

De-Bordering Solidarity: Civil Society Actors Assisting Refused Asylum Seekers in Small Cities

IRAKLIS DIMITRIADIS 

Università degli Studi di Milano, Milano, Italy
iraklis.dimitriadis@unimi.it

MAURIZIO AMBROSINI 

Università degli Studi di Milano, Milano, Italy

MS received September 2021; revised MS received July 2022

This article elaborates on the activities developed by various actors from the civil society in favour of non-deported refused asylum seekers (NDRAS) through the lens of ‘de-bordering solidarity’. Drawing on qualitative data collected in two small Italian cities ruled by anti-immigrant coalitions, this study explores the rationales and outcomes of migrant supporters’ actions in providing help to NDRAS, thus deepening the action of pro-immigrant civil society in small urban centres. The findings show that, while civil society’s engagement in the provision of basic needs to vulnerable people is unconditional, legal advice and practical help for access to regular status can be more selective and reflect lack of human and financial resources available, the low probability of a part of NDRAS to achieve legal status, low demand in local labour markets, and social workers’ and volunteers’ subjectivities. Despite recognizing such limits in solidarity activities, this article shows that civil society in practice challenges deportation policies through practical and daily solidarity that assumes political and cultural meanings. Based on these findings, this article suggests durable solutions for addressing the issues connected with the presence of NDRAS.

Keywords: civil society, refused asylum seekers, NGOs, asylum governance, Italy, small cities, de-bordering solidarity

Introduction

In recent years, national governments have adopted increasingly restrictive measures aimed at making ‘unwanted’ migrants with no legal residence (in)voluntarily return to their home country (Gibney 2008). Despite this tendency, there is a deportation gap suggesting that countries are not able to achieve the goals of restrictive policies due to legal issues, financial and procedural difficulties and the persistence of economic interests and liberal values (Gibney 2008; Leerkes

2 *De-Bordering Solidarity*

and van Houte 2020). Most irregular immigrants, and among them a growing number of non-deported refused asylum seekers (NDRAS), succeed in remaining in receiving countries (Bloch *et al.* 2014), and this fact has implications for both irregular migrants (e.g. lack of access to welfare services and destitution) and local authorities (e.g. homelessness or dysfunctionalities in the public order) (Spencer and Triandafyllidou 2020).

Civil society actors (CSAs)¹ also fit into this ‘deportation gap’, providing services and support to NDRAS (Karakayali 2017; Ataç *et al.* 2020; Kox and Staring 2022; Spencer and Triandafyllidou 2020; Dimitriadis *et al.* 2021). On the one side, these scholars have focused on CSAs assisting NDRAS and irregular migrants (e.g. welfare assistance, language courses, emotional support) in big cities. On the other side, research has often questioned the political dimensions of pro-migrant actors’ activities. However, fewer studies have investigated the role of CSAs and their actions in small-scale cities.² Small urban centres have received considerable numbers of arrivals since 2014 (OECD 2018), as national redistribution plans targeted areas beyond big cities. In addition, research in small cities can provide deeper insights on the dynamics and interactions between different actors (e.g. local authorities, police, and civil society), as well as the motivations of their actions. Because of the limited number of actors with denser networks in small cities (Semprebón *et al.* 2022), it is possible to obtain a more comprehensive overview of the dynamics between these actors.

This article aims to overcome this bias and offer better understandings on the migration dynamics in these under-researched places, by drawing upon empirical material collected through in-depth interviews with different social actors and some instances of non-participant observation in two small cities in Northern Italy, namely Como and Busto Arsizio. It discusses the rationales and dilemmas of the civil society engaged in assisting NDRAS, and contributes to the debate of the political character of CSAs’ action by questioning whether CSAs working with NDRAs undermine or maintain/support border regimes. To what extent CSAs engaged with the NDRAs population challenge external and internal borders, or contribute to the reproduction of the causes of refugees’ suffering and legitimization of restrictive migration policies? The settlement and dispersal of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (RAS) across small municipalities since 2015 (Ambrosini *et al.* 2020), difficulties in accessing international protection or asylum and the poor implementation of deportation policies (Leerkes and van Houte 2020) constitute factors that make the study of the Italian case of particular interest.

We use the concept of ‘de-bordering solidarity’ (Ambrosini 2021, 2022), which indicates the various actions of help towards immigrants undertaken by actors in civil society in contesting asylum policies and borders in practice, through support activities which challenge borders’ closure and exclusion of irregular immigrants from social services (Dimitriadis *et al.* 2021). This concept emphasizes that these deeds can have a political meaning, although the people involved often do not (apparently) aim to achieve political transformations, or do not declare this openly (Fleischmann 2020). It also recognizes limitations and dilemmas in CSAs’ rationales and actions.

In the next section, we review critical literature on the role of CSAs in migration and asylum governance and introduce the main concept used in this article. After providing some information related to legislation in Italy and the contexts where the empirical material was collected, the following sections discuss the practices of CSAs and the outcome of their acts. The final section includes some conclusions and proposals for durable solutions in relation to NDRAS.

The Role of CSAs in the Battleground of Asylum Governance at the Local Level

In examining the role of CSAs in assisting migrants, critical scholars question the political meaning of the activities of pro-migrant actors. Criticism concerns organizations' and citizens' involvement in making efforts to achieving humane living conditions (Kox and Staring 2022; Vandevordt and Verschraegen, 2019) and alleviating the harshest consequences of border closure (Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017). Critical literature also puts emphasis on the alleged complicity of CSAs with the violence of the borders (Dadusc and Mudu 2022) and securitization imperatives (Fassin 2011). This is largely manifested when humanitarian agencies cooperate with authorities in managing unwanted immigration (Agier 2011). At the local level, critical border studies also accuse CSAs of being driven by emotions and portraying refugees as victims (Karakayali 2017), thus disciplining and constraining their agency on the one hand, and dehistoricizing and depoliticizing their condition on the other (Malkki 2015). Moreover, criticism includes the reproduction of inequalities and social hierarchies (Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017), the exercise of a 'mental motherhood' and attitudes of superiority (Braun 2017) that can also entail the introduction of forms of categorization based upon vulnerability, legal status, and deservingness (Chauvin and Garcés-Masareñas 2014, Kaşlı (2016)). CSAs have been also accused of excluding unauthorized migrants when starting cooperation with state actors (Vandevordt and Verschraegen 2019), or of being harnessed to the state when receiving state funding (Kox and Staring 2022). Overall, CSAs are accused of reflecting a depoliticization and neutral process of migration management, thus being far from disagreeing with or contesting state policies (Cuttitta 2018).

