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11

‘Only Volunteers’? Personal Motivations and Political Ambiguities Within the *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* Civil Initiative

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Introduction

In 2015, Sweden's asylum, reception and integration services faced an unprecedented challenge when it received more than 160,000 applications from asylum seekers (Fratzke 2017). Moreover, more than two-thirds of all asylum seekers who came to Sweden that year arrived in the last four months of the year. The majority arrived at Malmö Central train station (hereafter 'Malmö C') via the Öresund bridge which provides both train and vehicle connections to Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark.

Before the City of Malmö and the Swedish Migration Agency established their presence at Malmö C as the first point of the asylum seekers' arrival in Sweden, civil society (Spurk 2010) had stepped in. During the first six weeks of the time period when most of the refugees arrived (September–mid October), volunteers got together to manage the situation, which was overwhelming in both practical and emotional terms. Between 7 September (when *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* was first initiated as a public Facebook group called *We Who Help the Refugees at Malmö C*) and 12 November 2015 (when checkpoints at the Swedish border with Denmark were set), approximately 800 volunteers met up to 1000 refugees a day under the banner of *Refugees Welcome to Malmö*.

The volunteers organized the continuous provision of donated aid at the first point of entry in Sweden to people who needed warm clothes and refreshments, sanitary pads, diapers and toys, information and practical guidance, money for their continued journey or shelter for the night. *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* volunteers also sorted large quantities of donated clothes and transported them to the 'free shop' in the *Bike and Ride* cellar near Malmö C from which the refugees could get what they acutely needed.

In March 2016, *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* received a 'Grassroots Organization of the Year' award with the following motivation:

Because you have worked tirelessly and with passionate commitment for the people searching refuge who came to Malmö and Sweden. With help from your volunteers,

you managed to engage many people in a short time and showed a genuine grassroots engagement as well as providing emergency help to people in times of urgency. *Refugees Welcome* has, together with the whole asylum rights movement, shown that love is the greatest and that the heart does not contain any borders. (Svensson 2016)¹

The ‘Grassroots Organization of the Year’ is one of the five categories of The Opinion-builder of the Year awards given out since 2015 by the independent media firm, Dagens Opinion, and the campaign office, Reform Act. The awards are based on citizens’ nominations (Dagens Opinion 2016).

The engagement of the *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* volunteers with people in need was not only hailed by the general public but also publicly recognized by politicians. At a press conference held in October 2015 by the Swedish Minister of Migration (*Justitie- och migrationsminister*) and the Director General of the Swedish Migration Agency (*Migrationsverket*), it was stated that ‘if the volunteers did not exist, everything would have crashed a long time ago’ (Rydhsagen 2015).

Just a few weeks earlier, on 13 September 2015 (a few days before the official founding of *Refugees Welcome to Malmö*), thousands of people gathered on the main square in Malmö ‘to welcome newly arrived refugees and to stand up for a humane refugee policy’ (Radio Sweden 2015). Drawing inspiration from the *Refugees Welcome* movement in Germany, France and Austria, it was the third large-scale demonstration organized to express solidarity with the refugees in Sweden, following those in Gothenburg and Stockholm that were organized a few days earlier (Radio Sweden 2015).

A ‘walking demonstration’ took place after the demonstration, and an open letter was sent to the Swedish government and the Swedish Migration Agency (*Öppet brev* 2015), which stated:

To welcome someone with words while creating deadly premises for coming here is nothing other than the deepest hypocrisy. Some talk about the refugee crisis, while this is actually a politicians’ crisis, with devastating consequences for the people on the run. (...) What we did together is to mitigate the consequences of this politicians’ crisis. (...) Hundreds, maybe thousands, of volunteers and individual Malmö residents have been

engaged with that. It is us who have so far solved the problem when the authorities and the politicians misjudged the contingency needs. It is us – Malmö residents – who have shown, both to the refugees and to ourselves, that we can and will take care of one another. We have been organizing for a solidary Malmö for a long time, and that makes possible the machinery of solidarity that is needed in order to mitigate the crisis created by the politicians.

On the Facebook page announcing the event, prospective participants were not only urged to ‘show true solidarity through action’ but also to ‘make demands’ because ‘civil society should not need to pick up after [deal with the consequences of] the wrong political priorities’ (<https://www.facebook.com/events/815945578526697/>).

Based on interviews with *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* volunteers, this chapter explores the tension between their aforementioned passionate commitment and their perception of their role in relation to Swedish politics and the authorities’ responsibilities.

To understand this tension, the volunteers’ motivations, experiences and ambiguities are analyzed against the background of a specific historical, organizational, and local (city) context in which this grassroots initiative emerged. This context is described in this section following a brief note on our current data and former research. The subsequent two sections discuss the actors’ motivations and perceptions of their work as well as collaborations and conflicts with other actors present in the field. This includes the state actors that were perceived as being dismissive towards people who were ‘only volunteers’ to be replaced by officials and professionals. The concluding sections involve the analysis of the volunteers’ positions towards the politicization of a civil initiative and identify the need for city context-sensitive research on the changing constellations of actors who provide support to refugees.

