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Informal volunteering in Greece's discriminatory migrant regime: Practices in inclusivity

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CHAPTER 7: Conclusion



This thesis set out to explore the relationship between international informal volunteers, aid workers, and government actors engaging with border crossers in Greece. Specifically, it has put forth new ways of thinking about volunteering with border crossers. The main research question asked: *How does the relationship between informal volunteers and state-sanctioned institutions affect the aid landscape as a whole, and how does it affect the border crossers in their charge?* To answer this, I employed a transdisciplinary methodology that aimed to be solution-oriented and comprised a wide variety of stakeholders and disciplinary angles. Through ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in Athens and on Lesbos, Greece, I teased out the tensions and contradictions between different groups in order to expose the ways in which informal volunteers enacted agency against a backdrop of structural violence inherent in the border and asylum regimes.

This research exposed the failings of the Greek and the European Union (EU) governments as well as of large organizations to care for the myriad border crossers in their charge. The chapters lay bare the tensions within the humanitarian landscape of Greece and show that there is space for informal volunteers to enact solidarity and new forms of humanitarianism that subvert state-sanctioned aid. This research contributes to new ways of engaging with cross-sector collaborations; importantly, it highlights that actors in the informal sector in Greece are major players in providing aid, advocating for rights, and bearing witness to human rights abuses and unlawful treatment of border crossers. These findings likely translate into diverse humanitarian landscapes throughout Europe and beyond. More research into these tensions in various locations may help alleviate some contradictions and contribute to better, more sustainable collaborations.

The chapters took the form of individual articles and, as such, each contained its own research question, as follows:

- *Chapter 2*: In which ways do the actions of informal volunteers relate to their conceptions of the border and asylum regimes? And how do these informal volunteers interact with, act upon, and (re)produce categories of deservingness?
- *Chapters 3 and 4*: Why do informal volunteers experience ethical challenges in their work? And what kind of ethical ambiguities does informal volunteering both respond to and produce?
- *Chapter 5*: How does the criminalization of civil society volunteering affect the volunteer and humanitarian landscape? And why are informal volunteers being targeted by the Greek state?

- *Chapter 6*: How do informal volunteers, government actors, and humanitarian actors conceptualize other groups in the humanitarian landscape? How do these discursive framings challenge or maintain the status quo or the border regime and of aid delivery?

In answering these questions, each chapter contained its own theoretical argument. In chapter 2, I argued that volunteers enacted their own ethical principles in contrast to governance regimes that categorized border crossers in restrictive ways. The volunteers therefore became “informal street-level bureaucrats” (Partridge 2008; Lipsky 1980), using their discretionary power to help border crossers fit into the categories of “refugee” or “vulnerable person.” They thereby helped *all* border crossers attain entitlements and rights, and consequently interfered with state sovereignty. In chapters 3 and 4 (co-authored with Dr. Victòria Fumadó), I exposed the ambiguous ethical landscape that plagued informal volunteering, arguing that volunteers were often forced into a double-bind in which any action appeared inadequate. For example, volunteers often had to choose between either leaving border crossers (including unaccompanied minors) to live on the streets, during which they would have to wait months for state or humanitarian aid, or taking the border crossers into their personal apartments, where both border crossers and volunteers could potentially be at risk of violence or criminalization. In chapter 5, my co-author Laura Schack and I exposed how volunteers of informal accommodation spaces and search and rescue (SAR) associations were criminalized by the Greek state. Through the framework of “hostile hospitality” (Derrida 1999), we hypothesized why this was happening, arguing that volunteers were criminalized because they offered a form of hospitality that was not in line with state-sanctioned practices of hostile hospitality. Instead, volunteers offered unconditional hospitality, which included *all* border crossers rather than only those the state deemed as deserving. Finally, in chapter 6, I highlighted the tensions between informal volunteers, state actors, and aid workers. The negative discursive framing and exclusionary boundary-making tactics had deeper motivations and consequences, which helped to maintain or challenge the border regime.

In this conclusion I explain how the main concept that underpinned the thesis—inclusion and exclusion—worked on both the stakeholders and the border crossers under their charge. I then reveal how informal volunteers embedded in the humanitarian landscape navigated the secondary theme of ambiguous ethics, and I expand on how this fractured humanitarian landscape affected border crossers. Finally, I look at how the geopolitics of the current

climate can be extended beyond Greece and the EU and reflect on how this research speaks to broader themes in migration, ethics, and volunteerism.

