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Acts of Volunteering for Refugees: Local Responses to Global Challenges

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This article explores volunteering in grassroots networks that formed to support refugees arriving to Europe, in the context of a socio-political landscape marked by disunity in 2015. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Berlin and Copenhagen in 2017, the article analyses grassroots volunteering as local responses to global challenges. The analysis draws theoretical inspiration from a performative approach and concentrates on everyday activities in the networks, with a focus on the motivations and rationales of the volunteers. Building on dynamic understandings of citizenship and borders as proposed by Engin Isin and Chris Rumford, this article discusses the volunteer activities as *acts of volunteering* that negotiate who belongs in a given society and thus rearrange the notion of citizenship. In this context, this article argues that grassroots networks function as platforms for testing out forms of everyday activism in the specific socio-political context.

Keywords: Grassroots volunteering; Forced migration; Citizenship; Ethnography; Northern Europe

Introduction

The European summer of 2015 is referred to in literature as ‘the long summer of migration’ (Hess et al. 2017), as more than one million refugees made their way to the European Union from conflict-affected countries such as Syria, Eritrea, and Afghanistan. It was a summer marked by disunity within the political and civic European response to their arrival. However, it has also been characterised as the ‘summer of welcome’, as an unparalleled number of citizens throughout Europe welcomed the arriving refugees in various ways (Karakayali & Kleist 2016). People of different ages, social backgrounds, political beliefs, and professions started to engage in informal initiatives to support refugees (Karakayali & Kleist 2016). Citizens initiated and joined these welcome initiatives at the grassroots level in their local area. Against the backdrop of an EU in crisis, they assumed responsibilities—like providing basic necessities—that the EU member states did not sufficiently carry out, whether due to unwillingness or lack of ability. These activities were increasingly framed as constituting a ‘welcome culture’ (Hamann & Karakayali 2016), which created platforms for encounters between people in their local contexts.

The term 'welcome culture', which was originally coined by the German government around 2005 to attract a skilled labour force, re-entered wider public discourse in 2015, taking on new meaning to characterise the civic endeavours supporting refugees in Germany and other parts of Europe (Trauner & Turton 2017: 35). The German government's initial strategy, led by Angela Merkel from the conservative Christian Democratic Union, was to open borders temporarily for Syrian citizens, resulting in the country receiving the largest number of refugees in the EU (Thranhardt 2019). In contrast, other countries with more restrictive policies against refugees also saw civic welcome initiatives mushroom. The then liberal-led Danish government attempted to keep the number of asylum seekers in the country low e.g., with deterrent strategies and reinforced border controls (Politiken 2015; Udlændingegog Integrationsministeriet 2016). At the same time, citizens in Denmark took on the task of welcoming refugees themselves (Toubøl 2015).

In the years after 2015, many grassroots initiatives in Germany and Denmark continued to exist, going on to help refugees establish their lives in the respective country. In their local contexts, volunteers offered support to refugees and carried out activities for both refugees and the local community to participate in. This included running clothing banks, providing language classes and legal advice, and hosting communal dinners. The plurality of grassroots networks was especially salient in the countries' respective urban centres: Berlin and Copenhagen.

In order to understand why people engage in these communities and how they organise themselves locally, we conducted ethnographic research in grassroots networks in these two urban contexts in 2017.¹ In line with other academic efforts across disciplines, we aimed to investigate the role of the welcome culture from a national and transnational perspective (e.g. Hamann & Karakayali 2016; Karakayali & Kleist 2016; Toubøl 2015). Based on our research, this article unpacks the motivations and rationales enacted in the everyday activities of grassroots initiatives. Analysing the activities as *acts of volunteering*, we argue that they are forms of everyday activism that represent instances of negotiating citizenship in contemporary Europe.

The theoretical backdrop for this analysis was developed conjointly with our fieldwork. In this iterative process, we developed the notion of *acts of volunteering*. The concept is based on a performative approach to investigating volunteer work in grassroots networks (Butler 1990; Goffman 1990; Mol 2002). As anthropologist and philosopher Annemarie Mol argues, considering the practices of a certain phenomenon illuminates the multiple realities that are enacted through them (Mol 2002: 51–52). Accordingly, we unfold how volunteers enact their volunteering through diverse practices, allowing for its underlying rationales and motivations to appear in their dynamic and transformative dimension (Mol 2002).