Contrary to these critical voices, a burgeoning bulk of literature suggests that CSAs can undermine borders, despite limitations and flaws in their actions (Fleischmann 2020; Schwiertz and Schwenken 2020). In providing healthcare services to unauthorized immigrants, common citizens express solidarity with non-citizens 'beyond the traditional bounds of political community' (Castañeda 2013: 228). They utilize medical aid as a powerful device of disagreement with the state, thus contrasting the meaning of formal citizenship, without overtly promoting political claims. Similarly, grassroots organizations at the so-called Jungle of Calais were not always motivated by political considerations, nor were they connected with politicized actions. Yet, their acts contested states and border regimes in practice (Sandri 2018). These acts can be seen as a kind of 'civil disobedience', which goes beyond the political construction of the neoliberal state. Help to

4 *De-Bordering Solidarity*

people who are not authorized to remain in Europe and risk removal due to bureaucratic obstructions is another demonstration of how CSAs contest border policies (Artero and Fontanari 2021).

To explore whether CSAs working with NDRAs undermine or maintain/support border regimes, this article adopts the concept of ‘de-bordering solidarity’ (Ambrosini 2021, 2022). This concept allows an open, pragmatic view with regard to both the supporting and undermining elements, compared to other, more politicized sides of the literature. On the one hand, using this concept helps to recognize that humanitarian action entails limitations and inconsistencies, such as non-continuity or dependence on emotions, and that it can have unexpected consequences or implicit flaws (e.g. hierarchical relations or dependency stemming from humanitarian assistance). On the other hand, this vision claims that policies of closure are concretely contested by acts of help and support undertaken by CSAs who disagree with national supremacy views and do not share the ideological framework and the rules of conduct of the large humanitarian agencies (e.g. international organizations and institutions). The actors of ‘de-bordering solidarity’ actions may not aim to subvert the social and political order, but they establish human rights as a focal point of commitment, contrasting xenophobic impulses and increasing the political and cultural spaces for the settlement of immigrants (Schwartz and Schwenken 2020). In times of polarization of public opinion and increasing hostility towards asylum seekers and their supporters in many countries (Agustín and Jorgensen 2019), these deeds may have a political meaning, although assistance and charity have been traditionally considered detached from politics.

Contexts and Methods

Deportability and Legal Framework Producing (Ir) Regularity among Migrants and Asylum Seekers in Italy

Italian deportation policies have been traditionally considered unsuccessful despite the political will to tackle the phenomenon of non-deported migrants. Italian governments have not been much capable of or interested in implementing enforced returns or assisted voluntary return programmes. In Leerkes and van Houte’s (2020) terms, Italian deportation policies are generally considered ‘thin’ in comparison with other European countries, due to the need for migrants in the informal labour market, organizational weakness, and limited financial resources, among other reasons. This did not change notwithstanding the rise of a populist and anti-establishment government in 2018, which introduced restrictive measures targeting asylum seekers and made more funds available for deportation enforcement. Table 1 confirms the gap between deportation policies and effective repatriations, which has been increasingly established due to the rise in the number of refused asylum seekers since 2018, despite the decrease in asylum applications. In addition, the yearly number of deportations remains largely the same, regardless of the

Table 1

Number of Applicants for Asylums, Negative Decisions and Deportations			
Year	Asylum applications	Rejected applications	Deportations
2015	83,535	41,503	7243
2016	122,960	54,254	5817
2017	128,855	46,992	6514
2018	59,955	63,742	6820
2019	43,675	76,798	7054

Sources: IDOS (2020), Fondazione ISMU (2021), and OPENPOLIS (2019), www.openpolis.it.

number of rejections, as if there is a symbolic ‘quorum’ of deportations reflecting a compromise between the Italian government’s will to exhibit State sovereignty on legal settlements and its limited capacity to implement proclaimed policies.

Since 2017, the rise of refused applications has largely been connected to the introduction of new laws that made it more difficult for asylum seekers to access international protection. Overall, the number of NDRAS increased as (a) obtaining a legal status became harder, (b) the number of deportations remained the same, and (c) the number of asylum applications increased over time (according to the Ministry of Interior, 606,809 people applied for asylum from 2011 to 2020).

In contrast, two recent legislative initiatives gave access to legal status for some thousands of irregular migrants, including NDRAS. On the one hand, the Italian government introduced a regularization scheme in June 2020, collecting about 200,000 applications by employers of migrants who had previously worked in the agriculture, fishing and the care and domestic work sectors (Bonizzoni and Hajer 2021). On the other hand, a new Security Decree (no. 130/2020) reinstated a broader framework of conditions under which migrants can apply for humanitarian protection, making reference to migrants’ integration pathway as a criterion to be considered when examining reiterated asylum applications.

CSAs in Small Cities and Case Selection

Studies on the characteristics of CSAs in small cities have shown that the size of the city affects the nature and actions of formal organizations and informal groups (Kriesi and Baglioni 2003). In small cities, the number of actors is lower, their activities and focus are more homogenous, and their resources are often limited. In addition, the coordination between public authorities and private actors can be facilitated as interpersonal relations can be more easily established and maintained (Semprebón *et al.* 2022). However, this may result in more control by public authorities over NGO practices and activities as well as more limited politicized action. Migration scholars have also looked at factors shaping the conditions of the reception and acceptance of refugees, indicating that previous immigration

6 *De-Bordering Solidarity*

experience (Glorius and Doornik 2020) and geographic location (Ikizoglu Erensu and Kasli 2016) are crucial in explaining favourable or xenophobic stances towards migrants.