Inclusions and Exclusion

The theme of inclusion and exclusion wound its way through the entirety of the thesis although each chapter analyzed ethnographic data using different concepts. Throughout the thesis I showed how border crossers were differentially included into the asylum system, accommodation and camps, refugee and vulnerability categories, and the Greek nation and EU more broadly. Informal volunteers were embedded into the systems of inclusion and exclusion as they attempted to use their agentive power to be more inclusive of border crossers whom the state would wish to exclude (such as undocumented migrants, those considered not vulnerable, or those to be deported). However, informal volunteers were actively excluded from offering certain forms of bureaucratized aid, such as housing and SAR, and were criminalized for including themselves in certain aid regimes without being sanctioned by the state, as shown in chapter 5.

This interplay of inclusion and exclusion was often difficult for stakeholders to navigate, as the majority of the aid workers and informal volunteers wanted to include border crossers into services, and physical spaces but often lacked the capacity. This can be seen, for example, in chapter 6, where I explained how medical NGOs in Moria camp worked in a triage system, resulting in border crossers sometimes returning to the clinic many days in a row; desperate border crossers would cut their wrists while outside the clinic in hopes to be included as a patient. In chapter 2, I shared a quote from Ingird, a healthcare worker in Moria, showing that even border crossers with suicidal ideation could be excluded from medical aid: “If you don't have actual, concrete plans [for suicide] in hand, we don't even accept you as our patient [. . .]. There are just too many people.” Both of these accounts expose a systematic problem: border crossers were excluded from services that were specifically set up to aid them due to the limited number of aid workers and the many thousands of border crossers in need.

Yet, I argue that this systemic issue was manufactured rather than being a byproduct of crisis. Cabot makes an important point when she writes, “crises do not just happen, they are made” (2019, 264). Colonial pursuits, neocolonial extraction and exploitation projects, and engagement in proxy conflicts are all examples of how crises have been made, usually by the very states to which border crossers flee. Yet as Ramsay succinctly articulates, although displacement “is an increasingly defining characteristic of everyday life”, it nevertheless has

“become synonymous with crisis” (2020, 386). Framing the situation as a crisis, furthermore, obfuscates the historical and political actions that create the crisis.

And current actions such as the creation and fortification of border walls as well as the instigation of policies such as the Dublin III Regulation and the EU-Turkey Agreement further exacerbate crises that border crossers experience when they land in Europe.

If the mistreatment, marginalization, and death of recent European migrants is so deplorable, it is because Europe has created a social system that has made this a reality. The subject of the crisis should be flipped right side up: Europe is a crisis for migrants. (Nail 2016, 160)

A good example of this manufactured scarcity and crisis frame is Moria camp. As described throughout my various chapters, during fieldwork, Moria was almost three times its capacity and residents did not have enough blankets, nutritious food, or privacy. Moria was over capacity due to the EU-Turkey Agreement and its “island restriction,” which did not allow border crossers to leave the island unless transferred to the mainland on compassionate grounds, such as being perceived as having a severe vulnerability. Therefore, while hundreds of border crossers arrived by boat to Lesbos each week, fewer were transferred off the island, which meant that numbers continued to increase. Border crossers were largely forced to stay in Moria rather than being allowed to live throughout the island, as shown in chapter 6, “to keep them out of sight of locals and tourists,” according to one interlocutor. The camp swelled as more and more residents arrived, which created or exacerbated vulnerabilities and physical and mental health issues. Border crossers then required medical attention, which they could be excluded from, based on the overwhelming number of people in need. Here the exclusion tactics—in the form of border security and policies, such as the EU-Turkey Agreement—harmed border crossers, while governments, aid workers, and informal volunteers provided aid, such as accommodation and medical services.

This Foucauldian dichotomy of care and control relates to critiques of humanitarian governance that I articulated in the introduction. For example, Pallister-Wilkins explains that actors who engage in “humanitarian borderwork” both produce and respond to violence at the border (2017). In the same vein, I argue that it is the policies and practices at both EU and Greek governance levels that, at least partially, create the deplorable conditions in which border crossers find themselves, thereby exacerbating ill-health and trauma. Government actors, aid workers, and informal volunteers are then charged with aiding border crossers in navigating the consequences of these exclusionary policies and practices.

