



The politics of pro-migrant volunteering: Exploring the role of pro-migrant volunteering in the local migration governance

Maurizio Artero

Department of Social and Political Science, Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the phenomenon of pro-migrant volunteering in urban areas. Its objective is to contribute to our understanding of this phenomenon, which has recently undergone important reconsiderations. Indeed, scholars in migration studies have long contrasted activists in social and political movements with volunteers: the first were usually celebrated for the challenge posed to the status quo, whereas the latter looked down for engaging in a depoliticized form of civic action. Drawing from two research studies conducted between 2017 and 2022 in the Italian city of Milan, this paper shed light on the current processes of hybridization between pro-migrant volunteering and activism, and on the politicization affecting pro-migrant volunteering. Here, politics include instances of micro-politics, in which our way of thinking, behaving and imagining our society is transformed, even without triggering a revolution. To make this point, I presented a typology of volunteers and shed light on some important functions these actors play in the city of Milan vis-à-vis refugees. Underlining the strong interlinkages between these two 'words', I also stress the implications for the existing literature.

1. Introduction

In the last years, the local level has increasingly become prominent in the literature on migration governance, a domain historically dominated by discussion on the actions of National and Supra-national authorities (e.g., Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). As a consequence of a general decentralization, indeed, local authorities have greater margins of autonomy; this often leads (especially in large cities) to a pluralization of the number of actors involved in formulating, negotiating and interpreting migration governance (Oomen & Durmus, 2019). The almost decade-old refugee reception crisis (see Rea et al., 2019) marked a watershed in this sense, at least in Europe. During the summer of 2015 (but even before in countries like Italy and Greece), when hundreds of thousands of refugees were giving rise to one of the largest movements of migrants in Europe, civil society actors played a fundamental role, by filling the gaps and failures of political institutions: distributed meals, hosted refugees in their own homes, used their vehicles to shuttle refugees (Crawley et al., 2017).

Against this backdrop, activities of volunteering attracted the public and scholarly attention. The events of the refugee reception crisis emphasized the role of civil society actors in the governance of migration at the local level, especially concerning asylum-seekers and refugees, in what has been called the *local battleground on migration*

(Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020).

This work aims to analyze pro-migrant volunteering as developing in the last years. It does so by focusing on the Italian city of Milan. This offers a peculiar case study, as it is simultaneously one of the European cities deeply affected by the arrival of refugees following the 'refugee reception crisis', one of the settings where civil society groups have played an important role in the reception of this population, and has a historical legacy of civil society organizations active in the governance of migration (Artero, 2019a, 2019b; Bazurli, 2019; Bini & Gambazza, 2019; Sinatti, 2019; Van Aken, 2008). In particular, this work zooms in on the activities of 'native' pro-migrant volunteers in voluntary organizations, i.e., collective subjects based in the receiving societies and mainly run by native citizens whose main activity is the provision of services. This means that the pertaining organizations are not arising from social or political movements or communities (e.g., social centres or, in Italian, *centri sociali*).

By sketching a typology of volunteers, and discussing their role (and the role of these groups) within the so-called local battleground on migration, this work claims that we are witnessing two important processes: the politicization affecting pro-migrant volunteering and the hybridization between pro-migrant volunteering and political activism. In particular, volunteerism has traditionally been decoupled from the world of political struggle and the study of social activism. It is only

E-mail address: maurizio.artero@unimi.it.

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recently that light has been shed on how volunteers can inform progressive local responses to international migration (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021). By highlighting the politicization of pro-migrant volunteering and the convergence between pro-migrant volunteering and activism, this work wants to encourage scholars to build bridges between different strands of literature and consider all types of civil engagement when studying the local production of migration laws and practices.

2. Convergences and divergences between pro-migrant volunteering and political activism

In scholarly debates, volunteering and activism are often distinguished from each other. The study of volunteerism is discussed within the literature on civil society, while social activism is studied in social movement studies. It is generally accepted that social activists aim for social change, while volunteering is seen as an act of neutral altruism (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021).

In particular, volunteering, defined as the provision of services without explicit political aims, has traditionally been viewed negatively in migration studies. Third Sector organizations, which include pro-migrant volunteers, have been the subject of criticism for their activities in support of migrants. These critiques have been particularly addressed in a body of literature known as critical humanitarian studies (Agier, 2011; Fassin, 2012; Ticktin, 2011). In the social sciences, the term humanitarianism refers to a paradigm of governance for marginalized populations that prioritises aid over rights, relief over criticising of governments (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021; Fassin, 2012). Within critical scholarship, volunteers are often viewed as dutiful citizens mobilized by private emotions and compassion, rather than ideological imperatives (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021).

Critics have specifically pointed out the dominant repertoire of actions employed by volunteers. In addition to providing services, pro-migrant groups tend to use non-contentious forms of action and more consensual forms of interest representation, such as lobbying or advocacy, while avoiding explicit political protests (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021). In summary, the adoption of a humanitarian approach may lead to a depoliticisation process that aligns with neo-liberalism. This process may result in the devaluation of political decision-making and the potential for conflict against the current system (De Nardis, 2017). Furthermore, this approach may also weaken opposition to the existing migration regime (D'Agostino, 2017). In this sense, the trend of devolution of powers and responsibilities from the public to the private sector appears particularly relevant. There emerges, indeed, a public-private partnership in the governance of migration that lessens the actual conflicting potential of civil society groups, and tends to legitimize political decisions as shared rather than imposed (Busso, 2017).

