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## Humanitarian Help and Refugees: De-Bordering Solidarity as a Contentious Issue

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims at discussing the involvement of “humanitarian” actors, stemming from civil society, in treatment of the issue of refugees’ reception. It suggests the concept of “de-bordering solidarity,” to express the political meaning of such mobilizations. With this term, it refers to various forms of support provided by activists and volunteers, through which these actors contest policies of asylum and borders in practice, even when they do not advance overt political claims. Furthermore, the article factors four types of actors involved in the reception of asylum seekers, namely NGOs, other Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), social movements and common citizens.

### KEYWORDS

Refugees;  
solidarity;  
humanitarianism;  
civil society;  
immigration policies;  
de-bordering activities

Migration and asylum are among the most debated issues in the current public debate, and have attracted wide attention in social sciences in the last decades. Furthermore, they raise relevant questions about borders, reception, solidarity and humanitarian action (Faist, 2018).

My purpose in this article is to discuss the involvement of “humanitarian” actors, stemming from civil society, in treatment of the issue (Garkisch et al., 2017). I will look at grassroots mobilizations by citizens in particular through the lens of “active citizenship” and I will propose the concept of “de-bordering solidarity,” to express the political meaning of such mobilizations. With this term, I refer to various forms of support provided by activists and volunteers, through which these actors contest policies of asylum and borders in practice (Schwartz & Schwenken, 2020), even when they do not aim to achieve profound political changes or do not advance overt political claims (Ambrosini, 2021; Fleischmann, 2020).

Humanitarianism, however, is a debated topic in the sociological and anthropological literature. In the past twenty years, and especially in Europe, it has met with prevailing criticism, both in the form of international aid and in the form of local reception activities. I will review this literature and compare its main arguments with the so-called “refugee crisis” of recent years in Europe (Rea et al., 2019; Schmoll et al., 2015). More specifically, I will advocate deeper understanding of civil society’s activities and its different components, with a better consideration of its political role in the present dispute on asylum policies. To this purpose, I will factor four types of actors issuing from civil society and involved in the reception of asylum seekers, namely NGOs, other Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), social movements and common citizens.

The article is organized as follows. In section one I will review the debate on “humanitarianism” and on “humanitarian reason” (Fassin, 2012). In the second section, I will consider in more detail grassroots initiatives of support to asylum seekers at the local level, and the criticisms made of them. Thereafter (section three), I will discuss the personal and political implications

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of these initiatives. Later (section four), I will detail differences and commonalities between the four types of civil society actors I identified. In section five I will place these actors on the “battleground” of migration policies, and I will frame “volunteer humanitarianism” (Sandri, 2018) in terms of “active citizenship.” In the final section I will draw the conclusions of my analysis.

## 1. The debate on “humanitarianism”

Humanitarian principles and initiatives are a long-standing ground of debate in social and political sciences (Boltanski, 1993; Wheeler, 2000; Wilson & Brown, 2008). Asylum issues have provided a contentious argument for such discussions, especially in the last two decades (Fassin, 2005; Rajaram, 2002; Ticktin, 2011). Refugees receive assistance not only from public institutions, but also from NGOs and other civil society actors: volunteers, social movements, religious institutions. This is particularly true for rejected asylum seekers, who can remain on the territory and make ends meet thanks to the support of these nonpublic actors (Ataç et al., 2020; Leerkes, 2016).

This support, however, varies in form and intensity from one country to another, according to various factors: the extent of welfare provisions and their openness to irregular immigrants or rejected asylum seekers; the effectiveness of asylum applications and return policies; the freedom that states grant to NGOs, social movements and other non-institutional actors, or at least the tolerance of them; the support that NGOs and other CSOs receive from public opinion and private sponsors.

Even officially, some policies on asylum, and in particular complementary pathways to resettlement, can allow private actors to assume the burden of hosting and supporting asylum seekers, through private sponsorship schemes: an individual, group or organization can assume responsibility for providing financial, social, and emotional support to a resettled refugee, or a refugee family, for a period of time, usually one year (Ambrosini & Schnyder von Wartensee, 2022; Kumin, 2015).

Reception and support provided by nonpublic actors, however, meets several criticisms. A wide stream of scholarship has aimed at critically analyzing what is labeled “humanitarianism,” or “humanitarian reason” (Fassin, 2012) as a uniform category, detecting its internal flaws and unintended consequences; sometimes suggesting that it should entirely be dismantled, in other cases highlighting its complexities and limits (Ticktin, 2014).

