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Practicing Willkommenskultur: Migration and
Solidarity in Germany

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Abstract

During the ‘long summer of migration’ (Kasperek and Speer, 2015) a set of collective practices of solidarity with refugees in many European cities became (gradually) coined in public discourse as a ‘culture of welcome’. This article focuses on the volunteers in Germany who created structures out of the first spontaneous practices by building so-called welcome initiatives. Based on empirical research about these initiatives in Germany we share our first reflections about the attitudes toward migration policies, right-wing protests and the notion of integration held by these volunteers in order to illustrate what they think of the society of migration and its potential chances and conflicts.

Keywords: migration, solidarity, civil society, Germany, welcome culture, ‘Willkommenskultur’.

1. The Culture of Welcome - a Paradigm Shift?

The editors of a recent publication about the welcome culture speak of a paradigm shift (Szukitsch et al., 2014: 11). German society, they claim, is moving away from the imperative of integration (Hess et al., 2009), which focuses on migration and migrants as problematic for the rest of society, towards a perspective which monitors the capability of institutions and society to open up to immigration and migrants. Ideally, this involves a move away from framing migrants as deficient subjects who lack certain qualities necessary for adapting to the host society to a culture of claiming rights and equal opportunities for migrants.

Through a process of incorporating a cautious consideration of the history of migration and discrimination in Germany, Friedrich Heckmann identifies four levels of a welcome culture: the individual, interpersonal relations, organizations/institutions, and society as a whole.

On the personal level, a welcome culture means, according to Heckmann (2012: 13), having a preferably unprejudiced attitude towards people from another group. On the level of institutions and organizations, it is necessary to evaluate whether there exist regulations that foster discrimination. Finally, on the societal level it includes the existence of opening and welcoming practices towards new members. In order to become a welcoming culture, society must fundamentally acknowledge society itself as a 'society of immigration'. Heckmann highlights that one important component of a successful welcoming culture is the space it gives to immigrating cultures (Heckmann, 2012: 14-15).

2. An Empirical Approach

In this paper we present an analysis based on empirical data about volunteering for refugees which has been under collection since 2014. The analysis is largely based on three datasets. The first two originate from online surveys that were conducted among volunteers. The third dataset was collected among volunteering and professional coordinators. The first survey was conducted in 2014 with 466 volunteers and 79 representatives of organizations in the field of refugee work, while the second survey was conducted one year later, with 2291 volunteers. Both of them were carried out online. Because according to representative survey data on volunteering in Germany the number of volunteers who dealt with migrants from 2009 onwards was so small (0,72 per cent) (FSW, 2009), it would have required considerable effort to reach out to a significant number of them, which was beyond our capacity. However, there is some plausible evidence that indicates that the rise in the number of participants between the first (EFA 1) and the second survey (EFA 2) can be explained by volunteers newly mobilized in 2015 (respondents in both surveys were asked to state the year in which they had started participating). Another way of controlling the quality of the sample is to compare the results with the first (and so far the only) similar study based on a random sample. The Social Sciences Institute of the Evangelical Church undertook one survey in December, 2015 which shows that during the fall of 2015 more than 10,9 per cent of Germans older than 14 years had volunteered to help refugees (Ahrens, 2015). The survey was repeated six months later, remarkably

showing that the rate of volunteers had not dropped. The EFA surveys, which were conducted by Karakayali and Kleist, do not claim to provide estimations about the share of individuals who volunteered in relation to the general population. Instead, they rather estimate the distribution of activities and attitudes within the volunteering population itself. The data published by the Evangelical Church Institute appear to support these estimates because the relative share of certain types of activities – such as accompanying refugees in their visits to authorities, or language courses – are quite similar (Ahrens, 2015; Ahrens, 2016; Karakayali and Kleist, 2016).

The third and the most recent set of data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with coordinators of volunteering activities (mostly volunteers themselves) in 30 communities throughout Germany. The semi-structured interviews took place in the first months of 2016, when media coverage about refugees had changed into a stream of negative images and the notion of a welcome culture had almost disappeared from the public scene.

In our analysis we focus on three aspects to explore the political dimensions of the volunteering movement for refugees that emerged across Germany during the summer of 2015. These are, first, volunteers' attitudes towards asylum law and how this relates to consequences for their clients. Second, we address the notion of integration by looking at who is considered responsible by volunteers for the task of integrating refugees. Third, we study volunteers' experiences with right-wing activities or anti-refugee protests in the regions where their volunteer activism took place.

Data collection is based on a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data from two surveys provided general information about socio-demographic composition, types of activities and attitudes of volunteers. The combination of data from two subsequent surveys was particularly useful for identifying changes in the volunteering movement which we not only attribute to the events of summer 2015, but simultaneously develop further research questions about. These ideas were then employed in the qualitative phase, for which a semi-structured questionnaire was composed, comprising of four sections. Questions addressed were: 1) the founding moment of the initiatives, 2) the organizational structures the initiatives had resulted in, 3) the challenges they faced, and 4) the future and continuity of their work. Related interviews were conducted with three different kinds of coordinators of volunteering work: coordinators who were volunteers themselves, those who worked for local governments, and coordinators who were professionals in established NGOs. We undertook 25 interviews in cities of different size, location and socio-economic status, while most of the selected locations also have different histories of immigration.