This interpretation of volunteering has also influenced literature on cities as 'welcoming' locations for migrants. Although the literature on migration governance mostly focuses on the policymaking of local governments, scholars have recently highlighted the great capacity of 'civil society' to mobilize various resources for building solidarity and inclusive policies (Özdemir, 2022). However, although civic engagement plays an important role, credit for influencing progressive policies is typically given to activists (Darling, 2017).

Following the refugee crisis, the practice of volunteering for refugees and migrants in Europe underwent a reassessment. Against this backdrop, indeed, researchers have highlighted pro-migrant volunteering political dimensions. In particular, an emerging literature has convened that volunteering can represent a form of resistance, and in fact that pro-migrant volunteering and politics may be entangled (e.g., Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Sandri, 2018). These works show that the emotions that arise in the context of providing support to refugees and asylum seekers do not necessarily lead to a politics of empathy or compassion. de Jong and Ataç (2017) and Milan (2018) found that volunteering can be a means to change the political climate in favour of migrants, even

without individuals making explicit political statements or engaging in conventional forms of political protest (Karakayali, 2018); highlighted the political motivations behind the mobilization of many volunteers (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017). Simultaneously, volunteering has become a legitimate component of activists' collective action repertoire (Zamponi, 2018). Social movement actors have diversified their actions, focusing on 'direct social action', which involves practices that aim to transform specific aspects of society through the action of solidarity, rather than making claims. In this context, then, Sutter (2020) proposed to understand pro-migrant volunteering as a practice of prefigurative politics; it aims to realize a space of alternative and more egalitarian social relationships and impacts on how the refugees were treated by authorities.

According to della Porta and Steinhilper (2021), these developments were the result of various interrelated dynamics, including the financial breakdown in 2008, negative political and discursive contexts toward minorities, particularly migrants' rights, and restrictions on humanitarian actions for migrants. This predisposed political activists to direct social actions and politicized initiatives to help migrants.

By using various strands of social science literature, including urban studies, social movement studies, and civil society studies, this research highlights the 'convergence' between the political activism of solidarity movements and the supposedly apolitical pro-migrant volunteering. It provides a more nuanced view of the pro-migrant volunteer, who was once seen as providing humanitarian assistance out of compassion. On the other hand, civil society organizations and their volunteers are increasingly involved in contentious campaigns, informal networks, and advocacy campaigns in various contexts. These activities challenge the idea of pro-migrant volunteering as an apolitical activity. Therefore, it is necessary to broaden the understanding of what is considered 'political'. Pro-migrant volunteering differs from conventional politics and protest movements, which are mainly understood as struggles for power. However, pro-migrant volunteering activities also aim for change, specifically a change in attitudes toward refugees through 'micro-politics' (see Artero, 2019a). This does not mean that conventional politics and volunteering are incompatible; in fact, they can reinforce each other.

3. Milan, its civil society and the recent local governance on asylum

Milan has historically acted as a pole of attraction for migration: internal, earlier, and international, later (Van Aken, 2008). Like many other cities in Italy, Milan has developed its own approach to the governance and integration of international migrants due to the lack of an explicit national model (Caponio, 2006). Here local administrations, in turn, bestowed civil society organizations (mostly Catholic-related) with the task of practically implementing and organising the settlement and integration of migrants (Briata, 2014). Despite the aggressively negative public discourses on migrants of the centre-right administrations of the city (which lasted from 1993 to 2011), sometimes these organizations were able to introduce interesting policy innovations (Briata, 2014).

Asylum-seekers and refugees represented the 'new entry' in the migratory phenomenon of this city; indeed, although already present (see Van Aken, 2008), their existence emerged strongly only at the beginning of the 2010s. Following the 2011 end of Ghedaffi's dictatorship in Libya, and even more the 2013 Syrian war, Milan has become the epicentre of an intense arrival and transit of asylum seekers and refugees. In particular, in the summer of 2013, Syrian migrants (often families) arrived *en masse* at Milan's Central Train Station, a historical space of migration in the city (Colombo & Navarrini, 1999), while journeying northward. Upon arrival by train from Apulia or Calabria to Milan's central station, Syrian migrants would stop in Milan for a few hours (the necessary time to buy a train ticket to Central Europe) to a few days (in case they needed to withdraw money from a money transfer or rest) before departing. It was the beginning of an intense transit

migration of refugees of different origins crossing through Milan that lasted until 2016 with the arrival of around 125,000 people between 2013 and 2017 (Bini & Gambazza, 2019).

