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A Refugee Crisis?

The Volunteer Humanitarian Response in Lesbos after the EU- Turkey Deal: between Humanitarianism and Politics

Julie Melichar

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“Lesbos is a big prison. [...] Sometimes I think that one bullet of my enemy is better than this situation. Because a bullet of my enemy kills me one time, but here the situation kills me every second.”

Julie Melichar

A Refugee Crisis? The Volunteer Humanitarian Response in Lesbos after the EU-Turkey

Deal: between Humanitarianism and Politics

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ABSTRACT

Since 2015, the movement of people reaching the shores of the European Union has been labelled as a “refugee crisis”. Considering it to be a crisis allows a depoliticisation of the situation and provides a humanitarian response as a substitute for political action, while concealing its political root causes.

This exploratory case study analyses the dynamics at play between humanitarianism and politics in the volunteer humanitarian response on the island of Lesbos, Greece. It is based on qualitative interviews and observant participation in Lesbos in 2016 and 2017. Weaving evocative narration into academic writing, I sketch how the island has become a politicised borderland, through a history of migration and policies of movement deterrence. I detail volunteer humanitarians’ engagement, notably instigated by intrinsic motivations, moral sentiments of empathy and responsibility, and a disconnection with their political representation and governmental processes. I argue that it can be considered as a form of *hors-cadres* political engagement with many politico-ethical implications, creating a tension between the humanitarian imperative and refusal to be complicit. *Ad hoc* organisations navigate the politicised environment in different ways: through loyalty, voice or exit. Interactions and encounters with people on the move in the politicised borderland allow volunteers to humanise the debate around the ‘refugee crisis’ and to enhance understanding of its political root causes. Injustice may replace initial feelings of empathy. I hypothesise that upon return in their home countries, this may inspire volunteer humanitarians to participate in the dissemination of a new *forma mentis* - an alternative mindset.

Keywords: refugees, migration, humanitarianism, politics, crisis, humanitarian borderwork, volunteer humanitarians, Lesbos.

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ABBREVIATIONS

EASO = European Asylum Support Office

EU = European Union

ICRC = International Committee of the Red Cross

MSF = Médecins Sans Frontières

NGO = Non-Governmental Organisation

UNHCR = United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

January 2016, Skala Sikamineas, Lesbos, Greece

A black dot appears on the horizon. The sea is quiet, the cold biting. Other points converge with the first one. The wind, which shook the branches of the olive trees on the northern shore of Lesbos yesterday, has died down. On the beach, volunteers clothed with yellow vests are getting ready. Standing out against the imposing Turkish mountains, four inflatable boats navigate towards Europe. After several days of storms, which held the dinghies back in Turkey, the lack of waves foretells a day that will be filled with crossing attempts. For three days, children, women and men waited in the forest for the smugglers' arrival.

A boat reaches the beach of Skala Sikamineas. On board, a woman who died from hypothermia during the crossing. Men with strong features let themselves fall down on their knees in tears. Relief. Europe, promised and dreamt of, is finally underfoot. Volunteers help some of them break free from thin life jackets. Hands are shaken, people hug. Often, tears are filling the eyes of Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans, Iranians, Palestinians, Moroccans, Algerians and Burmese people who have only just arrived. Yet, they also fill those of the Spanish, British, Dutch, American, Swiss, Portuguese, Italian volunteers who, for weeks, have witnessed these scenes on an almost daily basis; repetition fails to diminish impact. Powerful and contradictory emotions. The anxieties of the water crossing intertwine with the hopes of a finally-reached different life. For volunteers, media pictures turn into reality. Words become feelings. This first contact will be forever carved in our memories.

Screams. Tears. Fears. Survival blankets. Hypothermia. The line of women and children waiting to receive dry clothes does not end. Boats relentlessly land without a break. Under a dusky tent, trousers, sweatshirts, scarves, hats, gloves and jackets are hastily distributed. Despite the feeling of emergency, we try to approach everyone as equals, and not merely as one more number in the queue of people waiting a few meters away from the sea. On the ground, wet clothes pile up. While their owners leave to warm up around the fires, they remain here; perhaps the last witnesses of difficulties belonging to the past. Yet, the route is not finished.

Tranquillity has returned. Boats have stopped berthing. The camp has been cleaned up, clothes put back in boxes. The frenzy vanished. However, the atmosphere is not the same as yesterday. A lethargic cloud seems to linger around the volunteers. Astounded by the situations they witnessed today. The image of a man, barely disembarked from the dinghy, running towards a doctor begging him to do something for the boy he carries at arm's length, is still floating in the air. Too late. His son has already died.

Standing on the Greek shore, I watch the Turkish coast in the distance. Ten kilometres of Aegean Sea, whose waters form the walls of Fortress Europe. The sea took two lives today. Out of sight, thousands more lie dead at its bottom. I stare at the water. Distributing warm clothes and tea might have allowed people on the move to feel better for a few hours. However, it will do little to aid their navigation through the walls that are rising higher everyday around European states. Nor will it prevent more boats from dragging countless other lives down to their watery graves. Is this really the response we should be giving? ¹

¹ Text adapted from excerpts of my field diary.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a world more than ever characterised by an unequal redistribution of capacities of mobility and where, for many, moving and circulating is the only chance of survival, the brutality of borders is nowadays a fundamental element of our times (Mbembe 2016, 9).²

Migration is a political act against global inequalities.³ It is a means for people to move from places of conflict and poverty to zones of peace and wealth, from zones of ‘non-rights’ to ‘zone of rights’, from the periphery to the centre (Mbembe 2016). These places are separated by borders that create two different experiences of mobility: people from places of rights are most of the time allowed to cross them, whilst the ones from zones of ‘non-rights’ ought to remain where they are. Nonetheless, war, poverty and violations of human rights in a combination of factors force them to flee. In so doing, they challenge the unequal ‘national order of things’ (Malkki 1995) and subvert the (un)balance established by global capitalism. Feeling ‘under siege’ (Hage 2016) and obliged to protect its privileges, Europe decides to erect protective walls to deter people from moving in. Yet they move and encounter the borders. ‘Some people roam the globe like masters, others like slaves’, says Hage (2016, 44).

‘Lesbos ‘on verge of explosion’ as refugees crowd Greek island’ (The Guardian 2015) - ‘A global surge in refugees leaves Europe struggling to cope’ (Washington Post 2015) - ‘Refugee crisis: Shipping strike on Lesbos leaves 20,000 asylum seekers stranded’ (The Independent 2015).

Since 2015, the movement of people reaching the shores of the EU (European Union), notably through the island of Lesbos, Greece, has been labelled as a ‘refugee crisis’. Images of despair and suffering of those disembarking from dinghies made their ways into the newspapers and into European minds. They triggered varying responses: while part of the population felt threatened in its cultural, economic and religious identities, this movement of people triggered feelings of empathy in other segments of the European population. In absence of a coordinated governmental response – due to, depending on the opinions, lack of means or lack of political will (Crépeau 2016) – the situation was declared a refugee crisis, thereby necessitating an urgent humanitarian response. Moved by feelings of compassion, responsibility and disconnection with their political representatives, thousands of people experienced the need to ‘do something’. This need notably translated into a volunteer humanitarian response, notoriously on the island of Lesbos, which is the topic of this study.

² Source in French, translated by the researcher.

³ Oxfam reports that the richest 1 % of the world owns more than the rest of the world put together (2017).

However, the so-called 'refugee crisis' is not an abstract entity creating humanitarian needs out of nowhere. Instead, it is a consequence of government policies and the refusal of those on the move to obey policies of sedentariness. In focusing the response on providing humanitarian action without questioning the political roots of the situation, both volunteers and professionals may prop up the violence of borders – a violence driving human beings to death, letting them drown or condemning them to die a slow death in camps at the doorsteps of their territory. The EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan – hereafter the EU-Turkey deal - after which this study takes place, is one of the most recent examples.

1.1 Situating the study

This work sits halfway between an anthropological study and an engaged essay - as Fassin puts it, critical thinking of social scientists is 'at the crossroad between [...] curiosity and indignation, between the desire to understand and the will to transform' (2012, 243). It contributes to the debate on the dynamics between politics and humanitarianism, and relies on a tri-dimensional understanding of politics: as 'the activities of the government, members of law-making organisations', 'the relationship within a group or organisation that allow particular people to have power over others' and the actions of 'people who try to influence the way a country is governed' (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary 2017). I will broaden the first definition to encompass the decisions and behaviour of most forms of authority – European Commission representatives, Frontex, Greek police, military and coastguards. As for the question of 'relationship', it notably hints at the power dynamics between and among the organisations cited above and humanitarian actors. The dimension of 'people who try to influence the way a country is governed' shall be conceptualised in a Rancièrian interpretation, as 'defined in contradistinction to the model of the shepherd feeding his flock' (2014, 33), the contrary of a top-down disempowering form of politics. It will mainly encompass actions of the volunteer humanitarians, be they in the humanitarian or political directions, when they decide to set an agenda differing from the official ones (Rancièrè 2012). Throughout the study, I often refer to 'political engagement'. I understand it in Berger's sense, who differentiates between an attention and an activity. I call here the attention 'consciousness', and activity 'engagement' (2011). This all ties in with the debate on the dynamics between humanitarianism and politics, an academic debate I will now review some key elements of, to set the stage for my analysis.

1.1.1 Humanitarianism, politics, borders, migration

Humanitarianism, understood as 'an ideology, a movement and a profession' (Donini 2010, 221), materialises in multiple shapes and endorses different purposes depending on who enacts it and in which context. A distinction is commonly operated between Dunantist and

Wilsonian organisations. Dunantist institutions adhere to the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and stand for a separation of humanitarian interventions from politics. Organisations labelled 'Wilsonian' are thought to tightly collaborate with states to act upon political, economic and cultural structures and thus have closer ties to the political realm (Barnett 2005, 728). Donini (2010, 222) complements this categorisation by adding 'faith-based' and 'solidarists' groups. Since the 1990s, an expansion of humanitarian funding has led to a 'new form of humanitarianism' (Leader 1998, 19), where the principle of neutrality is weakened to help states pursue what they consider to be 'good' political aims. Against the backdrop of this change, Barnett (2005) considers the purpose of humanitarianism to have become politicised. Donini (2010, 226) regards humanitarianism as having 'metafunctions' that lie 'behind the official or declared functions'. Among them, he characterises humanitarianism as a conveyor of 'Western ideas and modes of behaviour' (Donini 2010, 226), a 'dominant discourse' and delineates the risks that humanitarian actions are instrumentalised by globalisation and securitization agendas (Donini 2010, 228). Moreover, he agrees with Rubenstein (2015) that humanitarian organisations are a segment of governance, 'if not of government'. For Fassin, humanitarianism is also a language that 'serves both to define and to justify discourses and practices of the government of human beings' (2012, 2). Thus, humanitarianism constitutes a form of power (Donini 2010, 230). Likewise, Roberts (2001, 23) holds that humanitarian issues have always been featuring 'significantly in the conduct of international politics'. The author continues that when faced 'with the prospect of massive refugee flows, taking some humanitarian action in or close to the country of origin [...] may be politically preferable to permitting refugees to settle permanently in one's country' (Roberts 2001, 28). He further argues that 'supporting action by an NGO or an international organisation may help to associate a donor government with good works, whilst reducing the risk to itself should things go wrong' (Roberts 2001, 28). Current European political dynamics favour deterrence and containment policies aimed at reducing movements of people towards European soil, or at least confining them at its periphery. In this context, there is a chance that the humanitarian 'polish' serves to hide the political move of deterrence behind it, for instance when 'intensified border-militarisation [sold as] humanitarian rescue missions' (Stierl 2016, 189) are the political responses given to deaths at sea. Moreover, humanitarianism has been considered to be a substitute for governmental political action (Higgins 1993). In the case of Lesbos, the humanitarian response provided by European leaders, through humanitarian actors, seems to fill in for their inability – or simply unwillingness? – to agree on a humane asylum policy and a common and effective resettlement and relocation systems. Ticktin considers that 'when humanitarianism, often enacted through a moral imperative of compassion, fills in for the failure of political-rights discourse and practices, the exclusionary

effects can be brutal: [...] rather than furthering human dignity, the result is a limited version of what it means to be human' (2006, 33). In a nutshell, the linkages between humanitarianism and politics encompass notably politicisation of humanitarian purpose, substitution of humanitarian to political action, collaboration of humanitarian actors with political powers and disguise of political moves behind a humanitarian facade.

Continuing the situation of my study, one particularly relevant form of humanitarianism is humanitarian borderwork (Pallister-Wilkins 2017a). The research of Pallister-Wilkins relies mainly on fieldwork conducted on the Greek islands, notably in the hotspot of Moria in Lesbos. What the author coins 'humanitarian borderwork' is 'the need for humanitarian, lifesaving interventions to relieve the effects of the violence produced by the restrictions of safe and legal routes' for those fleeing conflicts and human rights violations' (Pallister-Wilkins 2017a, 84). This humanitarian borderwork concerns two domains: 'the ways demands to save lives in border contexts impacts on the practices and performances of those engaged in border policing; [...] and the ways humanitarian actors who have entered the field of border performances in order to save lives and alleviate suffering impact the production of borders' (Pallister-Wilkins 2017b, 19). In this study, I focus particularly on the second aspect – the humanitarian actors. This particular kind of humanitarian interventions is not only brought about by the violence of the border; it also participates in the making and shaping of borders. Pallister-Wilkins argues that it is exactly such humanitarian interventions at the borders of Europe, especially those aimed at 'saving lives', which hide the inherent violence of borders. This implicates that the dynamics between humanitarianism and politics are inherent to humanitarian borderwork. Among the many actors participating in humanitarian borderwork, I focus on the social group of 'volunteer humanitarians', as they seem to be the ones for which the thinnest boundary between humanitarian and political engagement is at play. Firstly arriving in unstructured ways and little coordinated, volunteer humanitarians organise over time. This often leads them to officialise their work, either legally or conventionally, and to create what I call 'ad hoc organisations'. *Ad hoc* organisations analysed here were created specifically in the context of Lesbos to respond to the emergency situation produced by the 'crisis'. They did not operate elsewhere previously nor do they rely on professional staff.