The interviews were transcribed and coded according to Mayring's Qualitative Content Analysis (2000). In this article, we examine answers from the first, the third and the fourth sections of the interviews. The content we describe is thus partially a result of the semi-structured format itself which asked participants to react to certain topics without suggesting any particular direction. For instance, when we asked respondents about how their initiative had emerged, a considerable number of interviewees started to talk about a rise in hostility towards migrants in their city, which they had managed to turn into welcoming attitudes. For this article, we also focus on those interviewees (the majority of our sample) who talked about having negative experiences with administrative offices and the Foreigners' Registration Office. These

experiences also provide a more comprehensive picture about volunteer work and an explanation for some of the results from the two surveys about volunteers' motives (including in what sense they consider their work to be political). Additionally, we reflect on their understanding of 'integration' - a concept that was voiced during the interviews, but did not seem to play an important role according to the surveys. The notion of integration was brought up by the interviewees themselves and elaborated in a variety of ways. For the purpose of this article, which is to study and explore the pro-migration attitudes of volunteers, these topics can be considered plausible operational frames, insofar as they shed light on volunteers' views about a 'society of migration'. However, in order to contextualize how 'welcome initiatives' relate to the notion of a society of migration, it is first necessary to provide some historical background about contemporary migration in Germany.

3. A Brief History of Contemporary Migration in Germany (after 1945)

Contemporary immigration, in the conventional sense, started after a recruitment program for bringing guest workers and their families to Germany (and all over Europe) ended in around 1973. Although German authorities tried to restrict the settlement of immigrants, their attempts were largely futile due to intervention from the constitutional court. While in practice immigration continued to take place, there was no political consensus about Germany being a country of immigration. It was only at the end of the 1990s, almost a decade after the end of confrontation with the Eastern Bloc and German reunification, when the new government announced that Germany was actually a country of immigration (1998). Meanwhile, it was around that time that Federal German institutions employed the term integration at governance level.

At the same time, patterns of migration also started to change. Due to the enlargement of the European Union and the Schengen Agreement, which grants free movement within the borders of the EU, new member states like Poland became the main source of labor migration. Migration became normalized within Europe due to EU treaties and now EU citizens have obtained equal rights in almost all realms. However, this did not stop public debates from problematizing migration, just as occurred in Britain recently where part of the Brexit campaign was built around the stereotypical figure of the 'Polish Plumber' (which already has an equivalent in France: the 'Plombier Polonaise').

It is noteworthy that the enforcement of the current situation (in which Europe has sought to protect its borders since the 1990s as a result of the Schengen Agreement and the Dublin Regulation - which can be seen as an attempt to keep those who manage to arrive in Europe inside peripheral states such as Greece and Italy) is mainly the result of Germany's influence. The Dublin Regulation can in fact be considered a form of Europeanization of the measures that were taken during the reform of the asylum-related content in the German constitution in 1992. After its first 'refugee crisis' in the 1990s, when around 400,000 Yugoslavian refugees arrived in Germany, the parliament voted to add a paragraph to the constitution according to which asylum seekers could only apply for asylum when they had not crossed a safe country on their way to Germany. This reference to safe countries in the regulation is

the principle by which main destination states such as France, and predominantly Germany, have established a *cordon sanitaire* both within and outside the borders of the European Union. While Germany may appear to be the most migration-friendly country in Europe (especially since the summer of 2015), it did not have this reputation earlier when it came to refugee policy.

Politically, although Germany came to terms with its historical flows of immigration in around 2000, it still has no proper migration law.¹ Entry requirements for potential migrants are designed in such a way that only highly qualified individuals, whose incomes are higher than average, are actually able to successfully immigrate. This is partly the result of a political impasse, to which trade unions also have contributed in their attempt to prevent a decline in average wages.

In conclusion, this is the background environment in which the term ‘welcome culture’ became prominent in the German context – years before the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ actually took place. The failure of immigration law to attract foreign labor and increasing concern about demographics and a shrinking German population led to demand for a reform of the labor laws, predominantly by economists and employers’ associations. Thus, the term ‘welcome culture’ was largely introduced to the German debate by organizations such as the VDI (Verein deutscher Ingenieure; Association of German engineers) and the BDA (Bund Deutscher Arbeitgeber; Federation of German Employers), and the political parties CDU (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands; Christian Democratic Union of Germany) and the FDP (Freie Demokraten Partei; Free Democratic Party). It is striking that the term is often mentioned only in connection with the recruitment of specialists. The demand for a broader welcome culture which would encompass the existing population with a migration-related background or refugees did not exist when this specific term first emerged. In other words, the demand for a welcome culture seems to be a consequence of negative experiences with the so-called ‘green card’ model and bureaucratic obstacles in Germany. As a result, the question now becomes whether the unconditional engagement of refugee-assisting volunteers is reformulating the notion of a ‘welcome culture’ in a less utilitarian sense.

4. The Event – the ‘Long Summer of Migration’

The willingness to deal with refugee issues in 2015 that parts of the German establishment shared is not entirely surprising. Some of the economic elite consider migration to be a strategy for labor recruitment and beneficial to the economy for three reasons: 1) the lack of qualified workers in certain segments of the German economy, 2) the need to increase the profitability of some sectors through exploiting migrant labor, and 3) the fact that immigration could help counter the long-term shortage of labor caused by the demographic recession (Georgi, 2016). The chairman of Daimler AG, Dieter Zetsche, for example, immediately claimed that refugees “could trigger a new economic miracle” after the opening of the border (Spiegel

¹ The “Zuwanderungsgesetz” law is not much more than a reformed version of the previous “Foreigners’ law” (Ausländergesetz).

