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Grassroots responses to mass migration in Europe: Introduction

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1   Shifts in the EU's border regime

Whereas migration continuously is taking place, the events of the second half of the year 2015 and the first months of 2016 still mark a historical exception when over million refugee-migrants made their way across the different layers of the European border regime, marching along motorways, demanding again and again to cross the next border, and finally starting to arrive in masses at Central European cities. The international situation with the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war in the backyard of Europe had led to a rise in numbers of displaced and fleeing persons from 2011 onwards. The national and EU reception infrastructure and EU asylum system, as formulated within the framework of the CEAS (Common European Asylum System), were not prepared to accommodate these numbers of people seeking protection, shelter and security in a decent way as stipulated in international, European and national law. The 'long summer of migration,' as these months were labelled in critical migration studies (Kasparek & Speer, 2016), led to a temporal suspension of the EU and nation-state border and migration control regime and a massive 'migration reception crisis' across the continent. While there was general uncertainty over what kind of 'crisis' that was and who it belonged to, as Rajaram (2016) notes in his 'Introduction' to a special issue of *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics,* there was also a rise of solidarity and charity initiatives in broad segments of civil society, organized networks and institutionalized NGOs (Cantat, 2016; Hamann & Karakayali, 2016; Apostolova 2016; Greenberg & Spasić, 2017). Solidarity and charity initiatives were launched across Europe and with a high degree of transnational mobility and networking—including volunteering along the Balkan route, on the Greek islands, along the motorways, at border crossing points, train stations, camps, etc., from Sweden to Gaziantep as the Turkish–Syrian border 'entered into the European spotlight' (Kasparek, 2016, p. 2).

'Hospitality' and 'welcome culture,' as it was quickly framed by media and politicians alike, seemed for a short time to dominate at least part of the societal responses to migratory movements. In Germany, a survey of the Social Sciences Institute of the Evangelical Church from December 2015 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, quoted by Hamann & Karakayali, 2016, p. 70). In fact, a report based on 507 interviews with refugees fleeing to Turkey, Lebanon and eight EU-countries during these times clearly shows that those who made their journey through the 'formalized Balkan corridor' in the second half of 2015 frequently reported to be 'supported by tourists offering a ride or food, by locals, volunteers, and NGO staff.' The report also mentions that almost half of the sample (48 per cent) 'stated that they had experienced NGOs as a supportive actor during their journey' (Hess & Petrogiannis 2020, p. 18). Especially the so-called formalized or humanitarian corridor along the Balkan route, which operated for six months until Macedonia and Slovenia officially closed their borders on 8 March 2016, and had established a kind of 'state sponsored transit' (Hameršak et al., 2020), was only possible due to a corresponding humanitarian infrastructure by heterogenous assemblages of groups, individuals and well institutionalized organizations. 'The formalized corridor was the shifting and ever-changing interplay of the agency and autonomy of (mass) migration, the engagement of solidarity structures and broader civil society, as well as various humanitarian and securitarian practices of the affected state' (Beznec & Kurnik, 2020, p. 35).

Whereas many studies on this phenomena focus on Western societies or individuals from the West volunteering mostly in the Southern part of the globe—indicating a certain class and geopolitical bias—, scholarship on the recent rise in solidarity and charity in the wake of recent migratory movements rather points to specific regional and local genealogies of helping others and of being in solidarity with people on the move, and the existence of well-established national and transnational networks of migration-related and anti-racist activism and advocacy (see e.g. Bužinkić, 2018; Beznec & Kurnik, 2020; El Sharaawi & Razsa, 2019). Barbara Beznec and Andrej Kurnik (2020, p. 1) speak of 'assemblages of mobility' along the Balkan route, consisting of the very practices of the migrants and various solidarity initiatives (also by plenty of diverse local actors such as churches, youth organizations, etc.) that made the long summer of migration possible:

> By the time the first refugees arrived at the Slovenian border, hundreds of locals already volunteered for months along the entire route from the Greek islands to the Austrian border by collecting humanitarian aid, providing direct and immediate assistance to the people traveling north, and/or joining several antiracist manifestations for open borders in Slovenia, even denouncing or subverting government attempts to establish state control over freedom of movement (Pistotnik et al., 2016, quoted by Beznec & Kurnik 2020, 44).