Data and Method

The narrative material analyzed in this chapter is based on in-depth interviews conducted with seven women and three men who helped the asylum seekers at Malmö C between September and

November 2015. The interviews were conducted in Swedish by the second author in early 2016. The interviewees' details are presented in Table 11.1 (i.e. their age, profession, higher education, foreign background and length of time of living in Malmö) and Table 11.2 (i.e. their former experience of volunteering, membership in or financial support of organizations, and political orientation). For details on access to and choice of participants, see Mäkelä (2016).²

As presented in Table 11.1, three interviewees moved to Sweden from other countries, while two have a parent from another country (although none have a refugee background). What most of them have in common is university-level education, although in a range of different disciplines.

Table 11.1 Interviewees by age, profession, higher education, foreign background and time of living in Malmö

Alias ^a	Age	Occupation	University education	Foreign background	Time living in Malmö
Alexandra	31	Violinist	Yes	No	Entire life
Andreas	31	Nurse	Yes	Yes, Thai mother	1 year. 9 years in Lund
Antoinette	54	Translator	Yes	Yes, from Germany	4 years
Emma	22	Student	No	No	1.5 years
Ewa	47	Secondary teacher	Yes	No	Another place in the region
Lasse	62	Sports consultant	Yes	No	11 years
Maya	25	Treatment assistant	Yes	Yes, Spanish father	3.5 years
Mesere	38	Assistant nurse	No	Yes, from Macedonia	12-15 years
Petruska	57	Project leader	Yes	No	Entire life
Steve	68	Retired	Some courses	Yes, from USA	30 years

^aThe names used in this study were chosen by the participants; some are their real names

Source Mäkelä (2016)

As shown in Table 11.2, the majority of the interviewees have former experience with some kind

of voluntary work, although the fields and the length of engagement vary. For three interviewees, their work with *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* was their first experience of volunteering, although two of them have been members of or financially supported certain humanitarian organizations.³ They vote for a range of Swedish political parties.

Table 11.2 Interviewees by former experience of volunteering, membership in or financially support of organizations, political orientation (how they voted in Swedish parliamentary elections in 2014)

Alias ^a	Previous experience of voluntary work	Membership in organizations	Swedish general election 2014
Alexandra	In gaming associations	Gaming associations, <i>Refugees Welcome to Malmö</i>	The Green Party
Andreas	Within the church and the Red Cross	Doctors Without Borders, Red Cross	Social Democratic Party
Antoinette Emma	None	None	No right to vote
	On Lesbos in 2015, student associations	Red Cross, <i>Refugees Welcome to Malmö</i>	The Moderate Party
Ewa	None	Red Cross, Amnesty, Doctors Without Borders	The Feminist Initiative
Lasse	Several decades in sports organizations	Nature Conservation, Red Cross	The Green Party
Maya	None	Doctors Without Borders	The Left Party
Mesere	In Sisters for Sisters	Sisters for Sisters, <i>Refugees Welcome to Malmö</i>	Blank
Petruska	Parents' cooperatives, different boards	Greenpeace, Save the Children, project organizations	The Liberal Party
Steve	Mostly activism	The Left Party, HBTQ rights associations, Amnesty	The Left Party

^aThe names used in this study were chosen by the participants; some are their real names

Source Mäkelä (2016)

In line with the scholarship focused on the motivations for volunteering (Aydinli et al. 2016;

Aydinli-Karakulak et al. 2015; Bode 2017; Fleischer 2011; Otoo and Amuquandoh 2014; Rochester et al. 2012), studies of *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* address not only motivation (Mäkelä 2016; Rescala 2016) but also issues of mobilization (Grenholm 2016), performance and competition (Ghita 2016) as well as the tension between the volunteers' compassion and perceived own privilege (Mårs 2016). The material on volunteering in Malmö in autumn 2015 that was collected for the *Refugee Documentation Project* (Nikolić 2017) will allow for a variety of uses and scholarly analyses in the future.

The Context of Emergence of *Refugees Welcome to Malmö*

The Unprecedented Numbers

In 2015, Sweden had the highest number of asylum seekers *per capita* in the European Union, second only to Germany in absolute numbers, although first in terms of the number of people arriving from Syria (Tanner 2016). Approximately 12,000 people applied for asylum in Sweden on August 2015; around 24,000 in September; 39,000 in October; and 37,000 in November.

The media reported that 1500 newly arrived people asked for asylum in Sweden every day in October 2015, but the actual number of arrivals was estimated to be closer to 2000 per day (Nya siffran 2015). On 20 October, the Swedish Civil Contingency Agency (MSB) warned that the reception system in several municipalities was overburdened (Rosén and Olsson 2017). On 4 November, Sweden demanded to the EU Commission that the refugee reception be shared within the EU. On 21 November, the Swedish government introduced checkpoints at the Swedish border with Denmark. By that time, Sweden had received 163,000 applications for asylum (Fratzke 2017).

