A More Subversive Humanitarianism? The political strategies of grassroots initiatives supporting illegalised migrants.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2017, the Federal Belgian government has intensified its attempts to arrest, detain and deport illegalised migrants,[i] as well as to discourage those that cannot be deported from settling permanently. Several grassroots initiatives, however, continue to offer humanitarian support to migrants irrespective of their legal status and, in different ways, try to hold the state accountable. In this chapter I draw on on-going ethnographic work with three of Belgium's largest such initiatives to describe their key political strategies – understood as actions to change the policies and practices of a variety of state actors. First, the *BXLRefugees Citizen Platform for the Support of Refugees* (Plateforme Citoyenne de Soutien aux Réfugiés) has mobilised the broader public through humanitarian sentiments of compassion and indignation, and uses its popular support to criticise individual members of government for failing to live up to humanist ideals. Second, *Humain* (vzwHumain*)*, has relied on a small group of highly trained volunteers to advocate policy changes through existing legal frameworks. And third, the *Welcoming Network* (Gastvrij Netwerk) has tried to tackle structural barriers to migrants' inclusion by engaging in dialogue and cooperation with local state actors.

In spite of their different political strategies, I argue that these three grassroots initiatives share two properties that distinguish them from other organisations working in humanitarian settings. First, they enact a particularist solidarity with a specific group of migrants, which contrasts with the universalist

reason implicit in more politically prudent humanitarian action. Second, these civil actors use their humanitarian support to maintain a continuous presence in the field, which shapes and feeds their political strategies. This distinguishes them from both professional advocacy NGOs and from more openly political pro-migrant movements. Civil actors combining these two characteristics, I argue, can be usefully conceptualised as enacting a 'subversive' form of humanitarianism – a concept I have developed more systematically elsewhere (Vandevoordt 2019b; Vandevoordt et al 2019), building on a body of work emphasising the political ambivalence of grassroots humanitarian action (della Porta & Steinhilper, forthcoming; Steinhilper and della Porta 2020; Schwiertz & Schwenken 2020; Vandevoordt & Verschraegen 2019b). In the remainder of this chapter, I will briefly sketch the rise of Europe's 'humanitarian borders' (Walters 2011), before describing these three initiatives' political strategies in the period of January 2017 to July 2019.

1. RESISTING THE POLITICS OF EXHAUSTION

In border studies, it has become a commonplace that borders should not be conceived of as fixed lines marking national territories, but as sites where states try to enact their sovereignty by enforcing a distinction between national and foreign subjects (Balibar 2002). These distinctions can be imposed both within and outside of national territories (e.g. European border practices in Brussels and in Libya) (Menjivar 2014). From this perspective, the in/formal camps that arose in Calais, Paris and Brussels over the last few years, can be thought of as contentious borderlands in which states display their power to decide who is allowed in or forced to leave (De Genova 2013). In the last decade or so, European states have tried to make it harder for migrants to stay on these sites without the required legal status. As a result, these borderlands have increasingly turned into sites of protracted humanitarian crisis.

In a similar attempt to deter migrants from staying on its territory without legal residence status, the Federal Belgian government has targeted two sub-groups of illegalised migrants: so-called "transit-migrants" who are trying to reach the U.K. (cf. Collyer 2010) and rejected asylum seekers. The former became a 'problem' to the state in the summer of 2017, when a group of around 600 migrants stranded in Brussels' parks and train stations, waiting for a "chance" to board a lorry and cross the channel. According to research reports, the majority cannot or do not want to apply for asylum in Belgium for a variety of reasons: some have already filed an application or had their fingerprints taken elsewhere in Europe, while others have family members or hope to find better employment prospects in the U.K. (Jaspars & Buchanan-Smith 2018; Refugee Rights Europe 2018; Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen 2019). Government members of different political parties have argued that these so-called "transit migrants" should either apply for asylum or leave the national territory (Vandevoordt 2020b). Accordingly, the Federal police has conducted raids in public places where migrants are staying, such as parks and train stations, and in places where they are trying to board lorries, like highway parking lots. When arrested, most migrants are briefly detained and then released back on to the streets, as most cannot be immediately deported (see Ellerman 2009).