The humanitarian and political implications of the volunteer response of these *ad hoc* organisations are particularly salient due to their linkages with migration. This topic raises the question of the relationship between politics and humanitarianism with particular force. On the one hand, in a post-Westphalian world order, states' prerogative to control a territory and the entry, stay and exit of individuals is closely linked to borders. On the other hand, migration is a topic that has received sustained humanitarian attention, and where action is often couched in humanitarian terms. The case study brings together these different

tensions. The situation of immobility, to which a humanitarian response is given, is directly produced by political decisions creating geographical borders – most recently the EU-Turkey deal and the closure of the Balkan Route. These multiple events have fenced off the Eastern side of Lesbos by (partly) preventing arrivals from Turkey, and its Western side by forbidding voluntary departures to the Greek mainland. Lesbos has become a gated area, a place surrounded by borders, producing borders, at the border. I will call it a borderland, a place ‘on the periphery and margins of nations, cultures and civilisations’ (Carr 2015, 225), where border-making and shaping takes place. Yet the border ought to be understood as more complex than geographical barriers.

In deciding who can enter European territory and who cannot, a process of Othering is at stake. It implies identifying those who are considered as differing from oneself or the prevailing type and can ‘reinforce and reproduce positions of domination and subordination’ (Johnson et al. 2004, 256). Indeed, socially defined boundaries are markers ‘of the collective identity of social groups’ (Delanty 2006, 185). They have a symbolic role in creating a difference between ‘we’ and ‘they’, the Europeans and the others, the regular and the irregular, the inside and the outside. Oftentimes, this differentiation implies as well a dimension of order and classification, where one group is portrayed and understood as superior to another. According to Eder, borders are two dimensional: they are constructed as hard and soft facts. Hard borders are institutionalised and written down in legal texts, whereas soft borders are ‘encoded in other types of texts indicating a pre-institutional social reality’ (Eder 2006, 256). Nonetheless, these two conceptions of borders are intertwined: hard borders rely on soft borders in order to naturalise their artificial constitution. Indeed, soft borders’ symbolic power ‘produces the effect of taking borders for granted’ (Eder 2006, 256) and thus fosters their acceptance. Hard borders are visible; the barbed wired fences surrounding the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla within Moroccan territory are telling examples thereof. The imagination of Europe as a fortress is also an instance where borders are considered hard. On the contrary, soft borders have to be conceptualised in terms of social boundaries, of ‘border discourses on imaginary boundaries [that] can play a causal role in the making of institutional (hard) Europe which we call the European Union’ (Eder 2006, 256). Identity narratives and processes of Othering and ordering participate in the creation of soft borders. Turning it into hard borders is then a political project (Eder 2006, 269) leading to the institutionalisation of the EU, thereby excluding from it other territories. Transgression of the continental border by people on the move is often interpreted as posing a security threat to European people (de Haas 2008, 1306), yet also as endangering the boundaries of cultural Europe, hence creating a concern ‘with the cultural displacement of people, things and cultural products’ (Malkki 1992, 25).

In this context and debate, my work addresses the little-discussed dynamics between politics and humanitarianism in volunteer humanitarians' responses in a politicised borderland. From a historical vantage point, I explore how construction of the EU border regime, the manufacturing of a 'refugee crisis', the further movement restrictions of the EU-Turkey deal and its consequences on people on the move. I sketch how Lesbos has become a politicised borderland, through a history of migration and policies of movement deterrence. Then, I analyse the motivations of volunteers in order to unravel their complexity; they range from intrinsic motivations and moral sentiments of empathy and responsibility, to disconnection with political representatives and governmental processes. I argue that it can be considered as a form of *hors-cadres* political engagement that has a myriad of politico-ethical implications, creating a tension between the volunteers' humanitarian imperative and refusal to be complicit. Analysing the interactions between Lesbos as a borderland and volunteer humanitarians, it discusses the way *ad hoc* organisations navigate the politicised environment and their different forms of response: loyalty, voice and exit. Interactions and encounters with people on the move in the politicised borderland allow volunteer humanitarians to humanise the debate around the 'refugee crisis' and to enhance understanding of its political root causes, while triggering frustration. I hypothesise on their possible long-term effects and how they may subsequently spark forms of political engagement with different a logic or form than the initial *hors-cadres* political engagement, and participate in the dissemination of an alternative mindset. Thereby, this study contributes to the literature at the crossroad with humanitarianism, politics and borders.

1.1.2 Research questions

The overarching research question of this study reads: what are the dynamics at play between humanitarianism and politics in the volunteer humanitarian response in Lesbos? In order to sequence the study in analytical steps which contribute towards my overall argument, four sub-questions are posed: What makes Lesbos a politicised borderland? What drives volunteers to respond through humanitarian engagement, and does it replace a political struggle? What are the politico-ethical implications of volunteer humanitarian borderwork? What is the impact of volunteer humanitarianism on the volunteers?

While the analysis is localised in Lesbos, I suggest that the dynamics I describe may also be found beyond this space. Choosing to focus on the particular nexus of those who move, help to move and prevent movement enables a close reading of the process of bordering. Over the years, Lesbos, the biggest island of the Turkish-Greek border, has become a crucial place for and an emblem of the control of people on the move, both at national and European levels (Pillant and Tassin 2016, 28). The fact that 60 % of the 850'000

people who reached Greece in 2015 arrived through Lesbos (UNHCR 2015b)⁴ further supports its representativeness. Finally, similarly to Asad (2004) who argues in favour of an anthropology of state margins in order to understand some of the fundamental logics of sovereignty, Schmoll and Bernardie-Tahir state that it is important to look at the small, in this case, the Greek islands, to further grasp the whole (2015, 3). Although focusing on the limited geographical space of Lesbos, my analysis proposes to engage with wider processes of bordering and relation between politics and humanitarianism in our increasingly walled-up world.

1.2. Methodology

1.2.1 Fieldwork and observant participation

As any research, this work is a construction intending to (re)present social reality (Monsutti 2007, 24). It is based on two periods of fieldwork: an initial one in January and February 2016, and a more in-depth fieldwork in January and February 2017. During both stays, I went to Lesbos as a ‘volunteer humanitarian’ myself. My approach can be labelled ‘observant participation’, as its entry point was participation more than observation. The next lines shortly describe the fieldwork process, to reflect on it while providing a first sense of the activities carried out by volunteer humanitarians.

In 2016, I mainly volunteered on the Northern shore of Lesbos, in a camp in the village of Skala Sikamineas, 70 kilometres away from the capital Mytilene. Although the camp was located a few meters from the beach where boats were landing, I – mostly – did not directly participate in the ‘welcoming’ of dinghies, as many people were already crowding the beach. I spent most of my shifts in the changing tent for women and kids, where volunteers were handing out clean and warm clothes to newly arrived people. I invested countless hours in sorting new clothes, often received from European citizens, into boxes according to size, gender and season, or dirty and wet ones into plastic bags ready to go to the industrial laundry.⁵ I also participated in night shifts during which the main tasks consisted in freezing around a fire, scrutinising the sea with night vision and in case a dinghy was spotted, informing the paramedics and other volunteers, lighting up gas heaters and fires, warming up soup and tea, and be ready to welcome people on the move. During days characterised by the absence of boat landings, often due to bad weather conditions, free time served to ameliorate the camp and build new infrastructure. In addition to shifts in Skala

⁴ UNHCR’s figures only reflect the number of people registered in Moria (registration centre of Lesbos subsequently turned into a hotspot) and receiving documents. They do not represent a precise count of the actual number of arrivals as during some periods of time, people of certain nationalities (such as Algerians, Moroccans, Pakistanis etc.) were not registered. The latter were therefore stuck on the island without any other options than resorting to fake papers or clandestine means to reach the mainland.

⁵ A system put in place by one of the long-term international residents.

Sikamineas, I also volunteered for several day and night shifts in Moria – back then still a registration centre. I remember one night with particular clarity, during which a constant arrival of boats created an endless stream of busses to Moria. In temperature below zero, we stood in front of the gate to propose a first meal to people who had been brought to registration straight after landing in the middle of the night, tried to organise sleeping capacity by directing people to – not for long – empty tents built up by volunteers in the unofficial camp, distributed warm hats, socks and gloves to people queuing up in the early morning, helped with ‘crowd control’ and distributed food and water in the registration lines. In short, as volunteer humanitarians, we jumped in for what was not done by professional organisations.⁶ During the day, we would also provide information regarding the Balkan Route and distribute tea, food or clothing from specifically designated tents.

Although I did not have the present MA dissertation in mind during this first stay, natural curiosity led me to take notes in my field diary. This experience also started building my knowledge of the situation through observant participation, many informal discussions with volunteer humanitarians and people on the move, interactions with professional humanitarians, police guards and representatives of the authorities. In addition, I conducted three interviews which informed a previous paper on the motivations of volunteer humanitarians who I had met during this first stay, via Skype after my return from Greece.

In 2017, I wanted to focus my research on the hotspot of Moria and the nexus of humanitarian and security practices unfolding there. As a place of administrative detention, it would have been a perfect case study to observe dynamics of care and control. However, when I mentioned the academic intentions coupled to my volunteer work, I was refused access to the camp. Instead, while roaming around the island to conduct interviews, I volunteered with one of the organisations active in Kara Tepe camp. The activities I participated in, which will be described with further detail along the study, consisted in preparing and offering tea and hot water, sorting out and proposing clothes, and manual work to improve infrastructure. Although simple and repetitive, these tasks permitted to observe dynamics between volunteers and with residents of the camp, discover differences and similarities in the work of *ad hoc* and professional humanitarian organisations and hold lengthy discussions with fellow volunteers. All observations were inscribed in a field diary in the evenings, or during work shifts when I feared they would slip away from my mind by the end of the day.

⁶ There is a risk that this study presents volunteer humanitarians as the perfect solution. However, leaving a complex humanitarian setting in the hands of volunteer humanitarians is far from ideal and I have witnessed countless moments (and accounts thereof) where their actions had disastrous consequences. Their short-term commitments, lack of training and, sometimes, of cultural sensitivity, could easily spill over into problematic voluntourism, where the desire to be present in a situation of hardship and ‘help the suffering’ was more central than the actual work being done. However, this study does not intend to scrutinise the advantages and disadvantages of volunteer engagement and such negative consequences will not be a focus of the study.

1.2.2 Qualitative interviews

In addition to observant participation, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with five people on the move and twenty volunteer humanitarians. Although key questions were predetermined, the semi-structured format often allowed the interviews to turn into in-depth personal discussions. All interviews lasted between one and three hours. They were conducted in English, French and Spanish. I only translated into English the material that was used as quotation in the study. In addition to taking notes during the discussions, I recorded the interviews and transcribed them partly in the evenings, partly after coming back from Greece. Interviews were started by explaining who I am, the reason for my presence and the purpose of my research. My interlocutors were notified of their right to decline questions and to bring the interview to an end at any time. I met my key informants through personal networks shaped during my first stay; in connecting me with their acquaintances, they permitted to utilise a snowball approach to keep on meeting people. I have anonymised all voices by changing the names. Interviews ought to be understood more as ‘slices of life’ (de Sardan 2015, 31), apertures into the ‘life-worlds’ (Desjarlais and Throop 2011) of my interlocutors than scientific sampling. The reasons supporting this claim will be outlined below.

People on the move

Testimonies from people on the move are important for this study: they shed light on their experience of the island, its productive effect on subjectivities, and inform us on their state of mind after having been immobilised on Lesbos for often more than a year. Informal conversations and exchanges with people on the move were plentiful, both during my stays and through social media after having returned. However, I also conducted five semi-structured interviews with people immobilised in Moria and Kara Tepe, for which we met in cafés around the camps or at the harbour. My presence as a white Swiss female might have shaped perceptions and interpretations my interlocutors had of me. Potentially, I raised political or economic expectations that I could not fulfil: maybe, they thought I would be able to help them depart from Lesbos. My ambivalent position as a researcher and volunteer humanitarian sometimes seemed to render their understanding of my questions’ purpose difficult. Each person interviewed highlighted that his demand for protection was not justified by economic reasons, but security ones. Many kept on repeating that they were not ‘economic migrants’, which shows the impregnation of the dominant public narrative separating ‘deserving’ from ‘undeserving’ people on the move. Their testimonies were obviously embedded in this complicated context, and it is with this in mind that I will examine them in this paper.

In order to avoid discussions – important, but not the present focus - over whether people should be labelled refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, stateless, irregular or clandestine people, etc., I speak of ‘people on the move.’ Hereby, I refer to a description of someone’s movement regardless of their legal status. Given that the situation on Lesbos at the time of my second fieldwork was one of quasi-paralysis, I also use the term ‘immobilised people’ or ‘people immobilised in Lesbos’.