The overwhelmingly large number of arrivals in autumn 2015 could not be adequately handled by the Migration Agency, and many of its services were already facing capacity problems, such as reception accommodation and child services. In such a context, the civil society's help was indispensable.

Organization

The *We Who Help the Refugees at Malmö C* Facebook group was initiated by Mesere Zulfi Mustafa, a 38-year-old assistant nurse of Macedonian origin and no personal experience of war. She stated in a 2015 newspaper interview that ‘For us, it goes without saying that we should be here and help people who are fleeing. There are streams of people who want to help, give things away or pay for a train ticket and other things’ (Davidson 2015; see also Sjögren 2016).

In the interview conducted by the second author of this chapter, Mesere explains that the Facebook group was soon renamed *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* because that name was easier to find on Facebook and she thought ‘it sounded nice.’ The *Refugees Welcome* logo was accessible online and free to use. People became very active in the Facebook group, but Mesere did not have time for the 24/7 communication that was needed to keep things going. Therefore, she put the most active individuals into a chat group and suggested that they ‘steer up everything.’ Alexandra, a 31-year-old violinist, was one of those who found herself in that chat group and thus became part of what is later referred to as ‘the leadership.’ She said that the public mistakenly

saw the organization as much more organized than it was [laughing]. It [was], like, many presupposed that we were an international network [associated] with the other *Refugees Welcome* [organizations]. [They] thought that we had employees, that we were like the Red Cross.

The establishment of the leadership was not carefully considered but based on certain individuals’ (online) engagement at a particular moment (see Kaun and Uldam 2017). A week later, they registered *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* as a non-profit association in order to become a juridical entity with a bank account, which was needed for monetary donations.⁴ However, they did not have any communication or cooperation with other independent *Refugees Welcome* initiatives in Sweden, for example those in Gothenburg or Stockholm. They were only in contact with *Refugees Welcome to Flensburg* to get an estimate of the number of refugees who were on their way to Sweden from Germany.

Even if *Refugees Welcome* initiatives in different countries share a number of traits (Togral Koca 2016; Pries, this volume), the volunteers' involvement in *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the city. More specifically, Malmö is widely recognized as both a city of immigration and activism (Hansen 2018).

Malmö as an Activist City

With a population of more than 330,000, Malmö is Sweden's third largest city and is steadily growing (Malmö stad 2016). The inhabitants are relatively young (the average age is 38.5 years) and well-educated (48% of those between 25 and 64 years of age have tertiary education). Malmö is also 'an immigrant city,' with inhabitants who originate from 178 countries. Of Malmö's inhabitants, 32% were born abroad and 12% have parents who were born in other countries.

The city is characterized by the presence of a strong and prominently leftist civil society (Povrzanović Frykman 2016). Within Sweden, it is outstanding as a place of spontaneous civic action against racism, fascism and social inequality and for solidarity, justice and equal rights (Hansen 2018). For example, in March 2013, a large demonstration was organized in protest of the police operation REVA (Rule of Law and Effective Work Enforcement), directed towards locating undocumented migrants. In March 2014, ten thousand people demonstrated against fascism in conjunction with a then recent violent attack on four leftist activists by ultra-right party members. In early 2015, a dozen Pegida demonstrators were met by approximately five thousand counter-demonstrators, showing that Malmö is a city open to everyone, notwithstanding race, ethnicity or religion (Schau 2015).

The intensity of action and devotion which characterizes *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* was, therefore, not a surprise. Mesere voiced an understanding shared by other interviewees that if the same numbers of refugees were arriving to any other place in Sweden, 'everything would collapse.' 'Malmö is Malmö,' she said, contrasting the strengths of the local civil society in relation to the authorities:

I think that we have shown then, that we don't need the authorities. It is, like, the civil society that rules Malmö [laughs]. We are Malmö, not the authorities [laughs]! We didn't need the authorities. We didn't ask for them. We were there and fixed everything, like – no problem [laughs].

'We' in the quote above refers to all volunteers who helped the refugees in Malmö in autumn 2015. The notion of volunteers is used in this chapter as an umbrella term for anyone who engaged in volunteer work (also for those who 'did not even see themselves as volunteers, but just as fellow human beings'; Rescala 2016, p. 5). However, a city-specific issue important to address is the differentiation between ordinary people who volunteered and Malmö activists, where 'activism' denotes leftist political engagement. Doing fieldwork with the volunteers in Malmö in 2015, Rescala met people 'who identified themselves as either *activists* and *volunteers* or just volunteers. Activists tended to be more politically involved than the people who just identified as volunteers' (2016, p. 5).

A succinct yet evocative statement was made by the member of *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* leadership, Petruska, who depicted herself as 'a bit lonely at times,' as she is a middle-aged woman with extensive experience of project organization and official contacts while many of the volunteers around her were 'very young, very angry, very leftist, very anti-everything.'