In addition, the Federal Belgium government has increased its efforts to control and dissuade *rejected asylum seekers* from staying on the national territory. Like other West-European states, (Engbersen & Broeders 2009; Ellerman 2009) the Federal Belgian government has gradually limited illegalised migrants' access to basic social institutions such as work, education and housing (Van Meeteren 2014). In March

2018 the Federal government installed a further series of legal changes that make it easier to control and detain rejected asylum seekers. Most importantly, it broadened the legal basis to administratively detain migrants for up to 18 months whenever they are thought to pose a risk of disappearing (Agentschap Inburgering en Integratie 2018). However, as the state is unable to effectively deport most detained migrants, the underlying goal of administrative detention seems to be *deterring* migrants from staying on the territory without legal documents, rather than effectuating their deportation (see Kalir 2017; Leerkes and Broeders 2010).

To apprehend this situation, the notion of "humanitarian borders" was developed by scholars working mostly on Europe's Southern physical borders (Walters 2011; Pallister-Wilkins 2016). In and around the Mediterranean Sea, they argue, European governments have gradually closed off migration routes, both by intensifying patrols at Sea, and by outsourcing preventive controls to countries from where migrants try to reach Europe. This forces migrants to take more dangerous routes and makes border crossing "a matter of life and death" (Walters 2011, 137), which incites a range of non-state and state actors to organise rescue operations at sea. In some cases, border control and humanitarian support are even conjoined in one swift move, as migrants rescued at sea are immediately detained, or sent back to their country of departure (Walters 2011; Pallister-Wilkins 2016).

As Walters (2011) has argued, however, humanitarian borders are deeply contentious. The last few years, grassroots initiatives have engaged in humanitarian actions that are subversive both *politically*, with respect to states' attempts to guard their sovereignty by imposing borders, and *socially*, with respect to how (professional) humanitarians usually operate. Elsewhere, I have developed the notion of "subversive humanitarianism" to explore these differences more systematically (Vandevoordt 2019b; Vandevoordt & Verschraegen 2019b). In this chapter, I provide a more focused, empirical description of three grassroots initiatives in Belgium. These civil actors see themselves as working towards two goals: to provide humanitarian support to migrants, and to induce legal-political changes in order to address the causes of their needs. In spite of their differences, I argue that they share two characteristics that distinguish them from most professional NGOs, government agencies and political movements: they enact a particularist solidarity and their humanitarian work constantly feeds and shapes their political actions.

First, these grassroots initiatives enact a *particularistic sense of solidarity* that can be distinguished from the universalistic reason driving professional humanitarian action (Vandevoordt 2019b). As the

paradigmatic case of the Red Cross suggests, the principle of neutrality (not taking sides) helps to maintain the organisation's moral legitimacy in the face of international law and sovereign nation-states. Because the Red Cross does not overtly criticise nation-states or sides with particular groups (e.g. they principally do not distinguish between terrorists, soldiers or civilian victims of a conflict when providing medical support), it can provide help whenever it thinks necessary. This implies a universalist reasoning: the Red Cross aids anyone in need, irrespective of who they are and who caused their suffering. In this logic, humanitarian action is placed outside the political realm, and addresses universal human needs.

Subversive humanitarian actions, by contrast, require actors to take sides with those who they believe are harmed or wronged the most. Support goes to those who receive the least, and the actors inflicting injustice upon them are publicly held accountable. Across Europe, several grassroots initiatives have continued to support migrants, even when their governments design policies to discourage migrants from illicitly staying on their national territories. At least initially, many civil actors supporting migrants did not portray themselves as political, but rather as humanitarian or simply as 'human' actors (Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017; McGee and Palham 2018; Sandri 2018). Yet as they became aware of how these humanitarian crises are co-produced by these policies, they have become increasingly vocal in their criticism. As a result, they gradually began to provide maximal, more encompassing support to specific groups of migrants that were targeted by these policies (including legal, social and political support) (Vandevoordt 2019b), instead of offering minimal, bio-political services to anyone in need (e.g. purely medical aid to asylum seekers, recognised refugees and rejected asylum seekers, and/or shelter to homeless persons and established illegalised migrants) (Redfield 2005).

