the Greek state – combined with the fragmented and overlapping authority and collaborations between different state, non-state and supra-state actors – made it first and foremost difficult to *pinpoint* the state. While the Greek state sometimes appeared mysteriously absent, it also frequently happened that volunteers (myself included) mistook camp personnel and other actors as governmental workers, while later finding out that they were actually employed by NGOs, volunteer organizations or private corporations. Such incidents added to existing confusion about the division of labour and responsibility, a point I will return to in the conclusion to this chapter. As I discuss in what follows, DiH's relationship with the Greek state also raised a different and more controversial dilemma, relating to what Agier (2011, pp. 4–5) describes as the “functional solidarity” between humanitarian governance and policing.

## **Two dilemmas**

As examined earlier in the chapter, DiH's desire to help refugees in Greece required the organization to carefully navigate its relationships with Greek authorities and INGOs. Functioning as gatekeepers to the humanitarian field, these actors have strong disciplining effects on volunteer organizations like DiH who seek humanitarian access and legitimacy. However, DiH's role and identity vis-à-vis these actors were not uncontroversial, but raised several internal debates and dilemmas, of which I will highlight two.

***Dilemma 1: becoming professional?***

The first dilemma relates to DiH's level of professionalization. Put crudely, one might say that the question is whether, or to what extent, the organization should emulate or "become like" the more established INGOs they collaborate and compete with in the field. In the case of DiH, it is useful to distinguish between the professionalization of the administration and the professionalization of volunteers in the field. Concerning the former, DiH underwent a gradual and partial professionalization from the organization's birth in 2015 to the end of my fieldwork in January 2020. For instance, while DiH had only two full-time and paid employees in 2016, the organization hired a dozen former volunteers and new workers on full- or part-time contracts during 2018 and 2019, including a few employees with considerable experience from INGO work and diplomacy. DiH also gradually invested in more accountability and transparency through, for example, complying with the requirements of the Norwegian Control Committee for Fundraising (Innsamlingskontrollen), becoming ISO-9001 certified and registering as a Greek NGO. Some of these measures were taken in response to new and stricter demands from Greek authorities, which made it more challenging for foreign NGOs to work in Greece. However, most of the measures DiH undertook to formalize the organization's structure were considered necessary steps to ensure legitimacy and provide more effective and sustainable assistance to refugees in Greece. By employing people responsible for specific tasks such as social media and fundraising, DiH was also able to improve their outreach and advocacy work, organize several enormously successful fundraising campaigns and recruit more regular donors (including both private persons and companies), which in turn increased the organization's revenues and minimized financial uncertainty.

Significantly, DiH employees and volunteers were not nearly as suspicious of institutionalization as, for instance, the Greek solidarity groups Rozakou (2016) and Papataxiarchis (2018) have studied. Nevertheless, many stressed the importance of not becoming "too bureaucratized". Sometimes framed as a choice between flexibility, on the one hand, and increased predictability and accountability, on the other, the underlying assumption was that too much bureaucracy would lead the organization to lose what they described as their biggest strength: their flexibility. Some coordinators and volunteers were also worried that more bureaucracy would mean that the staff in Oslo – already geographically removed from the organization's humanitarian projects in Greece – would become even more distanced and disconnected from the people they sought to help. A few volunteers were furthermore sceptical of DiH's administrative expansion and introduction of salaries, arguing that it diverted focus and money away from the cause. Professionalization thus created a dilemma and communication challenge for DiH, who knew that many of their members chose to support and donate money to them – rather than the big INGOs – precisely because of their low administration costs.

Regarding the professionalization of volunteers in the field, DiH also undertook several steps from 2015 to 2020. Perhaps most notably, years of experience

working inside official refugee camps and collaborating with professional INGOs led DiH to gradually revise their guidelines in accordance with more “professional” codes of conduct. This entailed stricter requirements for volunteers, including a minimum age, criminal record certificate and sterner guidelines concerning use of social media, photography, attire and socialization with refugees. In 2019, DiH also introduced a mandatory online consciousness-raising programme for volunteers prior to their arrival. From the organization’s perspective, these actions were necessary to protect both their “beneficiaries” (the refugees) and DiH’s legitimacy and reputation. Nevertheless, DiH continued throughout my fieldwork to rely predominantly on self-funded volunteers with limited or no experience from humanitarian fieldwork.

With the exceptions of a few roles and activities, DiH only required volunteers to be over the age of 25, have a clean criminal record and commit to at least ten days of work. This was partly a question of feasibility. Like most volunteer organizations, DiH did not have the financial means or employee benefits to attract specialist aid workers or rely exclusively on long-term and trained volunteers. But relying on volunteers was also a matter of choice. Indeed, one of DiH’s central premises is that it is not necessary to be a professional humanitarian worker to “do good”. The organization also describes itself as a “low-threshold offer for ordinary people who wish to help refugees”. Part of the rationale of working with short-term and inexperienced volunteers is that volunteering is imagined to be a *transformative experience* that might change volunteers’ perspectives and attitudes and inspire them to engage in further volunteer work or advocacy once they return home. Further, DiH did not want to simply emulate or “become like” their more professional colleagues in the field. Conversely, the organization cultivated a self-image that emphasized their ability to *learn* from more established organizations, without being fully “domesticated” (Papataxiarchis 2018) or give into the world of “big aid bureaucracy”. Illustrating this attitude, DiH employees regularly emphasized that volunteers bring with them other skills and creative ideas that might help the organization to “think and act outside the box”. Moreover, a statement on DiH’s website reads: “Thanks to volunteering, the organization has evolved and become what it is today”.<sup>5</sup> Following this logic, relying on volunteers is not simply a necessity but also brings societal and organizational rewards.

Nevertheless, many DiH employees underscored that not all of their projects were suitable for short-term and inexperienced volunteers. The organization’s work with unaccompanied minors in Moria camp was frequently highlighted in these conversations. Given minors’ need for stable reference persons and a secure environment, DiH tried to recruit long-term and skilled volunteers for this project, but only partially succeeded. Stressing that volunteers were merely there to facilitate games and play – and not to act as psychologists or social workers – DiH nonetheless chose to continue the project. While most of DiH’s projects were subject to healthy debate and disagreement among coordinators and volunteers in the field, this decision was particularly controversial. When preparing for our first day of work inside Moria camp, one volunteer confessed feeling ill-prepared for the task. Proclaiming his doubts about the risk of DiH overreaching its

capabilities, he asked me: “Does the absence of qualified actors necessarily legitimize the presence of underqualified actors?” Other volunteers questioned DiH’s motivation, suggesting that the organization’s eagerness to gain access to Moria, or volunteers’ personal “need to help” (Malkki 2015), were prioritized above the needs and interests of their vulnerable beneficiaries. A former long-term volunteer told me she was shocked by DiH’s decision to work with the unaccompanied minors, suggesting that the organization did not take seriously the humanitarian imperative to “do no harm”. While the former volunteer emphasized that she “still cared about the organization”, she even said that, “If there was a humanitarian court, which there should be, I would consider reporting them.” Conversely, many coordinators and volunteers strongly believed that supporting unaccompanied minors in Moria was the most important and meaningful work DiH did. Some of those who had initially been sceptical also changed their opinion after learning about volunteers’ confined mandate and the praise the organization received for their work from the camp management and several INGOs on the island.

### ***Dilemma 2: the risk of depoliticization***

The second dilemma concerns DiH’s relationship with the Greek state and the risk of depoliticization. As discussed, humanitarian actors in Greece have faced increased policing and criminalization, as elsewhere in Europe. The Greek government has also been accused of severe mismanagement and rights violations (Fili 2018; Rozakou 2019). Several NGOs have thus taken a confrontational stance toward the Greek state, speaking out against its actions and policies or even trying to take the government to court. Contrariwise, DiH chose a more dialogic and collaborative approach. As one staff member explained to me, “It does not mean that we agree with everything Greek authorities do, but if we disagree, we tell them directly, rather than going publicly.” This approach was primarily a pragmatic choice taken in the interest of gaining access, protecting volunteers and, ultimately, helping more refugees. However, DiH staff and volunteers also expressed sensitivity towards Greece’s predicament. There is a widely shared belief within the organization that Europe has abandoned both refugees and Greece, leaving the latter with a responsibility the country is unable to cope with. Rather than criticizing Greece, or claiming to be apolitical, DiH has thus chosen to be vocally critical of the EU and European leaders. As a Norwegian NGO, DiH is particularly critical towards the Norwegian state, typically arguing that Norway has both the “capacity” and “space” to accept many more refugees, and that the country’s restrictive asylum policies were violating its humanitarian traditions and self-image as a “humanitarian superpower” (Tvedt 2017).

Yet DiH’s decision to collaborate with the Greek state, and particularly agreeing to work inside the notorious Moria camp, also provoked doubt and criticism – both inside and outside of the organization. Chief among many volunteers’ concerns was whether DiH’s work absolved the Greek state or the EU for their responsibilities to provide proper care and protection. Crucially, this is not only a question of the

quality of aid but also of rights and accountability. Even when performing state-like functions, NGOs are not formally accountable to the people they help. The practice of outsourcing responsibility to NGOs thus leaves refugees at the mercy of these organizations and their donors, rather than receiving access to basic necessities as a political right (Dromi 2020). Outsourcing responsibility to volunteers can be particularly problematic, as “the nature of volunteering itself is that they may at any point choose to withdraw from their designated tasks” (Guribye and Mydland 2018, p. 15). Concerning accountability, it is further important to note that refugees on Lesbos generally directed their political claims and critiques towards European leaders and intergovernmental organizations and agencies such as UNHCR, Frontex and the EU. Rather than asking “where are the big INGOs?” (as volunteers typically asked), or requesting more help from volunteers, the questions I heard refugees in Moria ask most frequently were “where are my/our human rights?” and “when will I/we be able to leave?” These questions, and volunteers’ lack of accountability and authority to address refugees’ political claims, highlight some of the problems with NGOs seeking to fill humanitarian gaps.

A related concern was whether DiH’s work and presence in refugee camps, and particularly the notorious Moria camp on Lesbos, contributed to normalizing – or even legitimizing – the EU’s politics of containment and encampment. In scholarship on humanitarianism, this is a well-known critique. While humanitarian organizations and state actors have different mandates and agendas, the former are frequently accused of participating in the same “illegality industry” (Andersson 2014), thus allowing humanitarian assistance to go hand in hand with surveillance and repression (Agier 2011; Dunn 2018; Fassin 2005; Rozakou 2019). While couched in less academic language, this way of thinking was also expressed by many humanitarian actors, refugees and locals on Lesbos. As mentioned, several big INGOs, including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (Doctors Without Borders), halted their operations in Moria camp in 2016 in opposition to the EU’s harshening border regime and the concurrent transformation of Moria into a facility of containment and detention (Rozakou 2019). In the humanitarian community on Lesbos, several believed that volunteer organizations should react to the progressively worsening conditions during 2018 and 2019 by following suit. From their perspective, organizations that filled humanitarian gaps in Moria legitimized the camp as a solution to the “refugee problem” and thereby also political inertia from European leaders and the EU. Some volunteers on Lesbos were also strongly against all forms of collaboration with the Greek state, arguing that NGOs and volunteers should not do “the state’s dirty work”, as the founder of a popular volunteer organization from the UK put it.

While many refugees were grateful for the presence and services provided by volunteer organizations in Moria, others expressed similar concerns and accused organizations working in Moria for colluding with the state or abusing their power as service producers. Some refugees also questioned volunteers’ motivations or priorities, complaining, for example, that volunteers were mostly concerned about taking selfies, or suggesting that their time would be better spent doing political

advocacy. Finally, the permanence of Moria as a place to “manage the undesirable” (Agier 2011) was strongly contested by many local residents on Lesbos, who often described Moria camp as a concentration camp, or “the Dachau of our times”, as the mayor of the island put it. Echoing the claims of protesting asylum seekers and refugee advocates, local groups demanded the immediate closure of Moria camp and transferral of all refugees to the Greek mainland or other European countries, in order to “get their island back”. Crucially, many local residents continued to support refugees and aid work in various ways. However, local discontent grew increasingly explosive during my fieldwork, with NGOs being blamed for “invading the island” and attracting further asylum seekers, as well as stealing local jobs and profiting from the crisis (see Papataxiarchis 2016; Rozakou 2019).

While not oblivious to these critiques and grievances, DiH was reluctant to stop filling humanitarian gaps in Moria, arguing that it might result in immediate and intolerable suffering. As one of the coordinators responded, when it was suggested that distributing sleeping bags to residents of Moria would absolve the Greek state of its responsibility to “winterize” the camp: “Maybe that’s true. But we cannot risk that anybody freezes to death because we wish to take a political stance.” Such statements were not rare. During my fieldwork, I regularly heard staff and volunteers from DiH and other volunteer organizations suggesting that refugees would suffer or even die if volunteers withdrew from the camp or stopped distributing essential items. This argument was also used concerning DiH’s work with unaccompanied minors in Moria, who, in the eyes of many volunteers, were the “most vulnerable of the vulnerable”. Accordingly, DiH arrived at an uneasy compromise: continuing their humanitarian projects in Moria and other refugee camps in Greece, while advocating for political change at home. As Jacobsen summarized in a Facebook update on 21 August 2019: “Without a common European political change, all we can do is to continue covering the huge needs, putting pressure on the decision makers, and showing the people in the camps that they are not forgotten.”

## **Conclusion**

Since 2015, a multitude of citizen-led humanitarian organizations has emerged to provide care and support to refugees in Greece. This chapter has traced the trajectory of one of these initiatives – a Norwegian NGO established by an indignant mother of five – and the organization’s efforts to negotiate access and legitimacy vis-à-vis the Greek state and more professional INGOs. Following DiH across time and space, I have shown how the organization has relocated and reinvented its engagement in response to changing humanitarian gaps and needs, and in the context of increasing criminalization and encampment. Some of these gaps emerged from the absence or withdrawal of state authorities or more professional INGOs, leaving vulnerable populations without critical support. Other gaps were identified or constructed by the organization itself, in response to political developments as well as discursive trends and innovations within the humanitarian field.

In trying to fill humanitarian gaps, DiH has grappled with some of the enduring dilemmas that aid organizations face in their work, including questions of overreach and accountability, as well as humanitarian actors' uneasy relationships to sovereign power and biopolitics. I have argued that these dilemmas were most pressing regarding DiH's work with unaccompanied minors inside Moria camp, which prompted both internal and external debate and disagreement. However, the dilemmas were also present at other times, and in other contexts, when the responsibility to rescue and care for asylum seekers on Europe's doorstep were neglected by more accountable or qualified actors.

To conclude, I want to suggest that DiH's efforts to fill humanitarian gaps in Moria camp serves as a limit case, which highlights the perhaps inevitable impurity of humanitarian assistance in a context where responsibility is outsourced to volunteers and care becomes entangled with the politics of containment. As indicated, DiH was not oblivious to this impurity. As one of the organization's coordinators on Lesvos often reiterated: "What we are doing here is good, but of course it is not ideal. In an ideal world, we [volunteers] would all be superfluous." This attitude can partly be explained by the fact that DiH is relatively unconstrained by an official ideology or commitments to abstract principles. Unlike "ideal-typical" organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and MSF, or the local anarchist and solidarity groups studied by Greek scholars (Papataxiarchis 2018; Rozakou 2016), DiH is rather guided by pragmatic or consequentialist ethics, where the "central idea is that the rightness of an action is determined by whether it helps to bring about a better outcome than its alternatives" (Barnett and Weiss 2008, p. 44). Further, DiH had a quite different understanding of the relationship between state repression and humanitarianism than many of the scholars and other actors mentioned above. From DiH's perspective, their care and support were not entrapped in the institutionalized violence that permeates Moria camp, but rather acted as important *correctives* to this repression and inhumanity (James 2019).

Finally, DiH's trajectory is also telling of the increasingly fluid and fragmented humanitarian landscape of Europe's southern border. As this chapter has shown, DiH proved remarkably apt at navigating what my interlocutors often described as an "unpredictable and incomprehensible humanitarian regime". However, I also suggested that considerable confusion existed among volunteers regarding the status and affiliation of different actors and the division of labour and responsibility. For volunteers and researchers (myself included), navigating this "fluid governing assemblage" (Kalir and Rozakou 2016) was often frustrating and perplexing. However, for asylum seekers the effects were far more precarious. In a context where sovereignty and responsibility are fragmented and diffused, accountability was easily evaded and often untraceable (Rozakou 2019). These conditions exacerbated already existing vulnerabilities and reinforced the European borderland, and Moria camp specifically, as a zone of impunity and rightlessness (Balibar 2004).

## Notes

- 1 Like many of my interlocutors, I believe the predicament of refugees in Europe is more aptly described as a policy or solidarity crisis. On the problems with “crisology”, see Cabot (2015) and also Rozakou (2019). On the Eurocentrism embedded in the notion of a “European refugee crisis”, see Fiddian-Qasmieh (2016).
- 2 The choice of categories to describe people crossing the Mediterranean is highly politicized and contested. “Refugees” or “boat refugees” are the emic terms used by most of my interlocutors and will generally be used in this chapter. Following Carling (2017), I use the term “migrants” as an umbrella term to describe all people who have left their place of residence, irrespective of reason.
- 3 When COVID-19 spread across Europe in the spring of 2020, DiH was forced to suspend or modify many of their activities and routines in response to new restrictions and needs. In February 2020 DiH also closed their activity centre on Lesbos in response to escalating threats and attacks on volunteers by far-right groups. I do not address these events here as they took place after my fieldwork ended and the chapter was first written, however they will be addressed in forthcoming publications.
- 4 DiH suspended their activities on Chios before this request because there was no regular transport from Vial camp to Chios town, where DiH had set up a distribution centre.
- 5 See [www.drapenhavet.no/en/home/](http://www.drapenhavet.no/en/home/).

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## 2 **A community centre in a humanitarian context**

### The professionalization of a grassroots initiative in Istanbul, Turkey

*Tsjalline Boorsma*

Yes, you want to change, you want to do something, but don't kill the soul.

– Naima (volunteer)

Different people walk in and out of the room, close to the front door of the community centre. They bring in cardboard boxes filled with colourful earrings, bracelets and scarfs, in packages that need to be sent abroad to customers in Europe, America and Asia. The postman stands on the doorstep asking for a signature to confirm the arrival of another package, containing new materials for the social enterprise. Three women pass by to sign the attendance sheet for a workshop that will take place today, smiling to the familiar faces of the staff members while chatting to each other in Arabic. A Syrian girl comes in with her father asking in Turkish if there are any Turkish language classes for men at the community centre. They are told to ask upstairs, where other staff members are in charge of planning the programme. There they talk in Arabic with Malik, a Syrian staff member, who explains that they are still expanding the activities in the community centre: “Hopefully we will have a Turkish class for men in the future. We just need to find a teacher.” After the girl and her father have left the room, Malik shows me some graphs on his computer, statistics based on a survey they asked the families to fill in a few months ago. The survey was created in such a way that could be easily filled in on a phone. Malik explains that the women filled it in on behalf of the whole family: “Most of our communication with the community goes through our WhatsApp group with over 200 members.” Lana, his co-worker from Iraq, turns around in her chair and adds:

We try to make our communication more digital, to reach everyone efficiently, but the families still come to the office with questions. It's actually nice to see them in person, because we often don't have time to attend the activities going on downstairs. We are too busy with running the NGO.

The professionalization of grassroots refugee aid initiatives is exemplified by this community centre for refugees in Istanbul, Turkey. As a result of the prolonged conflicts in the Middle East, especially the conflict in Syria and the consequent forced displacement of millions of people, Turkey has become the world's largest refugee-

hosting country since 2015. More than 3.5 million Syrians were registered under the status of temporary protection at the beginning of 2018 (Sunata and Tosun 2018, p. 2). Korkut (2016, p. 14) described this mass displacement as a “humanitarian crisis”, because of the insufficient government response to the high numbers of displaced people. Turkey had limited capacity to deal with such a large and sudden influx of refugees (Genç et al. 2018, p. 13). This crisis of reception, or the “failure to protect” (Kirişci and Ferris 2015) stimulated the involvement of international organizations and humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Aras and Duman 2018). Support for refugees emerged in various forms, varying between large-scale humanitarian operations managed by well-known international NGOs to small-scale local initiatives of solidarity. The development of established humanitarianism has been extensively covered in academic literature (see e.g. Barnett 2011; Fassin 2012; Malkki 1996; Redfield and Bornstein 2010; Ticktin 2011), and there are well-documented ethnographic studies of local grassroots approaches to refugee aid (McGee and Pelham 2018; Rozakou 2017; Sandri 2018). However, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to the transition of grassroots initiatives to established humanitarian NGOs through processes of professionalization. It is relevant to study what motivates this development, how it might help the organization to move forward in the humanitarian sector, but also what challenges it poses.

This is an ethnographic case study of the professionalization of a local initiative that aims to help displaced Syrians through activities in a community centre in Istanbul, the Almond Tree Community.<sup>1</sup> The organization characterizes itself as “grassroots”, but has been growing considerably in recent years, becoming a recognized NGO in the humanitarian sector in Turkey and internationally. Following Rozakou (2017, p. 104), who argued that the main objective for anthropologists studying humanitarianism is “not to examine the ideological purity of solidarity initiatives, but rather to capture changes in the contemporary humanitarian world”, my aim is to analyse the changes that happened in this particular organization, while connecting to broader developments in the humanitarian field at the borders of Europe. The narratives and practices of NGO volunteers and staff members are fundamental to investigate how the approach to humanitarian aid changes when an NGO shifts from a grassroots initiative to an established humanitarian organization. Refugee aid workers internalize a focus on professionalization, combined with the sense of a political pressure from the state to control the practice of humanitarian aid. The combination of these two factors leads to the externalization of the ideal of professional aid in the daily practice of the community centre.

The method of investigation for this research was a combination of qualitative interviews and ethnographic participant observations in the NGO, with daily visits to the community centre of the organization, during a period of three months in the autumn of 2018. In total, 20 volunteers and staff members were interviewed. I already had been involved in the Almond Tree Community as a volunteer in 2016. Consequently, the majority of the informants were familiar with me, because we had worked together or we had met during my subsequent visits to Istanbul. The sustained contact with people in the organization enabled an in-depth study of the organization and its members.

The Almond Tree Community started as an informal grassroots initiative in 2012, as one of the NGOs that emerged in this political context of the so-called “Syrian refugee crisis”. The initial members consisted of a group of international and Turkish residents of Istanbul and a number of Syrian families that had recently been displaced by the war in Syria and relocated to Istanbul. Over time, the group was also joined by Palestinian, Iraqi, Egyptian, Afghan, Turkish and Kurdish community members. The first activities started in local parks and private homes, focusing on the access to education for displaced children, financial support for urgent cases and emergency housing for families that had just arrived. In 2013, the group rented a small room for the activities, which included educational sessions, psychosocial support and social events. The network was growing and the initiative attracted volunteers and donations from supporters in Istanbul and abroad. When I got involved with the NGO as a volunteer in 2016, the Almond Tree Community had just moved to a bigger space. The community started gaining more attention in Istanbul, attracting volunteers from different backgrounds and nationalities. These people were mostly young, highly educated, English speaking and already employed in another job in Istanbul. As the organization was growing, there was a need for more full-time staff members. Some volunteers took on more responsibilities in return for a small financial compensation. In 2017, the NGO moved to a new building again, just around the corner from the old community centre. This was the biggest space so far, divided over several floors. The Almond Tree Community was becoming a well-known and established humanitarian organization, with an administrative office and a team of full-time paid staff-members. It was in this context that I conducted my research.

I consider whether it is possible for an NGO to maintain the meaningful connections and informal networks of mutual support that characterized the grassroots phase, while it is transitioning into a more established organization. Some aid workers expressed the concern that this transformation would result in a loss of the “community spirit” of the grassroots initiative, emphasizing the importance of meaningful personal connections as a prerequisite for effective aid. Others supported the process of professionalization, arguing that it would lead to better efficiency, productivity and validation of the NGO in the humanitarian sector. The next section briefly outlines the theoretical debate on the professionalization of humanitarian aid initiatives and the relation to grassroots approaches to aid. I then describe my case study of the transformation of a refugee community centre in Istanbul, followed by an analysis of the intersection with the “bordering” and controlling influence of the Turkish state, promoting the professionalization of grassroots refugee aid initiatives.

### **The professionalization of aid at the humanitarian border**

Humanitarian aid has taken various alternative approaches, in some cases as a critical reaction to established forms of aid. These informal practices of aid for refugees have been characterized by scholars in various terms, depending on the

local context. Sandri (2018, p. 66) used the term “volunteer humanitarianism” for the informal aid to refugees in Calais, France, as these solidarity initiatives were “not supervised or funded by international aid agencies or governments, but based entirely on the work of volunteers and financed by donations from the public”. In the same context of Calais, McGee and Pelham (2018, p. 27) used the term “grassroots humanitarianism”, arguing that this alternative form of aid “serves as a striking alternative to the state humanitarianism which is said to have proliferated under neoliberal regimes”. In a similar way, Rozakou (2017, pp. 103–104) has observed that grassroots solidarity initiatives with refugees in Greece were often overtly antagonistic to humanitarian organizations, as these “solidarians” emphasized “the disinterestedness of their endeavour and scrutinized the professionalism of humanitarian workers” and referred to “the dangers of the ‘NGOification’ of solidarity”. Dempsey (2009, p. 340) pointed out that grassroots initiatives are often perceived as “tied to a romantic ideal of place, in which the local is understood as unified and conflict-free”, which is problematic because it denies the politics operating at this local scale. In practice, grassroots initiatives are often characterized by conflicting interests.

Grassroots initiatives are affected by the increasing focus on professionalization in contemporary humanitarianism. The humanitarian sector is evolving from an “impromptu, emotion-driven system to a professional service delivery system” (Dube and Broekhuis 2018, p. 152). Barnett (2011, p. 8) argued that humanitarianism has become an area of global governance, meaning that it has become increasingly public, hierarchical and institutionalized. The professionalization of the humanitarian sector and the attempt to retain highly valued staff and to attract employees from the private sector has made the sector increasingly competitive. Being “a humanitarian” is increasingly perceived as a profession on its own (Barnett and Weiss 2008, p. 12).

Professionalization is manifested in humanitarian NGOs on both organizational and individual levels. As Hwang and Powell (2009, p. 270) have pointed out, “the non-profit sector’s professionalization may have significant implications for its core identity as an arena for volunteerism and participation”. The professionalization of NGOs is reflected in the shift from informal activities organized by unpaid volunteers towards more formalized organizational structures and management involving full-time paid staff members. On an individual level, aid workers are increasingly focused on personal career development (Hopgood 2008, p. 112). On an organizational level, NGOs increasingly suppose that professionalization will “enhance their credibility and authority, and legitimize their ‘voice’ at the global level” (Siméant 2005, p. 856).

The adoption of professional practices in the field of refugee support is influenced by the pervasive belief in the humanitarian sector that professionalization will lead to more successful aid practices. Grassroots initiatives are transformed through phases of “NGOification” (Rozakou 2017), which is influenced by the need to be considered a professional organization providing refugee support in an effective manner. The ideal of professionalization has been changing the way in which organizations see themselves and their work in relation to questions of

mobility justice and borders. NGO practices become more focused on registering and monitoring the local refugee community as a “population” in need of assistance, in order to gain funding and support in global humanitarian networks and with the Turkish government. By aligning to these international actors, local NGOs become entwined in complex bordering practices, enacting a form of humanitarian borderwork. Pallister-Wilkins (2018, p. 21) demonstrated that the humanitarian sector shares many of the logics and narratives of the security sector, “focused as it is on the population as the subject and the provision of the necessary conditions for life”. Similarly, professional humanitarianism is focused on an ordering process of subjects, through a combination of care and control. This also explains the interest of the state in monitoring the activities of grassroots NGOs on its territory, as happened in Turkey. By creating structures for caring, the grassroots NGO was confronted by the state’s structures of control, notably the need to monitor and manipulate what is happening on its territories. Humanitarian initiatives that did not comply with these monitoring demands would quickly be considered a security threat, especially considering the tense political situation in Turkey, which will be explained next.

### **Researching humanitarian borders in Turkey**

The members of the Almond Tree Community self-identified differently over time, first as grassroots volunteers, later as professional humanitarians who aimed to be actively engaged in an international network of institutionalized humanitarianism. The shifting position of humanitarian actors in Istanbul is connected to the distinct political situation in Turkey. The political context in Turkey created a situation in which grassroots NGOs in Istanbul felt the need to professionalize in order to find stability and recognition in the humanitarian sector. This development was ultimately connected to the bordering practices of the European Union (EU), which emphasized the geopolitical position of Turkey as a “gate-keeping” country.

The political cooperation between the EU and Turkey in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis became entrenched in the “Turkey–EU Joint Action Plan”, which was activated at the EU–Turkey summit in November 2015. It has been critiqued by many human rights organizations and migration scholars, including Genç et al. (2018, p. 12) who stated that the EU–Turkey deal disenfranchised migrants and eroded the right to claim international protection in Europe by turning the right to claim asylum into a favour.

The European Commission (2015, p. 1) argued that the purpose of the EU–Turkey statement was “to step up cooperation for the support of Syrian refugees under temporary protection and their host communities in Turkey and to strengthen cooperation to prevent irregular migration flows to the EU”. The EU rationalized the closing of the borders for refugees coming from Turkey by combining humanitarian narratives with bordering practices. The EU partially financed humanitarian support for Syrian refugees in Turkey. At the same time, the EU–Turkey deal forced refugees to stay inside

Turkey, as aggressive border patrolling on land and sea made access to the EU territory near to impossible. Pallister-Wilkins (2018, p. 15) pointed out how the EU uses “humanitarian rationalities in the maintenance of the EU’s own security and efficacy and their work in keeping strangers politically distant, cared for but not equal”.

My fieldwork took place two years after the EU–Turkey statement. The humanitarian field in Turkey was severely impacted by the Turkish government’s cooperation with the EU, which placed the humanitarian border of Europe deep within Turkey, starting at the southern borders with Syria dotted with government-run refugee camps and moving along the main Turkish cities with a large urban refugee population, such as Gaziantep, Istanbul and Izmir, and going along the western Turkish coast sharing a sea border with the Greek islands that many border crossers attempted to reach. In Istanbul, NGOs like the Almond Tree Community became aware of the possibility to gain more financial support through the funding that was made available by EU countries, with the aim of providing aid to refugees “in the region”. At the same time, both international and local NGOs working with refugees were impacted by the increased mode of surveillance of the Turkish government, which was also funded by the EU with the specific objective to enforce immobility on Turkey’s refugee population. The Turkish state’s increasing willingness to encourage settlement in Turkey has to be understood in the wider context of EU–Turkey relations.

Turkey developed a dominant international position as host country of the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world. At the same time, the operations of international humanitarian organizations offering support to Syrian refugees were met with suspicion by the Turkish government. Several international NGOs were forced to quit their operations in Turkey on grounds of “national security”. Sunata and Tosun (2018, p. 17) noted that “the closure of hundreds of NGOs by the decree law have become the indicators of the authoritarian tendencies in Turkey”, which challenged the stability of humanitarian NGOs involved with refugees.

At the same time, Turkey’s refugee regime presented various obstacles for Syrians as they were only granted a status of “temporary protection”. The Turkish state effectively excluded refugees from “citizenship rights and the prospect of a secure future in Turkey” (Genç et al. 2018, p. 13). While the temporary protection status theoretically qualified Syrian refugees to access state health care and education, in practice full participation in Turkish society has proven extremely difficult due to language barriers and economic hardship (Baban et al. 2017, p. 53). In these circumstances, humanitarian organizations emerged in Turkey, aiming to fill the gap that was left by the government.

Many unofficial schools, the so-called “temporary education centres”, had been set up by the refugee community in Turkey to address the demand for education for millions of displaced children. However, these unofficial schools were all being closed down again by the Turkish government in favour of state schools, because of the increasing emphasis on compulsory integration of Syrian refugees in Turkish society.

The Almond Tree Community aimed to help refugee families to enrol their children into Turkish schools, assisting with the registration process and raising funds if the families were unable to pay for school fees. In response to the demand for education, the community centre continued to offer various classes, ranging from language classes to mathematics, depending on the availability of teaching volunteers. However, the NGO had to be careful regarding the Turkish state, as they did not want to give the impression they were running an unofficial school, against government regulations. At the end of 2015, the Almond Tree Community was registered as an official association in Turkey. Even though it was registered as a Turkish NGO, most volunteers were non-Turkish nationals from diverse origins in Europe, the United States, Australia and the Middle East. The main language in the community centre was English, followed by Arabic. Turkish was primarily used in the activities that related to integration and education. As the Almond Tree Community was becoming a recognized humanitarian organization in Istanbul, a news article appeared in the Turkish press suggesting that the NGO was undermining the Turkish state by offering separate schooling. I spoke about this tension with Jamila, an American volunteer who had been living in Istanbul for several years. She noticed that the suspicion of international NGOs had been increasing, reflecting on the complicated position of the Almond Tree Community in Turkey:

It's just difficult to make the connection to Turkish society. The NGO is registered under a Turkish name, but this does not make a difference in how it is viewed by the general public. We have experienced quite some police investigations, up to the point of harassment. We are seen as an international NGO with mainly non-Turkish employees.

The increasing suspicion of foreign NGOs in Turkey created a precarious situation for the Almond Tree Community. The absence of legal protection caused an overall feeling of insecurity over the risk of being closed down. The staff members were cautious to not use terms that would make the NGO appear like an illegal educational facility, by saying “language club” instead of class, which they thought seemed less official.

The Turkish state's approach to informal education implicated both a tendency of disciplining solidarity to refugees, as the state attempted to control who was allowed to offer help and how, and the policing of refugees themselves. Forcibly displaced people in Turkey were hesitant to invest in formal education for their children, as that would imply settling in and staying permanently in a foreign country. Informal education, which was self-organized by Syrians, catered for people who were in that transitory condition, while state education and integration can be interpreted as a form of “bordering” – that is, as part of a policy aimed at preventing and modulating a form of potential unwanted mobility. In a poignant analysis of Turkey's refugee policy, Biehl (2015, p. 68) noted that the state employed a strategy of “governing through uncertainty”, as the state creates a sense of “living on the border, even within places located at great distance from the actual physical boundaries of the nation state”.

In these circumstances, the staff members of the Almond Tree Community decided to collaborate with the Turkish state to run an intensive Turkish language course for adults in the community centre. The salaries of the language teachers were paid by a development organization that was funded by the Turkish state. Joyce, an Australian staff member, argued that the collaboration was a sign that the Almond Tree Community was gaining legitimization by the Turkish state: “We’ve got legal classes from the Turkish government, which is quite rare to have, with the teaching of Turkish to all the women in the community. It is normally quite difficult to have this support from the government”.

The staff members of the Almond Tree Community observed that the Turkish government was partially outsourcing the support for newly arrived Syrian refugees to NGOs and civil society. This was perceived as an inevitable development, which was justified by the limited capacity of the Turkish state, as explained in the NGO’s annual report of 2017:

With limited infrastructure and resources, the Turkish government cannot, on its own, comprehensively and effectively respond to the complex set of long-term challenges facing its Syrian guests. At the local level, we believe that civil society has a critical role to play in filling the gaps in services and support.

### **Control through professionalization**

Humanitarian NGOs in Turkey, especially those offering informal educational support, were kept under state control through the threat of criminalization. In order to acquire legitimacy from the Turkish state, the Almond Tree Community had to follow the legal requirements that were set for NGOs in Turkey. This created a transformative dynamic within the organization. Diana, an Australian staff member who started as a volunteer, argued that it was necessary to transition from a grassroots initiative to a professional organization, in response to the legal demands of the Turkish government:

We cannot be a facility providing community services without having structure. As a registered organization, we are by default existing in a system. There are legal requirements to achieve, so in order to fulfil those there has to be a level of structure.

Nevertheless, there was also a desire to preserve the grassroots ideal of a local, small-scale organization based on personal connections. This tension was reflected in the distinct narratives of volunteers and staff members within the organization. There were some significant changes in the motivations of the people who were involved in the Almond Tree Community, as the organization grew from a grassroots initiative towards a more conventional NGO in the humanitarian sector.

The early volunteers’ motivations were characterized by a desire to “do good” and creating social connections. One of the Turkish volunteers who later became

a staff member was Ela, who had switched to the humanitarian sector after previously working for an advertisement agency. She recalled how she had felt touched by the plight of Syrian refugees in Istanbul, the city in which she grew up: “For the first time I had the feeling, the urge, that I had to do something.” Max, a British volunteer, explained that he felt inspired by the small size and grassroots character of the NGO: “At the Almond Tree Community I feel part of what is happening, you feel like you are doing something. You can see the impact of your work every day.” Max vividly remembered a Syrian teenager who used to regularly come to the community centre: “Over the course of a year, he transformed from a shy kid to a confident teenager, and that’s only because we, the small NGO, gave him that opportunity to come every day.”

One of the staff members who had been involved in the Almond Tree Community since the very beginning, was Joyce. Originally from Australia, she had been working in humanitarian projects with refugees in the Middle East for several years before moving to Istanbul. Joyce increasingly believed that it was necessary to professionalize the NGO and employ full-time staff members, commenting on the transformation the organization had been going through in the past years:

The whole project has changed enormously. The more professional the people are that we have coming in, the better our service becomes. We are coming from a grassroots initiative into an NGO with full-time people, with better evaluation systems and a better sense of direction.

The transition to full-time professional staff members was thought to improve the aid to the refugee community, combining with the desire for recognition in the humanitarian sector. The Almond Tree Community started to recruit staff members through an official job application, instead of informally asking people who were already involved in the community to take on more responsibilities. Staff members who joined the Almond Tree Community more recently demonstrated a career-oriented motivation to their involvement in the NGO. One of the newcomers was Lana, originally from Iraq, with previous experience in other NGOs in the Middle East. She explained her motivation to start working for the Almond Tree Community based on career ambitions and professional interests: “I was determined to enter the NGO world and to work with different humanitarian organizations. I want to have the practical experience and I want to work with refugees.”

The changes in the narratives of humanitarian workers reflect a revision of the community ideal of the Almond Tree Community, as the organization grew and became determined to professionalize. Many volunteers and staff members expressed that they thought the social relations at the NGO had become more formal. They connected this to the growth of the organization and the bigger size of the new building, which increased the sense of hierarchical relations. Several staff members and volunteers expressed the fear that the social character of the Almond Tree Community was disappearing, to be replaced by a more

professional and formal approach. Even the physical distance between participants, volunteers and staff members had increased, since the latter had relocated to the administrative office. In the office, the personal social connections that were previously so important were not considered essential anymore. The focus had shifted to the outcome of the work and the establishment of a “professional work environment”. Increasingly, the staff members were looking for ways to increase the efficiency and output of the NGO, which became manifested through a change in organizational practices.

Naima, a Jordanian volunteer, was afraid that the desire for professionalization had destructive effects on the organization: “You can’t make it all professional, because this place is not something professional. They’re trying to get more offers, funding and everything. That’s great, but don’t ruin the main point of it.” Naima felt that the contribution of the families and the volunteers had been underappreciated. Mounir, a volunteer from Egypt, explained why he preferred the smaller community centre: “I loved the old place more than the new one, because it gives you the feeling that the place is surviving to help people surviving. There was nothing too fancy, it was so simple.” Mounir said that the growth of the NGO had created more distance between the staff members, volunteers and the Syrian families.

The organizational practices of the Almond Tree Community changed significantly as well. The staff members started to actively promote the model of professionalization. The NGO initially identified as a small-scale grassroots initiative, based on informal methods and a focus on the ideal of creating a supportive local community. The organization relied on unpaid volunteer work and small donations from individual supporters. Most of the activities at the community centre were created spontaneously by the volunteers, depending on the skills available and the demand of the Syrian families visiting the centre. Volunteers in the grassroots phase were expected to be resourceful and independent, reflecting the “community spirit”. Cecily, an American volunteer, said that this informality and spontaneity were some of the things she loved most about the volunteer work in the early grassroots phase: “There was this freedom to create your own initiative and implement new ideas. I really enjoyed that.” Nevertheless, she remarked that there was also a downside to this spontaneous way of working, as she noticed that it was hard to develop high-quality long-term programmes. The activities at the community centre were often completely changed after a volunteer left the NGO. New volunteers had to develop programmes on their own, because there were no guidelines on what the activities were supposed to look like.

The staff members increasingly expressed the need to create well-defined organizational procedures and a structured way of working in order to be taken seriously as a humanitarian organization. Karim, a Syrian staff member, argued that a grassroots NGO would not be able to function properly in the long term: “The problem with a grassroots NGO is that nothing is planned. There is no assignment of tasks. Who is the manager, who is responsible, who decides on the faith of the organization?” A similar narrative was expressed by the Syrian Malik: “Having an NGO means having a plan. If you don’t have a clear plan, the NGO

will not last for a long time.” The staff members supposed that if the Almond Tree Community did not establish formal organizational practices, it would not be considered a valid NGO in the humanitarian sector. Joyce said she was delighted that the Almond Tree Community was finally being recognized as a valid NGO rather than “just” a grassroots organization. Through the creation of stricter policies and guidelines, the NGO intended to demonstrate competence and expertise, which was expected to result in more chances to acquire funding.

Karim explained that he was planning to record data about the community members, as he expected this would lead to more funding for the NGO from humanitarian donors:

If you have data of the beneficiaries, you can make a report about each person. What is their status in the country? What are their needs? I can track them from the moment they get involved with us, until several years later. Then I can show what has changed in their lives. If we have data about this, we can easily get big grants to manage new projects.

The transition from a grassroots initiative to an established humanitarian NGO did not only constitute a new direction within the organization, but also reflected the general expectation that professionalization necessarily would lead to more effective aid.

The NGO had arranged a collaboration with the Turkish state to run an intensive Turkish language course for adults in the community centre. Joyce, the co-director of the NGO, argued that the collaboration was a sign that the Almond Tree Community was gaining legitimization by the government: “We’ve got legal classes from the Turkish government, which is quite rare to have, with the teaching of Turkish to all the women in the community. It is normally quite difficult to have this support from the government.” Before, the term “community” used to refer to anyone that was involved in the NGO, both volunteers and beneficiaries. However, as the NGO aimed to professionalize and become legitimized by the Turkish government, the word “community” was increasingly being used exclusively to refer to the programme participants and beneficiaries only.

İşleyen’s (2018, p. 861) work on the geographies of care and control in Turkey underlines the “complexity in the materialization of humanitarianism and the emergence of spaces of care within the borders of the territorial state”. This complexity is reflected in the various perspectives on humanitarianism of aid workers at the Almond Tree Community. While the motivations of early volunteers were based on ideals of generosity, altruism and “feeling good” through helping others in a team of like-minded people, the motivations of staff members who joined the NGO recently were more calculative, determined to make an impact. This was also reflected in the formalization of social relations between aid workers, shifting from close friendships between volunteers to more formal work relationships, in an effort to neutralize personal emotions that could interfere with their sense of professionalism. This more formal approach to humanitarian work also revealed itself in the organizational practices. Whereas the grassroots phase

had been characterized by spontaneous activities in a local park or one-room community centre, the effort towards professionalization manifested in a carefully planned long-term programme, managed through an increasing amount of structures, policies and rules.

The narratives and practices of humanitarian aid were expressed differently from person to person. Generally, the volunteers and staff members who had been involved in the NGO since the grassroots phase emphasized the principles of community, meaningful personal connections and informality. However, the staff members who got involved in a later stage during the process of professionalization idealized the values of efficiency, neutrality and objectivity. This negotiation of seemingly contradictory interests were part of an ongoing dialogue within the NGO about the best way to “do good”, which in some cases led to internal conflicts. Several volunteers and staff members had left the organization because of these disagreements. Many were critical of the NGO’s transformation, expressing the fear of losing the original community character of the grassroots initiative. However, other aid workers supported the transformation of the Almond Tree Community, because they believed it would lead to more recognition and validation in the humanitarian sector in Turkey and internationally. Consequently, these staff members adapted their way of working to what they perceived to be the standards of established humanitarianism. The logic of professionalization became integrated in their individual narratives and practices. Interestingly, even the staff members who were initially critical of the transformation acknowledged that change was inevitable.