The exclusion did not only act on border crossers; as explicated in chapter 6, the three main stakeholder groups under analysis acted in ways that excluded each other. Their discursive tactics of delegitimizing each other showcases the ways in which inclusion and exclusion were not only enacted toward border crossers, but toward all groups operating within the “humanitarian arena” (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010) of Greece. While this was less insidious and harmful than the exclusion enacted toward border crossers, it nevertheless had ramifications in the humanitarian arena. Of importance here is how these delegitimization and exclusion tactics affected the humanitarian landscape; they seemed to exacerbate tensions and fuel more exclusion. However, informal volunteers largely used these tactics to challenge the border regime and thereby fight against the cultural hegemony of the state and state-sanctioned aid.

Ethical Landscapes

A secondary theme that ran through the majority of this thesis was that of a fractured and ambiguous ethical landscape. In chapter 2, for example, I described how volunteers struggled to enact their own ethical principles when navigating what they viewed as an unethical asylum regime. For the volunteers, this regime created an unfair hierarchy of deservingness in which the categories of “refugee” and “vulnerable person” prioritized certain border crossers over others and increased the vulnerabilities of those who could not fit into these narrow legal categories. Chapters 3 and 4 then exposed how volunteers were placed into ethically ambiguous positions due to the failings of state institutions and aid organizations. Here I highlighted how the informal nature of volunteer work created an opportunity for volunteers to react quickly and offer alternate forms of aid. Yet, this informality also pushed them into unclear ethical situations in which any action appeared inadequate. For example, volunteers often felt compelled to offer more intimate forms of solidarity, such as sharing their personal phone numbers, impromptu late-night meet-ups to help with serious circumstances, and even hosting border crossers in their personal apartments. As far as the last point goes, volunteers were forced to choose between either leaving border crossers to sleep on the streets, knowing that no aid or government organization could help in the immediate, or hosting them personally, which could pose risks to both parties. Chapter 4 aimed to answer why these ethical situations existed, and what type of risks “intimate solidarity” (Scheibelhofer 2019, 215) responded to and produced.

I also exposed structural issues present in the asylum and aid regimes, which included slow bureaucratic processes and, in some cases, institutional abandonment in the form of

leaving unaccompanied minors homeless. Informal volunteers make up a large portion of aid delivery in Greece and around the world; therefore, these findings have wider implications for an exploration into ethical ambiguities faced by informal—or, as it is also called, citizen—volunteering or solidarity. Risks to both parties, particularly in the form of violence or criminalization, are possible consequences of intimate solidarity. Yet, my interlocutors chose to host despite the risks; they were concerned that if they did not host, the border crossers would be in even more danger. This theme of informal volunteers feeling personally responsible mirrors literature about informal volunteering in “the jungle” camp of Calais, France (Sandri 2018). I suspect informal volunteers around the globe experience similar feelings of responsibility and face ethical quandaries in relation to this perceived responsibility. Therefore, more research into these ambiguities in Europe and beyond could shed light on the actual scope of this issue.

Chapter 5 revealed the ethical dimension inherent in the different ways that actors viewed their roles and the role of the state. For example, informal volunteers who were criminalized by the Greek state framed the government as unethical, while the government claimed that informal volunteers were acting illegally in hosting border crossers in squats or through “unnecessary” SAR operations. This theme carried into chapter 6, which showcased how each stakeholder group employed discursive boundary-making tactics to delegitimize other stakeholders. This was highlighted through a case study whereby informal volunteers at Pikpa camp housed an excess of 400 border crossers at the camp during a crisis, and faced a lawsuit from locals and closure by government authorities for this hosting. Pikpa camp was framed by the Region of the North Aegean (a governing body), as “dangerous to public health and the environment,” while volunteers of Pikpa declared governing actors to be neglecting the rights of border crossers. This chapter attended to conceptions of, and tactics used by, stakeholders to delegitimize each other. For example, I shared how Clara, an informal volunteer on Lesbos, described the UNHRC as “not working on the same side” and stating, “it would be better if they leave.” There was a clear in-group/out-group dynamic, which was enacted through oppositional positioning; volunteers pitted themselves against an imagined monolithic state—collaborating with large organizations—as engaging in unethical policies. On the other side, state actors and some NGO actors viewed volunteers as “dangerous” or “criminal.”