The first issue concerns the meaning of humanitarian interventions in political tragedies. To cite an example, in her influential work on Hutu refugees from Rwanda, Malkki (1996) spoke of “speechless emissaries,” denouncing how humanitarian actors transform refugees into pure victims, dehistoricizing and depoliticizing their condition: “Refugees stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general (...) humanitarian practices tend to silence refugees” (p. 378). Even if Malkki warns against a dismissal of humanitarian assistance as useless, she questions radically “clinical and philanthropic modes of humanitarianism” (p. 398). Likewise, Rajaram (2002) denounced the representation of refugees as “mute bodies” by international humanitarian agencies, advocating that refugee situations “cease to be sites where Western knowledge is reproduced” (p. 263). Khosravi (2010), in turn, in his auto-ethnography, described how, once hosted in a camp, he was trained to become a victim, being deprived of his dignity.

The link between humanitarian support and states’ policies falls in the spotlight accordingly.

While in the United States some well-known scholars have praised humanitarian actors as determined opponents of anti-immigrant policies (Hagan, 2008; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2006), or as providers of crucial services to people who do not possess a legal status of residents (Marrow, 2012; Portes et al., 2012), in the European debate, on the contrary, criticism has prevailed. Humanitarian actors, including NGOs, would be accessories of state policies aimed at keeping refugees distant from the First World, trapping them in inhospitable refugee camps and denying the possibility of accessing rights: they would cooperate in managing unwanted immigration (Agiar, 2011). Or, in another version of the argument, they would soften both borders’ closure and a generalized repression of undesirable human mobility by introducing some elements of compassion into immigration policies, at the price of treating migrants and refugees as victims (Fassin, 2005; 2011). According to this perspective, “humanitarian action thus forms part and

parcel of the governance of migration” (Fleischmann, 2018, 57). Under the label of “humanitarian government,” governmental and non-governmental initiatives are categorized as sharing the common aim of managing populations which face violence and suffering (Fassin, 2012, p. 5).

A frequent observation regards the fact that humanitarian organizations, such as the Red Cross, depoliticize their activity (Malkki, 2015), emphasizing their political neutrality. The fact that NGOs usually reject a political engagement, emphasizing rescue of human lives, exposes them to the accusation of embracing an “antipolitics of care.” Priority given to ethical values and relief of human suffering is seen as a withdrawal from a fight in favor of justice and a new political order: “Humanitarianism elicits the fantasy of a global moral community that may still be viable and the expectation that solidarity may have redeeming powers. (...) Humanitarianism has this remarkable capacity: it fugaciously and illusorily bridges the contradictions of our world, and makes the intolerableness of its injustices somewhat bearable” (Fassin, 2012, p. xii).

As a consequence, contemporary humanitarianism is seen as deeply embedded in the neo-liberal order: “Contemporary humanitarianism endorses neo-liberalism becoming restructured along neo-liberal premises regarding its agents and their roles, their activities and their assessment, their ways of thinking and talking, and their self-perception” (Sözer, 2020, 2166).

In this article, as in most of this stream of literature, the “humanitarian” sector is considered as a whole. It ranges from international agencies such as UNHCR or OIM, through semipublic organizations such as the Red Cross, and big NGOs, to local grassroots initiatives.

Quite similar is another observation: the outsourcing to civil society of public services is often labeled a fundamental feature of the neoliberal project (Harvey, 2005; Kearns, 1992). In particular, service-oriented NGOs are considered useful to the system. Good intentions notwithstanding, these NGOs enable politicians to continue to espouse a rhetoric of closure without facing accusations of inhumanity (Castañeda, 2007). Their activities may even create consensus on exclusionary policies by preventing highly visible human rights infringements that might backfire. Such statements avoid the issue of the destiny of people involved (in this case, the object of criticism is health care for irregular immigrants), and imagine that public opinion would rise up against state policies in the case of loss of human lives. What has happened in the Mediterranean in recent years would suggest at least more caution in this regard. And it appears cruel to use the suffering of people in need in order to achieve a political change.

## 2. Grassroots initiatives and their flaws

Various forms of humanitarian help stem from grass-roots initiatives. Della Porta, (2018), Feischmidt et al., (2019), Rea et al., (2019) among others, have studied the wide set of actions and initiatives that are being established “from below” in various European countries in solidarity with asylum seekers coming from the Middle East and North Africa.