Online, 2015).² It is therefore also not surprising that scholars of migration are associating the term ‘welcoming culture’ with utilitarian aspects of German migration politics. Mariá do mar Castro Varela (2014), for instance, is reminded by the gesture of greeting guests that throughout history German society has treated migration movements as a source of labor that has no effect on society. She underscores the fact that both economic migrants from Turkey and from other countries in southern Europe were framed temporarily using the term ‘guest workers’. The author identifies similar lines of discourse in the current debate about welcoming refugees, as it is often framed in terms of what economic benefits they provide.

Nevertheless, the recent boom in groups of German citizens who seek to show solidarity with refugees has gained international attention mainly because of its magnitude. On the very surface the need to address a number of practical problems creates the ground for the current solidarity movement. The search for new accommodation facilities, the establishment of emergency facilities and the increase in the distribution of asylum seekers to smaller municipalities (where the presence of refugees was to many a novelty) led to very different reactions. In many cases citizens reacted angrily and in some cases even with racist protests and riots. However, Germany also witnessed the unprecedented willingness to help of local residents, an increase in interest in volunteering at organizations which assist refugees, and the involvement of citizens in innumerable new initiatives designed to offer a variety of support to new asylum seekers.

Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that this rise in support did not come from nowhere. Even during the First World War volunteer relief organizations existed to help refugees fleeing from the German army. During and after the Second World War, when Europe was a ‘continent of refugees,’ displaced persons could not have been helped without the support of volunteers. In Germany after the Second World War, despite prevailing skepticism, displaced persons and refugees obtained a wide range of support from relief organizations and volunteers. After the arrival of Vietnamese refugees in West Germany in the late 1970s, many Germans gave practical and financial assistance to the so-called ‘boat people’. In the 1990s, many voluntary aid organizations emerged to support refugees from the Balkans and elsewhere. They also evolved in response to racist attacks on asylum-seekers which resulted in many deaths and created an increasingly hostile political atmosphere. This atmosphere further led to the reform of asylum procedures in 1993, which was allegedly implemented to solve the political crisis that had arisen around these events. The current refugee solidarity movement in many ways is an outcome of the experience and the general social knowledge of these grassroots organizations and parochial networks of solidarity (Mehlhase, 1999; Dünnwald, 2006; Kühne and Hüßler, 2000).

In contrast to this, for many political and academic observers the temporarily hegemonic atmosphere of welcome in 2015 came as a surprise. Every major political

² The Term “economic miracle” (“Wirtschaftswunder”) has mythical connotations as it is commonly used to refer to a phase of economic growth after the Second World War. (Werner, 2004) In fact, contemporary sociologists such as Helmut Schelsky suggested in the 1960s that the wave of German post-war refugees – seen as a flexible and mobile workforce – were partly responsible for this process.

party, trade union, company, all kinds of associations and the media joined in the welcoming campaign (even the populist and rather right-leaning tabloid “BILD”). The events themselves, and the positive attitude of the government and mainstream media together mainstreamed the movement that already existed.



Graphic 1. Screenshot of a “BILD” newspaper supplement in Arabic welcoming refugees to Berlin.

Moreover, not only did institutions and the political establishment respond in such a way, but millions of Germans went to train stations, shelters and other places where refugees were arriving. Some volunteers from Southern Germany and Austria even went directly to Hungary or Croatia to pick up refugees during the ‘long summer of migration’ (Kasperek and Speer, 2015; Misik, 2015). But, as already mentioned, this atmosphere of welcome did not come ‘out of nowhere’. A survey from 2014 (Karakayali and Kleist, 2015) shows that, according to the employees of organizations in this field, volunteers had already increased in number from 2011 by around 70 per cent (Karakayali and Kleist, 2015). Almost parallel to this increase, the number of asylum seekers continued to rise (after 2008). We assume that this new interest in volunteering was piqued in relation to the historically low number of asylum seekers: In 2007, only 20,000 people applied for asylum in Germany, the lowest number for decades. Younger people in particular have not been confronted with the situations and struggles of refugees in their lifetimes, which may explain the high percentage of younger people engaged in the early movement. When asked when they started becoming interested in the subject of refugees and asylum, only 30-40 per cent of those above 30 years of age said 2011 (the year that the Syrian civil war erupted), while 65 per cent of younger individuals picked that year.

5. The Transformation of the Volunteer Movement and its Attitudes towards the Asylum Law

With the massive mobilization of volunteers in August and September 2015, mainly triggered by the media coverage and the government's initial reaction, the composition of the volunteer movement changed almost overnight. Data from a second survey among volunteers (Karakayali and Kleist, 2016) conducted before the end of 2015 (n=2,293) suggests that the composition of the volunteers had changed with regard to age, occupation and the size of the town in which they were active. For example, the relative share of younger volunteers had declined from almost 30 per cent to around 16 per cent, whereas the relative share of people older than 40 had increased (see Chart 1).