As noted in chapter 6, boundary-making and categorization are part of the human condition; we make sense of the world through identifying who is within and without different groups and categories (Mac Ginty 2017). However, the boundary-making tactics I

witnessed between stakeholders underlined the power dynamics inherent in the humanitarian landscape; informal volunteers fought against hegemonic humanitarian aid, such as the use of Moria camp to keep border crossers contained and out of sight, to the detriment of their physical and mental well-being. The state and state-sanctioned aid organizations on the other hand, fought to maintain the status quo of the border regime, which parsed border crossers into deserving refugees and underserving migrants, slating the majority to be sent back to Turkey. Informal volunteers have many reasons to believe that Turkey is not a safe country for border crossers. Turkey did not sign the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which results in border crossers from outside Europe being unable to attain refugee status, and the safeguards that come with it, in Turkey (Baban et al. 2016). Furthermore, at any point, Turkey can decide to “open the border” and allow border crossers to enter Greece once more, which the EU and Greek governments want to avoid at all costs. Therefore, Turkey has considerable leverage over the EU, and it has used this threat of “releasing” border crossers into the EU to carry out increasingly authoritarian politics without sanction (Christopoulos 2017; Galinos 2020).

Border Crossers and Ethical Research

Voices that were not amplified in these pages was that of border crossers themselves. The reasons center around my personal ethical quandaries with researching vulnerable populations. I felt strongly that interviewing border crossers about their ongoing traumas would be neither ethical nor practical. De Genova postulates that researching migrants or attempting to distil their diverse life histories into a telltale “migrant experience” is an act of “epistemic violence” in that it obfuscates the processes that create and perpetuate refugeeness or illegality (2002). I agree with De Genova and aim not to speak for or give voice to border crossers. However, in order to better understand the motivations of informal volunteers, it is important to articulate how border crossers experienced the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion in Greece. I engaged with border crossers on a daily basis through volunteering, and observed the various ways their bodies were subjugated and how they enacted agency in response to overwhelming structural barriers.

Equally important to acknowledge, as does Andersson in his research into the Sahel-Morocco-Spain route, is that clandestine migration “was not all gloom: it was also a journey of self-realization that revealed resilience, restlessness, and striving of a very contemporary human condition” (2014, 11). Likewise, I believe that many of the border crossers I met in Greece experienced the same kind of exhilaration and comradery that underlies international

travel. Some had spent years journeying from their home country to Greece; some worked along the way and met new friends and romantic partners. Therefore, I want to make explicit that I do not deny nor obfuscate their agency; border crossers showed incredible capabilities, ingenuity, and resilience. They had often lived and travelled through many countries, spoke multiple languages, and used various forms of capital to make their lives as livable as possible; in the words of a colleague, “refugees are busy living life” (Zbeidy 2019, 156). By focusing on the barriers they faced and the structural violence they endured, I aim not to downplay their agency, but rather to expose the deleterious geopolitical structures that forced them into precarity. For example, after the EU-Turkey Agreement and the effective closure of borders en route to Northern Europe, Greece, and particularly the Greek islands, became a “de facto, open-air prison” (Karas 2016, 56) in which border crossers languished for years. For most border crossers, entering Greece after March 2016 did not lead them to the EU. Likely the majority would be sent back to Turkey; some would attain refugee status in Greece; and just a fraction would be sent to other countries in Europe through family reunification.²³

Although the main contributions of this thesis centered around the role of informal volunteers, it has also highlighted how border crossers struggled to live and attain resources and capital in Greece. In chapter 2, I showed how border crossers were placed into a hierarchy of deservingness in which those who could show they suffered in specific ways were afforded care and the possibility of asylum. Here nationality was of particular importance, as border crossers from countries deemed “safe” had a difficult time accessing the asylum service in mainland Greece. Furthermore, they were usually considered “economic migrants” by Greek Asylum Service (GAS) personnel even before their asylum claims were heard, and they faced an uphill battle to prove they were worthy of refuge. Being categorized as a “vulnerable person” was aspired to in ways similar to the “refugee” label, although it did not always confer access to resources. Throughout the thesis, I have argued that the precarious living conditions in Greece actually inscribed vulnerabilities onto border crossers’ bodies and minds, whether or not these vulnerabilities were recognized by state actors and NGOs. That these vulnerabilities then had to be on display so that border crossers could attain certain amenities furthered their subjugation. It also created division between

²³ Some border crossers clandestinely moved from Greece to other EU countries, but they faced the possibility of being sent back to Greece when seeking asylum in another country, as per the Dublin III Regulation.

border crossers, as they struggled to show how their vulnerability was more severe than another's.