I conceive these activities as expressions of a de-bordering solidarity. National borders have regained a strong political importance, especially after 2001, responding to an increasing demand for security and protection against external threats (Balibar, 2012; Newman, 2006). In such a context, defence of national security against terrorist attacks has been combined with a fight against unwanted immigration (Adamson, 2006; Andersson, 2016), triggering a criminalization of unauthorized border crossings and sojourn on the territory. Not only smugglers, but also humanitarian actors helping irregular immigrants have been legally prosecuted in several countries (Müller, 2020; Stierl, 2016). Against this backdrop, many activities in favor of migrants and asylum seekers acquire a political meaning, even if not openly declared or even conceived: they imply an objection against borders, either external (rescuing people from the sea, against border closure), or internal (providing various types of help to people who are not authorized to remain on the territory, against removals and bureaucratic obstructions: Artero & Fontanari, 2021). Opponents, and also several governments and judiciary authorities, see well this point: they do not attack people who voice against borders, but people who support migrants in practice, helping them to cross borders and establish on the territory (Schwartz & Schwenken, 2020)

Initially these initiatives received a more positive evaluation by scholarship, which focused especially on no-borders movements and saw a counter-hegemonic meaning in their protests (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019). More recently criticism has been voiced in this case as well, highlighting similarities with the “humanitarianism” previously analyzed (Herrmann, 2020; Sandri, 2018)

A case in point is the large mobilization by private citizens in Germany during the so-called “Summer of Welcome” in 2015. According to some estimates, it involved from 10 to 20 percent of the adult population (Karakayali, 2017), often without any previous experience of voluntary work, and without any political or religious affiliation. Summarizing the results of other studies, Fleischmann and Steinhilper (2017) highlight that before 2015, German citizens committed to refugees were a small minority, mainly belonging to faith-based circles or networks of left-wing activists. The new volunteers were on the contrary mainly “ordinary citizens” positioned in the socio-political “centre” of German society. In their past, they were neither politically engaged nor involved in other forms of voluntary work. They justify their commitment, in rather vague humanitarian terms, as “humane duty to people in need aimed at providing assistance and care in order to relieve human suffering” (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017, 19).

Pries (2018, p. 49), citing some German newspapers, talks of the “September Miracle” in Germany and other countries. He frames this mobilization as a new type of social movement, with some distinctive features: first its pluri-local and transnational dimension, involving people in different countries; second, the fact that refugees are not only the beneficiaries of support and solidarity, but active agents, claiming global human rights (see also, in this regard, Fontanari, 2018); third, its multiple layers and connections, strengthening local ties, creating new communities of old and new citizens, and subverting traditional political divides. A fourth feature is the great importance of social media networks and web-based forms of communication. Information is immediately transmitted across localities and borders, collective actions can be coordinated also over large distances, and civic support can be organized through new media. Lastly, this movement claims a minimal normative programme: the protection of people fleeing violence and war in their homeland.

However, as said, also this social movement has provoked criticism. Some observers see the ambiguity inherent in caring and helping people in distress, denouncing the infiltration of individual and psychological motivations. A point of reference is again a study by Malkki, whose title is emblematic: *The Need to Help* (2015). She claims that practices of humanitarian support were inspired in the first place by personal interests, such as the desire to find a diversion from the routine of daily life and current work, or by the need to make “oneself as part of something” (Fontanari, 2018, 123).

In the same vein, humanitarian aid can be analyzed as a response to private emotions, on which the present communication of solidarity works, to raise funds and support (Chouliaraki, 2013). Campaigns aim to “find your feeling,” showing the spectacle of vulnerable others. While Chouliaraki is aware that all ethics of solidarity involve elements of “egoistic altruism,” she appears not to consider the consequences of this acknowledgement: she refers to the past as a golden age in which solidarity was rooted in “an other-oriented morality” and in “grand narratives” about a loosely defined “common humanity.”

Kapoor (2005) goes further by speaking of “narcissistic samaritanism,” in which the benevolent self searches for a “glorification” even when he/she claims the desire “to empower the Other.” The sentiment of a lack of gratitude by refugees toward their supporters (Moulin, 2012) is often cited as testimony of this hidden motivation: the helping subject demands to be recognized and gratified by sincere and warm expressions of gratitude by beneficiaries. Refusal, protest, lack of cooperation are seen as faults in the appreciation of what they receive. More simply, volunteers tend to choose more rewarding activities, in terms of personal contact and emotional payback, avoiding tiresome and frustrating tasks, even if necessary (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019).

According to Pries (2018), this stream of criticism claims that “caring for refugees had nothing to do with altruism, but was a comfortable way of using the refugees as an object for stabilizing

their own lives... People were looking for meaning in their lives or for social recognition and were making more or less helpless and destitute refugees the objects for solving their own existential problems” (p. 58).