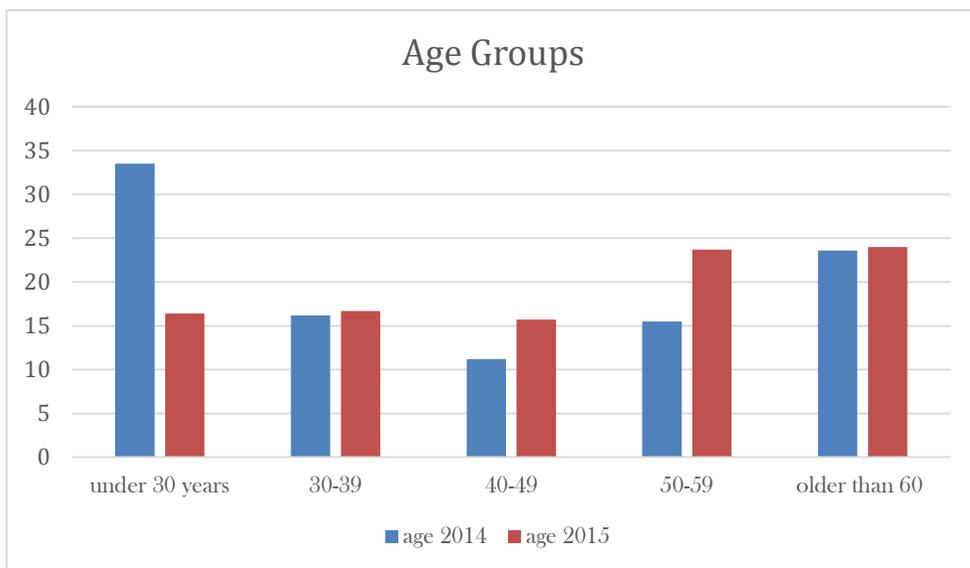
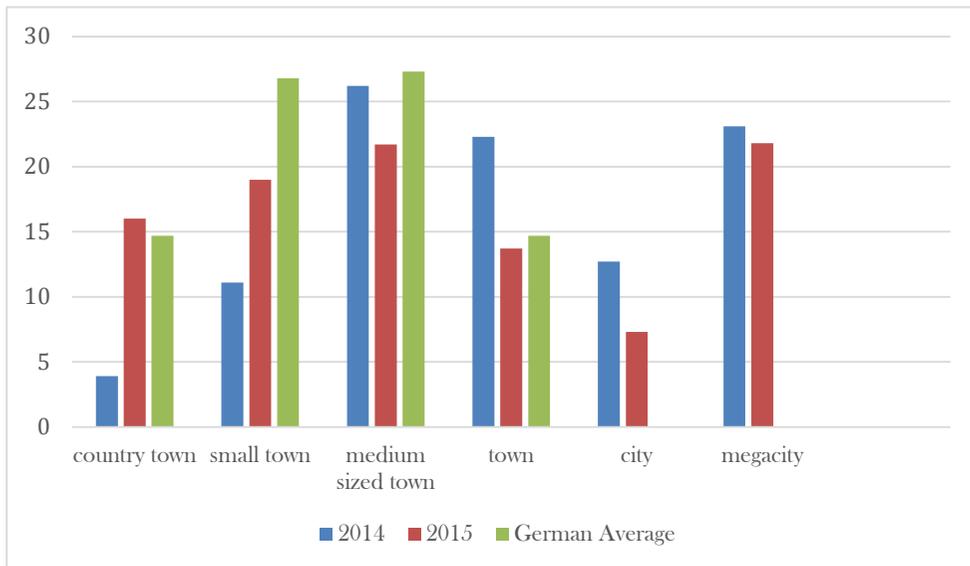


Chart 1.

The proportion of volunteers in country towns is especially striking (see Chart 2), having quadrupled from nearly 4 per cent to 16 per cent. The increase in the proportion of volunteers in smaller towns also increased from 11.1 to 19 per cent. With the exception of the metropolis, the share of volunteers in larger cities decreased. This is an interesting development, not only in terms of the normalization of the movement (since the majority of Germans live in mid-size and smaller towns), but also with regard to the likelihood of such engagement because the populations of non-urban environments usually tend to be less migration-friendly.³

³ Some of the volunteers in the east of Germany may be non-native themselves, especially since Berliners move to the countryside for numerous reasons. For example, in an interview with a group of volunteers for a new (ongoing) research project in the region of Brandenburg participants identified themselves as

*Chart 2.*

While these numbers could be interpreted as evidence of the mobilization of completely new sections of the population and ‘refugee solidarity’, another item from this survey suggests that this claim should be treated cautiously. When asked whether helping refugees was ‘important’ in their social environment, half of all respondents answered that their environment was already refugee-friendly. With slight differences according to the size of settlement (a more pro-refugee environment in middle-sized cities, less in country towns), this creates an interesting picture and demonstrates to what extent the new engagement may really be considered ‘mainstreaming’. The observation holds for both volunteers who were involved for a longer period of time, and those who only become active in 2015. Thus, rather than mobilizing a group of citizens being entirely indifferent to the cause of refugees and migrants, the events of 2015 seem to have triggered a shift from passivity to activity.⁴

But this larger group is not homogeneous with regard to their ideological or political views. One of the indicators of the ways volunteers frame their activities in political terms is their understanding of the legitimacy of migration. In the most recent survey (Karakayali and Kleist, 2016) participants were asked to identify the grounds according to which refugees could be legitimately ‘taken in’. We consider the answer to this question to be an indicator of the relative distance of volunteers from the

‘West Germans’, attributing the hostile attitudes of the majority in the village to their ‘East German’ heritage. However, there are many groups of volunteers from eastern Germany as well.