This situation was initially dealt with by the involvement of ‘ordinary citizens’: many locals who had witnessed the dire needs of the newcomers spontaneously provided help and solidarity by joining volunteer associations or forming spontaneous initiatives (see Artero, 2019b). Over time, however, the Municipality of Milan has given rise to an original reception system to respond to this intense flow of migrants; a system that stands side by side with (but are not part of) the governmental one, relying on the action of a civil society traditionally strong and organized. *Sistema profughi* (the name of this system) consisted of a registration desk and related reception centres for refugees that were supported by the municipality. In these ‘municipal’ centres, board and lodging, medical care and clothes were given.

Sistema profughi represented the backbone of what was called *Modello Milano*, a peculiar approach to the reception and integration of both asylum seekers and refugees, which merges territorial institutions, private actors and Third Sector entities (Bini & Gambazza, 2019). In this context, Milan has become an example of alternative approach of reception: its representatives were invited to the European Parliament to present the virtues of Milan’s reception model amid the ‘refugee crisis’ (Bazurli, 2019), and the city strengthened its involvement in different networks of ‘welcoming cities’.¹

With the end of the intense arrival of transit migrants, however, *Modello Milano* has struggled to retain its identity. The decrement of the transit phenomenon as well as a political climate that had changed since 2016, with a national government that increasingly aimed to control migration movements, ended *Sistema Profughi*. Since 2017, Milan, on one side, has hosted large collective pro-migration events, like the demonstrations on May 20, 2017 and March 2, 2019, in evident contrast with the national approach (see Bazurli, 2019); on the other side, witnessed a worsening climate for migrants and refugees. In particular, Milan has seen the deployment of strategies for contrasting asylum rights, like the administrative and bureaucratic praxes of immediate rejection of asylum applications (see Artero & Fontanari, 2019) and the establishment of a quota system for asking asylum,² from local authorities (despite being tied to the national government) such as *Questura* and *Prefettura*. In this vein, we can also see the opening (long-fought against by pro-migrant civil society groups) of a detention centre in the city, once a refugee centre in *Sistema Profughi*, and the prevalence of CAS reception centres over SPRAR centres, which underscores, once again, the persistence of a myopic view of reception (Bini & Gambazza, 2019). In this phase, despite the importance that pro-migrant groups still retain in the local governance on migration (as it will be observed), the Municipality stopped any concrete actions against the national anti-migrant initiatives and the relationship with pro-migrant activists deteriorated (Bazurli & Kaufmann, 2023).

4. Sources and methods

The results presented in what follows come mainly from two research studies. The first one is my Ph.D. research project: a 13-month ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Milan between January 2017 and February 2018, during which I conducted interviews with volunteers, civil servants, legal advisors and refugees.³ In particular, I applied overt participant observation in two voluntary groups: SOSERM, from May to

¹ See for example: https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl16/files/docs/city_of_milan_submission_to_the_ece_regional_review.pdf.

² <https://www.meltingpot.org/2022/07/diritto-di-asilo-ostacolato-e-sanzi-oni-alle-persone-in-coda-in-questura-a-milano/>.

³ With this expression, here I refer to asylum seekers, beneficiaries of international protection, and generally migrants that even if ‘irregular’ arrived also for humanitarian reasons.

September 2017 (see Artero, 2019a), and Naga, from June to October 2017 (see Artero, 2020); I also interviewed 61 subjects (28 between volunteers and activists; 9 legal advisors; 4 NGOs’ workers; 5 public officials; and 15 refugees). The second source is a research conducted between 2020 and 2022 within a PRIN project financed by the Italian Ministry for University and Research (MIUR). Together with a colleague, we surveyed 300 refugees and asylum-seekers living in Milan, and collected qualitative, in-depth interviews with refugees and their ‘supporters’ (volunteers, social workers, case workers and public officials). Specifically, we conducted 57 interviews; among them, 21 involved participants volunteering in Milan in 6 different organizations.

Ultimately, this work draws from the information gathered in the context of these two studies. Both fieldworks were equally employed to substantiate the findings and the discussion: the typology of volunteers and the roles played by pro-migrant groups, indeed, are mainly based on the analysis of 41 interviews with pro-migrant volunteers active in the city of Milan conducted in these two studies (20 interviews from the first study and 21 from the second one).

The resulting ‘sample’ is not statistically representative of the Milanese pro-migrant volunteering phenomenon. However, in the two studies, I tried to maximise the differences in terms of longevity and ideological roots of the groups under study to well-represent the ‘scene’ of pro-migrant volunteering. Indeed, volunteers come from seven different groups that reflect the diverse ideological and aetiological backgrounds of pro-migrant volunteering in Milan: there are Catholic-inspired organizations, groups that emerged after the spontaneous mobilization during the refugee reception crisis, and secular associations, ideologically left-wing. Finally, participants provide different types of help, usually outside the national system of reception. The bulk of them (28) teach the Italian language in organizations not connected with the national reception system,⁴ others were assisting migrants, especially by distributing food, within *Sistema Profughi*, the rest were involved in activities like legal help or organization of recreational sports events. In this regard, it is noteworthy that some engaged in more than one activity, at the same time or at different times.