Motivations and Perceptions of Engagement

Several interviewees stated that they 'simply had to do something' for the refugees; they 'simply wanted to help.' They were motivated by compassion with people in dire need of help. They stressed the simplicity of joining *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* as crucial for them to cross the threshold from donating to volunteering. Their desire to help was channeled into a concrete possibility to take immediate action, as joining this particular civil initiative did not require any training or experience.

Lasse, a 62-year-old consultant, mentioned that the volunteering location was 'just 20 min away'

from his home. When he first came to donate some clothes, he was asked to consider becoming a volunteer:

There was a possibility to sign up directly—come down and help [clicking sound]. And tomorrow, I am there (...) I come down there and I help for three hours, so I have made a concrete contribution. I don't attend any meeting where I say what someone else should be doing or what we should be doing and so on, but [rather] I go down, and after three hours' work, I have helped people who needed me.

Donating clothes was also Petruska's entry point into volunteering. She is 57 years old and a certified project leader. She realized that her professional experience and skills could be helpful in the organization of clothes distribution. As she mostly worked for international organizations, she felt good that she was able to contribute locally:

So, when that came up, when I suddenly saw a situation in front of me, where one really needed the competences I have in my professional role as project leader, I felt it was like coming to a set table where I could be very useful. (...) There is a great joy, and actually, pleasure, in being allowed to help and to see that one contributes to an immediate benefit.

Steve is 68 and retired, yet very active on social media. He presents himself as an 'Internet Twitter warrior,' since he engages in social media activism concerning gender equality, LGBTQI+ rights, and the occupation of Gaza. He, too, appreciated the directness of help he could provide:

I went down there because someone told me that I should go to the central station since they needed help. And when I went there, they said I should go down to Bike and Ride. You know, it took one week [laughs] before one came home (...). It felt very good that one could do something in reality, in real time, instead of just sitting by the internet.

Ewa, a 47-year-old high school teacher, learned about *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* via social media and approached the organizers to offer them help. 'And then,' she says with a laugh, 'I never came back from there!'

The sense of never wanting to leave Malmö C during those intense weeks with overwhelming numbers of people arriving was felt by many (Ghita 2016; Mäkelä 2016; Rescala 2016; Rydhagen

2015), and it was mentioned by all our interviewees: ‘One just couldn’t leave!’ This reflects the volunteers’ strong emotional engagement and immersion in the situation, and echoes the findings in the study of volunteers in Hungary who were ‘all preoccupied by the need to immediately and actively help refugees’ (Feischmidt and Zakariás, this volume).

The leadership’s attempts to organize the work in a more efficient manner was sometimes opposed, and many volunteers disagreed with their decision to limit the amount of time one could volunteer to nine hours per day after an increase in cases of fatigue syndrome was observed. Conflicts (addressed also in Kaun and Uldam 2017) also emerged along the perceived dividing line between the ground-level volunteers and the leadership. Alexandra remembers,

There was extremely much prestige in who was going to do the work, and who was doing it best [pause]; who was going to decide how things should work. Very much prestige (...) and a lot of bullshit.

The interviewees talked about differing perceptions of ‘pure’ or ‘true’ and ‘broadly defined’ volunteers (Cnaan et al. 1996; Ghita 2016), where the amount of time spent was central, particularly, how many hours in a row people worked at Malmö C. This confirms the relevance of Wilson’s (2000, p. 215) definition of volunteering as ‘any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or cause’ that focuses on the activity as such, without taking into considerations neither the issue of reward nor of motivation. Time devoted to volunteering, especially if it implied taking unpaid leave from work (Kelemen et al. 2017), was a central ingredient in the equation leading to the recognition of ‘true’ volunteers among those helping at Malmö C—and the related perceived hierarchies within and across the groups of volunteers.

However, the interviewees unanimously confirmed that volunteering had been an emotionally overpowering experience. Even if they ‘ate too little, trained too little, and slept too little for months,’ it was all very positive, said Petruska, who continued,

For better, for worse. Incredibly much frustration, concern, overwork, anger, and also much, much joy and togetherness. When I start talking about it, I get tears in my eyes.

It has really been truly fantastic! And I have come to know people I would never have encountered otherwise. If I only start with the volunteers I became good friends with, well [laughs], all from Malmö's most known transvestite to Malmö's strongest left-wing activists and an entire drove of retired aunties and uncles from all political camps, who gave all, really, all their energy and time to this – I think it is truly wonderful.

Even though the political climate in Sweden at the time referred to in the quote above was very different from the hostile climate in Hungary presented by Feischmidt and Zakariás (this volume), the positive feelings and emotional benefits of volunteering appear as very similar in both contexts. They included not only sending a message to the wider public, but also—as described in the quote above—emerged in the feeling of a shared experience for participants.

Cooperation and Conflicts with Other Actors

Refugees Welcome to Malmö had a prominent role in refugee reception during the six weeks before the official authorities came to handle the arrivals in autumn 2015, but several other organizations were in place at Malmö C as well. They included *Röda Korset* (Red Cross), *Frälsningsarmén* (Salvation Army) and *Stadsmissionen* (City Mission). Religious organizations were present as well, such as the *Muslimska Förbundet* (Muslim Federation), *Turkiska Moskén* (Turkish Mosque) and the *Judiska Församlingen* (Jewish Assembly), while *Johanneskyrkan* (St John's Church) participated by leaving their doors open for the refugees who needed a place to sleep. Along with these organizations and associations, smaller autonomous groups were also present at the central station.