This harkens back to critiques of humanitarianism, which I brought up in the chapter 1. Ticktin (2005; 2006) and Fassin (2011a; 2011b) have been outspoken in their critiques of humanitarian action that differentiates and excludes migrants who have suffered in ways not currently conferring asylum. Ticktin's work in France fifteen years ago highlighted how border crossers with severe illnesses that could not be aided in their country of origin could be given an "illness clause," allowing them to stay in France (2006). This had unintended consequences, much like those I witnessed in Greece. For example, Ticktin explained that the former president of an NGO had received queries from undocumented migrants about how "they could infect themselves with HIV and thereby obtain legal status in France" (ibid., 33). Ticktin described this as exchanging one's "biological integrity for political recognition" (ibid.). I exposed a similar issue in Greece: in chapter 2, an aid worker is quoted saying that in Moria camp she "did not remember how many people had cut themselves outside the clinic anymore" because they were so desperate to see a doctor. Here, border crossers felt compelled to harm themselves physically in order to access services.

My contribution to the canon of humanitarianism literature is twofold: firstly, I have built from Ticktin's work to show how the categorizations of "vulnerability" and "refugee" (rather than "illness" in Ticktin's case) were aspired to because they offered possibilities for border crossers to access entitlements. I showed that this systemic issue still lingers in the EU: citizenship and even services are given only on the basis of extreme—and provable—suffering. In this respect, I question how far we have progressed; for example, Ardent spoke of this nearly five decades ago when she explained this inequality as the "right to have rights" (Ardent 1973, 296). Following Fassin (2013), this trope of victimhood and the type of humanitarian action it inspires obliges refugees as indebted recipients of generous aid rather than as entitled claimants to international "inalienable" rights (for gift relationships and refugees in Greece, see also Rozakou 2016, 193). Secondly, throughout this thesis I tried to conceptualize the work of informal volunteers as a potential "site of sovereign power" (Ticktin 2006, 44). Through their often-subversive forms of humanitarianism, informal volunteers become gatekeepers to Greece (and the EU). They, furthermore, challenge power asymmetries between government, aid organizations, and ordinary citizens, showing us that ordinary citizens can leverage discretionary power to aid border crossers to attain entitlements and rights.

Throughout this thesis, I have shown how informal volunteers enacted inclusionary agentive power against exclusionary structural forces. Here I want to reiterate and expand upon the structure/agency conversation I began in the introduction (chapter 1). I briefly introduced the idea of the duality of structure and agency; they are both products of the other and act upon and transform each other through time. Whether or not we agree that “structure has an objective existence beyond human agency” (Bakewell 2010, 1697), for the border crossers seeking resources and rights as well as the volunteers aiding them, the structures they navigate are real and the structures “exercise their own causal powers, independently of the agency which produced them” (Parker 2000, 73). Archer (1995) proposes to conceptualize agency and structure as a morphogenic process.

The consequences of past actions contribute to structural conditions that have a causal influence over subsequent social interaction. While action may be structurally conditioned, it is not structurally determined, as actors come with their own agency. This social interaction sets in train structural elaboration which modifies the previous structural properties and may introduce new ones. (Bakewell 2010, 1697)

In conceptualizing the informal volunteers as a “site of sovereign power” in which they challenge state sovereignty by aiding border crossers to attain entitlements and residence status, they are, in effect, modifying the structural landscape. Over time, their cumulative agency may in fact work on the structures to change them. This was most clearly articulated in chapter 6, in which I argued that informal volunteers fought against the cultural hegemony of the state and that through discursive practices, they are engaged in the war of position over the necessity of exclusionary borders as the only viable solution to migration.