The profile of the interviewees is more uniform and discloses their prevalent ‘ordinary’ background: on average they are 51 years old, with a prevalence of people over 50 (26) and women (27); they are, or were (for retirees), generally employed in different types of ‘white-collar’ jobs (e.g., teachers, investment banker, medical scientist). Around half of them (18) started volunteering in favour of refugees between 2013 and 2016, at the time of the refugee reception crisis.

I applied a grounded theory approach to my studies. In particular, the analytical procedure consisted of moving from raw data to meaningful descriptions or statements by using successively codes, categories, and concepts (Lichtman, 2014). The data analysis procedure was computer-assisted with the use of QDA Miner Lite. All participants’ names were pseudo-anonymised to protect their privacy.

5. Pro-migrant volunteers: a typology

The works that investigated pro-migrant volunteering following the ‘refugee crisis’ have often sought to shed light on the profiles of pro-migrant supporters (e.g., Hamann & Karakayali, 2016; Karakayali, 2018; Sutter, 2020). In the following section, I will present my typology of pro-migrant volunteers. This is based on an analysis of the Milanese volunteers’ motivations and functions (Clary & Snyder, 1999) and attitudes toward refugees (Marrow, 2012), as well as on their biographical, social and cultural backgrounds. To be clear, with motivations, I identify the personal and social processes that initiate, direct, and sustain volunteering (Clary & Snyder, 1999). Drawing from the well-known Volunteer Function Inventory (VFI) by Clary and Snyder, motivations

⁴ Specifically, many form the network *Scuole Senza Permesso* (translatable as ‘Schools without Permit’): <https://www.scuolesenzapermesso.org/>.

can be categorized according to their functions, namely the goals that orient volunteers' activity; these can be clustered between altruistic and egoistic goals. Attitudes, instead, refer to the personal imagination and belief concerning the target of their activity, refugees in this case. Albeit not explicitly theorized, this dimension emerges in many studies on pro-migrant supporters (for example, Marrow, 2012).

The study of pro-migrant supporters' motivations, functions and attitudes is particularly relevant as the critical humanitarian literature tends to illustrate volunteerism as an issue of moral sympathy complicit with state-driven intentions (see Ticktin (2011); Fassin (2012)). In this reading, pro-migrant volunteers conceive their activities as acts of humanitarian assistance evolving from feelings of 'apolitical' compassion. Beneficiaries are seen as victims and volunteers' actions revolves around protecting beneficiaries from sufferings. As observed, the almost decade-old refugee reception crisis (see Rea et al., 2019) marked a watershed in this sense, at least in Europe, and the literature recognized how volunteers' motivations, functions and attitudes are complex and coexistent (for example, Ambrosini, 2015). Recently, then, scholars have paid attention to the contentious character of pro-migrant volunteering. In particular, this emerging literature has convened that pro-migrant volunteering can both represent a form of 'activism' for people driven by political ideals and foster the politicization of 'a-political' supporters (e.g., Artero, 2019a; Sandri, 2018; Zamponi, 2018).

The following section examines how pro-migrant volunteers view their involvement as a means of expressing a desire to alter negative attitudes toward refugees and migrants. Three ideal types of volunteers were identified, highlighting the presence of activists who situate their volunteering within a broader political action against the current governance of migration, individuals who adopt a human rights perspective, and people volunteering for personal benefits. In accordance with recent research on pro-migrant volunteering (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021; Sandri, 2018; Zamponi, 2018), this typology challenges the conceptual division between volunteerism and activism and highlights the strong interlinkages between the two. The motivations, functions, and attitudes of volunteers were compared with their biographical, social, and cultural backgrounds, including age, occupation, and political affiliation. It should be noted that this three-pronged typology is an 'ideal type' and its clear-cut categories may not perfectly fit real cases. Individuals may also alternate between categories.

5.1. The militant

Recently, scholars have observed how pro-migrant support has become a topic of strong politicization, in light of the processes of criminalization of 'acts of solidarity' toward migrants (e.g., Mezzadra, 2020; Parsanoglou, 2020). In this context, volunteering in favour of refugees might become a form of activism and their proponents can be considered militants (see Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017).

Just under a third of participants (11) expressed this kind of volunteering. Among militant volunteers there are people usually over 60 with a very specific political background who situate their volunteering within their broader political action. These volunteers were or are still engaged in political movements, and see their participation in pro-migrant volunteering as a stage in a longer path of political engagement, informed by ideological principles and goals. The involvement of these volunteers exemplifies what Sandri (2018) and Zamponi (2018) postulated: volunteering is now part of activists' repertoire of collective actions, blurring once more the distinction between volunteerism and activism.