The notion of *acts of volunteering* furthermore builds on a dynamic approach to the notion of citizenship as developed and employed by scholars such as Engin Isin (2008). Isin highlights the performative dimension of citizenship and thereby acknowledges that it is more than a legal status, but rather a concept in flux that is subject to active negotiations among actors in civil society (Isin 2009: 370, 383). Based on Hannah Arendt's (1993) theory of being political as the capacity to act, Isin argues that it is through *acts of citizenship*, actors (citizens as well

¹ The research was conducted in the context of a Master's thesis at the department of European Ethnology at the University of Copenhagen (Kirchner & Steen Bygballe 2017). It was framed in the context of the Helping Hands Research network (Helping Hands 2019) and presented at the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration Conference in Thessaloniki in 2018 on the panel "Helping hands" in a rebordering Europe', as well as the article workshop organized in connection with the conference 'Europe Trouble: Welcome Culture and the Disruption of the European Border Regime', on the 12th–13th of June 2019 at the University of Copenhagen.

as non-citizens) are claiming their rights (Isin 2009: 380). This serves the purpose of changing existing norms and regimes of citizenship; However, acts of citizenship should not be confused with routine democratic actions, such as voting and taxpaying, which link to rights and obligations of citizenship (Isin 2009: 379). Rather, acts of citizenship are ways of 'making a difference' by introducing a change or rupture (Isin 2009: 379). In a number of ways, these claims are enacted, influencing to whom rights are given and thereby who is perceived as a citizen. Exploring the concept of citizenship concurrently links to the notion of borders, as they are used to demarcate a given community, such as a nation-state, where borders are tools for managing who belongs within and who is thus granted formal citizenship. Within border studies, scholars such as sociologist Chris Rumford argue that borders are no longer the exclusive concern of nation-states (Rumford 2006: 164), but rather that 'borderwork is very much the business of citizens, of ordinary people' (Rumford 2008: 3). He continues by stating, '[G]lobal civil society stands in a rather ambivalent relation to borders and borderwork. Some civil society actors work to erode borders, while others work to reinforce them or to create new ones' (Rumford 2008: 8). As part of our analysis, we draw on Rumford's conceptualisation of the border and how citizens as well as non-citizens both stabilise and destabilise the border through borderwork. Bringing together *acts of citizenship* and *borderwork*, we thus explore how our informants are (de)stabilising, constructing, and contesting borders through *acts of volunteering* and thereby negotiate the question of who belongs as citizens. The concept of acts of volunteering considers the everyday actions of grassroots volunteering in the specific socio-political context of the recent arrival of a large number of refugees to Europe. It thereby sheds light on the actions underlying rationales and socio-political potentials. Accordingly, we use this notion to conceptualise civic attempts to negotiate and rearrange the dominant citizenship figure across borders in a Northern European context. In this connection, the article discusses how volunteers across borders use the grassroots networks as platforms to experiment with forms of everyday activism that promote the assignment of rights and obligations independent of a legal status connected to a nation-state. It thus provides insights into how Europe exists and is performed in multiple ways by local citizens in grassroots networks for refugees in Berlin and Copenhagen. Accordingly, we locate this work among research approaching the topic with respect to the (re)bordering of European space (e.g., Bendixsen 2016; Hess & Kasperek 2017; Sandberg 2018). In this context, the article will allude to different geographical scales—local, national, European, and global—in various ways. While unfolding our informants' rationales, we will consider what scales they activate to determine when and why they consider a certain scale of importance.

The article explores grassroots volunteering for refugees by means of a twofold analysis. In the first part, we will unfold the motivations and rationales of the volunteers with a focus on our informants' explanation of how they started volunteering as well as their characterisation of the volunteer work they do. Here, we put forward an analysis of how this kind of volunteering can be perceived as bottom-up activism. In the second part, we move to an in-situ analysis of volunteering based on empirical examples from donation banks in Berlin and Copenhagen. We unfold the activities in the donation banks as *acts of volunteering* by looking at both the practical and social aspects of it. Before this analysis, we set the stage with a presentation of the ethnographic research that builds the backbone of this article.

Doing Fieldwork in Grassroots Networks for Refugees in Berlin and Copenhagen

In 2017, we engaged with a multi-sited field (Hirvi 2012) to investigate volunteering for refugees in Berlin and Copenhagen. At this point, the number of refugees arriving had decreased in both cities. This was, amongst other reasons, due to political developments such as border

closings across Europe and the (continued) tightening of refugee laws in both Germany and Denmark (Sandberg 2018: 53–54). Additionally, the governments had started to respond to the arrival of refugees by providing infrastructures (e.g., temporary housing). With fewer refugees arriving, the number of volunteers also decreased as some of the ad hoc tasks of providing emergency help and welcoming refugees ceased. In 2017, the focus of grassroots initiatives in the two cities was on helping refugees navigate the respective bureaucratic and urban systems, providing them with material goods and language support as well as providing space for refugees to meet with the local community.