The far-reaching responses by the EU and the nation states to these migratory movements, especially the steady closure of the Balkan route in 2016 with the help of border closures, the setting up of new bordering infrastructures, as fences, watchtowers, and ditches as well as the normalization of violence in the European 'borderscapes,' went along with an increasing pressure on these welcoming infrastructures and solidarity initiatives (see Hameršak et al., 2020; Nagy, 2016). On the one hand, as states regained control over the migratory movements and were increasingly able to restore themselves as the central

sovereign powers organizing reception, especially not-institutionally organized actors and groups got pushed more and more out of the field, and were forced to register and to transform themselves into institutionally acknowledged and legally approved associations and NGOs (see Cantat, 2020; Jovanović, 2020). On the other hand, initiatives and actors that did not follow the new regulation were increasingly criminalized, as is the case on the Greek islands, where almost all independent monitoring and rescue activities by volunteers have been stopped due to the risk of being the next victim of a smuggling litigation (Adam & Hänsel, 2021).

Nonetheless, there are still 'helping hands' around, at a local level as well as ever better organized transnationally. These everyday and grassroots-based, at times invisible acts of support for people on the move as well as the highly visibilized practices of monitoring, documenting, scandalizing, and protesting against the brutalization of border and reception policies as they are performed today in many of the European borders are still part and parcel of the daily 'border struggles' as Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013) once termed the ongoing contestations of how the border is enacted and experienced.

2   Forms of humanitarianism

In the social sciences in general, the 2015 'migration reception crisis' stimulated a conspicuous body of research focusing on grassroots responses to mass migration, the role of volunteers and activism (Feischmidt at al., 2018; McGee & Pelham, 2018; Rozakou, 2017; Sandri, 2017; Sutter, 2020). This literature has emphasized important aspects of the broad migration receiving apparatus, which is not only constituted by governmental and intergovernmental entities and structures, but also by migrant networks, spontaneous movements, civil associations, local NGOs, and so forth. It illuminated some of the continuities and shifts that shape the work of humanitarian reason on different scales (Brković, 2016a). Ambivalences and the largely emergent character of vernacular forms of humanitarianism meant that the grounds of critique had to be explored anew (Brković, 2017).

Whereas the critique of large-scale international forms of humanitarianism (De Lauri, 2016; 2019; Dunn, 2012; Fassin, 2011; Pandolfi, 2003) has addressed the dimensions of power, injustice and inequality enhanced by humanitarian actions and narratives, studies of bottom-up humanitarian responses in the wake of the last decade's migration processes directed their attention towards forms of solidarity mostly built around notions of prefigurative politics, ethical citizenship, anti-racism, affective aid, and face-to-face solidarity. Of course, grassroots responses do not necessarily accommodate practices and ideals of care and solidarity. Europe at large has been caught between two simultaneous responses: hospitality versus xenophobia, compassionate pragmatism versus fear of (cultural and religious) difference (De Lauri, 2019, p. 162). In one case or the other (grassroots hospitality or grassroots racism), humanitarian ethos has been constantly mobilized through notions of crisis and emergency. In fact, whether it was an NGO willing to rescue people at sea or a right-wing movement arguing for rejecting shipwrecked persons, crisis and emergency have been used as *the* conceptual framework to read migration flows (Rajaram, 2016). Rescue/civil humanitarianism (Esperti, 2020) and xenophobia (Cap, 2018) have thus co-existed in the narrative of crisis that ignited diverse grassroots responses.

The conceptualization of mass migration as crisis and emergency—and therefore as a humanitarian issue—shows that grassroots solidarity and care are integrated into a larger and highly politicized humanitarian framework able to absorb a plurality of experiences, ideas, and elements ranging from militarization to civil engagement, and from institutional approaches to activism. Vernacular, grassroots, voluntary, and other bottom-up humanitarian responses to this sense of crisis have ambivalently provided space to pursue prefigurative forms of politics, while reproducing particular forms of power and inequality (Brković, forthcoming). Multiple forms of humanitarianism—international, vernacular, subversive, civil, voluntary, grassroots, everyday, demotic, domestic, imperial, solidary—confirm rather than contradict the main premise on which the modern humanitarian ethos rests: the recognition of a crisis and the need to do something now (Sandri, 2018; Altman, 2018; Horstmann, 2017; Richey, 2018; Taithe, 2019; Kloos, 2019; Fechter & Schwittay, 2019; Vandervoordt, 2019). Identifying a social or political phenomenon as a humanitarian crisis corresponds to the tendency of allowing specific forms of action but disallowing others, pushing the public debate into a specific direction but not another (De Lauri, 2019; Scott-Smith, 2016). To declare a humanitarian crisis, such as the 2015 'migration crisis,' implies an imperative to do something, and to do it now. This makes room for a certain latitude in the scope of possible action. First, precisely what should be done remains unspecified in the narrative of humanitarian crisis, which focuses on immediate needs. What becomes prevalent is that doing something is clearly necessary, which often means that anything can be done, because something is better than nothing. Indeed, 'it's better than nothing' is one of the most common responses to any critique of humanitarianism (Dunn, 2019). Doing something was a core element of grassroots humanitarian responses to mass migration, and of course 'something' has been deployed in a variety of ways, some highly elaborated, others more improvised, ranging from complex rescuing operations to occasional volunteerism. Whether in continuity with more established anti-racism movements or as expressions of new European identities, these responses have not simply expanded the realm of humanitarianism, they have also actively promoted different forms of participation and self. As the European borders became 'humanitarian borders' (Walters, 2010) in the post-2015 conceptualization of the crisis, forces of contingency (i.e. humanitarian exceptionalism) merged with grassroots instances of renewed volunteerism, citizenship, and collaboration.