Volunteer humanitarians

I conducted interviews with twenty volunteer humanitarians in total. Eleven of them were short-term volunteers, while nine were founders or coordinators of *ad hoc* organisations. With the short-term volunteer humanitarians, who stay from a few weeks to several months, three interviews were conducted in 2016 and eight in 2017. The varying levels of friendship with my interlocutors influenced the content of what was disclosed during the discussions. Interestingly, the interviews often led to disclosure of very personal private details or deep intellectual discussions. Both differ from daily work in the camp and thus often tied closer our relationships – a development often pointed out to by researchers (Driessen 1998, 42). This notion of friendship in ethnographic fieldwork is discussed in the literature (Monsutti 2007; Driessen 1998; Grindal and Salamone 1995), yet it often involves befriending the subject of one’s study as part of a different social group. My case differs from this practice: I am mostly studying my peers, which complicates the data production process by blurring the line between researcher and volunteer, volunteer and friend. Moreover, my interviewees and I were in the middle of an emotionally charged experience and, naturally, we were not able to all equally reflect on our motivations and verbalise our experience.

As for the nine representatives of *ad hoc* organisations holding a ‘strategic’ role, in seven cases, the informants either initially came out to Lesbos in 2015 as volunteers, thereafter formalising their efforts and creating registered organisations or where already on the island when the arrivals increased and spontaneously started helping. Two other informants held a position of ‘field coordinator’ and remain indefinitely in Lesbos. However, beyond representing their organisations, I also consider my interlocutors as individuals facing moral dilemmas. While the first interviews were conducted on-site and in person, others took place via Skype. The organisations informing my analysis are Lighthouse Refugee Relief, Humanitarian Support Agency (HSA), ProActiva, Emergency Response Centre International (ERCI), Advocates Abroad, Dirty Girls, The Hope Project and Filoxenos. The activities they conduct include search and rescue operations, provision of clothes, food, beverage and medical first aid, washing of clothes and blankets to be re-used, transportation, and simply offering a first smiling face to people on the move upon their arrival in Europe. I will not identify them personally in the interviews in order to respect their right to anonymity. In so

doing, there is a risk to presume that all of them share the same work practices and ethical limits. They do not. Their anonymised statements should be understood as displaying a plurality of opinions whose diversity will be explored as well.

1.2.3 Navigating subjectivity

All the people I have met and all the situations I have experienced in Lesbos have affected me personally and positioned me in the debate on the ‘usefulness’ of such strict border regimes and the inexistence of legal and safe ways of passage. Hence, I run the risk to over-interpret my data and to search for conclusions that my empirical material does not reveal. As Lahire explains, interpretation happens during and before data production (1996). In order to understand my data in its complexity and in its situatedness in a specific moment, I have to recognise the presuppositions and assumptions that I have brought to and collected in Greece. For example, on Lesbos, I was constantly exposed to an excessive amount of ‘useless’ suffering, of people dying crossing the Mediterranean because state policies forbid them to take a plane or cross on a ferry. Inadvertently, I have come to see how I have taken on a position critical of the state, and I repeatedly – when going through my field notes – stumbled over ideas that considered state involvement as inherently negative. Hence, I will not pretend to provide an account of the situation as it could have been perceived from the outside, but as someone who has also been affected by the situation. Finally, given that Lesbos is for me one of these ‘affective environments in which one cannot be at ease, [yet] nevertheless stick with the observer, as much as they haunt those who live in them every day’ (Stoetzer 2014), I decided to weave evocative narration into a more conventional academic writing style.

2. LESBOS, A POLITICISED BORDERLAND

Labelling those moving across borders as 'refugees' allows a humanitarian response to a political crisis.

Katy Long, 2014, 158

Presenting the current situation as a humanitarian crisis only demonstrates short-sightedness. The real crisis in Europe resides in the lack of political will, resulting from the absence of a common political vision as to how migration and mobility are part of Europe's present and future.

François Crépeau, 2016



This chapter sets the stage for the study. It serves as an introduction while explaining the claim that Lesbos is a politicised borderland. First, from the vantage point of a history of migration, it will briefly relate the island's past and suggest that Lesbos, due to its location, has long been affected by both the phenomena of migration and the making of borders. Then, it will describe the progressive construction of the EU border regime, its attached restrictions on mobility, and the parallel securitisation response to the increase of arrivals. This will show the steps that led to the 'borderisation' (Cuttitta 2015) of Lesbos. Thirdly, I will portray the manufacturing of the 'refugee crisis' following the increase in arrivals of people on the move in 2015. It will display tensions between interpretations of the crisis as being political or humanitarian; tensions also to be found in the varied responses provided by political leaders and individual citizens. While some of the latter responded by an engagement as volunteer humanitarian, European member states reacted with an additional attempt to clamp down on migration. On 18 March 2016 the EU-Turkey deal was struck, resulting in the shutting down of parts of Europe's borders. Thus, the final section of this chapter will both outline the deal and analyse the consequences that it has had for people on the move, specifically the immobilisation of those on Lesbos. This description shows the situation and state of mind of many people on the move that volunteer humanitarians encounter. It hints at why the encounter with Lesbos and people immobilised on the island impacts volunteer humanitarians.

2.2 'There have always been refugees'

A car slows down on the road leading to the camp. Inside, a family, and bags filled with food. The person who we suppose is the father gets out of the car, carrying food supplies, and brings it to volunteers working in the camp. Our lack of knowledge of the Greek language hinders us from understanding his words, yet his body language is clear: the food is intended for the people immobilised in the camp. Despite the impact of the economic crisis on their daily life, part of the population of Lesbos did not fall short in their hospitality. While discussing with some of the 85,300 inhabitants of Lesbos, many of whom are descendants of refugees who were forced to flee what is now Turkey (Tsoni 2016, 42), my interlocutors often mentioned that "my grandparents were also refugees and the Greek people who were already living here helped them settle down".⁷ The historical notion of refugeeness, 'a hereditary element of Greek identity and valued as a term of honour' (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008, 59) probably had an influence on the current reaction towards movements of people arriving on the island.

Indeed, Lesbos has been characterised by displacement for decades. During the Balkan War (1912-1913), many Orthodox Christians sought refuge in Lesbos (Anastassiadou

⁷ All quotes without explicitly dedicated source are from my field notes or qualitative interviews.

2012, 3). Initially considering their setting to be temporary, they came to realise the permanent nature of their exile. In 1923, a population exchange was agreed upon by the Turkish and Greek governments under the *Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations* in Lausanne on 30 January, an annex to the *Lausanne Peace Treaty*. This treaty settled both the conflict between the Ottoman Empire and the Allies (France, United Kingdom, Italy, Japan, Greece and Romania) after the First World War (1914-1918) and the consequent Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922), in addition to defining and recognising the national borders of Turkey. As a result of the Convention, Orthodox Christians had to leave Turkey, whilst Muslims residing in Greece had to return there. Populations were hence sent into exile and categorised as refugees, with the situation itself labelled as 'refugee crisis' (Salvanou 2017). These elements illustrate the recurrence of the notion of a 'refugee crisis' throughout the years.

While the post-war period was marked by the transformation of the Ottoman Empire into multiple nation-states, this state formation was a process that has indeed 'operated through the persecution, by means of deportation, displacement, interment and death, of specific categories of populations' (Jeandesboz 2014, 87). The goal of the exchange, 'singular and irreversible' (Green 2010, 272) was to ensure, in Greece as in Turkey, ethnic homogeneity within national borders (Anastassiadou 1995, 161) and prevent new conflicts from arising. The island of Lesbos, at the time bearing the name of its current capital 'Mytilene', is especially mentioned under Articles 12 and 13 of the Treaty of Lausanne. The articles confirm the sovereignty of Greece over Mytilene and other islands and outline military restrictions on the latter, while simultaneously prohibiting complete demilitarisation (Lausanne Peace Treaty, 1923). It shows the borderland role that islands such as Lesbos have played, as places that have been used to delineate territories and thus as focal points of political agreements.

Hence, the *Lausanne Peace Treaty* is the first conventional element geographically constructing the border between Greece and Turkey, which would later become one of the EU external borders. Moreover, this event was the first of a series of agreements across the Aegean Sea trying to control movement between Turkey and Greece. If one considers the current hardening of borders – both of Greece and of the EU – as aspiring to hinder a population of 'Others' from reaching Europe, it can be said that the EU-Turkey deal is not the first political agreement of its kind. Scenes described by a journalist in 1923 are reminiscent of images observed presently in the same country:

[...] Some of the historical monuments or sites of Athens are currently presenting a singular sight. [...] For instance, a vast camp of tents extends over the surroundings of the Theseus temple and the Observatory. Shacks have been hastily erected around the Acropolis. Even the municipal theatre has been converted into a hospital

*facility. Each lodge, enclosed by wooden bulkheads or by drapes, is used as a housing facility for a family. The clothes or the poor rags are drying among the gildings of the bannisters... (L'illustration, 7 April 1923)*⁸

Despite being a description of Athens, the paragraph shows how such images have reoccurred in Greece over the last century: the movement of people far from being an isolated or contemporary phenomenon has, in fact, characterised the last century. 60'000 inhabitants of the Greek islands fled to Turkey during the Second World War. A military coup in Turkey in 1980 triggered the displacement of 30'000 Turkish refugees towards Europe, many first arrived through Lesbos and other islands (Carr 2015, 93). Besides these forced displacements, it was only recently that Greece came to welcome more people on the move than it produced (Mantanika 2014, 110). Indeed, between 1946 and 1977, almost one million Greek citizens left the country for Western Europe, America and Australia (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008, 48). A shift from emigration to immigration emerged after the opening of the Iron Curtain in 1989. Routes of passage subsequently alternated, following apertures and closures, between the Aegean Sea and the terrestrial point of passage in the Greek province of Evros. Administrative decisions leading to closures of migration routes are the topic of the next section.

2.3 Construction of the EU border regime

The construction of nation-states gave Greece administrative borders, maritime and terrestrial, with Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Turkey and Italy. In the past, Europe's external borders used to be considered as soft, whereas the internal borders between states were 'harder' (Delanty 2006: 187). Nowadays, the paradigm has been inverted. The establishment of the Schengen area in 1985, which currently encompasses 26 states, has led to the dismantling of the EU's internal borders. Hence, Greece came to serve as one of the main entry points on the route to Europe, alongside Spain and Italy. Movement became, however, increasingly curtailed by the progressive construction of the EU border regime. As part of the aforementioned states aggregated or ran for membership to the EU, the south-eastern border of Greece was left to become the external border of the European territory. This 'Europeanisation of the external border' (Jansen, Celikates, and de Bloois 2014, 194) arose as a consequence of the lifting of internal borders following the treaties of Schengen (1985) and Amsterdam (1997). It created an area of free movement, yet only for those entitled to it, and gave birth to what has been coined the 'Schengen problematic': 'the cost of greater internal mobility is that the external border must be tighter' (Reid-Henry 2013a, 198). Indeed, this lifting of borders was accompanied, in the 1990s, by two classical measures aimed at controlling migration. The first was imposition of visa requirements for citizens of extra-EU

⁸ Source in French, translated by the researcher.

countries. The second consisted in the imposition of sanctions on transport companies (maritime, aerial or terrestrial) who brought people without the required documents into EU territory. Indeed, *The Schengen Acquis* of 1990 stipulates that the ‘carrier’ is ‘obliged immediately to assume responsibility’ for aliens whose entry was refused – in other words, to return them, with additional financial penalties also being imposed. These two measures are the first elements paving the way towards the EU border regime. Cuttitta argues that without them, ‘irregular migrations would be almost non-existent’⁹ (2015, 3).

However, what public authorities consider as ‘irregular migration’ is very much present nowadays, as it remains one of the only methods to reach Europe. For more than 30 years, the emphasis put on control and surveillance of the external borders to curtail migration has been the norm. The myriad of agreements following the establishment of the Schengen area follow this trend: the summit of Tampere in 1999 described the ‘need for a consistent control of external borders to stop illegal immigration and to combat those who organise it’, the program of the Hague Summit of 2004 equally emphasised this ‘will to fight against clandestine migration’ (Rossetto 2013, 111). Increasingly, migration is viewed through the prism of security and border control. As an island situated close to the external EU border, Lesbos is one of the main scenes in the theatre of border control. One consequence of the development of this theatre is the creation of the European Border Agency called Frontex, which started operating in 2005. Its stated purpose is to ‘enhance external border security by coordinating the border control operations of EU Member States, Schengen Associated Countries and other partners’ (Reid-Henry 2013: 199). Its main focus is the control of the southern maritime border. Such a regime ‘sustains and reproduces global inequality, material, and symbolic segregation and reproduces a discrimination on the lottery of birth’ (van Houtum 2010, 973).

In the Greek case, additional ‘crises’ experienced by the country must also be taken into consideration. The global financial crisis of 2008 drastically changed the political dynamics and brought about the fall of its economy in 2010. This turmoil, coupled with the strict austerity policies imposed on Greek citizens generated severe anti-immigration measures (Lazaridis and Konsta 2015, 189). Moreover, the ‘structural limits imposed by austerity have had particular effects on the ability of Greece to be a ‘response-able’ actor and has, in turn, made space for greater levels of European intervention’ (Pallister-Wilkins 2016a, 312). On Lesbos, the process of borderisation (Cuttitta 2015) had been at play for decades. The constant presence of the island in the newspapers in 2015 was not new: it had already appeared in 2009, following protests against the immigration detention centre of Pagani. The centre was closed in 2009, following the mobilisation of locals and preoccupations at national

⁹ Source in French, translated by the researcher.

and European levels (Pillant and Tassin 2016, 31). It was, however, only to open another centre, Moria, in September 2013. The next section will present and discuss how porous the border remains, despite the increasing policing of the EU external borders and the political efforts to curtail migration.