I have always been politically active, since I was young, in particular fighting for the weakest social groups in my hometown, Naples. When I came here to Milan a 'new world' opened up to me, the problems of the refugees, and so I found back this motivation to fight for this marginalized group

(7, Diego)

Besides, people without a very specific political background can fall under this category. As seen better in the next section, the help to refugees can mobilize 'apolitical' people who over time politicize their actions, being confronted directly with the situation, and consequently become a vehicle of political claims for them too (see also Zamponi, 2018). These volunteers are generally younger than the 'longstanding activists' ones, situating between 40 and 60 years old. In both cases, political motivation becomes prevalent to the extent that for some volunteering (with its focus on providing services) is perceived as a more appropriate expression of political identity than traditional political activism:

I've always situated politically on the radical left, but I never as a member of a party or anything... Now, volunteering has become my political action

(38, Simona)

Consequently, for militants, volunteering performs the function of changing this society; in particular, many highlight an ambition to change the public opinion about refugees. Finally, their attitude toward refugees is often to consider them within a social justice perspective, like the members of a disadvantaged and subaltern population:

Refugees are among the most precarious on the whole scale of immigration. The ones who are the least equipped, who face the most difficulties, because they start from a very problematic situation.

(48, Marcella)

5.2. The good Samaritan

Under this category, which is the largest (18 people) among the participants, finds its place a quite variegated group of volunteers whose activity is informed by a strong commitment to human rights, and values of tolerance, empathy and compassion, and by the idea of providing effective support to forsaken individuals. This varied and complex group is composed of volunteers mobilized mostly by a feeling of solidarity toward refugees. In many cases, a specific incident, like seeing the mass arrival of refugees in the central station, or the media echo of the crisis led 'ordinary citizens' to participate out of an emotive reaction (see Artero, 2019a; Milan, 2018). On other occasions, particular social/ethical networks, such as churches and religious movements, which valued the caring response toward refugees, appear to have prompted their desire to engage. In any case, the biblical reference of the label cannot be misunderstood: although there are volunteers who refer to their Catholic belief as a drive to volunteer, many deny any connection with religion:

I'm a Christian and Jesus came into this world, it's not that he sat in the Temple in Jerusalem and died there... But you don't need to believe; helping refugees has to do with being a man, which means to actively live in the world

(2, Alberto)

This disposition to volunteer was also strengthened by personal characteristics in two ways: on one side, some volunteers share a background of internal migration (usually from Southern to Northern Italy), experienced personally or by close family members, which fostered identification with international migrants; on the other, some retained a personal identity of "helper":

I'm the type of person who likes to cheer others up. I thought about immigration: how could I 'cheer' these people up? By volunteering!

(6, Livia)

To be clear, unlike militants, whose function revolves around the ambition of changing the systemic approach to refugees, good

Samaritans aim at helping, first of all, concrete others.

I can't change their stories, their journey; I can't change how Italy treat them. However, for those who are lucky enough to have arrived, I can smile at them, give them some advice, and help them to settle here. It's something that makes their life a little bit better

(36, Pasquale)

Nonetheless, as Pasquale's words suggest, good Samaritans mobilized not solely based on compassion. They articulate critiques for the inadequate response of public authorities to incoming refugees; additionally, they often volunteer with the idea of empowering refugees, of giving them fundamental resources to navigate Italy and defend their rights (see Artero, 2023). Specifically, while all good Samaritans made arguments grounded in an 'ethics of care', most were also profoundly outraged and moved by the government's policies toward people seeking asylum, and the growing populism and nationalism.

We are all brothers, we are all on this planet, and there are global issues, including immigration, which cannot be solved with nationalism, closures, walls, but with creativity and building bridges

(2, Alberto)

Ultimately, as suggested also by Alberto, although they refuse to frame their volunteering as political, their mobilization and their attitudes toward refugees are often rooted in a human rights' perspective (i. e., all humans have fundamental rights, see Nash, 2015) which contrasts the current political approach on migration governance.

5.3. The utilitarian

In contrast with mostly 'selfless' and ideological reasons people gave for volunteering explored above, people also volunteered prevalently for 'personal benefits'. These volunteers, 12 among our interviewees, usually either quite young (less than 35) or elderly people (60 or more), can be labelled as 'utilitarian'. Similarly to the corresponding category of Ambrosini's (2015), many utilitarians are motivated by the idea of learning employability skills, when young, or exercise skills that they mastered in their professional life, when old. This is particularly salient for Italian teachers; one of them, Sandra, disclosed that a by-product of voluntarily teaching Italian is the acquisition of professional skills as a teacher:

by teaching here I discovered so many things that were also useful for me, to give me also professional training, some extra notions

(5B, Sandra)

However, unlike Ambrosini's, the motivations and benefit they obtain from volunteering do not always concern their profession. Indeed, some volunteered with the motivation of making new friends, others for the sake of approaching a mediatic phenomenon or knowing a new 'reality' that can open their mind:

Volunteering doesn't mean that I sacrifice myself. I got a lot of knowledge because I knew new people and cultures... That enriches you because you open your mind

(3B, Alessia)

In this respect, for some, the 'target' of their volunteering (the refugees) per se was not so important, at least at the beginning; this perhaps explains the prevalence of images of refugees as either people in need or resources for the economy. Additionally, utilitarians are not usually strongly 'fitting' their organizations' identity (e.g., in terms of cultural or political background) nor engaged in activities beyond the tasks they perform. In this sense, their engagement can be identified as 'post-modern volunteering' (see Ambrosini 2020b); unlike classic volunteering, where volunteering implies belonging to an organization and

proximity to its cultural, political or religious background, in post-modern one participation is not linked to a cultural or political belonging.