Second, these civil initiatives' *strategies to induce legal and political change are shaped by their everyday humanitarian work*. In practice, their humanitarian work comes first, in response to which they take political action to address its causes. This is not as evident as it seems. On the one hand, grassroots initiatives supporting migrants have mostly been analysed as either radical social movements advocating No Borders in the case of newly arriving immigrants (Ataç et al 2016; della Porta 2018) or as pro-regularisation movements in the case of established illegalised immigrants (Chimienti 2011; Nicholls 2013). These initiatives are then portrayed as primarily political actors who, due to a perpetuated state of crisis, find themselves forced to offer humanitarian aid. On the other hand, rights-based NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Refugee Rights Europe have produced numerous reports on the human consequences of Europe's politics of exhaustion. Their work is oriented primarily towards

advocacy or lobbying, and occasionally includes field visits to border sites, often in response to calls of grassroots initiatives. When visiting the field, these NGOs focus almost exclusively on conducting project-based research to document human rights violations.

The three initiatives I discuss here, however, provide humanitarian support, and *then* take action to address the causes of these human needs (cf. Redfield 2006). This, I believe, brings them closer to a thoroughly politicised variant of humanitarian action (cf. Schwiertz & Schwenken 2020; Schwiertz & Steinhilper 2020; Stierl 2018; Sinatti 2019) that is more in line with professional organizations like Médecins du Monde, Médecins Sans Frontières or Oxfam International than to social movements or human rights NGOs, who often have an uncomfortable disposition to providing help (see Rozakou 2016). In that sense, they can be conceived as subversive humanitarian actors whose political strategies are shaped by their humanitarian work. In the following sections, I describe how three Belgian initiatives have developed such political strategies, each in their own way.

2. THE CITIZEN PLATFORM FOR THE SUPPORT OF REFUGEES

The *Citizen Platform* emerged in the summer of migration of 2015 when Federal government agencies struggled to arrange accommodation for newly arriving refugees. As thousands of people flocked to the Maximilian park to provide all kinds of support, a make-shift camp emerged in front of the Immigration Office where refugees could submit their asylum applications. By early September, a group of citizens united themselves in the Citizen Platform to coordinate their actions, and align them with the needs of refugees. From the very beginning, the Platform thus thrived on the mobilisation of a diverse group of volunteers which was driven by two humanitarian sentiments (Boltanski 1999): compassion for refugees and indignation with the lack of adequate response by government agencies.

The same dynamic emerged in a more contentious way in August 2017. Due to the destruction of informal shelters in Calais, Dunkirk and Paris, a growing group of around 600 persons got "stranded" in Brussels as they were trying to reach the U.K. (cf. Collyer 2010). As the Platform's volunteers saw there were several minors and single women among them, a small group of up to 12 volunteers decided to take a radical decision: they offered them a bed for the night, in their own homes (Vandevoordt 2020a and 2020b). Throughout this period, the Federal police conducted raids in and around the Maximilian Park. After one of those raids, State Secretary of Asylum and Migration Theo Francken boasted that 13 "transit-migrants" had been arrested and the park was being "#CleanedUp". This sparked a small controversy in the media, and, more importantly, led an estimate 300 volunteers to start hosting migrants into their homes (Vandevoordt 2020a and 2020b).