We investigated four grassroots initiatives across the two cities: *Moabit hilft* and *Wedding hilft* in Berlin and *Venligbohus* and *Solbjerggruppen* in Copenhagen. Each of these networks functioned within one or several locations, mainly in public buildings that the grassroots initiatives rented or were offered to use. These locations were where people met in person and engaged in everyday activities, such as sharing coffee and food, providing language support, and collecting and distributing clothes. The four researched networks differed in the form and frequency of activities. *Moabit hilft* and *Venligbohus* were running on a daily basis, including both scheduled and spontaneous activities and services. *Wedding hilft* and *Solbjerggruppen* hosted several weekly events that were tied to a particular activity and timeframe. In addition, all four networks had an online presence on social media. The networks' online and offline dimensions were inextricably intertwined. Facebook groups were an easy starting point for people to get involved, functioning also as a way to mobilise volunteers. Furthermore, participants used Facebook groups to share practical information about upcoming events, share legal and political developments, organise shifts and meet-ups, as well as communicate everyday stories and pictures.

We researched the networks' activities both online and offline over a time span of five months. This included interactions with network members in person and via phone, following the online activities of the networks as well as participating in the activities on-site. We analysed our empirical material from Berlin and Copenhagen with a comparative perspective. Investigating the relations, intersections, and differences between the activities within and across the urban and national contexts, we aimed to arrive at a nuanced discussion and understanding of grassroots volunteering.

Our research centred around the perspectives and actions of local volunteers. To get access to the networks, we contacted them explaining our research endeavour and offering to volunteer in this context. We experienced a great willingness from the volunteers to welcome us in the networks and to talk with us about their activities. Our informants comprised a diverse group of volunteers that covered an age range of 22 to 67 years and had different professional backgrounds, such as students, teachers, scientists, hairstylists, or administrative employees. They differed in the type of activities they participated in and the amount of time they spent in the networks. Our informants were predominantly women, as women made up the majority of volunteers in the networks we researched. The diversity of our informants reflects the composition of the group of volunteers in the networks. We conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with volunteers that lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Moreover, we carried out 23 instances of participant observation within the everyday activities of the networks. We were continuously documenting and reflecting on how we acted and felt while participating in volunteering activities, which allowed us to gain valuable first-hand insights. Our intensive engagement with the fields, including volunteering in the networks, however, elicited an interventive potential of our research (Vikkelsø 2007). Our supposedly neutral positioning as researchers was challenged following our fieldwork activities at *Moabit hilft* in Berlin, when the network members publicly positioned us as people promoting humanism. They did so by posting a picture on Facebook of a thank-you card that we left after our research stay there.

The accompanying caption was directed at us and other people that choose *Moabit hilft* as a place for research or internships:

We are very happy that you show so much interest and engagement and are involved in the name of humanism. [...] Never stop standing up for humanity. (Facebook, Moabit hilft, 03.04.2017)

This points to several aspects of the interventive potential of our research presence. Firstly, the public and positive proclaiming of our presence as researchers can be read as positioning their work as significant and legitimate. Secondly, it communicates an expectation of us and the use of the material we produced, namely to act in the name of humanism. It also alludes to the fact that *Moabit hilft* has been a subject of research before and that researchers have been assigned a role in the networks not as mere observers but as fellow fighters. This instance underlined the importance of reflecting on the expectations and aspirations we conveyed as well as those that were projected onto us by volunteers and refugees. With regards to our analysis, the way that our work was portrayed and mobilised by the volunteers offered further insight to understanding their motives and rationales that we were trying to grasp.

Volunteering for Refugees as Bottom-up Activism

Welcome culture rose in a time marked by a disunited Europe, both on a political level and in civil society. During and following 2015, borders were reinforced geographically, politically, as well as in civil society throughout Europe. In our research, we found that our informants were, to a high degree, aware of and affected by the global issues that manifested themselves during the arrival of refugees to Europe. We found that what motivated our informants both in Berlin and Copenhagen to volunteer were socio-political developments unfolding around 2015 as well as a general political mistrust.