Refugees Welcome to Malmö established local collaborations—for example, by joint advertizing for monetary donations (Davidson 2015) and by practical help from the organizations *Allt åt Alla* (Everything for Everyone) and *Kontrapunkt* (Counterpoint). As described by Steve,

It was a good mix of people, and especially during one week, there were some from the Jewish Assembly who were there with kippa, and I thought, what a wonderful thing: there are Christians and Muslims and Jews who welcome these people who are arriving, you know. And, like, that people could cooperate – people who have not always

[cooperated], [people] who usually confront one another. One could work together for this particular purpose. (...) One could see how people set aside their political ideologies, now that people are dying, and we have to help them, you know. The atmosphere was actually wonderful.

However, civil society consists of a diverse set of voluntary organizations that may compete with each other (Smith 2015), and this was the case with the groups helping the refugees at Malmö C. Alongside cooperation over religious and political boundaries, conflicts and claims of prestige lingered in the background. Different groups had the same aim and felt that they were competing with one another (Ghita 2016). However, these conflicts did not pertain to religious or political differences, but rather to practical issues concerning the ways help was provided to the refugees and to the issues of collaboration with the authorities.

There also emerged a conflict between *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* and the police, as driving the refugees in private cars between Malmö C and the places where they could stay overnight (notably to *Kontrapunkt* and *Turkiska Moskén*) could be interpreted as smuggling. Maya, one of the drivers, was not thinking about the possibility of ending up in court: ‘There needs to be some civil disobedience [laughs] as long as no one is hurt’. No one was charged for smuggling people, but some people were arrested and that scared a number of volunteers. After much discussion between *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* leadership and the police, the agreement was met that the police would ‘look the other way’ as long as the volunteers were discreet and received people into their cars a bit further away from Malmö C.

Refugees Welcome to Malmö received much critique from other organizations for not ‘screaming’ enough at the City of Malmö, although, according to Alexandra, ‘We did it, but in a meeting room, as we could criticize them there.’ She was frustrated that the other civic actors could not recognize the benefits of not taking up the public fight against the authorities. ‘It was a pity,’ she said, ‘that organizations such as *Allt åt Alla*, *Turkiska Moskén* and *Kontrapunkt* could not see how different actors complemented each other but rather “wanted to quarrel.”’ She concluded,

It felt (...) surreal. First of all, those conflicts between the volunteers and bullshitting and so on, as someone commented, ‘It is not so strange that there is war in the world, when the volunteers [laughs] act like this and argue so much among themselves!’

The ambivalence characterized by both opposition and cooperation with the official authorities has been observed in a number of local contexts presented in this volume (Pries, this volume). Mesere stated that ‘civil society rules Malmö’ and that the volunteers have shown that they ‘do not need the authorities.’ However, some organizations criticized *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* for collaborating with ‘the enemy.’ Alexandra said that *Turkiska Moskén* wrote on Facebook ‘how we went in their [the City of Malmö’s] leash and were their obedient dogs (...). It got very infected.’ Steve mentioned ‘extreme leftist groups’ that accused *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* for ‘licking the authorities’ behind.’

Mesere claimed that the authorities did not start engaging before what she calls ‘the crisis, catastrophe, chaos’ was over. The interviewees quoted below point out that civil society actors took *all* the responsibility for the situation during the six most intense weeks in autumn 2015 (see also Olsson [2015](#)).

Everyone is talking about a crisis, but I wonder, if civil society did not engage, how much, much, much, much worse would it have been then? [pause] It is thanks to the volunteers and civil society’s engagement that it could still work quite OK. [pause] It is, like, the City of Malmö and Sweden were all of a sudden waking up from a dream and just, ‘Oh, shit, maybe we have to take care of this?’ It was necessary that civil society did engage, or it would have not worked otherwise. People would have been dying in the streets. (Maya)

It would have been total chaos, the City of Malmö would have just drowned (...). If the volunteers hadn’t been there, so I actually don’t know where, how many thousands would have lived, lived in the streets, there, in that incredibly cold winter, and I don’t know if people wouldn’t have been dying, actually. (Andreas)

The efforts of the civil society during the six weeks before the official authorities took over the responsibility for the arrivals in Malmö in autumn 2015 cannot be overstated. Even if *not* helping was never an option for *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* volunteers, they as a matter of fact helped

‘saving’ the government and other responsible authorities from humiliation and the human costs of their passivity and neglect. This Catch-22 of humanitarian aid and politics is discussed in several contributions to this volume (Cantat & Feischmidt; Feischmidt & Zakariás; Pries; Scheibelhofer; Vandevoordt & Verschraegen; Witkowski, Pries & Mratschkowski, this volume). As put by Vandevoordt and Verschraegen (this volume), ‘precisely by addressing the most urgent needs, civil humanitarians risk becoming a living apology for their governments and NGOs’ reluctance to act.’