⁴ We tested the assumption that social environments are an indicator of the political positions of volunteers by examining the correlation between the social environment and a specifically political question (by asking questions such as ‘under what conditions should refugees be accepted?’). While only a few volunteers answered that supporting refugees was regarded as important in their social environment, many of them agreed with the statement that countries should have the right to decide themselves which sort of migrants they agree to accept.

political movement of refugee solidarity, since fully accepting refugees is clearly much more controversial than engaging in most conventional volunteer activities. Although in many regards the most recent cohort of volunteers does not appear to be differentiated, there are slight variations in their attitudes. The majority of volunteers have very extensive ideas about asylum, but they still only ‘conditionally’ accept immigrants. Findings suggest that the relatively small share of volunteers who would agree to ‘unconditionally’ accept refugees and the demand for ‘open borders’ has significantly declined since the rise in participation of 2014.

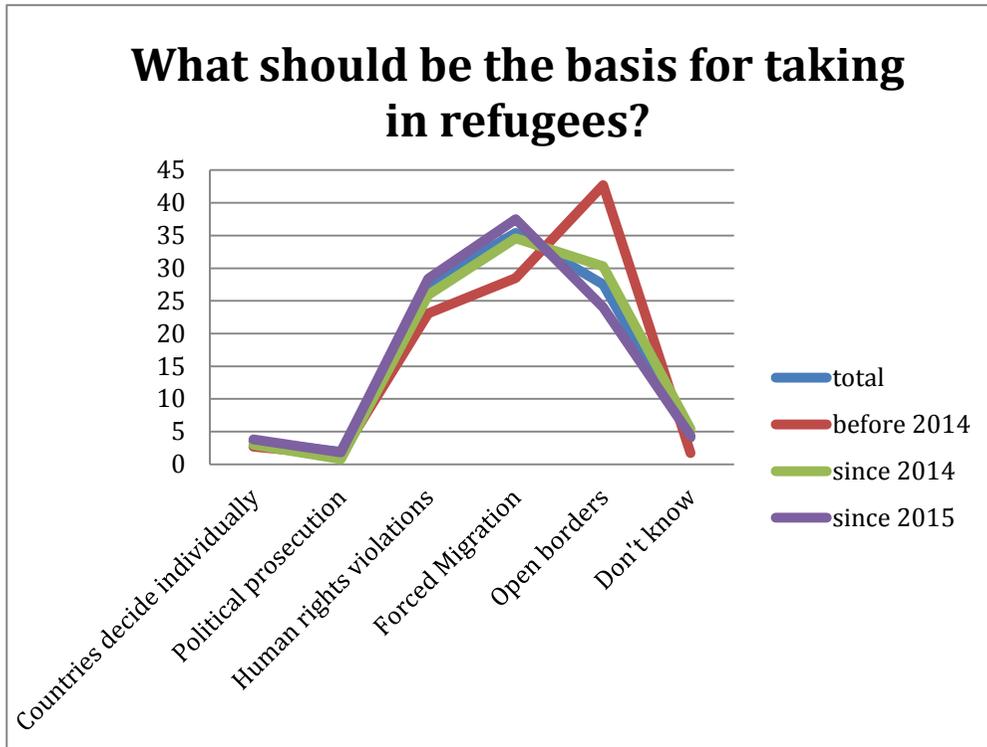


Chart 3.

Only 25 per cent of newcomers support the notion of ‘open borders’, whereas more than 40 per cent of older activists share a worldview associated with the ‘no border movement’. Support for open borders is a very particular claim that is only voiced by a tiny minority of the political spectrum. From this data, the question whether volunteering can be seen as a political activity *per se* cannot be answered in a clear-cut way. Concerning the question of the legitimacy of refugee migration, it is noteworthy that the majority of volunteers today understand migrants through the rather generic notion of ‘forced migration’ which is not a legal but a moral concept. The notion of ‘being forced’ contrasts with the currently dominant humanitarian disposition towards migration in which migrant agency can only be framed and conceived of as ‘economic’ or utilitarian (Vis and Goriunovaet, 2015). This broader definition is more open as it does not define particular criteria (although it may include ‘economic’ reasons) and because it is conditional concerning the motivation of migrants. There is evidence that

this generic notion is correlated to having an 'apolitical' attitude. Moreover, newcomers more often describe their engagement as apolitical (see Chart 4).