Many of our informants disagreed with how their respective governments made it increasingly difficult for refugees to come and stay in Europe. They often mentioned specific political situations and public figures that they disagreed with as a trigger to volunteer. Some of our German informants, for example, referred to Thomas de Maizière, Interior Minister at the time, who was pursuing strict regulations on deportation, particularly of Afghan refugees (Tagesspiegel 2016). Gerta,² a 67-year-old retired teacher and volunteer at *Wedding hilft* told us, 'I really see this as my personal fight against de Maizière (laughs), that I really do everything I can to save as many people as possible from deportation' (INT14). In Denmark, many of our informants mentioned Inger Støjberg, the former Danish Minister of Integration, who adopted increasingly restrictive measures and launched campaigns discouraging refugees to choose Denmark as their country of refuge (Politiken 2015). Ina, a volunteer at *Solbjerggruppen* explained the connection between her volunteering and Inger Støjberg's politics as follows: 'This is an act of defiance. Every time I read something about Inger Støjberg I am thinking: "This should not be the impression that refugees get and what is going to be part of the history books!"' (INT1).

The societal mood around 2015 was also named as a motivation by our informants to act. This manifested in two different ways. One was a positive societal mood that attracted volunteers who wanted to participate in welcoming and helping refugees, such as Julia from *Wedding hilft* who explained to us 'how euphoric everything was back then [in 2015]' and that she 'want[ed] to be part of this movement, of this positive feeling' (INT9). The second

² We changed the names of our informants to keep them anonymous.

was a negative societal mood, made up of xenophobic, anti-refugee voices that they felt the need to take a stance against. Ina explained her perception of the situation as follows: 'In connection to the refugee crisis I needed to make up my mind – Whose team are you on – of those that help or those that find it horrible or those that just sit back?' (INT1). Both refugee politics and the societal mood concerning migration took up a lot of space in the media at the time. Many of our informants wanted to volunteer as a reaction to stories disseminated by the media, such as a picture of a Danish man spitting on refugees walking on the highway (Information 2015), that according to Birte from *Solbjerggruppen* 'started something in [her] mind' that made her think 'I cannot have this [the situation] on me as a Dane. I had to do something myself' (INT5). In Berlin, pictures of the many refugees waiting in front of the *Landesamt für Gesundheit und Soziales* (LAGeSo), the institution that was responsible for registering refugees in Berlin at the time, were named as similar triggers by some of our informants (Berliner Zeitung 2015).

In short, what motivated our informants to start volunteering seemed to derive from their perception of inhumane treatment of refugees by both politicians and the anti-refugee discourse and sentiments from the civic right-wing movement. The degree of personal and political commitment and opinions, however, differed. Moreover, our research indicates that our informants' actions were more than a reaction to the refugee situation. In many cases, they reflect a general negative attitude towards and mistrust of the political establishment and citizens within right-wing civil society. This was exemplified by Peter, a 34-year-old IT employee who volunteered at Copenhagen's *Venligbohus*:

[...] there is one party that is like "Whoa, you can do whatever you want, as long as we get to decide that you don't like immigrants". You know that's DF [Dansk Folkeparti – a national-conservative, anti-immigration party]. So the government [consisting of liberal and conservative parties] is basically saying "[...]Yes sure, as long as we get to decide the rest of the politics". And that is usually what they do (INT6).

This quote demonstrates how Peter believes that the Danish government was giving the nationalist right-wing party too much influence on refugee politics in their pursuit of extending their own political power. Similarly, Mark, a 22-year-old student of International Relations from the Berlin initiative *Moabit hilft*, expressed his frustration towards the German government: 'The government doesn't really give a fuck about it [the housing of refugees]' (INT12).

Their mistrust and dissatisfaction with the political establishment were also reflected in how several of our informants connected the situation to World War II. For our German informants, references to WWII often invoked a fear of the past repeating itself. For our Danish informants, WWII was a historical reference with respect to a concern regarding the reputation of Danes as people who help other people in need. Thus, the historical references of both German and Danish informants were rooted in a common concern of what will be told in the future about this point in history and what 'we' did or did not do.

Because of generally negative attitudes towards the political establishment and a wish to avoid conflicts caused by diverging political beliefs, the volunteer networks shared a strategy of avoiding party politics. All of the networks had a direct or indirect rule of not talking about politics, something that Tim, a 42-year-old hairstylist and *Venligbohus* volunteer, stressed:

I think we are political in some way. But we are not a party political organisation [...]. We deal with it by having some guidelines – we don't like to call them rules – that we do not talk about politics. Because the thing we have in common is that we think that people who are new to Denmark need to have a warm welcome and you can do that, even though you vote for Dansk Folkeparti (INT7).