Aiming to explore the action of CSAs in small cities, we opted for two cities in Northern Italy run by local governments with anti-immigrant attitudes. In the Italian case, the reception of refugees has been particularly conflictual at the local level, in the sense that local governments have often contested the establishment of reception centres, and different actors with different interests and values have been engaged in the so-called battleground of asylum governance (Ambrosini 2021).

Busto Arsizio is a city of 83,000 people, where the arrival and settlement of RAS became conflictual due to the establishment of a big reception facility that offered poor services to asylum seekers. In addition, this city has been traditionally governed by centre-right-wing anti-immigrant coalitions, and it is in the province of Varese where the xenophobic party League was founded and prevailed politically. Its proximity to Milan makes the city a residential opportunity for migrants who search for informal jobs in the thriving metropolitan labour market: for instance, as riders in food delivery. The second city is Como, with a population of almost 85,000 residents, located on Italy's northern border. Many people transited through this city to enter other European countries until 2016 (Fontanari 2018). From then onwards, numerous migrants have been entrapped in the Italian territory due to the implementation of rigid border controls in the Schengen Area and have precariously settled in Como. In the case of Como too, local authorities have been supported by centre-right-wing parties and have adopted a negative stance towards immigration. Local authorities of both cities have never adhered to the national reception system, thus rejecting any responsibility for newly arrived people. This implies not only a denial of help to vulnerable populations but also exclusion from a series of rights, which RAS should enjoy. This attitude appears even harsher in relation to NDRAS.

Busto Arsizio and Como were selected as two critical cases. The rationale of this approach is that case selection can be driven by the expectation that conditions or aspects of a phenomenon are more likely to find forms of expression in a specific context (Cardano 2011). We expect that CSAs' action in small cities will have no political meaning as critical anthropologists claim, considering also homogeneity in civil society's activities. Geographic position of Como as border city and proximity to Milan, together with limited previous experience of Busto Arsizio with refugees enable us to do some comparisons.

Methods

This article draws on empirical evidence collected within a research project focusing on the discursive (re)production of refugee crisis narratives, refugee integration and multi-scalar governance of asylum issues. Data come from 33 qualitative interviews with CSAs³ engaged in the management of (non-deportable refused) asylum seekers with RAS themselves⁴ (Table 2). Some of them were initially accessed through personal acquaintances, whereas these

Table 2

The Sample		
Participants	Busto Arsizio	Como
Reception centre managers	3	2
NGO professionals	3	5
CSO volunteers	5	2
Trade unionists	1	1
Religious actors	1	1
Lawyers	1	1
Refugees/asylum seekers	3	4
Total	17	16

initial contacts introduced the researcher to other colleagues or their acquaintances. The selection of research participants was based on the heterogeneity of types of CSAs and their role in the asylum governance. The sample is far from being representative of the population of the CSAs engaged in asylum governance and migrants. CSAs have been asked to talk about their actions and interactions with local governments and other public and private actors in relation to NDRAS. A semi-structured interview outline was used to collect newly arrived people’s experiences concerning the reception facilities where they had been hosted, integration projects, jobs, their legal status and future plans. Interviews were conducted from May 2019 to May 2021 in Italian. All interviews conducted before March 2020 were face to face, whereas most of those conducted after the pandemic outbreak were carried out via video communications platforms or telephone. Interviews typically lasted between 40 min and 2 h and face-to-face interviews were conducted in public spaces or at the venues of associations. and all participants were informed about the scope of the research and gave their consent to participation, audio registration and processing of personal data. The process of data collection and analysis was approved by the ethics committee of our university. From January 2021 to May 2021, some empirical data were collected through instances of non-participant observation at a help desk migration service in Como. Ethnographic fieldwork was fully overt, as the researcher informed all the relevant participants (volunteers, social workers, and migrants) about the scope of his presence. This technique was used to triangulate information collected through face-to-face interviews. We have used nicknames and changed the identifying details of people to protect participants’ anonymity.

Interview transcripts were analysed using the QDA Miner Software that enables structuring, organizing, and managing a large amount of empirical data. We used qualitative content analysis to identify a set of common themes from the interviews, and then we developed a thematic codification. The software allowed us to cross-check the results and perform comparisons of the two different cases studies.

De-Bordering Solidarity from NDRAS' Supporters in Hostile Municipalities and Dilemmas in Providing Assistance

Against both Como and Busto Arsizio municipalities' reluctance to engage directly in asylum governance, CSAs have undertaken an active role and adopted an inclusive approach towards NDRAS through daily assistance to address basic needs or support to facilitate their integration. In the following lines, we investigate whether the actions of civil society and their outcomes generate dilemmas and support border regimes or (practically) contest policies of exclusion against NDRAS.

Unconditional Practical Help to NDRAS

Most common actions intended to help NDRAS constitute subsistence assistance, such as clothes' donations and food banks. Clothes' distribution is managed by formal organizations, such as religious institutions, reception facilities or various associations, whereas food banks are mainly organized by church organizations, such as Caritas or other religious NGOs. Food provision can be offered by informal groups of people too. Elena, a woman in her forties who works as caseworker and also takes part as a volunteer in an informal food bank initiative without any political orientation in Como, recounts:

I can think as citizen, I can create relationships with other people just because I'm a human being, not because I make part of an association. [...] Every day, we offer breakfast to people living on the streets or those who transit. [...] the breakfast is really instrumental in the sense that the morning is objectively a difficult moment because everything starts again. [...] many people come to have a coffee, which they may have already taken before, but this is just the excuse to chat for a moment.