2.4 Manufacturing a refugee crisis

In the 1990s, people whose journeys started in Africa, Asia and the Middle-East began to reach Lesbos at a reduced pace (Pillant and Tassin 2016, 30). For the last 15 years, notably Kurds, Afghans and Iraqis had been crossing to the island, familiarising its inhabitants with 'the Other' (Afouxenidis et al. 2017, 26). Among these inhabitants are Helen and Mark, a British couple that made Lesbos their home in the early 2000s. They live a few meters away from the beach and have witnessed the consistent berthing of dinghies since their arrival:

There have always been refugees, from the beginning. Always small boats, generally men, generally at night. We would just see the debris in the morning when we got out because they had already walked and left. We never really intervened in it.

The initially sporadic landings became increasingly regular as the most common route shifted from the one linking North Africa to Italy to the one between Turkey and Greece (European Court of Auditors 2017, 8). In 2014, 43'500 people on the move reached Greece (Fotiadis and Howden 2017), while UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) estimates that they were 850'000 in 2015 - of which 60 % arrived on Lesbos (UNHCR 2015b).

We saw the boats coming, getting more and more, and as of 2015, I'm driving my child to school and there are kids on the beach. Women, children, men. Syrian families soaking wet, exhausted. And that's when we ended up getting involved. They are arriving here [pointing outside the window] so it's impossible to walk out and go shopping past someone else in this situation and not do anything.

The immediate proximity of their house prevented Helen and Mark from shutting their eyes to the arrival of people on the move, and they started distributing food, clothes and shoes. Before the increase in arrivals, tourism was the main reason for the majority of foreigners flooding into Lesbos, with 'help' only being provided by Greek locals and a few foreigners who had been living on the island for decades. In May 2015, the EU Commission proposed a quota scheme to relocate people from Greece, which was opposed notably by Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland. When the number of sea arrivals reached 31'000 people in June, the UNHCR declared an emergency across the Western Balkans (Fotiadis and Howden 2017). In July 2015, the solidarity wave started sweeping in, and volunteers – whose motivations will be described in a subsequent chapter - started arriving.

It was horrible, every single day we were out there just rescuing people, swimming to rescue them, pulling them out of the water, trying to bring them to somewhere safe with dry clothes.

When the pace of arrivals started increasing, no professional organisation was operating in Lesbos yet. People on the move whose dinghies were landing on the shores of the island would be greeted by independent volunteers. The latter, often having rented a van, would drive on the dirt track along the coast and distribute bottles of water, snacks and when necessary, first aid and emergency blankets. At this point in time, no formal system was in place and people on the move had to walk all the way down to the registration centre. Alice, an American woman who has now been spending her summers on Lesbos for a number of years, also felt the need to help when the arrivals of people on the move began to disrupt her holiday.

The refugees had no transport from the shores to Mytilene. It was heartbreaking, shocking to see them walking for hours under the sun on the roads of the island. More, it was unrealistic because people who would help them by transporting them would get a fine. So we would take water and healthy snacks and give them to the people along the route. But it wasn't that much about giving water and snacks; it was more about showing solidarity with them.

Little by little more volunteers arrived by just turning up on the beach and asking *how can I help?* In doing so, structures started to take shape. Nik, an Orthodox priest from the United States who spends his life between Lesbos and Norway since 2001 and has created an organisation, remembers organising a soup kitchen at the beach, under a tarp, and trying to organise donations from Norway. Other people would make sure that tea was ready for when the boats were arriving, and offer it together with biscuits. Most of the actions were thus carried out by independent volunteers relying on their personal savings or raising funds in their networks to buy necessary items. In the summer of 2015, international bodies and organisations (UNHCR, Frontex, other NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations)) had not reached the island yet (Afouxenidis et al. 2017, 26). Before UNHCR became involved in Lesbos, thousands of people were sleeping under tarps. Yet despite the arrival of some professional humanitarian organisations, many gaps – intentionally? – remained and were filled in by volunteers. A side camp, named *Better Days for Moria*, was set up next to the official registration centre of Moria. It provided additional sleeping facilities, clothing items and offered information about the next steps to take on the Balkan Route to people who received registration papers.¹⁰ While many volunteers joined forces with *Better Days for*

¹⁰ Before the EU-Turkey deal, Syrians would receive a 6-months authorization to reside in and move within Greece. Other nationalities, including but not limited to Iraqi, Afghans, Pakistani, Somali, Palestinian and Eritrean would receive the same authorization for 30 days. Citizens of Bangladesh, Morocco, Algeria or Tunisia would

Moria, others came in groups and collaborated in the same space, while organising additional activities. For instance, a British group came in with professional utensils to cook in bulk and provided a thousand meals three times a day. Another group set up a tea tent and organised shifts to provide tea and snacks around the clock. If it were not for the food provided by volunteers or the few Greek people selling food at the entrance of the camp in one small truck, nothing would be available to eat. In the camps of Kara Tepe and Pikpa, similar support activities were organised, albeit sometimes differing in approach. Overall, independent initiatives, either stemming from one country or resulting from the alliance of a mix of volunteers aggregated in order to fill as many gaps as possible and have come to shape the identity of Lesbos. As Cuttita argues, the identity of a place is shaped by people living, working and transiting there (Cuttita 2015, 8) – people on the move, Greek people, Frontex patrol officers, European and Greek political representatives coming to evaluate and discuss the situation, doctors, nurses and paramedics, professional humanitarian workers, volunteer humanitarians – whose numbers incremented alongside people on the move ones.

And it just escalated until October 2015 when some days there were 12'000 people coming in, within 15 kilometres of coast. We thought the dinghies were as bad as it could get but then the wooden boats came with 200 to 300 people.

This same month, Greece agreed to finish the construction of the islands' registration centres or 'hotspots', designed to identify, register and fingerprint up to 50'000 people, alongside with checking their data against other security databases (European Court of Auditors 2017). This hotspot approach¹¹ also compels people on the move to apply for asylum in Greece, be relocated to another Member State or returned to their respective country of origin. However, the slowness of said procedures created bottlenecks and obliged many camps to host people beyond their capacity. Hotspots have since been qualified as 'unsafe, unsanitary' (Human Rights Watch 2016). The creation of hotspots was not merely a humanitarian endeavour and also served political goals; 'the camp [is] the secret matrix, the *nomos* of the political space of our time'¹², says Agamben (1995, 48). In February 2016, the scene started to emerge for the EU-Turkey deal. At the Greek ministerial level, important functions were moved from the migration to the development ministries and the army was called into the hotspots, whilst a warning against a complete 'break down' of the system was emitted by the EU Migration Commissioner (Fotiadis and Howden 2017). The idea of an 'unstoppable migrant flow across the Mediterranean into Europe' (Voanews 2015), assaulting

receive no authorization at all and be left to resort to smugglers to leave the island. These categories were however fluid and constantly changed in accordance with administrative decisions. Hence, this explanation might not have been valid before and/or after January and February 2016.

¹¹ Implemented both in Greece and in Italy.

¹² Source in French, translated by the researcher.

and putting the European system into crisis, started to spread in most media. The Balkan Route was declared closed in the beginning of March 2016, closely followed by the EU-Turkey route.

The war in Syria had been going on for five years. Everybody knew a crisis was coming. Academics were saying it, people from the humanitarian world were saying it... And then everybody goes "oh we didn't know!" Bullshit. You did know. You just didn't want to react.

The historical timeline detailed above has shown the response given by politicians to the increase in arrivals of people on the move. It was mainly phrased in terms of 'emergency' and 'crisis', in reply to unexpected events – although Nik, quoted above, considers that they knew. It seems that presenting it as an unforeseen event, for which tools and response means are lacking, justifies their lack of appropriate response. Habermas considers crises to be historical turning points (1988). Generally, a crisis is deemed abnormal and a temporary phase before returning to normality (Lindley 2014). Edelman (1977, 44) makes three claims about a this concept: he considers a crisis to be presented as 'different from the political and social issues we routinely confront', that it 'came about for reasons outside of the control of political [...] leaders' and requires the adoption of emergency measures. Looking at Lesbos through a crisis lens, focusing on the 'severe threat or damage to important human needs and goals' (Lindley 2014, 2) conceals the political structures and decisions behind the situation. It is a process of problematisation, which inherently discards 'other ways of describing and interpreting reality, of determining and constituting what exactly makes a problem' (Fassin 2012, 6). In other words, directing attention solely to the suffering of the soaring numbers of people reaching Lesbos masks the progressive construction of the EU border regime and restrictive immigration policies since the 1990s built over principles of racial, class and social boundaries. A process of depoliticisation – 'the oldest work of the political art', says Rancière (1998, 35) – of the crisis is at play.

Pallister-Wilkins emphasises the importance of thinking about crisis as an 'analytical and practical sticking plaster that staunches or, worse, conceals much deeper, systemic wounds' (Pallister-Wilkins 2016a, 311). Moreover, crisis labelling hides the bureaucratic forms of control built to manage migration (Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins 2014) and justifies drastic measures, such as the EU-Turkey deal aiming at deporting people to a country drifting towards authoritarianism. When such response is deployed hastily and presented as a crisis response, our ability to understand the structural causes of the issue is undermined. In short, considering the situation as a crisis allows a depoliticisation, provides a humanitarian response as a substitute for political action and shifts responsibility from governments' onto humanitarian organisations' shoulders. As it has been described

previously, migration and border-making are not new to Lesbos, where ‘emergency became chronic and emergency the rule when it came to migration control’ during the last decade (Pillant and Tassin 2016, 26). To summarise, given the considerations outlined here, this study will be based on the premise that the roots of the crisis, although creating great humanitarian consequences, lie in political decisions.

2.5 18 March 2016: The EU-Turkey deal

Several authors argue that the movements to Europe are considered as challenges to ‘migration policies and to the well-being of ‘receiving’ societies’ (Marfleet and Hanieh 2014, 24), ‘the concretisation of borders and the capacity of the state to decide’ (Johnson 2014, 11) and ‘endangering more than the already collapsing national borders; they are also endangering its global apartheid structures’ (Hage 2016, 44). Hence, in order to counter these challenges, European decision-makers decided to take further steps to clamp down on mobility by progressively closing the Balkan Route. The last border that remained open was the Aegean Sea. Despite prior EU efforts to convince Turkey through monetary means to hinder people from embarking on their maritime journeys, dinghies kept landing on the shores of ‘Fortress Europe’ (Carr 2015). Hence, additional measures were taken. The EU-Turkey deal, already activated on the 29th of November 2015, entered into force on the 18th of March 2016. A comment on a law written by Rancière can be transposed onto the deal: ‘the law objectives what so far was the content of a sentiment, known under the name of sentiment of insecurity’ (1998, 135).

This political agreement stipulates that any person who ‘illegally’ arrives on the Greek islands after the 18th of March 2016 will be returned to Turkey. Amongst other subtleties, Turkey additionally commits to continuing the obligatory registration of people reaching its territory, thus further reinforcing the interception capacity of its coastguards, who, in collaboration with both Bulgarian and Greek authorities, aim to inhibit ‘illegal’ movement (European Commission 2016, 2). In exchange, the EU is entrusted with mobilising funds and providing humanitarian aid via organisations in Turkey who both support efforts to ‘combat migrant smuggling’ (European Commission 2016, 2), and facilitate the organisation of ‘joint return operations towards countries of origin of irregular migrants’ (European Commission 2016, 2). This approach considers Turkey to be a ‘safe third country’¹³ – in spite of the fact that the country was recently denounced by both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch for contravening the principle of *non-refoulement*, on the basis that it has been

¹³ Article 33 of the ‘Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection (recast)’ considers that ‘Member States may consider an application for internal protection as inadmissible [...] if [...] a country which is not a Member State is considered as a safe third country for the applicant [...]’.

deporting Syrian, Afghani and Iraqi asylum seekers. Moreover, Turkey has been found to have been shooting at those seeking to enter the country (Tunaboğlu and Alpes 2017, 9). Therefore, upon their arrival in Greece, the EASO (European Asylum Support Office) and the Greek Asylum Service (GAS) are no longer evaluating the protection needs of people on the move, but instead are seeking to determine whether they can be sent back to Turkey (Lovertt, Whelan, and Rendón 2017, 2). In doing so, the EU has transferred its protection responsibilities towards the people arriving on its shores in search of asylum, to a country already hosting three million refugees. Moreover, it has encouraged other states to question their protection obligations towards people on the move. One year after its entry into force, while European leaders were boasting about having successfully ‘stemmed the flow of illegal migrants’, conversely, several humanitarian and human rights organisations have denounced this practice. The Norwegian Refugee Council evaluates the deal as endangering the right to seek asylum (NRC, 2016) whilst others explain that ‘Greece has become a testing ground for policies that are eroding international protection standards’ (Lovertt, Whelan, and Rendón 2017, 2).