Another step consists in highlighting selfish interests, or, according to critical studies on humanitarianism, the confirmation of an asymmetry of power between givers and receivers: volunteers tend to reproduce inequalities and hierarchies, an attitude of superiority inherent in humanitarian assistance and compassion (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017, p. 22). According to Fassin (2012) and many others, caregivers, holding the power to decide whom to help, and how, establish a “relation of inequality” (p. 3).

Being mainly Western educated women of the middle class, they exercise forms of paternalism, or better, a “mental motherhood” toward refugees (Braun, 2017), assuming an educational and emancipatory mandate. They desire to teach them the right way to behave in a European country, revealing a background of colonial stereotypes. This occurs especially when they consider refugee women as (passive) victims to emancipate from patriarchal control. In various ways, they confirm the superiority of the Western way of life, put refugees in a subaltern position, and shape asymmetric relations between givers and receivers of support (for a similar criticism from the USA, see Nagel & Ehrkamp, 2016)

Another relevant body of criticism concerns the political awareness of volunteers and their commitment to the political dimension of solidarity toward refugees. Karakayali (2017) observed that volunteers, while portraying refugees as victims deprived of agency, tend to exclude references to the social or political context of suffering. Kleres (2018) is even more critical, highlighting how several “emotional regimes” have affected welcome initiatives in Germany, depoliticizing civic actions. Compassion, following Arendt (2006), is seen as a “depoliticizing emotion” (p.153).

Vandevoordt and Verschraegen (2019) have talked instead, more positively, of “subversive humanitarianism”: “a morally motivated set of actions which acquires a political character not through the form in which these actions manifests themselves, but through their implicit opposition to the ruling socio-political climate” (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019, 105). Despite this statement, they insist on their “ambiguities”: beyond the production of “vertical relations” between helpers and recipients, the definition of specific categories of recipients, based on vulnerability, legal status or deservingness, and the substitution for flaws in government policies. Under several aspects, they liken grassroots mobilizations to depoliticized humanitarianism.

### **3. The personal and political meaning of solidarity toward migrants and asylum seekers**

The crisis of reception policies in recent years (Dines et al., 2018) in the EU and in the USA has to be confronted with this body of literature. A first question clearly regards whether criticism can be applied in the same terms to all humanitarian endeavors. I wonder if search and rescue activities run by NGOs in the Mediterranean can be inserted into a frame of complicity with governments and with a neo-liberal governance of asylum; if Carola Rackete, the young captain of the ship Sea Watch 3, to cite an icon of this activity, can be seen as an ally with the Italian government or with the EU policies. And the same can be said about the other NGOs which have saved lives in the Mediterranean, at risk of confiscations, heavy fines and accusations. One is surprised by the lack of nuances and distinctions in the vision of what is called “humanitarianism” in general terms, and in the harsh condemnation of its activities.

Expressing a different vision, Irrera (2016) showed the mixing of conflict and cooperation, of political and practical activities, developed by several NGOs in their relations with EU authorities, in treating the “refugee reception crisis” (Rea et al., 2019) in the Mediterranean. Also Cuttitta (2018) admitted that humanitarian action is not always so depoliticized or connected with governments policies as previously claimed. NGOs can assume different positions, but at least some of them try to question and contrast governmental policies and practices.



Turning to grassroots initiatives and volunteers mobilization, it does not come as a surprise to find that pure altruism (probably) does not exist: individual motives and personal interests blend with solidarity in regard to others. Already thirty years ago Wuthnow (1991) subtitled his famous book, *Acts of compassion: "Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves."* Social scientists such as Godbout and Caillé (1998) have theorized the implicit pay-backs of altruistic behaviors, and at the same time they have claimed that "egoism that finds its pleasures in altruism is very different from the crude, primary egoism whose universality the modern ethos takes for granted" (p. 4). Caillé (2007) has advocated a "modest conception of the gift," underlining that gift-giving is never perfect: gifts and personal interests are combined in the actions of donors, are not incompatible and recall each other. Adopting the logic of gift-giving however, means breaking with the circular and narrow logic of rational economic calculations. It implies putting the search for individual benefits in relation to the well-being of other people.

Furthermore, compassion is not necessarily in contradiction with a political commitment to justice and rights. It can be seen as a "political virtue," an element in political life which serves to reinforce a strong connection between the personal and the political (Whitebrook, 2002, p. 539). Schwiertz and Schwenken (2020) talk of "inclusive solidarity" and "solidarity citizenship," to define civil society initiatives aimed at renegotiating societal structures in solidarity with people on the move. This "solidarity from below" strives to overcome forms of exclusion on the national level and to create "links and feelings of closeness between people from very different origins" (Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020, 409).