Food-related activities can be seen as a kind of gift-giving that, while responding to compelling needs, challenges the formation of egalitarian relationships between volunteers and NDRAS. This can impede autonomy of the people served and generate relationships of dependence. However, food-related activities can also be seen as 'solidarity socialities' (Rozakou 2016: 186). Although such interactions entail the risk of creation of vertical relationships between volunteers and homeless or marginalised individuals, daily practical and emotional assistance allows NDRAS to be incorporated "in culturally significant forms of social interaction", thus challenging the divide between citizens and non-citizens (Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017). In addition, as Elena told us, the action of her group has been obstructed by local authorities. Some of the volunteers were fined for seizing public space by the municipal police that enforced a newly introduced local ordinance mainly targeting homeless migrants. Thinking of similar local ordinances such that in Ventimiglia (n. 129/2016) where the municipality had prohibited food distribution to migrants in public spaces, food delivery can be seen as an act of 'de-bordering solidarity', an act of civil disobedience that challenges people's exclusion from welfare services, regardless of migrant supporters' motivations. The COVID-19 pandemic hindered such activities, as for instance people could not

eat indoors, but they had to take a meal bag and eat elsewhere, thus depriving them of socialization and emotional help from social workers and volunteers.

The provision of shelter to homeless people is delegated by the municipalities to NGOs in both cities. As NDRAS are excluded from the only permanent dormitory of 56 places in Como, they can find shelter in two other facilities, both with 50 places, during the cold months. Two ‘cold emergency’ dormitories offer night shelter from December to April, including for people without legal status. Petra, a social worker in her forties who also informed us that the municipality covered a large part of one of the two dormitories’ expenses in 2021, said:

For us (NGO with religious principles managing one of the two dormitories) it’s not relevant whether one has legal documents or not. Municipality said that irregular migrants should be placed elsewhere, but we didn’t make distinctions.

Shelter provision can enable the state to avoid providing such services, whereas the involvement of volunteers in such activities in some way compensate states’ deresponsabilization. However, in contrast with indistinct accusations of complicity on the part of CSAs when receiving governmental funds (Kox and Staring 2022), NGOs may not be harnessed to the state. Instead, public resources can be used to address NDRAS’ exclusion from local welfare services. This can be seen as another example showing how humanitarianism combats policies of exclusion, as the concept of ‘de-bordering solidarity’ suggests. Moreover, differentiation between humanitarian actors and solidarians who act on the basis of support receivers’ legal statuses (Cantat 2021) does not seem relevant here.

The need for shelter among NDRAS (and other marginalized people) is poorly addressed in Busto Arsizio, and more generally in the province of Varese, as a reception facility manager claimed. Formal services for homeless people only offer 16 places. Scarcity of resources has preceded the arrival of refugees since 2015 and is connected with cuts in welfare services by the regional right-wing government. Some other places are informally offered by religious institutions or associations with religious orientation (Mitchell 2017).

Healthcare services are another type of aid offered unconditionally to all NDRAS. Doctors and nurses, many of them retirees, offer healthcare and medicine to asylum seekers who cannot access the formal health system through an informal group running a first-aid station. However, these volunteers face difficulties in offering help to people with psychiatric disorders. In these cases, people have to move from Como or Busto Arsizio to Milan thanks to the intermediation of volunteers and social workers.

Moving now to other types of practical help, CSAs can facilitate NDRAS to transit the border. Caterina, a middle-aged woman social worker within a religious association in Como, recounts:

Since the end of 1990s, there’s a church located 200 metres from the Swiss border. There was always a transit of migrants. The parish of Ponte Chiasso used to host many people even for a night. We continue to give help to everyone.

Similarly, Renata, a woman in her forties who is social worker in a volunteer association hosting asylum seekers in Busto Arsizio, talks about the future of the people who will have no access to legal status:

The choice that we (associations) will make is that of civil disobedience since these people (NDRAS) have spent time here, or they have even been integrated. Maybe we could accompany them to take a train to go to another country, in France.

Despite the risk of being arrested for transporting irregular migrants (Rozakou 2016), volunteers can create a form of civil disobedience that is informed by their daily interaction with NDRAS and the injustice of restrictive policies (Sandri 2018). This can be seen as another ‘de-bordering’ solidarity initiative, as volunteers contest borders and state policies. In comparative terms, Como as a border city (Ikizoglu Erensu and Kasli 2016) has traditionally been a place of transit for people intending to move beyond Italy. This factor pushed CSAs to undertake an active role towards people in transit and NDRAS in the absence of responses on the part of the local government.

Diversity of Rationales among CSAs for Providing Legal Support and Bureaucratic Assistance

Rights-based advocacy, legal advice and bureaucratic assistance to NDRAS are very crucial, yet they generate dilemmas and tensions among migrant supporters. Starting from the case in Busto Arsizio, legal advice to RAS is provided only on a private basis. The municipality has delegated the operation of a help desk migration service to an NGO that has little or no experience with asylum issues.

In the case of Como, NDRAS can contact two associations, a non-profit association specialized in migrant rights and a help desk within a religious organization. Through talking with different participants, it became evident that people assisting migrants are in constant contact among themselves and exchange information and opinions on NDRAS. The continuous circulation of information is particularly facilitated by densely knitted networks of social workers and volunteers, as everybody knows each other. However, these patterns may have ambiguous effects as the fieldwork notes reveal:

The lawyer is trying to convince Malek from Gambia not to repeat his application. According to the lawyer, the applicant has no chance of getting international protection because Gambia has been considered a safe country since 2017. Instead, the lawyer explains to Malek that it would be better for him to examine the possibility for a voluntary return. ‘You have to think about it. It’s better for you to return to Gambia. Here, you have no future. You didn’t learn Italian: if you go to the judge, and you cannot speak Italian, he will deny you the status. [...] you don’t have a job.’ When Malek went away, the lawyer said to me that ‘like him, many guys from Gambia have done nothing in terms of integration, and now they have no chance of accessing regular status. We know his story very well’. Despite these considerations, the lawyer proceeded with the resubmission of Malek’s application, as the latter is not convinced about returning home.

[...] another refused asylum seeker from Gambia arrived to ask for help, and the lawyer said to me, 'here we are. His case is very good because he learnt Italian, he has a good job. He's a good guy'. The lawyer claims that this man has a chance of holding regular status thanks to the new decree.