In the next few months similar controversies emerged around State Secretary Francken which, according to the Platform's coordinators, brought more and more volunteers to the Platform. As winter approached, the Platform lobbied with different governments – some of Brussels' 19 municipalities, the Governments of the Regions of Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia, and the Federal government – to create a collective reception centre, where illegalised migrants could find shelter, and receive adequate legal information on asylum procedures and the Dublin agreements. While the Platform did not convince these governments to establish such a centre, they did secure enough material and financial support from some of Brussels' municipalities and the Region of Brussels to open such a centre themselves. With their temporary funding, a team of 12 long-term volunteers was employed to coordinate the volunteers working shifts in the so-

called Porte d'Ulysse. In December, the Platform was able to shelter 80 persons per night, which was increased to 350 beds a few months later (Vandevoordt 2020a).

The same dynamics thus continued to characterise the Citizen Platform: its coordinators mobilised the broader public to respond to both migrants' needs and police actions coordinated by the Federal government. By offering humanitarian support in spite of government policies attempting to deter illegalised migrants, the Platform and its volunteers enacted a particularistic form of solidarity: it sided with this specific group of so-called 'transit-migrants', precisely because they were wronged the most by the state. Over time, the Platform increasingly tailored their efforts to this particular group by offering legal information (focused on the Dublin regulations, rights for unaccompanied minors and the conditions for applying for asylum in Belgium), and several ad hoc humanitarian needs such as shelter, food, clothes and medicine. This meant that the Platform gradually shifted its focus away from supporting other groups such as established illegalised migrants with different material needs (e.g. long-term housing) and political demands (e.g. regularisation) (see de Praetere & Oosterlynck 2017). Similarly, the Platform began to focus less on supporting asylum seekers and recognised refugees, as they too have different needs, and, in addition, more easily attract assistance from NGOs and government agencies.

Central to the Platform's political strategies has been its ability to mobilise a large and varied pool of volunteers. The Platform's closed Facebook groups include approximately 40,000 members, out of which every week up to 70 volunteers take shifts in the Platform's collective shelter and the humanitarian hub, and in collecting clothes, raising funds and organising leisure activities. Its coordinators estimate that around 6,000 persons have hosted migrants into their homes at least once. This has armed the Platform with thousands of members that can be quickly mobilised in case of emergency, and to take immediate action to obstruct police raids. In January 2018 for instance, it received tips from within the police forces that a new raid was about to take place in and around the Maximilian park. In response, the Platform mobilised its members to warn off migrants. When the police arrived, all they found was a human chain of more than 2,000 people silently expressing their solidarity (Vandevoordt 2019b). Over the next months, the Platform continued to receive tips on pending raids, which incited the Platform to organise 'counter-marauds' to evacuate the Maximilian Park and the Brussels North train station. This demonstrates I believe, the political strategy that still forms the core of the Platform's work: offering humanitarian support to migrants as a publicly visible act of civil disobedience.

At the same time, the Platform's coordinators have been vocal in criticising Belgian state actors. Two points form a key thread throughout their criticism: citizens have taken more effective action than their governments in supporting migrants, and citizens have embodied values of humanity better than those governments. Both arguments imply a humanitarian critique of European migration policies. In public posts, press releases, open letters and public speeches, the Platform's coordinators have framed migrants' living conditions as a moral scandal for which the state is held responsible. Instead, they have pointed out, ordinary citizens go out of their way to offer some very basic services that allow migrants to live in dignity. I think it is in this sense that one of the Platform's key slogans should be understood: "faced with government immobility, the citizen movement!" (Face a l'immobilité gouvernementale, le mouvement citoyen!"). While the state is failing or refusing to address a humanitarian crisis at the heart of the EU, citizens are taking pragmatic action in their place.

Summing up, I argue that the Platform's ability to mobilise among a large and varied pool of volunteers, has enabled it to develop two closely related political strategies. First, the Platform has been able to *publicly criticise* the Federal government and its police forces by contrasting their inhumane and ineffective policies with the opposite approach of citizens. Most often this criticism is expressed through acts of civil disobedience in which citizens perform their solidarity with migrants – as with the human chain they formed in response to a police raid. In their public discourses, its coordinators have framed the Platform as a popular, rather than an ideological or radical political movement. In Facebook posts and media interviews, for instance, its coordinators have emphasised the demographic (including young and old members), social (including rich and poor), ethnic (people with and without migration backgrounds), religious and political diversity among volunteers hosting migrants into their homes.