Even if they were slow to take action, in October 2015, the City of Malmö organized a temporary refugee reception office at Posthusplatsen (Post Office square) next to Malmö C, with toilets, a waiting room, a playroom for the children and cooking facilities. The city’s Social Services Department and the Swedish Migration Agency were there with interpreters who could give the asylum seekers their first official information. The Red Cross volunteers were responsible for taking care of the incoming people while *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* volunteers were instructed to make coffee and tea and distribute fruit and food for infants. They were forbidden to continue distributing donated food received from individuals and restaurants, as the City of Malmö now was responsible. To avoid any health risks, all donated food had to be excluded—even if that meant that newly arrived people had to go hungry. This policy made the volunteers very angry and frustrated. Civil society actors could still engage (Pedersen 2015) but only under strict, preset conditions.

According to the interviewees, many volunteers felt that the authorities looked down on them and that their work was not appreciated or needed any more. So, many quit; they did not want to come to Malmö C any more. In Mesere’s words:

‘Yes, yes, you can go home now. We will take over from here’, but I mean, we can’t just let this go. What can we do to help? We wanted them to benefit from us—but no. (...) Like, they were working with this [professionally], so they knew best and, like, the volunteers were nothing—‘you are only volunteers.’

As explained in the introductory chapter (Pries, this volume), the issue of replacing the state in providing services was a crucial point of contention for the volunteers helping the refugees all over Europe; they were torn between the moral imperatives to assist people in need and their disapproval of the partial—or delayed, as in Malmö’s case—withdrawal of the official authorities from public duties.

The open letter cited at the beginning of this chapter suggests that the volunteers saw themselves as engaging the ‘machinery of solidarity that is needed in order to mitigate the crisis created by the politicians,’ although they should not have to ‘to pick up after the wrong political priorities.’ Here, a clear position is expressed concerning the dilemma of whether civil society groups should compete with or attempt to substitute state activities (Pries, this volume). Our interviewees also confirmed that they expect the authorities to take full control of their mandate. Mesere perceives volunteering as unsteady and fragile:

Well, the authorities, they need a long time to start, but once they do, it becomes more stable and keeps going. We [civil society initiatives] can start immediately, but many volunteers don’t have the stamina. They give up at once, and we can totally dissolve.

Petruska, too, thinks that civil society should not take over the public institutions’ responsibilities, but that they should be open to receiving civil society’s help, as ‘there are so many willing and competent people out there who want to help.’ Like several other interviewees, she hopes that new models, methods and rules will be set for future collaboration between civil society on the one side and the state, municipalities and regional and other authorities on the other.

The authorities seem to be of the same opinion, as they had a number of ‘hearings’ in 2016 where they received civil society actors’ detailed critique and suggestions for how to organize collaboration in the future and ‘not see the involvement of volunteers as a risk factor instead as a possibility’ (Mikkelsen [2016](#)).

Was Volunteering a Political Act?

Despite the initially welcoming climate and that Sweden's support for refugees is rooted in the country's open and receiving self-image (Tanner 2016), a fundamental change in public attitudes took place in Sweden (as in other Scandinavian countries) from historically welcoming to increasingly hostile, as reflected in rise of the right-wing Sweden Democrats party that reached a record 19.9% support in the polls conducted by the country's statistics agency in November 2015 (*The Local Sweden* 2015).

The extensive asylum immigration in 2015 contributed to further xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment. In autumn 2015, the volunteers at Malmö C were aware of the news media reporting that 'at least a dozen buildings marked for asylum accommodation have been set on fire since summer 2015' (Tanner 2016). Those arsons feature as a point of reference in our interview material. However, while all the interviewees highlighted the role of moral and emotional mobilization addressed in the newer theories of civil society (Pries, this volume), their views on how it relates to wider political issues differed.

While in a survey from 2015, 90% of volunteers working with refugees in Germany stated that they were motivated by a desire to make a statement against racism (Karakayali and Kleist 2016), only one out of the ten interviewees quoted saw their volunteering as politically motivated; all the others stressed that their involvement was humanitarian (similar to the volunteers in Hungary; see Feischmidt & Zakariás, this volume). This came as a surprise to us as researchers who agree that it is 'neither possible nor desirable to separate humanitarianism and politics' (Cantat and Feischmidt, this volume). However, instead of interpreting our interviewees' understanding of politics as narrow, we point to Vandevoordt and Verschraegen's (this volume) observation that the literatures on contentious politics 'largely *presume* the political nature of the actions they study, or the political motivations of those who enact them.' Among our interviewees, nine out of ten described their motivation and their work as humanitarian. It was only when the interviewees were directly

asked to reflect on volunteering against the background of the changing political climate in Sweden that they conceded that their choice to help refugees could be interpreted as a political act.⁵ An answer to the reluctance to frame their work as political could be understood in the light of their understanding of politics as affiliation to or support for a political party, or it could also be a reflection of the local understanding of ‘political’ as pertaining to a specific kind of leftist activism. As mentioned in Turinsky and Nowicka’s contribution to this volume, the new volunteers ‘tend to state humanitarian reasons for their engagement while distancing themselves from the controversial activism for refugees’; some ‘did not want to identify themselves as “political activists” but had a sense of being “from the middle of the society”.’ Perhaps the act of saying that one is ‘not political’ in Malmö may be viewed as a way to negotiate activist activities within the local civil society.⁶