Ethnographic notes at the help desk migration service, 9 April 2021

In informing NDRAS about the chances of being granted legal status in Italy through a repeated application, legal advisers may take a position of trying to persuade eventual applicants to make a specific decision (Bonizzoni and Hajer 2021). The introduction of 'integration' as a criterion for the acceptance of a repeated asylum application according to the recent legislative reform makes it more likely for NDRAS with good knowledge of the Italian language and with previous job experience to obtain legal status. Criticism may be directed towards the stance of volunteer lawyers for conditioning decisions and agency, as in the case of Malek, and for reproducing a deservingness frame (Chauvin and Garcés-Masareñas 2014), as in the second quotation. The following quotation of Cinzia, a middle-aged woman, lawyer by profession, who volunteers in a pro-migrant association in Como, reveals the rationales of those supporting migrants and the outcomes of their activities:

Some volunteers provide help to refused asylum seekers and make them remain in Italy at any cost. Giving them money or shelter, or even taking them to your home can result in tragic situations. Then, you possibly find them (NDRAS) on the streets (homeless) or dealing drugs or becoming drug or alcohol addicted. Some of them end up in psychiatric facilities. Isn't it better that they go back home?

Once again, this account reflects a subjective and paternalistic view of what 'is better' for NDRAS. Some volunteers consider it more 'correct' to put emotions aside to protect NDRAS from social marginalization, substance addiction, and engagement in criminal activities. This means that a hosting-at-home system can offer opportunities for close interaction and the space for more intensively personal ties between volunteers and refugees (Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019) but can also disempower migrants and drive them towards precarious or even dangerous situations. Despite the reproduction of deserving frames, CSAs seem to be active towards people who find themselves in very vulnerable conditions, as the following quotation of Giacomo, a retired man who is volunteer within an NGO in Busto Arsizio, suggests:

[...] it is clear that this choice (non-repatriation) meant that some of them (refused asylum seekers) who did not return to their countries were at the mercy of the organised crime... We (NGO) closely worked with police headquarters and DIGOS (police agency investigating cases involving organised crime, terrorism, kidnapping, extortions) to tackle labour exploitation or victims of trafficking. In this way, some guys access international protection as trafficked persons or victims of exploitation.

In the same vein, Barbara, a woman in her thirties who is social worker within an NGO in Como, said:

12 *De-Bordering Solidarity*

[...] the police enable the conversion of some expiring permits for humanitarian reasons into one-year stay permits for unemployed individuals searching for jobs. ... it's not totally illegal, but we (volunteers and social workers) try to understand little by little to what extent we can push [...] I was talking about the importance of our network, within a small town...

Close-knitted networks between state authorities and CSAs in small cities seem to fuel the discretionary power of police officers who act as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980). Civil society may trigger public officers' sensibility and make them reflect on individual cases of NDRAS. This can be seen as another 'de-bordering solidarity' act in the sense that CSAs influence police forces' decisions in favour of some NDRAS, thus challenging migration policies and questioning political, cultural and administrative borders in fact. This expression of 'de-bordering solidarity' is particularly relevant when considering that law enforcement forces can hinder the attribution of legal status to refugees by introducing implicit and informal obstructions (Artero and Fontanari 2021). However, such ties cannot imply the request of a generalized tolerance as Barbara explains:

I have to admit that the police headquarters collaborates a lot with us ... they (police officers) appreciate that we try to get them (homeless irregular migrants) off the street ... and they turn blind eyes to some cases ... [...] but I cannot arrive there asking for the regularisation of all people.

Despite reproducing frames of deservingness, local bureaucracies become sensible and, in some cases, available to the requests concerning the regularization of people thanks to the work of CSAs. Although tackling homelessness and irregular migration through the intermediation of CSAs enable local governments to address issues of public order given the deportation gap in Italy, this has little to do with accusations related to migrant supporters' complicity in implementing exclusion policies or reporting undocumented migrants (Kox and Staring 2022; Dadusc and Mudu 2022). In light of this, the formalization of interactions between CSAs and local bureaucracies would enable the former to inform state authorities about NDRAS' rights, thus combatting unconditional application of rigid and, sometimes, unconstitutional laws and preventing from the introduction of new informal obstacles by local bureaucracies against RAS (Artero and Fontanari 2021).

Language Courses and Assistance with Jobs

Provision of language courses for migrants (including NDRAS) is common in both cities. These are organized by a variety of actors, such as cultural associations or religious institutions, while volunteers and ordinary citizens participate as teachers. Sara, a retired woman who volunteers in an NGO in Busto Arsizio, says:

We have been teaching Italian to immigrants for a few years, and we didn't ask them if they were illegal or if they had a residence permit.

CSAs' refusal to differentiate between regular and irregular migrants blurs boundaries between humanitarianism and solidaritarianism (Rozakou 2016; Cantat 2021). In the same vein, social workers and volunteers offer job orientation services and assistance with finding jobs to NDRAS. To be sure, this is not always possible, as employers may show little interest in hiring NDRAS. However, when it is feasible, it largely concerns jobs in the informal sector, as the quotation of Barbara suggests:

I tell the guys I assist so that they can probably do an undeclared job because it is better to have an undeclared job than no job at all. Having money in their pockets possibly guarantees them finding a good place to sleep and other solutions in view of a possible activation of a (formal) employment contract (in the future).

In considering the above findings, it can be argued that language courses and the circulation of information about informal jobs could be an important source of empowerment for NDRAS, mainly those who achieve regular status through repeated asylum applications. Support for learning the Italian language and find employment can be seen as acts of 'de-bordering solidarity', since NDRAS have the opportunity to develop economic independence, better social insertion and acceptance by local employers (Dimitriadis 2022). In addition, language skills and employment constitute criteria upon which NDRAS' applications are examined, so civil society smoothen NDRAS' regularization. Thinking of the restrictive provisions of the so-called Salvini Decrees that cut funding for language classes and vocational training, this kind of support has a strong political meaning, as these enrich the notion of citizenship by providing access to rights to which (refused) asylum seekers are entitled. Overall, new state initiatives are required to smoothen labour market integration, as discussed in the last section.

Political Engagement

Cases of lobbying, protests, or activities to raise the awareness of local citizens about questions concerning NDRAS were not frequent in our study. However, there have been some political actions undertaken by CSAs aimed at greater segments of vulnerable populations, such as homeless people and migrants, thus also including NDRAS.