3   But what does 'grassroots' mean?

The papers in this special issue illustrate the complexities of finding the right vocabulary—both descriptive and analytical—to explain how people living across Europe have responded to the recent shifts in the EU border regime. They also help us understand some of the challenges of thinking critically about this topic. This thematic issue contributes to the ongoing lively debates on the relationship between humanitarianism, solidarity, and human rights in Europe. It does so by approaching the concept of 'grassroots' critically and from an ethnographic perspective. We suggest that the meanings, practices, and sociopolitical effects of 'grassroots' need to be ethnographically explored, rather than assumed in advance as a given.

In the world of political praxis, the term 'grassroots' evokes almost instant associations

of political progressiveness (Staples, 2016). In leftist, feminist, no-border, and antination-alist circles (and in some recent critical migration scholarship), grassroots are contrasted with state institutions, which are seen as failing, absent, or violent (Milan, 2018). To describe a movement or a response as 'grassroots' is meant to indicate that it is widely accepted by those affected by the issue at hand and that, therefore, it is socially just, morally legitimate, and politically progressive. Indeed, in the face of violence inherent to the European border regime, inflicted and upheld by the representatives of the institutions of the EU and its member states, the focus on non-institutional, grassroots responses to mass migration in Europe may be politically and analytically promising (Vandervoordt & Verschraegen, 2019).

Yet, such a simplistic understanding of 'grassroots' can be theoretically and politically limiting for several reasons. First, as mentioned above, 'grassroots' reactions to migration may involve negative and violent, as well as welcoming, or indifferent standpoints and responses. Exploring how some types of grassroots responses emerge in particular locales and among particular groups of people, but not in others, suggests that in order to understand 'grassroots,' the analytical focus must be broadened so as to see the ways in which 'grassroots' and 'institutional' are co-constituted differently in various socio-historical contexts. An excellent example of this is the outpouring of grassroots support and solidarity to refugees in Serbia, which took place in 2015, while the Balkan route was open (Greenberg & Spasić, 2017).[1] However, once the EU borders went up again, and the Balkan route was officially 'closed,' solidary grassroots support scaled down, while indifferent and violent responses to people on the move became much more common. Journalist reports about groups of men in Slovenia who self-organized in 2019 to hunt and violently attack people on the move are another example of this.[2] Differences between political 'solidarity' and 'the culture of welcome' *(Willkommenskultur)* articulated in Germany are yet another example of how broad the scope 'grassroots' can be. There, the term *Willkommenskultur* was first used by organizations such as the Federation of German Employers, Association of German Engineers, and several political parties to discuss problems of migration of highly skilled workers into Germany (Hamann & Karakayali, 2016). Since 2015, however, the term *Willkommenskultur* has been used in new ways. Some initially used the term to advocate 'radical cosmopolitanism,' which would challenge traditional European ideas about belonging, polity, borders, and citizenship that are commonly expressed in the vocabulary of a nation-state (e.g. Baban & Rygiel, 2017). However, soon a distinction emerged between two kinds of grassroots responses: 'solidarity,' as a more intentionally political and egalitarian relationship towards people on the move, and *'Willkommenskultur,'* as a more integration-oriented and politically neutral form of everyday help provided by German citizens (Karakayali, 2017; Hamann & Karakayali, 2016; Rozakou, 2017).