## **Conclusions**

This case study is significant for the wider debate on humanitarian aid, because it demonstrates how practices of bordering and control intersect with and promote the professionalization of grassroots refugee aid initiatives.

The aid workers who had been active in the Almond Tree Community since the beginning emphasized how there used to be a strong sense of community, characterized by intimate personal connections between the people at the centre. They emphasized the joy of working in a team of like-minded people and collaborating to help others. However, as the organization was growing the social life of the Almond Tree Community changed over time and became more focused on professionalization. In the grassroots phase, aid providers and beneficiaries were not clearly separated, as the community members could both provide and receive aid. Community members would help with organizing the programme, while also attending activities and receiving support from others. As the Almond Tree Community was transforming into a more formal humanitarian organization, the social engagements in the NGO became less casual and more tied to responsibilities and authority. The emphasis on community was slowly replaced by a more impersonal approach, as this was seen as more professional for a humanitarian organization.

The aims of “helping others” and “helping each other” out of solidarity became replaced by a more systematic humanitarian approach based on the ideal of professionalism. While this model had certain benefits, in the form of an increased sense of stability, continuation and validation, it also came with losses. The cost of change was felt most by the grassroots pioneers, who established an initiative of support where there was none before. The grassroots ideal was cherished by the early volunteers because of its emphasis on meaningful personal connections. The community gave the volunteers a sense of belonging, which made them commit to continue working for the project with little financial compensation.

The relation between the aid workers and beneficiaries became more formalized and distant with the professionalization of the NGO, which indicates some of the limits of a community where all are perceived equal, as the aid workers increasingly take on a position of authoritative and enabling power, while beneficiaries are placed in the more passive role of aid recipients. In order to construct a sensible moral judgement about the positive and negative effects of professionalization, it would be necessary to conduct more research on the perspectives of beneficiaries. The goal of this study was to contribute a better understanding of what characterizes the narratives and practices of humanitarian aid workers of a changing support initiative for refugees in Istanbul, in the context of the political situation in Turkey. While the initial grassroots project was focused on establishing a network of support and personal connections between a diverse group of people, the members of the Almond Tree Community were aiming to develop a professional NGO that would be included as a member of another type of community: the humanitarian world.

## **Note**

1 The name of the NGO is a pseudonym, as are all the names of the informants.

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### **3 Citizen humanitarianism and local responses to the migration crisis in Serbia**

*Svetlana Stanarević and Vanja Rokvić*

#### **Introduction**

In 2015, a surge of migrants fled across the Greece–North Macedonia border into Serbia. Data provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (WHO 2015) show that by the end of June as many as 600–1,000 people per day were entering Serbia (WHO 2015). Facilities for reception and accommodation of migrants, including provisions for legal and medical care and other forms of assistance were lacking. Several other factors compounded Serbia’s already strained capacity to manage this influx of migrants, including changes in migration routes, the intermittent closures of borders between Serbia and Hungary, as well as between Serbia and Croatia, and Hungary’s immigration policy with stricter immigration rules that strengthened border management (including razor-wire fence on the border). As a result, the Serbian government sought international assistance to accommodate migrants with properly equipped reception centres (new and renovated), adequate medical care and other forms of support.

In the first weeks of the 2015 migration crisis, the European Union (EU) Delegation in Serbia and the Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Directorate (ECHO) presided over EUR 800,000 for emergency assistance, and by the end of the year, the EU Delegation had provided grant agreements to partners to commence with implementation of a new aid package worth EUR 7 million.<sup>1</sup> With the support of UNHCR, the Serbian government set up centres to facilitate the registration of refugees with specific needs and provided access to humanitarian aid and medical care.

The migrant crisis galvanized not only government institutions and international aid organizations, but also a large number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), volunteers and individuals across the region, who committed themselves to providing aid for refugees and asylum seekers by addressing basic human needs (e.g. water, food, clothes, accommodation) and providing them with elementary hygiene and medical care. In some environments, civilians are increasingly rallying in support of the cause, taking on initiatives traditionally considered to be under government jurisdiction. Volunteer initiatives for refugees have been observed as contributing to raising political awareness and encouraging social activism among ordinary citizens

both in the region and in Serbia. For many, the daily involvement in the humanitarian cause marks the beginning of a personal journey in which they gradually conceive of what they do as being politically loaded, rather than in support of state policies, often seeking to depoliticize states' securitized policies (Sinatti 2019).

According to Fechter and Schwittay (2019), a number of terms have been used to describe such endeavours, such as the “fourth pillar” of development, citizen initiatives, private development initiatives, grassroots international NGOs or undertakings of “independent development volunteers”. If the emphasis is on humanitarian work, these endeavours are designated as “demotic”, “grassroots humanitarians” or “everyday humanitarianism” (Fechter and Schwittay 2019). In this body of work, the term “citizen” does not refer to formal national belonging, but to a “global citizenship”, with regard to citizens of different nations acting for others, often across borders (Fechter and Schwittay 2019). One example is the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme in Serbia, where volunteers come from many other countries, while the informal Serbian organization, No Name Kitchen (NNK), is an example of a less formalized group.

For the purpose of our research, however, the main focus will be on Serbian citizens with examples of humanitarian practices in response to the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. At the same time, we will attempt to determine whether citizen humanitarianism varies (in historical, economic and ethnic terms) from the north to the south of Serbia, considering the local contexts of these regions. To achieve these goals, we carried out a field study and conducted interviews with volunteers at the Asylum Protection Centre (APC), an NGO whose work has been acknowledged and recognized under the Government of the Republic of Serbia's Migration Management Strategy (“Official Gazette RS”, no. 59/2009). We selected APC for several reasons. First, APC has wide national coverage in terms of its working, maintaining offices in the towns where the reception and asylum centres are located. Second, APC work is based on volunteerism and cooperation with government institutions (e.g. Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia, the police, social welfare centres, health care institutions) and international organizations (e.g. Global Fund for Children, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Norwegian Embassy). The APC proved the most productive point of contact for seeking out the volunteers (i.e. citizen activists) as contacting them through our own chosen locations would have been difficult.

We emphasize localness in our research because a local community represents a place where citizens engage in various forms of social life in the most direct way, where they exercise their civil and other rights and where they can best recognize their potential for emancipation and preparedness to react to challenges and issues facing the community (Đurić 2013). Also, Hoppe-Seyler (2020, p. 226) states that geographical and ethnographic approaches to voluntary migrant aid are still very rarely found in the literature, and for that reason it is “important to focus more closely on practices of volunteering at a local level”, specifically on the experience and perspective of volunteers.

In our research we chose our locations on account of geography and ethnography as well as their economic specificities. Preševo<sup>2</sup> is a small town in the poverty-stricken south with high unemployment rates, an inadequate education system and a majority Albanian population (predominantly Muslim). It is the first point of humanitarian assistance for migrants entering Serbia from the south, and has extensive experience in that regard, initially receiving internally displaced persons from Kosovo and the Metohija region in the 1990s and later from Macedonia (Kumanovo) in 2015. Subotica is located in the more affluent north and hosts a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional community with city status. Subotica has some official camps, but they are surpassed by improvised camps located near the border with Hungary, “which progressively limits access to its territory and deters asylum seekers from requesting protection in 2015 and the first quarter of 2016” (UNHCR 2016).

### **Serbia’s migration-related policies**

At the onset of the migrant crisis, the Republic of Serbia did not have a comprehensive institutional and regulatory framework of migration policies or the political capacity to respond adequately to migration-related challenges, such as, among others, border management, the legal aspects of asylum systems and irregular migrations, the sustainable return of Serbian citizens who have applied for asylum status in EU member states and how to prevent human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Although the Balkan route was officially closed in early March 2016, the influx of refugees and migrants from the Middle East, North and sub-Saharan Africa into Serbia continues. These migrants arrive primarily from the direction of Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, supported by a strong network of smugglers and human traffickers.<sup>3</sup> As the number of people seeking asylum in the EU has declined steadily since 2016, the number of refugees seeking and being granted protection in Serbia has been on the rise, especially following the adoption of the new Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection in 2018.

UNHCR has welcomed this increase in the quality and quantity of refugee recognitions in the Republic of Serbia by authorities as the most positive development of 2018. In a joint agency paper prepared by UNHCR, the Humanitarian Centre for Integration and Tolerance (HCIT) and the Crisis Response and Policy Centre (CRPC), Hans Friedrich Schodder, a UNHCR representative, confirmed that this positive trend continued to accelerate during the first half of 2019 (UNHCR 2019).

The first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed increasing migration from the Middle East, North and sub-Saharan Africa towards Europe. In 2014, the Mediterranean route was the most populated. That pressure shifted to the Balkan route in 2015, precipitated by the movement of the Albanian population from Kosovo and Metohija, Albania and other parts of the Balkan Peninsula inhabited by Albanians. These groups moved mostly through central and eastern Serbia towards EU countries in the first months of 2015.<sup>4</sup> What

followed was a large-scale mixed migration from the Middle East across the Balkans, which began in early 2015 and continued into 2016. According to a 2016 report of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), this movement was described as a refugee/migrant crisis, and so the political discourse, media attention and public opinion focused on the issue as a security crisis (IOM 2016). Even though the scale of the migratory pressure of 2015 had declined, migrants still continued moving towards, and eventually settling in, western Balkan countries.

The institutional and legal framework within which the Republic of Serbia operates with regard to migration management is well regulated and compliant with European integration systems. The visa liberation agreement, the opening up of new chapters in the negotiation process with the EU and the reform programme that Serbia began implementing in the early 2000s all call for the formulation of legislative acts to regulate asylum and transit migrations issues.<sup>5</sup> Serbia joined the International Humanitarian Response to the Refugee Crisis programme by establishing the Working Group on Mixed Migration Flows in July 2015 to address the increasing influx of migrants.

The closure of the western Balkan route in summer 2016 gave rise to increasing collective expulsions from Hungary and Croatia, which often involved physical abuse of refugees and migrants.<sup>6</sup> The humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (Doctors Without Borders) made a series of public disclosures documenting the violence and physical abuse that preceded the collective expulsions from Hungary (MSF 2017). These reports, in turn, generated further pressure to address issues of providing legal, psychosocial and medical aid to victims in compliance with the *Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* – more commonly known as the Istanbul Protocol (United Nations 2004). At the very beginning of the migrant crisis, the Republic of Serbia adopted a “refugee-friendly” policy, which involved a responsible and humanitarian approach. Many believed this approach could be used to advance Serbia’s position in current and future negotiations with the EU, emphasizing Serbia’s increasingly significant role in the mutated European geographies of humanitarian management of refugees, which would favour Serbia’s integration into the EU (Minca et al. 2018).

However, with the Balkan route closed, the international community and the global media, in particular, lost interest in the “refugee crisis” in Serbia. But it was not forgotten by some of the key actors in the region, who were involved in “the production of the geographies of irregular migrations along the Balkan route (i.e. the Hungarian government, Serbian authorities, NGOs and other volunteer organizations, refugees stranded in Serbia and smuggling organizations)” (Minca et al. 2018, p. 451). As Minca et al. (2018) state, since the route has become an entirely informal path for irregular migrants, the country has experienced the appearance of a series of makeshift camps and other precarious and improvised settlements in regions near the Hungarian border and, more recently, the Croatian border. The position of the authorities toward these improvised dwellings has been conspicuously ambivalent. At times, authorities adopt a policy of non-intervention (as

in the case of abandoned warehouses in Belgrade and a couple of abandoned factories in the north occupied by irregular migrants). At other times, authorities intervene to dismantle these precarious settlements, succumbing to pressure from the international media (as in the case of the warehouse camps in downtown Belgrade) or the local population (in northern Serbia). The ambivalent approach to regular and irregular migrations is a reflection of the structural way to manage the present irregular migrants and the associated border policy in the wider region (Minca et al. 2018).

Even though in November 2016 the Serbian government formally forbade NGOs from distributing food and clothes to migrants living outside the official camps, NGOs continued to do so. There have been inconsistencies in the implementation of migration policy and the treatment of migrants, often making the situation confusing and unpredictable, which can also be seen in the periodic reports on the right to asylum from January 2016 to June 2019 from the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights.<sup>7</sup> These reports have been confirmed by employees at the APC, who stressed their deteriorating cooperation with the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia and other state institutions.

The APC, in particular, has been strongly committed to migrants' welfare. The organization was established at a time when it was necessary to strengthen Serbia's capacities for providing legal, psychological, social, integration, humanitarian and other forms of support to asylum seekers and all other persons migrating to or transiting through Serbia. Furthermore, the APC boasts a strong volunteer network that brings young people together and, as previously stated, these are the very reasons we chose this organization for our field study.

## **Theoretical framework and research methodology**

Barnett and Weiss (2008, p. 237) write that humanitarianism concerns the attempt to alleviate the suffering of distant strangers. But, they acknowledge, it cannot alleviate all suffering, because suffering is part of the human condition. Instead, humanitarianism typically concentrates on suffering that can have long-term debilitating consequences for, or can significantly affect the life chances of, distant strangers.

Humanitarianism is a practical endeavour, which in cases of emergency (such as a mass influx of refugees and asylum seekers) involves setting up feeding stations, providing medical care, delivering food, building shelters and protecting the rights of vulnerable populations (Barnett and Weiss 2008). Barnett and Weiss's observations from 2008 are still true today: humanitarianism is flourishing and has gained a firm global foothold. The legitimacy of humanitarian action has been met with growing acceptance in the form of funding and there are more organizations, states and agencies committed to the idea of mitigating the unnecessary suffering of tormented peoples than ever before. Even so, Barnett and Weiss (2008) raise a number of pertinent questions. Which organizations are humanitarian and why? What features of humanitarianism have changed and how have the boundaries of humanitarianism changed? What are the forces that

have shaken the humanitarian sector only to lay bare ontological insecurity/unsafety despite all that humanitarianism has achieved (Barnett and Weiss 2008)? To these questions we add some of our own. How do we make sure global, national and local actors and institutions assume greater responsibility towards migrants? How do government bodies implement concrete mechanisms to ensure the provisions of relevant global declarations and conventions are respected? How do we achieve a better implementation of national legislation on the protection of human rights and security of migrants? How do we strengthen the state's capacity to provide humanitarian assistance? What is the extent of the humanitarian collaboration – assuming there is one – between government institutions and other actors in a society?

On the other hand, Craig Calhoun examines issues that afflict humanitarians:

Do they seek to improve the human condition, the well-being of all humanity? Or, do they seek to alleviate suffering, impartially, neutrally, and wherever it may occur? Or, do they respond more specifically to “humanitarian emergencies”, seemingly sudden crises in which human conflict creates concentrated human suffering, in which, perhaps, suffering is so extreme as to be dehumanizing?

(Calhoun 2008, p. 73)

In addition to the above interpretations humanitarian action can become a means to express disagreement, à la Rancière (1999), and antagonize the configurations of institutional approaches to migration. In this regard, Sinatti (2019, p. 141) asks, “Do civil volunteers and workers reinforce and support depoliticization by filling an institutional gap? Or do they repoliticize migration by disagreeing with state perspectives?” It is precisely the filling of this institutional gap that proved significant since it was the result of activities undertaken by the NGOs, volunteers and other actors who were the focus of our field study.

On their journey of exile, which is fraught with uncertainty and constant danger, any form of organized (national, international or NGO-led) support and assistance is instrumental to refugees' survival. The European migration “crisis” in 2015/2016 brought to the fore emerging actors from civil society in the field of humanitarianism (Sezgin and Dijkzeul 2016). Individual acts of humanitarianism are equally important, only this time they were not in accordance with new developments triggered by the unexpectedly large-scale migratory movements towards Europe in the 2015–2016 period. Minca et al. (2018) highlight the need to think critically about the idea of “refugee crisis” in the Balkan region and along the Balkan route, where major interactions between refugee mobility, invisible geographies of smuggling and practices of state bureaucracies take place. They also problematize the idea of a permanent “refugee crisis” in Serbia pointing out that, at one stage, Serbia was the only country on the Balkan route that did not close its borders, choosing instead to continue providing humanitarian aid. After the Balkan route was closed, the country became an informal route for illegal immigrants and witnessed the emergence of numerous improvised camps, toward

which the government adopted an ambivalent stance. Minca et al. (2018) also note that within the geographies of irregular mobility along the Balkan route, Serbia has played an important role in supporting irregular migrants while appearing as a reliable partner for other major European countries and the EU authorities as a whole. However, after the government forbade NGOs from distributing food and clothes to the refugees outside the network of institutional camps, most of these organizations continued to marshal and provide support, citing the inadequacy of the state humanitarian aid system.

A particular challenge was the need to research citizen humanitarianism and individualized manifestations of compassion and solidarity towards migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and to examine whether the “humanitarian borders” of Europe are mere instruments of control, dual roles of care and control of mobile bodies, or sites of aid, activism, resistance and solidarity. In this regard, Musick and Wilson’s (2008) findings on volunteer motivation are significant because they focus on the subjective states of individuals, their available resources and the influence of age, gender and ethnic differences in volunteering and historical trends. They also point out the manifold benefits of volunteerism. The reasons behind volunteering can be altruistic and instrumental: a volunteer helps another person, learns new skills and gains the experience and qualifications needed for their education and career, while also developing a sense of civic responsibility in the process (Holdsworth 2010). Hoppe-Seyler (2020, p. 228) argues that emotions and spatial dimensions play an important role in voluntarism towards migrant and refugees, although this area remains unexplored and a “theoretical framework is almost completely missing”.

It would be fair to say that the research conducted into humanitarian practices in the territory of the Republic of Serbia posed a special challenge, for field visits in particular. Humanitarian policies and practices across Serbia are presented in part as a review of their institutional aspects, specifically border and asylum procedures, reception and asylum centres, relevant legislative acts and the like. Desk research was used to review primary resources such as reports of state institutions (e.g. Ministry of Interior, Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia), NGOs (e.g. APC, Belgrade Centre for Human Rights), international organizations (e.g. IOM, UNHCR, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)) and media and activist networks. We also reviewed secondary resources, including studies carried out in Serbia by researchers from academic institutions and research institutes. In the field, we obtained data through semi-structured interviews with representatives of the APC and their volunteers who were operating near border crossings in the south (Preševo) and the north (Subotica) of Serbia.

Data on the overall number of volunteers working at the selected locations during the migrant crisis of 2015/2016 is uncertain, because it proved impossible to obtain a reliable piece of information from local governments about the list of all the humanitarian organizations engaged in the field. However, the situation is somewhat different with the APC, since the employees at the APC organized their own network of volunteers,<sup>8</sup> kept in touch with them while they were at the

selected locations and then called them for interviews. The interviews were conducted from 1 September 2019 to 15 September 2019 at the APC's regional departments in Preševo and Subotica and their head office in Belgrade.

Using a prepared set of questions, we asked volunteers about their personal data (age, occupation, if they were of migrant descent, organizational affiliations and previous experience with volunteering). Then we inquired about their volunteer experiences: had they volunteered on their own initiative and what was their experience with the ACP? The most important findings emerged from questions concerning the motivation to volunteer: what kind of reactions did they receive from their environment and what were their ultimate goals for volunteering? Finally, we were keen to find out how much they thought their volunteer work was appreciated in the local community: what part did local authorities play in assisting migrants and what was the quality of services provided? What kinds of changes had the volunteers experienced since they began volunteering?

The interviewees' responses revealed fundamental differences in the structure of volunteering that were context specific, determined by the basic economic, cultural, demographic features of the Pčinja District (Preševo) and the North Bačka District (Subotica). We interviewed ten volunteers proposed by APC (two in Subotica, six in Preševo and two in Belgrade) and four representatives at APC (one in Belgrade, two in Subotica and one in Preševo). The interviews were designed to elicit direct answers to our questions and without much elaboration from the interviewees. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and was recorded with the volunteer's permission.

The volunteers ranged in age from 16 to 37 (in our sample the younger volunteers were mainly in Preševo, the older ones in Subotica). Interestingly, none of the interviewees was of migrant descent. The volunteers had a wide range of previous experiences within student parliaments, youth offices and other NGOs like Save the Children.

We experienced difficulties conducting our research due to the ever-changing situation on the closed Balkan route. For this reason we were unable to obtain accurate data on the actual number of migrants, especially refugees. We were also challenged in the field by the unavailability of part-time volunteers and the language barrier, which was especially difficult in Preševo, where few members of Albanian minority speak Serbian (the conversations were either held in English or interpreted from Albanian into Serbian). Despite these difficulties, our sampling and recording of these examples of citizen humanitarianism in Serbia shed light on a segment of volunteering for refugees that is underexamined in Serbia. Our results, we believe, can provide fresh impetus for new investigations of this kind.

## **Research results**

In the midst of the migrant crisis of 2015/2016, Serbia lacked a comprehensive legal and institutional framework to address all the issues and dilemmas surrounding the legal and health needs of all categories of migrants. For this reason, we believe it is vital to provide a clear overview of the legal and institutional

framework for these two aspects, as well as to record the activities of the different actors who became involved in the process when seeking to fill the gaps in existing regulations and to address the inconsistencies in the implementation of legislation that was subsequently adopted.

### ***Legal and institutional framework of law and health assistance delivery***

While making sure that refugees and asylum seekers are provided with proper accommodation, the government of Serbia has created a legal framework for the standardized provision of services to migrants, asylum seekers and persons who have been granted asylum. As a result, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia (2017) has published a document specifying to whom legal assistance refers in the provision of three basic services: legal information, legal advice and legal representation.

Several civil society organizations (CSOs) in Serbia provide pro bono legal assistance to migrants, asylum seekers and persons who have been granted asylum.<sup>9</sup> Legal assistance is primarily donor funded and, therefore, free of charge to the end user. There are also many individual lawyers who provide legal assistance in asylum procedures. As a result, legal outreach has been expanded, but this has been hampered by a lack of coordination between legal assistance providers.

CSOs have also been identified as actors and mediators in dialogues between citizens/institutions and migrants, as even the key actors are overburdened. However, CSOs are also valued actors because they are often more sensitized to and experienced in working with vulnerable population groups. However, representatives of local CSOs do not have technical and operational capacities that would enable them to address the needs of the migrant population in a more concentrated fashion and over the long term. These groups would greatly benefit from additional assistance programmes and capacity building (Krstić 2018).

In terms of health care for migrants, at the institutional level, services are provided at local health centres and health councils, which were set up pursuant to the Law on Public Health.<sup>10</sup> All data on migrant health and the health services provided is passed on to the Institute of Public Health of Serbia and then to the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia (Project Love 2015).

Migrants' health risks arise from health issues in their native countries and from health conditions incurred during their journey and settlement. According to Svetozarević et al. (2019), migrants experience a host of stressful and traumatic events during the pre-migration period, such as loss of a family member or physical violence, but the migration itself is no less harrowing since it involves long and gruelling journeys, physical abuse and shortages of food, water and shelter. All these factors exact a heavy toll on migrants, who commonly suffer from fatigue, frostbite, physical injuries, skin and respiratory infections and mental health issues. Medarević (2016) found that between 1 June 2015 and 10 January 2016, systematic health monitoring of asylum centres registered 68,802 health conditions in migrants, with respiratory infections accounting for 45 per cent, injuries 8

per cent, intestinal infections with diarrhoea 5 per cent and intestinal infections without diarrhoea 4 per cent. Furthermore, living conditions in the reception centres favour the spread of infectious diseases, and quite often lead to body lice infestation. A case in point was an outbreak of body lice in 2016 (Pusztai et al. 2018, p. 222). In addition to these physical injuries, psychological support is often needed. The Red Cross of Serbia found that every month health professionals register approximately 500 interventions associated with mental disorders among the refugee population in Serbia, a number that ranges between 3,600 and 4,800 migrants (Bjekić et al. 2019, p. 4). The most common mental health issues include depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

NGOs can only deliver primary health care with state approval, such as a letter of support from the Ministry of Health.<sup>11</sup> According to available information, in 2016 more than 180,000 health care services were carried out, of which over 50 per cent were delivered by NGOs within the framework of the state health system. NGOs delivered another 25 per cent outside the state framework, although these services were reported to the Institute of Public Health of Serbia (Pusztai et al. 2018, p. 222). In addition to providing medical care, some NGOs provide legal counselling, helping migrants to understand their rights before the law. For example, the APCs intervened on behalf of a 5-year-old Afghan girl suffering from a neurodegenerative disease, whose parents were told that she could not get treatment in Serbia (Project Love 2015). Following the APC's intervention, the little girl was hospitalized with her mother in a rehabilitation centre, where she received the required treatment, to which, they learned, they were entitled as asylum seekers in Serbia.

Besides these formal organizations, there are a number of informal ones, which operate “under the radar” and rally volunteers to support migrants. One such organization is No Name Kitchen (NNK), which was founded in Belgrade in 2017 and includes approximately 15 volunteers from several countries, but mostly from Spain. NNK's manifesto sets out their governing principles: “[W]e were born from the profound indignation that we feel towards the inequality and injustice that [the] capitalist and racist system creates” and that its members wish to extend solidarity “to our equals, and practice civil disobedience”.<sup>12</sup> The organization was set up to provide necessary assistance to the migrants who, following the closure of the Balkan route, were forced to seek shelter in informal camps, mostly abandoned barracks in Belgrade. After the government demolished those barracks to make way for the Belgrade Waterfront project, the migrants were referred to registered camps, prompting the organization to reroute its activities to Šid (at the border with Croatia) and Velika Kladuša (Bosnia-Herzegovina).

What distinguishes NNK from other organizations is the fact that its volunteers assist migrants living outside the state-controlled camps, which means they receive no government support and depend solely on individual donations. NNK's work is founded on the principles of integration, respect and non-discrimination, and, unlike the activities of volunteers with formal organizations, they strive to foster solidarity and friendly relations with migrants. NNK also differentiates itself by including migrants in all its activities. NNK's activities include preparation and

distribution of food for migrants living outside the official reception centres (in Šid they deliver breakfast and dinner to around 100 people), collection and distribution of clothes, provision of free showers (three times a week) and psychological counselling. NNK also connects migrants with donors willing to cover their medical expenses. More recently, NNK has begun reporting on violent incidents and publishing monthly reports on violence.<sup>13</sup> However, given that NNK's volunteers are mainly foreigners, they struggle due to their lack of legal status. In February 2020, two NNK volunteers were ordered to leave the country following a confrontation with the local Serbian population and members of a nationalist group.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Examples of citizen humanitarianism at selected locations in Serbia***

For a clearer picture of the extent of individual acts of humanism and humanitarianism, we interviewed APC volunteers to learn about their volunteering experience, the motivations behind their involvement, the activities in which they were most engaged and the manner in which they assessed the work and role of local institutions.

Those volunteers who did help migrants prior to joining APC engaged in numerous individual activities, including distributing food and books, collecting clothes, making cakes for religious festivals, organizing sports matches, translating and interpreting and assisting migrants in finding available services, among others. One respondent even provided temporary accommodation to a migrant family in her home.

When asked about their motivation for volunteering, respondents said they had a desire to help persons in need, while many also expressed empathy for the migrants' situation:

It's in my nature, I like helping people ... I have witnessed all manner of things, hardships, families howling with grief ... I once saw an entire family faint, the mother, the father and the daughter, as I stood clutching the baby ... it was the first time I'd held a baby in my arms ... how excruciating to behold the suffering and weeping of these people, to see their lives undone.  
(Tueda, age 26)<sup>15</sup>

The sight of all those people in town sleeping in the streets, out in the cold, was heart-breaking ... everyone deserves a good life and they, too, deserve a good life ... the first thing that occurred to me as – I have to help them!  
(Suada, age 16)

Slavica (age 21) from Belgrade said that volunteering activity itself was in a way “emotionally exhausting” and that she needed some time to recover afterwards.

With APC, the respondents visited camps (especially the illegal camps in Subotica), prepared and collected food, participated in workshops, worked with children and accompanied them to school, provided migrants with information

about their status, opened bank accounts for them, escorted them to doctor's appointments, organized meetings between migrants and the local population, collected books and clothes and provided medical care.

When asked about the positive and negative experiences gained from volunteering, the respondents focused on the positive, such as meeting new cultures, making new social contacts and developing a changed outlook:

It was a freezing December day. Two kids were playing volleyball in the camp, but they were short of players. So we joined in the game from the other side of the fence. The smiles lighting up their faces, seeing them so happy ... you can't put that feeling put into words.

(Suada, age 16)

The stories I'd been told in the camp changed my life ... how they'd managed to get past the barriers on their way here, the violence they'd endured ... I couldn't even begin to imagine there were people capable of doing such things ... I think volunteering is one of the best things I've done.

(Drin, age 16)

Frustrations with volunteering were usually attributed to the language barrier with some migrants, but that was only a temporary barrier. As Suada (age 16) reports: "In the beginning, we were shy because we couldn't speak their languages; soon enough, we were communicating in signs and using phone translation apps."

Other volunteers expressed negative experiences with miscommunication or issues regarding the volunteers' cooperation with the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia, which grew increasingly difficult sometimes, for reasons that were unclear. For example, the Commissariat did not allow APC volunteers to enter the reception centres to provide legal assistance.

Also, the volunteers reacted to the negative experiences of migrants and tried to point them out to us. For example, a volunteer from Subotica asked us to "pass on his message": "Tell those Croatian and Hungarian police officers not to use such brute force on migrants, and particularly not on the juvenile ones" (Dragan, age 37).

Collectively, these volunteer comments point to Pallister-Wilkins's (2015, p. 59) conclusions about the ever-increasing trend of disregard (on the part of official institutions) for the principles of humanitarianism proclaimed by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which resembles the older forms of policing and governance that began in the seventeenth century, long before global declarations, conventions and national policies that define accountability for and observance of these principles were adopted.

The volunteers also shared with us the opinion that local institutions, such as local self-government, do not help enough and do not make every effort to provide basic humanitarian aid, especially to migrants who are in unofficial camps.

As for how their work was received, the volunteers in Preševo said they had met with approval and great support, whereas in the north of the country, in Subotica and Belgrade, the volunteers encountered disapproval, lack of interest and were occasionally minded to be cautious. They received support from friends on very few occasions.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

In this chapter, we have discussed the Republic of Serbia as one of the key transit countries along the Balkan migration route. In the 1990s, Serbia hosted the largest number of refugees and internally displaced persons in Europe and, again, in 2015, the country witnessed another large influx of migrants.

Since the beginning of the migrant crisis, Serbia has adopted a humanitarian approach, which has been internationally acknowledged. However, even though at the outset Serbia managed the migrant crisis well and responded to it adequately, it nevertheless failed to solve the problem systemically; an example of this is the failure to integrate the part of the migrant population that wanted to stay. By creating an institutional and normative (though imperfect) framework and through practical activities aimed at implementing the adopted norms and rules, numerous bodies and institutions have generally responded adequately to the situation and ensured a humane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. However, in so doing, state authorities sometimes lacked proper organization and adequate coordination and often employed an ad hoc approach to strategic challenges. Although our desk research has revealed that Serbia has, for the most part, created legal and institutional frameworks for providing services to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, the practices (i.e. how certain legislative acts are being implemented<sup>16</sup>) remain a problem area. Another cause for concern is timeliness in passing relevant legislative acts. There have been delays in enacting some legal provisions concerning the status of migrants or the provision of assistance in some areas, such as legal or health care. For example, the government's adoption of the Law on Legal Aid,<sup>17</sup> which came into force on 1 October 2019, specifies the circumstances of pro bono legal assistance, the persons eligible for free legal aid benefits and the means of providing free legal aid, but the problem is that it arrived three to four years after the beginning of the migrant crisis. Therefore, in this legal vacuum the role of other, mostly non-governmental, humanitarian organizations and volunteers is significant.

However, despite these institutional flaws and organizational oversights, there have been numerous examples of humanitarianism from national and international actors and ordinary citizens. It is therefore important to acknowledge, for purposes of better coordination, that besides state actors there is a large number of other actors providing legal assistance at a time when the state is ill-equipped to deal with the issue on its own. Health care delivery to migrants is also regulated by a relevant legal framework and involves a number of (national and international) actors whose roles and activities are in keeping with the instructions, supervision or support of state health care institutions. Humanitarianism in the context of legal and health

care in Serbia is rightly defined as an initiative undertaken by different actors to fill the gaps that the state is either unwilling or unable to address.

It is important to emphasize that in current responses to migration (in Serbia and throughout Europe) there is an increasing complication between institutional actors, development agencies and relief organizations, charities, volunteers, activists and social movements. The interactions and frictions between these groups become the cogwheels through which the underlying ethics and responsibilities are interrogated (Sinatti 2019). Our findings confirm a lack of compatibility between the activities of state institutions, NGOs, voluntary organizations and formal and informal associations, and how they respond to the migration crisis and migrants' needs. This discrepancy is most evident in state institutions' failure to honour their formal obligations, but also in the overlapping of activities of the state and civil society actors.

Aligning with Barnett and Weiss's (2008) contention that humanitarianism is a practical endeavour and an attempt to alleviate the suffering of people in need (distant strangers), we have noted examples of citizen humanitarianism and individualized manifestations of compassion and solidarity with migrants. Given our small sample, it is difficult to make generalizations, but considering the extensive secondary resources analysed, we have confirmed that individuals can try to alleviate suffering by acts of humanitarianism, at least through basic assistance in providing food, clothing or the provision of basic information to migrants.

Finally, understanding volunteerism in the context of citizen humanitarianism fundamentally depends on intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, which are sometimes difficult to distinguish. Despite the small sample and research limitations, we have identified both these motivations in our research and, in keeping with well-established definitions (the act of self-expression and the instrumental act), corroborated the earlier research of Musick and Wilson (2008) and Holdsworth (2010).

## Notes

- 1 See <https://europa.rs/factsheet-eu-assistance-for-migrants-and-refugees-in-serbia/?lang=en>.
- 2 Preševo is arguably the only "closed" camp on the Serbian archipelago, which means that the guests are allowed to leave only with special permits and accompanied by a staff member. All the other camps in Serbia are "open camps", in the sense that guests may enter and exit with no restrictions or limitations. Preševo is the only camp directly controlled by the minister of labour, employment and social welfare but managed by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration (Umek et al. 2019, p. 46).
- 3 The number of refugees and migrants during 2017, 2018 and the first half of 2019 ranged from several thousand to several hundred persons per month. Throughout 2018, UNHCR estimated that more than 16,000 refugees and migrants entered Serbia, originating mostly from Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and other countries. The child protection system faced a higher number of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), especially in mid-summer (UNHCR 2019).
- 4 While there are no precise data on the number of Albanians that fled Kosovo, according to unofficial figures the number ranges from 50,000 to 100,000 people (see [www.euractiv.rs](http://www.euractiv.rs)).
- 5 The most important pieces of legislature include the Law on Asylum (2008) and the revised Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection (2018), the Law on State Border

- Protection (2008), Law on Border Management (2012) and Law on Employment of Foreigners (2014). Along with existing action plans, strategies that form the basis for defining migration policies are equally important, such as the Strategy for Combating Irregular Migration in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2018–2020 (2018), Integrated Border Management Strategy in the Republic of Serbia 2016–2020 (2016), Strategy for the Reintegration of Returnees Under Readmission Agreements (2009) and the EU’s Strategy for Supporting Migration Management in the Republic of Serbia – Communication and Visibility (2018).
- 6 Border agencies of neighbouring countries (Hungary, Romania and Croatia) introduced a practice whereby an extremely vulnerable category of persons (refugees, asylum seekers) were deprived of a whole set of fundamental human rights, some of which are safeguarded under the norms of international common law, namely the right to personal freedom and security, the right to efficacious and efficient legal remedy and absolute prohibition of abuse and collective expulsions of aliens. More detailed information on the topic can be found in the report *Dokumentovanje zlostavljanja i kolektivnog proterivanja izbeglica i migranata* (Documenting the abuse and collective expulsions of refugees and migrants), prepared in 2017 by the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights and the International Aid Network and available at: [http://azil.rs/azil\\_novi/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Dokumentovanje-zlostavljanja-i-kolektivnog-proterivanja-izbeglica-i-migranata.pdf](http://azil.rs/azil_novi/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Dokumentovanje-zlostavljanja-i-kolektivnog-proterivanja-izbeglica-i-migranata.pdf).
  - 7 All reports are available at: <http://azil.rs/periodicni-izvestaji>.
  - 8 Since the beginning of 2015, they have had 273 domestic and 26 foreign volunteers involved in activities in Serbia. In addition, they had more than 100 foreign volunteers who participated in one-day APC activities as part of various visits and programmes.
  - 9 In 2015, the APC legally informed more than 110,000 refugees, of which more than 31,000 were children and more than 30,000 women. See [www.apc-cza.org/sr-YU/o-nama.html](http://www.apc-cza.org/sr-YU/o-nama.html).
  - 10 Other relevant national legislative acts governing this delivery include the Law on Health Care (“Official Gazette RS”, 2015), Law on Health Insurance (“Official Gazette RS” nos. 107/2005, 109/2005 – rev. 57/2011, 110/2012 – Decision of the Constitutional Court, 119/2012, 99/2014, 123/2014 and 126/2014 – Decision of the Constitutional Court) and the Rulebook on the Procedure for Exercising the Rights Under the Compulsory Health Insurance Scheme (“Official Gazette RS” nos. 10/2010, 18/2010 – rev. 46/2010, 52/2010 – rev. 80/2010, 60/2011 – Decision of the Constitutional Court and 1/2013). Furthermore, the Law on Public Health (“Official Gazette RS”, 2016) and Law on Asylum (“Official Gazette RS”, 2007 came into force in 2008) and the Rulebook on Medical Examinations of Persons Seeking Asylum Upon Arrival at the Asylum Centre (“Official Gazette RS”, 2008a), as well as the Law on Foreigners (“Official Gazette RS”, 2008b) and the Law on Migration Management (“Official Gazette RS”, 2012). Law on Migration Management prescribes the tasks of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, and Article 11 of the Law regulates the Commissariat’s cooperation with healthcare organizations and institutions (Project Love 2015).
  - 11 A major role in health care delivery is performed by international organizations such as the Real Medicine Foundation Balkans (RMFB), MSF and Doctors of the World. For example, since 2016 RMFB has been assisting migrants by setting up mobile health and dental clinics and distributing hygiene kits.
  - 12 See [www.nonamekitchen.org/en/manifesto](http://www.nonamekitchen.org/en/manifesto).
  - 13 See [www.borderviolence.eu/violence-reports/](http://www.borderviolence.eu/violence-reports/).
  - 14 For more on the case, see <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/06/serbia-orders-activists-to-leave-after-confronting-chetniks/>.
  - 15 All the names give are pseudonyms to protect identities in keeping with research ethics.
  - 16 The main concerns have been observed with regard to the asylum procedure, specifically its obstruction by police officers who claimed they were preventing the abuse of the asylum system.

- 17 Among the beneficiaries of the law are persons seeking asylum in the Republic of Serbia, refugees and persons under subsidiary protection. Pursuant to Article 56 of the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection (“Official Gazette RS”, no. 24/18), a foreigner who has expressed his/her intention to seek asylum in the Republic of Serbia, and the applicant, may use free legal aid and representation before the competent authorities provided by the organizations whose objectives and activities are aimed at providing legal aid to the applicants and persons who have been granted asylum and free legal aid provided by UNHCR. The applicant shall also have the right to be informed about the citizens associations or other organizations providing assistance and information to the applicants.

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# 4 “They just come and try to help”

## Exploring the prioritization of downstream accountability in citizen-led Humanitarianism in Calais

*Leila Denniston*

### **Introduction**

In the face of the expanding securitization of the UK–France border and state restrictions on interventions by traditional humanitarian actors, citizen-driven aid has been celebrated, notably since 2015, for filling a humanitarian void and transforming the Calais border into a site of resistance and solidarity (McGee and Pelham 2018). An emerging literature highlights this citizen-led humanitarianism in Calais as distinct from formal humanitarianism and neoliberal governmentality (Sandri 2017). This chapter brings this emerging literature into conversation with a long-standing body of work that criticizes the bias of non-governmental organization (NGO) accountability practices towards donors’ needs (*upstream accountability*), as opposed to so-called beneficiaries’ needs (*downstream accountability*) (Edwards and Hulme 1996). It investigates the extent to which citizen-led humanitarianism in Calais, in differing from formal humanitarianism, succeeded at prioritizing downstream accountability in 2015/2016.

The chapter draws from 24 in-depth, qualitative interviews with forced migrant residents and volunteers who lived and worked in the informal camp in Calais, as I did for four months, before it was demolished in October 2016. Thirteen interviewees were long-term volunteers (LTVs) from six different citizen-led organizations (LTV1–LTV13; from here on, often referred to as “volunteers”). Eleven were former camp residents (FCRs), of whom seven volunteered with citizen-led organizations and four did not (FCR1–FCR11; from here on, often referred to as “residents”). Including camp residents who also volunteered with citizen-led organizations contributed insight from those who experienced both the “give” and the “take” of humanitarianism in Calais.

All names used are pseudonyms and participants stressed that their individual accounts do not capture the vast array of perspectives amid residents and volunteers. My position, as a white British woman and former volunteer myself, directed my opportunistic sampling and may also have impacted the ways that participants perceived my questions. Nonetheless, participants’ accounts do expose that citizen-led humanitarianism in Calais is not free of the accountability imbalances of formal humanitarianism, and that its particularities lead to specific accountability challenges of its own.

## **Calais**

Since the 1990s, forced migrants have established informal settlements in Calais while attempting to cross the Channel. In 2015 the number of forced migrants entering Europe informally increased markedly and the camp on the outskirts of the French port town became a sandy expanse of tents, tarpaulins and wooden shelters. In 2009 an estimated 700 forced migrants resided in the area. By 2015 this grew to 6,000 and by September 2016 the camp’s population was estimated at 10,000 (Bouagga and Pette 2017).

Residents constructed not only makeshift homes, but also schools, places of worship, shops and restaurants. While most forced migrants arrived in Calais with the desire to reach the UK swiftly, in reality, many would have to stay months if not years while trying to make the crossing. Thus the camp became a space that could “sustain” livelihoods in some ways over longer periods of time. It became a space where individual resilience and community cohesion were direct neighbours to abrupt abuses of human rights by state actors and to smugglers’ exploitation of the limbo that people were left in.

The increase in forced migrants travelling to Calais in 2015 was accompanied by an influx of individuals – many from the UK but also from France and further afield – seeking to offer voluntary support. Individuals with cars full of donations sought to do the job they felt their governments were failing to. They handed out clothes and tents, cooked meals, shared tea and in many cases drove back to their countries aghast at the humanitarian crisis on their doorstep.

Some independent volunteers, however, stayed longer term. As they did, larger groups formed, warehouses were rented, organization “brands” were developed and donation sorting and distribution practices were streamlined (Cotterill et al. 2016). In the absence of institutional and formal support from international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) – which the French government has widely been reluctant to mandate for fear of improved reception conditions encouraging further migration – these individuals, groups and newly forming initiatives sought to fill the humanitarian void in Calais (McGee and Pelham 2018). Although the director of Doctors of the World has emphasized that “internationally agreed standards for the provision of aid and protection in refugee situations are nowhere to be found in Calais” (Dhesi et al. 2015, p. 1), to date over 90 citizen-led initiatives have attempted to alleviate the challenges faced by forced migrants, offering essential material goods, legal support and social and linguistic activities in the Calais area.

This research included volunteers from an array of them: several were from the two largest British organizations on the ground, Care4Calais and HelpRefugees. These started with individuals planning to stay the weekend, but who then stayed put, established warehouses, recruited extensive numbers of volunteers, raised significant amounts of funding and eventually registered as charities. Others volunteered with smaller initiatives such as Ashram Kitchen, where three to ten volunteers would cook meals and serve tea from a tent and van in camp; Baloo’s Youth Centre, where a small group of volunteers provided a safe space for the

teenagers in camp; and the Refugee Info Bus, which was staffed by one to four volunteers and provided access to the Internet, charging for mobile phones and key information. Some interviewees started working in camp prior to the establishment of any such initiatives, and several still considered themselves independent volunteers despite their involvement with formalized organizations.