The quote from Tim underlines a tendency to avoid affiliating with political parties in the networks. This aligns with our informants' perception that their volunteer work is different from what they consider common political participation within representative democracy, such as voting, going to demonstrations, or signing petitions. Ina, a linguistics teacher in her mid-30s from *Solbjerggruppen* stressed that

One might change more regulations by demonstrating, but if we want people to like Denmark and to like living here, then I think it is more important for the individual refugee that they are met by people, who would like to talk to them. That is better than demonstrating, which can be quite hollow (INT1).

Similarly, Nina, a 23-year-old student from *Moabit hilft* explained how she did not perceive her helping out in the donation bank as political work, but rather as '[giving] at least something to the people' (INT11). If she was to do something political, she would 'engage on a different level' (INT11), such as being part of demonstrations or other activities that she considers as empowering people.

Thus, our informants have a range of different perceptions of what 'being political' means, many of which are linked to formal political action and party politics, that they do not consider sufficient in the given situation. Their activities in the networks they view as disconnected from traditional political actions and thus somehow apolitical. The phenomenon that volunteers do not perceive their work as politically engaged work is discussed in the research of anthropologist Larissa Fleischmann and sociologist Elias Steinhilper (2017). They argue that many volunteers in welcome initiatives embed their actions in humanitarian logics and with an apolitical self-representation. Because being political often is understood as positioning oneself on the political spectrum of left to right, volunteers claiming to be 'apolitical' characterise themselves as 'neutral' individuals and distance their work from political action (Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017: 20). Furthermore, Fleischmann and Steinhilper argue that the increased number of volunteers looking to help refugees brought with it a growing myth of apolitical volunteering that hides the volunteers' active role in contributing to a bigger political system by giving refugees access to society through their activities (Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017: 18–22). Likewise, we suggest a reading of our informants' volunteering as a form of activism. Although they do not link their activities in the networks to political work, their actions do support the process of settling and stabilizing the lives of refugees and can therefore be perceived as pro-refugee political acts.

In addition, according to the networks' self-understanding as explained to us by the volunteers, they also saw their aim to be open to all who wanted to help as further evidence of their apolitical nature. Yet, at the same time, our informants wanted to make a clear distinction between themselves and the political establishment, as they did not want to be associated with 'people in power'—those who our informants believe are failing to meet their responsibilities. Taking into consideration the fact that volunteers' motivations are rooted in socio-political dissatisfaction, we argue that their activities represent means of bottom-up activism.

Performing Citizenship from Below

'We have to find another solution. Our politicians are not doing it well enough' (INT5). Birte, a 60-year-old retired administrative employee who volunteered at *Solbjerggruppen*, located in the Frederiksberg area of Copenhagen, told us. She is particularly involved in the daily routines concerning the donation bank *Solbjerg Lageret*, which is located in an old building rented by Frederiksberg Municipality. There, she is engaged in receiving, organising, and redistributing donations for refugees, such as clothing and furniture. She made the statement

while explaining how volunteering is her way of transforming her general frustration with the political establishment into actions and 'solutions' in her life and her local community.

The grassroots networks had certain structural features that offered volunteers such as Birthe a way to support refugees with their existing abilities and resources and thus a platform to develop their own 'solutions' for the socio-political situation. They had an informal and fluid structure characterised by the following aspects: the practical nature of the volunteering activities, immediate gratification, easy accessibility, flexibility in regards to jobs and the amount of devoted time, a flat hierarchy amongst network members, and independence from political or economic agendas (Kirchner & Steen Bygballe 2017). Peter from *Venligbohus* explains this approach of trying to find 'solutions' through activities with the following words:

It's a marketplace of ideas. If someone says, "Well I want to start a club where you can learn how to draw" you know "Yeah, sure, do that." Someone did gymnastics, or you know, photo tours through the city or a nerdy club, like we are trying to make (laughs). It's not like planned from the top [...]. [I]t means that people can contribute with how little or much they can or want to contribute with (INT6).

As Peter articulates, these networks function as 'marketplaces of ideas' on a trial-and-error basis. Some ideas introduced by the volunteers are never realised or are only temporary. This might be due to volunteers who end their engagement or the fact that some activities do not meet the needs or wishes of network members. The activities may also be short-lived due to fewer refugees arriving and their relocation to other areas, resulting in fewer refugees participating in the activities. However, other 'solutions' from the marketplace persist and develop into more or less stable activities in the networks.