Most demonstrations in Como took place in 2016 and 2017, expressing solidarity with people who could not continue their journey to Europe due to the closure of Swiss border. Concerning the city of Busto Arsizio, some protests were organized by RAS in 2016–2017, who requested better amenities at reception services and during the issuing of identity cards by municipalities. In that case, the role of CSAs was auxiliary: 'there were some people who gave us the contacts of some journalists, stuff like this', explained a refugee.

Considering the answers of CSAs, the great majority of them considered pure political engagement as something counterproductive, mainly in the case of Busto Arsizio as Sara explained:

We didn't think of going to the square (to protest). This is not part of our logic. We would have a significant reaction from the local press and political forces, and therefore the game would be over.

Given the politicization of the migration issue, the hostility in specific environments, and the negative stance of public opinion towards irregular migrants, small cities may constrain manifestations of purely political acts in favour of NDRAS (Kriesi and Baglioni 2003). Instead, participants may believe that practical help and support can produce better results in terms of undermining restrictive policies and expressing politicized solidarity to refused asylum seekers. Overt political actions may make public authorities' stances towards asylum seekers harsher, thus compromising the everyday workings described above. However, such opinions are not always shared by all those taking part of specific pro-migrant associations and decisions about overt political engagement may not be unanimous. In the words of Laura, a woman in her forties, lawyer by profession, who volunteers in a pro-migrant association in Como:

We're always reflecting on the extent to which we (publicly) express our opposition to certain questions. We're asking all members if they agree with a possible 'exposure' of the association (in relation to a political question); otherwise, we can express our disagreement through one lawyer, one of the members of our association, individually. [...] taking a stance publicly against Salvini Decrees has been very hard for us in so far as Alessandra Locatelli (ex-Minister for Family belonging to the xenophobic League party) was a member of our municipal council.

Therefore, apart from heterogeneity in pro-migrants' visions, this quotation suggests that a higher visibility in the public debate for pro-migrant CSAs can be used by local political actors to attack pro-migrant actors and potentially influence public opinion against immigrants.

At this point, it is interesting to analyse the outcomes of informal networking among pro-migrant actors. In both cities, heterogeneous CSAs created informal networks in order to exchange information on issues around migration and marginalized people, and coordinate their actions. Renata, a social worker in Busto Arsizio, and Petra, an NGO volunteer in Como, claimed:

This network was created by various associations in order to explain that Busto was not the city that contested the possibility of migrants and refugees to arrive and remain here, that is there was a big part of the locals who welcomed and received them. [...] the contribution (of the network) is mostly cultural because we've organised meetings and events on migration. We wanted to show that not all citizens were of the part of the mayor and to combat racism and stereotypes such as 'immigrants steal our jobs'.

This network is a discussion table in which a council member head of social policies represents the municipality. Thanks to this network we achieved to open two dormitories instead of only one.

The concept of 'de-bordering solidarity' is translated here in the empowerment of CSAs through informal networking. In the case of Busto Arsizio, the formation of

CSAs' network enabled the questioning of cultural borders through public events that can trigger a change in the way local people perceive newly arrived migrants (including NDRAS), and build up the basis for mutual relationships between the two parts. In the case of Como, the CSAs' network became a pressure group that explained the needs of homeless people (including NDRAS) and shaped local policies as the new dormitory in Como was mainly funded by the municipality. In turn, delegation of the functioning to an NGO created the conditions for NDRAS to access local welfare services as showed above. Therefore, permanent social dialogue between local authorities and CSAs' representatives may generate the basis for addressing better questions concerning vulnerable populations.

Concluding Remarks: Durable Solutions for NDRAS

This article has explored whether different forms of help and support from CSAs towards NDRAS in two small Italian cities reinforce/support or undermine border regimes. In analysing the rationales of migrant supporters and the outcomes of their practices, this article contributes to discussions on the engagement of CSAs in asylum governance and elaborates on the debate on the political nature and social outcomes of pro-migrant actions.

Our analysis showed that some CSAs' initiatives aiming to enable migrants to access services can shape migrants' agency (e.g. by reproducing frames of deservingness) and compensate the state's deresponsabilization (e.g. through free-of-charge basic services). However, provision of legal advice, vocational training, medical services and language courses to people regardless of their legal status blurs the boundaries between solidarians and humanitarian actors (Rozakou 2016; Cantat 2021). Without necessarily sharing political background or motivations, also humanitarian actors refuse to differentiate people on the basis of the latter's legal status. Despite the apparently apolitical manner in which CSAs engage in asylum governance, everyday acts of 'de-bordering solidarity' (Ambrosini 2021) can entail political and cultural meanings within local environments hostile towards migrants when, for instance, CSAs influence police officers' positions towards NDRAS and decisions on the recognition of one's legal status, or when CSAs enable NDRAS to establish contacts with local employers. This aspect is even more evident when networks of CSAs are able to pressure local governments to dedicate more resources to address the rights of marginalized population or when networks of CSAs organize events and discussions aiming at combatting stereotypes and favouring the development of relations between locals and newly arrived people. Following Fleischmann (2020: 18) 'practices of refugee support can turn political when they strive to instigate change by enacting alternative modes of togetherness and belonging on the ground'. Therefore, this calls for research focussing on the results of civil society's action, without biasing against social actors on the basis of their political positioning.

The empirical discussion of the concept of 'de-bordering solidarity' through two critical cases also nuances studies on CSAs' action in small cities (Kriesi and Baglioni 2003; Sempredon *et al.* 2022). Although purely political acts are often

avoided as these can increase visibility in solidarity practices, drawing attention to immigration issues and triggering more hostility at the local level, everyday lobbying in favour of migrants and asylum seekers can assume social and political meanings. This is possible thanks to close-knitted relations between CSAs and public officers and interactions between the former and local politicians through informal networks.