## **Accountability**

Alnoor Ebrahim (2016, p. 106) defines accountability in the NGO sector as “the processes through which an organization makes a commitment to respond to and balance the needs of stakeholders in its decision-making processes and activities, and delivers against this commitment”. In the mid-1990s, a number of NGO scandals resulted in a body of literature, such as Edwards and Hulme’s (1996) widely cited work, which exposed the extent to which bi- and multilateral donor agencies can in fact distort the accountability, compromise the performance and weaken the legitimacy of NGOs. This exposition remains pervasive in today’s literature on NGO accountability, stressing that too often an imbalance in accountability practices prioritizes donors (upstream accountability) at the expense of intended beneficiaries (downstream accountability) (Terry 2002; Walsh 2016). This imbalance is notably stark in the humanitarian sector, where actions are justified because they are deemed “to be in the favour of others exposed to a vital danger ... in the name of a shared humanity”, yet are “always situated” (Fassin 2010, p. 239) in the ways “others” are perceived to be in need of assistance (Fox and Brown 1998).

Some have optimism that improvement and balance can stem from “humanizing” the refugee, while others condemn such humanization to failure. In her seminal paper “Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees Be Humane?” Barbara Harrell-Bond (2002, p. 64) goes as far as arguing that asymmetrical relationships, authoritarian structures, the lack of mechanisms for measuring “consumer” satisfaction and the accountability bias towards donors as opposed to intended beneficiaries, unavoidably renders such humanitarianism “inhuman”. Agamben (1998) reduces the refugee-other to the *homo sacer* and the idea of *bare life*, where the refugee is merely an “object of biopolitics” (Žižek 2002, p. 91).

Those that perceive the accountability imbalance in humanitarian work with refugees as irresolvable interpret the refugee as an integral and necessary “other” in the sovereign, neoliberal state system (Haddad 2003). Since the refugee serves as a constitutive outsider in defining the identity and imagination of the citizen and the state, so too do the aid worker and the aid organization rely on its otherness. They are part of a system that depends on the “refugee” as a beneficiary in need (Haddad 2003). In this view, downstream accountability can only do so much to “un-other” and render human and equal the refugee, if only to avoid rendering the aid organization devoid of its founding purpose.

Alice Obrecht (2011, p. 107), however, argues that NGOs can go further to recognize that certain actors lack power compared to others and to take on the responsibility of enabling those with less power to nonetheless hold the NGO

accountable. Her socio-ethical framework offers alternatives to the donor-centric imbalance so prevalent in practice and the criticism of them. Yet to date there remains little empirical evidence of successful implementation of such power-balancing ideas (Terry 2002; Walsh 2016).

Given (a) Ebrahim’s definition; (b) Obrecht’s insistence that socio-ethical accountability involves NGOs empowering actors with relatively less power than others to nonetheless participate in accountability dynamics; and (c) the pervasiveness of an imbalance towards donors and upstream accountability in the refugee sector, this chapter considers the successful prioritization of downstream accountability to be based on three pillars:

- 1 A commitment to the needs and desires of intended beneficiaries, and the delivery of that commitment.
- 2 An enabling of intended beneficiaries – recognized as individuals who have relatively “less power” than others in NGO accountability dynamics – to nonetheless participate in such dynamics
- 3 The relative absence of a donor-weighted imbalance within perceived accountability dynamics.

### **Citizen-led humanitarianism in Calais**

An emerging literature on citizen-led humanitarianism in Calais since 2015 seeks to highlight the extent to which the citizen-led organizations on the ground are distinct from the formal NGOs they seek to fill the void of. This literature suggests that citizen-led organizations in Calais “[challenge] both the humanitarian machine and neoliberal governmentality” (Sandri 2017, p. 77). It does so because this grassroots humanitarianism, unlike formal humanitarianism, operates without formal permission; is driven by public donations and often-untrained volunteer commitment; is characterized by improvisation, informality, physical and emotional proximity between volunteers and intended beneficiaries; and is motivated – at least initially – by humanitarian concerns rather than so-called political or activist ones (Gerbier-Aublanc 2017; Redfield and Bornstein 2010; Sandri 2017).

Gerbier-Aublanc (2017) writes that these particularities led to volunteer humanitarianism acting as a “buffer” between the camp residents and the aggression of the police and government officials in Calais. Bouagga (2018) argues that the heterogeneous citizen-led activities in Calais call for a re-examination of how humanitarianism and politics are themselves understood.

McGee and Pelham (2018, p. 32) outline how two initiatives, Play4Calais and the Refugee Youth Service, challenge “the hierarchies of humanness which construct the refugee as *homo sacer*”. It is the initiatives’ “relative informality, spatial proximity and volunteer activism” that position them in tension with the “violent border sovereignties of neoliberal states” and provides fertile breeding ground for a more refugee-centred humanitarianism (McGee and Pelham 2018, p. 22). In the authors’ words, they “reveal a grassroots humanitarian praxis which offers an

alternative to the large-scale ‘professionalized’ registers of aid delivery” (McGee and Pelham 2018, p. 22).

Sandri (2017, p. 65), similarly, distinguishes what she calls *volunteer humanitarianism* in Calais as an “alternative to formal humanitarian aid”. By “not [collaborating] with governments to provide humanitarian assistance”, this volunteer humanitarianism, Sandri (2017, p. 65) writes, does not become complicit in border regime practices and the clear inclusion/exclusion of liberal democratic citizenship, thus humanizing the refugee and evening out the playing field between the individuals “giving” and “receiving” aid. In 2019, Doidge and Sandri outlined how this citizen-led volunteering has created new spaces for sociability and community, between volunteers and refugees.

This emerging literature includes an acknowledgement that many challenges accompany the particularities of citizen-led humanitarianism in Calais, prevailing from their informality, lack of professionalism and management and inability to address complex issues such as trafficking and violence (Davies et al. 2017). McGee and Pelham (2018, p. 32) stress that they seek not to “moralize grassroots humanitarianism as the compassionate antithesis” to the bureaucratic machine of the NGO sector, but instead to “reveal the ‘imperfect offering’ of humanitarianism in its more vernacular forms”.

The emerging literature does not explicitly centre on the notion of accountability. Yet, its characterization of humanitarianism in Calais as refugee-centric and an alternative to the state- and donor-centric bureaucracy of the formal NGO sector chimes productively with (a) Ebrahim’s definition of accountability as a commitment to respond to and balance the needs of different stakeholders; and (b) the wider call for a (re)prioritization of that commitment towards so-called beneficiaries (Walsh 2016). This chapter thus seeks to ask whether this emerging literature’s celebration of citizen-led humanitarianism in Calais as distinct and refugee-centric also indicates an effective prioritization of downstream accountability.

### **Narrative conceptualizations of humanitarianism and accountability in Calais**

Participants from both the volunteer and FCR communities acknowledged how humanitarianism in Calais diverged from formal humanitarian practices. They touched upon the fact that organizations and activities were operated without formal permission, financed by public donations, based on untrained volunteer work, improvised and informal, characterized by a physical and emotional proximity and shared sociality and affectivity between volunteers and intended beneficiaries (Sandri 2017). A Syrian FCR, in close contact with both Médecins Sans Frontières and citizen-led initiatives, explained that volunteers at the former “went through training, have volunteered all over the world, sometimes in war zones”, while for the latter, “maybe it’s the first time in their life they volunteer. Most of them don’t have an idea about the refugee crisis” (FCR10).

Most participants’ understandings of accountability comprised elements of answerability, regulation and “doing more good than harm” (LTV1). Volunteers

defined accountability as “formalizing and applying boundaries” (LTV8); and by its opposite: “being able to do what you want without people being particularly aware of it, or being held to certain standards, legally, professionally or just ethically” (LTV5). One volunteer acknowledged it is “multi-layered” and “not one-way traffic”. Most formalized the relational aspect of accountability, nodding towards Ebrahim’s (2016) idea of accountability as the commitment to respond to and balance the needs of different stakeholders. Most spoke unprompted of camp residents as the first group they felt accountable towards in Calais, but many also spoke of accountability relationships with other volunteers, leaders, donors and organization structures.

However, three volunteers expressed uncertainty or confusion over the idea of using the term “accountability” for “bottom-up” relations:

You can’t do things on the whim of your own feelings. You have to be influenced by other people who have some kind of power over you. But I don’t find it easy to think of outside of [funders] ... I wouldn’t have thought about [a commitment to camp residents] in terms of the word accountable.

(LTV11)

Enabling those with less power to participate in accountability relations is precisely what Obrecht (2011) calls for humanitarian initiatives to do. Yet, this volunteer struggled to place camp residents in the same category as those “who have some kind of power over you”.

Additionally, 5 of the 11 camp residents interviewed highlighted that either they or their friends did not – initially or ever – understand that the majority of the humanitarians in the camp were unpaid volunteers. Several mentioned that people in their communities believed the volunteers in camp were paid humanitarians, government workers or even “spies” (FCR3). One resident recounted, “They are here to spy, so if we go to [the] UK, they will say something about us to the Home Office” (FCR7). Another added, “People would say you have to keep distance with them ... They destroyed our countries and now they come here, you can’t trust them” (FCR1).

The depiction of citizen-led initiatives as distinctive and thus successful at prioritizing the needs and desires of intended beneficiaries stands in tension with these accounts that indicate many FCRs misconceived the volunteers and humanitarianism in Calais as precisely what Sandri (2017) and McGee and Pelham (2018) distinguish them from. This, in combination with the fact that several volunteers struggled to see intended beneficiaries as legitimate actors of accountability, suggests that the particularities of humanitarianism in Calais may have enabled downstream accountability in some ways but complicated it in others.

## **Humanitarian particularities in Calais as enabling**

Participants’ accounts did reveal how, to an extent, the donor model in Calais successfully enabled the decentralization of upstream accountability and how the

informal, flexible and affective characteristics of the humanitarianism facilitated the inclusion of camp residents in accountability relations themselves.

Over 75 per cent of the volunteers emphasized that they feel accountable “always to the people in camp, always” (LTV10). Several stressed they did not feel accountable to donors beyond entrusting their funds to an organization, as their donations were “emotional” and “short-term” contributions (LTV6). Because of the small-scale public donation model, donors upstream did not “[ask] you for anything in repayment” (LTV11). Three volunteers and one resident emphasized that they did not prioritize upstream accountability because so many donors seemed to be “getting rid of crap in their house” (LTV6). One resident exclaimed, “People were donating wedding dresses and high heels. That wasted the capacity of the warehouse, wasted volunteers’ time!” (FCR10).

The informal nature of humanitarianism in Calais and the small-scale public donation model also allowed leaders to refuse any exchanges that they deemed unfair:

We wouldn’t accept money or donations from people if they felt it was necessary to get an experience of the camp in exchange for it ... That is an unacceptable exchange, that you treat people as if they’re victims, as if they’re in a safari park. It’s not a photo opportunity for someone.

(LTV11)

Moreover, despite some misconceptions, several camp residents also stressed that volunteering entailed sacrifice and risk taking and that it was “amazing” that individuals were giving their time to “help for nothing” (FCR3). Some residents did thus perceive this commitment to their needs and desires.

Additionally, since resources were often scarce, distributions became targeted in order to reflect camp residents’ changing needs. Volunteers from multiple organizations explained “ticketing” – a distribution technique whereby teams went from shelter to shelter to ensure residents could choose items they most needed. The system was developed in response to community feedback on the previous line distributions, which were deemed undignified and ineffective, and a camp resident volunteer translator would accompany ticketing teams. Occasional formal surveys informed practices, but informal feedback was most prevalent. As one volunteer (LTV11) explained: “We knew we were on to a good thing [with the ticketing] because we didn’t ask them, people just told us ‘we like how you’re doing this’.” Council-like meetings with ethnic community leaders in the camp, as well as the omnipresence of volunteers in camp and use of camp resident translators, presented avenues for residents to offer input and for feedback to be incorporated rapidly.

Informal feedback mechanisms prevailed in part because organizations were reactive and lacked institutional capacities. They were also preferred because organizations sought not to overwhelm camp residents with formal procedures that encumbered those with more “political” potential (such as the monthly census) or emulated governmental practices that often embodied anxiety for

residents. Volunteers recognized that informal feedback allowed them to tailor practices without taking away from the fact that “what [camp residents] were dealing with is so much bigger than [whether they want lentils or kidney beans in their food pack]” (LTV11).

Several camp residents spoke positively of such informal feedback mechanisms, recognizing that amid challenging conditions, distributions were designed to offer choice, flexibility and rapidity. Similarly, most referred to the accessibility of volunteers in the camp and identified the bridge-like role that camp resident translators played: “Without translators, they were like deaf” (FCR7). Camp resident translators themselves expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to contribute to bettering the organizational processes and the experiences of other camp residents and volunteers.

One resident translator expressed pride in offering protection to volunteers when an intended beneficiary became aggressive during ticketing. He recalled how four men offered to serve them tea while the aggressive resident calmed himself, stating: “They are now in our tent, they are now our guest, you cannot touch them” (FCR2). Interviewees suggested that the trust and empowerment that came with this (often gendered) role of protector allowed camp residents to participate in the services and activities designed to better their living circumstances (Orbinski 2008). The fact that there were “volunteers who were also refugees” (LTV5) and refugees who were also “protectors” blurred the boundary between camp residents and humanitarian workers, appearing to enable camp residents to contribute and feedback into humanitarianism in Calais and to create a seemingly more equal system of exchange between those involved.

Social proximity and affectivity were also depicted as a way of (a) listening to and meeting individual camp residents’ needs and desires and (b) enabling camp residents to participate in a more equal exchange. Volunteers emphasized that they took into consideration residents’ needs “simply by listening” (LTV1) and prioritizing the “recognition of a human-to-human connection and dignity” (LTV10). One volunteer recounted: “I didn’t understand the needs of 10,000 refugees. But I understood Taher’s needs, and I understood Sami’s needs, and Mahmoud’s needs” (LTV4). When Mahmoud was too afraid to seek critical medical attention, she explained the positive ramifications of friendship in the face of the relative insignificance of material distributions:

Every person you know can send ... a lifetime’s worth of toothpaste, but you are never going to help a 15-year-old boy who has lost his whole family, who has gone halfway across the world, and then is left to sit in his own squalor for months ... There is not enough fucking toothpaste in the whole fucking world that can change that ... At the end, I was like, if all I can do is be a friend to Mahmoud, and hold his hand while he gets told he is HIV positive, then I’m going to sit here and hold his hand.

(LTV4)

Solidarity and friendship thus sought to humanize, or “un-other”, camp residents and served as a basis for material but also emotional support (Haddad 2003). Moreover, they were celebrated for enabling more multidirectional exchanges than those of the typical aid worker-giver and refugee-receiver (McGee and Pelham 2018). A volunteer explained that saying yes to an invitation for dinner or tea

[gave] people the opportunity to equalize the exchange. If we came earlier and distributed some food, by then going back later for a cup of tea, that was us both giving and taking ... about enabling people to then give you something back, about dignity.

(LTV10)

Several camp residents labelled friendship and solidarity some of the only “good things” (FCR5) about Calais. One recounted:

When someone come[s] across from [the] UK or from Europe to help you ... you feel like someone is standing behind you ... Even if they don't bring anything and they just come and try to help, they are really important.

(FCR3)

Several perceived this shared sociality as a route to voice needs, access support and reaffirm their humanity (Agier 2010). One resident explained, “They are listening to you. ... It looks like your family”; “When I come to Calais, I get to know who I am. I am [a] human being. Because of the volunteers” (FCR3). Five residents also stressed how important ongoing support from volunteer friends they made in Calais in 2015/2016 is in their current lives.

Participants' accounts therefore suggest that, to an extent, the informality, public donations and shared sociality of humanitarianism in Calais did allow successful commitment to camp residents' needs and decentralization of upstream donors. Some volunteers and residents stressed that informal feedback opportunities, camp resident translators, the sense of solidarity and kinship and opportunities for multidirectional exchanges across the giver–receiver divide of aid, contributed to humanizing camp residents and to placing them at the centre of the humanitarianism seeking to support them (Fassin 2010; Ilcan and Rygiel 2015). Others, however, contextualized this humanization in ways that demonstrate that the particularities of humanitarianism in Calais also presented numerous accountability challenges.

### **Humanitarian particularities in Calais as hindering**

Some participants stressed that a number of context-specific barriers hindered their ability to commit and deliver to camp residents' needs. Resource constraints made expectation management a priority and many saw the lack of downstream accountability as due to ignorance rather than malice: the aid was reactive, learnt on the fly, described by some as emergency as opposed to humanitarian aid

(Calhoun 2010). Some residents echoed this: "They [are] doing their best" (FCR2). Yet the data exposes more than these context-specific barriers, highlighting how the particularities of humanitarianism in Calais came with its own challenges.

Volunteers and residents criticized the lack of organization and collaboration that accompanied the informality and competitiveness of humanitarianism in Calais. Several residents could not recall the names of organizations or at times distinguish between them, yet were aware of the tensions between them. "Unfortunately, every day, a charity or organization, pops up", one resident exclaimed. "All these charities have the same goals, so why [do] we need a new charity? Why don't all these charities collaborate? ... Their work will be more efficient" (FCR10). He went on to call out how material distributions were relatively insignificant in the face of residents' greater needs: access to stability and support to apply for refugee status. The resident stressed,

80 per cent of the charities give food, tents, hygiene stuff. Not many are helping refugees achieve what they want: to be recognized, about their status ... For me and for many people, the [camp] wasn't and would never be a home. It's just a transit station on the way.

(FCR10)

He highlighted the lack of collaboration and leadership of grassroots organizations in Calais as obstacles to responding to camp residents' most fundamental needs: "The government will never listen to small charities. So if these people collaborate and work together, you could be more represented, have a stronger voice" (FCR10). When he asked volunteer friends why this was not the case, they told him that organizations sought not to interfere in politics, and that leaders at different organizations liked to do things "their way". He exclaimed, "Again, it's become about [leaders] as individuals, not about refugees." For several volunteers too, "manic", egotistical and monopolized leadership and the informal, untrained nature of volunteering led to the lack of collaboration and failure to address and include residents' needs and perspectives (LTV8, LTV5). The emotionality of humanitarianism in Calais meant many volunteers "[gave] too much" (LTV1) and leaders were "reactive", "impulsive" and "emotional" (LTV8). "There was no formalized way of making decisions", explained one volunteer (LTV8). Shoe distributions where protocols were reversed mid-handout "destroyed every ounce of credibility that the organization had" (LTV8). Other distributions were described as game-like: "We'd see the van coming and we'd literally run. It was the first [residents] who'd get there who would be allowed in the line ... It created an atmosphere of panic and competition" (LTV5). Volunteers called out such impulsive and game-like practices as hardly demonstrating successful commitment to camp residents' needs.

Several residents also explicitly pointed towards hypocritical leadership. Two spoke explicitly of a "scandal" (FCR1; FCR10) where the leader of an organization was quoted in the media as insisting that although the camp was an unregulated site, sexual relationships between volunteers and camp residents were prohibited in

their organization, yet was then revealed to themselves be in a romantic relationship with a former camp resident. One exclaimed: “If the boss of the organization is doing this ... what are you going to expect from the volunteers?” (FCR1). Another said that as a result of this incident, “I lose as a person. I lose the trust in this organization” (FCR10). Some residents did recognize that organizations were operating under challenging conditions and one volunteer acknowledged that monopolized leadership facilitated fast decision-making and capitalized on the experiences of those who had been on the ground longest. However, many believed this hypocritical and monopolized leadership led to less accountable decisions.

Some participants posited that humanitarianism in Calais better enabled intended beneficiaries to participate in accountability relations by offering more opportunities – through a shared sociality – for a more equal exchange between camp residents and volunteers. Yet, participants warned of the romanticization of this shared sociality. Both volunteers and residents questioned its authenticity and brought up linguistic and cultural barriers that hindered organizations’ ability to identify and meet needs. The shared sociality was recognized by some as a basis for support and solidarity, but also called out for (a) only doing so much to reconcile key power imbalances between volunteers and camp residents, notably freedom of movement; and (b) further complicating power dynamics because of the select nature of said “shared” sociality.

Participants highlighted that, regardless of intention, important power differentials prevailed in Calais:

Obviously I wanted to become friends, I wanted to treat them like humans because they are ... but the fact that I had access to a warehouse and they didn’t, I had access to clothes that I could choose to give them or not give them, that power means we’re not on an equal footing.

(LTV5)

Volunteers referred to the fact that they could “walk away with [their] passport and come to the UK” (LTV10), while several camp residents explained that their friendships often dissipated when volunteers made that return journey. “The moment they head back to England, they close that door. So whatever happened in Calais stays in Calais ... This is hard for refugees” (FCR10). The fact that this shared sociality apparently meant such different things to many volunteers and residents indicates that expectations and self-judgement were at times poorly managed, only serving to emphasize the differences between those involved. Furthermore, volunteers and residents recognized that, regardless of what motivated them, friendships and their benefits – emotional and material – could make others jealous, simultaneously creating a shared sociality with some and deepening existing social divides with others.

The presence of camp resident translators both built a bridge between volunteers and intended beneficiaries but also epitomized the complication of power dynamics between groups. According to one British volunteer, some camp resident volunteers would only directly translate her words in order to not “be seen as more of a

volunteer than a refugee” and thus demonstrate “loyalty and commitment more to being part of the refugee community and not being more of a volunteer” (LTV10). Several camp residents interviewed, however, demonstrated that translating inevitably blurred the boundary between resident and volunteer, creating more layered power dynamics.

One resident expressed upset that the leader of the organization he translated for daily never once asked him what he needed. Another recounted pressure from his friends to ask for money or materials in exchange for his translation services and others still emphasized that working with the organizations meant you could access resources that others could not. Accounts ranged from translators being given items as “thanks” for their work (clothes, mattresses, shelters), to distributions that were perceived as biased and reinforcing of power dynamics within the camp and that played into the hands of smugglers (e.g. gas given to church leaders, who would sell it on to restaurants).

Similarly, the benefits of friendship and romance in the camp included having access to resources and favours and even to financial or physical assistance to reach the UK. While such instances helped “meet the needs” of certain individuals in camp, they ostracized others, rendering the sociality and affectivity of humanitarianism in Calais notably select. This select sociality, in turn, may have enabled some camp residents to participate in accountability relations, but certainly not all, instead at times aggravating tensions and distinctions across but also within stakeholder groups.

In the first instance, participants’ accounts reveal that to an extent, the refugee-other prevailed since the sociality of humanitarianism in Calais could do little to reconcile persistent power dynamics: access to a warehouse, a passport, a secure home to return to. However, on another level, they reveal that in fact a myriad of more subtle but complex refugee identities were created through the selectivity of the sociality: the refugee-volunteer, the refugee-beneficiary, the refugee-friend, the refugee-lover (Haddad 2003). The refugee is more than *bare life*, but not human either: the data suggests that instead there are additional layers of “othering” and “humanity” in between the two (Agamben 1998, 2005; Agier 2010).

Likewise, a more complex layering of volunteer identities emerges. Participants signalled to the volunteer short-term “friend”, the volunteer long-term friend, the volunteer one-night stand, the volunteer lover, the volunteer aid worker, the volunteer perceived as paid/professional, the volunteer perceived as threat. Therefore, in attempting to create more equal exchanges between volunteers and camp residents and prioritize refugee-centric humanitarianism and downstream accountability, the select sociality in Calais instead largely complicated the identities, exchange possibilities and accountability relations between groups (Ebrahim 2016).

Moreover, considering how some participants pointed towards accountability biases in favour of donors, the citizen-led humanitarianism in Calais appears to succumb, regardless of its particularities, to some of the very challenges faced by formal NGOs (Fox and Brown 1998). The founder of one organization insisted

the priority was “that people give me money” (LTV9) and several volunteers at that same organization recounted being asked to give donors tours of camp in order to incentivize future donations. Four volunteers explicitly expressed that there was undoubtedly a bias towards donors. They outlined justifications relating to organization sustainability and reputation, with one administrative volunteer explaining:

Obviously we want to do the best that we can for refugees, but at the end of the day, we can only do what we can do. Whereas for people who are giving their money and time to us, we want to make sure we are using that in the best possible way.

(LTV7)

Additionally, both volunteers and residents drew attention to the fact that accountability includes actors beyond the donor–beneficiary binary, notably the government and volunteers themselves. Sometimes, despite and sometimes because of the grassroots particularities of Calais, organizations were subjected to government procedures, such as the police checks at the entrances to the camp, which at times affected their ability to commit and deliver to camp residents.

The volunteer model in Calais was called out by both volunteer and resident participants for catering for individuals who only wanted to “help” in ways that “helped themselves” (De Jong 2011). A tension arose between the extent to which volunteers’ experiences and egos were prioritized and the extent to which they were abandoned as actors in accountability mechanisms themselves. Even residents acknowledged risk taking on behalf of volunteers, yet many volunteer participants stressed a lack of organizational concern for their safety and well-being. This resulted in an oscillating volunteer-specific accountability imbalance. On the one hand, volunteer experiences were at times prioritized above the dignity and perceptions of camp residents, and on the other, meeting camp residents’ needs was at times prioritized above volunteer safety and well-being.

In the experiences of both volunteers and camp residents, therefore, the informal, improvised and purportedly apolitical nature of citizen-led humanitarianism in Calais did significantly hinder its ability to successfully commit and deliver to camp residents’ needs. The lack of organization and collaboration, prioritization of material over political and legal needs, lack of volunteer training and emotional and egocentric leadership were emphasized as key barriers to listening and responding to camp residents’ needs. The emotional proximity and shared sociality often depicted as central to humanitarianism in Calais not only further hindered dedication to certain camp residents’ needs, but also complicated the ways that residents were enabled to participate in accountability relations themselves. A bias towards donors and volatile dynamics with other accountability stakeholders, such as the government and volunteers themselves, prevailed in several accounts of humanitarianism in Calais (Fox and Brown 1998).

## **Distinctions between organizations, individuals and through time**

Throughout their interviews, residents consistently stressed that they could not speak for others in the camp. In parallel, the informality and lack of collaboration in Calais reveals many different understandings of what “humanizing” camp residents and prioritizing downstream accountability meant. Highlighting a number of the differences between organizations, initiatives and individuals in Calais sheds light on the extent to which celebrations of citizen-led humanitarianism in Calais are rooted in particular perspectives, contexts and time frames.

Of the two largest, warehouse-based British organizations in Calais, for example, one took all volunteers into camp in order to (a) show camp residents that people cared and (b) ensure volunteers had experiences they could use as an emotional tool to gather further donations and raise awareness. Volunteers wore tabards so that they would be seen as having come to help rather than observe. The other organization, from May 2016, only allowed long-term volunteers into the camp, in order to (a) ensure volunteer safety in camp and (b) respect the dignity of camp residents by not rendering them a spectacle to be visited (Chouliaraki 2013). Their volunteers did not wear anything in camp that distinguished them as aid providers because they did not want to “[elevate themselves] further into that power dynamic where you are wearing the bib of power” (LTV11). One leader indicated that tabards gave off an “unwarranted sense of authority” (LTV11); they considered themselves individuals in solidarity, not aid workers. Organizations thus approached humanizing the Calais context in different if not opposing ways.

Practices not only varied between organizations, but also through time. How accountability was experienced – by both volunteers and residents – in Calais largely depended on when you were there and how long you stayed: both the camp and the humanitarianism within it changed drastically between August 2015 and October 2016. Camp residents’ opinions on accountability mechanisms such as the community leader system varied based on when they arrived in the camp: those present when the system was established in autumn 2015 seemed more likely to understand it was the best available option. In contrast, those arriving to a much larger camp in which the community leader system seemed much less representative in 2016 struggled to see it as an effective involvement of residents in accountability dynamics.

Some volunteers indicated shifts in personal accountability priorities the longer they stayed – notably those that arrived “for themselves”, but “stayed for camp resident friends”. Others indicated that despite the centralization and formalization of organizations into 2016, they remained more accountable to the people they worked with and for, rather than to the organizations they wound up falling under, since their personal relationships preceded the consolidation of such organizations. Several problematized what the organizations represented (Montanaro 2017). One indicated that “the institution almost becomes the person” (LTV13); others drew distinctions between the work they were doing in the camp

and the organization as the warehouse and platform enabling that work. Many acknowledged that the organizations' procedures and services improved drastically as lessons were learnt, but also drew attention to the fact that it at times took severe incidents to trigger change. These included a large fire that devastated the camp in May 2016, which led to significant bureaucratization of several organizations in order to formalize volunteering processes.

Several leaders spoke of a significant shift in the perceptions and expectations of volunteering from 2015 into 2016. In 2015, volunteers arrived independently, responsible only for themselves. Yet, as these volunteers stayed longer, they became responsible for overseeing others who had joined their efforts, and then responsible for the organizations that formed out of these informal groups committed to upscaling, streamlining and humanizing the camp's aid provision. Individuals volunteering in 2016 arrived to large-scale, warehouse-based humanitarian initiatives and had expectations of them as such. A volunteer that had arrived independently in 2015 and become a leader as organizations formed expressed that "suddenly it changed ... to being my responsibility ... and everyone is saying 'how can you take volunteers into that camp, it's so dangerous, you're so irresponsible'" (LTV9). Over time, then, hierarchies were formed between short-term volunteers and long-term leaders, altering accountability relations and expectations.

This volunteer-leader divide also revealed significant discrepancies in experiences and perceptions of accountability dynamics. One leader stressed how central accountability was to their professional life and humanitarian engagement in Calais; yet the majority of interviewed volunteers who worked with that leader pointed towards a lack of accountability within their organization.

These distinctions highlighted through time and between organizations and individuals first serve as a reminder of the unregulated, fast-changing, diverse and notably difficult environment that was Calais in 2015/2016. Second, such distinctions further complicate generalized celebrations of humanitarianism in Calais as refugee-centric. Third, they contextualize the fact that while citizen-led humanitarianism in Calais appears to have both enabled and hindered downstream accountability, and to have been distinct from formal humanitarianism in some ways, what downstream accountability consisted of amid the informality of Calais depended on who you were, when you were there and how you were involved.

## **Conclusion**

Citizen-led humanitarianism in Calais does not therefore appear to adequately resolve the donor-driven models of formal humanitarianism, nor is it as successfully refugee-centric and humane as an emerging literature largely celebrates it to be (Doidge and Sandri 2019; McGee and Pelham 2018; Sandri 2017).

Participants' accounts stressed the particularities of humanitarianism in Calais compared to formal humanitarianism: public donation and volunteer based, informal and improvised, social and affective. However, while these particularities did, to an extent, facilitate a commitment to the needs and desires of intended beneficiaries in 2015/2016, a bias towards donors pertained in aspects of the

humanitarianism in Calais, and its improvised nature, gave rise to distinctive accountability issues.

Crucially, from its informality stemmed a lack of organization and collaboration; what was perceived as egotistical, monopolized and hypocritical leadership; and a select sociality that – in attempting to enable a more equal exchange and multidirectional sense of accountability – in fact complicated power dynamics within and across different groups in Calais. Socially driven attempts to equalize and humanize exchanges between informal volunteers and forced migrant demographics created more layered power dynamics and identities between the “us” and “them” at the centre of othering literature (Haddad 2003). The fact that vast distinctions were acknowledged between individuals, organizations and through time further indicated that what downstream accountability meant and how it was thus prioritized depended on who you were, how you were involved and when you were in Calais.

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**Part II**

**Criminalization and violence  
against citizen  
humanitarianism**



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# 5 Melilla

## Fight and survival of activist humanitarianism

*Clara Miralles Vila*

As one of the only two land borders of the European Union (EU) in Africa, the Spanish autonomous city of Melilla has been one of the main entry points of irregular migration flows that seek to reach Europe since the 1990s. At the same time, this Spanish enclave has been used as a laboratory for testing the securitization and externalization of borders, which has been characteristic of the Spanish and EU migration policies of the past decades. Citizen movements have emerged in the city as a reaction to these border regimes and to the perceived failure of the political authorities to comply with or even recognize their legal and their moral responsibilities. They aim to address the needs of migrants and refugees that are left unprotected by the lack of political will and to fill the gaps that professionalized humanitarian organizations cannot or do not cover. At the same time, these initiatives serve as a form of protest to denounce the governmental neglect and abandonment and contest the imposed security mandates to control human movement (for similar citizen movements in Greece, see e.g. Mitchell and Sparke 2020; Rozakou 2017).

Nonetheless, these citizen movements have to fight in order to survive in the complex reality of this autonomous city. The hostility of a significant part of the civil society towards migrants, the anti-immigration narrative of the local government, as well as the criminalization of their activities are just some of the obstacles that citizens have to face when showing their solidarity towards migrants and refugees in Melilla. This study investigates different forms of “citizen humanitarianism” present in Melilla’s borderscape by focusing on a local association, Prodein, which has been the epicentre of various pro-migration initiatives. By tracing the heterogeneous and polymorphic practices of resistance, activism, solidarity and aid that have emerged within and around it, I aim to provide an improved understanding of how these types of humanitarian practices make and reshape securitized border spaces.

This chapter is based on field research conducted in Melilla in April 2019, where I had the opportunity to experience life in this fenced city. I could observe the dynamics of the enclave and its border and talk to and interview activists from Prodein and members of other organizations that work with migrants and refugees.<sup>1</sup> The field research was complemented by secondary desk research, which provided insights into Melilla’s context and further studied Prodein’s activities

from afar. The chapter is structured as follows: I begin by putting Melilla's border regime within a contemporary historical and political context. Then, I introduce Prodein, the association that is at the centre of the study. After describing its origins and general characteristics, I present the main initiatives that have been developed or promoted by the association. Through a detailed account of how and why these initiatives emerge and who the subjects that take part in them are, I locate them within the framework of "citizen humanitarianism". More specifically, I identify them as forms of "activist humanitarianism", a variant of citizen humanitarianism that goes beyond the provision of assistance and aims to bring socio-political change through protest, resistance and solidarity. I conceptualize them as an assemblage of spatially fluid and heterogeneous practices that challenge the "humanitarian borderscape" in which they are embedded while continuing to reproduce it. By juxtaposing them with some of the commonly agreed elements of "traditional" humanitarianism, I capture the most important commonalities and divergences. This helps me place them within the shifting geographies of humanitarian practices and I conclude by emphasizing their significance within the humanitarian government domain.

### **Setting the scene: Melilla in context**

The cities of Melilla and Ceuta are two singularities within the European geography. They are two Spanish enclaves on the North African coast, with a total surface area of 12 km<sup>2</sup> and 18 km<sup>2</sup> respectively and less than 100,000 inhabitants each. Their reduced geographical size remains in contrast with their remarkable geopolitical, functional and symbolic significance. Indeed, these Spanish–Moroccan borderlands are more than a (contested) geographic delimitation between the two countries. They embody the division not only between Spain and Morocco but also between Europe and Africa, Christianity and Islam, EU territory and non-EU territory (Ferrer-Gallardo 2008; Soto Bermant 2017). Melilla's turbulent military history, the city's peculiar economic scheme and its fundamental role in the management of migration flows to Europe configure the complex setting of this border zone in which citizen humanitarianism emerges.

Melilla fell into Spanish power in 1497 after the end of the *Reconquista* and it functioned as a military garrison during the following centuries. During the years of the Spanish–French Protectorate of Morocco (1912–1956), the city was used as a basis for colonial penetration. The military uprising of 1936, which marked the beginning of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and led to Francisco Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975), started in Melilla with the revolt of the Spanish Army of Africa. The Army of Africa, composed in essence by the Spanish Legion and a Moroccan infantry known as the *Regulares*, had a key role in the victory of the nationalist side. Traces of Melilla's military past and present can be found all around the city: from the various statues and monuments commemorating the Spanish armed forces and its "heroes" to the Legion's military base, still in use, and the soldiers deployed in Melilla. These elements symbolize and perpetuate an

idea of Spain and its nationalism that is based on the opposition to the “Moors”, a notion that goes back to the spirit of the *Reconquista*, when a collective Spanish identity intimately tied to Christianity and the battle against the “Muslim invader” was constructed (Soto Bermant 2017). This idea of “Spain” and “Spanish-ness” is still firmly rooted in a part of Melilla’s society. Nonetheless, the geographic proximity to Morocco, the porosity of the border and the inevitable transborder movement allow for border communities to renegotiate and reinterpret the “us–them” divide – sometimes reinforcing, sometimes blurring it – providing the grounds for “ambiguous, complex and hybrid identities” (Ferrer-Gallardo 2008, p. 314).

Relations between Spain and Morocco regarding Melilla have always been strained, characterized by a regular alternation between open confrontation and fragile entente (Ferrer-Gallardo 2008). Despite the political tensions over Melilla’s sovereignty, the commercial activity between the enclave and its neighbouring country has developed intensely, benefiting from Melilla’s free-port status, advantageous tax conditions and strategic location. Most of the cross-border trading activity corresponds to what is euphemistically called “atypical commerce”, mainly referring to the smuggling of basic commodities and luxury goods that feed a full-blown black market (Soto Bermant 2014). The economic sustainability of Melilla depends not only on the flow of goods but also on the flow of people and people transporting goods that crosses the border back and forth every day. The permeability of the border to the illicit trade and daily labourers collides with the exclusionary border practices imposed by the regulatory needs of the EU border securitization, which curtail mobility for certain populations. Anderson’s notion of “selective permeability of state borders” and their “differential filtering effects” becomes thus clearly manifested in this border zone (as cited in Ferrer-Gallardo 2008, p. 303).

The renewed function of state frontiers as mechanisms to regulate migration acquires particular relevance in the context of “Fortress Europe”. With Spain’s entry into the EU in 1986, Melilla became one of its gates, an entry point and transit space for migrant flows aiming to continue their journey to continental Europe. A continuous process of re-bordering has followed. Since the early 1990s, the enclave has served as a pioneering laboratory for Europe’s migration policies and practices and has become a clear exemplification of Europe’s expanding security apparatus, set up to “defend” the borders of the Global North from the “invasion” of migrants and asylum seekers (Walters 2011). Under this narrative, military tactics, high-tech surveillance systems, razor-wire fences and watchtowers are considered not only necessary but also legitimate instruments to “protect” the border. In addition to the physical reshaping, processes of abandonment and structural violence are also used as strategies of control and deterrence, suggesting what Davies et al. (2017) call “violent inaction”.

Within this context, the border becomes a divide imposed on certain groups of the migratory population for which crossing the border becomes a matter of life or death. In parallel, it evolves into a generating space of “humanitarian government” (Fassin 2012), where different sorts of agents organize themselves around the higher moral principle to preserve life and alleviate the suffering of those that

are the object of such social violence. The coexistence, complementarity and confrontation of brutal securitization and migration control practices and different forms of humanitarian engagement turn Melilla into a “humanitarian border” (Walters 2011). Moreover, the variety of border functions and practices that one encounters across time and space illustrates how Melilla’s border is in a “constant state of becoming” (Pallister-Wilkins 2018b, p. 117), made up of a fluid and shifting array of humanitarian-related features and activities. These characteristics call for what Pallister-Wilkins (2018b, p. 117) has named a “humanitarian borderscape”. Amid this complex tangle, citizen initiatives that emerge in opposition to the border’s political order become part and parcel of the construction of this border space.

### **Prodein: 20 years of resistance**

We are a social movement united by a shared feeling of indignation at the lack of respect for others just because of their skin colour or because of where they come from ... Witnessing that we feel we must take action, we must oppose it.

(José Palazón, co-founder of Prodein, see HUMAN la Pelicula 2015)

Many of the citizen-led pro-migration initiatives that have taken place in Melilla in the past decades revolve around the local association Prodein and their co-founders José Palazón and Maite Echarte. Praised and respected by pro-migrant rights’ supporters and criticized and criminalized by political groups and local media, they are well known both in the enclave and outside and are a reference in terms of activism on migration issues and support to migrant and refugee groups. The association was founded in the late 1990s by a group of local citizens that came together with the urge to react to the worrisome situation of the roughly 100 Moroccan children that were living in Melilla’s streets at the time. Its name stands for Pro Childhood Rights (“Pro Derechos de la Infancia” in Spanish), reflecting its origins. Nonetheless, their focus has continuously adapted to the social reality of the city, meaning that their practices and strategies have shifted along with the changing context. As we will see, the movement that Prodein embodies is dynamic in the temporal dimension but also spatially. Its geography moves not only with the routes of the migrants, but also with the birth and death of transborder networks and with the actions carried out beyond the enclave: on the pages of the newspapers, on the streets of Madrid or in the law courts of Brussels. Free of mandates or donors’ impositions yet constrained by the political climate and limited resources, their work holds up through the commitment of its members and the many sympathizers who offer their time and knowledge or their financial support. The structure of the association is characterized by its dynamism and fluidity, as it can transform from being a handful of people to uniting dozens of voices, from taking individual action to merging or collaborating with other initiatives. Their practices are equally heterogeneous and cover a continuous spectrum that goes from acts of open protest to others of aid, assistance and care. In the following, I analyse these different initiatives, interpreting them as specific but interconnected and interdependent facets of citizen resistance that collide with and challenge Melilla’s border regime.

### ***Mobilization against inaction***

The first battle that Prodein fought was to claim the development of a child protection system in Melilla. In 1999, when the organization was founded, the Spanish law for the protection of children had been already approved but was not being implemented in the city. At that time, there were around 100 unaccompanied Moroccan children who, without a place to stay, were sleeping in garbage containers and begging in the streets of the enclave. Confronted with the situation and the passivity of the local government, a group of friends decided to get together and establish an association to fight for the rights of those children. The initiative was well received and gained broad social support, as there was great concern on the issue among citizens in the city. Initially, the local administration persisted in its inaction, claiming that taking action would generate a “pull effect”. From their point of view, providing appropriate reception conditions for unaccompanied minors would encourage more children to come to the enclave. Through determined protests and political pressure, the association achieved the establishment of the child protection centres that are now present in the city.

This first achievement was celebrated at the time but has never been secured and consolidated. Even though the centres are functioning, the living conditions are frequently inadequate and overcrowding and mistreatment are recurrent. Some children are not given access to school or are intentionally left by themselves, without their situation being regularized, so that they can be returned to Morocco when they turn 18. These practices can be regarded as deterrent measures that are operationalized through actions as well as inactions, uncovering how “power can [also] be administered through the deliberate withholding of care” (Davies et al. 2017, p. 1269). The intended institutional abandonment becomes a strategy of political violence that is exerted to particular groups through depriving them of the possibility to improve their condition of vulnerability. This violent inaction connects with the idea of structural violence postulated by Galtung (1969): an institutionalized form of repression that is based on the denial of the necessary means for human beings – in this case, children – to fully realize their somatic and mental potential.

As a consequence of the recurrent neglect, some of the children prefer to escape from the minor centres and live on the streets. Many of them risk their lives trying to get on to the ferries that leave for mainland Spain, where they hope to find a better future. Interestingly, even though the central issue is effectively the same as in the 1990s, the social climate has significantly changed. The local government constantly criminalizes the minors and uses them as scapegoats to blame for all of the city’s problems. This discourse, which is spread through the local media and fed back by xenophobic groups, has deeply penetrated the society and has resulted in a generalized animadversion towards this stigmatized group. The transformation of the society’s perception of the Moroccan street children has led not only to the loss of the local social support that Prodein had in its origins but also to the disapproval of a part of the society towards their work. Consequently,

the association's mechanisms to exert political pressure on this matter and the people composing the movement have been forced to change.

Prodein's members continue to use a method of "naming and shaming" to denounce the brutal abandonment that these children suffer. However, they seek to bring their protests beyond the enclave, build synergies with national and international networks and inform larger organizations, respected institutions such as the Ombudsman's office and the population in general. By disseminating their concerns and denunciations, they have transmuted their spatiality from being specific and localized to diffuse, diverse and cross-border. Similarly, new subjects have jumped in and out of the scene: volunteers that support the activists in the enclave, solidarity networks that bring Melilla's reality closer to mainland Spain, journalists that report on the issue or other citizens and movements with whom Prodein cooperates in new common projects. This fluidity allows the association to have a stronger voice that reaches outside the city and offers its members a temporary break from a very hostile environment.

### ***Assistance as a form of protest***

One of the regular activities that are carried out by the association on an almost daily basis is "*la cena*": a daily supper for the street children served on a small square of the city. The dinner is usually organized by a group of no more than six or seven people at most, who commit to preparing some soup, lentils or boiled eggs one day per week each. Every day, a designated person is responsible to buy the ingredients, with his or her own resources, and cook the meal before the evening. Three or four people bring it and distribute it to the 30 or 40 kids that gather in the square. The group preparing and serving the supper is remarkably heterogeneous, sometimes enlarged by new participants that sporadically join. People taking part range from a couple of teachers, a retired nurse or some temporary volunteers, to a nun, a local police officer or a PhD student conducting field research.