Second, partly due to its ability to mobilise so many people, the Platform has received favourable attention by the Francophone media, and received several prizes for their work. Again, the fact that the Citizen Platform is not an openly political protest movement calling for a total subversion of the European migration regime, but instead centers on the inhumane effects of specific policies in the here and now, has enabled them to negotiate support from other (more local) state actors. This, in turn, has enabled them to take more structural action on the ground: their first and foremost policy demand has been the creation of a centre where migrants could find shelter and adequate legal information.

3. HUMAIN

Compared to the Citizen Platform, *Humain* is a smaller civil initiative whose main political strategy consists of public advocacy work. It emerged in the fall of 2015 when a handful of people who had been collecting and distributing donations to Dunkirk , decided to "shift the scale" of their actions. Since then, Humain has organised regular trips to offer a range of humanitarian services and leisure activities for children and youths. Drawing on its frequent presence, however, Humain has documented cases of police violence and negligence in order to submit official complaints, and it has tried to inform both political actors and the broader public about possible courses of action.

In contrast to the Citizen Platform, Humain relies on a small group of around 40 well-trained volunteers that undergo a lengthy preparation process. Volunteers are divided into two large groups: a Humanitarian Team venturing into the field and a Policy and Media Team producing content for journalists, politicians and lawyers. When the Humanitarian Team travels towards the field, it is divided into separate sub-teams preparing and distributing warm meals, bringing electricity generators, setting-up mobile showers or hair-washing installations, or organising leisure activities for children and youths. After a careful briefing, a separate team of outreachers carry back-packs stuffed with food and medicine to people who have settled deeper into the forests or meadows and can't make it to the food distribution. This group also writes internal reports on the general living conditions in the field, the needs of particular groups (e.g. minors, pregnant women), and indications of police violence.

The Policy and Media Team reads reports by NGOs, think thanks and government agencies, follows up on European policy evolutions, and writes notes for political actors. When they receive questions from journalists, they delve into the field notes of their outreachers and their professional networks, and examine pathways for legal and political action. Evidently, doing so requires not only an investment of time and energy, but also a particular set of professional skills.

This way of working has resulted in two political strategies: monitoring and reporting human rights violations, and informing the broader public. First, politicians, journalists and lawyers regularly request information for parliamentary debates, newspaper articles or research reports. When Humain receives such a request, it invites these actors to join them on one of their visits, after which it provides them with a "package" of information that emphasises rights violations, and suggests concrete paths of action.

According to one of Humain's coordinators, inviting politicians, journalists and lawyers to these border sites is crucial because, "you cannot really talk about all this and understand it if you haven't seen it yourself." This way, Humain uses its regular presence in the field both to inform their advocacy work, and to stimulate other actors to take appropriate action.

Compared to the Citizen Platform, Humain applies a sparser (political) communication strategy targeted to specific types of rights-violations. On one of its visits to Grande-Synthe, for instance, Humain found out that several unaccompanied minors had been detained and released by Belgian police forces. This is a basic violation of their rights, as Belgian police officers have a legal obligation to report unaccompanied minors to official care agencies, who can then arrange, if the minor desires this, additional legal and psycho-social support. By collaborating closely with other organisations in Grande-Synthe and Calais, Humain was able to document some minors' stories, and gather evidence that the police had failed to declare them as minors and instead had released them back on the streets. These acts of negligence were then included in a formal complaint against police behaviour, and it was widely covered in the media due to Humain's targeted communication strategy. This, the coordinators hoped, would pressure police officers to change how they would deal with unaccompanied minors in the future.