In addition, public funds to NGOs and delegation of tasks do not seem to condition NGOs' inclusionary approach towards NDRAS, which is far from the accusation of collaboration with the authorities to report undocumented migrants (Kox and Staring 2022; Dadusc and Mudu 2022). Given the deportation gap in Italy, control by local governments over CSAs receiving public fund does not seem harsh. This might be interpreted by considering, on the one side, anti-immigration governments' reluctance to directly address questions of public order concerning 'unwanted' populations, and on the other side, CSAs' empowerment through the formation of informal networks. The growing number of newly arrived people to Como as a border and transit city, and previous experience of CSAs with refugee populations seems to be determinant in developing a greater range of services provided to NDRAS in comparison to Busto Arsizio.

Overall, considering that public authorities can hardly provide services to this population, because this could openly contradict principles of national sovereignty and closure to unwanted immigration, collaboration between state authorities and CSAs can contribute to some responses related to the issues of migrants who do not have a right to stay, without the formal or direct engagement of the state. This requires recognition of CSAs as relevant partners of public authorities on different scales, functioning as institutions that can provide ideas and suggestions. This means that CSAs should have a place at round tables on a permanent basis; that is, they should be recognized as fully fledged partners in the local governance of immigration and asylum policies. Such collaboration should concern not only big cities but also smaller ones. This is of great relevance when considering the dispersal of RAS across various cities in which local governments often deny participation in asylum governance. Funding CSAs that cover NDRAS' basic needs (food, shelter, and healthcare issues) can be a solution that goes beyond the risk of CSAs losing their autonomy and contributing to the state's control over NDRAS. Indeed, our research has shown that local governments with hostile attitudes towards immigration can turn a blind eye in relation to the provision of some services to NDRAS, as deportation policies are not successfully implemented. Therefore, CSAs' engagement in the provision of the basic needs can offer the fundamentals for the local integration of NDRAS, protecting them from social marginalization and further vulnerability.

The following step towards local integration concerns the issuing of temporary stay permits for NDRAS to look for jobs in the formal labour market. The rigid link between stay permits and the existence of formal employment contracts forces NDRAS to exclusively access informal jobs. Having the possibility to access employment opportunities in the formal labour market can enable the realization of NDRAS' plans and aspirations. Opportunities for vocational training and

internship can be a further measure to facilitate integration in the labour market. The economic cost of such activities could also be financed by fundraising or through various organizations, which aim to help asylum seekers. These organizations have proved to be key actors in matching migrants with job opportunities by reinforcing contacts between migrants and locals. This also facilitates access to housing and other services, thus favouring long-term acceptance of migrants from local people. In this regard, Germany has already implemented a similar project enabling the regularization of refused asylum seekers (EMN 2016). Despite the rejection of one's application, asylum seekers have the right to access vocational training programmes and seek employment. Beneficiaries are given 3 years to complete vocational training and two years to remain and work in the country.

In summary, this article calls for more research on political vision, organization, rationales and outcomes of CSAs engaged in asylum issues at the local level.

Acknowledgements

This article was written from April 2021 to July 2022.

Funding

This article is part of the output of the Horizon 2020 MAGYC project, which received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 822806

ENDNOTES

1. By CSAs (research population) we intend non-governmental organisations (NGOs), associations, trade unions, religious institutions, social movements, activist networks, and independent supporters (subcategories within the research population). Apart from social movements and activists with a claim to being political, all other subjects are labelled as humanitarian actors by critical literature, while their action is defined as humanitarianism, volunteerism, or even philanthropy.
2. This refers to the population size of the city.
3. Interviews with stakeholders were conducted in Italian, as Author A has proficiency in the Italian language. Author A was presented to them as a young researcher and interviewed representatives of associations and volunteers as experts in the field of migration.
4. Although the initial research plan involved a higher number of interviews with refugees and asylum seekers, this was not feasible due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Six men and one woman (Africans) who were interviewed would have served as initial participants for the recruitment of more people. RAS have been introduced to Author A by social workers and volunteers. Author A is a Greek who has lived in Italy for many years. He was an outsider in relation to RAS, not only due to objective factors (e.g. his being white and European, which implies almost equal rights to the locals), but because he was perceived as a local by the interviewees. He interviewed six out of seven people in Italian (as they had good knowledge of the local language) and one of them in English, although not interviewing people in their mother tongue might condition RAS to a certain extent. Moreover, engaging with vulnerable people (four out seven were refused asylum seekers), we acknowledge questions of ethics, morals, and power.

However, we tried to present a fair account of our results, entailing an analysis that goes beyond personal standpoints and highlighting the complexity of migration of asylum processes.