The dinners are not only meant to offer some warm food to these young kids, but also to bring a sense of care and affection to children that are sometimes as young as 8 or 9 years old. Furthermore, they are also an act of protest, a statement against the local government, which is the institution that should be providing adequate care, shelter and education to these children but is intentionally failing to do so. In this sense, *la cena* becomes an everyday act of political resistance in the form of humanitarian practice, an open critic to the neglect of these children by state authorities. However, in the words of Maite Echarte, one of the organizers of the initiative, "The city doesn't like to be criticized". The resulting animosity of the local government towards the association's work has had a high cost on both the movement and its members. The mayor of the city, echoed by the local media, has gone as far as to explicitly call citizens not to give food to street children, arguing that this encourages them to leave the minor's centres (P. Sánchez 2018), a message that can be clearly read as directed against Prodein's initiative. The association

constantly finds further impediments, from bureaucratic obstacles to encounters with the police. Furthermore, some of the association's members have been publicly discredited and subject to different types of retaliation and criminalization, including being accused and fined for defamation, subversive activities and promoting vandalism (Antúnez Álvarez et al. 2016; EuropaPress 2018).

This reality reaffirms Walters's (2011, p. 156) observation that "while the circumstances may vary, the common thread is that the practice of humanitarian intervention is revealed to be contestable" both "in political and media realms" as well as "under law". Indeed, Prodein's case exemplifies that "placing the blame on the rescuers" (Jumbert 2018, p. 119) is not only found in relation to maritime rescues in the Mediterranean, but also regarding citizen pro-migrant initiatives on land. The resulting fear of providing aid or challenging the state's response and management of migration is one of the factors that explains why the number of local people openly engaged in Prodein's initiatives has considerably shrunk since the start of the association, and why most of the support comes from people coming from outside the enclave. In a context like Melilla, where everyone knows each other and almost everything depends on the local administration, being marked as a *persona non grata* is a risk that many cannot or do not want to take.

### ***Articulating migrant voices***

In recent years, Prodein has also worked to defend the right to education of many children born in Melilla but whose families, of Moroccan origin, do not have their situation regularized in the city. The local administration does not allow the children to be registered in Melilla, despite having been born in the city and lived there all their lives, because their families do not have a residence permit. This, in turn, prevents their parents from enrolling their children in school.

During 2018, Prodein mobilized a campaign to claim the right to education of these children. They organized daily demonstrations in front of Melilla's government office, with the children themselves shouting together "we want to go to school". They collected over 100,000 signatures for the cause and brought them to the central government and the public prosecutor's office in Madrid (G. Sánchez 2018). The Ministry of Education eventually agreed to find a solution to school the children, a small victory for Prodein and especially for these 160 children and their families. However, this was not the first time that Prodein had taken action against this education "apartheid" and most probably not the last time, as the situation threatened to happen again the following school year (2019–2020) (Vargas 2019). A similar pattern as the one observed in the case of the child protection centres can be found here. Despite advances in the recognition of basic rights, this progress only lasts as long as there is pressure made on policymakers. As a consequence, the association must be constantly alert and continue advocating for long-term and long-lasting changes. An interesting trait particular to this campaign is that the children and their migrant families were all involved in the protests. This element echoes what Stierl (2019) has categorized as "migratory dissent" in his research on migrant resistance. In the study, he

questions the “unfortunate separation” that in many instances is drawn between migrant movement and political movement. He contests the assumption that “the (citizen) activist’ acts usually on ‘the migrant’s’ behalf”, whereas “[t]he migrant has merely moved into a geographic space that is transformed by the activist, and other constituent actors and forces, into a sphere of politics” (Stierl 2019, p. 6). The central and active role of migrant families in the protests demonstrated how, indeed, they can be active subjects in resisting the process of being “othered”. It also calls into question the “powerlessness” of the subjects of humanitarian government and proves wrong the presumption that their voices have no place in the sphere of politics.

### ***Confronting racialized distinctions***

Some members of the association have also engaged in trying to ameliorate the dire situation that sub-Saharan migrants and refugees face on both sides of the border. Without any possibility to cross the border legally, these migrant groups are stranded on Moroccan soil just outside the enclave. They live in improvised camps, spread out in the nearby woods and on the slopes of Mount Gurugú, a hill that overlooks Melilla from its neighbouring country. In resemblance to the camp in Calais (see e.g. Davies et al. 2017), the migrants and refugees are left abandoned to live informally, exposed to harsh living conditions that severely impact their physical and mental well-being. Furthermore, the camps are frequently raided by the Moroccan military forces and their inhabitants are violently abused and deported to the Algerian border or other deserted areas further south. Migrants and refugees in the camps wait months for their opportunity to take a boat to mainland Spain or be smuggled in a car or truck, risking their lives in the attempt to reach Spanish territory. Those without enough resources to pay smugglers are left to climb the border fences, a similarly dangerous undertaking due to the barbed wire, the sheer height of the fences and the brutality of the Moroccan and Spanish border patrols. The illegal pushback operations that are systematically carried out at the border perimeter complete the dehumanized scenario of Melilla’s border regime, a paradigmatic example of how the European border regime “systematically generates and multiplies the conditions of possibility for mass migrant deaths” (De Genova 2018 p. 1767). In 2004 and 2005 the number of attempts to jump the border fences increased significantly and so did the violence used by both the Moroccan and the Spanish authorities against migrants and refugees, as widely reported by human rights organizations (Davies 2010). During those years, José Palazón and Maite Echarte, together with other friends, used to spend their weekends on Mount Gurugú. They brought bare essentials such as food, medicines or clothes to the hundreds of people who were surviving in the makeshift camps. In Arthus-Bertrand’s documentary #HUMAN (HUMAN la Pelicula 2015), Palazón recalls how the Moroccan police would often accuse them of smuggling illegal goods at the border checkpoint. Palazón would answer saying that it was not contraband but that it was for the poor, to which the Moroccan police would retort, “For the poor, or for the

blacks?” The rhetorical question of the Moroccan police emphasizes the racialized nature of the violence and abandonment to which sub-Saharan migrants and refugees are exposed on both sides of Melilla’s border. Distinguishing between those who are worthy of aid and those who are not worthy also opens up a dispute on who are the subjects that deserve compassion, and on what grounds. As Benton (2016, p. 195, emphasis in original) notes, “Inequalities of various kinds and differential value of lives precede *any* humanitarian encounter (or non-encounter)”. Race, as she further argues, is one of the many social distinctions that play out in humanitarian (in)action and its hierarchies of power. The abandonment and dehumanization process suffered by sub-Saharan people at the Spanish–Moroccan border is certainly racially configured. Yet, these racial hierarchies do not occur in isolation at Melilla’s border but are continuously reproduced in today’s European border regime (De Genova 2018). The refusal to step up aid and rescue efforts in the Mediterranean Sea is just another example of how processes of “othering” facilitate and justify the withdrawal of once recognized rights to certain populations (Jumbert 2018) and articulate a differential valuing of human lives.

Such hierarchies and distinctions clash with the egalitarian notions that ground Prodein’s actions. “I don’t know if they are ‘blacks’, I paid no attention to the colour of their skin. All I know is that they are poor” would be Palazón’s answer to the Moroccan police officer (HUMAN la Pelicula 2015). Prodein’s co-founder further reflects on how these types of distinctions – black/white, Christian/Muslim and so many others – poison human relations. It is precisely these social relationships, more than the material goods that they brought to the people on Mount Gurugú, that defines the essence of Prodein’s work. This resonates with what Rozakou (2017) has coined as “solidarity humanitarianism”, a term that emphasizes lateral and anti-hierarchical relationships that go beyond gift-giving and that contests the humanitarian schemata of “traditional” humanitarian actors.

### ***Documenting a dehumanized regime***

In addition to providing assistance and trying to bring back some humanity to the migrants and refugees living on Mount Gurugú, José and Maite persistently denounced the unbearable situation in which these people were forced to live. They also roundly condemned the police brutality to which they were exposed. The open criticism was never well received by the Moroccan authorities. The pressure on Prodein’s co-founders increased to the point of receiving threats, being followed by Moroccan police officers when crossing the border to Morocco or being held for hours at the border checkpoint when going back to Melilla. After these incidents, they decided to stop working in Morocco. Nonetheless, they kept advocating for the rights of migrants and refugees from the Spanish side and continue to do so today. Armed with his camera, Jose Palazón has been documenting the injustice and systematic rights violations that take place in this border space for over 20 years, which is also his home town. The vast amount of testimonies generated by his daily experiences contribute to the particular pieces

of knowledge that “problematize the border as a site of suffering, violence and death, and a political zone of injustice and oppression” (Walters 2011, p. 150). His documentation practices may take the form of posts on social media, participation in conferences and talks or production and release of videos on Prodein’s Vimeo channel.<sup>2</sup> This shows how Prodein’s heterogeneous practices can take place in physical but also virtual spaces, reemphasizing the idea of its spatial malleability.

The aim of recording the border reality is twofold. First, it is an act of “witnessing”, which, much like the practices of grassroots coalitions at other violent borders (see e.g. Till et al. 2013), seek to inform a geographically disconnected public about the actual tragic reality of this border zone. In this sense, it is a fight against Melilla’s borderland being a “space of non-existence”, understood as a space that “excludes people, limits rights, restricts services and erases personhood” (Coutin 2003, p. 172) and does so by dint of its intrinsic opacity. Thus, the practices seek to uncover a violent border regime that exists, in part, thanks to its invisibility. Second, the practice of documenting the humanitarian border also serves to compile a record of the numerous ways in which Melilla’s border regime is denying certain rights and violating certain norms of treatment that are recognized and even legally encoded (Walters 2011). This can be used not only for informative purposes but also to bring to justice those responsible for such violations and abuses. The judgement case *N.D. and N.T. v Spain* published by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in October 2017 provides an important example. In its judgement, the ECHR declared Spanish police “pushbacks” to be illegal. The court based its ruling on the fact that during the pushback process the potential refugees were handed over to the Moroccan military without checking their identity and age, without considering possible grounds for asylum and the circumstances they were being returned to and without offering the possibility to challenge their expulsion (Moya 2017). One of Prodein’s videos (Asociación Pro.De.In. Melilla 2014) was used as evidence to document the Spanish police border practices before the court. This particular case shows the relevance of citizens witnessing practices and reflects the major impact that they can have.<sup>3</sup>

## **Conclusions**

The city of Melilla proves to be a space of great sociopolitical complexity. Security mandates of migration control intertwine with contestations over the violent border regime and manifestations of compassion and solidarity towards migrants and refugees. As seen in this research, the latter two are carried out not only by traditional humanitarian actors but also by volunteers and activists that remain outside the traditional geographies of humanitarianism. The study of the heterogeneous practices and rationalities of citizen initiatives in Melilla helps to shed light on how they contribute to configuring this border space as a humanitarian border.

Despite the existence of commonalities, it is possible to distinguish various elements that differentiate citizen-led actions from those carried out by more established humanitarian actors. In contrast to many large humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and governmental agencies, Prodein's initiatives opt to stay "outside the institutional matrix of the contemporary border regime" (Walters 2011, p. 155) by refusing to receive state funding and maintaining total independence from state authorities. This feature allows people involved in the initiatives to be openly critical with the border practices and place them under continued scrutiny. Furthermore, despite being configured as an association, Prodein's nature embraces a changing and flexible structure that moves away from the rigid conception of a well-defined organization and provides its members and sympathizers greater agency. However, the association is also faced with drawbacks and limitations. On the one hand, their confrontational approaches breed the animosity of the local government, which results in the systematic hampering and criminalization of their activities. On the other hand, the lack of a solid membership scheme makes the initiatives heavily dependent on volunteers and social support that cannot always be taken for granted. These downsides force Prodein to renegotiate its temporality, spatiality and partnerships, boosting the dynamism and malleability that are intrinsic to citizen movements.

The initiatives also move away from Redfield's idea of "minimalist biopolitics", understood as "the temporary administration of survival" (Redfield 2005, p. 344), which tends to govern humanitarian interventions. In Redfield's opinion, (medical) humanitarian action strives to preserve existence, but it does so at the possible expense of prioritizing "life at any cost" over "life with dignity". However, Prodein's practices and motivations contest the perpetuation of such a "state of survival". They reject the cruelty of being left to live a "bare life" (Agamben 1998), a form of life reduced to mere existence, with no guarantees on the quality of the life lived. Their struggle is aimed at restoring the rights and dignity to those considered humanitarian subjects while the preservation of life becomes a prerequisite – and not a goal – for this. Their actions can be thus seen as based on ideals of social justice rather than built around the moral duty to alleviate human suffering.

Finally, one last interesting point of discussion originates from reflecting on how Barnett's (2011) idea of helping "distant strangers", conceived as a fundamental feature of dominant humanitarian practices, translates into Melilla's context and citizen practices. As noted by Pallister-Wilkins (2018a), the so-called "refugee crisis" in Europe has unsettled the traditional humanitarian *modus operandi* in the sense that the "strangers" are no longer distant, at least not geographically. Yet, in the humanitarian imaginary, "distance" is not only geographic but also defined by the separation between the "self" and the "other". The humanitarian subject, observed under this lens, is constructed "as a victim with needs rather than a person with full subjecthood" (Pallister-Wilkins 2018a, p. 8). Prodein's practices challenge this idea. They not only contest the social distance imposed between humanitarian actor and humanitarian subject but also question the divide itself. Acts such as *la cena* or the

visits to Mount Gurugú aim to narrow this distance by offering care and a sense of belonging to those that have been “othered”. Furthermore, migrant resistance, exemplified by the mobilization campaigns for school enrolment, demonstrates that those who are the subjects of political abuses can also have a political voice to challenge their marginalization and exclusion.

The citizen initiatives that have been presented here are only a small sample of citizen movements that continue to unfold in Europe, and throughout the world, as manifestations of solidarity towards migrant struggles. They constitute an assemblage of citizen practices, an organic unity formed by elements that can be “added, subtracted and recombined with one another” (Nail 2017, p. 23). Together, they give rise to what can be termed “activist humanitarianism”, a form of citizen humanitarianism that aims to bring about social change through denunciation, resistance, aid and solidarity. As seen in this study, activist humanitarianism is characterized by the great variety and spatial fluidity of its practices, as well as by the malleable structure and membership scheme of the groups that embody it. It is precisely this dynamic nature that lends it the strength to transform, adapt and re-emerge in changing and challenging contexts. Thanks to their versatility, these citizen movements are able to contest the violence of contemporary border regimes and to provide help to migrants and refugees where governments and traditional humanitarian organizations fail to do so. Yet, while they challenge the hierarchies that are often present in humanitarian biopolitics, they remain confined within the humanitarian borderscape. Thus, they become intrinsic elements of the border’s humanitarian government and fundamental in understanding the shifting geographies of migrant struggles and refugee aid.

## Notes

- 1 The field research also led to the photographic exhibition “Borderline Melilla”, organized together with the photographer Bastian Bernarding at the University of Deusto (Bilbao) in July 2019. It can be visited at <https://borderlinemelilla.com>.
- 2 Asociación Pro.De.In. Melilla, see <https://vimeo.com/user12822802>.
- 3 The ruling was revoked by the Grand Chamber of the ECHR in February 2020, arguing that the two potential refugees should have followed the official entry procedures to enter Spanish territory lawfully and thus their expulsion was a consequence of their own conduct (ECHR 2020). The ruling clearly ignored the fact that sub-Saharan people are systematically and often violently prevented from approaching the Spanish–Moroccan border crossing and therefore have little to no chance to use the legal procedures to enter Melilla lawfully. For a critical review on the ruling, see Bernarding 2020.

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## 6 A more subversive humanitarianism?

The political strategies of grassroots initiatives supporting illegalized migrants

*Robin Vandevoordt*

### **Introduction**

Since 2017, the federal Belgian government has intensified its attempts to arrest, detain and deport illegalized migrants, as well as to discourage those that cannot be deported from settling permanently.<sup>1</sup> Several grassroots initiatives, however, continue to offer humanitarian support to migrants irrespective of their legal status and, in different ways, try to hold the state accountable. In this chapter I draw on ongoing ethnographic work with three of Belgium's largest such initiatives to describe their key political strategies – understood as actions to change the policies and practices of a variety of state actors. First, the BXLRefugees Citizen Platform for the Support of Refugees (Plateforme Citoyenne de Soutien aux Réfugiés) has mobilized the broader public through humanitarian sentiments of compassion and indignation, and uses its popular support to criticize individual members of government for failing to live up to humanist ideals. Second, Humain (vzwHumain), has relied on a small group of highly trained volunteers to advocate policy changes through existing legal frameworks. And third, the Welcoming Network (Gastvrij Netwerk) has tried to tackle structural barriers to migrants' inclusion by engaging in dialogue and cooperation with local state actors.

In spite of their different political strategies, I argue that these three grassroots initiatives share two properties that distinguish them from other organizations working in humanitarian settings. First, they enact a particularist solidarity with a specific group of migrants, which contrasts with the universalist reason implicit in more politically prudent humanitarian action. Second, these civil actors use their humanitarian support to maintain a continuous presence in the field, which shapes and feeds their political strategies. This distinguishes them from both professional advocacy non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and from more openly political pro-migrant movements. Civil actors combining these two characteristics, I argue, can be usefully conceptualized as enacting a “subversive” form of humanitarianism – a concept I have developed more systematically elsewhere (Vandevoordt 2019b; Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019b), building on a body of work emphasizing the political ambivalence of grassroots humanitarian action (Della Porta and Steinhilper 2020; Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020; Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019a). In the remainder of this chapter, I will briefly sketch

the rise of Europe's "humanitarian borders" (Walters 2011), before describing the political strategies of these three initiatives in the period of January 2017 to July 2019.

### **Resistance at the humanitarian border**

In border studies, it has become a commonplace that borders should not be conceived of as fixed lines marking national territories, but as sites where states try to enact their sovereignty by enforcing a distinction between national and foreign subjects (Balibar 2002). These distinctions can be imposed both within and outside of national territories (e.g. European border practices in Brussels and in Libya) (Menjívar 2014). From this perspective, the in/formal camps that arose in Calais, Paris and Brussels over the last few years, can be thought of as contentious borderlands in which states display their power to decide who is allowed in or forced to leave (De Genova 2013). In the last decade or so, European states have tried to make it harder for migrants to stay on these sites without the required legal status. As a result, these borderlands have increasingly turned into sites of protracted humanitarian crisis.

In a similar attempt to deter migrants from staying on its territory without legal residence status, the federal Belgian government has targeted two subgroups of illegalized migrants: so-called "transit migrants" who are trying to reach the UK (cf. Collyer 2010) and rejected asylum seekers. The former became a "problem" to the state in the summer of 2017, when a group of around 600 migrants were stranded in parks and train stations in Brussels, waiting for a "chance" to board a lorry and cross the channel. According to research reports, the majority cannot or do not want to apply for asylum in Belgium for a variety of reasons: some have already filed an application or had their fingerprints taken elsewhere in Europe, while others have family members or hope to find better employment prospects in the UK (Jaspars and Buchanan-Smith 2018; Refugee Rights Europe 2018; Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen 2019). Government members of different political parties have argued that these so-called "transit migrants" should either apply for asylum or leave the national territory (Vandevooort 2020b). Accordingly, the federal police has conducted raids in public places where migrants are staying, such as parks and train stations, and in places where they are trying to board lorries, like highway parking lots. When arrested, most migrants are briefly detained and then released back on to the streets, as most cannot be immediately deported (see Ellermann 2009).

In addition, the federal Belgium government has increased its efforts to control and dissuade *rejected asylum seekers* from staying on the national territory. Like other west-European states, (Engbersen and Broeders 2009; Ellermann 2009) the federal Belgian government has gradually limited illegalized migrants' access to basic social institutions such as work, education and housing (van Meeteren 2014). In March 2018 the federal government installed a further series of legal changes that make it easier to control and detain rejected asylum seekers. Most importantly, it broadened the legal basis to administratively detain migrants for up to 18 months

whenever they are thought to pose a risk of disappearing (Agentschap Inburgering en Integratie 2018). However, as the state is unable to effectively deport most detained migrants, the underlying goal of administrative detention seems to be *detering* migrants from staying on the territory without legal documents, rather than effectuating their deportation (see Kalir 2017; Leerkes and Broeders 2010).

To apprehend this situation, the notion of “humanitarian borders” was developed by scholars working mostly on Europe’s southern physical borders (Pallister-Wilkins 2016; Walters 2011). In and around the Mediterranean Sea, they argue, European governments have gradually closed off migration routes, both by intensifying patrols at sea and by outsourcing preventive controls to countries from where migrants try to reach Europe. This forces migrants to take more dangerous routes and makes border crossing “a matter of life and death” (Walters 2011, p. 137), which incites a range of non-state and state actors to organize rescue operations at sea. In some cases, border control and humanitarian support are even conjoined in one swift move, as migrants rescued at sea are immediately detained or sent back to their country of departure (Pallister-Wilkins 2016; Walters 2011).

As Walters (2011) has argued, however, humanitarian borders are deeply contentious. Over the last few years, grassroots initiatives have engaged in humanitarian actions that are subversive both *politically*, with respect to states’ attempts to guard their sovereignty by imposing borders, and *socially*, with respect to how (professional) humanitarians usually operate. Elsewhere, I have developed the notion of “subversive humanitarianism” to explore these differences more systematically (Vandevoordt 2019b; Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019b). In this chapter, I provide a more focused, empirical description of three grassroots initiatives in Belgium. These civil actors see themselves as working towards two goals: to provide humanitarian support to migrants and to induce legal-political changes in order to address the causes of their needs. In spite of their differences, I argue that they share two characteristics that distinguish them from most professional NGOs, government agencies and political movements: they enact a particularist solidarity and their humanitarian work constantly feeds and shapes their political actions.

First, these grassroots initiatives enact a *particularistic sense of solidarity* that can be distinguished from the universalistic reason driving professional humanitarian action (Vandevoordt 2019b). As the paradigmatic case of the Red Cross suggests, the principle of neutrality (not taking sides) helps to maintain the organization’s moral legitimacy in the face of international law and sovereign nation states. Because the Red Cross does not overtly criticize nation states or side with particular groups (e.g. they principally do not distinguish between terrorists, soldiers or civilian victims of a conflict when providing medical support), it can provide help whenever it thinks necessary. This implies a universalist reasoning: the Red Cross aids anyone in need, irrespective of who they are and who caused their suffering. In this logic, humanitarian action is placed outside the political realm and addresses universal human needs.

Subversive humanitarian actions, by contrast, require actors to take sides with those who they believe are harmed or wronged the most. Support goes to those who receive the least, and the actors inflicting injustice upon them are publicly held accountable. Across Europe, several grassroots initiatives have continued to support migrants, even when their governments design policies to discourage migrants from illicitly staying on their national territories. At least initially, many civil actors supporting migrants did not portray themselves as political, but rather as humanitarian or simply as “human” actors (Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017; McGee and Pelham 2018; Sandri 2018). Yet as they became aware of how these humanitarian crises are co-produced by these policies, they have become increasingly vocal in their criticism. As a result, they gradually began to provide maximal, more encompassing support to specific groups of migrants that were targeted by these policies (including legal, social and political support) (Vandevooordt 2019b), instead of offering minimal, bio-political services to anyone in need (e.g. purely medical aid to asylum seekers, recognized refugees and rejected asylum seekers, and/or shelter to homeless persons and established illegalized migrants) (Redfield 2005).

Second, the strategies of these civil initiatives to induce legal and political change are *shaped by their everyday humanitarian work*. In practice, their humanitarian work comes first, in response to which they take political action to address its causes. This is not as evident as it seems. On the one hand, grassroots initiatives supporting migrants have mostly been analysed as either radical social movements advocating No Borders in the case of newly arriving immigrants (Ataç et al. 2016; Della Porta 2018) or as pro-regularization movements in the case of established illegalized immigrants (Chimienti 2011; Nicholls 2013). These initiatives are then portrayed as primarily political actors who, due to a perpetuated state of crisis, find themselves forced to offer humanitarian aid. On the other hand, rights-based NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Refugee Rights Europe have produced numerous reports on the human consequences of Europe’s politics of exhaustion. Their work is oriented primarily towards advocacy or lobbying, and occasionally includes field visits to border sites, often in response to calls of grassroots initiatives. When visiting the field, these NGOs focus almost exclusively on conducting project-based research to document human rights violations.

The three initiatives I discuss here, however, provide humanitarian support, and *then* take action to address the causes of these human needs (cf. Redfield 2006). This, I believe, brings them closer to a thoroughly politicized variant of humanitarian action (cf. Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020; Schwiertz and Steinhilper 2020; Sinatti 2019; Stierl 2018a, 2018b; Vandevooordt and Fleischmann 2020) that is more in line with professional organizations like Médecins du Monde, Médecins Sans Frontières or Oxfam International than to social movements or human rights NGOs, who often have an uncomfortable disposition to providing help (see Rozakou 2016). In that sense, they can be conceived as subversive humanitarian actors whose political strategies are shaped by their humanitarian work. In the following sections, I describe how three Belgian initiatives have developed such political strategies, each in their own way.

## **The Citizen Platform for the Support of Refugees**

The Citizen Platform emerged in the summer of migration of 2015 when federal government agencies struggled to arrange accommodation for newly arriving refugees. As thousands of people flocked to Maximilian Park to provide all kinds of support, a makeshift camp emerged in front of the immigration office where refugees could submit their asylum applications. By early September, a group of citizens united themselves in the Citizen Platform to coordinate their actions and align them with the needs of refugees. From the very beginning, the Platform thus thrived on the mobilization of a diverse group of volunteers that was driven by two humanitarian sentiments (Boltanski 1999): compassion for refugees and indignation with the lack of adequate response by government agencies.

The same dynamic emerged in a more contentious way in August 2017. Due to the destruction of informal shelters in Calais, Dunkirk and Paris, a growing group of around 600 persons got “stranded” in Brussels as they were trying to reach the UK (cf. Collyer 2010). As the Platform’s volunteers saw there were several minors and single women among them, a small group of up to 12 volunteers decided to take a radical decision: they offered them a bed for the night, in their own homes (Vandevoordt 2020a, 2020b). Throughout this period, the federal police conducted raids in and around Maximilian Park. After one of those raids, State Secretary of Asylum and Migration Theo Francken boasted that 13 “transit migrants” had been arrested and the park was being “#CleanedUp”. This sparked a small controversy in the media and, more importantly, led an estimated 300 volunteers to start hosting migrants in their own homes (Vandevoordt 2020a, 2020b).

In the next few months similar controversies emerged around State Secretary Francken, which, according to the Platform’s coordinators, brought more and more volunteers to the Platform. As winter approached, the Platform lobbied with different governments – some of the 19 municipalities in Brussels, the governments of the regions of Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia and the federal government – to create a collective reception centre, where illegalized migrants could find shelter and receive adequate legal information on asylum procedures and the Dublin agreements. While the Platform did not convince these governments to establish such a centre, they did secure enough material and financial support from some of the municipalities in Brussels and the region of Brussels to open such a centre themselves. With their temporary funding, a team of 12 long-term volunteers was employed to coordinate the volunteers working shifts in the so-called Porte d’Ulysse. In December, the Platform was able to shelter 80 persons per night, which was increased to 350 beds a few months later (Vandevoordt 2020a).

The same dynamics thus continued to characterize the Citizen Platform: its coordinators mobilized the broader public to respond to both migrants’ needs and police actions coordinated by the federal government. By offering humanitarian support in spite of government policies attempting to deter illegalized migrants, the Platform and its volunteers enacted a particularistic form of

solidarity: it sided with this specific group of so-called “transit migrants”, precisely because they were wronged the most by the state. Over time, the Platform increasingly tailored their efforts to this particular group by offering legal information (focused on the Dublin regulations, rights for unaccompanied minors and the conditions for applying for asylum in Belgium), and several ad hoc humanitarian needs such as shelter, food, clothes and medicine. This meant that the Platform gradually shifted its focus away from supporting other groups such as established illegalized migrants with different material needs (e.g. long-term housing) and political demands (e.g. regularization) (see Depraetere and Oosterlynck 2017). Similarly, the Platform began to focus less on supporting asylum seekers and recognized refugees, as they too have different needs, and, in addition, more easily attract assistance from NGOs and government agencies.

Central to the Platform’s political strategies has been its ability to mobilize a large and varied pool of volunteers. The Platform’s closed Facebook groups include approximately 40,000 members, out of which every week up to 70 volunteers take shifts in the Platform’s collective shelter and the humanitarian hub, and in collecting clothes, raising funds and organizing leisure activities. Its coordinators estimate that around 6,000 persons have hosted migrants in their homes at least once. This has armed the Platform with thousands of members that can be quickly mobilized in case of emergency and to take immediate action to obstruct police raids. In January 2018, for instance, it received tips from within the police forces that a new raid was about to take place in and around Maximilian Park. In response, the Platform mobilized its members to warn off migrants. When the police arrived, all they found was a human chain of more than 2,000 people silently expressing their solidarity (Vandevooordt 2019b). Over the next months, the Platform continued to receive tips on pending raids, which incited the Platform to organize “counter-marauds” to evacuate Maximilian Park and the Brussels-North train station. This demonstrates I believe, the political strategy that still forms the core of the Platform’s work: offering humanitarian support to migrants as a publicly visible act of civil disobedience.

At the same time, the Platform’s coordinators have been vocal in criticizing Belgian state actors. Two points form a key thread throughout their criticism: citizens have taken more effective action than their governments in supporting migrants, and citizens have embodied values of humanity better than those governments. Both arguments imply a humanitarian critique of European migration policies. In public posts, press releases, open letters and public speeches, the Platform’s coordinators have framed migrants’ living conditions as a moral scandal for which the state is held responsible. Instead, they have pointed out, ordinary citizens go out of their way to offer some very basic services that allow migrants to live in dignity. I think it is in this sense that one of the Platform’s key slogans should be understood: “Faced with government immobility, the citizen movement!” (*Face a l’immobilité gouvernementale, le mouvement citoyen!*). While the state is failing or refusing to address a humanitarian crisis at the heart of the European Union (EU), citizens are taking pragmatic action in their place.

To sum up, I argue that the Platform's ability to mobilize among a large and varied pool of volunteers has enabled it to develop two closely related political strategies. First, the Platform has been able to *publicly criticize* the federal government and its police forces by contrasting their inhumane and ineffective policies with the opposite approach of citizens. Most often this criticism is expressed through acts of civil disobedience in which citizens perform their solidarity with migrants – as with the human chain they formed in response to a police raid. In their public discourses, its coordinators have framed the Platform as a popular, rather than an ideological or radical political movement. In Facebook posts and media interviews, for instance, its coordinators have emphasized the demographic (including young and old members), social (including rich and poor), ethnic (people with and without migration backgrounds), religious and political diversity among volunteers hosting migrants in their homes.

Second, partly due to its ability to mobilize so many people, the Platform has received favourable attention by the Francophone media, and received several prizes for their work. Again, the fact that the Citizen Platform is not an openly political protest movement calling for a total subversion of the European migration regime, but instead centres on the inhumane effects of specific policies in the here and now, has enabled them to negotiate support from other (more local) state actors. This, in turn, has enabled them to take more structural action on the ground: their first and foremost policy demand has been the creation of a centre where migrants could find shelter and adequate legal information.

## **Humain**

Compared to the Citizen Platform, Humain is a smaller civil initiative whose main political strategy consists of public advocacy work. It emerged in the fall of 2015 when a handful of people who had been collecting and distributing donations to Dunkirk, decided to “shift the scale” of their actions. Since then, Humain has organized regular trips to offer a range of humanitarian services and leisure activities for children and youths. Drawing on its frequent presence, however, Humain has documented cases of police violence and negligence in order to submit official complaints, and it has tried to inform both political actors and the broader public about possible courses of action.

In contrast to the Citizen Platform, Humain relies on a small group of around 40 well-trained volunteers that undergo a lengthy preparation process. Volunteers are divided into two large groups: a humanitarian team venturing into the field and a policy and media team producing content for journalists, politicians and lawyers. When the humanitarian team travels towards the field, it is divided into separate sub-teams preparing and distributing warm meals, bringing electricity generators, setting up mobile showers or hair-washing installations or organizing leisure activities for children and youths. After a careful briefing, a separate team of outreachers carry backpacks stuffed with food and medicine to people who have settled deeper into the forests or meadows and can't make it to the food distribution site. This group also writes internal reports on the general living

conditions in the field, the needs of particular groups (e.g. minors, pregnant women) and indications of police violence.

The policy and media team reads reports by NGOs, think tanks and government agencies, follows up on European policy evolutions and writes notes for political actors. When they receive questions from journalists, they delve into the field notes of their outreachers and their professional networks and examine pathways for legal and political action. Evidently, doing so requires not only an investment of time and energy, but also a particular set of professional skills.

This way of working has resulted in two political strategies: monitoring and reporting human rights violations and informing the broader public. First, politicians, journalists and lawyers regularly request information for parliamentary debates, newspaper articles or research reports. When Humain receives such a request, it invites these actors to join them on one of their visits, after which it provides them with a “package” of information that emphasizes rights violations and suggests concrete paths of action. According to one of Humain’s coordinators, inviting politicians, journalists and lawyers to these border sites is crucial because “you cannot really talk about all this and understand it if you haven’t seen it yourself”. This way, Humain uses its regular presence in the field both to inform their advocacy work and to stimulate other actors to take appropriate action.

Compared to the Citizen Platform, Humain applies a sparser (political) communication strategy targeted to specific types of rights violations. On one of its visits to Grande-Synthe, for instance, Humain found out that several unaccompanied minors had been detained and released by Belgian police forces. This is a basic violation of their rights, as Belgian police officers have a legal obligation to report unaccompanied minors to official care agencies, who can then arrange, if the minor desires this, additional legal and psycho-social support. By collaborating closely with other organizations in Grande-Synthe and Calais, Humain was able to document some minors’ stories and gather evidence that the police had failed to declare them as minors and instead had released them back on the streets. These acts of negligence were then included in a formal complaint against police behaviour, and it was widely covered in the media due to Humain’s targeted communication strategy. This, the coordinators hoped, would pressure police officers to change how they would deal with unaccompanied minors in the future.

In some cases, these attempts to monitor and report have fed into more concrete administrative actions. In 2017, Humain’s volunteers picked up more and more complaints about police violence at several sites in Grande-Synthe, Brussels and Zeebrugge. At the same time, Myria, an independent federal agency protecting migrants’ rights, had submitted a formal complaint with Committee P, an independent government agency that examines complaints about police misconduct. Together with Doctors of the World (2018), Humain was able to share its experiences with Committee P in a formal meeting. In order to substantiate the complaint, Humain reached out to academics specialized in crime data collection, to adapt a methodology for collecting witness accounts of police violence. This methodology was then used by Humain on its visits to Grande-Synthe, while Doctors of the World did the same in Brussels.

While the outcome had little success – Committee P conducted its own investigation and claimed that there was no evidence of systematic, disproportional police violence being used – Humain carried this strategy further. It trained some of its volunteers in using the data collection method to collect witness statements on its field trips and it has presented the method and its results to different local municipalities and their police stations.

Irrespective of its modest success, this course of events actions shows how Humain tries to induce legal and political change: it draws on existing legal procedures and institutions to protect migrants' rights. More precisely, Humain has tried to change how state actors like the police operate on the ground. These strategies led Humain to focus on specific groups of migrants: those whose rights are violated and whose cases might lead to a formal complaint and an actual change in police behaviour. This focus is partly why Humain has contemplated targeting its efforts more decisively towards (unaccompanied) minors: this is a particularly vulnerable group whose more extensive rights make them more easily defensible before the law. In addition, this feeds into specific types of leisure activities and services tailored to youths (i.e. involving specific legal information on their protected status). This is what I understand to be a particularist form of solidarity: tailoring their efforts to a specific group who they believe are wronged the most.

This brings us to a second way in which Humain has tried to induce broader political changes: by sensitizing the broader public. Apart from social media posts and fundraising campaigns, Humain has trained some of its volunteers to present their work to secondary schools and university students and a wide range of civic associations. While the Citizen Platform directly criticizes individual politicians or governments, Humain constructs a counter-narrative on so-called “transit migrants”. Rather than publicly accusing responsible politicians, Humain tells the story of what is “really” happening in places like Grande-Synthe and what they believe can and should be done. As one of its coordinators explained to me:

When I present our work in schools, you notice that you can bring your story, which is not left or right, it's objective. I show images that I have seen in Calais, Dunkirk, Zeebrugge or Brussels. And I don't judge. It shows how people survive there, today, in those places. And irrespective of what the reason of their flight is, I show them that that actually doesn't matter. People don't flee without a reason. If you ask people in Calais or Dunkirk where they would like to be, most would like to be home, in their country.

Their main aim is not so much to mobilize the public through personal stories that evoke sentiments of compassion or indignation, but rather to nuance and inform. “So, for example,” the coordinator continued,

people always think that everyone there wants to go the UK. But then I ask, is that really the case? About half of the 10,000 people in Calais [in 2015] have applied for asylum in France. Many of them are learning French. And

those that still want to go the UK, you can ask why is it that they still want to go there? And what role do human smugglers play in that decision? I mean, most of them don't arrive in Europe with the idea of going to the UK. So why is that? And then we start explaining the things we see and hear.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on its regular presence in these places, Humain tries to give the public “a correct and nuanced image of what is going on. And then it's up to the people to judge for themselves” (Ip9). This approach brings them closer to the universalist reasoning commonly associated with humanitarianism, due to its de-politicized emphasis on neutrality and the law. Yet whereas humanitarian action traditionally emphasizes loyalty to (inter)national law and refrains from publicly criticizing governments, Humain takes up a proactive role in substantiating complaints against state actors, via existing legal avenues, and in telling the stories they encounter. In this sense Humain's approach bears close resemblance to what Schwiertz and Steinhilper (2020, p. 2) have recently described as “strategic humanitarianism”, in “which actors combine the strategic employment of predominantly depoliticizing, narrow and humanitarian framing with a contentious repertoire of action”. As they argue, this also entails sacrificing a “deep” politicization of fundamental critique against contemporary migration regimes in order to achieve a “wide” politicization and broad consensus for progressive social change. In doing so, Humain focuses on a particular group, partly based on the legal opportunities they find to file such complaints: migrants subject to disproportional police violence, unaccompanied minors and youths more generally.

### **The Welcoming Network**

The Welcoming Network unites 40 local volunteer groups across the region of Flanders, who support “people on the run” – the term they use to disconnect forced migrants from their strict legal status. These local groups spend most of their time facilitating recognized refugees' social inclusion: they help them find housing, arrange translation on visits to doctors or solicitors, pair migrants with buddies to help navigate the bureaucratic fields in Flanders, support children in doing their homework and organize sociocultural events to bring them in touch with locals. Increasingly, however, due to the state's policies to limit illegalized migrants' access to social services (van Meeteren 2014), these volunteer groups have become one of the last sources of informal support to asylum seekers whose applications have been rejected.

Most of the Network's member groups were kick-started in late 2015 and early 2016 by someone who called together local meeting of citizens engaged in Belgium's densely populated field of civic associations. Their overall strategy is characteristic of the corporatist-democratic approach that has long been central to how these civic associations work: rather than providing ad hoc humanitarian assistance, they try to *cooperate* with NGOs and state actors and to work *structurally* to dismantle barriers to social inclusion, rather than providing ad hoc humanitarian assistance (Vandevoordt 2019a).

The success of this strategy strongly depends on the local context. In some municipalities, the Network's members have developed fruitful working relations with the local state, mostly through the latter's social services and social workers. In joint meetings, member groups try to "signal" problems with respect to issues like housing, family reunification, work, education or hidden barriers to civic participation. They often suggest practical solutions, knowing that some volunteers are more experienced in supporting migrants than local municipalities. When all goes according to plan, social workers follow up on some of these signals and plea with their municipalities for ad hoc or more structural measures.

In a rising number of cases, however, the Network's member initiatives are wound up in strenuous or even hostile relations with local state actors. This is partly due to the growing dominance of the N-VA, an anti-immigrant, neoliberal political party that aims to replace Belgium's horizontal model of corporatist civil-state cooperation with a hierarchical model in which the government sub-contracts executive assignments to civil and private partners that subscribe to its policy visions (Vandevoordt 2019a). As the N-VA is the largest party in most Flemish municipalities, many social services now ignore volunteers' concerns, refuse to meet with them in formal meetings or publicly criticize them for "pampering" refugees. In spite of such strenuous relations, most of the Network's local groups still prefer dialogue over conflict: they have continued to write public memoranda on structural barriers to inclusion, and they have continued to invite members of local administration and different political parties to meetings.

In addressing these structural barriers, these member groups have tended to shift their focus to migrants' changing challenges. Over time, many member groups have focused their efforts on finding housing, which is one of the most pertinent problems refugees and their families are faced with. This is due to a structural shortage of affordable rental properties on the Belgian housing market, which is exacerbated by discrimination based on ethnicity, religion and/or income (many landlords and agencies refuse to let to someone dependent on benefits). A large group of refugees therefore end up living with friends and family in small studios or flats, paying high rents for substandard quality housing, or simply living on the street (Saeys et al. 2018).

In response, many local volunteer groups have launched buddy systems or housing cafes, in which volunteers and refugees jointly search for properties and contact landlords. They have also tried to act as brokers on the housing market by setting up networks with church communities, state actors and individual landlords. However, due to the structural lack of affordable housing on the market and the widespread presence of discrimination, refugees and volunteers still struggle to find housing. In response, some of the Network's members have therefore begun renting and letting accommodation themselves, while two have even established a cooperative that buys and lets properties and uses its volunteers to handle the entire process.

Within this increasingly hostile context, the Welcoming Network has tried to take up a role as an umbrella organization supporting local volunteer groups. It has called together general board meetings in which representatives of local

groups discuss common challenges and solutions. And it has organized network events and workshops, which have resulted in an elaborate toolkit for volunteers that contains tips and tricks on finding housing, dealing with legal issues and working with local state actors. The Welcoming Network also tries to signal local groups' concerns on structural issues like housing, family reunification and illegalized migrants to larger, professional NGOs like Refugee Action Flanders and Orbit. These in turn translate these grassroots signals into policy recommendations, advocacy work and public campaigns to change Flemish, federal and European policies.

The currently hostile political climate, however, has made it more difficult for civic associations both to cooperate with state actors and to address social issues structurally. As one of the local groups' leading figures told me: "It's impossible to solve a housing crisis as long as the government doesn't want to solve it. We can call around for houses as much as you want, but if there aren't enough houses, then it just has to stop somewhere." And yet, as a whole, local groups are still relatively able to find solutions for recognized refugees, partly because they continue to find other actors willing to support them. When it comes to illegalized migrants, however, many local groups have been forced to limit their support to ad hoc actions. This includes basic humanitarian services such as offering shelter, clothes and access to health care, as well as helping schoolgoing children in secondary school and providing legal support to submit claims for regularization.

In sum, the Welcoming Network's political strategies are centred around cooperating with a variety of state and non-state actors to address structural barriers to social inclusion. In spite of the difficult political climate, they continue to engage in dialogue with any actor prepared to take their concern on board. Through this dialogic approach, these member initiatives try to wring open migrants' access to housing, education, work and legal information. In this rather limited sense, the Network also displays a particularist form of solidarity, as it continues to side with migrants and refuses to be simply co-opted by the state. Instead, the Network and its members insist on their autonomy to support people on the run, irrespective of their legal status, and to respond to their changing needs and signal structural barriers to inclusion to more powerful political actors.

## **Conclusion**

Since the 1990s, European governments have gradually intensified their attempts to deter migrants from staying on their territories without legal residence documents. For some time illegalized migrants have been denied access to basic social services and subjected to a constant fear of deportation. Recently, some states have deepened this development by practising a "politics of exhaustion": by dismantling makeshift shelters, continuously detaining and releasing migrants and by criminalizing those who offer support. As a result, humanitarian borders have been created across the European continent, not only at its southern borders.