Hotspot Geopolitics and Wider Global Implications

This thesis attended to contemporary humanitarian politics in Greece. Geopolitical histories that propelled border crossers to journey to and through Greece are central. These histories were incredibly varied; during my fieldwork in Greece, the top three sending countries were Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. However, there were people from Somalia, Yemen, Eritrea, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, among other places.

Therefore, any attempts to distil a quintessential history, journey, or reason for migration would be futile. What many of these border crossers had in common, however, was a history of colonization or neo-colonization, whereby their livelihoods were at least partially robbed by global processes emanating from the very places they desired to immigrate. Betts and

Collier describe these people as “survival migrants” (2017), while Pallister-Wilkins calls them “life seekers” (2020); what they shared was a desire to survive and thrive.

The conditions they experienced in Greece—homelessness, severe overcrowding in camps, physical and sexual violence—were a direct effect of intentional EU and Greek policies and practices.²⁴ Greece, however, was not alone in its failure to protect the rights of border crossers. Wealthier EU member states have failed on multiple occasions to live up to their promises of taking in border crossers, leaving Greece to deal with asylum claims and integrating refugees (Zachová et al. 2018). Greece has been the recipient of policies enacted at the EU level, without the majority of Greek citizens’ approval, such as the continuation of strict austerity measures in 2015, despite a referendum in which the overwhelming majority of Greeks voted against (Artelaris and Tsirbas 2018). Furthermore, Greek government actors in this research highlighted Greece’s economic precarity, its overburdened social system, and its under-resourced asylum service. Therefore, while border crossers have been neglected in Greece, many Greek citizens believe that Greece has been neglected by the EU in its duty to care for these border crossers.

The 2016 EU-Turkey Agreement relieved Europe from some of the obligations it faced toward asylum seekers by outsourcing its asylum to Turkey. As explained in the introduction, this policy benefitted Turkey financially (in the form of issuing six billion euros over three years) and politically (through visa-free travel for Turkish citizens). It benefitted Europe by markedly decreasing the number of border crossers arriving to and through Greece. The continuation of talks between the EU and Turkey about visa-liberalization exposes another aspect of differential inclusion that I introduced in chapter 1. The filtering of border crossers now takes place in Turkey while Turkish citizens themselves are more readily chosen for. In addition, EU member states have a number of agreements with countries on the periphery, for example, the 2009 Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation (Italy and Libya) and the 2017 Memorandum of Understanding (Italy and Libya) (Bialasiewicz 2012). These agreements and policies essentially allow Europe to legally externalize immigration and even asylum.

Besides these externalization methods, the EU has increased security measures aimed at keeping border crossers out. Therefore, although Europe has become a relatively border-free zone, it is increasingly difficult to immigrate into the continent from outside the external borders, earning it the nickname “Fortress Europe” (Del Sarto 2010). Border crossers,

²⁴ Included among these policies are, for example, the EU-Turkey Agreement and the Dublin III Regulation.

furthermore become illegalized for (attempted) crossings in which the border is increasingly considered sacrosanct and the crossing thereby, a grave individual transgression (De Genova 2013). At the same time as being excluded and constituted as illegal, imprisoned in detention centers, and facing deportation, many of these undocumented border crossers are also (obscenely) included and exploited as form of cheap (and quiet) labor (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012; De Genova 2013).

Kalir introduces the term “departheid” as a governing ideology by which liberal Western states “spatially manag[e] illegalized and racialized migrants” (32) with seemingly little resistance (Kalir 2019). The term encompasses the “combination of policies and practices, rationales, and emotions that force illegalized migrants to depart, be deported, and evade deportation [...] or risk the ultimate removal in the form of death” (Ibid., 20).

Departheid is both a socio-cultural mood in which certain migrants are dehumanized to the point that their illegalization and subordination appears “natural”, and a material reality, in laws, detention centers, Frontex ships, etc (Ibid.). Kalir links departheid with the colonial subjugation of “subject races” and sees it as the continuation of White supremacy (ibid.).