In a polarized political situation, in which harsh adversarial stances against asylum seekers have gained ground in several countries, the fact of giving help to refugees in various ways appears in itself an action loaded with political meanings and consequences (Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020). And not without dangers, because not rarely supporters of (irregular) migrants and asylum seekers have had to face xenophobic attacks and legal problems (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019). Practical and mundane solidarity acquires a political meaning, and this is perceived as an act of disobedience, subversion, violation of state sovereignty by its opponents.

In this perspective Sandri (2018) talks of the "volunteer humanitarianism" of "grassroots organizations" at the so-called Jungle of Calais, where hundreds of volunteers assumed the burden of delivering humanitarian aid and basic services to asylum seekers precariously hosted in the camp. They were not funded by states or international agencies, neither trained nor professionally competent in working with refugees, but they engaged in flexible and informal ways, learning new skills and roles in the field. Volunteer humanitarianism provided an alternative to the "humanitarian machine," with its structures, and at the same time "it stands as a symbol against the strict and violent policies of migration across Europe" (Sandri, 2018, 66). Even if these grassroots organizations were not initially motivated by political considerations or connected with political activism, but instead mobilized by humanitarian concerns, they went beyond the "neoliberal governance" of borders, contesting states and border regimes. Thus, this form of humanitarianism can be seen as a form of "civil disobedience" (Sandri, 2018, 66) and "cannot be interpreted simply as an expression of the neoliberal project." (Sandri, 2018, 76).

On the other side, no-borders movements and radical left activists have also started to provide goods and services to asylum seekers and immigrants: Zamponi (2018) has termed these activities as "direct social actions": "actions that do not primarily focus upon claiming something from the state or other power-holders but that instead focus upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the action itself" (Zamponi, 2018, p. 97). In this way, solidarity initiatives and political claim-making are not two separate (and even opposed) forms of action, but are related. Activists explain that they have moved from a political mobilization to a "mobilization of doing" (Zamponi, 2018, 98). As Della Porta (2020) has argued, distinctions between social movements and civil society tend to blur, and an "hybridization" between these two types of social actors is going on. Political claim-making and direct social actions reinforce each other: direct social action provides a hub of shared experiences that fosters politicization; or allows the expression of political claims; or grants legitimacy and credibility to be spent in the realm of political claim-making.

Fleischmann (2018) in turn, inquiring on support to asylum seekers in Germany, explains how volunteers, while defining their activity as “apolitical,” in fact introduce political purposes in different forms: as “covert activists,” avoiding to reveal the political meaning of their action; as “change agents,” trying to promote more acceptance of newcomers in local societies; as “political dissenters,” protesting against policies hostile to refugees. In sum, “the ‘apolitical’ can indeed be highly political,” as “new meanings of political action stem from the manifold acts of volunteering for refugees.” (Fleischmann, 2018, 55).

Karakayali (2017) and Kleres (2018) have highlighted the role of emotions in the solidarity displayed by volunteers. Emotions are often temporary and fragile; they can be activated by narratives conveyed by the media system or by personal encounters; and they can be reversed by other narratives and by other emotions. They are however an input that can trigger awareness and activism, as we are seeing in this moment (March 2022) with the reception of Ukrainian refugees in several European countries.

Nicholls (2013a, 2013b) has developed further relevant reflections: political struggles by immigrants in a weak legal and social position need the support of native actors to achieve some success. Activists know the political culture of the country and the right way to formulate claims that can reach a wider audience. Their symbolic capital favors the legitimacy of their discourse for public opinion. Furthermore, they have connections with the media system which can help them transmit their messages to the public.

Nicholls shows also the reverse side of this support: native activists tend to shape claims and campaigns, speaking on behalf of migrants and leaving their direct voice at the margins (Nicholls, 2013a). Or they can have their own agendas, purposes and priorities, and these may not coincide with migrants’ interests and objectives (Nicholls, 2013b), which are often more pragmatic and limited. Belloni (2016), in the same vein, reported a conflict between African refugees, mainly Eritreans, and their politicized supporters in a squatted building in Rome. As she states, migrants can learn and accept some elements, and reject other aspects of the beliefs and aims of their native partners. The relationship between the two groups is thus more complex and composite than other accounts suppose.

In other terms, the support by native actors is valuable and even necessary, even if it does not come without problems, ambiguities and hidden interests. I would add that it is also necessary to disentangle various types of native and immigrant actors, campaigns, national and local backdrops.