As several scholars have indicated, however, these humanitarian borders are also deeply contentious sites that open up space for resistance (Stierl 2018a,

2018b; Walters 2011; Zamponi 2018). In this chapter I have described the political strategies of three grassroots initiatives that have not only continued to offer humanitarian support to illegalized migrants, but also tried to induce legal and political changes to migrants' benefit. The Citizen Platform has mobilized a diverse group of volunteers by articulating sentiments of compassion and indignation, which allowed them to publicly criticize the federal government for its lack of effective and humane action. Humain has drawn on a small group of volunteers monitoring human rights violations, to pressure state actors into changing their practices on the ground. And the Welcoming Network has continued to invest in cooperation with local (state) actors, in order to dismantle structural barriers to migrants' social inclusion.

Despite their differences, these initiatives share two features. On the one hand, they enact a *particularist form of solidarity of siding with groups they believe are wronged the most*. They focus their efforts on these groups and move beyond offering minimalist humanitarian services by tailoring a range of legal, social and political forms of support to a particular group of migrants. This leads them to voice criticism and concern to state actors. Second, *their political strategies are deeply shaped by their daily humanitarian work*. Rather than emanating from broader ideological programmes, their strategies emerge as an attempt to tackle the causes of the humanitarian crisis migrants are faced with, here and now. As a result, the grassroots initiatives discussed in this chapter can be thought of as socially subversive actors whose political strategies are shaped by their humanitarian work.

## Notes

- 1 I use the term “illegalized” rather than undocumented or irregular migrants to indicate that illegality is produced by a series of laws, policies and practices, rather than a natural state of personal characteristics (cf. Bauder 2014).
- 2 This corroborates findings from NGO reports, see Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen 2019.

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## 7 Beyond borders

### Transnational turn of Russian refugee aid

*Johanne Kalsaas*

#### **From Chechnya to Poland: Russian transnational refugee aid at a glimpse**

On a cold December day in 2018, the main spokesperson for refugees in Russia and head of the country's main citizen-led initiative for refugee aid, Svetlana Gannushkina of the Civic Assistance Committee, stands alone in front of the Polish embassy in Moscow. She carries a poster that says in Polish: "Deportation means handing someone over to their executioners". Her solo picket demonstration is in support of Tumso Abdurakhmanov (Civil Rights Centre Memorial 2018), a young Chechen dissident blogger who has sought asylum in Poland following death threats from the Putin-backed regime in the conflict-ridden southern borderlands of the Russian federation. Polish authorities want to deport Abdurakhmanov back to Russia, claiming that the federation is a safe place for refugees. At their end, Gannushkina and colleagues argue that if returned, Abdurakhmanov will face the threat of political persecution, fabricated criminal cases, torture and even extrajudicial execution – by extension making the European Union (EU) member complicit in murder. More than a cry for mercy, the movement to stop the deportation of Abdurakhmanov asks that Polish authorities make *knowledge-based* decisions and stop deporting refugees to Russia founded on "assumptions alone" (Civil Rights Centre Memorial 2018). Providing European decision makers in the migration field with such knowledge is a primary concern for advocates supporting Abdurakhmanov and Russian refugees more broadly. While Gannushkina's appeal is never acknowledged by the embassy, with Polish – and European – authorities seemingly turning a deaf ear to what is happening right outside its doors, the protest does not end there. Instead it is amplified by the Civic Assistance Committee's many social media followers, who mobilize to share and support Gannushkina's mission online (Civic Assistance Committee 2018).

This scene highlights a number of crucial developments in Russian civilian efforts for refugees. Why, for instance, might the country's most prominent humanitarian in the field of refugees dedicate herself to the fight for a Russian citizen in Poland, when millions of people are fleeing war zones just south of her nation's border? What lies behind this shift towards Europe and attempts to break

down boundaries with the West? Why does knowledge dissemination seem to emerge as a central element of these attempts and how do digital technologies play into it? Through a field study of Gannushkina's Civic Assistance Committee (from here on "the Committee"), this chapter aims to uncover these changing practices, strategies and geographies of refugee aid in Russia.

As the world's largest country, stretching across the global east–west and north–south divide, Russia has a unique position in the global migration system, placed in the top five of migrant-receiving countries worldwide (Jolkina 2020, p. 925). This position has grown increasingly intricate through the country's active involvement in the conflict, which became the source of one of the major exoduses after World War II – the war in Syria (Stent 2016). Nevertheless, the issue of contemporary Russian refugee aid is characterized by a notable research gap and "has long remained terra incognita for migration scholars" (Jolkina 2020, p. 925). This is particularly true for ethnographic approaches: field studies focusing on refugees in contemporary Russia are all but missing from English-language literature – the notable exception being Agnieszka Kubal's extensive research on Russian immigration law as lived experience (Kubal 2019; Kubal and Olayao-Méndez 2020). The research gap grows deeper still when considering the question of how digitalization and the emergence of a *transnational online public sphere* – understood by Bohman (2004, p. 154) as computer-mediated expansion of dialogue "across borders and publics" – plays into practices of refugee aid in contemporary Russia. The present study addresses both gaps through an in-depth case study employing both online and offline ethnographic methods, mapping five years of Russian refugee aid through the perspective of the Committee.

### **"The empty skyscraper": Russia as a refugee country**

When reviewing literature on contemporary Russia as a refugee country, the Committee itself holds a unique position. The already mentioned focus on information activities has led to a significant body of literature produced by the Committee. An example of such literature is the comprehensive analysis of Russia as country of asylum published in 2015. Despite being a signatory to the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Status of Refugees since 1992, the institution of asylum in Russia had been left largely unstudied until that point. The Committee's report was the first to look in-depth at this giant in the global migration system *from the perspective of refugees*. It studies access to, quality of and information about the asylum procedure, implementation of refugees' rights and compliance with the principle of non-refoulement in Russia. The report looks not only at the formal conditions and official framework of asylum, but at the lived experiences of people. It reflects – and carefully documents – the Committee's decades-long interaction with refugees, migration authorities on all levels, as well as the international humanitarian society. The report provides for sombre reading, unequivocally concluding that the Russian asylum system is fundamentally broken:

The asylum system in Russia resembles a *monumental, empty skyscraper* with a very important superintendent, service personnel and stern armed security at the entrance who do not let almost anyone in. There are, moreover, minimal conditions necessary for life, with people living only on one floor. Sometimes someone from the crowd at the entrance manages to arrange it with the security and enter via the rear entrance. But *the majority, exhausted by vain attempts to burst into the building, retreat.*

(Burtina et al. 2015, p. 286, my emphasis)

The pure size and geography of Russia would make it a likely host for a significant part of the global population of refugees. The analogy of the empty skyscraper, however, refers to the fact that Russia accounts for *less than 0.2 per cent of the world's refugees*. As of January 2020, the federation provides asylum for a mere 487 people (official numbers from the Russian Federal Statistic Service; see Civic Assistance Committee 2020c). Despite the number of refugees worldwide being higher than ever before, steadily increasing in recent years, the Russian numbers are historically low (Civic Assistance Committee 2019a). How can this be?

According to the Committee, the rights of refugees to access the asylum procedure in Russia are “systematically violated” (Burtina et al. 2015, p. 77). The idea of a heavily reinforced high-rise building, controlled by an omnipotent overseer and his brutal footmen, is based on activists’ and refugees’ lived experience with the Federal Migration Service. Detentions at the border, refusals to receive applications, criminal charges, large fines and costly bribes to immigration officials are integral to Russia’s asylum procedure. Refugees are also subject to deportation at the time of applying for asylum, blatantly disregarding the principle of non-refoulement (Burtina et al. 2015, pp. 76–78). The Committee has highlighted the systemic practice of more or less explicitly forcing asylum seekers, notably Syrians, to go back, as part of an argument that Russia’s military interventions abroad have successfully obliterated any “previous” threats (Glazunova 2019).

The most significant obstacle in Russia’s asylum procedure, however, appears to be its non-transparency. Pointing back to the metaphor of the closed-off skyscraper, the asylum system is highly opaque, not only making it difficult to enter, but making it difficult to know what the requirements to enter even are. As refugees are not informed about their rights or duties they are “set up” for failing to comply with immigration laws, increasing the likelihood of detention or deportation. According to refugee activists, what communication is indeed provided by migration officials is also intended to mislead and actively divert refugees from seeking asylum (Burtina et al. 2015, p. 54). A primary concern of the Russian refugee aid activists, then, is not only to provide information that is lacking but to *counter false messaging*. However, the analogy of the inaccessible and heavily guarded skyscraper applies not only to the people attempting to seek refuge in Russia, but to the people attempting to aid them. When working on the 2015 report on Russia’s compliance with the UN Convention on Refugees, the Committee was explicitly forbidden from monitoring the work of asylum authorities

(Burtina et al. 2015, pp. 8–9). Further, there exists no openly accessible information about the refugee situation in Russia from government bodies. Much of the statistics about Russia as a refugee country can only be obtained through “special approval” by the Ministry of Internal affairs (Civic Assistance Committee 2019a, p. 4). The seemingly basic task of providing information about Russia’s asylum system – be it to the asylum seekers themselves, other civil society actors or the general public – is exceedingly difficult.

In her study of this system, Kubal (2019, p. 27) observes what she calls a “restrictionist turn with elements of criminalization” in the Russian state’s approach to refugees after 2013. One step towards criminalizing asylum seekers is the so-called entry bar (*zapret na v’ezd*), where any migrant charged with minor administrative offences, such as receiving a parking ticket or “crossing the street in the wrong place”, faces expulsion and a three-year ban on re-entering Russia (Kubal 2019, p. 28). Kubal (2017, p. 748) finds that this policy takes the form of a “silent and clandestine” deportation, locking migrants in a limbo where they are *prevented from legalizing their status*. The entry bar, however, is only one cogwheel in the larger Russian socio-legal machinery of migrant suppression where, as Kubal argues, refugees are subject to systemic dehumanization through a *process of othering*:

[T]he law seems to be doing its job very well when it comes to othering of migrants and refugees on account of their legal status, country of origin and the degree of social, political and even human rights afforded. When combined with toxic political narratives, this othering takes extreme forms: by *denying migrants their basic humanity*.

(Kubal 2019, p. 168, my emphasis)

Following this argument, reinstating refugees’ humanity in Russia might be principal challenge for humanitarians in this field. This challenge is further complicated by the *geopolitical dimension of the refugee issue*, where as Braghiroli and Makarychev (2018 pp. 823–824) would have it, Russia strives to “capitalize on anti-refugee attitudes” as a tool to influence European public opinion and promote its long-term strategic goal of sowing discord in Western societies. In this view, more than human beings, refugees are a convenient instrument of geopolitical brawn for the Kremlin. The practice of dehumanizing forced migrants, as sketched out by Kubal, plays into the complex post-Crimean power play of Russia and the West.

## **Qualitative research offline and online**

Having established in the previous section an overview of the many challenges facing refugees in Russia, we now move on to explore the different ways the Committee addresses these challenges. In doing so, I draw on Kubal’s (2019, pp. 4–6) approach to “thick description” of the Russian migration and refugee regime, triangulating a broad spectrum of source material by combining participatory observation, qualitative interviews and content analysis. This broad-spectrum framework also

encompasses the digital realm: the Committee has a widespread online presence, and their website, social media platforms and other digital tools are central to their humanitarian practices. Turning to the Internet has become a major strategy not only for refugee aid providers and activists, but for Russian civic action in its entirety (Denisova 2017). To better understand the Committee's citizen humanitarianism in contemporary Russia, then, the present study integrates *offline and online ethnography*. The methodology is informed in large by Sade-Beck's (2004, p. 50) idea of "[expanding] the geographical dimension of the research field", using complementary data-gathering approaches to broaden the understanding of both online and offline sites, as well as their interaction. Such an expansion of the geographies of refugee aid in Russia, as I see it, is vital to account for not only the various online and offline activities in the field, but to better understand how the Committee positions itself in the broader – increasingly digitally mediated – international context.

The qualitative offline and online ethnographic study of the Committee was organized as follows: starting in September 2016, I conducted a series of participatory observations at the Committee's headquarters in Moscow. I followed along the daily life of the Committee's lawyers, social workers and volunteers, as well as the refugees seeking aid. I also conducted semi-structured interviews to get in-depth perspectives on the different humanitarian practices and strategies I observed, among others with Committee head Gannushkina herself. Following the on-site fieldwork in Moscow, I continued my observations online, exploring the Committee's activities across digital media. Finally, I analysed a variety of content and communication formats, from investigative reports to hashtag campaigns. Along the way, I have kept in contact with the Committee to try to ensure that the analysis of online activities is supported by perspectives "on the ground".

### **Knowledge as aid**

As previously highlighted, an overarching principle in the Committee's approach to refugee aid is *knowledge*. The importance of acting as knowledge source not only for refugees but for the broader Russian public and international society can be explained by substantial knowledge gaps at all these three levels. The first gap, as addressed in the overview of Russia as a refugee country, is at the level of refugees themselves: the Committee frequently serves as the only information provider for refugees in Russia about their rights and duties, as well as the laws and procedures of applying for protection. Central to this level of informational activities are free consultations on asylum and migration matters provided at the headquarters in Moscow. One of the most frequent questions raised by refugees during the thousands of consultations conducted yearly concerns where to go to apply for asylum. In the complex Russian bureaucracy, still plagued by the Soviet legacy of different organs and offices without much mutual communication, it can be tremendously difficult even for native Russians to know whom to contact. The Committee reports of refugees having spent *months* searching for the Federal Migration Office in Moscow while starving and freezing to death on the streets. The state's online information service on migration issues is only available in

Russian and, as the Committee describes it, “in such specific ‘bureaucratess’ that not even [citizens] of the Russian Federation can understand [it]” (Burtina et al. 2015, pp. 47–48). Raising knowledge about how to access the asylum system, then, is a question of life and death for the Committee.

In addition to providing information to refugees on an ad hoc, consultative basis, the Committee established the Migrants’ School for Human Rights in 2014. The educational initiative gave refugees a six-month training course in migration law, rights and duties, as well as the legalization process. The aim was to empower refugees in becoming their own advocates and protectors (Civic Assistance Committee 2015b, p. 35). The school was made possible through project funding from the US non-profit National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and is an example of how significant Western funders are to the Committee’s fight for refugee rights in Russia. However, as the state has tightened its grip on civil society by labelling NED and other Western supporters as *undesirable organizations* – a law allowing Russian authorities to ban international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) perceived to “[undermine] Russia’s security, defence, or constitutional order” (Human Rights Watch 2020) – the project was discontinued (Civic Assistance Committee 2016a). While certainly a setback, the Committee has maintained its primary educational programmes for refugees through support from another international institution, far more difficult for Russian authorities to disregard – the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As an official partner to this global titan, the Committee has been able to consolidate their general integration programme. As no such programmes are provided by Russian authorities, the free courses offered by the Committee often serves as the only opportunity for refugees to learn the language and cultural skills required to adapt in their host society (Gaeva and Manina 2017).

One of the knowledge-related activities the Committee spends the most effort on, is fighting for *refugee children’s right to education*. Despite the Russian constitution unequivocally stating that all children have such a right, only a third of children born to migrants do indeed attend school (Merkuryeva 2019). A 2014 change in administrative regulations limited education to children with the “right” documents, which, as previously discussed, are no easy feat to obtain. The Committee launched a big online campaign opposing the regulations under the hashtag #детихотятучиться (children want to learn) (Civic Assistance Committee 2015a), eventually proving their unconstitutionality in Russian court (Civic Assistance Committee 2019d). As the illegal practice nevertheless continues, the Committee has taken the fight beyond Russia – to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) (Civic Assistance Committee 2019c). They also provide legal and practical aid to paperless parents fighting to exercise their children’s right to school – in 2019 succeeding in entering over 100 refugee children into the seemingly impenetrable Russian education system (Civic Assistance Committee 2020b). To further ensure the crucial access to basic schooling is not limited by a child’s access to the right papers, the Committee also runs its own learning and integration centre for children (*tseñtr obucheniiia i adaptatsiiu detei*). The centre provides Russian language training and preparation for school together with cultural and

social activities intended to help children adapt to their new home country and has gained widespread recognition – even earning it a place in the Council of Europe’s *Manual for Human Rights Education for Young People* (Council of Europe 2015, p. 543). Despite facing increased pressure from Russian authorities, including eviction threats and confiscation of property (Civic Assistance Committee 2016b), the centre remains an essential service for refugee and paperless children in Moscow.

The second level of the Committee’s informational activities do not address knowledge gaps among refugees, but in *Russian society at large*. The importance of raising knowledge about the refugee issue domestically is illustrated by the following quote from Gannushkina during an interview with the author in 2016: “In Russia, no one talks about these people. It is as if we *do not have* refugees”. At the height of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015–2016, when thousands perished in the Mediterranean, Russian authorities consistently referred to it as “a *European* issue”. Refugees continually lack representation in the Russian media and are characterized by a collective silence (Kalsaa 2017). As a result, “ordinary” Russians have very little knowledge about refugees. Myths, misconceptions and deeply entrenched prejudices pervade, anchored in the country’s long history of systemic and violent racism (Amnesty International 2006; Levada Centre 2018). To address this, the Committee launched the project “Myths About Migrants” (*Mify o migrantakh*) in 2019. The project provides evidence-based explanations countering common ideas about refugees and migrants among Russians, such as the notion that this group is responsible for the vast majority of the country’s crime, spreads disease and “Islamizes” society (Civic Assistance Committee 2019b). The project is part of the Committee’s persistent work to *humanize refugees* in the public eye. Another example of this humanization effort is the video project “The Same Kind of Kids” (*Takie zhe deti*), supported by Germany’s Goethe Institute and the EU. In the video, refugee children and youngsters at the Committee’s children’s centre are shown playing around, drawing and studying – just like any other child in Russia or anywhere else in the world does (Fyodorov and Parkhomenko 2015). Beyond representing refugee children, the video puts a face on the above-mentioned battle for access to education. More than an abstract legal issue few Russians might care about, the video shows how this is a question of concrete children’s lives.

The third, final level of the Committee’s efforts to close knowledge gaps about refugees in Russia, targets *Europe*. One example of such an effort was shown at the start of this chapter, pleading Poland not to repatriate a Russian refugee. This plea is part of the broader battle to inform Europe about Russia’s inability – or unwillingness – to protect people from persecution. The battle culminated when the Arctic, notably the Russian–Norwegian border, became a major area of transit for refugees in 2015. While an average of only five asylum seekers had previously used the border crossing on a yearly basis, this year the number reached almost 5,500. For comparison, the Norwegian border city of Kirkenes has a population of only 3,500 (Abelsen and Flyum 2017). In order to justify returning the refugees, Norway labelled Russia a “safe third country”. However,

the notion perpetuated by Norwegian immigration authorities that these refugees could “simply” apply for asylum in Russia was debunked by the Committee’s report titled *Why Are Residents of Russia Asking for Asylum in Europe?*. The report documents an array of cases where people having fled war and persecution, particularly in Syria, are not only refused asylum by Russian authorities, but *actively deported* (Gannushkina 2019, p. 42). When some of these refugees go on to seek protection in one of Russia’s neighbouring countries to the west, it is thus not a question of “asylum shopping”. As the report explains, it is rather a question of not having anywhere else to turn.

The Committee’s report on Russian asylum seekers highlights the issue that many European countries appear unaware of, namely that Russia is not only a transit country for refugees, but a *producer* of them. The case with Poland and the Chechen blogger is only one example of Russian citizens – especially those from religious, ethnic and sexual minorities – seeking asylum in Europe after fleeing persecution in their home country. When inevitably denied asylum and returned to Russia, these people face torture, kidnapping and fabricated criminal charges (Gannushkina 2019, p. 11). The Committee in turn sees informing European migration authorities about this practice to be an essential aspect of their humanitarian efforts. In doing so, they actively rely on their network of international allies: in the case of the “refugee crisis” in the Arctic, the Committee became an essential resource for Norwegian rights organizations fighting the government’s policy of returning prospective asylum seekers to Russia, with the Norwegian Helsinki Committee (2019, p. 16), calling them “an indispensable source of information”. By personally travelling from Moscow to the Norwegian Arctic, Gannushkina herself highlighted the importance of supporting the humanitarians and activists helping refugees there, while also becoming a crucial symbol of the treacherous journey by documenting it online (Gannushkina 2015).

### **Refugee aid as active citizenship**

A core characteristic of the Committee is *its anchorage in the Russian civil rights movement*. According to Gannushkina, this characteristic can be explained by the fact that the development of the movements for refugee aid and active citizenship in post-Soviet Russia were intrinsically linked: as the Soviet Union collapsed and new borders were drawn along nationalist lines, large groups of people suddenly found themselves displaced and exposed to ethnic persecution. Simultaneously, the totalitarian regime, which had previously prevented civil society from forming, was gone. The co-occurrence of a sudden refugee crisis and an equally sudden opening up of the public sphere resulted in humanitarian-minded Russians coalescing around the issue of refugee aid (Gannushkina 2018). The practices of Russian refugee aid, then, run parallel to the practices of Russian civic activism. This interplay is illustrated by the fact that Committee-leader Gannushkina is not only the primary advocate for refugees in Russia, but one of the country’s most prominent civil rights activists as such (Engesland and Tegnander 2016).

Citizen humanitarianism in the field of refugees is, in the Russian context, so deeply intertwined with human rights activism that it is not always meaningful to distinguish one from the other. This connection is not only a result of the mutual historical origins of the two movements. In contemporary Russia, it is just as much the result of the Committee and other rights groups having to fight for their *own* rights in an increasingly restricted civil society. Any kind of advocacy independent from the state – especially if that advocacy is supported by international actors outside the state’s control – is met with suspicion from the illiberal regime of President Putin (Human Rights Watch 2017). This suspicion manifests itself most clearly in the Law on Foreign Agents introduced in 2012. The law requires Russian civil society groups who receive financial support from abroad and engage in “political activity” – vaguely defined and selectively applied to citizen-driven humanitarian efforts – to register as foreign agents. Labelled an example of “lawfare” against critically minded civic action, the law has received widespread condemnation from rights groups both inside and outside of Russia for connoting to Soviet-era persecutions against “enemies of the people” (Human Rights Watch 2018). Several civil society groups were forced to shut down their activities in response to being labelled foreign agents. Rather than putting the brakes on their activism, however, the Committee ramped it up: they have fought the law by appealing to international society, specifically the ECHR (Civic Assistance Committee 2013). While proceedings in the ECHR are still ongoing, the Committee and other appellants have received crucial support from other central institutions such as the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights (2017) and the European Parliament (2019).

The foreign agent label and other restrictions on Russian civil society have had significant implications for the Committee’s activities. As previously mentioned, the Migrants’ School for Human Rights was closed when the international funder was labelled “undesirable” by Russian authorities. While being cut off from foreign funds, the Committee is also experiencing trouble with their domestic support network: both Russian non-governmental and corporate sector funders are shying away from being associated with “foreign agents”. This also goes for potential partners – the Committee experienced several collaborative projects falling apart due to project partners fearing trouble with authorities (Polevaya 2016). Perhaps the biggest issue following the Law on Foreign Agents, however, is the amount of *administrative resources it occupies*. In order to fulfil the long list of requirements placed by authorities on this mistrusted segment of civil society, the Committee spends almost as much effort reporting on their activities as on executing them. For every new refugee they provide aid to, the amount of paperwork increases exponentially.

Notably, however, the struggles emerging from the foreign agent label has become part of the Committee’s identity. On the bottom of their website, where all such organizations are required by law to publicize the – ostensibly – less than desirable label, the Committee puts its own take on it: “The Justice Department has entered us in the register of ‘organizations, fulfilling the function of foreign agents’. Well so what, we really *are* agents of these foreigners! (*Nu chto zhe, my*

*deistvitel'no agenty etikh inostrantsev!*)." The sentence even triggered a campaign, where pictures from the Committee's children's centre highlighting the everyday interactions of students and volunteers gave a human face both to the "foreigners" and the "agents" of those foreigners (Civic Assistance Committee n.d.c). Rather than a label of shame, then, "foreign agent" has become a term to carry with pride, bringing the Committee closer to the population it is serving – namely, foreigners in Russia.

## **Breaking barriers inside and outside Russia**

When analysing the broader patterns of the Committee's approach to refugee aid, two central strategies appear to crystalize. The first strategy can be labelled as *external*: It manifests itself in the Committee's appeal to international society, Europe in particular, in its search beyond the borders of Russia for aid to refugees finding themselves within it. While some examples of such external action have already been addressed (the "Polish protest", Gannushkina's journey to Norway), the following looks specifically at how the Committee utilizes international resources, specifically the ECHR, to save lives of refugees within Russia. Beyond being a platform for the Committee to fight the Kremlin's repression of civil society, as shown in the case of the foreign agent law, ECHR has facilitated *concrete protective mechanisms* for refugees. One such case is the story of Darii, an Iranian who fled to Russia to escape religious persecution. Darii was one of the many refugees attempting to take the Arctic route to Norway, only to find themselves "stuck" in Russia. He was subsequently arrested and faced deportation back to Iran. Darii's case was appealed by the Committee's lawyers to the ECHR, which in 2019 invoked the "urgent measures paragraph", Rule 39, which is only applied in cases of "imminent risk of irreparable harm" (ECHR n.d., p. 1). According to the Committee's lawyers, this in effect means "forbidding Russian authorities from sending [Darii] out" (Kravtsova 2020). While the Committee is still fighting for Darii to be granted full protection by Russian migration authorities, the support from Europe in this regard kept him safe from the torture and subsequent death sentence likely facing him in Iran (Kravtsova 2020).

The second strategy appearing in the Committee's approach to refugee aid, could be called *internal*: it encompasses efforts to break down barriers between refugees within Russia, making them visible to each other as part of one community. One example of this practice, in addition to the integration courses, informational services and children's centre, is the "Without Borders" (*bez granits*) festival. Organized in connection with the International Day for Refugees in June 2020, the festival gathered humanitarians, academics, artists, athletes, social media influencers and, most importantly, refugees, in a platform for dialogue (*ploshchadka dlia dialoga*) (Civic Assistance Committee 2020a). The two-day programme included seminars on drivers of forced migration, discrimination and human trafficking, along with theatre, sports and concerts. One of the main elements of the festival, was the "living library" (*zhivaia biblioteka*), where refugees would take the role of "open books", sharing their stories with each other and a broad audience. The festival was supposed to take place in a Moscow

park, but due to the coronavirus pandemic had to be moved online. Rather than seeing this as a shortcoming, however, the Committee enthusiastically embraced this as an opportunity to move beyond borders proper, stating: “By the will of fate, the borders are in fact gone, and now there are no territorial restraints!” (Civic Assistance Committee 2020a).

Another of the Committee’s initiatives, which has been highly significant in terms of connecting refugees in Russia irrespective of such restraints, although on a far more sinister note, is the online project Hatecrimes.ru. This interactive website allows users to track violence based on “faith, nationality or colour” across the entire country (Civic Assistance Committee n.d.a). On the website, hundreds of victims of hate crimes are represented by green and red figures on a map over Russia: the green colour indicates that the victim survived, while the red marks attacks resulting in death. Users can take a virtual journey through all of Russia’s vast territories in a brutal visualization of how racial violence sees no geographical barriers. They can zoom in on individual victims and learn about their background, or read up on the aggregated statistical analysis, an example of which is the dismal fact that over 20 per cent of recorded hate crimes have fatal outcomes (Civic Assistance Committee 2017). Users can also easily report attacks themselves – thus taking part in “building” the map and spreading awareness of how refugees and other minorities continue to experience violence in Russia – as well as ask the Committee for help on behalf of themselves or others (Civic Assistance Committee n.d.b).

While the project might not seem to be an example of refugee aid, it is one of the Committee’s online initiatives most frequently highlighted by refugees themselves in the present study. The humanizing effect of the map, where victims of racial violence appear as an “actual person” (*nastoiashchii chelovek*) on an actual map, appears to hold significant value. Further, the somewhat counterintuitive *sense of inclusion*, even when facilitated by violence, is an important dimension of refugees’ interaction with the map. Even though many forced migrants in Russia report isolation and marginalization, the map, crucially, symbolizes that they are *not alone*.

## **Conclusion**

For the Civic Assistance Committee, humanitarian action for refugees is a battle with several frontlines. One frontline intersects the relationship between refugees and the Russian state, where the Committee’s battle consists of resisting the state’s extensive efforts to eliminate refugees’ very existence. As increased criminalization combined with intrinsically opaque, arbitrary and even blatantly corrupt migration procedures is threatening to undermine the institution of asylum in Russia, humanitarians see their primary mission as protecting the country’s refugee population against existential risk. Such risk can manifest itself in being deported without due process, or not even being permitted to enter the country at all. It can take the form of being prohibited from legalizing one’s stay in Russia, by extension precluding any form of “official” existence, or having one’s children kept outside the school system, rejecting them from the very beginning of life

entry into Russian society – perhaps even society as such – on equal terms. In its most extreme form, the existential risk to refugees in Russia emerging from the state’s hostility, is death: authorities’ inaction against institutional racism and hate-motivated violence has brought on a situation where refugees are persistently antagonized not only by state officials, but by “ordinary” Russians as well. Refugees, then, are not only facing threats from above, but from all around them.

Another battle the Committee fights, in many ways existential in nature as well, relates to the escalated encroachment on civil society under President Putin’s recent terms. Humanitarians are experiencing that their very ability to provide refugee aid is under attack. The state’s mistrust of citizen-led initiatives independent of official structures has put the Committee in a position where it is forced to not only fight for refugees, but for itself. Labelled a “foreign agent” by authorities, the Committee, like the people it is serving, is in many ways represented as fundamentally out of place in Russian society.

A third battlefield for the Committee deeply connected with the two just mentioned, faces international society – primarily Europe. Here, on the one hand, the Committee seeks support for the battles it is fighting within Russia: institutional and economic, through such actors as the UNHCR, EU and Council of Europe; legal and practical, through the ECHR; and symbolic and moral, through active integration with sister organizations and fellow humanitarians in the field of refugees in Europe, such as the Norwegian Helsinki Committee. On the other hand, the Committee also battles *with* Europe, fighting for Western neighbours to acknowledge the brutal realities of refugees in Russia and discard the illusionary idea of “safe third country”. As a result, the Committee’s battlefield protecting refugees from injustice goes far beyond the borders of Russia, extending, as the chapter has shown, from the Nordics to Poland and beyond.

In all the different battles the Committee is fighting, one “weapon” appears to be especially significant: the Internet. By incorporating digital communication technologies across all aspects of their practices, the Committee is breaking down informational barriers dividing refugees from migration authorities, from the broader public and from *other refugees*. By utilizing online spaces to inform, empower and, crucially, represent refugees in Russia and beyond, the Committee has exponentially expanded the scope of their aid. Despite being confined to the largely closed-off regime of President Putin, the Committee has managed to position itself as an unlikely front-line fighter in the global humanitarian effort for refugees.

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## **Part III**

# **The multifaceted politics of citizenship humanitarianism**



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# 8 **Contesting humanitarianism through solidarity and hospitality in the French–Italian borderscape**

*Janina Pescinski*

## **Introduction**

Throughout Europe, while citizens are aiding asylum seekers and migrants there has simultaneously been an increase in the criminalization of such actions. While these actions are often described as humanitarian, such a framing may obscure the more dissident aspects of the actions taking place to aid migrants. This chapter considers why, particularly in the context of criminalization, it is necessary to consider aid to migrants through frames other than humanitarianism and suggests hospitality and solidarity as possibilities. It considers how people are rupturing conventionally accepted patterns of citizen behaviour by interpreting their aid to migrants through these two alternative theoretical frames. Both hospitality and solidarity are contested concepts, but they also allow for a consideration of the more radical nature of citizen activism in favour of non-citizens, particularly when in contravention of state law. Empirically, this chapter is based on actions taking place along the French–Italian border, where people engage in various practices of solidarity and hospitality for migrants that have been met with prosecutions. The chapter further considers how, as aid is being criminalized, acts of solidarity and hospitality may become new ways of performing citizenship that rupture conventional patterns. Therefore, the chapter situates how citizen performances of solidarity and hospitality in favour of migrant non-citizens can be understood as political acts promoting inclusion.

Since the increase in people arriving to Europe in 2015, and particularly since France closed its border with Italy in June 2015,<sup>1</sup> migrants seeking to cross the border from Italy to France have been forced to take more dangerous routes in order to circumvent border controls. This border is produced by various practices across time and space, extending beyond the territorial border to social and political spaces; the term borderscape will be used throughout the chapter to evoke these diffuse and practised elements (Brambilla 2015; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007). Initially, people crossed from Ventimiglia, a Mediterranean coastal town on the Italian side, to Menton, on the French side, by train or bus. However, police checks became systematic and people without the proper documents were returned to Italy, so many changed their route to pass through the mountains, transiting through the Roya Valley, a mountainous border area just

north of the Mediterranean. As more people arrived in the Roya Valley on the French side, local residents mobilized to provide food, shelter and advice to migrants passing through. But because the people arriving do not have legal status to be present on the French territory, the people aiding them have become targets of criminalization by the French state, leading to several high-profile court cases. Some of the actions taking place in the Roya Valley, such as the provision of food and clothing, can be considered humanitarian, and as such these actions have not been targeted for criminalization. However, other actions that do not fit the state's humanitarian narrative can be better understood in terms of hospitality and solidarity, and they produce contestation as to how the citizen is entitled to act with regard to the non-citizen.

Humanitarianism, solidarity and hospitality have come to the forefront in migration discourse in Europe at this particular moment because of the contestation over how European states are receiving migrants and refugees – particularly since 2015. On the surface, these framings seem to oppose the securitized discourses common in migration policy, but they can in fact work in conjunction with that agenda. Another disputed point is who is deserving of aid: state narratives create a stark division between the deserving refugee and the underserving (illegalized) migrant. Yet in practice, citizens helping do so based on the common humanity of the person, not their immigration status. A citizen engaging in humanitarianism is legally acceptable, but the citizen might be performing solidarity or hospitality as a form of radical dissent, challenging the state's migration management policies. The state, citizens and non-citizens perform and politicize solidarity, hospitality and humanitarianism in different ways. When people aid migrants, these terms are employed strategically by different actors (states, citizens, lawyers, etc.) to serve different purposes. States may call actions “humanitarian” to suggest they are morally justifiable. Individuals may call their actions “hospitality” to emphasize the intimate nature of aid provided by inviting migrants into their own homes. A lawyer defending that individual in court may once again label the action “humanitarian” in order to fit into the legal narrative that is acceptable to the state. Civil society groups may use the term “solidarity” to emphasize the collective, egalitarian nature of the interactions between citizens and migrants. Such examples are frequent in the contemporary European context but may be practised differently at different times and in different places. What is clear is that the meanings and uses of these terms are constantly being renegotiated, they may overlap and they may conflict. Therefore, looking at the theoretical background of each concept will help to elucidate the variety of meanings each contains.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the terms “humanitarianism”, “solidarity” and “hospitality” before turning to how these are practised in the French–Italian borderscape. The objective of the following section is not to define these terms, but rather to outline different approaches to these concepts and how those can be understood in the context of aid to migrants. The ways in which citizens aid migrants do not necessarily fit neatly into any single one of these concepts, but rather may be a hybrid including elements of all three combined in ways that vary according to context.

## **Humanitarianism**

Humanitarian aid typically focuses on short-term relief to save lives and alleviate suffering by providing basic necessities to people in need of assistance, often due to conflict and natural or man-made disasters. There is a broadly recognizable set of practices agreed upon in international law and underpinned by the key principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence.<sup>2</sup> But the humanitarian system has come under criticism for the way it functions as a mechanism of governmentality (Fassin 2011). As a defining feature of contemporary global politics, humanitarianism is used as a way of situating political issues in a moral framework. It is a part of the larger landscape of liberal interventionism, a new kind of imperial rule in which Global North states intervene in the Global South for the supposed democratization and development of these states. Humanitarianism fits into this logic because its stated intention is to save lives and alleviate suffering in crisis situations, yet it can be used to manage populations and their movement. Furthermore, humanitarianism has expanded from short-term interventions in times of crisis, such as armed conflict and natural disasters, to ongoing missions that border on development assistance.

Humanitarian discourse is employed by states as a way of managing migration to keep the undesired other at bay. It has also come to define the acceptable space of encounter with the migrant within the bounds of the law. Therefore, this chapter understands humanitarianism as a logic of government, performed in different ways from state policies to institutional practices to individual actions. Yet the practices that people engage in when providing aid to migrants do not always fit into this bounded humanitarian space. Often they are filling a gap left by the state: governments do not make aid available to these vulnerable populations, so citizens step in to provide bottom-up assistance because they see people in need (see Mogstad, Chapter 1 this volume). For example, in the Roya Valley residents began by simply providing food and shelter to migrants. But, as time passed they became more politically engaged through statements criticizing the state's migration policy and even engaging in strategic litigation against regional authorities. Understanding these actions simply as humanitarianism does not capture these multifaceted forms of engagement.

Humanitarianism can be considered a form of governance used to maintain the status quo. In his history of humanitarianism, Michael Barnett (2001) calls the period since the Cold War the era of liberal humanitarianism. This era is characterized by the convergence of humanitarian discourse with human rights discourse on the one hand, and security discourse on the other. Michel Agier (2011, p. 5) argues that in humanitarian government there is a convergence “between [the] humanitarian world (the hand that cares) and the police and military ordering (the hand that strikes)”. Thus, humanitarianism is a dual system of care and control. Providing aid to care for beneficiaries simultaneously controls them. In his ethnography of humanitarianism in refugee camps, Agier (2011) critiques the foundations of humanitarianism and its political effects. Agier (2011) recognizes that categories and statistics (e.g. refugees) are produced through mechanisms like international

humanitarian law and play a role in the “management of undesirables”. Didier Fassin (2011, p. 4) calls this system humanitarian reason, which

governs precarious lives: the lives of the unemployed and the asylum seekers, the lives of sick immigrants and people with AIDS, the lives of disaster victims and victims of conflict – threatened and forgotten lives that humanitarian government brings into existence by protecting and revealing them.

This comprises different forms of authority (medical, legal, religious) and different technologies of government, working both inside and outside state forms. This suggests that humanitarianism is itself performative: it brings its subjects into being.

Because humanitarianism’s stated goal is to alleviate suffering, it focuses on individuals, rather than structural violence. This depoliticizes suffering by taking it out of the socio-economic and historical context that produces it and forces individuals to perform as the victim. This performance of the victim is part of a fixed hierarchy humanitarianism imposes between the actor offering aid (state, non-governmental organization (NGO), individual) and the beneficiary (always individual). Humanitarian discourse, by forcing a person in need to perform as the victim, creates a distinction between the deserving and the undeserving. Those not sufficiently suffering are not deserving of assistance. Recipients of humanitarian aid are expected to perform their role in the hierarchy. In this way, asylum seekers are expected to perform as victims grateful for any assistance, but there is no acknowledgement of the conditions that produced their displacement. Migrants are considered to have moved of their own volition, not due to structural conditions, so they are considered less deserving and may be excluded from assistance that they in fact need. Thus humanitarian governance of migration denies the agency of migrants. In the context of migration, humanitarian discourse functions similarly to securitization discourse in that the citizen is a reference point functioning as an implicit “us”, creating the category of the other (Perkowski 2016, p. 332). The other is expected to perform as the victim in order to be considered worthy of receiving aid (Ticktin 2011). At the same time, humanitarianism dehumanizes the people it targets: “In poor countries [humanitarian reason] deals with large and often undifferentiated populations, for whom mass initiatives are set in place. In rich countries, it is faced with individuals, whose narratives it examines and whose bodies it scrutinizes” (Fassin 2011, p. 253). Fassin (2011) concludes that the humanitarian present is governed by a new moral economy of suffering. This is particularly evident when humanitarianism becomes part of the practices creating the borderscape.

In the context of migration, humanitarianism has arrived in the borderscape with what Walters (2011) calls the humanitarian border. The humanitarian border can only emerge once border crossing becomes a matter of life and death (Walters 2011, p. 138). At certain borders this has become the case because of a security agenda predicated on keeping migrants out by constructing them as a threat. The humanitarian border is not universal; it emerges in specific places under specific circumstances.

These spaces can be likened to faultlines in the smooth space of globalization where it seems that the worlds designated by the terms Global North and Global South confront one another in a very concrete, abrasive way, and where gradients of wealth and poverty, citizenship and noncitizenship appear especially sharply.

(Walters 2011, p. 146)

These spaces are not static, as the humanitarian border emerges it shifts and changes. Migrants are often portrayed as objects without agency in these border regimes, simply objects for the border to act upon, but migrants are conscious of bordering tactics and modify their own strategies accordingly (Andersson 2017, p. 85). Thus, some fluctuations in humanitarian borders are determined by the routes and strategies of migrants themselves. This challenges the narrative of a linear trajectory of the development of the securitized border. The humanitarian border is also not simply produced by state authority, rather it is constructed by practices emerging from politicization and contestation by the multiplicity of actors in the borderscape.

Humanitarian discourse is prevalent in European border control regimes both as discourse and in practice. Agencies such as Frontex have adopted humanitarian practices and discourse as a justification for their policies (Pallister-Wilkins 2015). This is evidence of the blurring of humanitarian and securitized border regimes: they overlap, sometimes in complementary ways, sometimes contradictory. This is because at the border, the migrant occupies a dual space of being *at risk* and *a risk* (Pallister-Wilkins 2015, p. 54). Thus border actors respond with the aforementioned care and control duality, making the migrant a subject of humanitarianism and an object of securitization. “Humanitarianism and policing are not separate, contradictory practices but rather both are linked in the governance of populations who are simultaneously at risk and a risk” (Pallister-Wilkins 2015, pp. 65–66).

Because of the links between humanitarianism and securitization, I argue that the state uses the category of humanitarianism as an attempt to “capture” practices of assistance to migrants into an acceptable range of actions. Humanitarianism becomes a mechanism of governmentality: it is a prescribed way of being a citizen in a way that is acceptable to the state, whereas actions that do not fit the humanitarian norm are criminalized. In political discourse humanitarianism is granted a status of moral exceptionalism. This is reflected in the relevant legal frameworks: these laws refer to humanitarianism as an acceptable exception to actions that may be criminalized in the context of preventing smuggling and illegal entry of migrants (CESEDA 2020; Council Directive 2002/90/EC 2002). To perform humanitarianism in the way defined by the state is depoliticized, but any actions falling outside this state-sanctioned repertoire are threatening to state sovereignty and are therefore criminalized.

Certain aid to migrants may well be humanitarian in nature, but universally labelling all such actions as humanitarianism strips them of claims that citizens are making on the state through these acts and their radical political potential.

Although humanitarian reason is a central feature of the European response to arrivals of refugees and migrants, it is problematic to capture all forms of assistance into humanitarian governmentality, particularly in terms of the hierarchy it produces between the “saviour” and the “victim” and in denying migrants their agency. While the citizen humanitarianism performed by individuals may not explicitly be part of the humanitarian governance regime, such actions are judged against the state’s humanitarian narrative. To explore other ways citizens have of acting with migrants, this chapter will now turn to two alternative concepts, solidarity and hospitality.

## **Solidarity**

The uses of the term “solidarity” are highly varied, and its definitions are contested. This chapter understands solidarity in the social sense as a bottom-up practice. In the current migration climate in Europe, solidarity discourses and practices appear at different levels: between migrants, between citizens and migrants, between activist groups at the national and European levels. Even as solidarity requires inclusivity to see oneself as part of a collective, it is also exclusive in that there are others outside that collective. To understand solidarity in the context of migration, I will look at how solidarity has been addressed in moral and political philosophy and social theory. This section does not attempt to provide an exhaustive discussion of these approaches, rather it highlights several important elements of solidarity in order to demonstrate why certain actions of aid to migrants might be considered solidarity, while also identifying some potentially problematic elements of solidarity.

In his comprehensive history of solidarity in Europe, Steinar Stjernø (2005, p. 2) proposes a pragmatic definition of solidarity as “the preparedness to share resources with others by personal contribution to those in struggle or in need and through taxation and redistribution organized by the state”. Solidarity is not based on self-interest but rather on collective action, which Stjernø (2005) contends may be institutionalized through rights and citizenship. However, rights and citizenship are granted to individuals, so this understanding seems to suggest that one must first be recognized as an individual by the state to act in solidarity, which seems at odds with collective action in favour of oppressed groups whose individuals may not be recognized in terms of rights and citizenship. Stjernø’s definition emphasizes the role of the state and its institutions, yet many acts of solidarity are performed outside those confines.