The 22-year old student, Emma, saw her work as humanitarian, but when asked to put it in the current political context, she said,

I think that we can influence politics. (...) I think that the more [people who] are volunteering, the more attention their work receives. (...) They are not volunteers for nothing. I mean, they show that something needs to be done.

As suggested in Vandevordt and Verschraegen’s chapter (this volume), little manifestations, discourses or debates were actually needed, to criticise the failure of the government to deal with the situation: the presence of volunteers and their (humanitarian) actions in public space were enough. Indeed, *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* volunteers were highly visible, placed at the transportation nod in the center of the town.

The 54-year-old translator, Antoinette, volunteered for ‘humanitarian and human reasons,’ but agreed that in the situation when refugees are the focus of political debates, volunteering as such can be seen as ‘a political statement.’ Welcoming refugees while others are burning their dwellings frames volunteering as political even if that is against the volunteers’ intentions, she said. Maya, too, felt that *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* became political because of the contextual factors such

as the arson attacks, racism and Sweden's changed refugee policies of outer—and inner-border controls. 'Everything ends up being politics,' said Petruska—even if it is meant to be only humanitarian. Lasse pointed to the question of refugees as 'to a great extent a political question' which turns volunteering into political engagement.

However, all interviewees except for the 47-year-old high school teacher, Ewa, thought it was *a pity* that their humanitarian work should be perceived as political; therefore, we interpret this as 'reluctantly political' engagement. Ewa, on the other hand, told about how she observed racism and xenophobia becoming normalized and legitimized in a way that would have been unimaginable in Sweden a decade ago. However, she sees the arson attacks on refugee dwellings mentioned above as *a counter-reaction to the positive forces* that emerged in the context of refugee reception.

Steve saw the arsons as the extreme right's 'political statement'—terrorism targeting the politicians who should, in their turn, stop immigration to Sweden. He suggested that *Refugees Welcome to Malmö's* work can be seen as political in contrast to them. In the same week when the many arsons were reported in refugee dwellings, he received a death threat via Twitter for his engagement and was aware of some people taking photos of him and other volunteers.

None of the interviewees were actually attacked. In this regard, again, the city context was regarded as important. Petruska explained,

If I had worked with those issues in Bromölla, or somewhere else far out in the countryside somewhere in Sweden, (...) I don't believe I would be similarly spared, but now I am in multicultural Malmö, and here is it actually not, almost not worth attacking those who want to make an effort like this. For we are too many and the racists are too few, but it would have been different in some other place.

The question of politicization of civil society can be examined with regard to diverse sets of relations, such as those between volunteer groups and state institutions; between humanitarian and political agendas; between pro—and counter-asylum ideological stances and their respective worldviews and moral values.

An example of civil society engagement in refugee reception in Malmö 2015 that was interlinked with *Refugees Welcome* offers yet another insight into the difference between (civic) volunteering and (political) activism and refers to the aforementioned *Kontrapunkt*.

Kontrapunkt is 'a cultural and social center which follows the principle of activism, volunteering and personal engagement' (Povrzanović Frykman 2016, p. 44). Being a meeting point of left-wing activists in Malmö, the center also hosts a soup kitchen made possible by food donations. It never cooperates with the authorities. *Kontrapunkt*'s proclaimed support for refugees has been documented long before the events of 2015. Along the keywords such as 'engagement,' 'action,' 'international solidarity' and 'equality,' the rally cry 'Help the asylum seekers in Calais!' headlined across *Kontrapunkt*'s webpage in 2012, where they also promoted the *Asylum Musical* presenting 'a world without borders,' where 'no human is illegal' (Povrzanović Frykman 2016, p. 45).

In autumn 2015, *Kontrapunkt* became a safe place for the refugees who had neither decided nor knew whether they were going to stay in Malmö or Sweden, or else travel further to Norway or Finland (Nikolić 2017, p. 218). It was one of the most prominent *loci* of civil society's involvement in welcoming refugees in Malmö. Over 1100 volunteers helped there, and around 17,000 refugees were helped in autumn 2015. Between September and November, 1000 portions of food were cooked and served in *Kontrapunkt* daily (Rescala 2016).

Placed at the central station, *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* were more visible than *Kontrapunkt*, but they made an equally large contribution. As noted by Rescala, it was remarkable that *Kontrapunkt* was not mentioned in connection to the 'grassroots' award. 'Possibly,' suggests Rescala (p. 57), 'there might also have been a political aspect involved; Kontrapunkt might have been regarded as too far to the political left to get a prize.'