In some cases, these attempts to monitor and report have fed into more concrete administrative actions. In 2017, Humain's volunteers picked up more and more complaints about police violence at several sites in Grande-Synthe, Brussels and Zeebrugge. At the same time, Myria, an independent federal agency protecting migrants' rights, had submitted a formal complaint with the Committee P, an independent government agency that examines complaints about police misconduct. Together with *Doctors of the World*, Humain was able to share its experiences with the Committee P in a formal meeting. In order to substantiate the complaint, Humain reached out to academics specialised in crime data collection, to adapt a methodology for collecting witness accounts of police violence. This methodology was then used by Humain on its visits to Grande-Synthe, while Doctors of the World did the same in Brussels.

While the outcome had little success – the Committee P's conducted its own investigation and claimed that there was no evidence of systematic, disproportional police violence being used – Humain carried this strategy further. It trained some of its volunteers in using the data collection method to collect witness statements on its field trips, and it has presented the method and its results to different local municipalities and their police stations.

Irrespective of its modest success, this course of events actions shows how Humain tries to induce legal and political change: it draws on existing legal procedures and institutions to protect migrants' rights. More precisely, Humain has tried to change how state actors like the police operate on the ground. These strategies led Humain to focus on specific groups of migrants: those whose rights are violated, and whose cases might lead to a formal complaint and an actual change in police behaviour. This focus is partly why Humain has contemplated to target its efforts more decisively towards (unaccompanied) minors: this is a particularly vulnerable group whose more extensive rights make them more easily defendable before the law. In addition, this feeds into specific type of leisure activities and services tailored to youths (i.e. involving specific legal information on their protected status). This is what I understand to be a particularist form of solidarity: tailoring their efforts to a specific group who they believe are wronged the most.

This brings us to a second way in which Humain has tried to induce broader political changes: by sensitising the broader public. Apart from social media posts and fundraising campaigns, Humain has trained some of its volunteers to present their work to secondary schools and university students, and a wide range of civic associations. While the Citizen Platform directly criticises individual politicians or governments, Humain constructs a counter-narrative on so-called 'transit-migrants'. Rather than publicly accusing responsible politicians, Humain tells the story of what is "really" happening in places like Grande-Synthe, and what they believe can and should be done. As one of its coordinators explained to me: "When I present our work in schools, you notice that you can bring your story, which is not left or right, it's objective. I show images that I have seen in Calais, Dunkirk, Zeebrugge or Brussels. And I don't judge. It shows how people survive there, today, in those places. And irrespective of what the reason of their flight is, I show them that that actually doesn't matter. People don't flee without a reason. If you ask people in Calais or Dunkirk where they would like to be, most would like to be home, in their country."

Their main aim is not so much to mobilise the public through personal stories that evoke sentiments of compassion or indignation, but rather to nuance and inform. "So, for example", the coordinator continued, "people always think that everyone there wants to go the UK. But then I ask, is that really the case? About half of the 10,000 people in Calais [in 2015] have applied for asylum in France. Many of them are learning French. And those that still want to go the UK, you can ask why is it that they still want to go there? And what role do human smugglers play in that decision? I mean, most of them don't arrive in

Europe with the idea of going to the U.K. So why is that? And then we start explaining the things we see and hear."[ii] Drawing on its regular presence in these places, Humain tries to give the public "a correct and nuanced image of what is going on. And then it's up to the people to judge for themselves." (Ip9)

This approach brings them closer to the universalist reasoning commonly associated with humanitarianism, due to its de-politicised emphasis on neutrality and the law. Yet whereas humanitarian action traditionally emphasises loyalty to (inter)national law and refrains from publicly criticising governments, Humain takes up a proactive role in substantiating complaints against state actors, via existing legal avenues, and in telling the stories they encounter. In this sense Humain's approach bears close resemblance to what Schwiertz and Steinhilper (2020, 2) have recently described as 'strategic humanitarianism', in 'which actors combine the strategic employment of predominantly depoliticizing, narrow and humanitarian framing with a contentious repertoire of action.' As they argue, this also entails 'sacrificing a "deep" politicization of fundamental critique against contemporary migration regimes in order to achieve a 'wide' politicization and broad consensus for progressive social change. In doing so, Humain focuses on a particular group, partly based on the legal opportunities they find to file such complaint: migrants subject to disproportional police violence, unaccompanied minors, and youths more generally.