Furthermore, Stjernø (2005, p. 324) argues that relationships of solidarity are not symmetrical, that it is most often well-off citizens in a privileged situation offering solidarity to an unprivileged other. This is visibly the case in the Roya Valley when citizens aid migrants. Because of this, Stjernø (2005) understands solidarity as altruistic, though in a political, not paternalistic way. This framing of solidarity implies a hierarchical relationship that deprives the unprivileged other of agency, yet many citizens aiding migrants are attempting to break down such a hierarchy. Further to this point, Nikita Dhawan (2013, p. 145) has criticized

global solidarity as reproducing hierarchies that maintain the privileges of some while reinforcing the alterity of others: “When progressive activists and intellectuals intervene ‘benevolently’ in the struggles of subaltern groups for greater recognition and rights, they reinforce the very power relations that they seek to demolish.” Dhawan’s critique addresses a homogenized solidarity that, in attempting to be universal, flattens difference in way that is disempowering for certain people. In contrast, solidarity can be expressed in a localized context that recognizes the specificities of a particular marginalized group, as numerous examples of solidarity in migrant activism illustrate (Agustín and Jørgensen 2016; Della Porta 2018). In this case, people are not necessarily expressing a cosmopolitan “solidarity across borders”, but rather a localized solidarity across a specific border. It is not a generalized feeling of solidarity with all refugees and migrants, but a specific recognition of those with whom one is acting in solidarity.

It is possible to understand solidarity as a horizontal, collective relationship in which all subjects share agency. Avery Kolers (2016, p. 5), in his work on the moral philosophy of solidarity, defines solidarity as “political action *on others’ terms*”, particularly with regard to oppressed groups. Such solidarity prioritizes the marginalized, and it is deferential in that it requires that people suspend their own judgement in order to act on the terms of those with whom they are in solidarity. This is the case in the Roya Valley, where people aiding migrants suspend any judgement about migrants crossing the border without authorization. Instead, they act with migrants to help them continue their journeys by buying them train tickets, organizing group trips to police stations where it is possible to make an asylum claim and driving them to places of shelter, even when this means the person helping could face prosecution.

Sharing a goal is not sufficient for solidarity, one has to also adopt the other’s approach to achieving that goal. Solidarity is not about achieving an outcome, but rather acting in a way that gives the other equity in the process. In this way Kolers’s understanding of solidarity is more empowering for oppressed groups because it recognizes their agency to determine their own interests, rather than others acting in their presumed best interest. Therefore, Kolers (2016) argues that solidarity is a moral imperative because it constitutes a form of equal treatment. However, this does make the assumption that the oppressed group one is in solidarity with has some unified agenda, an assumption that could obscure the interests of the most vulnerable within that oppressed group. With all these tensions, it is evident that there exist a multiplicity of solidarities that are practised differently depending on the actors and context.

In France, solidarity is closely related to fraternity, part of the French national motto of “liberty, equality, fraternity”. Solidarity appears more frequently in the everyday discourse on migration, with those helping migrants calling themselves “citizens in solidarity” (*citoyens solidaires*) and people protesting prosecutions of those aiding migrants refer to the charges as “crimes of solidarity” (*délit de solidarité*) (Amnesty International France 2020). French legal scholar Michel Borgetto (1993) argues that solidarity is just one aspect of fraternity, but not a replacement for it. The meaning of fraternity has different connotations: (1) a national one, as

in between French citizens; (2) a Republican one, universal to anyone sharing the Republican values; and (3) a social one, related to the welfare state (Fraternité 2019, p. 189). Within these different conceptions of fraternity, societal inequalities are reproduced; in particular racialized people do not experience fraternity in the same way as white French citizens, despite France's republican ideal of equality. Furthermore, Cinalli and Sanhueza (2018, p. 230) argue that in France, fraternity has become an increasingly fuzzy concept that exists in words only and "political references to solidarity as a 'public' fundamental, an essential aspect of republican citizenship, have become few and far between, replaced by a more individual notion of solidarity understood as a private virtue". Certainly, it is true that the solidarity between French citizens and migrants and refugees is expressed individually or through civil society rather than through public policies. However, fraternity has gained increased political power since the French Constitutional Court ruled in 2018 that fraternity has legal value, as will be discussed later in the chapter. Cinalli and Sanhueza's research specifically considers solidarity with refugees, and they argue that "the political trajectory of solidarity can have a remarkable potential even when it comes to helping vulnerable people outside the boundaries of the *political community* in France" (Cinalli and Sanhueza 2018, p. 247). This recognizes that although migrants and asylum seekers are considered outsiders of the political community that includes French citizens, citizens find ways to act in solidarity with them even when the state does not. One such practice is offering them a place to stay, which can also be understood as a practice of hospitality.

## **Hospitality**

Hospitality is fundamentally about the relationship between host and guest, which raises questions about the nature of this relationship and how it is performed. The host/guest relationship in hospitality can serve as a metaphor for other relationships of insider/outsider, belonging/nonbelonging or citizen/non-citizen. These are not inherent identities but rather are roles dictated by external conditions. Historical developments have created the socio-political and economic conditions that put certain people in the position to have the capacity to host and leave disenfranchised others in the position of guest without the possibility to escape that position. This leads to tensions surrounding the hierarchy embedded in hospitality, as well as the role of property, ultimately posing the question of whether there can be an equitable form of hospitality. The context of migration highlights the contestations surrounding hospitality.

Immigration issues are a symptom of how profoundly the citizens of a modern European state can disagree about the definitions of hospitality. And whether or not the word is explicitly used, hospitality is now at the centre of this political, social, and economic controversy.

(Rosello 2000, p. 6)

This section discusses key theoretical contributions on hospitality in order to consider whether contemporary aid to migrants is expanding the scope of what can be considered hospitality. The creative ways in which citizens are cooperating to host migrants in spaces they claim challenges ideas of hospitality based on an individual host with private property.

The idea of hospitality that Jacques Derrida developed has become central to much of the contemporary literature on the concept. Derrida identifies two key aspects of hospitality: the *law* of hospitality and the *laws* of hospitality. On the one hand, the law of hospitality is absolute and unconditional: it requires welcoming anyone without imposing any limits or conditions on them or their stay. On the other hand, the laws of hospitality are conditional: these are the norms that set out the rights and duties of hospitality in practice. The absolute law is above the conditional laws, yet at the same time it depends on them:

It wouldn't be effectively unconditional, the law, if it didn't have to become effective, concrete, determined, if that were not its being as having-to-be. It would risk being abstract, utopian, illusory, and so turning over into its opposite. In order to be what it is, the law thus needs the laws, which, however, deny it, or at any rate threaten it, sometimes corrupt or pervert it.

(Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 79)

In order to be practised, the absolute law needs conditions, but such conditions transform the law into the laws.

This creates a paradox in which one law is inevitably a transgression of the other. Absolute hospitality does not follow the conditions of the laws of hospitality and is therefore impossible in practice.

Absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names.

(Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 25)

Such absolute hospitality is impossible, because in order to offer hospitality, one must exercise sovereignty over one's home and exercise discretion over who is invited. As soon as this is the case, the hospitality is no longer absolute, it is conditional, and thus fails to live up to the law of absolute hospitality. At the core of this is the individual with private property: "I open up my home". There are many individuals who have done just that to offer hospitality to migrants, however there are also collectives of people that have claimed public spaces or unoccupied private property (i.e. squats) in order to host migrants in an attempt at unconditional hospitality.

Furthermore, exercising sovereignty and choosing who is invited produces exclusion that is a form of violence (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 55). Such violence is a consequence of the power relations grounded in the exercise of sovereignty over property: in order to offer hospitality one must have ownership over a space in which to host. Feminist hospitality calls for minimizing these power relations as a way of facilitating connections that prioritize the well-being of the guest. “Such an approach entails a radical rethinking of the host’s relationship to property – not necessarily a negation of property rights, but perhaps a mitigated sense of ownership” (Hamington 2010, p. 25). When hosts offer hospitality in spaces they do not own, they are making a claim to the right to use that space, not because they own it, but because they are prioritizing people in need.

When individuals offer hospitality to migrants, they are doing this in opposition to the hostility of state border controls, fences and deportations. They are attempting to practise unconditional hospitality that exists outside the law when they welcome all migrants regardless of legal status, though they are limited by the ways in which the state criminalizes certain actions. However, such practices of hospitality take place within the larger structures of the state, so in practice, hospitality is regulated by the state. Consequently, hospitality is always contingent on national policy (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 55; Rosello 2000, p. 37). Private homes and public spaces where individuals can offer hospitality are situated within a national territory where the state has sovereignty to intervene. Even so, such hospitality may escape the notice of the state, and therefore hospitality is “by definition clandestine ... the obsessive fear of modern states” (Scherer 2005, p. 25 cited in Agier 2018, p. 35). Despite state attempts to regulate hospitality, they do not have the capacity to control every aspect of hospitality performed by citizens, though this is what they attempt through criminalization.

Postcolonial critiques of hospitality have focused more explicitly on the political dimension of hospitality by considering the role of the state in regulating encounters with the other. Assimilationist policies have been put in place by former colonial powers to regulate immigration and manage the identity of the potentially dangerous other. In this vein, Rosello (2000) argues that under the guise of hospitality the host strips the guest of his identity. This is precisely what is happening in assimilationist migration policy and thus, hospitality becomes a form of domination. Citizens extending hospitality to migrants deliberately enable their guests to maintain their identities, and this can be seen as a form of hospitality that is also solidarity.

Considering aid to migrants as hospitality necessitates acknowledging the political dimensions of the act (Boudou 2012, 2017). It also requires an examination of the power relations at play, asking whether the citizen and the migrant are in a hierarchical relationship during the encounter, or whether they can become equals. These aspects are crucial when considering the acts taking place in the borderscape.

## **The French–Italian borderscape**

To consider how European citizens engage in humanitarianism, solidarity and hospitality with migrants, the chapter will now turn to the Roya Valley, where migrants are attempting to cross from Italy into France. As residents of the Roya Valley were confronted with the increasing arrivals of people, they mobilized to help them through associations such as Roya Citoyenne. Roya Citoyenne is an association that was created to address other local concerns in the early 2000s, went dormant and was reactivated when migrants began arriving and residents determined they needed a coordinated response. Individuals and families agreed to host migrants; clear acts of hospitality inviting the stranger into one's own home. The state can view such actions as illegal because of provisions against facilitating the stay of an irregular foreigner.<sup>3</sup> Françoise Cotta, a Roya Valley resident who is a lawyer, has hosted migrants and understands that the state may find her actions illegal, but she says that “at some point it is our duty to disobey” (Frénois 2016).

By October 2016, there were so many migrants arriving that individuals could not shelter everyone in their homes. In cooperation with other members of Roya Citoyenne, Cedric Herrou, a local olive farmer who hosted many migrants on his farm, created a makeshift shelter in a disused building belonging to the national railway service that had been abandoned since the late 1990s. Herrou (2017) explains:

I could have kept my door closed, but I opened it, simply, by duty of mountain hospitality. Mountain people are like sailors. They are amazed by their natural environment, but the duty to rescue surpasses any political or religious ideology or personal conscience.

Although no longer taking place in the home, this can be seen as a radical act of collective hospitality that challenges the centrality of private property to hospitality. When a collective of people play the role of host and offer hospitality in a space that is not legally their property but over which they claim a right of access on behalf of those in need, as Herrou and others did, this challenges the power relations of hospitality and attempts to be unconditional.

For this action, as well as for allegedly helping people to cross the border, Herrou became the target of legal proceedings for assisting irregular foreigners. Humanitarianism is the rhetoric used by the state when determining which actions are acceptable and which actions are illegal. In the law that criminalizes facilitation of aid to migrants, there is a humanitarian exception that says people cannot be prosecuted if the aid seeks to preserve the dignity or physical safety of the foreigner while giving no direct or indirect benefit to the person providing the aid, or if they are an immediate family member of the person concerned. Herrou was initially found guilty in February 2017, a ruling that was upheld on appeal in August 2017 because the court found that his activity did not meet the law's humanitarian exemption clause because it benefitted his activism. During the

trial, Herrou explained that he felt he was “doing the work of the state” (Leroux 2017). Subsequently, the decision was partially overturned following the July 2018 ruling of the French Constitutional Court recognizing fraternity as having legal value.<sup>4</sup> The Constitutional Court (2018) ruled that “it follows from the principle of fraternity the freedom to help one another, for humanitarian reasons, without consideration as to whether the assisted person is legally residing or not within the French territory”. This decision is significant because it recognizes that acting in fraternity does not depend on immigration status, therefore reaffirming the social understanding of fraternity as extending to people beyond those who are members in the nation through their citizenship and those who share Republican values. However, this decision still limits fraternal actions to those for humanitarian purposes, as defined by the state. Even since this significant decision, prosecutions have continued to take place. Suzel and Gibi, other members of *Roya Citoyenne*, figure that “trials are one way to try to discourage those helping refugees” (NPA 2018). Despite the fact that such prosecutions have continued, people in the *Roya Valley* have become even more active in aiding migrants and advocating for them.

Other activities taking place at the border are not ones that the state would recognize as conventionally humanitarian, however are still done to protect those whose lives are put in danger by the borderscape. On 7 July 2017, a group of activists calling themselves the *Roya Solidarity Collective*, including Cedric Herrou, released a video showing unaccompanied minors being detained and sent back across the border to Italy in violation of French immigration law, which prohibits the expulsion of minors, and international law, which guarantees the right of any person to claim asylum.<sup>5</sup> On 30 June, the activists boarded a train from Ventimiglia in Italy to Menton, the first station across the border in France, and filmed police interactions with migrant minors using hidden cameras and cell phones. Herrou disseminated the video on his Facebook page, which was picked up by several major French media sources and resulted in France’s human rights ombudsman calling on the minister of the interior to investigate such police practices in south-eastern France. The day the video was released, Herrou was once again taken into police custody after being stopped in the presence of migrants. He was released without being charged. Such arrests have become routine for Herrou, yet despite the increasing policing he suffered, Herrou continued his political actions because he feels that “humanitarianism wasn’t enough” (Herrou 2017). He has become so widely recognized in France and abroad for his activism that his lawyer, Zia Oloumi, says “Cédric Herrou is the face of solidarity” (Leroux 2017).

This activism can be interpreted as a local act of solidarity with the migrants whose rights are being violated. As in Kolers’s definition, this is a political action done on behalf of others, who, because of their marginalized status, cannot do the action themselves. The action advances the goals of the migrants themselves: enable them to enter the French territory in order to make an asylum claim. The activists do not claim to be in solidarity with all migrants globally, therefore they avoid the trap of solidarity reifying hierarchies that Dhawan identifies. Rather, by

acting in solidarity with a specific group of people, the activists are recognizing the specific inequalities these people face because of their age, racialization and migration status; the activists are challenging such oppressions rather than reifying them. It is also an act of political dissidence: instead of unquestioningly accepting the police's treatment of migrant minors, the activists challenge the police practices.

## **Conclusion**

The actions of Herrou and other residents of the Roya Valley cannot be easily divided into those that are purely humanitarian, hospitality or solidarity. The terms themselves are contested and used by different actors to serve different purposes, and practices may overlap or conflict. French citizens and migrants perform these actions together as a way of claiming dignity and rights for irregularized migrants. Broadening the frame from humanitarianism to look at acts of hospitality and acts of solidarity enables us to see other ways citizens have of aiding migrants, and which of those actions become targets for criminalization by the state. The state criminalizes acts that do not fall into the conventional humanitarian realm. Offering collective hospitality beyond the confines of private property is a radical act that challenges individualistic, private-property-based hospitality and the state sees this as a threat. While not all acts of hospitality and solidarity have an explicit activist agenda, they do have political consequences. If the conventional way of being a citizen in the borderscape is to follow the state script of humanitarianism, the state's sovereignty and control of its borders are threatened when citizens perform more radical forms of hospitality and solidarity. But by challenging the state's restrictions against migrants, these citizens are performing their imaginary of a political community that includes migrants. In this context, people are challenging citizenship as a bounded legal category based on national identity in favour of an active form of citizenship as a practice of human solidarity, blurring the boundary between citizen and non-citizen. Interpreting aid to migrants in terms of hospitality and solidarity opens possibilities beyond the frame of humanitarianism for considering the radical political potential of these acts.

## **Notes**

- 1 The regional chief of police initially re-established border controls, then this was extended as part of the national state of emergency declared after the November 2015 terror attack in Paris.
- 2 These principles are defined in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182 of 1991, on "strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations", which lays out the architecture for the contemporary international humanitarian system.
- 3 Provisions at the European Union (EU) and state level allow for the criminalization of those assisting irregular foreigners. The EU Facilitation Directive, adopted in 2002, criminalizes any act that facilitates the entry, transit or stay of unauthorized foreigners. Its intent is explicitly to combat illegal immigration. There is an optional humanitarian clause by which states may decide not to impose sanctions on people whose aim is to

provide humanitarian assistance, but the interpretation and application of this provision is left to the discretion of individual states. In France, in the Code for the Entry and Stay of Foreigners and the Right of Asylum (CESEDA), Article L 622-1 states that “any person who has by direct or indirect assistance facilitated or attempted to facilitate the entry, circulation or irregular stay of a foreigner in France can be subject to up to five years imprisonment and a 30,000 euro fine”. The humanitarian exception only applies if one gains no benefit from the action (CESEDA 2020).

- 4 Following this decision, the case was sent back to the appeals court and the charges against Herrou were voided on 13 May 2020. The prosecutor is once again appealing this decision, and another trial will take place at the Court of Cassation, which will be the final judgement in the case.
- 5 In French immigration law, Article L. 521–4 specifies that a foreign minor cannot be expelled, he must be protected like any other vulnerable minor (CESEDA 2020).

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## 9 Proximity and protest

### Citizen demonstrations against anti-immigrant policies in eastern Sicily

*Vera Haller*

#### Introduction

Francesco Italia, mayor of the Sicilian port city of Syracuse, remembers the last Thursday in January 2019 as being particularly busy. Engrossed with his official duties in the seventeenth-century Palazzo del Vermexio, he did not check his smartphone until late in the day. He then found an unusually large number of messages, mostly from people alerting him that a storm was bearing down on a ship sailing nearby with 47 migrants on board rescued from the Mediterranean. No port was willing to let it dock.

The distressed vessel, *Sea-Watch 3*, operated by the German non-governmental organization (NGO) Sea-Watch, was also raising the alarm. “We’re facing a Mediterranean cyclone, a rather rare weather phenomenon with waves of seven meters, rain and icy wind”, the organization wrote in a tweet on 24 January.<sup>1</sup> Later in the day, another tweet accompanied by a photo of the ship’s wave-lashed deck expressed more desperation: “We need a #PortOfSafety, now!”<sup>2</sup>

The charity boat was caught in a political stand-off created by Italy’s then interior minister and leader of the right-wing Northern League political party, Matteo Salvini, who seven months earlier had closed the country’s ports to migrant rescues by NGOs. Salvini said his “*porti chiusi*” (closed ports) order was an effort to force the rest of Europe to take more responsibility for the migrants and refugees from Africa, the Middle East and other countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh who for the past several years had been making the dangerous central Mediterranean crossing, with more than 650,000 leaving Libya and landing in Sicilian and southern Italian ports since 2014 (UNHCR 2019a). It was part of Salvini’s larger anti-immigrant agenda that included criminalizing the NGOs’ rescue activities in the Mediterranean through boat seizures, arrests of crew members and hefty fines on charity boats that docked in Italy without authorization.

Mayor Francesco Italia said he could not stand by as danger loomed for the stranded *Sea-Watch 3*. “I said, ‘Come to Syracuse,’” recounted the mayor, an independent supported by a centre-left coalition.<sup>3</sup> He immediately saw support from many of his constituents, setting off a week of street protests that represented one of the most spirited outbreaks of Italian citizen resistance to the anti-immigrant

policies imposed during Salvini's 14 months in government. And across Europe, few examples of such resistance were as visible and consequential for the shaping of attitudes toward citizen involvement in the reception of migrants.

When a government carries out harsh anti-immigrant policies, as the former right-wing Italian government did in 2017–2019, what factors bring citizens to the point when they say, “Enough. No more”, and move them to demand change and a more compassionate approach? Are they purely motivated by humanitarian concerns or are other factors also at play? The events in Syracuse in late January 2019 offer an opportunity to examine these questions.

This chapter is based on interviews with key players in the events that transpired in Syracuse in late January 2019, news accounts and social media posts about the *Sea-Watch 3* stand-off. It seeks to explore the motivations behind the protest movement as well as examine why the citizen mobilization that convulsed Syracuse when the migrants were left stranded in their harbour quickly abated once *Sea-Watch 3* was granted a port of entry in nearby Catania.

The chapter will review scholarship around what prompts citizens to act when they are faced with a humanitarian situation, with an emphasis on the role that proximity to suffering plays in prompting civil action, a key factor behind the Syracuse protests. The review of existing literature will be followed by an analysis of how the stranding of *Sea-Watch 3* in Syracuse's harbour created an atmosphere of immediacy among citizens that impelled them to challenge the government's “closed ports” policy. A further analysis explores other factors, beyond proximity, that contributed to the spontaneous protests that flared up in Syracuse, including examples set by elected officials and religious leaders and a shared cultural identity that clashed with the harsh treatment of migrants. The final section explores why acts of citizen mobilization around a humanitarian issue are difficult to sustain, as was the case in Syracuse, where the movement quickly fizzled out. Once the immediacy created by the presence of *Sea-Watch 3* was removed, other concerns that citizens held overrode the emotions that had been roused in the protesters by the proximity to the migrants' plight. Among those overriding factors were a collective burnout of the city's psyche because of the long-running nature of the migrant crisis and worries citizens had about the depressed local economy.

### **Between proximity, moral spectatorship and identity**

Indignation with witnessing the migrants' plight was a major factor in the outpouring of support for the migrants trapped on *Sea-Watch 3*. Coming face to face with their human suffering when the ship was blocked in the city's harbour, residents took to the streets to call for their release. The immediacy of seeing the migrants being kept from disembarking was a key factor in spurring the citizens of Syracuse to publicly challenge the national government's policies. Citizens of Milan were similarly compelled into action in 2013 when survivors of two deadly migrant shipwrecks off the island of Lampedusa travelled north and ended up camping near the city's main train station. In her study of how Milan's citizens responded to the unfolding migrant

crisis, Giulia Sinatti (2019, p. 141) notes how residents, “witnessing the scene at their doorstep”, spontaneously mobilized to distribute food, blankets and clothing to the traumatized and destitute shipwreck survivors; similar to the spontaneous calls from Syracuse residents to let the stranded *Sea-Watch 3* migrants disembark. The Milan example – and the nature of the Syracuse protests – indicate that organized citizen actions that form in the face of human distress often are reactive. Movements will swell when people are confronted directly with suffering, but as the Syracuse protests show, these actions are short lived as the immediacy of the situation fades from people’s view.

The idea that close visuals of human suffering are powerful catalysts for citizen action is also supported by findings in a 2016 study by Mette Mortensen and Hans-Jorg Trezn.

Mortensen and Trezn (2016) examine the public outrage that erupted globally over the plight of Syrian refugees when a photograph of the body of 2-year-old Alan Kurdi, taken on a Turkish beach after the boy drowned while his family tried to cross the Aegean Sea to Greece, was shared widely on social media. The researchers found that image created moral bonds among disparate people, much like the scene of *Sea-Watch 3* stranded in Syracuse’s harbour brought together a broad coalition of residents in protest. The protesters appear to fall under Mortensen and Trezn’s (2016) classification of critical observers, who “assess causes and effects of the visual evidence at hand and take a stance on moral responsibility”.

The street protests in Syracuse also corresponded to a phenomenon described in the study, “From Border to Border: Refugee Solidarity Activism in Italy Across Space, Time and Practices”, by Lorenzo Zamponi (2018), whose research found that citizen protests often happened when the government placed an obstacle on a migrant route, as Salvini’s order did to the passengers aboard *Sea-Watch 3*.

The opportunities for mobilisation are created in most cases by the inter-action between a specific spatial setting (an island in the middle of the Mediterranean, a train station in the centre of a big city, a border town) and some initiative taken by a specific actor, most often a government (closing a border, opening a detention centre, dismantling an informal camp).

(Zamponi 2018, p. 109)

In his study “Compassion and Repression: The Moral Economy of Immigration Policies in France”, Didier Fassin (2005) examined public outrage over the detention of some 900 migrants, mostly Kurds, who were rescued after their ship wrecked off the coast of France in 2001. Fassin (2005) wrote that initial public hostility toward the “illegal immigrants” turned sympathetic after television reports showed women, children and the elderly crying behind barbed wire fences. “This gave birth to a different rhetoric. They became ‘victims’ of political oppression as well as of common misfortune. Surely, the ‘homeland of human rights’ would not let them suffer in what was now referred to as a ‘camp’” (Fassin 2005, p. 373).

Fassin (2005) noted how the French prided themselves on upholding human rights. In Syracuse, people proudly described the centuries-old Sicilian tradition of welcoming people from other lands. The Italian government's detention of migrants on a ship during a winter storm offended this long-standing view they had of themselves.

## The backdrop

The protest movement in Syracuse began unfolding on 19 January when *Sea-Watch 3*, at the time the only charity-run rescue boat operating in the Mediterranean, picked up the 47 migrants from a rubber dinghy after it left the coast of Libya.

The stream of migrants making the dangerous central Mediterranean crossing had dwindled at that point in time, in part because of Salvini's closing Italian ports to rescue missions. According to the International Office for Migration (IOM 2019a), 7,118 migrants had successfully made the central Mediterranean crossing, landing in Italy and Malta, during the first eight months of 2019, compared to 20,510 over the same period in 2018. But the crossing became even deadlier. By late September 2019, more than 650 people had died in the central Mediterranean while trying to reach Europe (IOM 2019b). With traffickers supplying small rubber dinghies or wooden boats not seaworthy enough to make it across, migrants using the central Mediterranean route – most of whom had been tortured, abused or used as slave labour in Libya before their escape from detention centres – depended on sea rescues to survive.

Francesco Italia extended his welcome to *Sea-Watch 3* on 24 January, issuing an official statement that he would allow the charity ship to dock at Syracuse and let the people off in clear defiance of the national government's ban. His city, he said, had a history of welcoming people, “a distinctive trait from which we do not intend to deviate” (Catania 2019). The next day, Italian authorities let *Sea-Watch 3* enter Syracuse's harbour and anchor about a mile and a half offshore, giving it some protection from the waves and winds. But the Italian government remained firm: come no further. The migrants must stay on board.

And so, with the mayor's offer of a port overruled by the national government, the *Sea-Watch 3* crew and passengers rode out the storm from their berth in the harbour, the dazzling white marble palazzi of Syracuse's historic centre, an island called Ortygia, tantalizingly close. The ship's new location near shore also brought the migrants' plight into the direct view of the citizens of Syracuse, who could see the ship from the waterfront. Much like seeing migrants miserable outside Milan's train station in 2013 mobilized people in the landlocked north, so did the sight of a ship take root in the awareness of Syracuse's seafaring people. News of the mayor's offer to take in the migrants spread and some residents decided to mobilize to show their support.

### Suffering was “impossible to cover up”

Citizens found it difficult to ignore what was happening aboard *Sea-Watch 3*. The situation was no longer something they read about in the newspapers or saw being condemned or championed on social media. “When faced with something concrete, you can’t stay indifferent,” said Archbishop Salvatore Pappalardo, the spiritual leader of the Syracuse’s Catholic faithful since 2008, during an interview in August 2019. “There were people there who couldn’t disembark and it was winter.”<sup>4</sup>

The archbishop was describing the moral spectatorship identified by Mortensen and Trenz (2016). The reaction in Syracuse sprang from a similar dynamic, piercing the consciousness of the city. “What happened in the Sea-Watch case was to smack the situation in their faces,” said Gabriel Bernardo da Silva, director of Centro Ciao, a migrant services centre run by the Catholic Marist order in Syracuse.

It was impossible to cover up, impossible to sweep it under the carpet. It’s one thing to hear that Salvini is pushing people back to Libya or hearing that this law doesn’t allow the people to enter, but it is another thing to see it in front of you.<sup>5</sup>

While moral spectatorship played a role in Syracuse during those days of protest, the outrage being expressed on the streets also was fuelled by the proximity to the stranded ship, identity politics and the direct action of local non-profit groups and politicians.

Carla Frenguelli, president of AccoglieRete, a non-profit organization that offers services to under-aged unaccompanied migrants in Syracuse, said that word about the stranded ship went out on a WhatsApp chat group whose participants mostly worked for other NGOs and social service organizations in the area. They pulled together plans for a protest that Saturday, 26 January, on a beach facing *Sea-Watch 3*.<sup>6</sup>

Among the many groups involved were unions and the local chapters of Amnesty International, Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana (ARCI), a national social services organization, and Legambiente, an environmental NGO. Frenguelli said the protesters made huge welcome signs and brought bunches of balloons in hopes that the passengers on *Sea-Watch 3* would see them and find some comfort in understanding that their plight was being noticed. One banner had the slogan, “Fateli Scendere” (Let Them Off), which became a rallying cry during the city’s week-long opposition movement. The desire to make their statement visible to the migrants was evidence of the power of literally *seeing* the other in stimulating citizen humanitarianism. This observation underscores the importance that proximity plays in inspiring citizen humanitarianism, in contrast to classical humanitarianism outreach, the goals of which may seem distant and fail to spur the kind of group action seen in Syracuse in late January.

Several hundred people, bundled in coats and hats, showed up at the protest on the beach that Saturday. Regular citizens joined the activists. Members of a boy scout troop came out and, during a particularly poignant moment, students in the chorus of Syracuse's Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico gathered on the beach and sang a capella, their voices wafting over the water towards *Sea-Watch 3*.

Frenguelli, of AccoglieRete, said she believed *Sea-Watch 3* also provided a rallying point for residents who privately opposed the government's migration policies. "Maybe they agreed that these people should be taken in but never did anything personally about it," she said. "Then faced with this political climate of hate, which continues to grow, they thought that I, too, have to contribute."<sup>7</sup>

Mayor Italia said he was surprised at the city's response. "The people of Syracuse do not always go in the streets to protest. We don't have a history of resistance," he said. "But in light of the situation, citizens spontaneously went out to make these people feel welcomed."<sup>8</sup>

The protests gained steam. Italian news media descended on the city and the *Sea-Watch 3* stand-off became a national story. Two days later, another large rally was held in a plaza near the ruins of an ancient Greek temple of Apollo. Some residents also hung sheets spray-painted with "Let Them Off" from the balconies of their apartments. A number of pundits noted that the last time Sicilians hung sheets from their balconies to express outrage was in 1992 after the prominent anti-Mafia prosecutors Paolo Borsellino and Giovanni Falcone were assassinated in separate Mafia bombings in the Palermo area (Filippone 2019).

Some residents described how the scene of the stranded rescue ship in the harbour elicited emotional responses that propelled them to actively protest the government's "closed port" policy. One local businessman interviewed in July 2019 said the *Sea-Watch 3* stand-off stirred feelings of compassion that compelled them to try to help people in need. The archbishop's observation that residents could no longer be indifferent to the migrants' suffering supports this point.

### **Leadership and cultural identity**

While the citizens' mobilization was largely due to the immediacy that residents felt seeing *Sea-Watch 3* anchored in the harbour, other factors contributed to creating an atmosphere in which the protests flourished. Among them were the statements and actions by political and religious leaders that were echoed in the moral stance voiced by the citizen protesters, as well as a collective sense of identity among Sicilians that they were a welcoming people.

Mayor Italia's decision to defy the government's "closed ports" directive and welcome the trapped migrants to Syracuse set the stage for residents to themselves call for the migrants' release. He continued to show public support of the migrants after his initial statement. On 27 January, the day after the beach protest, he and a group of parliamentarians motored out to *Sea-Watch 3* in a rented rubber dinghy, even though Italian authorities had rejected official requests for permission to board the ship to check on the conditions of the passengers. Italia and members of parliament Nicola Fratoianni, national secretary of the Italian Left party, Stefania

Prestigiacommo of the People of Freedom party and Riccardo Magi of the +Europa party visited with the migrants, listened to their stories and assured them that there were Italians who supported them. Italia said: “I wanted to let them know they were welcome, not that after risking their lives crossing deserts and being held in Libya that they were now being refused. I wanted to make them feel like human beings, brothers.”<sup>9</sup>

In a statement to reporters after returning to shore, Prestigiacommo noted that she was from Syracuse and had for years witnessed the arrival of migrants on Sicily’s shores. But she said the current situation with *Sea-Watch 3* could not be ignored. “You can’t turn your head away,” she said. “We agree that we must involve Europe, but these people are exhausted. It’s heart-breaking to see their reality up close” (Albanese 2019). The involvement of Prestigiacommo, a member of a centre-right political party, in this mission was evidence of how visible and emotional the topic of barring migrants’ entry had become for people in Italy.

Five months later, the politicians and others who visited *Sea-Watch 3* found they, too, were not immune to Salvini’s tough actions against people who supported the Mediterranean rescues. Italia, the Parliament members and the others who were part of that mission were notified on 5 May that the captaincy of the port of Syracuse, which operates under the jurisdiction of the Italian Coast Guard, had issued an administrative fine of 2,000 euros against each of them for boarding *Sea-Watch 3* without permission (Ziniti 2019).

Francesco Italia said he and the others were contesting the fines in court. He said he had no regrets about standing up to Salvini and going against his orders not to visit *Sea-Watch 3*. “I would do it again and again,” the mayor said, adding that, as an elected official, he would abide by whatever court ruling was ultimately made regarding the fine, which he described as “a badge of honour”.<sup>10</sup>

Statements by Syracuse’s archbishop also added to creating an atmosphere in the city that reinforced the citizen protest movement. On 13 December, a little more than a month before the *Sea-Watch 3* controversy began, Pappalardo used the feast day of the city’s patron saint Lucy to urge compassion for migrants. He returned to the theme in public statements he made after the rescue boat landed in Syracuse’s harbour. “The message that I wanted to bring was independent of any political decisions, because I can’t speak to politics,” he said. “But it is my responsibility as archbishop to communicate the gospel and in the gospel, Christ says, ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me.’”<sup>11</sup>

As the protests in Syracuse mounted, the archbishop felt he needed to offer a spiritual outlet for emotions washing over the city. The archdiocese called a meeting with priests and lay employees who worked with migrants to discuss what action the church could take, according to da Silva, director of the Centro Ciao migrant services centre.<sup>12</sup> The discussion resulted in plans for an evening vigil in Syracuse’s magnificent Baroque cathedral, built around the remains of an ancient Greek temple and a powerful symbol of the different civilizations that have populated the city over the centuries. The archdiocese said the gathering would offer an opportunity “to reflect on our humanity” away from the media clamour surrounding the *Sea-Watch 3* stand-off. Every pew was occupied on the evening of

the 30 January vigil. “In this moment of suffering because the ship was anchored and they weren’t allowed to get off, the church was open for a moment of prayer,” said Pappalardo. “They were there because the people of the city were living this situation.”<sup>13</sup>

Others, when asked to explain why opposition percolated to the surface that week in Syracuse, pointed to a subtler factor having to do with the history and character of Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean. Because of its highly strategic location, the island has been at the crossroads of many cultures since ancient times. The island has been fought over and inhabited by the ancient Greeks and Romans, the Carthaginians, Normans, Arabs and the French and Spanish. Some say this unique history instilled in the modern Sicilian a tolerance of migration. This rhetoric of a shared identity also, in part, expressed a self-perception of Sicily as being in opposition to the values of Italy’s industrial, capitalistic north, where Salvini’s North League party originated and has shaped the political anti-immigrant discourse and where there has historically been an anti-southern Italy animus. Mayor Italia said: “Syracuse is an ancient city dating back to 700 BC. It has a history of integrating different cultures and people and because of this, it has a spirit of welcome that is sacred throughout our history.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Resolution, but no long-term solution**

Several days into the stand-off, the opposition in Syracuse showed no sign of waning. The controversy had by this time made its way into the international news media and human rights organizations were strongly condemning Italy’s keeping *Sea-Watch 3* at bay. On 26 January, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the IOM and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) issued a joint statement in which they said forcing the migrants, including 13 unaccompanied minors, to remain on *Sea-Watch 3* in cold temperatures and rough seas was untenable. The organizations urged the European Union (EU) to find a “safe and orderly landing mechanism in the central Mediterranean” that would put an end to the current approach, in which similar stand-offs precipitated by Salvini’s “*porti chiusi*” policy had ended in a “ship-by-ship” resolution (UNHCR 2019b).

That same kind of ad hoc agreement brought *Sea-Watch 3*’s January odyssey to a close. The first indication that a resolution was imminent came from the Sea-Watch International Twitter account on 30 January:

The hostage situation seems to be over! After ten days of loitering at sea, finally our guests might reach a safe haven. #Europe should be ashamed. Human rights must not be conditional to negotiations of the @EU\_Commission, what we need is a sustainable solution. #OpenThePorts.<sup>15</sup>

Salvini’s confirmation soon followed. The interior minister remained defiant and claimed victory, announcing that negotiations with the EU Commission had resulted in commitments from France, Portugal, Germany, Malta, Luxembourg

and Romania to divide the migrants among them. He told the Italian news media: “Mission accomplished! Once again thanks to the work of the Italian government and the determination of the interior ministry, Europe has been forced to intervene and assume its responsibilities” (ANSA 2019).

The next day, *Sea-Watch 3* was given permission to dock at the nearby port city of Catania, where the migrants disembarked and this particular saga ended, only to be repeated many more times as the year progressed.

### **Why Syracuse’s welcome went only so far**

The protest movement in Syracuse dissolved as soon as *Sea-Watch 3* was granted its berth in nearby Catania, bolstering the argument that citizens need to see and be close to a distressing situation in order to mobilize around a humanitarian cause. But some city leaders and observers claimed that the outrage that erupted in Syracuse over treatment of the migrants on *Sea-Watch 3* was superficial at best and only briefly masked an ambivalence about migration and more pressing worries about the economy.

Luca Signorelli, a reporter for local online news outlet *Siracusa News*, who covered the events of *Sea-Watch 3*, was sceptical that the protest movement that week had penetrated deeply into Syracuse’s soul. Signorelli said he believed the mayor’s decision to publicly welcome the migrants aboard *Sea-Watch 3* mostly had rallied citizens who already held similar political beliefs – those of the left and “*i sociali*”, union members and people working in social services. He pointed out that in a city of more than 100,000 residents, each of the protests, while newsworthy, had drawn a mere 200 to 300 demonstrators.<sup>16</sup>

Signorelli said that in his many years of covering news in Syracuse he has witnessed ambivalence among readers to the ongoing immigration story. He noted that refugees and migrants had been landing in Sicily for years, surging in 2016 and 2017 after the EU struck a deal with Turkey that effectively slowed the flow of migrants across the eastern Mediterranean to Greece and pushed more people to attempt the central Mediterranean crossing to Italy. “We were telling the same stories back then,” he said. “People don’t want to hear the stories of immigrants anymore. For them, migrants are numbers.”<sup>17</sup>

Frenguelli and da Silva said that even before the *Sea-Watch 3* drama unfolded in Syracuse’s harbour, they had noticed a general hardening of people’s attitudes towards migrants in Syracuse after Salvini took office in June 2018. Migrants they worked with had been reporting meeting hostility from some residents with more frequency, including anti-immigrant taunts and drivers aggressively cutting them off while they rode bikes.

According to Frenguelli, Syracusans had largely tolerated migrants until Salvini began implementing his anti-immigrant agenda and trumpeting his views on social media. “That climate (of tolerance) has changed. There have been many more of these events”, she said.<sup>18</sup>

At the Centro Ciao centre for migrants, Karfala, a 19-year-old Guinean who arrived in Sicily two years ago, said he was trying to build a life for himself in

Syracuse. While his application for permission to stay in Italy is processed, he finds seasonal work harvesting produce at farms outside the city, earning 25 euros for a seven-hour shift. He also studies Italian and plays for a local soccer club, with dreams of one day becoming a professional player. He is appreciative of the support he has received from the centre and has made Italian friends, but he said he often encounters small acts of hostility as he travels through the city. “The other day I was out and I saw a little boy and I greeted him, but his grandfather called out and said, ‘We don’t talk to Africans,’” Karfala recounted. “I said to him, ‘I am not a bad person. I am not going to do anything bad. I’m a good person. We are equal.’”<sup>19</sup>

Worries over how the continued influx of migrants to Italy would affect the local economy also emerged as a counterpoint to the outpouring of support for *Sea-Watch 3* even at the height of the city’s public welcome. A generous offer emanating from a third pillar of Syracuse’s society – the business community – quickly turned controversial. On 29 January, Giuseppe Rosano, president of Noi Albergatori Siracusa, an alliance of the city’s hotel owners, released an open letter to the national government saying the group was prepared to offer shelter to the 47 migrants. The group said that if the government allowed the *Sea-Watch 3* migrants to disembark in Syracuse, the hotel owners, at their own expense, would provide accommodation for them as well as food and clothing until a more permanent solution for their future in Europe could be set. If no such solution was possible, Rosano said the hotel owners would, again at their own expense, assume responsibility for their integration into Italian society. The offer included commitments to provide lessons in Italian and the Italian Constitution and job training. The final promise included in the letter – to provide the migrants with seasonal jobs in the hotel industry – struck a nerve (La Gazzetta Siracusana 2019).

To many, the offer of employment was insensitive and unwarranted in a province where almost a quarter of the population was jobless – 22.2 per cent compared to a national average of 10.6 per cent – and 52.4 per cent in the 15–24 age group, which nationally stood at 32.2 per cent, according to data released in July 2019 by Confcommercio, the largest business association in Italy (Confcommercio 2019). The offer fed into the narrative, found in many other countries, that migrants would take jobs away from the “true” inhabitants of a place.

The controversy fizzled when two days later the migrants aboard *Sea-Watch 3* were allowed to disembark in Catania, but it illustrated a point raised by the journalist, Signorelli. He believes that the economy is a factor contributing to the ambivalence he sees many residents show towards migrants. “It’s social malaise,” said Signorelli. “We are in a period of protectionism, not just here but in the rest of Europe and the US.” He went on to say: “The economy in Syracuse is stagnant. It’s especially difficult for young people. Some are trying to reinvent themselves by developing businesses in tourism but there are few opportunities for government jobs. It’s all stopped.”<sup>20</sup>

## All quiet on the southern front

Unnoticed by most, on the morning of 29 July 2019, the humanitarian vessel *Open Arms*, operated by the Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms, pulled out of Syracuse's harbour. Later in the day the organization posted a tweet with a video of the ship heading out to the central Mediterranean, saying: "We have few resources, we are vulnerable, but we resist."<sup>21</sup> It was the beginning of a similar story. After picking up nearly 100 mostly African migrants from sinking vessels, the ship spent 19 days stranded in the Mediterranean before five EU states agreed to take them and Italy allowed it to dock at the island of Lampedusa on 20 August.

The *Open Arms* stand-off and other events of the summer – among them the 3 July bombing of a detention centre in Libya that killed more than 50 migrants and the deaths of 150 people in a single shipwreck off the coast of Libya on 25 July – failed to disrupt the normalcy that had returned to Syracuse after its week at the centre of the controversy over how Europe could practically and humanely manage the flow of migrants crossing the Mediterranean.

Some progress toward a solution was made over the summer of 2019. After a late July meeting of EU foreign and interior ministers in Paris, participants announced that 14 EU countries had reached agreement in principle for a temporary mechanism leading to the sharing of responsibility for the resettlement of rescued migrants, with eight of those countries – Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Portugal – pledging cooperation. Salvini, who did not attend the meeting, made clear that his government would not be party to the deal. In a defiant tweet, he said that Italy did not take orders from other countries.<sup>22</sup>

Not long afterwards, Salvini, whose popularity in the polls had been rising, made a tactical move to solidify his power by breaking the shaky governing partnership his Northern League party had with the anti-establishment Five Star Movement and calling for early snap elections, which he believed he could win. The development threw the country into a political crisis, leading President Sergio Mattarella to dissolve the government. Salvini's move backfired when, instead of leading to elections, the Five Star Movement and the centre-left Democratic Party joined forces to form a new government without him and the Northern League.