#### 4. Actors and practices of de-bordering solidarity

It is necessary to consider also the overall context in which solidarity toward immigrants and refugees has developed. As said above, in recent years strong political reactions against immigration, and in particular the reception of asylum seekers, have proliferated in many countries, with the advance of far-right political parties and movements. Italy is a case in point (Franceschelli, 2020). Castelli Gattinara (2017) has depicted some key aspects of their political discourse. In general, the far right builds its identity *ex negativo*, targeting a set of enemies: among them, they place not only NGOs and social cooperatives, but all kinds of supporters of asylum seekers. Such movements make reference to arguments which can attract a wider consensus even “invading the linguistic territory of their opponents” (Castelli Gattinara, 2017, 87). Among them are “fake solidarity” and corruption in the third sector, with the accusation to aid organizations of hosting asylum seekers in degraded buildings; or the accusation that “fake refugees,” or disguised “economic migrants” exploit the asylum system. “Overall, the idea is that corrupt NGOs, the mass media, and multiculturalist elites have strategically constructed the concept of ‘refugee crisis’ to generate a moral panic, softening public opinion and legitimizing the ‘invasion’ of Italy by economic migrants.” (Castelli Gattinara, 2017, 88).

Bulli (2018), in turn, has analyzed the far right Pegida Movement in Germany, which in 2015 evolved into the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) Party. Even if this movement preceded the



so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015, also in this case anti-immigration stances are a crucial aspect of the ideology, rhetoric and capacity of mobilization. They are a recognizable feature and means to garner “visibility and agreement at a time when anti-Islamism represents one of the core elements of populist right parties and movements” (Bulli, 2018, 121).

Against this backdrop, mobilizations in favor of asylum seekers’ reception go in the opposite direction: they try in various ways to open breaches in external and internal borders (Ambrosini, 2018). In doing this, they acquire a political meaning, sometimes explicitly, other times implicitly, or even strategically, by choosing not to exhibit a political motivation.

Supporters of asylum seekers, and unwanted immigrants, however, are very different, in ideological, organizational and professional terms. I distinguish in this regard four types of supporters (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020).

The first group are NGOs and other specialized third-sector organizations: mainly endowed with professional staff, they deliver services to asylum seekers. Often they cooperate with national and local governments, but they can also act with independence and also against state policies, as the conflict over Search and Rescue activities in the Mediterranean has shown.

The second group is formed by other civil society organizations, ranging from volunteers’ associations, through trade unions, to religious institutions: they mix in various ways professional competences with the free contribution by volunteers. They assist in particular people who fall outside the public provision of welfare services: rejected asylum seekers, refugees in transit, irregular immigrants. Health services, shelters, soup kitchens, language classes, are typical examples. Furthermore, despite their heterogeneous cultural background, they take public positions in defence of refugee and immigrant rights in the public debate.

The third group consists of social movements: as I showed above, coming from a radical political engagement, they have more recently been involved in delivering various forms of help to migrants and refugees in need: shelter in squatted buildings and support in crossing national borders are probably the best-known expressions of their solidarity. Furthermore, they are also involved in supplying other practical services, such as bureaucratic and legal assistance, food, education, entertainment. Migrants and asylum seekers’ movements can be added to native social movements: mainly active in demonstrations and protests (Chimienti, 2011), through hunger strikes, marches (Monforte & Dufour, 2013), occupations of central sites in cities (Ataç, 2016; Fontanari, 2018), they can also combine political activities with practical support: for instance, through squatting (Hajer & Ambrosini, 2020), or cooking and dispatching food (Swerts & Oosterlynck, 2021).

The last group are simple citizens, mainly natives, who have taken part in various local initiatives of refugee reception, without associative labels, and without declaring a political or religious engagement. In Germany, for instance, according to Herrmann (2020), most volunteers of the Summer of Welcome of 2015 founded their own self-organized groups rather than joining established organizations. Up to a third of these volunteers even declared that they organized their activities entirely by themselves, outside of any type of group.

As in the case of other spontaneous mobilizations, most of these initiatives have petered out, while others have assumed a more institutional and professional form (Rea et al., 2019).

Overall, these various supporters provide what Leerkes (2016) calls “secondary poor relief” and Montagna (2006) and Belloni (2016) describe more positively as “welfare from below,” while Agustín and Jørgensen (2019) talk of “civic solidarity.” Another type of help is the delivery of moral support by some civil society actors, particularly faith groups, to people who experience social exclusion and personal suffering (Bloch et al., 2014, 110).