At the time of our research, one of the activities that persisted over time were donation banks. In 2015, temporary donation banks were formed in places such as railway stations, gym halls, and refugee shelters to accommodate refugees' need for basic necessities. This kind of emergency assistance was how many grassroots networks started, such as *Moabit hilft* in Berlin. The group originated as a donation bank when the LAGeSo offered a place called *Haus D* to the group to store and distribute donations to the many refugees waiting for registration in the area. Our informants described the situation at *Moabit hilft* as well as at other donation banks during 2015 as chaotic due to high demand from arriving refugees and the large number of donations from locals. At the time of our research in 2017, the donation banks had developed into stable and well-organised parts of the networks. Across the grassroots networks that we studied, the redistribution of goods among refugees through donation banks was one of the main activities.

In the donation banks of *Moabit hilft* and *Solbjerggruppen*, volunteers were comprised of both local citizens and refugees. The donation bank was popular amongst volunteers, as the tasks were easy and did not require specific qualifications or political beliefs. Lise, a 63-year-old retired employee of an IT company and volunteer for *Solbjerg Lageret*, described her volunteer work as follows:

You receive a box of donations, you organise it, refugees come and immediately have a material addition to their lives that hopefully makes it a little more comfortable. I do it with joy – it makes so much sense to me (INT5).

In line with Lise's statement, the practical aspects of giving refugees the supplies they need and the gratification of seeing results right away were widespread reasons for taking part in this kind of volunteer work in both cities.

Anthropologist Julia Eckert calls practical, unorganised collective actions *practice movements*. She describes practice movements as the expression of goals through practices rather than words, thus positioning them as central sites of politics in which issues of access and (re)distribution are negotiated (Eckert 2015: 567–568). Through these practices, the aspirations of actors for social and political change emerge (Eckert 2015: 570). This way of framing political claims as practices is akin to Isin's conceptualisation of acts of citizenship, which he argues, transform 'new actors as activist citizens [...]' (Isin 2008: 39). In line with this, providing refugees with winter jackets, bed sheets, kitchen gear, and furniture are practical activities that can be understood as supporting the process of refugees settling and establishing more or less temporary homes and thereby claiming rights on behalf of the refugees.

However, other parts of civil society confront and challenge the networks with their differing beliefs and approaches to global migration. Volunteers from Berlin told us several stories about how they have had trouble from the extreme right-wing movement. At *Haus D*, for example, all donors have to empty their donation bags personally in front of the volunteers when arriving with donations. Haus D began this protocol after they had received bags of clothing that contained hidden shards of broken glass (PO19). The bag-emptying routine underlines how their activities are challenged by those with opposing beliefs, who use adverse acts to reinforce who they think does and does not belong in the local community. With respect to actions of the extreme right-wing movement, we understand these in line with Rumford's argument that borderwork can be seen as 'everyday fear', related to the perception that globalisation is responsible for an increase in insecurity and risk (Rumford 2008: 6–7). The borderwork of the extreme right-wing movement can then be understood as working towards a more gated community and sense of security, that they feel cannot be guaranteed by the nation-state (Rumford 2008). The volunteers, however, adapt to this kind of borderwork by finding new ways to deal with adversity in their everyday practices. This was more salient in Berlin than in Copenhagen, where our informants did not experience the same direct aggression from people motivated by nationalist sentiments.

The Act of Volunteering as Reorganizing the Figure of Citizenship in a Northern European Context

While doing fieldwork in the donation banks, we experienced that other than collecting and distributing items, the activities to a high extent also function as platforms for social interaction between volunteers and refugees. When practicing languages, while folding clothes, sharing food, or drinking coffee, relationships are established and developed.

In *Solbjerg Lageret*, there are many activities throughout the week that involve picking up and delivering furniture, refrigerators, and other large items that people are not able to transport themselves. The volunteer Lise describes one of these situations:

There were a lot of things to be driven out to many different people, in and out from the donation bank, in and out between people. On purpose, I put together a team [of refugees] so that 5 different nationalities came in contact with each other. It was so nice to get them talking with each other and get them to help some Syrian refugees, who are normally in the bottom of the hierarchy. It was just magical. These young guys sat there [in the car] and told stories in their broken Danish and were laughing. It is something like this that can get me all high (INT5).

The anecdote from Lise underlines how the donation bank created a platform for social interaction. According to Lise, the activities in the donation bank gave way to an interaction of people that would usually be hindered by language and embodied borders based on

national belonging. Through the act of volunteering, both Lise and the refugee volunteers were active in performing a social sphere, in which legal status, nationalities, and language did not exclude them from one another. Instead they performed a version of citizenship that creates patterns of emancipation across and in spite of nationalities.