Second, 'grassroots' is a profoundly ambivalent concept. It may refer to 'prefigurative politics,' striving to reflect those forms of care and relationality that are seen as constitutive of a future, and better, society. At the same time, grassroots forms of help may contribute to the reproduction of neoliberal regimes of care. As Muehlebach (2012) has demonstrated, the neoliberalization of welfare may include an active call of the state to

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[1]   See also the 2015 docu-drama *Logbook Serbistan,* directed by Želimir Žilnik: https://www.zilnikzelimir.net/logbook-serbistan

[2]   https://apnews.com/article/57424e6bf60046e594b4c052bac86b6c

transform oneself into an 'ethical citizen' and a 'loving citizen,' a person willing to step in and mediate the effects of the withdrawal of public and state forms of support (see also Rose, 1996; Hess, 2014). Neoliberal transformations of welfare throughout Europe have evoked particular forms of morality, which are reflected in the move of responsibility for survival and wellbeing from public institutions to an individual and their moral dispositions (Trnka & Trundle, 2014). Similarly, complex configurations of care, morality, and responsibility are emerging with respect to the treatment of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and other people on the move in various places in Europe (Van Dyk & Misbach, 2016; Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Cabot, 2016; 2013; Rajaram, 2018; Feischmidt et al., 2019; Brković, 2018; 2016b). Over the last six years, we have witnessed intense negotiations and disagreements taking place across Europe—from the discussions of the Dublin agreement in the EU parliament and various state commissions, to deeply intimate conversations about humanitarian aid in the privacy of one's home—over what would constitute an 'appropriate' responsibility for which actor concerning the survival and wellbeing of people on the move during their attempts to reach the EU and once they are there. In these negotiations, it is not always quite clear where the boundary between prefigurative politics that charts the contours of a desired future and the moral configurations that are more in tune with the neoliberal political projects of the EU and its individual member states lies. As all the papers in this thematic issue illustrate, an ethnographic approach is needed to tease out how these ambivalences and complexities of the grassroots responses to mass migration are played out in everyday life in Europe.

4   Contributions to the special issue

The range of grassroots responses to the 2015 migration reception crisis is vast. Depending on the local, national, and migratory contexts, different groups employed different modalities and policies to help the people on the move.

Synnøve Bendixsen and Marie Sandberg ethnographically explore small-scale volunteering and NGO work in Greece, Germany, and Sweden. They suggest that three different modalities of everyday humanitarianism have emerged among non-professional volunteers, and that we can distinguish these on the basis of temporality. Temporality of crisis is characterized by an impulse to immediately provide help in an emergency; temporality of care develops in an attempt to help across asymmetries and inequalities of power that shape relations between refugees and migrants on the one hand and volunteers on the other; temporality of reflexivity takes place alongside ambivalences and doubts that strongly colour the experience of volunteering.

Lieke van der Veer's analysis redirects our attention to the bureaucratic context structuring the work of grassroots organizations to a great extent. Studying the work of grassroots organizations that support refugee status holders in Rotterdam, van der Veer shows how classifications regarding preferred target groups determine certain grassroots responses as fringe-activities that are less legible bureaucratically. Such lessened legibility translates into insecurity for grassroots organizers and, in combination with employment precarity, motivate them to play guessing games and to give in to municipal preferences to improve their funding eligibility. By exploring in particular the story of a grassroots organizer—a woman of colour with a forced migration background—the article links the

process of giving in to municipal preferences to different attempts to render grassroots activities legible, enabling a less precarious life, and turn affective labour into a life-sustaining practice.

Some of the practices that were developed in this large framework of grassroots humanitarianism evolved over time into different forms of engagement with border restrictions and violence. A case explored by Marijana Hameršak in her paper is the lasting practice of reporting of pushbacks by grassroots groups active at different locations at the Southeastern territorial fringes of the EU. After a comprehensive review of the relevant literature on pushback reports and reporting practices, Hameršak focuses on these reports as a form of writing in the context of a 'global documenting fever.'

Edgar Córdova Morales draws the attention to the dark side of the European migration and asylum regime starting from an ethnography-volunteering conducted in a small humanitarian organization in the refugee camp Kara Tepe, a few kilometers away from the old site of the former Moria camp. In his reflection on politics of life and death, he discusses the EU–Turkey Deal of 2016 in light of the enactment of a restrictive asylum process, which made the former Moria camp a detention centre for thousands of migrants unable to access international protection, thus generating demonstrations and riots. The article delves into the asylum process in Lesbos as a postcolonial border space where re-actualized forms of racializations of migrants become mechanisms of control, detention, illegalization and ultimately exposure to premature socio-physical death.

In his research note, Grzegorz Piotrowski discusses how the discursive field around the issue of migration has rapidly changed in Poland since 2015. Contextualizing anti- and pro-migrant activism in the broader struggles over party politics, the author points to the new and complicated political alliances emerging in the country. Focusing particularly on the relations between radical grassroots groups, registered NGOs, civil servants, and politicians, the author demonstrates the importance of municipal and city levels for articulating political struggles across lines of identitarian and other distinctions.

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