The notion of “subversive humanitarianism” (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019), almost an oxymoron, tries to capture the hidden meanings, and also the ambiguities, of these activities. As I already argued, I place these activities under the concept of “de-bordering solidarity.” Actions of help contest policies of asylum and borders in practice, but often do not aim at subverting the social and political order, or they acquire a political meaning only in a second moment, being confronted with various oppositions; nor do they share the ideological framework and

rules of conduct of most established humanitarian agencies (Sandri, 2018). Furthermore, softening the political meaning of de-bordering solidarity can also favor an expansion of the support to migrants and asylum seekers, involving other citizens not eager to engage in political struggles (Ambrosini, 2021). Political awareness can follow. As Artero (2019, p. 158) argues in his study on humanitarian assistance to refugees in Milan, “volunteering functioned as a micropolitical practice: it allowed volunteers to be outraged by structural injustices, sympathize with migrants and (...) engage in outspoken forms of dissent such as lobbying, advocacy and public demonstration.”

## 5. The battleground of immigration policies: pro-migrants mobilizations as forms of active citizenship

This diversified pro-refugee front is a vital actor on what I previously called the “battleground” of migration policies. This concept focuses on the involvement of various subjects, with their interests, beliefs, and values, in the practical governance of immigration, at international, national and local level (de Haas et al., 2020; Triandafyllidou, 2020a). At all these levels, a complex process of “borderwork” (Rumford, 2006) occurs. It involves not only public powers but also a wide range of other actors: international humanitarian agencies; NGOs and other civic organizations; public administrations and local authorities; private citizens and local societies (Fontanari & Borri, 2018, p. 33). In particular, I cite civil society actors that mobilize in favor of the reception of refugees and immigrants with dubious legal status, or against them. As on other battlegrounds, alliances are crucial, and often decisive. A significant aspect here is the convergence in pro-migrant mobilisations among very different actors, ranging from the radical left of social movements, through institutionalized trade-unions and human rights advocates, to religious institutions: an advocacy coalition that recalls the “strange bedfellows” identified by Zolberg (2006) in US immigration policy.

Sometimes this coalition has found other allies in municipal governments, in the United States, Canada and in some European Union countries, which have declared themselves “sanctuary cities,” or “cities of refuge”: cities which furnish local services also to unauthorized immigrants and rejected asylum seekers, and do not cooperate with national governments in enforcing restrictions and deportations (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019, who talk of “institutional solidarity”; Bauder, 2017; Oomen, 2020; Sabchev, 2021).

As a consequence, management of this issue is the outcome of alternative views and political actions, of conflict and cooperation, of alliances and divergencies, of official policies and practical support, of formal statements and informal practices. For instance, providing support also to rejected asylum seekers or other unauthorized immigrants has an impact on the effectiveness of exclusion policies.

For the same reason, practical help is imbued with political meaning, even when it is not declared or acknowledged. The notion of de-bordering solidarity is intended to grasp the tension between these actions of support, which infringe external and internal borders of receiving countries in various ways, and policies which seek to reaffirm national sovereignty through stricter asylum and migration measures.

To conclude on this point, the concept of battleground highlights the fact that the practical governance of immigration and asylum is not only determined at an institutional level; it is also influenced by this mobilization on the part of civil society (Della Porta, 2020). Despite the flaws that a thorough intellectual analysis can evidence, the overall meaning of this activity is to counteract xenophobic stances and to create more space for entrance and settlement of asylum seekers and legally weak immigrants: it has de-bordering effects, on external and internal boundaries.

Furthermore, pro-migrants mobilizations, in their various expressions and with their fragilities, shortcomings, unintended consequences, can be placed in the framework of “active citizenship.” The notion of active citizenship emphasizes the practice of citizenship, beyond its legal

dimension, and direct involvement by citizens (Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009). I recall here in particular the concept of “acts of citizenship,” which focuses on claims and practices enacted by both citizens and non-citizens (e.g., legal immigrants, refugees, undocumented migrants) so that they act and constitute themselves as “citizens” (Isin & Nielsen, 2008). This notion has the merit of placing practices at the forefront of conceptualisations of citizenship; however, it restricts its focus to practices of protest in the public sphere. This concept, moreover, is mainly applied to subordinate groups, and immigrants among them, to emphasize how they are able to organize and to claim respect, dignity and rights, in forms of “citizenship from below” (Paret, 2017; Shinozaki, 2015). I suggest broadening this conception to include also expressions of “inclusive citizenship” (Kaber 2005) by national (legal) citizens to newcomers, as Castañeda (2013) did for medical aid to irregular immigrants in Berlin.