In addition to this common ground of shared activities, we identified another instance that we consider representing a wish by our informants to reframe roles and that we therefore understand as an act of volunteering. We experienced that the network members use categorizations beyond 'volunteers' and 'refugees' to refer to each other. Anthropologist Andrea Behrends explores the use and effects of categorizations in her work on UNHCR's efforts to integrate Sudanese refugees from a refugee camp in Chad into the Chadian borderlands. She writes

Categorizing can have the effect of changing a sense of belonging, limiting the range of possible actions and access to services, or for that matter the experience of reality. But it also opens up new senses of self and makes room for creative adaptations, particularly in situations of displacement [...] (Behrends 2018: 3).

Building on Stefan Hirschauer's (2014) analysis on un/doing differences, Behrends thereby argues that by foregrounding certain categories and backgrounding others, differences are done and undone (Behrends 2018). In line with this, we suggest that the ascription of categories in the networks can be understood as attempts to (un)do differences installed by socio-political and media frameworks and thus to negotiate access to rights and services for the refugees.

One example of the recategorization of roles is how Ella, a volunteer at *Venligbohus* at the time, explains her role in the network:

I am not seeing myself as a host helping refugees. I see myself as a human being, who has more friends now. I have more friends now. I have a family now, I have a place where I can always go (S1).

Like Ella, many of the volunteers we talked to framed their relationships with other network members as familial ones, referring to each other as (grand-)mothers, (grand-)fathers, brothers, and sisters and so forth. As Ella's quote implies, she was in need of a(nother) family and (more) friends, and *Venligbohus* provided a way to build these relationships. Like Ella, some of our other informants described the networks as fulfilling certain social needs. This in turn blurs the distinction between the refugee and the volunteer—between the idea of who is in need of help and who is providing help—that the dominant socio-political discourse perpetuates. Other categorizations used in the networks included the categorization of both refugees and locals as 'volunteers' and the framing of all network members as 'neighbours'. This foregrounding of a commonality, with disregard to their socio-political positioning when first joining the networks, can be seen as an attempt to undo differences. Through these alternative frames of reference, however, other dynamics and latent power relations come into play. This can be hierarchies and power relations that result from new categories, which bring along certain cultural and social expectations as to how to play out those positions and roles. Thus, the (new) framing of volunteers has to be considered with a critical eye. However, in the context of exploring the volunteers' motivations and rationales behind their acts of volunteering, we argue that by reframing and enacting these relationships, network members are negotiating belonging and access to the networks as well as to larger society.

By using the examples of donation banks, we presented an analysis of how, through mundane practices, volunteers perform a version of citizenship. We have argued that their acts

of volunteering support refugees in getting settled and include them socially in a community. This poses additional questions of whose citizenship the volunteers enact and what it implies. Although they are claiming rights for refugees through the everyday activities in the networks, it is to a large extent also their own citizenship that they are enacting and affecting in this process. Their practices reflect a transborder orientation and show identification with a more global framework. Following Isin's argument that citizens and non-citizens do not exist as pre-social and settled entities, we argue that these acts of volunteering question and negotiate the notion of national citizenship for the volunteers themselves and their co-citizens (Isin 2008: 37). Through acts of volunteering in the donation banks, our informants partake in reorganizing the borders of who should be considered neighbours, friends, family, as well as co-citizens. However, this argument also points to a discussion of what kind of *acts* qualify as acts of volunteering and raises questions of what kind of agency needs to be behind such actions. Following the arguments put forward in this article, actions can be perceived as acts of volunteering when they are carried out by people in the framework of the grassroots networks and the underlying welcome culture. Yet, the intentionality behind the action can be more or less conscious and might alter with time. In this regard, and with respect to acts of citizenship, Isin writes

Although acts of citizenship involve decisions, those decisions cannot be reduced to calculability, intentionality and responsibility.[...] Acts of citizenship do not need to originate in the name of anything (2009: 381).

For some of our informants, such as Ella, the motivation for engaging in the networks was to build relations. Nevertheless, our informants are still part of ensuring that the activities in the networks continue and thereby provide refugees with a space where they are welcomed and supported. Therefore the volunteers' activities take place on a platform that negotiates the place and standing of refugees in society as local responses to global challenges. This corresponds with how Rumford emphasizes the importance of thinking civil society in regards to 'globalisation from below' and that borderwork can be seen as an expression of 'people power' in civil society, with the possibility of playing a significant role in global politics (Rumford 2008: 7).