The EU-Turkey deal is a clear attempt to pursue, in the East, a process that is already underway southwards: the externalisation of border controls and asylum procedures (de Haas 2008b; Andrijasevic 2010; Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias and Pickles 2014). In recent years, states tended to tackle refugee-producing situations at or near the source (Roberts 2001, 34). Bilateral partnerships between Spain and Morocco or Italy and Libya previously inscribed this practice in a discourse of humanitarian or compassionate borders (Little and Vaughan-Williams 2016), with the stopping of boats being portrayed as compassionate given its ‘life-saving function’. Hidden behind a discourse of protection, such government action ‘reinforces the feeling of siege’ (Hage 2016, 39). Finally, the deal creates a border that ‘generates the differences that [it] marks, rather than simply reflecting them’ (Green 2010, 261). For all these reasons, the border becomes performative. In the past, such efforts had – in the eyes of their initiators – counterproductive effects. Border closure generated a diversification of routes, resulting in a wider area to control for the authorities, and a professionalisation of smuggling methods (de Haas 2008b, 1312). Indeed, since the deal, a search and rescue organisation in Lesbos has come to witness the emergence of a new practice:

Very often, we have smugglers coming with speedboats and bringing the people to very hard, inaccessible places that you can't reach from land because it's under a cliff. They drop the people there and drive back to Turkey with their superfast speedboats. And in the morning, we find people sitting on the beach, freezing.

This exemplifies the inability of political agreements to definitively clamp down on migration. When people need and want to move, borders will serve to make their journey more expensive and dangerous, however, they will not impede them from moving. Rising prices also introduce an element of class in defining the people allowed to move and their potential geographic destinations. Van Hear argues that alongside social and cultural capitals, their economic situation 'shapes the routes and channels migrants can follow, the destination they reach, and their life chances after migration' (2014, 100). Such agreements amplify the already important humanitarian consequences of restrictive migration policies. Thousands of people have reached the shores of Lesbos since the enactment of the deal in March 2016. Yet instead of swiftly continuing their journey to mainland Greece and through the Balkan Route, they now linger in Lesbos.

What has increased are the controls put in place around the different sites, restricting the mobility of people on the move who are now immobilised on the island. Perched on a hill not far from the village of Moria, the camp bearing the same name has an imposing presence. High fences topped by barbed wire enclose the place. The camp is situated in a former military base, whose purpose may have changed, yet its manner remains. Built in September 2013, Moria camp is controlled by the Greek national police. Since its inception, it is considered to have 'institutionalised a form of exception' (Pillant and Tassin 2016, 33), as it normalises the systematic detention of newcomers for a period of 25 days. Following Agamben's analysis, 'the camp is the space opening when the state of exception starts becoming the rule'¹⁴ (1995, 49). At the beginning of my first stay in January 2016, everyone could enter the camp without being hindered by the police. In the course of just a few months, site entry was progressively restricted and during my second time in 2017, the number of organisations active within the compound had decreased following the EU-Turkey deal. At the two main entrances, police guards were tightly controlling both the entrances and exits, thus limiting the activities of volunteer humanitarians in Moria as well as the movement of those for whom this place bars the road to Europe.

Indeed, in an attempt to regain sovereignty, the EU has sought to restrict the mobility of 'those humans who challenge the capacity of European nation-states to maintain their territorial integrity' (Schuster 2010, 101). Originating as a registration centre, Moria has been transformed into a detention centre, where people on the move are brought immediately upon arrival and are initially detained. A 25 days restriction of liberty order is enacted for the completion of procedures which usually take one day. This order is issued together with a decision to detain, in view of deportation (Dutch Council for Refugees et al. 2016, 41). This indiscriminately applied mandatory detention, supported by Greek legislation, is 'not in line

¹⁴ Source in French, translated by the researcher

with legal standards and the EU acquis' (Dutch Council for Refugees et al. 2016, 34) and is used as a tool to police borders (McNevin 2014; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Is Lesbos becoming one of these zones at the periphery, a zone of 'non-rights' (Mbembe 2016)? After these 25 days, those who apply for asylum receive a decision which suspends the execution of the deportation and instead imposes a condition of non-departure from the island. While single men usually have to remain in Moria, families and people deemed vulnerable are transferred to Kara Tepe camp. While Moria is military-run, Kara Tepe's head is employed by the municipality. This element, together with the higher number of *ad hoc* organisations allowed to operate in the – nonetheless fenced – compound of Kara Tepe makes life there apparently more bearable. A third camp, the *Village of All Together* or Pikpa, has chronically been used in parallel to official camps in the 1990s, in 2009 and since November 2012 (Lepora and Goodin 2013, 8). It offers an autonomous alternative solution to the harsh conditions of administrative detention, yet transfers to this camp remain intrinsically linked to the political decisions affecting the entire camp system. Hence, even after the lifting of the 25-day restriction of liberty, people on the move cannot travel to mainland Greece before receiving an official authorisation, which takes an indefinite amount of time. Detention in Moria is converted into indeterminate detention on Lesbos, whose surrounding waters act as lethal fences.

They are forcing us to use illegal ways. [...] They are not registering; they are not letting us leave, so guys like me have to go through smugglers.

For those yet undecided on whether or not to resort to smugglers, like Mahfooz, one option remains: lingering in the borderland and waiting. 'Neither here nor there, the locked out are being side-lined inside'¹⁵ (Agier 2011, 22). From a place of transit, Lesbos shifted to a place of desperate inertia, one of those 'waiting zones' described by Bigo (1996, 4). And, according to Hage, such border sites work to 'limit people's movement and in time also to limit the imaginary space of their aspirations' (2016, 46). As I will expand upon later, being immobilised for an indefinite amount of time greatly affects the state of mind of people on the move. This, in turn, impacts volunteer humanitarians once they encounter people on the move. Confronted with this situation, they are likely to deconstruct the narrative of a humanitarian refugee crisis and discover the underlying political roots. However, border-making is not merely a geographic operation, it is also clearly manifested in subjectivities and affects. Interviews with people on the move immobilised in Lesbos reveal the consequences on their mental health:

¹⁵ Source in French, translated by the researcher.

My first sight when I arrived in the camp... I was immediately deeply discouraged. The fence erected in front of the camp... It seems like a moral jail. Bad thoughts invaded me straight away. [...] But there was neither a return nor a way forward.

As others before and after him, Sadou finds himself trapped in one of those camps 'where one feels to have escaped and be protected, [transformed] in camps where one is actually maintained, tolerated, detained, the impossibility to leave becomes more evident, and turns into a network of in-between places rather than the insurmountable border'¹⁶ (Agier 2011, 22). Lesbos seems to have become one of these places of 'non-rights' at the periphery (Mbembe 2016), the counterpart of the zone of rights that constitutes the EU. The event narrated here by Sadou corresponds to a display of the 'hard' European external border. For many, the gate to Europe is Lesbos. This gate is fenced, and lined with barbed wire; shifting the visual displays, elements, practices and narratives of the border. When he says "there was neither a return nor a way forward", the bi-directionality of the border becomes apparent. It not only impedes people on the move from reaching Lesbos, but also prevents those already there from leaving it as they please – unless they decide to resort to the 'voluntary' return¹⁷ to countries of origin or of transit. When he complained about the late date of his asylum interview, which he had no choice but to apply for if he wanted to remain in Greece, three options were put on the table in front of Mahfooz: (1) you wait until this date; (2) you return to Turkey; (3) you return to Afghanistan. This further supports the claim that Lesbos is a borderland and that the elements of the border are not merely found in the Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey, but also on the islands themselves. Moreover, several interviewees expressed their disbelief regarding the reality of the conditions they were experiencing, by affirming in denial that "this is not Europe", possibly trying to convince themselves that the 'real' Europe is awaiting them further up the road. In many minds, Europe was expected to be a place which had respect for human rights, and offered peace and security. Yet the conditions encountered in Lesbos do not correspond to the image imagined by many people on the move. Their perception of Europe's identity has been modified: "This is supposed to be Europe, not a jungle!" By saying this, Zahir, who has been immobilised in Lesbos since July 2016 after having left Bangladesh in 2015, participates in reshaping the narrative around Europe, from which Lesbos is hence excluded. When Hassan remembers his arrival to Lesbos, the disillusion of his expectations of Europe appears clearly:

They brought us to Mytilene and said welcome to Europe. We were happy, we are in Europe! When the bus bringing us to the camp was entering the gate, I saw the

¹⁶ Source in French, translated by the researcher.

¹⁷ The AVRR is an 'Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration' to countries of origin program, put in place by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

barbed wire, the main gate... I thought 'shit'. When I saw the tents, I lost my hope. I asked myself: 'Why did you come here'?

In addition to the modification of the perception of Europe already outlined above, this excerpt also demonstrates how Mahfooz starts calling into question the mere reason why he originally came to Lesbos.

Lesbos is a big prison. Around us there is sea everywhere. When I see the sea sometimes I feel very disappointed, very guilty. Guilty that I came. If I was not in such a bad situation back home I would never have come. Sometimes I think that one bullet of my enemy is better than this situation. Because a bullet of my enemy kills me one time. But here the situation kills me every second.

One of the professional humanitarian organisations working in Lesbos, MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières) asserts that the waiting imposed by the EU-Turkey deal has resulted in people being 'mentally crushed and physically harmed' (MSF n.d., 20). Mahfooz's statement that the situation kills him every second is an appropriate metaphor: psychologists confirm the deterioration of the mental health of people immobilised on the islands, reporting cases of suicide and self-harm, mostly attributed to poor living conditions and fears of being deported to Turkey. In Moria, MSF's patients witness 'widespread alcohol and drug abuse, [...] sexual harassment, violence and people fighting on a daily basis' (MSF 2017, 13). The high psychological and physical toll that the waiting takes on people immobilised on Lesbos has wider repercussions. Those experiencing the bad treatment deriving from restrictive migration policies, like Zahir, spread the word and warn their friends and relatives against undertaking the journey, thereby strengthening and participating in the construction of deterrence policies.

I tell my friends not to come to Europe. The gate is Greece. They will keep you here and they don't give you entrance to the rooms. If I had known I would not have come. I tell my friends: 'don't come here for now, they don't have any plan, any facilities to keep you warm and healthy'.

The EU-Turkey deal turned Greece into a gate, a waiting space forbidding access to Europe, enacted in the form of mobility restrictions, visually represented by barbed wire and fences and deterioration of the physical and psychological well-being of people on the move.

2.6 Conclusion

From a site of transit, a synonym for hope and relief, Lesbos has become a place of despair. As a reaction, notably, to a feeling of ‘siege’ (Hage 2016) amongst a share of the European population, it has been turned into the outside part of the community (Rancière 1998)¹⁸, a gated area that the zone of rights at the centre relies on to thrive and ensure the efficiency of its exclusionary globalised capitalism.

Countering the idea of siege, this chapter brings forth that the movement of people through Lesbos is a historical feature of the island. Alongside the making and shaping of borders, ‘refugeeness’ has characterised the place and its inhabitants for decades. New is the scale of the attempt to create an infrastructure to control movement, through the progressive construction of the EU border regime since the 1990s. This regime is a patchwork of policies and actors with different political mandates and interests in the island, producing a politicised borderland where the political stakes materialise into tangible and visually displayed infrastructure – military camps surrounded by barbed wire, overcrowded with people on the move, patrolling coast guards and stranded life-vests. The EU–Turkey deal is a capstone that hardens previous attempts to control migration, partially reversing dynamics by sending people on the move back to Turkey, resulting in a more strictly enforced European physical border. Despite this attempt, people keep on arriving and are held captive in Lesbos, subjected to slow administrative procedures and largely dependent on the help of humanitarian actors. In such a context, humanitarian work is inevitably borderwork, as it seems implausible to refrain from participation in the making and shaping of the borders.

Lesbos has become a tool of discouragement to deter migration, notably through its effect on people on the move’s subjectivities and mental health. The display of this human suffering appeals to the humanitarian sentiment and calls for a humanitarian response, thereby possibly hiding the political root causes of the crisis and the instigated violence of borders. Yet, the impact of the performative borders seems to be twofold. While they are destructive for people on the move, borders and their performance apparently impact other persons witnessing the situation from afar. Several groups of individuals react in feeling the ‘need to do something’, which translates into an alleviation of the needs in the borderland through engagement as volunteer humanitarians.

¹⁸ Could this idea that Lesbos is rejected at the periphery actually be applied to the entire Greek country in its relation with the EU?

3. MOTIVATIONS FOR THE ENGAGEMENT OF VOLUNTEER HUMANITARIANS

Whereas volunteers eager to come to the aid of victims of conflict and oppression would previously have done so through political and sometimes military struggle, like Lord Byron in Greece, George Orwell in Spain, or Jean Genet in Palestine, today they do it via humanitarian assistance and advocacy, symbolised by Bob Geldof organising a concert for Ethiopia, Bernard Kouchner carrying a sack of rice on the Somalian shore, or George Clooney pleading for the persecuted people of Darfur.

Didier Fassin 2012, 7



Has humanitarian engagement replaced political struggle? The response by civil society to the so-called 'refugee crisis' since 2015 begs the question of the relationship between humanitarianism and politics. Witnessing suffering and injustice from afar, some individuals feel the need to 'do something', a humanitarian sentiment which is translated into a volunteer humanitarian engagement in Lesbos. Among the idiosyncrasies of these individuals, do biographical and discursive patterns emerge in the motivations for their engagement? And in the face of rising, populist politics and restrictive migration regimes, can these private initiatives to welcome and support people on the move be interpreted as a form of political engagement? In this chapter, I argue that volunteer humanitarianism in Lesbos, instigated by intrinsic motivations, moral sentiments of empathy and responsibility, and a feeling of disconnection with political representatives and governmental channels, can be considered as an *hors-cadres* political engagement.