In regard to humanitarian activities in favor of people with weak rights, such as asylum seekers and irregular immigrants, I maintain that “acts of citizenship” should include more mundane, apparently not politically-charged, forms of citizenship. In this perspective, the concept of acts of citizenship could be combined with what Lister has called “lived citizenship” (Lister, 2007), i.e., how people negotiate rights and responsibilities, belonging and participation, and understand and feel their citizenship. Taking inspiration from the care practices of Afro-American women, Lister (2007) argues that private activities like domestic care may function as forms of lived and participatory citizenship. Again, I suggest going beyond marginal populations to encompass also the practices with which citizenship is exercised by established members of the society, engaging in forms of solidarity. This can be defined as “the capacity to identify with others and to act in unity with them in their claims for justice and recognition” (Kabeer, 2005, p.7).

The outcome is a form of active citizenship that is not performed only by engaging in political militancy and protests but also through “mundane” acts of citizenship, such as providing food or shelter, teaching language skills, organizing entertainment for people in need. These de-bordering actions are important also because they can widen the support for asylum seekers, involving other citizens not eager to engage in political struggles. In addition, they are significant because they re-write the script of citizenship, questioning the significance of national borders in practice, if not at a theoretical level. Doing this, these actions enrich the script of citizenship with new ideas about entitlements and belongings, and they can in various ways be connected to more explicit political claims.

## 6. Conclusion. Solidarity from below beyond humanitarianism

Borders, national sovereignty, immigration and asylum are contentious issues in the present public debate (Triandafyllidou, 2020b). In particular, civil society’s humanitarian endeavors and grassroots initiatives of solidarity have been the object of this article, under the label of “de-bordering solidarity.”

Humanitarian activities, however, have been harshly criticized in the sociological and anthropological literature of the past two decades, especially in Europe. Grassroots activities have often received in turn a widespread critical evaluation. In this article I have compared this situation with the political backdrop of the refugee reception crisis in the European Union. I have recalled the polarization of public opinion and the advance of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee movements, including the far right.

Against this background, I have claimed the political meaning of solidarity activities, even when they do not have an explicit political motivation (Van Selm, 2020). Even if engagement can respond to personal needs and reasons, it has political implications (Fleischmann, 2020). It questions national borders, challenges state policies, weakens immigration restrictions, hinders deportations. Consequently, it can be conceived as “de-bordering solidarity.” It is precisely for this reason that it is blamed by anti-refugees actors and not rarely by the public authorities (Tazzioli, 2018).

I have also maintained the necessity to distinguish among different types of pro-refugee actors. They range from big international NGOs, other civil society actors, social movements, to common citizens without any label. It is an oversimplification to put all of them in the homogeneous category of humanitarianism. It is true, however, that this diversified set of subjects is often able to form an advocacy coalition on the side of refugees' (and immigrants') rights, on what I called the "battleground" of immigration policies. Through political campaigns and practical actions, they influence the governance of such issues in democratic countries: for instance, the effectiveness of exclusion of rejected asylum seekers and other immigrants with irregular legal status. These mobilizations can be seen as practices of "active citizenship," and they can encompass a myriad of activities which aim at solidarity with the weakest and their social inclusion, going beyond the boundaries of legal entitlements, citizenship, and national belonging.

This article, hence, has intended to bring new insights to broader questions, such as humanitarianism, solidarity, civil society and active citizenship, connecting migration studies, public policies and social movements. In particular, it has elaborated the concept of de-bordering solidarity as the frame to grasp grassroots citizens' activism.

To conclude, I advocate deeper understanding of humanitarian activities developed by civil society actors in favor of refugees and other immigrants at the margins. In this historical period of restrictions in asylum seekers' reception, various actors from civil society fight to protect human rights and to keep borders open for foreigners who are need. Their support activities do not contrast with political activism. On the contrary, these forms of de-bordering solidarity, the (explicitly) political and the humanitarian, converge for various aspects.

Directions for future research should include the following. First, comparisons should be made among pro-refugee mobilizations in different countries to detect similarities and differences, motivations, conditions, and outcomes. Second, studies on the formation of supporters' initiatives, on their evolution, transformation or disappearance with time, will improve our knowledge of the organizational side of de-bordering solidarity, and its links with the study of social movements. Third, deeper understanding of the relations between refugees and their supporters, of empowering aspirations and asymmetries of power, of the respective purposes and agendas, would be desirable. The points of view of people involved should be listened with more attention. The agency of actors on both sides, and their relations, should be better grasped.

Last but not least, studies which observe in depth the relations between de-bordering solidarity by civil society and public policies would be welcome: in particular, their links with the institutional setting, and their capacity to influence both policies and governance of asylum and immigration.

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