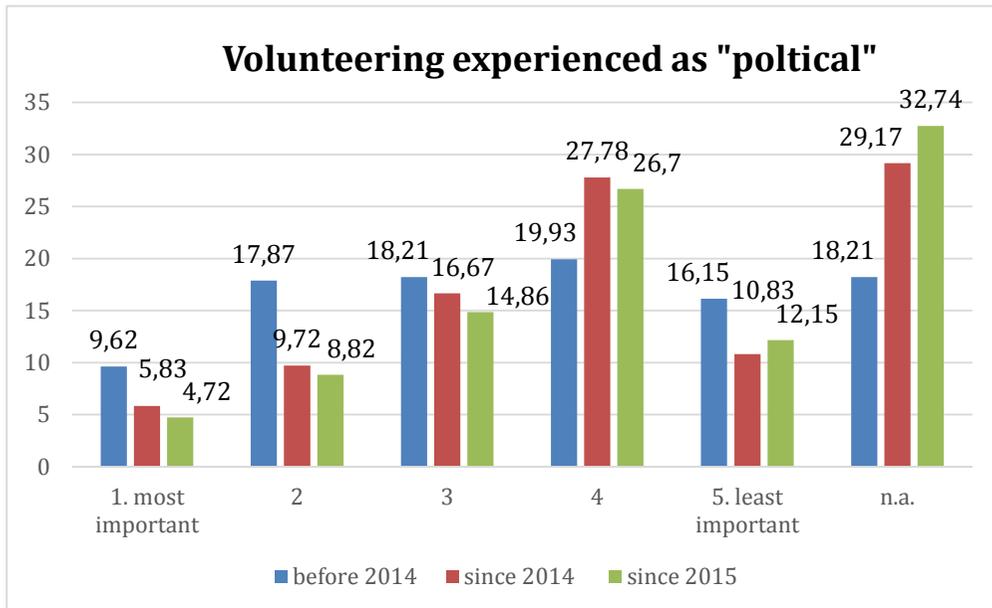


Chart 4.

6. 'Integration' as a Common Challenge

Against this background, we explore how volunteers' activities can be analyzed with regard to these different levels of sociality. In general, the role volunteers play in German society goes far beyond facultative engagement and offers additional opportunities of encounter for both refugees and residents. In many cases the volunteer groups tend to use the basic tools of access to society, such as offering German language courses, organizing transport in rural areas and opportunities for work, and so on.

While 40 per cent of all volunteers offered German language lessons, the share was higher in country towns where 55.2 per cent were involved in language teaching programs. The share decreases in relation to the increasing size of the settlement. A similar picture emerges when it comes to accompanying refugees during their encounters with authorities (55.7 per cent in country towns, 24.7 per cent in megacities) and assisting them in their relations with public authorities (35.6 per cent in country towns, 10.2 per cent in megacities). These figures suggest that the activities of volunteers are more comprehensive in smaller towns, which largely seems to be due to the lack of supply in the countryside.

The conclusion we also can draw from this is that volunteers often engage in activities that are typically thought to be the responsibility of the state. Discussion is ongoing about whether this is a problematic tendency: some argue that this phenomenon further accelerates neoliberal policies of privatization; others fear that the services provided by volunteers might actually be harmful to refugees (especially as

concerns provision of legal and medical advice, translation or language teaching). Volunteers tend to think that their activities are only partly the responsibility of the state. Through their assistance they have created a network of social relations and bonds (and even new kinds of communities) in and around refugee shelters and other facilities. These communities are symbols of the failure of the state to care and provide to refugees the necessary access to society. In this sense, the praise offered to the volunteer movement by state authorities can be seen as a withdrawal of state responsibility and an expression of the government's desire to activate the individual in the field of public work (Rose, 1996). The situation has also been criticized for exactly this reason (van Dyk and Misbach, 2016).

Nevertheless, the same authors also stress that the self-organization of active citizens (of whom a majority declare that they are active in informal groups) has the potential to enhance reflection and self-observation. It also has the potential to constitute a space from where resistance and a struggle for rights can emerge (Rose, 1996: 336), as we seek to demonstrate in this text. As many of the volunteers have a middle-class background, their engagement involves experiencing, sometimes for the first time in their lives, the structural violence that people of foreign backgrounds with low professional profiles face in the German welfare system. An example will serve to illustrate this phenomenon: A former German school principle accompanied a Syrian family to a job center to discuss how the cost of renting an apartment would be covered. Coverage had been hitherto refused on the grounds that the rent was higher than legal regulations provided for. The volunteer knew of a regulation permitting payment to be made on condition that the additional cost of renting was less than 20 per cent above the normally applied threshold, and insisted that this rule be followed. He was confronted by the clerk who initially persisted in the original rejection, but eventually approved payment for the new apartment, admitting she had done so only because the volunteer knew about the legal provision.⁵ According to the data we collected, there have been and still are innumerable similar situations. The experience of middle-class citizens may be described by the concept of 'becoming minor,' as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari put it in their theoretical work (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986).⁶

In fact, volunteers often have detailed knowledge about legal issues, about fundamental rights and procedures, and are capable of voicing frustrations about the inability of authorities to fulfill even their basic duties. We argue that these experiences raise the awareness of certain sections of the middle class in Germany about institutional racism, and therefore harbor the possibility of new alliances of solidarity.

While volunteers and refugees voice frustration about the constant denial, obfuscation or absence of services concerning housing, schooling or work, the

⁵ Interview with Hansjörg Behrendt, Coordinator of the network *W i R - Willkommen* in Reinickendorf, Berlin, 10-2-2016.

⁶ 'Becoming minor' implies a change in perspective in social theory. Generally, the assumption is that on the level of micro-power the subject can only be considered as a field of reproduction of societal power relations. Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) approach, however, is that developments at this level of the social (frequently and incorrectly considered as 'microsocial') have in fact the potential to displace, transform, or in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, 'deterritorialize' the whole network of the social.