3.1 Volunteer humanitarians

Voluntary work is defined as a 'formalised, public, and proactive choice to donate one's time and energy freely to benefit another person, group, or organisation' (Dutta-Bergman 2004, 355). The literature emphasises the 'natural urge' that people have to help fellow citizens, as well as the provision of a safe outlet for altruism and social concern (Sheard 1992, 122). The conceptualisation of voluntary work is a product of social relations and the organisation of labour. Early voluntary action can be related to religiously motivated charitable deeds. The volunteer can be perceived as a product of the industrialisation, as it redefined social class and the understanding of employment. The middle-class of Victorian societies would give rise to informal and individualised charitable acts that could be perceived as voluntary action (Taylor 2005). However, the term was first used in the 19th century for people who enrolled into the military without being conscripted (Carbonnier 2015, 190). The rise of the middle class in the 19th century instigated a surge of more formalised voluntary efforts, yielding philanthropic institutions and voluntary associations. More recently, the phenomena of volunteer tourism has arisen, motivated by a drive to 'give back', immerse oneself into another culture, seek camaraderie or develop family relationships (Brown 2005).

Thus, for decades, voluntary engagement has been an integral part of humanitarian action. It is inscribed into the charters of professional humanitarian organisations such as MSF (Abu Sa'Da 2012, 123) and constitutes one of the seven founding principles of the ICRC (ICRC 1979). Although volunteers provide a significant source of manpower and expertise to many professional humanitarian actors, they are seldom the drivers of action in these settings. In this study, I focus on organisations that have volunteers at their core, both in terms of planning and action, and that were created in an *ad hoc* manner in Lesbos since 2015.

In an ethnographic analysis of the events unfolding on the island of Lesbos, more specifically in the village of Skala Sikamineas, Papataxiarchis proposes a categorisation of the people working there. In addition to local fishermen and ‘grannies’, whom he names ‘ordinary people’, the author distinguishes between solidarians, volunteers, humanitarian professionals and e-volunteers. The author argues that the presence of the first is motivated by ‘strong ideological imperatives’ and inscribed in the ‘utopian project [of] making a self-organised collectivity built on ‘solidarity’ and ‘horizontality’ – bringing together people from all different quarters in order to stand by the refugees with ‘dignity’ (Papataxiarchis 2016, 8). The second category is composed of volunteers whose action is motivated by a will to help those considered as suffering. They respond to ‘needs’ and consider it a duty of compassion towards fellow human beings. The author writes that the third category is formed by humanitarian professionals, while the fourth uses humanitarian action for their e-career, being ‘ambitious performers, highly conscious of their volunteer personas and therefore very hard to miss: they look after their e-self, bear distinctive markers of identity and dress accordingly’ (Papataxiarchis 2016, 9). The object of my reflections here is the volunteer category, whose members will be called ‘volunteer humanitarians’. In spite of their portrayal by the media and by most of the solidarians as ‘questionable personalities with dubious motives’ (Tsoni 2016, 41), I will argue here that their motivations are more complex than naive feelings of compassion – based on a precondition of privilege inducing a social hierarchy – and entail a political component as well. I have chosen to focus on this social group as they seem to be the ones for which the boundary between humanitarian and political engagement is at its thinnest. Various studies have explored what motivates volunteers’ engagement and literature on the topic brings to light a continuum stretching from intrinsic to extrinsic motivations (Grönlund 2011, 853), which will now be discussed.

3.2 Intrinsic motivations: ‘I felt I lacked a purpose’

Intrinsic motivations can be considered ‘self-oriented actions’, and refer to the ways in which volunteers spoke about the relevance of volunteering for their own lives. Some of my interviewees decided to volunteer in Lesbos during a time of rupture or change in their lives. According to Siméant, such voids also characterised the lives of some of MSF’s founders in the late 1970s (Siméant 2001, 53). Examples included interviewees who found a sense of purpose as volunteers after finishing their studies, leaving a job or retiring. Though human biographies do not lend themselves to unilineal or functionalist explanations, my interlocutors themselves reflected on their volunteering experience in the context of their personal struggles. For instance, Zora, a 25 years old American, recounted that: “Around the time of my finals, I had a real sense of purpose and knew exactly why I was waking up in the morning. [...] Then I graduated and I felt I lacked a purpose”. Rehberg’s work on ‘reflexive

volunteers' sheds light on volunteers whose motivation stems from biographical discontinuity, for instance in the wake of a 'life crisis' or (voluntary) biographic reorientations (Rehberg 2005, 110). Other emotional moments such as the loss of a loved one are likely to influence the need to "do something meaningful". In 2016, someone also told me: "I just broke up with my girlfriend and thought that coming out to Lesbos to help was better than drinking alcohol or doing drugs". Thus, for some of my interlocutors, volunteering – and particularly 'helping others' – can give new meaning to a life that has lost its previous contours or direction. This is unsurprising, given the evidence that helping others contributes to individuals' sense of self and identity, and can even help in constructing a coherent identity in the face of adversity or contradiction (Grönlund 2011, 855). Volunteering may be a way of regaining a sense of coherence, by aligning one's actions with one's identity and values. Hitlin refers to this coherence (whether aspirational or real) between action and self-representation as self-acceptance (2007). Moreover, it can fulfil the need for social meaning and utility (Brauman 1995, 7). One of my interviewees pointed out with self-reflection that "people act in order to perform their identities. [...] In order to do anything, you have to convince yourself that it's in your self-interest. Therefore, if the identity that I've created for myself in my head is of the kind of guy who goes to Lesbos, then it's not a sacrifice to go to Lesbos". Not all of my interviewees were as explicit about how their motivations to volunteer related to how they see themselves, but a search for meaning was reflected throughout our conversations.

3.3 Moral sentiments: 'I had to do something'

A second theme of my interviewees' reflections on their decision to volunteer in Lesbos might be summarised in terms of 'moral sentiments': expressions of empathy and responsibility evidently emerged in the interviews. Whether my interviewees spoke about ruptures in their personal lives or not, they all framed their decision to come to Lesbos in terms of an 'extrinsic' impetus. Several of the volunteers I met during my first stay cited the 'iconic' (Goldberg 1991) image of Alan Kurdi lying face down on Turkish shore in September 2015. The toddler in blue pants and a red t-shirt triggered a wave of empathy. For Catherine, a 56 years old former businesswoman from the United Kingdom, it was a trigger of her departure:

That photograph of the little Alan Kurdi, in September, that little boy that drowned off the Turkish coast... [...] I think, like many people, that photograph made me think: 'Oh my goodness, what is happening in the world?' It made us want to investigate the situation and the more we found, [...] the more we wanted to do something.

This excerpt is a clear example of the productive effect that borders have on volunteers. Observing, although only through media, border closure resulting in death can be a 'call to action' (Prøitz 2017). "I came back from Lesbos at the end of August and saw the picture of the little Alan Kurdi. I thought: 'I haven't finished everything'. So I put my company

on hold, took the plane back and created my organisation”, explains the founder of one *ad hoc* organisation. My interviewees’ responses highlight that feelings of empathy in response to said picture motivated an altruistic action, often across national boundaries. I will explore the subsequent political implications of this action later in the study. For now, I would like to unpack the effect of Alan Kurdi’s image and other similar media triggers slightly more, as my interlocutors cited such images of death when speaking about their decision to volunteer.

For me it was not the child on the beach, but a picture with three children from Libya. I saw the picture and emailed the person who posted it, she didn’t know who they were. So I thought: ‘these three children died and we don’t even know their names. Enough is enough’.

This is an example of what Rygiel calls ‘dying to live’: the plight of people risking ‘their lives crossing borders, but also the legal and political mobilisation emerging in response’ (2016, 546). Images of violence and suffering from the border circulated widely in the media, and were a key point of reference in making sense of volunteers’ decision to come to Lesbos. Like Borja, a 28-year old Spanish engineer who took a few weeks holiday from his work in Madrid, many volunteers mention similar external elements triggering their departure, such as seeing “a documentary on TV that made me change the way I thought. Rescue operations were broadcasted and when I saw this situation, I found it so lamentable and felt the necessity to help in any way I could. Otherwise I would have felt bad, you know?” These moral sentiments discussed by my interviewees highlight the ‘humanitarian’ quality of their engagement. Such humanitarian sentiments refer to the urge to ‘do something’ when we witness people suffering and the impulse to try and alleviate their pain. It can subsequently be turned into a ‘humanitarian imperative’ to respond to the observed needs, whose ethical implications constitute the topic of next chapter. Almost everyone I spoke to recounted: “when the crisis started, I really wanted to do something”. The wording do something appears repeatedly in the interview. It however remains vague and the ways in which volunteers react and help their fellow human beings is at first not necessarily thought-through (Papataxiarchis 2016).

Before his three stays in Lesbos, John managed a shop that sells newspapers in a small town of the United Kingdom. At work, he read every day the headlines appealing to fears about migration and encountered those who read and believed them. Despite being personally well-informed and “knowing that the headlines were not the truth”, he felt it was problematic to sell newspapers. He recounts:

One day I was talking to somebody in the shop who had an image of the situation totally different from mine. She thought that we had no obligation to these people. We had a friendly discussion. As I was going home that night, I thought: ‘She is going

home and she will do nothing, and I am going home and I will do nothing.' Being well-informed and having the right views does not make you a better person if you do not act. So I thought I had to do something.

This excerpt illustrates John's sense of responsibility for not acting upon what he knew. Indeed, witnessing the situation from home not only sparks feelings of empathy and compassion. It also triggers an impression of responsibility, linked to one's privileged position, to which the need to 'do something' relates. Many individuals feel guilty about "staying comfortable in [their] house and thinking about everyone that has nothing". Here, the notion of privilege clearly appears: as North-Westerners, volunteer humanitarians will probably never have to cross the sea on a dinghy to find their desired life. This impression of privilege thus instils the injustice of the situation, from which an idea of personal responsibility and the obligation to help seems to arise.

"The obligation to help others increases the more you have the ability to help others. So it makes sense to me that pretty much the richest continent on earth has a very large obligation to help these refugees." Beyond a personal responsibility, my interviewees also discussed collective responsibility as wealthy Europeans and former colonising nations. Several of them, notably from the United Kingdom, mentioned the previous colonial expansion of their country as a trigger of a responsibility to welcome and protect. Moreover, many interviewees considered that the past and present involvement of many European countries and of the United States of America in the countries of origin of people moving from the Middle East and Africa creates an obligation to welcome people on their soil. This notion of responsibility, although entailing a strong moral component, also links volunteer engagement to political motives. Several volunteers considered that previous and current foreign policies such as colonialism and military interventions create an unequal repartition of wealth between the 'centre and the periphery' (Mbembe 2016) – the rich and the poor, the inside and the outside, the Europeans and the Others. Hence, it seems that several reasons to act ensue from moral sentiments: as individuals – altruism towards fellow human beings, as responsible country nationals of former colonial powers or countries conducting foreign military interventions, and as Europeans, "pretty much the richest continent on earth".

3.4 Political motivations

I felt angry. I don't know towards whom. I suppose, towards whoever was responsible. I think it's possible to be angry at a kind of empty space, at an outline.

In addition to the intrinsic motivations stemming from biographical discontinuities and the moral sentiments of empathy and responsibility – linked to migration as a revelatory factor of global inequalities, some of the interviewees mentioned additional reasons for their

departure. They regroup feelings of anger, frustration, disillusion and mistrust towards their political representatives and governmental channels. This general disappointment is bidirectional: part of it is targeting the response given to the crisis, while another is directed towards governments in general. In some interviews, political discontent was spontaneously mentioned as reasons for engaging in volunteering; in others, it was alluded to and follow-up questions enabled a deeper delve into the topic.

3.4.1 ... towards the response given to the crisis

The interviews challenge Chtouris and Miller's argument according to which volunteers' 'individual moral attitude is mainly presented as the outcome of inner struggling, search, and a self-critical view of lifestyle, rather than as a criticism of 'society's morality' or the indifference of others' (2017, 70). Indeed, they revealed a deep frustration and disillusion with states' policies and the morality of fellow citizens. Like Thoreau (1849) wrote that he could not recognise the American government as his government, as it was also the government of slaves, many volunteer humanitarians do not feel associated to political entities that let people drown at their borders. The image of death, mentioned as a trigger of action, shows here the political implications of the humanitarian sentiment:

Where I live, we still wake people. When the people die we just bring the body to the house and wake them for three days. So for me, it's like coming to a wake. If I'm your neighbour and your husband dies, I'll go and do your dishes, or bring food. Distributing tea here is a bit like that. Helping out in the crisis, that is what neighbours do.

Broader explorations around what Rygiel refers to as 'mobilisation around migrant and refugee deaths' (2016) highlight the salience of confronting death, which can seem to 'transgress the logic of the modern state and political subjectivity embedded in the figure of the citizen' (Rygiel, 2016, 547). Moreover, this moment can open up 'possibilities for imagining and practicing citizenship differently' (Rygiel 2016, 547), which transcend geographical, racial and class borders and result in a new form of international solidarity. The excerpt above shows that this mobilisation is also a response to a lost sense of community, comradeship or solidarity between neighbours at an individual level. Moreover, volunteer humanitarian engagement is a substitute to the lack of solidarity and appropriate action of politicians:

Donald Trump openly stated it, he doesn't want the refugees. At least, he is not a liar. Well, he is a liar, but at least he said it openly. François Hollande said 'I want them, but not now', so basically he doesn't want them. Angela Merkel said 'I want them, I don't want them anymore'. Everything is done in a haphazard way. [...] So now us, we are going to go and distribute clothes to them.