4. THE WELCOMING NETWORK

The *Welcoming Network* unites 40 local volunteer groups across the region of Flanders, who support 'people on the run' – the term they use to disconnect forced migrants from their strict legal status. These local groups spend most of their time facilitating recognised refugees' social inclusion: they help them find housing, arrange translation on visits to doctors or solicitors, pair migrants with buddies to help navigate Flanders' bureaucratic fields, support children in doing their home-work and organise socio-cultural events to bring them in touch with locals. Increasingly, however, due to the state's policies to limit illegalised migrants' access to social services (Van Meeteren 2014), these volunteer groups have become one of the last sources of informal support to asylum seekers whose applications have been rejected.

Most of the Network's member groups were kick-started in late 2015 and early 2016 by someone who called together local meeting of citizens engaged in Belgium's densely populated field of civic associations. Their overall strategy is characteristic for the corporatist-democratic approach that has long been central to how these civic associations work: rather than providing ad hoc humanitarian assistance, they try to *cooperate* with NGOs and state actors, and to work *structurally* to dismantle barriers to social inclusion, rather than providing ad hoc humanitarian assistance (Vandevoordt 2019a).

The success of this strategy strongly depends on the local context. In some municipalities, the Network's members have developed fruitful working relations with the local state, mostly through the latter's social services and social workers. In joint meetings, member groups try to "signal" problems with respect to issues like housing, family reunification, work, education, or hidden barriers to civic participation. They often suggest practical solutions, knowing that some volunteers are more experienced in supporting migrants than local municipalities. When all goes according to plan, social workers follow up on some of these signals and plea with their municipalities for ad hoc or more structural measures.

In a rising number of cases however, the Network's member initiatives are wound up in strenuous or even hostile relations with local state actors. This is partly due to the growing dominance of the N-VA, an anti-immigrant, neoliberal political party that aims to replace Belgium's horizontal model of corporatist civil-state cooperation with a hierarchical model in which the government subcontracts executive assignments to civil and private partners that subscribe to its policy visions (Vandevoordt 2019a). As the N-VA is the largest party in most Flemish municipalities, many social services now ignore volunteers' concerns, refuse

to meet with them in formal meetings, or publicly criticise them for "pampering" refugees. In spite of such strenuous relations, most of the Network's local groups still prefer dialogue over conflict: they have continued to write public memoranda on structural barriers to inclusion, and they have continued to invite members of local administration and different political parties to meetings.

In addressing these structural barriers, these member groups have tended to shift their focus to migrants' changing challenges. Over time, many member groups have focused their efforts on finding housing, which is one of the most pertinent problems refugees and their families are faced with. This is due to a structural shortage of affordable rental properties on the Belgian housing market, which is exacerbated by discrimination based on ethnicity, religion and/or income (many landlords and agencies refuse to let to someone dependent on benefits). A large group of refugees therefore end up living with friends and family in small studios or flats, paying high rents for sub-standard quality housing, or simply living on the street (Saeys et al 2018).

In response, many local volunteer groups have launched buddy-systems or housing cafes, in which volunteers and refugees jointly search for properties and contact landlords. They have also tried to act as brokers on the housing market by setting up networks with church communities, state actors and individual landlords. However, due to the structural lack of affordable housing on the market and the widespread presence of discrimination, refugees and volunteers still struggle to find housing. In response, some of the Network's members have therefore began renting and letting accommodation themselves, while two have even established a cooperative that buys and lets properties and uses its volunteers to handle the entire process.