- Agustín, Ó. G. and Jørgensen, M. B.** (2019) *Solidarity and the 'Refugee Crisis' in Europe*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot Publishers.
- Agier, M.** (2011) 'Managing the Undesirables', *Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Ambrosini, M.** (2021) 'The Battleground of Asylum and Immigration Policies: A Conceptual Inquiry'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44(3): 374–395.
- Ambrosini, M.** (2022) 'Humanitarian Help and Refugees: De-Bordering Solidarity as a Contentious Issue'. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 1. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2022.2059823>.
- Ambrosini, M., Cinalli, M. and Jacobson, D.** (2020) *Migration, Borders and Citizenship. Between Policy and Public Spheres*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot Publishers.
- Artero, M. and Fontanari, E.** (2021) 'Obstructing Lives: Local Borders and Their Structural Violence in the Asylum Field of Post-2015 Europe'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47(3): 631–648.
- Atac, I., Schütze, T., Reitter, V. and Reitter, V.** (2020) 'Local Responses in Restrictive National Policy Contexts: welfare Provisions for Non-Removed Rejected Asylum Seekers in Amsterdam, Stockholm and Vienna'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43(16): 115–134.
- Bloch, A., Sigona, N. and Zetter, R.** (2014) *Sans Papiers: The Social and Economic Lives of Young Undocumented Migrants*. London: Pluto Press.
- Bonizzoni, P. and Hajer, M.** (2021) 'Civil Society Actors and the 2020 Italian Amnesty: Bordering to De-border?'. Working Paper Presented at the Webinar NGOs/CSOs, Migration Management and Border Control, 15 March 2021.
- Braun, K.** (2017) 'Decolonial Perspectives on Charitable Spaces of "Welcome Culture" in Germany'. *Social Inclusion* 5(3): 38–48.
- Cantat, C.** (2021) 'Refugee Solidarity Along the Balkan Route'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34(2): 1348–1369.
- Cardano, M.** (2011) *La Ricerca Qualitativa*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Castañeda, H.** (2013) 'Medical Aid as Protest: Acts of Citizenship for Unauthorized im/Migrants and Refugees'. *Citizenship Studies* 17(2): 227–240.
- Chauvin, S. and Garcés-Mascreñas, B.** (2014) 'Becoming Less Illegal: Deservingness Frames and Undocumented Migrant Incorporation'. *Sociology Compass* 8(4): 422–432.
- Cuttitta, P.** (2018) 'Repoliticization Through Search and Rescue? Humanitarian NGOs and Migration Management in the Central Mediterranean'. *Geopolitics* 23(3): 632–660.
- Dadusc, D. and Mudu, P.** (2022) 'Care without Control: The Humanitarian Industrial Complex and the Criminalisation of Solidarity'. *Geopolitics (Online First)* 27(4): 1205–1230.
- Dimitriadis, I.** (2022) 'Migrants and Undeclared Employment within the European Construction Sector: Challenging Dichotomous Approaches to Workers' Agency'. *Work, Employment and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170211072777>.
- Dimitriadis, I., Hajer, M. H., Fontanari, E. and Ambrosini, M.** (2021) 'Local "Battlegrounds". Relocating Multi-Level and Multi-Actor Governance of Immigration'. *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales* 37(1–2): 251–275.
- EMN** (2016) 'Approaches to Rejected Asylum Seekers in Germany. Focus-Study by the German National Contact Point for the European Migration Network (EMN)'. No. Working Paper 69, https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/EN/EMN/Studien/wp69-emn-umgang-abgelehnten-asylbewerber.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=11.
- Fassin, D.** (2011) *Humanitarian Reason: The Moral History of the Present*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Fleischmann, L.** (2020) 'Contested Solidarity', *Practices of Refugee Support between Humanitarian Help and Political Activism*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.

- Fleischmann, L. and Steinhilper, E.** (2017) 'The Myth of Apolitical Volunteering for Refugees: German Welcome Culture and a New Dispositif of Helping'. *Social Inclusion* 5(3): 17–27.
- Fondazione ISMU** (2021) *Ventiseiesimo Rapporto Sulle Migrazioni 2020*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Fontanari, E.** (2018) 'Lives in Transit', *An Ethnographic Study of Refugees' Subjectivity across European Borders*. Routledge.
- Gibney, M. J.** (2008) 'Asylum and the Expansion of Deportation in the United Kingdom'. *Government and Opposition* 43(2): 146–167.
- Glorius, B. and Doomernik, J.** (2020) *Geographies of Asylum in Europe and the Role of European Localities*. IMISCOE Research Series SpringerOpen.
- IDOS** (2020) *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2020*. Roma: IDOS.
- Ikizoglu Erensu, A. and Kasli, Z.** (2016) 'A Tale of Two Cities: Multiple Practices of Bordering and Degrees of 'Transit' in and through Turkey'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29(4): 528–548.
- Karakayali, S.** (2017) 'Feeling the Scope of Solidarity: The Role of Emotions for Volunteers Supporting Refugees in Germany'. *Social Inclusion* 5(3): 7–16.
- Kasli, Z.** (2016) 'Who do Migrant Associations Represent? The Role of 'Ethnic Deservingness' and Legal Capital in Migrants' Rights Claims in Turkey'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42(12): 1996–2012.
- Kox, M. and Staring, R.** (2022) 'If You Don't Have Documents or a Legal Procedure, You Are out!' Making Humanitarian Organizations Partner in Migration Control'. *European Journal of Criminology* 19(5): 974–993.
- Kriesi, H. and Baglioni, S.** (2003) 'Putting Local Associations into Their Context. Preliminary Results from a Swiss Study of Local Associations'. *Swiss Political Science Review* 9(3): 1–34.
- Leerkes, A. and van Houte, M.** (2020) 'Beyond the Deportation Regime: Differential State Interests and Capacities in Dealing with (Non-)Deportability in Europe'. *Citizenship Studies* 24(3): 319–338.
- Lipsky, M.** (1980) *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Malkki, L. H.** (2015) *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism*. Duke University Press.
- Mitchell, K.** (2017) 'Freedom, Faith, and Humanitarian Governance: The Spatial Politics of Church Asylum in Europe'. *Space and Polity* 21(3): 269–288.
- OECD** (2018) *Working Together for Local Integration of Migrants and Refugees*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- OPENPOLIS** (2019) 'Gli esiti delle richieste di asilo tra il 2014 e il 2019', <https://www.openpolis.it/numeri/gli-esiti-delle-richieste-di-asilo-tra-il-2014-e-il-2019/> (accessed 28 April 2021).
- Rozakou, K.** (2016) 'Socialities of Solidarity: Revisiting the Gift Taboo in Times of Crises'. *Social Anthropology* 24(2): 185–177.
- Sandri, E.** (2018) 'Volunteer Humanitarianism': Volunteers and Humanitarian Aid in the Jungle Refugee Camp of Calais'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(1): 65–80.
- Schwartz, H. and Schwenken, H.** (2020) 'Introduction: Inclusive Solidarity and Citizenship along Migratory Routes in Europe and the Americas'. *Citizenship Studies* 24(4): 405–423.
- Semprebon, M., Bonizzoni, P. and Marzorati, R.** (2022) 'Migration Governance and the Role of the Third Sector in Small-Sized Towns in Italy'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 1: 1–37.
- Spencer, S. and Triandafyllidou, A. (eds) (2020) *Migrants with Irregular Status in Europe: Evolving Conceptual and Policy Challenges*. IMISCOE Research Series. SpringerOpen.
- Vandevoordt, R. and Verschaegen, G.** (2019) 'The European Refugee Controversy: Civil Solidarity, Cultural Imaginaries and Political Change'. *Social Inclusion* 7(2): 48–52.