This “illegality industry” (Andersson 2014) has forced border crossers to make more dangerous journeys (Pallister-Wilkins 2017; Andersson 2014). For example, removing the possibility of visas for certain nationalities forces border crossers to pay smugglers and to cross the Mediterranean and the Aegean by boat; the EU-Turkey Agreement has compelled border crossers to make the dangerous Aegean Sea journey at night in order to evade Turkish border guards; and the *refoulement* of border crossers to countries in North Africa, such as Libya, has resulted in brutal detention conditions, which often include “forced labour, rape, and beatings” (Bialasiewicz 2012, 855). Yet, in the words of a Greek interlocutor at UNHCR, “people will always search for a better life for themselves and their children.” These policies only increase the risks for people who will continue to seek safety and security outside their home countries.

In sum, governments of European countries and the EU as a whole have sought to transpose responsibility for the lives of border crossers onto other states on the periphery of Europe, which challenges the binary of exclusion and inclusion, traditionally practiced at the border. European governments have used financial and geopolitical tactics—leveraging visas, free travel, trade, and monetary incentives—in exchange for externalizing border security, migration, and asylum. What this thesis has shown is that informal volunteers interrupt these tactics, offering sea rescue, various forms of aid, and advocacy; informal volunteers and solidarians bring much needed media and social media attention to border crossers, who, after

2015, have all but disappeared from international news. Furthermore, through exposing how ordinary people with little political, economic, or bureaucratic power can affect real change in the lives of border crossers, this thesis offers results that can be extended to hypothesize how strong civil societies can combat inhumane policies in a range of contexts.

Contributions and Recommendations

This thesis contributes new theoretical insights as well as practical recommendations. First, I have highlighted how individual and collective actions have an important role within otherwise bureaucratic structures, often countering violent forms of exclusion. My employment of the concept of “informal street-level bureaucracy” is a new take on Partridge’s (2008) theory (based off Lipsky’s seminal work on “street-level bureaucracy”). Partridge employed the concept to describe how white German women used their citizenship as a form of discretionary power through marrying foreign men and, in so doing, granting them residence rights. I analyzed international informal volunteers through this lens to show the ways in which they leveraged their Global Northern citizenship to try to include border crossers into the polity and help them achieve rights. My analysis of this use of discretionary power is important because it shows how ordinary citizens can interrupt state sovereignty. Likewise, in chapter 5, my co-author and I explored how the criminalization of volunteers was inexorably linked to notions of sovereignty; the offer of hospitality by volunteers impeded state forms of hostile hospitality and furthermore challenged notions of “guest” and “host” because the majority of these volunteers were from outside Greece. For example, I have shown how SAR volunteers monitored the border and reported instances of *refoulement* to Turkey. The presence of informal volunteers likely forced border guards, Frontex, and others operating at the borders, to follow international (maritime and asylum) law. This phenomenon of civil society acting as watchdogs is likely not confined to Greece or the EU. This exploration offers a new lens through which to analyze the myriad informal civil society actions throughout Europe and beyond. Not only do these actions challenge sovereignty, but they also confront long-held power asymmetries assuming that government actors wield the majority of the power to decide who is included and excluded into the polity.

Second, through explorations of contradictions and tensions between various stakeholders, I have shown how the humanitarian landscape was complex and fractured, and how stakeholders used discursive practices to discredit each other. This data is not new; Hilhorst and Jansen (2010) have described humanitarian landscapes as “arenas,” pointing to their competitive nature. What I have added to this concept is that these discursive practices

are part of a power struggle over the dominant cultural viewpoint that sees statehood and citizenship as the correct or inevitable building blocks of the political system. Informal volunteers and solidarians, through these discursive practices, have challenged this viewpoint, and disputed the way that borders are navigated and border crossers are conceptualized and treated.

Finally, I have exposed how volunteers faced ethically ambiguous situations on a near daily basis. To my knowledge, there has been little to no research on this complex and confusing ethical landscape in relation to informal volunteering. Here my work has important practical implications. I have shown that informal volunteers placed themselves into complicated and ethically ambiguous positions due to their agentive power and the informal nature of their work, but they have also been cornered into these positions due to the failings of the large aid organizations and government agencies. For example, in chapter 5, my co-author and I shared a case study in which two international volunteers housed two unaccompanied minors in their personal apartment for three months in the summer of 2017. The boys, both seventeen, were facing homelessness, and although the informal volunteers contacted all the NGO, protection, and government agencies they knew of, they found no solution. The women, therefore, chose to house the boys, thereby placing themselves potentially at risk of violence (from the boys) and criminalization (by the state). This case study exposed the ambiguous landscape that volunteers navigate in different ways. State actors and paid humanitarians are often so slow to respond to the needs of border crossers that volunteers feel compelled to solve problems outside of official organizations. This becomes particularly problematic when concerning issues of accommodation, severe mental health, or death, as explained in chapter 3.