Within this increasingly hostile context, the Welcoming Network has tried to take up a role as an umbrella organisation supporting local volunteer groups. It has called together general board meetings in which representatives of local groups discuss common challenges and solutions. And it has organised network events and workshops, which have resulted in an elaborate toolkit for volunteers that contains tips and tricks on finding housing, dealing with legal issues and working with local state actors. The Welcoming Network also tries to signal local groups' concerns on structural issues like housing, family reunification and illegalised migrants to larger, professional NGOs like Refugee Action Flanders and Orbit. These in turn translate these grassroots signals into policy-recommendations, advocacy work and public campaigns to change Flemish, Federal and European policies.

The currently hostile political climate, however, has made it more difficult for civic associations both to cooperate with state actors, and to address social issues structurally. As one of the local groups' leading figures told me: "it's impossible to solve a housing crisis as long as the government doesn't want to solve it. We can call around for houses as much as you want, but if there aren't enough houses, then it just has to stop somewhere." And yet, as a whole, local groups are still relatively able to find solutions for recognised refugees, partly because they continue to find other actors willing to support them. When it comes to illegalised migrants, however, many local groups have been forced to limit their support to ad hoc actions. This includes basic humanitarian services such as offering shelter, clothes and access to health care, as well as helping school-going children in secondary school, and providing legal support to submit claims for regularisation.

In sum, the Welcoming Network's political strategies are centred around cooperating with a variety of state and non-state actors to address structural barriers to social inclusion. In spite of the difficult political climate, they continue to engage in dialogue with any actor prepared to take their concern on board. Through this dialogic approach, these member initiatives try to wring open migrants' access to housing, education, work and legal information. In this rather limited sense, the Network also displays a particularist form of solidarity, as it continues to side with migrants and refuses to be simply co-opted by the state. Instead, the Network and its members insists on their autonomy to support people on the run, irrespective of their legal status, and to respond to their changing needs and signal structural barriers to inclusion to more powerful political actors.

CONCLUSION

Since the 1990s, European governments have gradually intensified their attempts to deter migrants from staying on their territories without legal residence documents. For some time illegalised migrants have been denied access to basic social services, and subjected to a constant fear of deportation. Recently, some states have deepened this development by practicing a 'politics of exhaustion': by dismantling make-shift shelters, continuously detaining and releasing migrants and by criminalising those who offer support. As a result, humanitarian borders have been created across the European continent, not only at its Southern borders.

As several scholars have indicated, however, these humanitarian borders are also deeply contentious sites that open up space for resistance (Walters 2011; Stierl 2018a and 2018b; Zamponi 2018). In this chapter I have described the political strategies of three grassroots initiatives that have not only continued to offer humanitarian support to illegalised migrants, but also tried to induce legal and political changes to migrants' benefit. The Citizen Platform has mobilised a diverse group of volunteers by articulating sentiments of compassion and indignation, which allowed them to publicly criticise the Federal government for its lack of effective and humane action. Humain has drawn on a small group of volunteers monitoring human rights violations, to pressure state actors into changing their practices on the ground. And the Welcoming Network has continued to invest in cooperation with local (state) actors, in order to dismantle structural barriers to migrants' social inclusion.

Despite their differences, these initiatives share two features. On the one hand, they enact a *particularist form of solidarity of siding with groups they believe are wronged the most*. They focus their efforts on these groups, and move beyond offering minimalist humanitarian services by tailoring a range of legal, social and political forms of support to a particular group of migrants. This leads them to voice criticism and concern to state actors. Second, *their political strategies are deeply shaped by their daily humanitarian work.* Rather than emanating from broader ideological programmes, their strategies emerge as an attempt to tackle the causes of the humanitarian crisis migrants are faced with, here and now. As a result, the grassroots initiatives discussed in this chapter, can be thought of as socially subversive actors whose political strategies are shaped by their humanitarian work.

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[i] I use the term 'illegalised' rather than undocumented or irregular migrants to indicate that illegality is produced by a series of laws, policies and practices, rather than a natural state of personal characteristic (cf. Bauder 2014).
[ii] This corroborates findings from NGO reports: Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen 2018.