German coalition government passed a law on the ‘integration’ of refugees under the motto ‘support and demand’ (fördern und fordern). This is more or less a subliminal message to the German audience who are increasingly exposed to populist discourse that refugees should not only receive welfare benefits but also be pushed to actively participate. The genealogy of these policies can be traced back to the development of the success of a ‘new labor’ type of arrangement, in which social democratic political parties adapt to the political economies of neoliberalism. Bob Jessop called this phenomenon the ‘workfare regime,’ which ‘subordinates social policy to the demands of labor market flexibility and employability and to the demands of structural or systemic competitiveness.’ (Jessop, 2003).

Volunteers we interviewed for our qualitative study are often critical about the dominant notion of integration that was prevalent in Germany long before the new law was passed. They witness the great efforts by refugees to obtain access to society in terms of language, work and housing. Whenever refugees do not display such an attitude of ‘willingness’, volunteers tend to explain this (under normal circumstances ‘problematic’) behavior by pointing to the multitude of barriers that face them, their lack of cultural knowledge and traumatic experience of flight. Meanwhile, publicly voiced suspicions about refugees’ willingness to integrate are mainly related to behavioral attitudes such as punctuality, continuous participation in activities provided by host communities (such as language or integration courses), and more generally in regard to the adoption or rejection of the dominant social norms in German society. This goes even further in suggestions that refugees’ access to individual housing should be restricted when they do not demonstrate a willingness to separate garbage or act as ‘quiet neighbors’ by social workers.

In contrast to this increasingly dominant approach, volunteers for the most part demonstrate openness to the unknown social practices, norms or behavioral patterns of refugees. For instance, there is constant demand for intercultural training, including learning how to deal with birth and death, joy and grief in different societies, and so on. Instead of demanding the rapid adjustment of refugees to an imaginary ‘German lifestyle’, the volunteers acknowledge their own ignorance of others’ social practices. Thus, volunteers tend to reject the earlier described conceptualization of migrants as lacking certain values that Germans all (supposedly) share, and develop, on a personal and interpersonal level, a culture of recognition of differences,⁷ as well as a perspective of the institutional obstacles to integration. Many volunteers consider integration to be a reciprocal process that includes not just immigrants but also members of the host society. They see their volunteering as a contribution to creating the conditions ‘to let them [immigrants] become part of society,’ as one volunteer from Berlin put it.⁸

⁷ This can take the form of a general interest in other cultures: ‘Also ich möchte auch gerne was von denen hören und von ihrem Land, von ihrem Leben und die haben sich ja nicht nur abgewendet mit Widerwillen, sondern es ist auch ihre Heimat und mich interessiert auch die Heimat.’ (“Well, I want to hear from them about their country, their lives; they not just have abandoned them with disgust, but it’s their home and I am interested in their home country” (Interview with a volunteer in Dallgow, Havelland, 23-07-2016). But it also often takes the function of an explanation, when an inability to perform certain tasks is associated with a difference in cultural habits.

⁸ Interview with a volunteer from THF-welcome, Berlin, 27-07-2016.

7. The Transformation of Anti-immigration Sentiment

The German discourse about the refugee situation changed immensely during the first months of 2016. After a widely discussed event in Cologne on New Years' Eve in which young men (some of them asylum-seekers, others German citizens) were accused of criminal activities as a group, public interest in the volunteering movement declined. In contrast to the media coverage, which ceased reporting on the activities of the 'welcome culture,' many of our interviewees reported that the movement was still growing. Most of them declared that the influx of new volunteers was still high, and the number of initiatives was continuously growing. All of them reported an overwhelming willingness to help. An example from Nürnberg illustrates this situation: 5,000 people downloaded an application for three volunteer positions in a few days.⁹

Even though one of our interviewees stated that the events in Cologne had affected the motivation of some volunteers, resulting in a decrease in the influx of new volunteers,¹⁰ ultimately the majority of organizations still had more new volunteers than they needed for their work, and thus further recruitment was unnecessary. Many of the coordinators we interviewed insisted that the negative press had in fact actually motivated people to volunteer, and that they had recently been able to enlist even more people to their initiatives. One of the most common motives for volunteering that respondents stated was based on a neighborhood-focused desire to decrease the amount of negative propaganda against refugees and migration within their close environment.¹¹ Many initiatives were founded in the situation that a new camp was going to be established in a neighborhood and some citizens started raising concerns about the expected effects on the locality. The head of the division for volunteer coordination of the city of Nürnberg explains: '[...] the more problematic the atmosphere at these events (information evenings organized by local authorities), the bigger the circle of helpers becomes. People don't feel comfortable with the idea that so many negative and critical opinions are voiced in their neighborhoods, so they get involved. They come to register more often than in the neighborhoods where this is not a big issue.'

Some of the coordinators described their initial motivation for founding a welcome network as a desire to act in response to attempts to radicalize sentiments of insecurity in order to create a hostile atmosphere for refugees. We heard some similar stories about how the work of the initiatives had helped to marginalize the articulated racist sentiments of some residents.

⁹ Interview with Uli Glaser, Head of the Division for Volunteer Coordination and 'Corporate Citizenship' of the city of Nürnberg, Nürnberg, 15-2-2016.

¹⁰ Interview with the coordinator of Refugees Welcome Flensburg, 8-2-2016.