As this is a new line of inquiry, there is much to think about and there are many possible avenues for future research. My main goal was to show how informal volunteers faced what my co-author and I term an informality double-bind; their informality, on one hand, allowed them to help in the immediate, which contrasted the state and large organizations. They were therefore able to help border crossers avoid homelessness, a risk of violence, and a long wait for institutionalized aid. On the other hand, this informality could lead to difficult decisions, like that to offer intimate solidarity such as taking a border crosser into one's personal home which could result in other risks to both host and border crosser (Witcher and Fumadó 2021). There were other possible considerations that were not included due to the limited scope of the thesis. For example, an important consideration is the relationship of informal volunteers to the border crossers (or in other circumstances,

beneficiaries) they aid; what other implications does “getting too close” bring to the fore? For example, a dimension that did not receive attention in this thesis but that I observed and recorded in interviews was the ethical dilemma of romantic relationships with border crossers who were sometimes direct beneficiaries.

I recommend continuing research and, specifically, a multi-sited approach that would explore how ethical landscapes vary in different contexts. Practically, this could enable recommendations based on contexts in which collaboration is more efficient and where ethical ambiguity is less fraught. Furthermore, by uncovering and unpacking these ethical complications, possible solutions can be brought to the fore.

Final Words

At the time of writing, COVID-19 has become a global pandemic and has propelled states to enact more exclusionary policies toward border crossers. COVID-19 is just the latest ill to befall border crossers in a long line of atrocities they have experienced. It likely will not be the last. Yet, the majority remains resilient and unwilling to be defeated by the horrors that life has thrown at them. I have witnessed great patience, kindness, and humor where I would have expected anger, fear, and deep sadness. These border crossers are busy living life and trying to create a safe and secure surrounding for their children. Informal volunteers are helping them rebuild their lives and claim the rights they supposedly have under a range of conventions, policies, and international laws.

As I have shown throughout this thesis, Greece, like most countries, is a shifting landscape in which policies, people, and power are fluid, multifaceted, and complex. If the pandemic has exposed anything, it is that things can change quickly. Yet, as much as things change, many of the circumstances described in these pages will remain. People will continue to look for safety and security; border crossers will move, as they have for millennia. Citizens—whether we want to call them “volunteers,” “solidarians,” “civil society actors,” or “subversive humanitarians”—will continue to offer solidarity and fight for more just societies. State and humanitarian actors will likewise continue to operate in zones of crisis and post-crisis. And the levels of collaboration between stakeholders will determine the success of interventions and the degree to which the rights of border crossers are upheld. Although governments and policies may come and go, the lessons learned throughout this research endure.

This thesis has shed light on the failings of large organizations and government bodies, whose bureaucratic structures are slow to respond to changing situations and which

largely follow an asylum regime that implements a hierarchy of deservingness. I have shown that it is often through the pressure of ordinary citizens that governments are forced to uphold the human rights of border crossers in their charge. Here I am reminded of famous words attributed to Margret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”²⁵

The warming of the Earth will likely displace many times the numbers of forced migrants we see today. Rising waters, famine, agriculture-induced conflict, and other related climate disasters will push populations to the brink of collapse. The Global North will likely soon experience a level of mass immigration like nothing before. We have witnessed governments continually obfuscate responsibility and respond to sinking ships with pursed lips and finger-pointing. However, in 2020 the tide began to turn, where global solidarity movements—in the form of the Black Lives Matter protests, and the climate marches, for example—have shown that collective action can create change and can challenge long held power asymmetries. The informal volunteers who informed this research are a prime example of subversive collective action and they lay the groundwork for a future in which solidarity and equality are aspired to and valued.

²⁵ The attribution of this quote to Mead is disputed, as the original source is unclear. It was attributed to her on p. 158 in *Curing Nuclear Madness* (1984) by Frank G. Sommers and Tana Dineen.