This type of volunteering is certainly different from the others we have seen, but we must be wary of ascribing to it only negative characteristics. As the same label of utilitarian suggests, volunteers' actions increase the well-being for all affected individuals, refugees included. In this sense, self-oriented motivations are not opposed to the idea of performing a service that responds to the problems of people in need, as Paolo suggests in the next excerpt:

When I was young, one of my ambitions was to become an Italian teacher, I've always liked Italian at school. When I retired after many years doing a job that didn't fulfil me I said to myself: "I'd like to do something for others, what can I do?"... so I chose to teach the Italian language to immigrants

(8, Paolo)

6. The role(s) of pro-migrant groups within the 'local battleground on migration'

The literature on local migration governance has recently begun to examine the role of civil society. Previous studies have taken a monolithic approach to the multilevel governance of migration, focusing on the policymaking capacities of local governments, their trans-local networks, and negotiations with regional and national governments (Özdemir, 2022). However, social movement studies have celebrated the role of migrant and native activism in building solidarity and challenging exclusionary policies (Darling, 2017). Only after the refugee reception crisis has 'native' volunteering received attention from scholars (e.g., Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Sempredon et al., 2022). This scholarship has highlighted that civil society actors provide two main types of services for migrants. Firstly, they offer alternative services to support migrants, including refugees, in the host country. Secondly, they assert the rights of migrants, which has become increasingly important in recent years (Ambrosini, 2020a, 2020b). Some of these actors have even specialized in this area, becoming policy entrepreneurs capable of producing social change (Sempredon et al., 2022).

As observed in this emerging literature, volunteerism is a factor that impacts both the production of welfare for refugees and migrants in general and the implementation of political decisions concerning immigration, especially at the local level. In particular, the efforts made by voluntary groups to have a voice in the decision-making, made by developing policy networks, convincing local administrators, knitting multilevel relations, trigger different relations in the local government: the latter can resist, welcome or foster the contribution of civil society actors, based, e.g., on their political positioning and expected electoral advantage (Balbo, 2015).

In this section, I discuss two interconnected dyads of roles that volunteers play in the city of Milan, through their pro-migrant voluntary groups. This exposition is all but exhaustive. Volunteers and pro-migrant groups perform a vast set of functions, as observed in the foregoing overview of the literature. However, in the next paragraphs, I identified four elements in particular, grouped two by two. This will allow me to shed light on important functions that these actors can exert, potentially beyond the Milanese context, and that move volunteering and political activism close to each other.

6.1. Providers of services and advocates

The first, probably predictable, role that pro-migrant voluntary groups play is providers of services to support refugees and in some cases destitute migrants in general; the groups of the participants offer, inter alia: legal information through help-desks, meals for people in need, medical care for those without access to the national health system,

language courses to learn Italian. In this sense, these organizations usually compensate for the absence or the inadequacy of interventions by Italian institutions, providing to refugees what can be considered ‘welfare from below’ (Belloni, 2016). Nevertheless, this welfare is not only bounded to the provision of basic services, as also the foregoing list indicates. Specifically, while nearly all of them initially operated on an informal basis, these groups have often progressively institutionalized into formal associations and established quite sophisticated services like medical clinics and employment counselling. Individually, then, volunteers can act as personal ‘buddies’ (see Hajer & Ambrosini, 2020), providing practical help, extensive social capital, connections with local employers for example; resources that can be fundamental in helping refugees integrate (see Hajer & Artero, 2023; Sutter, 2020).

However, the provision of ‘alternative’ services is a highly controversial issue. Critics argue that these activities serve to support the restrictive political governance of migration, addressing its contradictions and avoiding serious violations of human rights (Hamann & Karakayali, 2016). Participants openly acknowledge these risks, specifically that voluntary groups become ‘stopgaps’ for the social welfare system. At the same time, volunteers often justify the legitimacy of their work by pointing out that they fill gaps that public authorities are neither willing nor able to fill. Additionally, they argue that their services are truly essential for refugees:

It's a problem that we discussed, but in the meantime people are here with their necessities and we try to help... attendance in our Italian course is important for them to include in the asylum application, for getting a permit

(37, Donata)

Additionally, I observed that voluntary organizations do not only provide alternative services but also act in the political arena to, e.g., make public opinion aware of the problems of refugees, oppose restrictive policies, and influence the local authorities. Essentially, they perform activities that elsewhere I called micro-politics (Artero, 2019a). For example, there are groups engaged in monitoring the state of the reception and welfare services for refugees, which brought to the wider public the shortcomings of the system of reception. This is the case of Naga, one of the participants' organizations that has long published on its website the results of their investigations. But more in general groups often organize or participate in public meetings to share the knowledge they have developed as ‘experts’. Some organizations are also part of networks and campaigns for refugees' rights and against restrictive policies which congregate also activist groups, like campaigns against the opening of expulsion centres or pressuring on the regularisation of rejected asylum seekers.