Here, this cynical urge to travel to Lesbos is connected to a necessity to fill in the gaps left by the *realpolitik* of governments. It is stated as a consequence of politicians opening and closing borders as they please. In addition to anger, disillusion also strongly emerges from the interviews and is clearly linked to the lack of political response given to arrivals of people on the move. Borja explains: “I’m paying with my own money and taking holiday from work to be here. So I would like that a little bit of the taxes I am paying to the Spanish government would go to this”. The impression of having to step in for his government, not only because it does not provide a political response, but also fails to offer a sufficient humanitarian one is clearly expressed in this statement. It seems that part of volunteer humanitarians’ engagement in Lesbos stems from a dissatisfaction with the lack of governmental action of politicians and translates into a lost sense of community. In turn, it creates a general disappointment and frustration with politics, which are not only directed towards the insufficient response given to the crisis, but also towards politics in general.

3.4.2 ... and towards politics in general

Indeed, a broader political discomfort appears in the interviews, expressed through feelings of frustration towards one’s government and fellow citizens electing it, lack of political representation, mistrust of those in power and feeling of injustice.

I was approaching my local MPs to try and get them to do something for refugee safe passage. But I was getting these political responses, nothing was helpful. And then came Brexit. Now I’m in a situation where I feel like I have no political representation. Because the politics of the UK is now directed inwards, there is no interest in the situation in Greece. So when Brexit came I decided to exit. [...] The fact that 52 % of the people voted in a xenophobic way was the final straw for me.

John’s explanation provides a crystal clear example of political elements triggering a humanitarian response. Although being politically conscious, he cannot become politically engaged as the people in power do not correspond to his expectations: hence his humanitarian engagement. These frustrations towards one’s government are echoed by Borja’s impression that “the political way, from the government, is not the way”. Many respondents, especially those from Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, outlined how they lost trust and faith in their fellow citizens and did not feel represented by the current elected leaders. It ties into the general disappointment in traditional political institutions, such as national parties. A volunteer gives the following explanation for his lack of involvement in government parties:

I’ve never joined a political party because I don’t trust myself to know whether such an abstract thing as government parties actually has an effect as concrete as they

say it would. [...] Whereas it's actually very simple to realise that by handing someone a cup of tea, you are slightly improving their well-being.

What he explains here underlines once more the disappointment with governmental political channels, whose outcomes are doubted. It concurs with the way Anderson and Rieff (2005) describe the last decade, as a 'dangerous historical moment' during which national sovereignty is eroding without yet being replaced by global governance. Many interviewees recounted a decreased interest in traditional parties and therefore less interest in engaging with them. Currently, individuals also seem to consider that politics do not provide a social meaning sufficient to enable 'real change':

It is killing me because I believed in it. I was 18, I had the right to vote, and I believed in it. But now I've lost all my illusions. I'm 23 years old and I don't believe in politics anymore. I've lost my hopes for a real change.

When Louis, a 23 year old French self-considered 'online militant' who has studied political science and international relations, says that he does not "believe in politics anymore", it shows that observing the lack of decent political response upholding the rights of people on the move seems to push people to desert the traditional political realm. However, this lack of trust in the political system provides an incentive to look for another way of acting. In addition to a sense that politics is "not the way", the majority of my interlocutors had the impression that they lacked necessary skills to engage in traditional political channels. The field coordinator of a search and rescue *ad hoc* organisation explains that:

I'm good at driving boats and rescuing people, not at sitting in an office in Germany. So I'm better at doing the first aid, and someone else at doing the 'medical analysis' and finding the root causes. If I knew how to stop the roots, I would say 'stop all the weapon production in Germany'. I don't have the power to do that, but I have the power to take people out of the water. Other people have other skills, are maybe good politicians.

What is most interesting here is the idea that the political world is unreachable, its political parties not trusted to enact change, and the root causes of the situation are too important to be acted upon by individuals. The disconnections felt with the government are many: anger, frustration, disillusion, mistrust, disbelief, lack of representation, and the feeling not to be able to participate. They seem to prevent my interviewees – at least those who would have been willing to do so – from transforming their political consciousness into political engagement. An option remains: a humanitarian engagement, which recognises and embraces its political components.

3.5 Volunteer humanitarianism, an *hors-cadres* political engagement?

Kaldor considers that an important part of the ideological burden to 'sustain the dream' has fallen on the emergent global civil society (2003), to which volunteers pertain. This burden can also be linked back to the previous section, where the responsibility to help emerged to counter global inequalities, notably triggered by foreign interventionism. One could argue that the disbelief that traditional parties can sustain the ideological dream have appeared more saliently after the election of Donald Trump, Brexit or the economic and political turmoil in which Spain has been for years. In light of these considerations, it is possible to extrapolate and compare this situation with Rony Brauman's description of the 1970s, when MSF was founded. The former president of MSF described it as a time when politics and religion underwent a crisis, where humanitarianism had to take over the need for social meaning and utility in an 'area incrementally deserted by its traditional occupants' (Brauman 1995, 7). I imagine that a parallel can be drawn with today's political environment.

Belloni considers humanitarianism as a 'political and normative alternative to the still predominant Westphalian system which has characterised international relations for the better part of the last three and a half centuries' (2007, 451). Hence, when politicians disappoint and one does not feel the ability to enter traditional political frameworks, the interviews revealed that "helping" and "being there" is considered by many volunteer humanitarians as a way to act politically *hors-cadres*.

There is a link between the fact that I was angry and the fact that I came. And it's not just the link of me noticing that [the politicians] weren't doing the job and that I can help do that job. It was also a sense of... I suppose something like 'spite against those twats who are just so inhumane as to not help these people'.

Humanitarian engagement is here considered as a direct response to growing populism, by exiting traditional frameworks of action. Beyond this, an abstraction seems to take place whereby helping people immobilised in Lesbos is sensed as a way to indirectly react to Trump's election, by helping in situations that he is likely to create in the future, as Louis explains it: "I am here, in Lesbos; I am looking after refugees for three months. I am not there to figure out solutions against Donald Trump. I am here at 2000 per cent. Every battle in its own time". A discussion with Zora, the 25 year old American volunteer who has just finished her studies abroad and has continuously prolonged her stay as far as her visa allows, confirms this element. Referring to the Women's March against Donald Trump of 22 January 2017, Zora explains that "it was a bit hard to be here while everyone was active against Trump in the US and not to be walking with them. But the following day, it was difficult for them because the action was over. While me, here, I could continue to do something against it." Here, volunteering is equated to a form of political protest. However,

given the disillusion with traditional forms of government, this political engagement unfolds outside the conventional frameworks, or *hors-cadres*. Rancière considers that ‘there is politics when there is a people, when this people is not one with its state representatives, but declares and manifest itself in choosing its location and times’ (Rancière 2012, 48). This analysis has shown the separation, at least ideological, operating between the people and its state representatives. When political leaders direct their efforts toward clamping down on migration and preventing people on the move from reaching European soil, some individual citizens, conscious of their privilege, jump in to help, outside of governmental structures. Hence, Rancière’s idea seems to concord with the understanding of volunteer humanitarianism as a form of *hors-cadres* engagement, an ‘autonomous expression of the people’ (2012), which sets and pursues an agenda diverging from the official one. Yet, may this type of *hors-cadres* political engagement solely be a way to ‘respond to our most immediate emotions and ease our consciences, whilst at the same time ignoring the structural changes [...]’ necessary to ease the tensions? (Exteberría 2001, 95). This humanitarian sentiment, turned into a humanitarian imperative to respond to arising needs, can produce unintended negative consequences. When enacted in a borderland, humanitarian borderwork risks hiding the violence of borders, even participating in their construction.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter discusses the different reasons why individual citizens decided to respond to the perceived ‘refugee crisis’ through a volunteer humanitarian engagement in Lesbos. It demonstrates that part of the motivation is intrinsic, when times of rupture or change in people’s lives create a quest for renewed social meaning and utility. Additionally, moral sentiments influence the decision process, illustrated by the variations on ‘I had to do something’ I have documented. Empathy, notably triggered by images of death through border performance on the shores of Europe was alluded to by all volunteers. Said moral sentiment relies on the principle of altruism, implying that fellow human beings, especially if they are neighbours, support each other in times of crisis. Responsibility and the ‘obligation to help’ are moral sentiments that surfaced frequently. The sentiment arises from the realisation of one’s privileged position, prompted by an unequal global wealth distribution and contrasting experiences of mobility (Mbembe 2016). The realisation is likely linked to a global consciousness and the growth of the feeling that people ‘live in one world’ (Ikenberry and Keane 2003), ensuing from globalisation, yet reveals a lost sense of community. Another source of the feeling of responsibility is the motivation to account for the colonial past and military involvement in war-torn countries of certain states.

For many of the interviewed volunteers, humanitarian engagement also originates from a disconnection with political representatives and governmental processes. Part of said disconnection is due to the perceived insufficient response to the crisis – the shutting down of borders and provision of humanitarian aid in transit countries, focusing on bodily needs, instead of an appropriate political response. Another part is aimed at “politics in general”. A considerable share of the volunteers seems to have been politically conscious before their departure, yet their disconnection from political representation and governmental procedures prevented them from becoming politically engaged in their home countries. Correspondingly, a disbelief in the efficiency of politics and the idea that the “governmental way is not the way” ruled.

So, is volunteer humanitarian engagement in Lesbos the substitute for a political struggle? The analysis argues that volunteer humanitarian engagement is a form of *hors-cadres* political engagement. Given the disconnection with political representatives and governmental channels, the need to “do something” is fulfilled in Lesbos through the alleviation of the consequences of the crisis. This engagement seems to be metaphorically interpreted by several volunteer humanitarians as a response to the election of Donald Trump or Brexit. Underlying motivations aside, could such a symptoms-focused humanitarian engagement create unintended consequences when carried out through humanitarian borderwork in a politicised borderland? Further, could the impact of volunteer humanitarian engagement allow a shift from political consciousness to political engagement? These are the questions addressed in the subsequent chapters.

4. POLITICO-ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE HUMANITARIAN BORDERWORK OF AD HOC ORGANISATIONS

Boots on feet, clothes on backs, warm people with food... That's what we're here for. The rest is politics and should be left to politicians.

Jack, volunteer humanitarian, 2017



In the previous chapter, I hinted to the idea that some of the volunteer humanitarians leave to Lesbos in order to act *hors-cadres*, away from disappointing political representatives and outside of governmental frameworks they have been deceived by. They also depart as a sign of protest against the political mismanagement of the crisis. In turn, this chapter observes that the work of humanitarian volunteers is unavoidably inscribed within a politicised sphere. By exploring volunteers' interactions and responses to the political conundrum of humanitarianism in Lesbos, this section strives to detail how some of the political elements present in the dynamics between humanitarian borderwork actors materialise. It addresses volunteer humanitarianism in a politicised borderland and scrutinises the specificities and politico-ethical components of humanitarian borderwork. These give rise to numerous questions: Do we have to respond to all needs? How far should we collaborate with the authorities or the coastguards? Are we becoming accomplices of the EU border control system by working in detention facilities? Shall we help in deportations? In carrying out humanitarian borderwork, the risk to impact the production of borders (Pallister-Wilkins 2017a) seems high.

The first half of this chapter sketches some of the visible and invisible political dynamics, interactions and tensions between humanitarian borderwork actors since the EU-Turkey deal. The second section discusses the different responses that individuals and their *ad hoc* organisations are willing to engage in – analysed through Hirschman's framework of 'loyalty, voice and exit' (1970), and the ethical implications thereof.

4.1 Dynamics of humanitarian borderwork actors

4.1.1 Ad hoc organisations

Small-scale *ad hoc* organisations differ from professional organisations in various ways. The two most relevant diverging characteristics are that *ad hoc* organisations take on a more 'grassroots' approach and are acting more independently.

For instance, in Kara Tepe, a considerable proportion of the long-term volunteer staff of *ad hoc* organisations is composed of people on the move. They are responsible for the tea point, the cooking, translation, and often work with one organisation in the morning, another in the afternoon and a third one in the evening. Their interrelations with other people on the move help shaping the humanitarian activities to respond to their needs. This allows a more inclusive approach, where people on the move play a facilitating role. In addition to avoiding some of the pitfalls of top-down approaches, it also has a positive effect for people on the move: "Before, I was always thinking about Iraq. Now that I am volunteering, I'm much happier: I have friends and I'm helping people, so I don't think too much anymore", says Hussein, a 17-year old Iraqi man from Sinjar who has been in the camp since February 2016

and now works as a shoe maker, at the tea point and as a translator. Additionally, one could argue that it might help downplaying the ‘silent mental health crisis’ (Human Rights Watch 2017) already alluded to. I also observed another element exemplifying different degrees of horizontality: while professional organisations often referred to people on the move as ‘PoC’ [‘People of Concern’], *ad hoc* ones would use ‘guests’ or ‘residents’. Despite being a symbolic element, this hints to different levels of bureaucratisation, different perceptions of people on the move.