On 23 September 2019, the Italian government gave permission for *Ocean Viking*, an NGO rescue ship operated jointly by SOS Mediterranee and Doctors Without Borders, to deliver 182 rescued migrants to the Sicilian port of Messina. Also that day, at a meeting of interior ministers in Malta, Italy, France, Germany and Malta agreed, again without releasing details, on a temporary mechanism for redistributing migrants, taking a step toward ending the stand-offs at sea (Deutsche Welle 2019).

## Conclusion

This chapter shows that the proximity of the charity boat in Syracuse's harbour during a storm was the most powerful force behind the week of citizen protests in January 2019. For a brief point in time, the plight of the 47 stranded migrants came

into focus for many residents of the city and they were compelled by compassion that the scene stirred in them to publicly speak out against the government's "closed port" policy. Furthermore, the impulse to protest, sparked by the proximity to suffering, was supported and fed by two other elements at play in Syracuse. The mayor's and archbishop's public statements sympathizing with the migrants set compelling examples for their constituents to follow, underscoring the influence that local political and religious leaders can wield in spurring citizen humanitarian acts. A collective identity was also behind the Syracuse protests. As noted, many of the people interviewed described how the *Sea-Watch 3* stand-off was an affront to a proud Sicilian tradition, going back centuries, of being a welcoming destination for people of different cultures. How they viewed themselves factored into their decision to speak out against denial of entry of these migrants.

What happened after the stand-off ended – an immediate cessation of public protest even though the government continued to enforce the "closed ports" policy – showed that the factors that converged that week in Syracuse could not sustain such acts of citizen humanitarianism. As the immediacy of seeing the migrants trapped on a ship in their harbour disappeared, so too faded the impulses that drove them into the streets in protest. A general weariness over the continued arrival of migrants and personal worries about the economy helped to dull the outrage that briefly burned in Syracuse.

## Notes

- 1 Sea-Watch International, 24 January 2019. Available at: [https://twitter.com/seawatch\\_intl/status/1088400885351366656](https://twitter.com/seawatch_intl/status/1088400885351366656) (accessed 17 September 2019).
- 2 Sea-Watch International, 24 January 2019. Available at: [https://twitter.com/seawatch\\_intl/status/1088476664433180672](https://twitter.com/seawatch_intl/status/1088476664433180672) (accessed 17 September 2019).
- 3 Francesco Italia, interview with author, July 2019.
- 4 Salvatore Pappalardo, interview with author, July 2019.
- 5 Gabriel Bernardo da Silva, interview with author, August 2019.
- 6 Carla Frenguelli, interview with author, August 2019.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Francesco Italia, interview with author, July 2019.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Salvatore Pappalardo, interview with author, July 2019.
- 12 Gabriel Bernardo da Silva, interview with author, August 2019.
- 13 Salvatore Pappalardo, interview with author, July 2019.
- 14 Francesco Italia, interview with author, July 2019.
- 15 Sea-Watch International, 30 January 2019. Available at: [https://twitter.com/seawatch\\_intl/status/1090579065914966017](https://twitter.com/seawatch_intl/status/1090579065914966017) (accessed 17 September 2019).
- 16 Luca Signorelli, interview with author, August 2019.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Carla Frenguelli, interview with author, August 2019.
- 19 Karfala, interview with author, August 2019.
- 20 Luca Signorelli, interview with author, August 2019.
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- 22 Matteo Salvini, 22 July 2019. Available at: <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1153371552077025282> (accessed 17 September 2019).

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# 10 Memorial tourism and citizen humanitarianism

## Volunteers' civil pilgrimage to the "life jacket graveyard" of Lesbos, Greece

*Giovanna Di Matteo*

### Introduction

The island of Lesbos (North Aegean, Greece) has become an emblematic place for migration in the Mediterranean. Over the last two decades, an increasing number of people have arrived from Turkey seeking to reach Europe. During the "migrant crisis" from 2008–2015, the number of people rose sharply. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2015), 500,018 people arrived on the island from January to December 2015, accounting for 59 per cent of the total arrivals in Greece and almost half of the total arrivals in the entire Mediterranean area (1,015,078) for that year (UNHCR 2016). Due to a lack of organic and efficient national and European response, at the end of 2015 several volunteers and grass-root organizations arrived in Lesbos to support migrants arriving on the shores of Lesbos, most of them northern European countries such as the Netherlands, the UK and Norway, but also from the United States and Australia. Some places around the island became symbolic for people who lived through those days, and those people who would arrive later.

In this chapter I focus on the relations between the phenomenon of volunteer tourism and the practice of visiting "sites of memory", also known as memorial tourism. In particular, I focus on the so-called life jacket graveyard. This site is a dismissed landfill located between the towns of Molyvos and Eftalou on Lesbos, where life jackets and rubber dinghies – abandoned by migrants at arrival or washed ashore – were discarded. This site is particularly relevant because it carries a material and symbolic correlation to the migrants' presence on, and passage through, the island, and specifically with reference to the tragedy of death at sea during the voyage. The life jacket graveyard has become one of the best-known symbols of the "refugee crisis" worldwide and it attracts large numbers of visitors, particularly volunteer tourists. It is important to note that the life jacket graveyard is a visual coagulation of various instances: for volunteer tourists it may configure as a place of memory while for politicians it becomes the evidence they use to promote repressive regulations towards migrants.<sup>1</sup>

After presenting the context in which the humanitarian response began in Lesbos, I will discuss the conceptualization of memory as a social construct.

Through interviews and participant observation, I will examine the individual motivations that bring volunteers to visit memorial sites, including meanings they assign to such memorials and how this relates to the practice of citizen humanitarianism. Finally, I will investigate volunteers' practices and emotions at this site of memory. Taken together, I conclude that these motivations and sentiments regarding memorial tourism can be a mechanism to turn a generally depoliticized volunteer tourism into a form of transnational citizen humanitarianism that expresses contestations to border regimes.

### **Lesvos's reception system and the emergence of volunteer tourism**

Even before the increasing arrivals that started in 2008, the Pagani detention centre in Lesvos, a government-run site to detain undocumented migrants and asylum seekers, had become a symbol of the inhumane conditions of migrants' detention (MigrEurope 2013). Following strong protests, the centre was closed and local activists from the "Village of All Together" opened a centre called "Pikpa" on the former site of a children's summer camp where people could be temporarily hosted – in acceptable conditions – before moving on to the mainland. In September 2013, in the village of Moria, about seven kilometres away from Mytilene, a new government-sponsored detention and registration centre opened on the site of a former military base. Since then, the Moria centre is jointly managed by the Greek police and Frontex<sup>2</sup> with assistance from the UNHCR (Trubeta 2015).<sup>3</sup> Frontex had begun working in Lesvos in 2006 (with a reinforced presence from 2011) while the UNHCR began operations in 2009; both were immediately involved in the management of the Moria detention centre.

Changes to Lesvos accelerated in 2015. Another reception centre was opened at Kara Tepe, bringing the total to three on the island (along with Moria and Pikpa). Then in September of that year, the Moria centre was declared an EU hotspot.<sup>4</sup> Alongside the establishment of the hotspot system, the EU and Turkey signed an agreement on 18 March 2016 aimed at stopping migrants' journeys in Turkey. Moreover, with Decision No. 4375 of the Asylum Service on 31 May 2016, Greece imposed the so-called geographical restriction on Lesvos, and the island was transformed from a transit point to a prison island. Migrants were forced to stay in Lesvos for the whole procedure of the asylum request, which might take up to two or three years. Due to a continuing influx of migrants, a number of temporary camps were created in the northern part of Lesvos. At the time of writing, only Stage 2 – a first aid and assistance UNHCR camp – is still active in the village of Skala Sikamineas, where people landing at the north point of the island are temporarily hosted.

These changes led to a decrease in the rate of arrivals on Lesvos starting with a sudden drop after 21 March 2016 (UNHCR, 2017, 2018, 2019).<sup>5</sup> In 2017, 11,570 people arrived in Lesvos; in 2018 and 2019, arrivals increased slightly with 15,034 and 27,049, respectively. Despite the fact that arrivals never reached again the numbers recorded in 2015, an increasing number of people were, and

still are, hosted in the centres, detained for months or years in Lesvos as well as in other Aegean islands. In September 2018, a total of 10,941 migrants (NCCBCIA 2018) were detained in Lesvos and by February 2020 that number had more than doubled to 21,725 people (NCCBCIA 2020).

To this influx of migrants, initial responses came from local communities and individual volunteers (Skleparis and Armakolas 2016) and the formal humanitarian response arrived in Lesvos shortly afterward. As Daphne, a local resident and activist, put it:

At first there was no one on the island, only the local inhabitants, and the situation was very hard ... Nobody at the government would understand that there was a real emergency. Only in September and October, some organizations began to arrive with volunteers, but before we spent months completely alone.<sup>6</sup>

Eventually thousands of people, from a wide range of national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), grassroots organizations, activists and volunteers would arrive in the Aegean islands seeking to aid migrants (Tsilimpounidi and Carastathis 2017).

There is no official public record of how many organizations and volunteers were on the island from 2015 up to the present. Many organizations were created ad hoc, often by people who had already volunteered on the island in previous months (Kitching et al. 2016). Many aid groups were informal and did not register with local authorities, thus the data on the number of volunteers and NGOs that passed through Lesvos is highly uncertain. Kitching et al. (2016) attempted an estimate that suggested between 2,060 and 4,240 volunteers worked on Lesvos from November 2014 to February 2016. In May 2018, the Coordination Committee for the Registration, Coordination and Evaluation of NGOs of the Secretariat General for the Aegean and Island Policy declared there were 114 NGOs operating out of reception and identification centres and 7,356 volunteers working on Lesvos from 2016 onwards (Observatory 2018). However, it is important to note that these numbers have not been verified.<sup>7</sup>

The migrant crisis in the Aegean islands attracted journalists, photographers, celebrities, artists, film-makers, activists, researchers and many volunteer tourists (or “voluntourists”) (Franck 2018, p. 200). The term “volunteer tourist” suggests that volunteers are engaged in travel (as defined by the UN World Tourism Organization) but with the purpose to “do something” for migrants while also acquiring new experiences to broaden their personal horizons and increase their awareness of social phenomena, such as migration and refugee challenges (Trihas and Tsilimpokos 2018). Daldeniz and Hampton (2011) distinguish between “VOLUNtourists” and “volunTOURISTS”, suggesting that for some persons the contribution of work for a cause takes precedence, while others are more focused on the travel and experience. In the case of Lesvos, my data show the majority of individuals identified as VOLUNtourists, but this self-identification does not blur their “tourist identity”; rather it is a renegotiation of what it means to be a tourist

in Lesvos. The pure ideal of “humanitarian help” and the non-committal and “selfish” tourism are not to be strictly categorized in opposition. Volunteer tourism can be a new form of balanced socio-spatial practice.

In Lesvos, volunteers are specifically a consequence of the “borderization” process (Cuttitta 2014) of the European islands in the Mediterranean and, as argued by Pallister-Wilkins (2017), their “humanitarian borderwork” is both a cause and an effect of borderscaping on the island. They are a consequence as volunteers go to Lesvos because of the desire to save lives and to assist migrants, which is connected to the border policies implemented at a national and international level; at the same time they are attracted by the discourses and narratives around this island that represent it as the heart of the refugee crisis. On the other hand, volunteers’ presence and humanitarian (tourist) performances confirm those same discourses and become part of the production of the borderscape.

I consider volunteers from the point of view of tourism, looking at some of their practices that could be considered a form of memorial tourism. If we understand borderscapes, on the one hand, as fluid, crossed and traversed by various bodies, narratives and practices (Brambilla 2015; Brambilla and Jones 2020; Pallister-Wilkins 2017), we can include volunteers’ visits to sites that are connected to the memorialization of the migration phenomenon. On the other hand, if citizen-humanitarian spaces risk being an active part of the border security apparatus, they can potentially be spaces of resistance and solidarity (Pallister-Wilkins 2020; Stierl 2018; Tazzioli 2018).

It is in this context and from this point of view that I consider volunteer tourists as one of the expressions of citizen humanitarianism. Volunteers’ practices in the field of refugee aid, even when addressed through NGOs (which in many cases, as for my case studies, have been created “from below” in Lesvos) exceed the goals and the spaces established by humanitarian organizations. In this sense, I will consider the relations between volunteer tourism – as an expression of citizen humanitarianism – and the spaces of memory, such as the life jacket graveyard, in order to interrogate what possible forms of countering the border regime can emerge from volunteer tourists’ practices in these spaces.

## Methods

I collected my data over four periods of fieldwork (13 weeks total) carried out between 2018 and 2019. While in Lesvos, I used participant observation, taking part in several activities alongside volunteers during their free time, sharing meals, spending evenings together, following their road trips around the island and sharing an apartment with one volunteer. During my third period of fieldwork, I volunteered for about one month, divided into two week-long periods, with two different organizations. I selected these organizations because they would allow volunteers to stay, respectively, for a minimum of 10 and 14 days, which enabled me to contact both short- and long-term volunteers. The first organization is *Dråpen i Havet* (A Drop in the Ocean), a Norwegian NGO present in Lesvos since 2015, which started as a grassroots movement and now works in Lesvos,

Samos, Athens (Skaramagas and Elefsina) and Nea Kavala in northern Greece. This group conducts educational and recreational activities with adults and children. They have hosted more than 6,500 volunteers in Greece since the end of 2015. The second organization, Refugee4Refugees, was created by a Syrian man and a Spanish woman. They are based in Greece and operate in Lesbos and Samos. Refugee4Refugees also conduct recreational activities for children and collect and distribute donations to migrants. In Lesbos, they manage five to ten volunteers per week.

During my time in Lesbos, I conducted 36 semi-structured interviews, 27 with volunteer tourists and 9 with other actors, such as local residents, organization employees or representatives from the tourism sector. Interviewees were selected through snowball sampling: most of them were people I volunteered with in the above-mentioned organizations. Between February and July 2018, I collected 73 online questionnaires from volunteers who had worked in Lesbos between 2015 and 2018. For the questionnaires, I was able to contact 40 organizations by email and asked them to forward the questionnaire to their past and present volunteers. Furthermore, I posted a link to the survey on the Facebook page “Information Point for Lesbos Volunteers”, which allowed me to reach independent volunteers I had not been able to contact, or those who volunteered for NGOs.<sup>8</sup> Both the interviews carried out in person and the written questionnaire were analysed qualitatively through the software Atlas.ti.

### **Memory-work on Lesbos: the case of the life jacket graveyard**

Memory “pertains to the actualization of the past in some form of contemporary experience” (Foote and Azaryahu 2007, p. 126); specifically, collective memory refers to the memory of a lived experience and/or mythicization of it by a collectivity (Lavabre 2000). In this way, memory is “blind to all but the group it binds” (Nora 1989, p. 9). In other words, there are as many memories as there are groups, and memories are manifold: specific, collective, plural, but also individual – whereas history does not belong (Nora 1989). Foote (1990, p. 380) argues that memory has a twofold meaning, referring to beliefs and ideas held in common by a group of people “that together produce a sense of social solidarity and community” and suggests that groups of individuals act jointly to uphold records of the past. Thus, memory is always socially constructed (Foote and Azaryahu 2007; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), taken from the past and reconstructed in the present (Lavabre 2000), influenced by the current social, economic, cultural and political environments.

The migration memorial sites on Lesbos present a theoretical challenge related to this definition of memory as having two specific moments: a past and a present. In Lesbos, we see a fluid boundary between these categories. While 2015 is considered a watershed and symbolic year for migration to the island, the arrival and permanence of migrants on Lesbos is still continuing. Therefore, it can be said that we are examining the memorialization of an ongoing phenomenon, which contrasts with the idea of memory as the actualization of a clear, distinct moment in the past.

In the memorialization process there are two main aspects that qualify the life jacket graveyard as a site of memory. First of all, as argued by Nora (1989, p. 19) “without the intention to remember, *lieux de memoire* would be indistinguishable from *lieux d’histoire*”. Considering history as an intellectual and secular production, according to Nora (1989) history preserves places or monuments as materials needed for its work. While *lieux de memoire* are dynamic, imbued with different meanings, open to remembering and forgetting, as memory can be manipulated and appropriated. Considering the life jacket graveyard, the word of mouth regarding visiting the site, the presence and passage of volunteers, their intention to understand and share stories – in other words volunteer tourists’ practice of visiting this site – make the life jacket graveyard a *lieu de memoire*. Second, I see in the life jacket graveyard an early stage of the memory-work (Foote and Azaryahu 2007; Young 1997), meant as those above-mentioned processes of engagement with the past, which go beyond the historical reconstruction and include social engagement (Till 2008, 2012).

### **Memorial tourism as citizen-humanitarian practice**

To outline how the memory of contemporary migrations is shaped in the context of Lesvos, we must consider the social groups who share these common memories: migrants, local inhabitants and volunteers. These groups, though not internally homogeneous, share some common past, views and goals, and, at least, some similar activities and spatial practices. Drawing from Halbwachs’s (1950) idea that there are as many memories as groups, in this study, the focus is on volunteer tourists who created a distinctive bond with the life jacket graveyard. As Philippa Kempson, resident in Eftalou and one of the creators of the Hope Project,<sup>9</sup> told me:

It was actually the volunteers ... [that turned the life jacket graveyard into a symbol] ... that place kind of erupted in October 2015, because there was nowhere else to put everything. And the volunteers were working with the rubbish collectors on the beaches to clean up ... you could see the north shores of Lesvos from space ... it was ... huge.<sup>10</sup>

Today, the life jackets are piled in two large heaps, separated by a walking path between them.

The process of memory-work began with the volunteers who were in Lesvos between 2015 and 2016. At that time, when the landings were still frequent and intense, volunteers and NGO workers experienced the fatigue and witnessed the emotions of arrival first-hand: the fear of the sea, the joy of the arrival, but also the death of people who did not make it to the shore and those who passed away shortly after arrival. Regarding these experiences, Philippa said:

Nothing made sense anymore, the volunteers struggled with that and a lot of them who were going and coming back ... they found solace just sitting among the life jackets ... and it was the volunteers who called it the life

jacket graveyard. Because it feels like a graveyard ... it feels a memorial to what happened ... In 2016 you had volunteers coming back after 2015 who would just sit there. And they cry, and they pray, they just sit there quietly ... I went a day up there and there was a group singing. It just feels like a memorial, which is where the name comes from. It's important for the volunteers to live through and talk through what happened to them.<sup>11</sup>

Volunteers are those most involved in the memorialization of the life jacket graveyard and they exercised a great deal of control over the meaning in what Foote (2003) defined the early stage of the memorialization process. Two other aspects of the life jacket graveyard are relevant here. First, the availability of Google Maps made the site more accessible, as one did not need a deep knowledge of the island to find the location.<sup>12</sup> In other words, for sightseeing, Google Maps creates a “marker” (MacCannell 1976). Second, the life jacket graveyard was involved in a process of sacralization that turns an artefact into a sacred object of the tourist ritual (MacCannell 1976), a process that is strongly constructed also through the media (Selwyn 1996), which often guides tourists' gazes (Urry 1990). From 2015 onward, this “heartbreaking mountain”<sup>13</sup> became a symbolic place to the point where it began receiving comments and ratings on Google Maps, a level of attention augmented by the media, journalists, researchers, visuals on social media and simple word of mouth.

Tourism is, at least in part, a peculiar type of memory practice (MacDonald 2012; Sather-Wagstaff 2011). Ahmad and Herzog (2016) call tourism a fundamental part of the emerging regimes of memory that can be identified as a central instrument for the historicization of social, cultural and public memory.

Furthermore, tourism – in this case, volunteer tourism – plays a fundamental role in the process of creating, preserving and modifying memory through practices. Indeed, it can be argued that tourism and memory are tied by a twofold connection. The first connection consists in tourists' appropriation of memory (politically, spatially and socially) through their practices (Ahmad and Herzog 2016). In the case of the life jacket graveyard, the performance and consumption of the site (Sather-Wagstaff 2011) are evident. Volunteers make a “civil pilgrimage” to this symbolic place; they walk around, often serious and silent, and take a moment for reflection. Some people cry. Here, the aspects of the appropriation emerge through the visit, the bodily and emotional engagement with the place, and the discussion with other volunteers. For example, some NGOs organize trips, which ensures that all their volunteers go to the site. Another group (or person) has constructed a small amphitheatre, using the boat engine shells as seats where people can sit and observe (and perhaps discuss) the site in front of them (Figure 10.1).

The second connection between tourists and memory is that they produce memories through their touristic experience, from an individual and collective perspective. Indeed, memories are the results of how and what we choose to remember of the places we visit and the people we meet. Individual and collective memory is often organized around material objects (Bærenholdt et al. 2004) such



*Figure 10.1* Two volunteers observe the life jacket graveyard from above. The boat engine shells at the bottom of the photo are often used as seats.

Source: author's photo.

as photographs or souvenirs (MacDonald 2012). The assembly of memory happens in two different ways. On one hand, tourists make sense of themselves through narratives (Gergen 1994; Giddens 1990; Shotter 1993) and photography of the experience “is part of a theatre of narratives and memories” (Bærenholdt et al. 2004, p. 105) and, thus, part of the production of identity and social relations. On the other hand, the act of taking and sharing photographs – especially through social media – contributes to the establishment of the subject of the photograph as a symbol, reiterating and producing that subject as a marker. Thus, tourists authenticate the symbolism of a place that inspired them to visit a site in the first place (D’Eramo 2017). Moreover, tourists contribute to the geographical diffusion of knowledge around sites of memory “through the narrative, performative and visual culture of travel once off-site, post-visit” (Sather-Wagstaff 2011, p. 22).

Indeed, pieces of the life jacket graveyard have been taken around the world by volunteers. These “splinters of memory” are both material and immaterial. They are shared as stories or as photos. Or they can be objects from the site: many

organizations recycle the discarded life jackets and rubber boats into something new, either taking them from the life jacket graveyard or collecting them after new arrivals. Lesvos Solidarity and Mosaik offer “safe passage” bags, which are then sold – as a sort of “civil souvenir” – to fund the project.<sup>14</sup>

As already discussed, volunteers create an imagined community<sup>15</sup> at Lesvos (Anderson 1983): they “enact or outline citizenship in particular ways through their actions, [they] ‘make’ and act out citizenship collectively” (Kallio and Mitchell 2016, p. 261). It is a community that is connected also through the strong emotions and experiences they share (Ahmed 2004). Spatial practices and embodied memories play a fundamental role in the construction of identity and community formations (Azaryahu 2012; Drozdowski et al. 2016; Hoelscher and Alderman 2004; Legg 2007; Till 2012), to the point that memory has been defined as a “concretion of identity” (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995, p. 130). In the next section, I will look at how this is one first element in which memory-work and the spatial practices related to the life jacket graveyard become part of the construction of a transnational citizen humanitarianism.

### **The social construction of a place of memory: volunteers’ voices**

Of the 96 participants (including both questionnaires and interviews), 39 did not visit the life jacket graveyard. For other participants, their visit to the life jacket graveyard was the only trip they made during their stay on the island, often as one of the stops on a tour of North Lesvos, which was – and still is – where most landings happened.

Most volunteers visit the site due to word of mouth, often hearing that the site is a “must see”. As one volunteer, Ottar, told me: “Quite a lot of those who have been before said, ‘You just have to go there.’”<sup>16</sup> Nicolay, another volunteer, defined the graveyard as a “tourist attraction” for volunteers.<sup>17</sup>

Many among the volunteers I interviewed see visiting the life jacket graveyard as duty and I interpreted this need as somehow functional to confirming their role and belonging to a specific community. By visiting this place, they visually confirm and “sacralize” the reasons why they have come to Lesvos through a staged performance that becomes part of the humanitarian borderscapes of the island (Cavallo and Di Matteo 2020).

The life jacket graveyard is the material evidence, as relayed by Isabel, of “the magnitude of the problem ... and also [a way to] humanize the numbers of people that we hear all the time”.<sup>18</sup> This is true also when a priori expectations were different from what was faced once in Lesvos. As for Hanne, who wanted to see the harsh and sad contrast to the happy time she had while volunteering:<sup>19</sup>

If I’d be totally honest it’s also because people talked about strong feelings and we are mostly seeing the happy side of the refugee lives when working at the community centre and sometimes it feels that we are as far from reality as when we are at home in Norway.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, some volunteers wanted to see tangible and concrete evidence of what was happening, as if meeting migrants was not enough. As in the case of Maryam, they associated the life jackets with people's stories:

Because I deal with a lot of clients [in my work with refugees in the UK] who came from the same route and when they tell me their stories, then I can imagine how they came, how it happened. For me I could relate it very much to my clients' stories.<sup>21</sup>

What Hanne was looking for, "the strong feelings", emerge when exploring volunteers' feelings and reflections following their visit to the graveyard, many indeed expressed strong emotions – typically sadness and frustration, in particular if relating the place to people's stories:

I found it really impressive. It's hard to describe the feeling you get there, but it's quite shocking and breathtaking. It's a special place for me. It symbolizes all the people I met during my stay and my time in Lesbos. It's also a place where all the feelings come together. It's hard to describe, but I think the feelings of hopelessness and the realization about how many people came to Europe looking for safety.<sup>22</sup>

It's a place where I felt sadness because I knew in every life jacket there was a person. I saw a swimming vest with ducks on it for a little girl or boy and I know that it can't save you in the sea. And there were life jackets torn apart and there wasn't any good stuff inside, only package paper inside ... So, it broke my heart [*starts crying*].<sup>23</sup>

Emotions are "an active component of identity and community" (Hutchison and Bleiker 2008, p. 63). They create ties among people to reinforce their sense of identity and group belonging due to shared experiences (Mitchell 2016). And these strong emotions connect well with social movements, which are able to produce solidarities and enhance "people's capacity to act" (Arenas 2015, p. 1125).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, there were volunteers for whom their visit to the life jacket graveyard stimulated further reflection:

I think people should go there, it gives some of the history and at least now, when there are not so many boats arriving ... it's a completely different situation. But going there and seeing this pile of life jackets gives a bit of the history and background and a sort of starting point for the whole thing. Why are these camps here, why are there all of these volunteers here, why are all the NGOs involved here? You can see more or less the starting point. Of course, it doesn't say it on the thing, you just see a pile.<sup>25</sup>

I know that the visit is also a time of reflection, because some people unfortunately lost their lives, so ... you get this emotion as well. But then you start asking yourself a question: is it that some people drowned in the water, or is it because of the political situation, or is it because how different nations

talk to each other? Why did I need to leave Poland, why did those people have to leave their countries?<sup>26</sup>

From this last comment, we can see a connection the speaker draws between her own life and the refugees' experience (see Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan, Chapter 11 this volume), allowing for further reflection on the causes of what is going on in Lesbos.

From the quotations reported so far, is evident that many volunteers visited the graveyard as a way to gain understanding or a stronger impression of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, a few volunteers (mostly among those who stayed for a longer time) expressed scepticism about visiting the life jacket graveyard, as Christos explained:

I see things daily: I see volunteers, I see refugees, I interact with them, I talk with them, I spend 12 hours a day with them, and then ... I've focused, I've read a lot, I've researched, I have done a very good dissertation. So, I know things behind the headlines, the life jacket graveyard for no reason gives me something to go and see, it's a place where they store life jackets. For me that's it.<sup>27</sup>

Others either expressed the idea of the life jacket graveyard as a place that could raise some personal questions, or spoke about how the site could be used to raise awareness about migration issues:

I really wanted to go ... because someone would make out of it a graveyard to raise awareness and have a good impact, so I was thinking if I would be emotional or if it would have a good impact thinking that people are getting aware of it and yeah ... doing something out of these horrible life jackets.<sup>28</sup>

Most volunteers believed the presence of the life jacket graveyard would be important to raise awareness, and that their own visit to the site would be useful to the same ends. Following their visits, they would be able to talk about the graveyard (and the migrant crisis on Lesbos) to their family and friends:

It was heartbreaking over there. For the people at home I thought it was necessary to know that. Because every person in Moria, or in Samos, is coming over the sea. And they all had life jackets on them, so I thought it was very important to show people at home to raise awareness.<sup>29</sup>

Some volunteers suggested building more structure into the site to make it an official monument that could amplify the messages and raise awareness beyond the community of volunteers:

I think that there should be structure ... because you could raise a lot of awareness ... things like journalist coming and hearing about this life jacket graveyard, taking pictures, publishing them. Everyone being aware that Lesbos

is one of the islands where refugees arrive in very bad conditions ... and I think it would definitely raise awareness. And I think that if it was in a nice place more people would go, and maybe more people would understand the situation, the locals should go ... I would think it's more important for locals to go or tourists ... I posted stories on Instagram and I received ten messages of people asking, "Where is this? Oh my god this is terrible", so I'm sure that more people will come, because I'm sure that tourists who come to Lesvos know about the situation and they will hear about this life jacket graveyard and will go, they'll feel sad, angry and frustrated once again, but then I think something more organized and clean will come out of it. Maybe there will be a decision by the local government to put it somewhere else, so it attracts more people.<sup>30</sup>

For some volunteers, however, critical thinking about the meaning and interpretation of the site led them to view the life jacket graveyard as a possible element of sterile pity. Kaayin said memorializing the site might feed "this idea of 'poor people'... I don't like the idea of pitying refugees ... I think what the life jacket graveyard does is that in many cases ... to make it seem more 'those poor refugees'".<sup>31</sup> Kaayin's words relate to what Fassin (2007, p. 517) calls the "humanitarian reduction of the victim", however they also pose a challenge to the "humanitarian gaze" over migrants that also characterizes citizen-led groups.

The critical reflection inspired by the graveyard could also, some volunteers suggested, stimulate advocacy in Europe and influence the way the EU manages immigration:

Obviously, many people when they come here and they see all these sad things they either already question the policies or they start to question them, but ... I didn't see it as resistance ... It was more about advocacy than resistance. Like spreading the message of what it is that's not working in the system or we need help, or we need to change this ... that is our "resistance" ... I think it's more empathy.<sup>32</sup>

Holding different positions and perspectives, many of the interviewees highlighted criticisms. Ottar, for example, spoke with bitterness, seeing the life jacket graveyard as a symbol of the failure of the European immigration system:

I think ... at least at the moment is an important place to show, it's a monument to the failed refugee policy, at least on the European level. So, I don't think you should be in Lesvos and not visiting it, I think it's important at least to see the remnants of what it was, what still is ... And then people can put on ideas and feelings of what should have been done differently. I don't ... think I would see it as a site of resistance, but again as a strong symbol of the failed refugee policy ... and yeah ... that failed quite a lot.<sup>33</sup>

From these examples, we can see that volunteers are not simply consuming the mainstream narratives of the memorial. Rather, they engage their own

subjectivities and personal stories within such narratives, thus creating new meanings and interpretations (Sather-Wagstaff 2011). As Mark underlined:

Memorialization of events is very politicized. So, it's better that it's not politicized by the state, or even by non-state organizations. At least with the life jacket people can take away what they want from the experience, it's not pack element what to think.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusions

This chapter has considered the life jacket graveyard as the fulcrum of the recognition of volunteer tourism as a form of citizen humanitarianism. Indeed, outside their volunteer work, volunteers act to confirm their role and participation in the community through their acknowledgment of the life jacket graveyard as a place of memory, through their “civil pilgrimage” to the site and their spatial practices at the site itself. The tourist practice of visiting a place of memory, and the emotions that arise, become the elements that tie together this transnational citizenship, founded on a humanitarian basis.

The volunteers in this study expressed the need for a deeper understanding and knowledge about the migration crisis and the moral imperative to spread awareness about the situation. This work is happening through the visualization and performance of visiting this site, and through the circulation of material and virtual pieces (in the media and social media) of the life jackets. If, on one hand, there are some people like Mark who argue: “I think a lot of people want to understand oppression”<sup>35</sup> – thus naming what is happening in Lesvos as “oppression”<sup>36</sup> – in general it seems that a more radical criticism, and sometimes a clear understanding, of the border regime and the borderization of Lesvos is missing. This sentiment is supported by statements from Heta and Ottar who argue that, although there is the acknowledgement of a political system failure, they do not consider their volunteer work and the visit to the life jacket graveyard as forms of resistance.

The reasons for the lack of a deeper politicized challenge can be found in Butcher's (2011, p. 75) conception of volunteer tourism as “an individualistic, narcissistic, and incredibly limited approach to politics”. Butcher's conception is part of a broader scholarly approach that sees humanitarianism as an individualized challenge of being a caring, responsible and active citizen of the world, thus risking hiding the structures of global capitalism that generate and reiterate inequality (Mostafanezhad 2014; Sin et al. 2015). In other words, emotional modes of governmentality connected to humanitarianism contribute to a “depoliticized global ‘care citizenship’” (Mitchell 2016, p. 290). In general, we must keep in mind the wider literature on humanitarianism and its critiques, such as that by Fassin (2011) who describes the formation of a humanitarian government over the last few decades.

However, the other side of the coin must still be considered before drawing final judgements. Mostafanezhad (2014, p. 116) writes: “[B]y paying attention to how the good intentions of volunteer tourism participants can have negative consequences we can begin to re-assemble the popular humanitarian gaze ... [and]

open up new spaces for collective and political action.” It is from this standpoint, I believe, that even though the actions or positions of volunteer tourists may often not be politically radical, the volunteers in Lesbos are questioning the status quo by virtue of their experience. I argue that the interplay between the territorialization of the experience and the deterritorialization of its echoes play a fundamental role in this sense (Mitchell 2016). The non-official memorialization of the life jacket graveyard is an example: the word of mouth that reaches people all over the world and that pushes many other people to it, the questions the site inspires and the need to confront each other about migration that the volunteers express – all are significant. Such analysis does not neglect the strong powers in play and the role that humanitarianism has in the securitization of borders; neither wants to be the umpteenth element of moving the focus away from essential challenges, such as just and equal possibilities of free movement for everyone. On the other hand, I argue that it may be seen as the sprouting of a specific political subjectivity derived from citizen humanitarianism. This position, that volunteers derive from the experience (and from their practices of memory-work), could be viewed as an intermediate stage between activism and depoliticized voluntourism. This stage could be the middle passage that is fundamental to opening cracks that allow more radical positions and actions to infiltrate citizen-humanitarian practices.

## Notes

- 1 On 20 September 2019, the Greek press reported that Taxiarchis Verros, the mayor of West Lesbos, had filed a request to remove the life jackets from the site due to environmental reasons (Kokkinidis 2019). However, in February 2020, he transferred (and invited the citizens to follow his example) some of the life jackets to the construction site for a new reception centre as a sign of protest against new migrant facilities in the northern part of the island, where tourism is more developed and the local population more hostile to migrants. See [www.kathimerini.gr/1065068/gallery/epikairothta/ellada/mytilhnh-swsivia-kai-varkes-met-anastwn-metafer8hkan-ston-xwro-poy-8a-ginei-to-kleisto-kentro-fwtografies](http://www.kathimerini.gr/1065068/gallery/epikairothta/ellada/mytilhnh-swsivia-kai-varkes-met-anastwn-metafer8hkan-ston-xwro-poy-8a-ginei-to-kleisto-kentro-fwtografies).
- 2 Frontex is an agency of the European Union (EU) headquartered in Warsaw, Poland, tasked with border control of the European Schengen area, in coordination with the border and coast guards of Schengen area member states.
- 3 In November 2019, the government announced the construction of new “closed facilities” to face the growing number of people arriving to the Aegean islands (Hurst 2019). At the end of February 2020, after the attempt by the local administrations to find alternative solutions (Smith 2020), the government sent ten special squads (MAT) to face the protests against the construction of a new detention centre in Karava, close to Montamados (Alexandri 2020).
- 4 A hotspot is “an area in which the host EU member state, the European Commission, relevant EU agencies and participating EU member states cooperate, with the aim of managing an existing or potential disproportionate migratory challenge characterised by a significant increase in the number of migrants arriving at the external EU border” (Art. 2 (10) of Regulation 2016/1624, European Border and Coast Guard Regulation).
- 5 At the moment, only data on the national level are available for 2016. That year 173,450 migrants arrived in Greece, most of which arrived through the Aegean islands. However, the EU declared that since 21 March 2016 arrivals on the islands dropped by 97 per cent, which means that most people arrived before that date (European Commission 2019).

- 6 Interview held with Daphne Vloumidi, 8 May 2018. From here on, I will cite the interviews I conducted using the first name of the interviewee and the date. I will use the full name of interviewees in the case of “public figures”. I do not use pseudonyms except in one case, as requested by the interviewee.
- 7 I had requested the latest data from the secretariat general for the Aegean and island policy regarding the number of volunteers, who, in theory, should have been registered by the municipality of Lesvos. My request was rejected without explanation.
- 8 See [www.facebook.com/groups/informationpointforlesvosvolunteers/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/informationpointforlesvosvolunteers/).
- 9 Philippa and Erik Kempson have been active since the very beginning of the “crisis” in Lesvos. They opened the Hope Project in 2018, where first-need goods are distributed and where there is an open space for art and music.
- 10 Philippa Kempson, 3 June 2019.
- 11 Philippa Kempson, 3 June 2019.
- 12 See [www.google.com/maps/place/Lifejacket+Graveyard/@39.3643872,26.1998616,17z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x14ba9b1eb98bc80d:0xd6a2a8f241ee423c!8m2!3d39.3643872!4d26.2020503](http://www.google.com/maps/place/Lifejacket+Graveyard/@39.3643872,26.1998616,17z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x14ba9b1eb98bc80d:0xd6a2a8f241ee423c!8m2!3d39.3643872!4d26.2020503).
- 13 Quote from an anonymous questionnaire.
- 14 See <https://lesvosolidarity.org/en/> and <https://lesvosmosaik.org/>.
- 15 This community is not only physically present in the space of the island but also online, through social media, blogs, websites and other online platforms.
- 16 Ottar, 14 May 2019.
- 17 Nicolay, 11 June 2019.
- 18 Isabel, 20 May 2019.
- 19 Many volunteers underlined this sense of guilt. They argued that we were seeing only the “bright side” of the situation, which is made of those people who were able to get out of the camps and come for the activities with volunteers, while the “bad side” was not accessible to us.
- 20 Hanne, 3 June 2019.
- 21 Maryam, 15 May 2019.
- 22 Olivia, 4 June 2019.
- 23 Bea, 12 May 2019.
- 24 This does not exclude the fact that there are also negative emotions and thus the emotionalization of memorial places does not automatically turn them into a social peacekeeper of collective memory.
- 25 Ottar, 14 May 2019.
- 26 Kasha, 24 May 2019.
- 27 Christos, 2 June 2019.
- 28 Juliette, 13 May 2019.
- 29 Bea, 12 May 2019.
- 30 Juliette, 13 May 2019.
- 31 Kaayin, 16 May 2019.
- 32 Heta, 9 May 2019.
- 33 Ottar, 14 May 2019.
- 34 Mark, 27 May 2019.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 A term that carries a strong political connotation.

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# 11 Approaching biographical life

## Grassroots humanitarianism in Europe

*Luděk Stavinoha and Kavita Ramakrishnan*

From the Greek islands, along the Balkan route, to the Calais “Jungle” and other camps in border zones and cities across Europe, self-organized networks of local and international volunteers have been filling the many gaps left by the state and established non-governmental organizations (NGOs), by providing food, clothing, tents and sleeping bags, emergency housing, informal education, legal and medical aid and other forms of assistance to people on the move. A growing body of research has sought to articulate the distinct nature of what has variously been termed “volunteer”, “solidarity” or “subversive” humanitarianism (Sandri 2018; Rozakou 2017; Vandevoordt 2019; see also Jumbert and Pascucci, Introduction, this volume) by exploring how volunteers navigate the ethical and political dilemmas inherent to humanitarian action (Fassin 2012; Ticktin 2016). More specifically, much of this research explores how and whether the distinct values, roles, structures and politics that many grassroots volunteers subscribe to allow them to reimagine everyday encounters with refugees in ways that challenge humanitarian business as usual.

Based on ethnographic research between 2016 and 2019 in Chios and Paris – two sites marked by an intense presence of volunteers – we build on this literature by asking: what kinds of refugee–volunteer encounters produce social relations that exceed humanitarian logics? How do the specific qualities of volunteer–refugee interactions in and beyond camps affect the possibilities of enacting alternative modes of humanitarian practice? We approach such questions by exploring how these interactions lead to exchanges of personal accounts of people’s pasts and subjectivities, or what Brun (2016) calls “biographical life”, and how far these encounters transgress or subvert principles and practices of professionalized humanitarianism.

We argue that the long-term presence of volunteers in the diverging spatiotemporal contexts of Paris and Chios offers more humane alternatives to “established schemata of humanitarian action” (Rozakou 2017, p. 99), through which aid workers, particularly those working in refugee camps, prioritize the “biological” survival of aid recipients and inadvertently reproduce relations of inequality (Agier 2010; Malkki 1996). Rooted in the improvisational and egalitarian ethos of grassroots volunteering, we conclude that refugee–volunteer interactions, which foreground biographical life, allow volunteers to not only

reimagine a more dignified provision of care but to politicize the spaces of humanitarian action as well. They open up a type of encounter that allows for creative solidarities with people on the move, even if these spaces of solidarity—where citizens and non-citizens struggle alongside each other against the brutality of contemporary border regimes— are being increasingly foreclosed through state-led criminalization and professionalization of the grassroots landscape.

### **Between biological and biographical life**

The thousands of volunteers from across Europe (and beyond) who have flocked to Greek islands such as Lesbos and Chios, camps in Northern France and cities like Paris and Athens since 2015 attest to how “humanitarian reason” – underpinned by moral sentiments of compassion and care – has come to occupy “a key position in the contemporary moral order” (Fassin 2012, p. 247). Approaching humanitarianism not as an “absolute value” but rather as “an array of embodied, situated practices emanating from the humanitarian desire to alleviate suffering of others” (Redfield 2005, p. 330), we take as our starting point Fassin’s (2012, p. 3) observation that humanitarian action is inherently structured by a “tension between inequality and solidarity, between a relation of domination and a relation of assistance”. Indeed, a large body of literature has documented how humanitarian care often becomes complicit in regimes of control, particularly in the context of refugee camp management, setting in motion thoroughly dehistoricizing and depoliticizing logics (Agier 2010). Refugees, as Malkki (1996) has shown, are effectively reduced to “speechless emissaries” in the humanitarian imaginary; they are recast as victims denied the capacity to assert their voice in how their past and futures are represented. For Ticktin (2016), humanitarian compassion is unable to confront the violence of border and asylum regimes. Rather, it reinforces a hierarchy of lives by privileging only some populations as worthy of care and by separating out “those who have the power to protect and those who need protection” (Ticktin 2016 p. 265). Inequality, then, constitutes the very condition of possibility for humanitarianism and, consequently, the humanitarian worker is seen as perpetually existing in an asymmetrical relationship to refugees.

In our attempt to conceptualize the distinctive nature of volunteer–refugee interactions, Brun’s (2016) differentiation between “biological” and “biographical” life has proven particularly useful. In her account of humanitarian interventions in Jordan’s refugee camps, Brun shows that aid workers focus primarily on refugees’ immediate material needs; their activities are overwhelmingly oriented towards saving *biological* lives. Set firmly within a temporality of emergency, the erasure of refugees’ pasts, subjectivities, identities – their *biographical* lives – and the foreclosure of their *futures* become necessary preconditions for sustaining principles of neutrality and impartiality that ostensibly govern the conduct of humanitarian actors. Biographical life, Fassin (2012, p. 254) claims, is the basis on which refugees can give an account of their lives and “give a meaning to their own existence”.