A central aspect in the analysis of the battleground is the relation between civil society groups and broader changes in the legal and institutional frameworks. In this regard, scholars have spoken of an instrumentalization of pro-migrant volunteering from local authorities (e.g., Steinhilper & Fleischmann, 2016), where authorities are interested in maintaining the engagement of citizens in order to obtain legitimacy for their decisions or conserve their own resources. Of the same opinion is Donata with reference to her activities of help to transit migrants in the municipal centres:

We can say that we helped the municipality. We're talking about a lot of people, the reception centres were full, and our activities met the needs of the municipality in terms of assistance to these people in need without weighing on the city's budget

(37, Donata)

The relationship between pro-migrant groups and local administration (and its politicians) was not always conflict-free, but rather subject to negotiation. Volunteers recount that interactions between volunteers and local authorities developed during everyday encounters,

particularly during the critical phases of the arrival of transit migrants, and were sometimes based on pre-existing connections. Thanks to the ‘social capital’ of these organizations and their members, voluntary groups attempted to encourage local authorities to adopt an inclusive approach toward refugees and migrants. This allowed them, in some cases, to hold meetings and negotiate important aspects of refugee policies with municipal authorities. From the beginning of the increased arrival of refugees, Viola was able to establish communication with the municipality by leveraging her connections with important local politicians:

I've already known the councillor for social politics, some alderpersons, the vice mayor... through all these connections, we were able to let them know what we were doing and later to hold some meetings with the municipality, sometimes all together, sometimes just few of us

(7B, Viola)

In this respect, different groups express different positions; while some assume a confrontational stance, trying to openly reclaim better conditions for refugees, others deliberately choose to avoid overt attacks. How this advocacy is exercised depends on the position they have established with local governmental actors and their ideological background (see Semprebbon et al., 2022), but also by the different opportunities and limits. Lidia, for example, discussed how the non-confrontational attitude toward the management of a reception centre can originate from the risk of being excluded completely from the reception centre where her organization was carrying out its activities:

We also discussed many times with the manager of the reception centre about the lack of services. When they tell you, “No, we cannot spend more...,” it's not like we protested publicly later. You can't do that, because otherwise you make enemies and then they kick you out.

(42, Lidia)

6.2. Resources of political fight and laboratories of politicization

Pro-migrant voluntary groups, regardless of whether they employ confrontational or non-confrontational strategies, are generally perceived as politically oriented. As scholars have observed, in a polarized debate about migration, every activity in favour of refugees becomes politically relevant due to its implicit opposition to an anti-immigrant climate and its political proponents (e.g., Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019). Therefore, voluntary groups' provision of services, as well as their advocacy work, can have political implications. This is particularly evident in the case of ‘militants’, where it is considered a socially acceptable activity and a suitable means of expressing political dissent and identity-based opinions (Frykman & Mäkelä, 2018; Karakayali, 2018; Kende et al., 2017). However, dissent toward restrictive policies on refugees is also expressed through traditional and publicly visible political actions, such as protests and demonstrations.

As observed earlier, some pro-migrant groups partake in political campaigns and networks born out of an idea of defending migrants' and refugees' rights; Naga and Todo Cambia, in particular, have been taking part in campaigns for the regularisation of migrants or the closure of the expulsion centre opened in Milan. Other groups are less ‘embedded’ in such initiatives but single volunteers take the street to make visible their opinions, and this happens not only for volunteers in left-wing organizations. Volunteers (alone or with their affiliation groups) constituted a significant part of the two big pro-migrant demonstrations that took place in Milan in 2017 and 2019, as I observed during my fieldwork, and their presence is apparent in many pro-migrant demonstrations that periodically cut through the city. In this sense, volunteering is a vessel and a resource for the constitution of a broad coalition against anti-immigrant politics. In other words, volunteering operates as a bulwark for citizens wanting to express opposition toward an anti-immigrant

climate and address the general political atmosphere.

This is possible also because to take the street are not only the volunteers with a previous political background. As highlighted also in my typology, indeed, ‘militant’ volunteers, that represent a relevant chunk of volunteers, are not always people with a strong political background. In particular, non-activists involved in pro-migrant volunteering can become activists following a politicization in line with collective identity. In this vein, I have personally compared pro-migrant volunteering to a ‘micropolitical practice’ that involves also the politicization of volunteers (Artero, 2019a).

The findings also demonstrate that volunteers who consider themselves ‘apolitical’ (which was the majority of the participants) can be motivated to adopt a political approach through identification with the people they assist. Many volunteers have ambivalent views about refugees: some have a ‘romantic’ view of refugees as innocent victims to be educated (Artero, 2023); some even admitted to being initially afraid to help refugees, especially black male refugees, because of the negative public image of them as dangerous. However, volunteers almost always develop some form of identification. It was particularly feasible outside of emergency contexts, where there is no rush to provide services and it is possible to establish regular relationships with others. These relationships later formed bonds of solidarity, contributing to the development of an awareness of the conditions that refugees endure, which we can refer to as ‘conscientization’, in line with Freire (1974). This is the story of a volunteer who engaged from 2015 in Milan’s central station and later became a voluntary Italian teacher:

At first, the situation was so hectic and we were performing very mechanical tasks like distributing food to hundreds of people, with no breaks... It was more difficult for me to understand a little bit of their world. Then, our tasks changed and we started teaching... we started talking more with them, found out other things about them, about these persons. You can really develop affection for some of them; the same people, however then you get attached and they get attached to you and it becomes a sort of friendship, seeing the same person one, two, three days a week... I've often asked myself a lot of questions during this time of volunteering because it's hard when you hear negative comments. Sometimes maybe you question yourself a little bit, you say but am I doing the right thing? Are they doomed to become criminals? As far as I'm concerned, my answer is that it's not like you can lump everyone together and say they're all like that, right?... If you happen to know them you understand they resemble a lot like you and you are no longer afraid

(1B, Lisa)

Finally, pro-migrant voluntary groups are a potential ‘laboratory of politicization’ for refugees too. This role is highly conjectural since my studies have not deepened this dynamic with the refugees themselves; however, according to some volunteers, assisted refugees can become increasingly aware of their rights, the political climate, the possibility to take part in political demonstrations, deciding to take the street to express their opinions. In particular, this is possible especially for students of Italian schools where lessons of Italian language are accompanied by classes of civic education (see Artero, 2023). In general, however, the informal nature of the relationship between helper and helped would enable the latter to connect with the voluntary groups and their activities, deciding in turn to take a more active role:

We say to all: we adhere to this demonstration, we will go. Whoever wants, there is this there. This often involves also the students

(35, Franca)

Our association is not just a ‘service’, but a family, so we think on a much broader level about migrants. It's not just a person who comes there, for us they become a member and then maybe even an active member over time, marching with us, taking the street

(40, Loredana)

7. Conclusions

This paper focused on the phenomenon of supporters of refugees in urban areas. My findings shed light on two important processes: the politicization affecting pro-migrant volunteering and the hybridization between pro-migrant volunteering and political activism. To establish these points, I presented a typology of volunteers and shed light on some important functions these actors play in the city of Milan vis-à-vis refugees. This because, I think, these two ‘sides’ need to be read together as part of an interconnected process.

The typology, which is based on the research I conducted between 2017 and 2022, identified three ideal types of volunteers (militant, good Samaritan, and utilitarian), and challenged the conceptual division between volunteerism and activism. It highlights the presence, among volunteers, of activists who situate their volunteering within a broader political action against the current governance of migration. At the same time, individuals who were initially apolitical use volunteering as a means to express their dissent regarding political decisions on refugees. Over time, some volunteers politicize their actions when directly confronted with the situation, while others, even though they refuse to frame their volunteering as political, adopt a human rights perspective that contrasts with the prevailing political approach to migration governance.

Furthermore, the study revealed that voluntary organizations not only provide alternative services but also engage in political activities. Here, politics include instances of micro-politics, in which our way of thinking, behaving and imagining our society is transformed, even without triggering a revolution. As observed, volunteers advocate for the rights of refugees and attempt to steer authorities toward an inclusive approach for refugees and migrants, particularly at the local level. This is facilitated by the ‘social capital’ developed by organizations’ members, allowing them to hold meetings and negotiate key aspects of refugee policies with municipal authorities. Additionally, dissent against restrictive refugee policies is expressed through more traditional and publicly visible forms of political activism, such as protests and demonstrations. Some pro-migrant groups actively participate in political campaigns and networks aimed at defending the rights of migrants and refugees. Others are less involved in such initiatives; nonetheless, individual volunteers take to the streets to make their opinions visible, often participating in pro-migrant demonstrations that periodically take place in Milan. In this way, volunteering becomes a means and resource for forming a broad coalition against anti-immigrant politics. Finally, pro-migrant volunteer groups also serve as a potential avenue for refugees to engage in politicization. The informal relationships between helpers and those being helped facilitate the connection between refugees and volunteer groups, including their political activities.

By highlighting the politicization of pro-migrant volunteering and the convergence between pro-migrant volunteering and activism, this work can contribute to opening new avenues in the literature. For the literature on local migration governance, which has often suffered from a monolithic approach, the politicization of pro-migrant volunteering could lead to the assumption of volunteers, along with other civil society actors, in the analysis of the production of local policies on migration (Özdemir, 2022). Simultaneously, in social movement studies, the politicization and hybridisation of volunteering with activism can result in the inclusion of volunteers and their groups as key players in effecting change (see also della Porta and Steinhilper (2021)). If these groups aim to challenge the status quo rather than merely support it, we can expect these studies to focus more closely on aspects of volunteering such as the personal and collective dynamics that underpin this phenomenon. As I attempted here, this requires conceptual and theoretical bridge-building between different debates. However, recent literature (e.g. Ambrosini, 2020a, 2020b; della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021; Karakayali, 2018; Zamponi, 2018) suggests that the disciplinary and analytical distinction between volunteering and political activism obscures the intersection between humanitarian practices and contentious politics. In this

connection, it is important to remember that the roles of activist and volunteer are social constructions, and that social circumstances, like the refugee reception crisis, help determine the meaning of these two roles and their relation to each other.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Maurizio Artero: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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