¹¹ See, e.g., interviews with Gerhard Spitta, Volunteering Coordinator of "Unterstützerkreis Flüchtlingsunterkünfte Hannover e. V.," Hannover, 12-2-2016, Uli Glaser, Nürnberg, Hans-Jörg Behrendt, Berlin-Reinickendorf, Petra Steffan, Equal Opportunities Officer (Gleichstellungsbeauftragte) of the city of Wismar, 8-2-2016.

8. Volunteers against Right-Wing Protests

In the regions where right-wing parties have considerable presence and right-wing extremists organize protests against refugees, refugee support groups are nevertheless frequently organized. On the local level, the volunteer movement is sometimes even able to repress the right-wing activities that are occurring in regions in which right-wing extremism has not taken hold. With the new law on integration, refugees cannot choose their own place of residence. The federal government decides on the place where each applicant should live for a minimum of three years. This regulation is called a 'constraint of residence' ('Wohnsitzauflage') which restricts the freedom of residency immensely, and ensures that even unpopular and economically underdeveloped regions have to host refugees.¹²

There is convincing evidence that the existence of these initiatives, even in underdeveloped regions, reduces the ground for political activities from the far-right, and involves more people without a history of migration into a society of migration. This happens especially in cities and areas in which right-wing extremists have a partial hegemony over some citizens who do not entirely agree with them but who feel unable to turn their protest against the right-wing movement into political action. They thus become engaged in supporting refugees.

When it comes to the framing the volunteers' motivation for supporting refugees, there is significant variability in relation to age and motivation: Older people tend to say that they want to do something against right-wing populism, while younger people see their activity as a form of support for asylum rights. The difference between the youngest group and the oldest group regarding this particular question is marked: 60 per cent of young people agree with the statement "we want to protest against how the state treats refugees", whereas only 30 per cent of older people support this statement.

While in Dresden the Pegida-movement¹³ repeatedly demonstrates in the streets, the number of volunteers who register to support refugees remains stable, and is even growing in some regions. Based on our qualitative interviews with refugees, volunteers and NGOs through two ongoing research projects¹⁴, we believe that the activities of volunteers are important as they offer safe spaces for refugees, even though they cannot completely guarantee their safety within the public space. In some

¹² El-Kayed, N. and U. Hamann (2016).

¹³ Pegida is a right-wing movement that started in the city of Dresden in 2014. In 2016 it was still mobilizing about 2000 protesters every Monday in the inner city of Dresden. One of its main points of protest is the migration-related policies of the federal government, especially the open-border politics related to the summer of 2015.

¹⁴ Both projects are part of a research cluster of BIM (the Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research) financed by the federal chancellery. The first is called "Between Camp and Lease - Different housing conditions and their potential for integration. A study on the housing situation of refugee women" by Ulrike Hamann and Nihad El-Kayed. The second is "Structures and Motives for the Voluntary Support of Refugees" and is being conducted by Serhat Karakayali and Ulrike Hamann.

cases, even the volunteers themselves become targets of right-wing extremist terror.¹⁵ In small cities, the position of the city authorities in relation to refugees can have a huge impact on the safety of both refugees and volunteers, and thus positively influence the conditions for volunteering. In other cities, the number of volunteers may even increase if there are right-wing protests because inhabitants can protest against such demonstrations through their volunteering work.¹⁶ In conclusion, it appears that through the presence of support groups for refugees, right-wing dominance can be prevented, especially when volunteers take on their role consciously. One statement by a volunteer explains the impact of their work: “We truly have the hegemonic position, because we make it public, with the help of the media. Nobody dares to confront us.”¹⁷

The volunteer groups have identified some common practices to dampen down the hostile attitudes and anxieties of the German population and turn them into welcoming neighborhoods such as organizing social encounters between refugees and their local social environment. All kinds of social and cultural activities are organized, the most relevant of which to this discussion are neighborhood festivities and the running of so-called encounter cafés, where refugees and neighbors can meet without commitment but out of general interest in one another. These kinds of activities create a space where prejudices can be reduced through personal encounters and potential connections can be established. The example of a neighborhood in Hannover illustrates this scenario: When a plan to establish a shelter for refugees in a neighborhood was announced, neighbors started to collect signatures against the shelter. In reaction to this mobilization, another group of neighbors organized a public gathering where they discussed the related concerns and established a refugee welcome group. After two years of work, most of the first signatories of the anti-camp list had become active within the welcome group. They organize neighborhood events and the refugee camp is now a well-accepted part of the community.

9. Conclusion

In this article we have discussed the attitudes and motives of volunteers who are part of the so-called ‘welcome culture’ in Germany, especially regarding their notion of state politics and right-wing protests. We demonstrated how the movement has changed in terms of age, motives and goals. Further, we offered insight into the potential for change that is induced by new flows of migration within parts of society that actively engage with refugees. Those volunteers not only practice solidarity with refugees, but also develop a sense of a society of migration. In some regions of Germany, the volunteer movement is preventing negative reactions towards migration and refugees from arising through their presence and activities. In other regions where right-wing activities are dominant, volunteers represent a part of society that is standing up against racism and working to foster a more open society.

¹⁵ Mentioned, for instance, in an interview with Claudia Poser-Ben Kahla, coordinator of “Akzeptanz! e. V. Gera”, Gera, 3-02-2016.

¹⁶ This statement was made, among others, by the city administrator for volunteering from Nürnberg.

¹⁷ Interview, Gross-Schönebeck, 23-08-2016.

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