However, Brun (2016, p. 399) finds the potential redemption of humanitarianism through the notion of “biographical life” that fertilizes people’s “ability to act within or upon the forces that shape and restrict [their] possibilities to reach a desired future” ultimately elusive. In his analysis of the work of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in refugee camps, Redfield (2005, p. 342) similarly concludes that “human zoology exceeds biography: those whose dignity and citizenship is most in question find their crucial measurements taken in calories rather than in their ability to voice individual opinions or perform acts of civic virtue”. Biographical life is also the basis, according to Brun (2016, p. 393, italics in original), on which an alternative ethics of care in humanitarian contexts can be constructed, one that emphasizes “caring *about* rather than caring *for*”. The exchange of biographies that occurs through the long-term co-presence of aid workers and their “beneficiaries” can alter the “relationship between humanitarian action and ethics” such that the “ambition of saving strangers’ lives turn[s] into an ambition of saving people we feel related to” (Brun 2016, p. 405). Indeed, we argue that it is through everyday volunteer–refugee encounters that foreground biographical life that the contradiction between solidarity and inequality becomes muddled when looking at grassroots humanitarianism in Europe today.

### **Grassroots humanitarianism in Europe**

Several distinguishing factors characterize the multiplication of grassroots initiatives across the continent since 2015. The first point to emphasize is the unprecedented number of volunteers *operating outside the purview of the institutionalized regime of humanitarian care*. In one estimate, more than 50,000 volunteers spent time on the Greek island of Lesbos in one year alone (Smith 2016). Furthermore, the organizational structure differs markedly from cases where volunteers operate within institutionalized organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or MSF, whose operations, facilitated by an army of professional logisticians, doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, policy experts and other salaried staff, span the entire globe. By contrast, in northern France and on the Greek islands, the landscape has been dominated by *self-organized* collectives and citizen-led initiatives that emerged in the context of “a relatively empty regulatory environment” (Kitching et al. 2016, n.p.). While there were long-standing organizations with clear leadership structures that shifted into the volunteer space, many teams were set up as ad hoc, small-scale operations with “minimalist decision-making hierarchies” and a shifting pool of local and international volunteers, to respond to the sharp rise in refugee arrivals in 2015 (Kitching et al. 2016, n.p.).

The volunteers we met exist across a spectrum, from seasoned anarchists who espouse a borderless world to first-time volunteers who were motivated by seemingly apolitical, humanitarian concerns after watching the “crisis” unfold in the media. Some volunteer for just a few days, while others have continued to volunteer over the course of months and even years, taking on various coordination roles or creating their own NGOs. Crucially, most teams, at least initially, have been composed of individuals with no prior experience in humanitarian work. Yet, despite their

“amateur” character (Freedman 2018), volunteers have established versatile, transnationally linked structures for assistance to displaced populations across Europe, which operate alongside and frequently in tense relations with established humanitarian and state actors (Vandevoordt 2019).

It is impossible to do justice to the multiplicity of organizations, motivations, experiences and ideologies that make up the volunteering space. Rather, much like other contributions to this volume, we seek to position our intervention amid the ambivalent and contradictory stances of emergent forms of volunteer-led “solidarity” (Rozakou 2017), “makeshift” (Sandri and Bugoni 2018) or “subversive” (Vandevoordt 2019) humanitarianism. Drawing on ethnographic research on Lesbos, Rozakou (2017, pp. 99–100), for example, argues that in Greece emergent “forms of vernacular humanitarianism ... subvert the dominant hierarchical schemata of humanitarian action” by resisting bureaucratization and foregrounding “social relationships with the refugees”. Politicized solidarity networks based on mutuality, informality and horizontality that first arose in response to Greece’s deep economic crisis subsequently played a central role in the reception of refugees arriving to the Greek islands as of 2015. While local “solidarians” tend to reject the label “volunteers” whom they accuse of being too close to the official humanitarian apparatus, in practice, as we document in what follows, the lines between these two categories of grassroots actors are more blurred. This ambivalence reflects the “multiple split of humanitarianism” witnessed across Europe and the redefinition of what citizen-led solidarity practices entail in political contexts marked by growing criminalization of acts previously considered as purely charitable (Tazzioli and Walters 2019, p. 181). What Rozakou (2017) calls “solidarity humanitarianism” thus has a wider resonance: moving beyond rigid binaries between solidaristic and humanitarian modes of engaging with refugees, it brings to the fore situated attempts to practise a different, more horizontal and “distinctly *relational* ethics of care that allows room for local contexts, individual biographies and mutual trust” (Vandevoordt 2019, p. 260).

The “progressive politicization” of “humanitarian” volunteer collectives is a core theme that cuts across much of the emerging literature on the grassroots humanitarian landscape (Cantat and Feischmidt 2019; McGee and Pelham 2018; Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019). In Sandri’s (2018, p. 77) reading of “volunteer humanitarianism,” distinguished from more institutionalized modalities through its emphasis on “improvisation, informality, geographical proximity, sociality, and activism”, she argues that volunteers’ presence in Calais created new social spaces that allowed for expressions of charity *and* political solidarity. Driven by their “lived experiences” in the “Jungle”, volunteers began circulating petitions against the absence of state provision and agitating against the French border regime. Indeed, makeshift camps like Calais are not merely “spaces of abjection” but equally of resistance and creative solidarities between citizens and non-citizens (McGee and Pelham 2018; Rygiel 2011). They are, in other words, spaces where citizens – whether self-identifying as volunteers or activists – and those denied their political rights routinely contest established boundaries of citizenship through everyday practices of claims-making vis-à-vis the state and the humanitarian apparatus (Stavinoha 2019).

However, some scholars remain sceptical of the progressive potentialities of grassroots humanitarianism. They highlight how, much like their professionalized counterparts, volunteers become entangled in regimes of border control through co-optation by the state (Stierl 2018); moreover, their modes of engagement with refugees may further unequal relations (Knott 2018) and reaffirm established boundaries of citizenship (Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019). In her study of the No Borders movements in Calais and Athens, King (2016, p. 124) portrays volunteer humanitarians as “allies in the struggle for the freedom of movement up to a certain point [but] also one of the biggest obstacles to it”. Others are more measured in their critiques. For instance, in their conceptualization of “subversive” humanitarianism, Vandevoordt and Verschraegen (2019) argue that volunteers’ stances are more ambiguous *due* to the humanitarian acts they engage in: at times, volunteers serve to “depoliticize” the context by providing for the immediate needs of people on the move without publicly condemning the (in) actions of governments. In other instances, however, the provision of care undermines structures of governance that seek to restrict mobility by implicitly challenging the “dominant political climate and the lines of exclusion ... drawn by policymakers” (Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019, p. 103). They note that volunteers in Belgium initially started out by prioritizing horizontal relations with refugees and providing care for citizens and non-citizens alike. However, emblematic of the ambivalent politics of grassroots humanitarianism, ensuing deeper ties to established NGOs and increasing restrictions by state authorities have confronted these civil initiatives with new dilemmas, challenging their egalitarian ethos and subversive nature.

In sum, the intention here is not to reify distinctions between “professional” NGOs, “activists” and grassroots volunteers. Rather, we ask how far the practices of the latter constitute *ruptures* from or, conversely, become entangled with dominant humanitarian schemata by giving further attention to the political and ethical dimensions of volunteer–refugee encounters through an engagement with “biographical life”. Thus, we seek to avoid a one-dimensional reading of grassroots humanitarianism as merely reinforcing relations of inequality or marking a singular break with established modes of humanitarianism, and add more analytical nuance to these debates by exploring the everyday practices and social relations that volunteers enact in Paris and Chios.

### **Contextualizing refugee–volunteer encounters**

Our fieldwork took place between March 2016 and November 2019. During repeat visits, we conducted semi-structured interviews with volunteers and refugees and engaged in participatory observation by joining different volunteer groups. In the analysis that follows, we also draw heavily from the considerable time we spent socializing inside refugees’ shelters on Chios, in nearby cafes or on the streets in Paris.<sup>1</sup>

A small island just a few miles off the Turkish coast, Chios has been the second main entry point for refugees fleeing to Europe across the Aegean Sea since 2015.

Marked by chronic deficiencies in water, electricity, sanitation and hygiene provision, as well as health, legal aid and protection services, conditions in the two camps – Souda and Vial – have been denounced by human rights organizations as “inhuman and degrading” (Amnesty International 2017). The population of Souda oscillated between 600 and 1,000 refugees from March 2016 until its closure in October 2017. Despite being jointly administered by the local municipality and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the presence of Greek and international NGOs such as the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Praksis, Médecins du Monde and Save the Children, Souda had many of the features of a makeshift camp with only minimal sanitation and rudimentary shelters, with a few metal benches pitched near the entrance serving as an improvised social space for refugees, volunteers, NGO and camp management staff. In this context, international volunteer organizations such as the Chios Eastern Shore Response Team (CESRT), the medical team *Salvamento Marítimo Humanitario*, the Basque volunteer-run kitchen *Zaporeak* and smaller collectives of local “solidarians” have been integral to the humanitarian response – attending to new arrivals along the shores, conducting food and clothes distributions, providing medical and legal assistance and, over time, creating social spaces for informal education and social activities, simply for people to find respite from camp life.

Though a very different political and geographical context, Paris also offers an important case study through which to interrogate volunteer dynamics, given the scale of refugee flows and similar patterns of incarceration. In May 2016, Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris, announced the construction of a temporary refugee camp in *Porte de la Chapelle* – “*Le Centre d’accueil pour les migrants*”. Informally called *La Bulle* (the Bubble), the camp was closed in March 2018, with more permanent accommodation systems put in place across the city. During its operation, the Bubble accommodated 400 men who were allowed to stay for up to ten days, and also operated as an entry point into the asylum process. However, the Bubble was unable to accommodate the hundreds of refugees arriving in Paris on a weekly basis, and as a result, at times close to 1,000 people slept rough in the streets nearby, in dire conditions and almost completely dependent on a few local and international volunteer teams. Despite its acclaim as a model of humanitarian integration, throughout 2017, the Bubble was completely fenced off, with police controlling entry and restricting refugees’ ability to sleep rough through constant evictions. The Bubble was managed by *Emmaüs Solidarité*, an NGO, though a clothing warehouse and distribution was supplemented by *Utopia56*, a grassroots organization. The policing of entry into the Bubble and the immediate surroundings led to frequent skirmishes as refugees waited for days in lengthy queuing systems. The Bubble thus acted as another site of bordering, with its own logics of containment and exclusion. Since the camp’s closure, *Utopia56* volunteers have maintained a street presence, assisting people with accessing social services and more generally responding to vulnerable cases. They have worked in conjunction with other small collectives such as *Solidarité Migrant Wilson (SMW)*, *Solidaritéh* and *Paris Refugee Ground Support*, which have overlapping remits of food, tent, clothing distribution and asylum information provision.

There are two factors of particular importance that distinguish Chios from Paris. First, the March 2016 European Union (EU)–Turkey deal turned Chios from a transit zone into a de facto prison, as thousands of refugees now had to undergo the lengthy asylum procedure on the Greek islands, compelled to stay in overcrowded informal camps and EU “hotspots” for months, even years. Second, in contrast to the heavily securitized Bubble, volunteers had almost unrestricted access to Souda throughout much of its existence. Consequently, we found much thicker social relations being formed between refugees and volunteers in Chios than in the more fleeting context of Paris. However, this changed dramatically when Souda camp closed. It left Vial, the EU “hotspot”, as the island’s only “reception and identification” facility where newly arrived refugees are sorted and contained and where access for volunteers (and researchers) is forbidden and policed – a reflection of how the specific bordering practices of the camp can lend itself to different types of encounters and structure the forms of grassroots humanitarianism that are able to develop in each site.

### **Biographical life in and beyond the camp**

Volunteers’ presence in spaces where the boundaries between formal and informal camps are blurred (Katz 2017) enables a wide range of encounters with refugees: from camp distributions, children’s activities, language classes, to accompanying people to hospitals and police stations, arranging translators or lawyers, and in cases of serious neglect, lobbying authorities for access to housing and other basic services. Through an improvisational ethos and engagement in forms of sociality that demarcate volunteer humanitarianism from professionalized humanitarian actors, volunteers, especially those that are long term, often develop an intimate knowledge of the camp and its inhabitants. In this sense, the “camp” is an important site for volunteer–refugee interactions, as social relations thicken during impromptu shared meals, cups of tea, jam sessions and “hanging” out. Many volunteers saw such encounters as one of their core reasons for coming to Paris and Chios – and were what drew many back. While volunteer narratives of camaraderie sometimes veered problematically to nostalgic remembering of a constructed utopia, any assessment of volunteers’ presence must be situated against the brutalities of camp life. As Rygiel (2011 p. 15) reminds us, “the simple fact of feeling that someone cares matters”. “If left with only [the] UN, people would be dying here,” Jonathan, a Nigerian refugee on Chios noted. “Thank God for those volunteers. They come inside, sometimes they come to drink tea with you, they discuss with you.”

It is in this context that spaces emerged for biographical exchange by allowing often close, informal relations of conviviality or even friendships to develop. These forms of sociality would often carry over into spaces beyond camps – cafes, parks, street corners and apartments. During such interactions, conversations ranged from casual banter, exchanging insights into the legal maze of the asylum regime, discovering each other’s cultural customs, family backgrounds, aspirations, debating current affairs, to harrowing accounts of refugees’ displacement and treatment by

authorities. “Some volunteers are like brothers to me,” Hayat, from Eritrea, told us. “I tell them my story and they tell me anything about them ... They give us hope ... They care about you like you are family.”

Spending time with refugees without an instrumental purpose also transformed individual volunteers’ self-identified roles and their engagement with refugees. Because “ethical demands thicken and increase the better you know people,” Brun (2016, p. 404) argues that “the durable presence of humanitarian actors ... necessarily challenge[s] humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality”. “Your role as a volunteer changes,” Julia, who returned to Chios several times, explained:

At the beginning, you come just to help people so you’re a bit naïve ... But when you come back and you meet people – locals, volunteers, refugees – you think about the system and, I have to be honest, you act also more in an emotional way: you start to *know* people, you get to *like* people so you want to help them.

Many long-term or returning volunteers developed a deep emotional attachment through recurrent exchanges of biographical life with people they had met, sharing intimate moments of pain, anger, but also affection and joy. Intense emotions “attached to specific individuals” (Brun 2016, p. 405) shaped an ethics of care that included emotional labour, with volunteers often finding themselves comforting individuals breaking under the psychological strain of living for months and years in conditions of material and legal precarity. Similar to Doidge and Sandri’s (2018, p. 475) research in Calais, daily interactions generated a heightened sense of “empathy” such that “inhuman conditions for refugees” came to be “seen as an attack on the individual volunteer”. Consequently, teams frequently worked late nights running emergency distributions, driven by a palpable sense that “our friends” could not be abandoned and anger towards the state, UNHCR or larger NGOs for failing to provide basic protection – resembling the emotionally taxing work performed by local staff within established humanitarian agencies (Pascucci 2019). Yet, where the latter derives from their precarious status within the humanitarian industry, the affective investment that fuels grassroots volunteers’ practices of care were ultimately rooted in recurrent biographical exchanges.

At the same time, there are notable costs to crossing the line of “impartiality”. For some volunteers, the emotional investment in the suffering of others, coupled with the lack of psychological care, eventually led to burnout. Friendships with volunteers would also sometimes give rise to expectations of preferential treatment or protection from deportation that went unfulfilled. Additionally, while some volunteers have maintained regular contact with their “refugee friends” via digital media once they had returned home, continuing to provide material and emotional support, for many others, however, their departure marked an abrupt end to their social ties with refugees they had encountered. As Fran, an English volunteer in Paris noted: “Facebook friends can become a full-on job and aren’t

friends in the traditional sense.” She hypothetically queried, “If they [the refugees] make it to the UK would you let them crash?” illustrating how “friendships” for some could only stretch so far beyond the intensity of the camp. Limits to biographical life emerge here, as borders act in territorial and symbolic ways to interrupt and restrict relationships developed during the volunteer–refugee encounter.

It is important to recall the informal and improvised nature of volunteer humanitarianism: most volunteers we met had no prior experience in humanitarian work. Utopia56 – one of the main volunteer collectives operating in Paris – was originally an enterprise that organized music festivals. On Chios, the largest volunteer collective – CESRT – was founded by a local hotel owner and only a fraction of the hundreds of volunteers who joined the team since late 2015 had previously visited a refugee camp. Unlike established NGOs, smaller teams in particular often started with no codes of conduct, provided only a cursory induction and individual volunteers were rarely supervised or under any formal obligation to report to camp authorities.

However, the improvisational nature of volunteering also had ameliorative effects. Everyday interactions we witnessed departed sharply from the “confrontational” and “disciplinary” aid worker–refugee relations documented by others (Harrell-Bond 2002; Rozakou 2012). In fact, teams like Zaporeak actively encouraged their volunteers to spend time with people in the camp, sharing meals that the team had cooked, in a deliberate attempt to break down relations of inequality. Such practices are in *direct violation of basic principles of professionalized humanitarianism*, with NGO codes of conduct strictly forbidding personal relations with “beneficiaries”. At a discursive level, too, there were clear markers of distinction: while UNHCR staff would commonly refer to refugees as “persons of concern” (POCs) volunteers spoke of “our friends” and accused professional aid workers of treating people like “numbers”. Furthermore, many insisted on calling themselves “independent volunteers” to mark out their identity from professionalized actors such as UNHCR or NRC. Much like in Kitching et al.’s (2016) survey of grassroots organizations on Lesbos, volunteers frequently identified *against* the bureaucratized and apparently inefficient official structures of securitized humanitarian care. At times, the different modalities of humanitarianism would collide, as vividly recalled by Julia:

I nearly had a fight with a girl from Save the Children in a meeting. She was saying we should not have any private contact with [refugees] or add them on Facebook. I didn’t agree with that because I think: we’re not talking about animals ... It’s a person. I said to her: “I agree that *you* feel like that because this is your job, you get paid for this ... But for us, it’s not *our* job, we *choose* to come here in our free time or our holiday and we have a completely different role.

It is through such moments of friction in daily interactions with professionalized humanitarian workers that volunteers’ “actions put into play conflicting

interpretations” of humanitarianism (Agier 2010, p. 40). By subverting established humanitarian practices and conventions, their presence serves to *repoliticize* the spaces in which they operate.

Furthermore, as King (2016, p. 112) suggests, even seemingly banal activities like sharing meals, singing and playing games “are not mundane, but essential to making equality”. Indeed, spending time in people’s shelters proved a deeply transformative experience for many volunteers. The exchange of biographies during such repeat encounters allowed volunteers to move beyond the temporal confines of “emergency” humanitarian work such as camp distributions, which underpins the separation between biological and biographical lives, and to recognize individuals as more than “anonymous bodies” (Malkki 1996, p. 389). Being confronted with their “political and moral history of displacement”, meant refugees were no longer seen as passive recipients of care but as “historical actors” in their own right (Malkki 1996, p. 385), as Greta observed near the end of her year-long stay on Chios:

A lot of them had much better lives than we do. And it’s been really difficult for them to see people just giving them shit, giving them food ... I think we all forget their lives before ... We forget the prisons, and the torture, and the war. Whereas if you spend time with people you remember.

The ability to form a more personal relationship was one of the distinctive social features of Souda. In addition to the materiality of a tent or UNHCR container, the accumulation of household items in which one could offer a guest a cup of tea or food was simply not possible in Paris given the tenuousness of street living and the permanent threat of evacuation. In this sense, the ability to harness something – a connection, a politics, a moment – beyond the “suffering body,” became more difficult, though not impossible (Fassin 2005, p. 370). For instance, Marie, a UK-based volunteer who drives to Paris every few weeks, said that it is through brief interactions with these “men on a journey” – her deliberate phrasing that rejects the labels of “migrants” and “refugees” – that a sense of shared humanity was reinforced. They “are not just vessels to be given [provisions] to but by being able to talk to someone, there’s a connection”. Indeed, most volunteers rarely, if ever, considered the legal status of the person assigned by the state as a precondition for engagement. In fact, many collectives and individual volunteers routinely offer assistance to individuals rejected by the asylum system, pointing to the transgressive potentialities of biographical life in defying established boundaries of citizenship and belonging.

To be sure, enacting equality within humanitarian spaces may prove elusive as another volunteer in Chios, Mara, acknowledged: “People like to think that they’re going to the camp and treating refugees as an equal. And I would say, for the most part, that’s 100 per cent untrue.” Volunteers are immediately placed in a position of hierarchy vis-à-vis those they proclaim to assist through routine practices of “policing” camp distributions. They can also never fully escape the fundamental divide that separates them, *citizens*, from *non-citizens* denied their basic

rights – a divide routinely reaffirmed in the differential treatment by police authorities in Paris and re-enacted on Chios whenever volunteers would seamlessly board the ferry to Athens, while their refugee “friends”, lacking the necessary documents, remained indefinitely trapped on the island. The limits of solidarity rooted in biographical life become further apparent when confronted with gendered and racialized hierarchies of deservingness, as many volunteers gravitated towards individuals with whom they could more easily identify, in terms of culture, language, gender or class. Thus, in Souda, the more intensive forms of socialization were generally confined to young, middle-class, English-speaking Syrian or Iraqi men and families. Like all humanitarian actors, then, volunteers face the “paradox at the heart of humanity’s sentiments” – the inherent contradiction between solidarity and inequality – as they find themselves departing from its universalist claims and reproducing certain “hierarchies of lives” through their practices (Feldman and Ticktin 2010, pp. 14–15).

Yet, this critique, we argue, does not fully exhaust the potentialities of refugee–volunteer encounters for disrupting humanitarian logics because it is, following Brun (2016, p. 405), the exchange of biographies that allows “social relationships of trust and mutuality rather than dependence” to develop. As Mara insisted, the inequalities between volunteers and refugees

can be greatly reduced by the length of time that you spend volunteering in accordance also with the friendships that are made. A big part of that comes down to respect ... from myself to a refugee but also the other way around. Relationships play a key role ... for treating people like equals.

Those exchanges were not unidirectional but, particularly in Souda, often instigated by refugees themselves, with frequent invitations for volunteers to join people inside their shelters. Repositioned temporarily as hosts, refugees were thereby “attributed the power and agency that they are typically denied in institutional aid contexts” (Rozakou 2012, p. 563).

In the hybrid spatialities of Paris, volunteer–refugee encounters materialized in other ways. When authorities restricted the easy transitions between the formal “Bubble” and the “tent city”, many of the makeshift practices of the camp – such as refugee-driven educational classes and social exchanges – transitioned to the latter. For a fleeting point in time prior to its demolition, the “tent city” began to reflect refugee self-expression in terms of sleeping arrangements, signs and artwork – something that allowed volunteers to engage in an atmosphere more of the refugees’ choosing. As Hugo, an Italian volunteer, recalled, the space enabled volunteers to see “more or less the same faces. It was almost like a village where solidarity played a role”. The interactions that occurred within the “tent city” demonstrate that “as precarious as these camp spaces might be ... their residents have the spatial capability to create a rich environment with a strong sense of place” (Katz 2017, p. 14). Furthermore, they also highlight the importance of the relationships built between volunteers and refugees in such spaces, if ready access is available.

In sum, once we zoom in on these interactions, the contours of a different modality of humanitarian action begin to emerge: an ethics of care that brings together a concern for biological *and* biographical life. What is more, it is an ethics of care that “integrates a concept of the future” (Brun 2016, p. 393), thus moving beyond the temporal limits of humanitarian action and imbuing spaces of control and confinement with hope. Reflecting on the importance of volunteers within these quintessentially liminal spaces, Youssef, another Syrian refugee on Chios, explained: “Volunteers come here and give us motivation, hope [that] life does not end in Greece; it’s just [for] a few months, a few days, and then it can change.”

### **From biographical life to an alternative politics?**

Ultimately, our research shows the possibility for refugee–volunteer encounters in which exchanges of biographical life take place, dominant humanitarian logics are at least temporarily transcended and refugee agency is retained. Though perhaps fleeting, even the possibility of challenging such logics reveals an emergent form of makeshift humanitarianism whose value lies in the foregrounding of more dignified care within different refugee spaces. We have found that the presence of volunteers plays an important role in *re-humanizing* and *re-politicizing* these spaces. In their attempts to “recognize humanity in a dehumanizing situation”, as Saz, a Paris-based volunteer reflected, volunteers are inevitably confronted with what Malkki (2015, p. 54) calls “impossible situations” that often leave “aid workers ... feeling ambivalent, inadequate, and even impure about the work that they have done”. Nonetheless, everyday refugee–volunteer encounters contrast in subtle but important ways with the relations traditionally enacted by aid workers. The exchange of biographical life not only allows volunteers to reimagine a more dignified provision of care, but also for a different conception of the “human person” to emerge – not a passive “beneficiary” or an “absolute victim” (Agier 2010, p. 37), but an individual with a history, aspirations and a distinct moral and political identity. Our research thus suggests an ability for volunteers to build meaningful and more equal relationships through the exchange of life histories, even if the hierarchical relations between volunteers and refugees can never be fully dissolved.

This is not to say that volunteer humanitarianism is primarily oriented towards political action. Smaller collectives may lack the capacity to do so, overwhelmed by the day-to-day provision of relief. Others have to carefully navigate the shifting political dynamics within specific sites and refrain from publicly criticizing state authorities for fear of losing access to camps. During the course of our research, the spaces for grassroots interventions in both Chios and Paris have been progressively restricted by state authorities and the dispersal of refugees to more carceral or distantly located sites. Moreover, some collectives began with a grassroots ethos but became larger, more hierarchical and formalized over time, a symptom of increased donations and partnerships with major NGOs and camp authorities. The creeping professionalization of grassroots collectives – through, for instance, codes

of conduct that mimic those of established NGOs – serves to delimit biographical life and its emergent forms of care and socialization. When the gaps between institutional and grassroots forms of humanitarianism diminish, so too do the spaces where lines between volunteers and refugees, citizens and non-citizens can be transcended. Here, collectives may consider involving refugees in meaningful ways to draft and continually review codes of conduct that resonate with the types of social spaces, relations and practices people in the camps would like to see exist.

If meaningful encounters are allowed to take place and thrive, crucially, as Brun (2016, pp. 405–406) suggests, care becomes “more than simply a social relation with moral and ethical dimensions” but may “also entail an alternative politics”. Indeed, what distinguishes grassroots humanitarianism from its more established modalities is precisely the willingness of many volunteers to dispense with principles of impartiality and neutrality. As Eleni, a local “solidarian” on Chios noted: “Solidarity entails going against official actors if this means helping people keep their dignity.” Dissent, then, can emerge from *within* humanitarian reason (Stierl 2018). In line with Rozakou (2017) and Sandri (2018), we have seen some volunteers almost inadvertently *become* politicized: over time, they agitate, advocate, document, denounce. This suggests that compassion and solidarity, moral sentiment and political action are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as some critiques of humanitarianism suggest. Instead, volunteer practices embody both an ethics of compassion towards suffering others as well as “political care” grounded within a politics of rights and equality (Ticktin 2016). During the functioning of Souda and the street camps outside the Bubble we saw concrete, collective strategies and solidarity-based initiatives that resonate beyond their closure and eviction. These take on many forms, including demanding changes to specific government policies, organizing long-term projects of integration and reimagining refugee reception. Like other grassroots initiatives across Europe, such forms create “social spaces where citizens and refugees encounter[ed] one another, unmediated by state agencies, professional NGOs, and media representations” (Vandevoordt 2019, p. 256).

It remains to be seen whether the improvisational and egalitarian ethos that we have documented captures only a very specific temporal juncture in the evolution of grassroots humanitarianism. This question, to conclude, carries important political implications. “When they are treating people as badly as they are, the last thing they want is volunteers reminding people that they have some rights,” Caitlin told us on her last day on Chios. Against the growing criminalization of grassroots solidarity action and securitization of informal camps, the continuing presence of volunteers within these spaces continues to offer glimpses of a more humane alternative to Europe’s increasingly violent and exclusionary treatment of people on the move.

## Note

- 1 Individual or joint trips to Chios were made in March, June, November 2016, January, March, June and September 2017, July and September 2018, March, September and November 2019; Paris trips were made in December 2016, February, June, November 2017, February and March 2018. In between field visits, we also monitored Facebook

pages such as AreYouSyrious? and People to People Solidarity – Paris to keep up to date on developments in various refugee spaces. See [www.facebook.com/areyousyrious/](http://www.facebook.com/areyousyrious/) and [www.facebook.com/groups/P2PParis/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/P2PParis/).

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# Conclusion

## Citizen humanitarianism beyond the crisis

*Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert and Elisa Pascucci*

Citizen humanitarianism has been a key feature in the overall European responses to refugees arriving in Europe from the summer of 2015 and onwards. This form of mobilization has not only delivered aid and provided legal support and advice, but has also challenged the “management” of migration led by both the state and the European Union (EU), as well the established humanitarian aid sector’s responses within, along and outside the geographical borders of the EU. By so doing, they have also contributed to reshaping these borderscapes. The chapters in this volume have grappled with these emerging forms of citizen humanitarian acts in various contexts, from inside Europe, in Brussels, to the camp areas of Calais and the Greek islands, to the border areas of the EU, in Melilla, along the Balkan route, as well as on the other side of EU borders, in Russia and in Turkey. Moved by common sentiments around the injustice of the plight facing refugees and other migrants seeking to reach and to find refuge in Europe, what has met these citizens “on the ground” has been a range of different realities, but also dilemmas. Many of these were at the outset mobilized by what appeared as lacking responses from appropriate authorities, whether local or national ones, EU agencies or international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). As more organizations, small and large, informal or formal, have come to the fore, with different, complementary, but also competing aims of providing assistance to migrants, or containing them and preventing their onward movement, the picture has grown more complex. It has led to both ethical and practical dilemmas and ensuing organizational adaptations from the different citizen humanitarian initiatives.

In this concluding chapter, we draw together the main empirical findings and analytical contributions discussed in the volume’s different chapters, from the key dilemmas they have faced to how their existence will influence the established aid sector. In doing so, we set out to think about citizen humanitarianism “beyond the crisis” – not only because the label of “crisis”, when referring to the recent developments in the government of migration and mobility in Europe, obscures much more than it actually reveals, but also because, as highlighted in the introductory chapter, citizen humanitarianism is rooted in years of mobilization, activism and volunteering for migrants and refugees across the continent. As the contributions to this volume have tried to do, here we attempt to capture the

dynamism of citizen humanitarianism by highlighting continuities, as well as the changes precipitated by this phenomenon, that may be here to stay.

We begin by reviewing how the chapters have engaged with the three themes in each of the sections: from how they show different examples of how citizen humanitarians seek to find the right place between resisting and becoming “the system”, in relation to the established aid sector; how they have navigated the broader political landscapes, between the political agency of the citizen humanitarians themselves to the politicization of their acts through governmental and EU policies; and finally how different initiatives have taken place in and been shaped by shifting border zones. We then discuss the challenges and opportunities the emergence of citizen humanitarianism poses for a mainstream aid sector, where citizen humanitarianism is both a symptom of and reaction to the political impasse revealed in the European crisis of refugee reception, as well as playing a role as a counterweight to the mainstream and established aid sector. The politics of border management, where the fear that the provision of even minimum levels of aid and protection to refugees and other migrants who have made it to Europe may encourage more to come, makes for particularly tense, complex and politicized arenas where the citizen humanitarians intervene (Jumbert 2018). These dynamics signal the emergence of a contentious politics of humanitarianism and borders that, far from being confined to the temporal and geographical space of the so-called “refugee crisis”, is having profound and lasting effects on practices of citizenship and belonging, both in Europe and in its many borderlands.

### **Citizen humanitarians forging their own space**

Part I of the volume grappled with how different citizen humanitarian initiatives have evolved over time, from how they have adapted to demands for increased formalization and bureaucratization of their organizations (Jumbert 2020; Macionis 2001), to how in this process they have sought to forge their own unique identities and roles on the ground while resisting “becoming the system” – as for many, it is the very dysfunctionalities of the existing system that sparked their initiatives at the outset. This has led to a range of organizational trajectories, from professionalizing but maintaining a solid volunteer or “community-based” identity (Boorsma, Chapter 2; Mogstad, Chapter 1), to citizen-based organizations that have become a useful complement to state-led responses (Stanarević and Rokvić, Chapter 3).

What these initiatives have in common is not just a sense of being sparked due to the lacking presence of other more formal actors, but also a desire – once these other actors came to the fore – to constitute a counterbalance, offering something different to the refugees than what the large INGOs are perceived to be offering. As Denniston shows in Chapter 4 on citizen-led humanitarian efforts in Calais, such initiatives would often be framed by the volunteers themselves as more concerned with the plight of refugees, than large organizations concerned with their donors’ mandates and guidelines. Denniston discussed this in the context of upstream accountability (towards states and donors), versus downstream

accountability (towards the intended “beneficiaries”, in this case the refugees themselves). She shows that turning towards such downstream accountability both allowed the volunteers to make a difference for many refugees, often more by virtue of showing their support than by the material donations they would hand out, while these relationships did not come about for all and for some they also came with other sets of challenges. The question is whether such downstream accountability is at all possible to achieve, if that means relationships devoid of power asymmetries and inequalities so long as the mere freedom of movement for each individual is so fundamentally unequal: while some can choose to volunteer for days or weeks and then travel home, the camp residents would only like to leave and move onwards, with few to no legal, financial or practical means to do so.

The idea of more direct aid and to equalize the relationship between “aid providers” and “recipients of aid” is central to many of these organizations. In some instances, as described by both Boorsma (Chapter 2) and Denniston (Chapter 4), this line is blurred when many refugees also work as volunteers, assisting the daily work in the camps or coordinating activities, and when some of them also have the role as “community leaders” or “protectors”. In the case of Calais, it allowed for a more equal system of exchange, where “camp residents” could more easily feedback on their needs. However, research on volunteering has explored the role of racism and neocoloniality in transnational relations of “help” (Henry 2019; Lough and Carter-Black 2015). As citizen humanitarianism evolves towards new forms of institutionalized aid practice, complementing, rather than replacing or challenging the mainstream forms of aid, future research will benefit from addressing the persistence of such inequalities by engaging theorizations of uneven spatialities, divisions of labour, gender, racialization and racism in humanitarianism (Benton 2016; Pascucci 2019; Smirl 2008; Turner 2020).

What happens then when these informal initiatives are professionalized, as they grow and they seek to organize their work more efficiently? Some appear to resist this bureaucratization, maintaining informal systems – which are still systems allowing them to organize their work, even if not codified. Others seek to professionalize, by formalizing their division of labour internally in the organizations and vis-à-vis other actors they interact with – all the while holding on firmly to their “community” identity (Boorsma, Chapter 2) or volunteer-based character (Mogstad, Chapter 1). The blurred relationship between aid providers and aid beneficiaries are more difficult to uphold in this process, yet the proximity to the aid beneficiaries remains a central ambition for most of the citizen-led humanitarian organizations. While there is scepticism towards what some have coined “becoming the system”, which sometimes translates to a resistance towards professionalization, there is also widespread understanding that professionalization is also synonymous with access, with legitimacy among other actors in the humanitarian field and an idea of efficiency. The latter is probably to be found somewhere in between the flexible volunteer-based organizations – with good systems to organize their volunteers, the aid provision and their coordination with other actors – and the large INGOs, perceived to be too bureaucratic to actually be able to be present among the refugees.

While forging their own space, one dilemma that humanitarians have met is whether their mere presence contributes to legitimizing the lacking responses from other authorities, be they national or local authorities or international humanitarian organizations. As Mogstad discusses in Chapter 1 on the Norwegian non-governmental organization (NGO) *A Drop in the Ocean* in Greece, there were moments where they needed to critically consider their own presence in Lesvos and the new camp in Moria, after several larger INGOs had suspended their operations – often in protest against the hardening border regime and claiming that their mere presence would contribute to uphold and legitimize this. Here, the very core humanitarian value of “do no harm” comes into play, with different ideas about whether and how harm is constituted and where the “need to help” (Malkki 2015) in the face of acute human suffering takes precedence over longer-term reflections of the possible macro effects of their aid. When the conclusion is to remain, the rationale is often, whether in Calais, Lesvos or in European capitals: if we are not feeding them, then they have nothing. It is also in this complex field, between immigration control and provision of care, that the citizen humanitarians have experienced their most challenging pushback: the criminalization of their acts.

### **Criminalization and violence against citizen humanitarians**

Part II of the volume discussed different forms, and facets, of the progressive criminalization of citizen humanitarian acts and the ensuing violence against these citizens. The criminalization of aid is closely tied to the idea that has become deeply engrained in almost all matters relating to immigration policies in Europe: that any form of aid to migrants may encourage more people to attempt the risky journey to Europe. This fear of the pull factor creates a “fear of saving lives” (Jumbert 2018) and correspondingly a formal suspicion among authorities in charge of immigration policies against anyone providing such relief to refugees and other migrants. While this fear predates the 2015 influx of migrants to Europe, it has progressively been brought to bear on citizen humanitarians. While a political atmosphere in many European countries in the late summer and early autumn of 2015 provided large moral and political support to the many citizens mobilizing for the refugees, this shifted progressively in the following months. As governments struggled with the management of refugee reception, at entry and transit points in particular, those assisting the refugees began to be seen with increasing suspicion by different authorities tasked with putting an end to the arrival of migrants from across the Aegan or Mediterranean Sea, across the Balkan route or even the Arctic route (through Russia into the north of Norway). Chapter 9 by Vera Haller, on citizen mobilization in Syracuse, Sicily, provides a glimpse on how fast mobilizations based on citizens’ humanitarian sentiments, fostered by occasional proximity and moral spectatorship, can revert to anti-migrant hostility when structural racialized inequalities remain unaddressed. Whether seen as facilitating migrant onward mobility, entry into Europe or simply making lives a little bit more liveable for those in Europe and caught in

different forms of waiting limbos (waiting to move further, or waiting to get asylum claims processed), these citizen humanitarians have been met with a range of measures aimed at limiting their activities. Their activities were seen as explicitly opposing policy and security measures aimed at limiting further arrivals, even when the activities and political orientation of citizen humanitarian groups were actually politically quiescent or had swiftly adapted to changing political circumstances.

Some measures destined to limit this assistance to migrants have been more deliberate and direct than others: from the arrests of volunteers conducting boat spotting and helping migrants ashore, to more subtle delimitations of the organizations' work by limiting their mandates or delaying their formal authorizations to operate. Yet, even when such efforts are resisted by the organizations, confirming their *raison d'être* even, these measures still have an impact on the organizations. Among some, these strategies are more subtle, leading them to choose to embark on a new mission, or rather to suspend one, and to seek formal approval among local authorities in order to protect their staff against what is seen as arbitrary interferences (as shown in Mogstad's description of A Drop in the Ocean in Lesbos in Chapter 1). For others, the measures aimed at restricting or even ending their operations lead them to ascertain their activities even more forcefully, as if the measures become the very confirmation of the need for their activities to continue (as discussed by Miralles Vila in Chapter 5 and Vandevooardt in Chapter 6). It also reshapes their activities, which often become more politicized, turned toward public or political advocacy or toward ensuring safe spaces for their activities.

### **Fragile politics**

As the forms of politicization and resistance documented by Miralles Vila (Chapter 5), Vandevooardt (Chapter 6) and Kalsaas (Chapter 7) in this volume show, citizen humanitarianism can indeed be "subversive". In sharp contrast to the purported neutrality of established humanitarian actors, citizen humanitarians "take sides with those who they believe are harmed or wronged the most" and provide help "to those who receive the least", while "the actors inflicting injustice upon them are publicly held accountable" (Vandevooardt, Chapter 6; see also Vandevooardt 2019). While the political nature of these acts of position-taking and resistance is prominent and explicit, the politics of citizen humanitarianism can also be more nuanced, and even mundane.

In their work on solidarity in Greece, Mitchell and Sparke (2018, p. 1053) describe these politics as "distinguished by their mix of transnational, but also personal and embodied modes of social justice-inspired protection", combining "preliberal ideas about hospitality and welcoming foreigners" with "postliberal and anti-neoliberal praxis of cohabitation, democratic self-government, and activism". Citizen humanitarianism is a form of transnational socialization, in which social geographical imaginaries and practices connecting people across borders are at play (Mitchell and Kallio 2017). For many, it starts with the search for a

human – rather than just purely humanitarian – experience of aid and solidarity overseas. People – often young and female – take up volunteer tasks, then become engaged in larger organizations, social groups and communities, and start advocating for political and social changes. Illustrated by several chapters in this collection, this process of socialization is notably present in Di Matteo’s description of memorial tourism in Chapter 10 as an almost obligatory ritual for all volunteers passing through Lesbos. Through embodied performances such as visits to the life jacket graveyard, citizen humanitarianism influences, or even shapes, the personal and professional identities of those who practise it. Whether it results in CV building, networking in the NGO sector or in political and religious socialization, the consequences for the volunteers often appear to be more long lasting than they are for those who receive help. Rarely do these practices of solidarity and protection succeed in securing a space of full “enfranchisement” for migrants (Mitchell and Sparke 2018, p. 1063). The radical, subversive hospitality experienced by people that transit through the Roya Valley at the French–Italian border, studied by Pescinski (Chapter 8), do not take people out of the border-control geographies within which they are allowed to exclusively exist on European territory. If they do, it is only for a limited time, in limited and fragile spaces that can only be secured through labour-intensive practices of care and resistance. Yet it would be wrong to assume that exchanges of “biographical life”, such as those beautifully described by Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan in Chapter 11, are without political consequences. The laborious negotiations and unequal relations established through and within humanitarian borders do not elide other subjectivities or other modes of being in the world, they do not make emancipatory encounters impossible (Kallio et al. 2019). The embodied and social politics of citizen humanitarianism pose a radical challenge to the borders of liberal citizenship. Yet this challenge remains fleeting and fragile if not accompanied by organized action for systemic change.

### **Europe, borders and the stage for citizen humanitarians**

As we discussed in the introductory chapter to this volume, the borders of Europe are today relations of power that extend well beyond the territories and times where physical crossing occurs. Across urban spaces, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces and even the intimacy of family relations, border control works through a “politics of exhaustion” (Vandevoordt, Chapter 6) involving bureaucracy, deportability and removals, disruptions, waiting and uncertainty. “Fighting and surviving” this politics, to borrow Miralles Vila’s expression (Chapter 5), require such enormous efforts in providing aid and assistance to migrants that very little energy or resources are left for claim-making or organized political work. Yet at specific moments in time, such as after the Moria fire of September 2020, the organized push for change gains momentum, re-emerging powerfully. While the fire itself appeared as the ultimate materialization of what many called “a warned disaster”, it nevertheless gave the activists and citizen humanitarians the impetus, and audience, to push their calls for help and for change. Many EU

countries stood up to the calls for solidarity, while the fear of a “pull factor” remained strong for others (i.e. that relocating some from Greece could function as a call for other migrants to seek to reach Europe).

Within the mobilization around Moria in 2020, as well as within mobilizations to “welcome refugees” in 2015, there is a strong narrative about the idea of Europe: “they are here now”, “this is Europe”. To be sure, Europe, the EU and its policies are central in the geographies of citizen humanitarianism, in manifold ways. In many countries along its borders, Europe is a donor, a geopolitical power to be reckoned with and with which to negotiate access and international status through migration management, including the coordination of citizen aid (see Boorsma, Chapter 2; Kalsaas, Chapter 7; Stanarević and Rokvić, Chapter 3). Yet for many citizen humanitarians, especially those moving north to south to “help” across the continent, Europe is also an idea. The squalid conditions in Calais and Moria are considered a disgrace to Europe’s image as a normative power or guardian of human rights as it seeks to influence third countries to adopt its norms and respect international conventions. Public debates on relocations from Greece sometimes turn to discussions that conditions are just as bad elsewhere, as an argument that asylum applicants from Greece should not be prioritized over refugees or recognized as such and that they should wait their turn in the resettlement lottery in other areas of the world. The response from volunteers and activists often returns to “but this is Europe” as a reason in itself to not accept such conditions, nor such treatment, of fellow humans on European soil. There is also a strong sense in this mobilization that the very conditions, indeed humanitarian crisis in the words of many, in Greece is seen as a direct result of EU border politics.

It is surprising, and indeed hard to reconcile, that this idea of Europe as a liberal normative power could coexist with a widespread sense among citizen humanitarians that the basic protection crisis slowly unfolding in Moria, before the fire broke out, is a result of the enforcement of EU border policies. Perhaps a solid politics for citizen mobilizations for migrants would require a more historically aware look at the relationship between the EU and colonialism (Hansen and Jonsson 2014), and between the idea of European, liberal citizenship and global racialized inequalities.

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