Our analysis has discussed that through the donation banks, the volunteers do not only help refugees get settled through practical and material support, but they also create platforms where people meet, socialise, build relationships, and rearrange roles. Considering these activities as acts of volunteering gives further insights as to what claims and aspirations underlie the local engagement of the volunteers. In this regard, the analysis shows how changing the focus from 'who is the citizen' to unfolding the many practices of 'what makes the citizen' illuminates the process of borderwork, where a kind of citizenship is performed that transcends national borders (Isin 2009: 383).

Conclusion

This article has centred its analysis around the helping hands in Berlin and Copenhagen that acted in the context of an EU migration crisis. The volunteers we met acted in reaction to the socio-political developments at the time and to support refugees. They expressed their dissatisfaction with how the government managed an influx of people in search of refuge and, as this article suggests, through their everyday activities, performed alternative ways to amend the situation in their local contexts. Their *local engagement* thereby represents a hands-on, everyday response to *global challenges* related to migration in Europe during the long summer of migration of 2015. More precisely, we conceptualised the activities in the networks as acts of volunteering and thereby argued that the volunteers, through bottom-up activism,

are enacting a citizenship across borders. The context-specific notion of acts of volunteering is used as a frame to discuss the actions of the helping hands as a form of negotiation of who should be included in (their) society and be granted rights and resources beyond legal definitions of citizenry. This negotiation takes the shape of various everyday, accessible activities ranging from folding clothes to sharing a cup of coffee. In this context, the concept of acts of volunteering provides an analytical lens that allows for unpacking these processes across and in spite of (Northern) European borders. The grassroots networks emerged to us as platforms for testing out ways to engage in specific socio-political contexts through trial and error. Activities in the networks are initiated based on demand and the abilities and availability of both volunteers and refugees. If they persist depends on those same factors.

This article has shown that these new areas to work with represent instances of everyday grassroots activism that can be understood as attempts to contribute to the re-making of the dominant understanding of citizenship. This is a long process taking place through everyday activities where volunteers enact and transform themselves and others into citizens by articulating claims for ever-changing and expanding rights (Isin 2009: 368). In this context, all network members—local citizens as well as refugees—partake in this process of rearranging borders. In their local contexts, volunteers build communities that counteract or expand notions of the citizen as put forward by the nation-state. However, as we have shown, notions of citizenship in the networks are also contested by rivalling notions from other parts of society that work to reinforce existing national borders.

At the time of writing, all four volunteer networks that our research focused on are still active. However, most of them have undergone processes of change. Some of the activities we partook in and witnessed still remain, while others have been suspended, such as *Solbjerg Lageret*. Some networks have changed location, either out of necessity or choice. Some have become more professional (e.g., with paid employees working alongside volunteers). The networks' activities are constantly changing to meet current and future demands. Following the analysis of this article, the grassroots networks for refugees can be seen as one on-the-ground manifestation of re-conceptualising Europe and the notion of the European citizen. The grassroots networks, thus, remain a recent phenomenon that requires further investigation in order to understand their development with respect to the changing geopolitical situation in the EU, in EU member states, as well as in the countries from which many people have had to flee.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Author Contribution

The article was co-authored by Lydia Kirchner and Line Bygballe Jensen.

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Interviews

- INT1 Ina, 35 years, *Solbjerggruppen*, Copenhagen. 14.03.2017.
- INT5 Birte, 60 years & Lise, 63 years, *Solbjerggruppen*, Frederiksberg. 06.04.2017.
- INT6 Peter, 34 years, *Venligbohus*, Copenhagen. 07.04.2017.
- INT7 Tim, 42 years, *Venligbohus*, Copenhagen. 17.04.2017.
- INT9 Julia, 21 years, *Wedding hilft*, Skype. 28.02.2017.
- INT11 Nina, 23 years, volunteer at *Moabit hilft*, Berlin. 29.03.2017.
- INT12 Mark, 22 years, volunteer at *Moabit hilft*, Berlin. 29.03.2017.
- INT14 Gerta, 67 years & Max, 50+ years, volunteers at *Wedding hilft*, Berlin. 31.03.2017.
- Interviews were carried out by the authors. Interviews in Danish or German were translated into English.

Participant observations

- PO19 *Moabit hilft*, Haus D. 29.03.2017.

Seminar

- S1 Helping Hands Kick Off Seminar, University of Copenhagen. 31.05.2017.

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