Indeed, in the context of Malmö, *Kontrapunkt* is synonymous with left-wing activism. Even if humanitarian volunteering replaced their actions with pronounced political claims in autumn 2015, it was an expected outcome of their long-term engagement for international solidarity and justice.

Thus, we could say that it was re-politicized in the direction of ‘subversive humanitarianism’ — defined as ‘a morally motivated set of actions which acquires a political character not through the form in which these actions manifests themselves, but through their implicit opposition to the ruling socio-political climate’ (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, this volume). *Refugees Welcome to Malmö*, on the other hand, can be seen as ‘contextually political’ — even ‘reluctantly’ so, as explained above.

Conclusion

Volunteering is often either understood as ‘a selfless act, the ultimate gift, or as a self-interested calculation of the benefits in terms of personal advantages’ (Fleischer 2011, p. 319). While the discussion of mutuality or reciprocity (Rescala 2016) is beyond the scope of this chapter, our material strongly supports Fleischer’s (2011) conceptualization of volunteering as an encounter. It helps to transcend the limiting dichotomies of altruism versus self-interest while demanding that the negotiated, locally specific and contingent meanings of volunteering are explored in their local contexts.

Within the framework of *Refugees Welcome to Malmö*, ‘encounters’ refers to the volunteers’ meetings with the refugees to whom help was offered and who, according to one interviewee, were ‘all very grateful.’ However, ‘encounters’ also refers to encounters relevant to a context-sensitive understanding of the meanings of volunteering which entailed meetings with other volunteers — both collaborative and competitive and on both group and individual levels (see Schiff and Clavé-Mercier, this volume). This entailed contact with the authorities in general and their representatives at Malmö C in particular, which proved to be controversial and had political undertones.

According to the volunteers who voiced their opinions at the hearing with the authorities in 2016, ‘When the refugee crisis reached Malmö C, the reception was marked by chaos, conflict and absent authorities’ (Mikkelsen 2016). However, the fact that the refugees were personally welcomed by

local people on such a large scale remains unprecedented in the history of Swedish refugee reception.

There is a need for the further investigation of the experiences and consequences of the fleeting, yet potentially deeply affecting human encounters between the grassroots helpers and the people they helped (Snyder and Maki 2015). An understanding of the interplay of personal motivations and rewards and their intersection with the meso- and macro-levels of the phenomena in the field of refugee reception could ultimately contribute to a better understanding of the conditions for societal change towards more tolerant and open societies (Hamann and Karakayali 2016; Togral Koca 2016; Leutloff-Grandits 2018).

As a spontaneous civic initiative responding to a particular historical situation, *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* did not evolve into a stable NGO, but nevertheless, a number of other initiatives and organizations have emerged in the aftermath of the events of 2015. Volunteers now engage in ‘building bridges’ for refugee empowerment (Erden 2017; Fiske 2006) by facilitating their lodging and everyday contacts with locals—as in *Refugees Welcome Housing* (<https://refugees-welcome.se>) or by ‘promoting inclusion’ and ‘providing assistance to asylum seekers in accordance to their wishes’—as in the recently established Facebook-facilitated *Refugees Welcome Malmö* initiative (*Refugees Welcome Malmö* 2017). Nevertheless, the consequences of the newly emerging collaborations and conflicts between local civil initiatives and the authorities and their relation to the activist scene in Malmö remain an open question which further research will answer.

Notes

1. All translations from Swedish are done by the authors.
2. The names used in this study were chosen by the participants; some are their real names.
3. Turinsky and Nowicka (this volume) point out that more than a third of volunteers on Germany became active in newly established self-organized groups in 2015 and 2016. See also Karakayali (this volume), on the composition of the volunteer movement in Germany, that changed in 2015 towards larger involvement of broad parts of the public.
4. Unlike the initiative described in Turinsky and Nowicka's chapter in this volume, *Refugees Welcome to Malmö* did not involve any paid positions.
5. Feischmidt & Zakariás (this volume) found a strong correlation between political party-preferences and perception of the state response, and symbolic support for helping refugees. Our data does not indicate any relation between particular party sympathies (displayed in Table 11.2) and the volunteers' attitudes towards refugees. An understanding of the relationship between political party preferences among the Swedish volunteers, their attitude towards, and the very acts of volunteering or advocacy for refugees, would require further research. However, all interviewees became very disappointed and frustrated when the government set checkpoints at the Swedish border with Denmark in November 2015, echoing the 'securitization discomfort' described by Župarić-Iljić and Valenta (this volume).
6. As in Germany, however, 'only a few years ago the slogan "refugees welcome" could only be seen on banners of marginal refugee supporter groups on the radical left' (Karakayali, this volume); now it was adopted by many mainstream initiatives. On the other hand, Karakayali (this volume) notes that in Germany, the share of volunteers supporting the unconditional intake of refugees and the demand for open borders dropped significantly with rising participation already in 2014. To be best of our knowledge, research on this matter is missing in Sweden.

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