The second main characteristic is independence. Most *ad hoc* organisations mainly rely on private funding, either provided by volunteer humanitarians themselves or by their family and friends back home. “For smaller organisations that don’t have government ties and do not depend on big funding schemes, it is easier to do what you believe in and what you want to do”, explains the founder of an *ad hoc* organisation. On the other hand, most professional organisations are largely state-funded – with a few exceptions which rely on private funding. This raises the question of their independence from states and the risk to become ‘an instrument of their foreign policy [...] that they tend to [...] to their interests’ (Humanitarian Studies Unit 2001, 10). Moreover, while commonly professional organisations commonly act under a mandate, *ad hoc* ones are mission-drive.

For these reasons, *ad hoc* organisations have more room for manoeuvre to avoid participating in the making of borders. However, when operating in such a politicised environment, playing no part in it appears difficult, especially when striving to professionalise.

4.1.2 On the road to professionalisation

One of the niches of the organisation I volunteered with in 2017 is clothes distribution. Upon arrival at the camp and every six weeks thereafter, people on the move come to the clothes tent. The first time I found myself under a dark tent again, surrounded by boxes of clothes, memories from 2016 started flooding back. Stress, clothes distributed hastily without certainty that the size is appropriate, crying of children shaken by the cold while their mothers try to warm them up, crumpled survival blankets lying on the floor. Nevertheless, the current situation cannot be compared to last year’s. Instead of the long queues of people off the boats, it is now a family who, every hour, comes to the door with a clothes voucher. Chaos has been replaced by a structured system. An inventory of clothes is kept and each distributed item is registered in a computer database, together with name and age of each family member and sometimes the number of items received. The clothes distribution is now more akin to shopping than the chaos it used to be. As the volunteers have progressively made the tent grow, the number of shelves offering clothes is increasing. However, in the meantime, the privacy of immobilised people is routinely intruded on. Indeed, twice a week, a time slot of the weekly planning is set for appointment-making. Name, nationality, number of

family members and number of the tent are collected in a small blue notebook. Without meaning to, I find myself asking to each newcomer: “Can I see your papers?” Unease. Are these words not supposed to come out of the mouths of policemen only? Does the need to increase the efficiency of the humanitarian action justify drawing near to the behaviour of law enforcement agencies? Whether one likes it or not, practices of *ad hoc* organisations become increasingly similar to governmental procedures along the road to professionalization. They can participate in the making of borders, and so they can work to reinforce the otherness of people on the move rather than asserting the human identity they share with everyone else. Moreover, they risk to become part of the ‘routine forms of control’ (Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins 2014) and reproduce the discrimination introduced by the categorisation of people on the move according to nationality, immigration and refugee frameworks: those that the authorities would not have deemed legitimate to receive papers would not be able to receive clothes; perpetuating the racialised border.

4.1.3 Power dynamics? ‘We are a neutral organisation’

Inter-agency coordination meetings take place at the General Secretariat for the Aegean and Island Policy in Mytilene. The imposing building is on the top of a hill that dominates the island’s capital. As the place is run by the Greek police, entrance and exit are controlled. Entering the building, I am made to hand over my passport, to disclose the exact time of my arrival and the name of the organisation I volunteer with. Thereafter, my name will be captured in a document, and shared through the UNHCR’s mailing list for Lesbos. During the meeting, the position of different actors in the room speaks to the power relationships and hierarchy at play between them. Representatives of humanitarian organisations, professional or *ad hoc*, sit in the centre of the room. UNHCR employees chair the meeting and stand at the front. During one of the meetings, a member of a law enforcement agency sits on a high chair at the back of the room. In his uniform, with arms and legs crossed in a presumptuous manner, he dominates the room. Once in a while, he voices his opinion, shouting, without waiting his turn to speak or introducing himself. A commissioner of the EU opens each session and sets the tone. While thanking the NGOs for the work accomplished, he emphasises the need to improve coordination with the Greek authorities. This is an interesting display of ‘the allegiance of humanitarian actors to institutional political authorities [...]; an alliance [that] entails the submission of humanitarian concerns to political interests’ (Bradol 2004, 21). In demonstrating the hierarchical relations between state officials, UNHCR and other humanitarian actors, these meetings raise the question of the influence of states’ interest in modulating humanitarian action. In the meeting, everyone seems allowed to express their opinion. Nevertheless, every time someone takes the floor, representatives of the UN agency insist that people reveal their name and affiliation. Hence, UNHCR

representatives repeatedly call to order people who have forgotten to introduce themselves. Criticism is permitted, but the critic must identify him- or herself. This reveals a form of power alluded to by Donini (2010), not only exerted over people it seeks to protect, but also over fellow humanitarian actors. Interestingly, when I approach a UNHCR representative and try to request an interview mentioning the EU-Turkey deal, I receive an icy reply: “We are a neutral organisation, I cannot talk about that”.

The answer of the UNHCR representative is a striking example of a dichotomy at play: on the one hand, my observations hint at a politicised interaction between humanitarian borderwork actors. There is a degree of control, exercised by the EU agents, the law enforcement officer and UNHCR representatives, demonstrating power dynamics. Yet on the other hand, the UNHCR representative tries to portray an image of neutrality and ‘works hard to distinguish their actions as apolitical’ (Barnett and Weiss 2008, 4). Based on these observations, one could argue that in the humanitarian borderwork, the approach considering politics to be a ‘moral pollutant’ (Barnett and Weiss 2008) holds less ground than accepting the impossibility for humanitarian actors to remain completely apolitical.

4.1.4 Changing perceptions of UNHCR

In the Asian countries, when we see a UNHCR jacket or t-shirt, we find hope in our heart. UNHCR is here, that’s the organisation that is helping in the whole world. In Afghanistan and Pakistan they are working very fast, very active. If you have a problem with the government they say ‘it is not under our control, but we will try’. Here they are not even trying, they say ‘we can’t do anything’.

“Where is the UNHCR?” Hardly disembarked from inflatable boats on the beach of Skala Sikamineas, it is not unusual for this question to be the first one on the lips of people on the move. The protection represented by the two [white] hands on the blue jacket of the UN agency employees seems to be looked for. Their absence on the beach of the island is noticed and disturbing. Are they not the ones supposed to facilitate arrivals and pave the way to protection? This section addresses varying perceptions of and positioning towards the UNHCR among *ad hoc* organisations, as this variety seems to be an indication of their degree of participation in the humanitarian borderwork and thereby the reproduction of borders.

When the general expectation is that the presence of the UNCHR will solve the situation, being confronted to the reduced presence of their staff and their role mainly as coordinator frustrates many volunteers. This is clearly expressed by a field coordinator: “UNHCR could be more of a support to us but it is not. It is here more to implement the states’ policies”. Some scholars argue in a similar direction. For instance, Belloni says that ‘sometimes reluctantly, UNHCR has accepted the assignment of helping victims on the

ground instead of bringing them to safety' (2007). Krever boldly argues that the UNHCR uses humanitarian discourse to mask 'what is fundamentally a shift to policies of containment – and the pursuit of States, not refugee, interests – which have undermined UNHCR's protection mandate' (2011, 589). The perception of this lack of support leads to a sense of frustration among people immobilised in Lesbos as well. After having repeatedly felt like he was "the ball, as UNHCR passes us to EASO and EASO passes us to UNHCR, without letting us know anything", Mahfooz, who has been immobilised in Moria for almost a year, recounts shouting at an employee: "Don't wear this jacket, you don't deserve it! It was not made for you, it was made for a responsible UNHCR". He then promised himself that "in the future, I will come back here, not as a refugee but as a useful UNHCR. To really help the refugees". Many of the *ad hoc* organisations seem to hold a perception of UNHCR close to the one of people on the move. Moreover, they seem to consider that part of their role is to remain suspicious of the UNHCR, just as Exteberría argues that one should remain 'critically suspicious of the state' (b2001, 96). The founder of them explains: "Criticising UNHCR is what we do. [...] I've seen ad hoc organisations, once they receive funding and get supported by UNHCR, they stop criticising it". *Ad hoc* organisations seem to consider that becoming an implementing partner of the UNHCR risks modifying one's way of working. Indeed, it is argued that UNHCR's role in Greece makes it 'collide with one of the core elements of its mandate: to advocate for the rights of refugees' (Fotiadis and Howden 2017). It is understandable: as it is their first operation of such scale inside the EU, its second largest donor, the UNHCR encounters difficulties to criticise the policies creating the need for its presence (Fotiadis and Howden 2017) – such as the EU-Turkey deal. Moreover, control and power dynamics are prevalent, as described in the previous section. Hence, one can imagine that once *ad hoc* organisations become implementing partners and fall under its mandate, they have to follow their guidelines, formalise their efforts and ostensibly lose independence from EU policies. Thereby, their participation in the shaping of borders – physical or racial, in reproducing policies differentiating between nationalities – may increase.

4.2 Defining the response: loyalty, voice, exit

After the previous contemplations of how some of the political elements present in the dynamics between humanitarian borderwork actors materialise, I will now move on to the ethical responses provided by said actors. My conversations with volunteer humanitarians and their varied responses show that most were aware that their work raises such politico-ethical tensions. Most of these tensions relate to whether one becomes complicit when entering into compromises (Lepora and Goodin 2013) and to how far one should go in responding to the humanitarian imperative. Responses to such situations entail politico-ethical elements and 'when law deviates from morality, it is morality that is of interest to us'

(Lepora and Goodin 2013, 8). This is arguably the case in Lesbos, where the procedures performed are ‘not in line with legal standards and the EU *acquis*’ (Dutch Council for Refugees et al. 2016, 41). Hence, it is all the more relevant to observe the politico-ethical and moral lines that volunteer humanitarians sketch when performing humanitarian borderwork, the questions they are brought to ask themselves and where they are placed on the continuum between complicity – a ‘graded moral notion [whose] badness comes in degrees’ (Lepora and Goodin 2013, 131), and the humanitarian imperative. The analysis of Hirschman (1970) can inform us on the prevailing ways of acting among *ad hoc* organisations. Hirschman analyses the different individual and collective responses to economic and political crises. He discerns three options: loyalty, voice and exit (Hirschman 1970). ‘Voice’ amounts to speaking up in protest and ‘loyalty’ to expressing that one has a role to play and hoping that the good will outweigh the bad. ‘Exit’ can mean literally leaving a camp and stopping an activity, or exiting from part of a collaboration about which one had so far agreed to compromise. The following three sections discuss responses along those three categories, where it must be noted that they are not mutually exclusive. Thus, one actor can pursue multiple types of response.

4.2.1 Loyalty: Compromises or disobedience to help

What can you do? There is a law. There is a state, a government. If they tell you ‘no’ and you do it, they will arrest you and the other NGOs. And if they arrest everybody, who will be there to help these people? [...] I’m here just to help, not to put my ideas above the refugees.

The approach described here by the field coordinator seems to correspond to Hirschman’s loyalty response (1970). Operating under the rules set by the state is considered to be better than not operating at all. The sense of loyalty towards the rules is strong and is seen as allowing loyalty towards people on the move. Yet, although *ad hoc* organisations have more room for manoeuvre than professional ones, working in the politicised borderspace requires them to lower the bar and make compromises. One of the compromises is the need to “hold back political opinions”. According to some of the founders of *ad hoc* organisations, providing independent and efficient humanitarian aid requires delinking one’s political opinion from one’s action.

I’m personally a very political person. I raise my voice in private whenever I can. But if your goal is to help the refugees, provide something for them, then you should take your personal political opinion back to fulfil the goal you want to reach. If you are just making troubles, because of your personal political opinion is that you don’t talk to the police, you have to leave, go home, and you help no refugee. So sometimes it’s better to talk to them and do a little compromise in order to be able to do your job.

This field coordinator gives more importance to the goals of his organisation than the means to which he resorts in order to attain them. Thus, although “talking to the police” is not necessarily something he would usually do in his private life, he accepts doing so in order to reach the overall goal of helping people on the move. The following excerpt is another telling example of ‘the durable tension between contestation and collaboration as imageries of the relation of governments to non-profit organisations and voluntary associations more generally’ (Clemens 2006, 224).

The proper way to help is to follow the rules and have a neutral relationship with the authorities. We had people here who were activists. I don't have problems with activists, but I have problems when you put your ideas above the refugees. When you are here, you leave your ideas and everything you believe outside, and you are here just to help.

In this case, it is the action of ‘helping’ that matters, no matter if that implies obeying rules one does not necessarily agree with, or leaving one’s political opinion aside. This idea is linked to the concept of ‘moral imperative’, which considers that ‘there is an obligation to provide humanitarian aid whenever it is needed’ (Rubenstein 2015, 6). More, it can be qualified as being ‘realist’. The realist approach means that one accepts the constraints imposed by national and international powers, without contesting them, in order to continue operating (Magone, Neuman, and Weissman 2011, 318). The reasoning of this search and rescue organisation is that if they exit, more people might die, as the coast guards will not jump in the water to rescue people, unlike the volunteer lifeguards. Instead, they obey to the authorities. Compliance may allow continued engagement, as well as preserve the mere possibility of a future intervention. Such compliance with authorities and laws, but also borders, can go as far letting people die:

If one boat full of people starts to sail from Turkey and after less than one mile sinks, I would not be able to help these people. I can't go to Turkey. I would have to let people drown.

This is a striking example of how a physical administrative border, outlining the territories of Turkey and the EU, has been internalised by individuals. In not helping the drowning dinghy, one reifies the invisible fence; one even participates in the production of borders (Pallister-Wilkins 2017b, 19). Such a statement is a display of humanitarian borderwork. On the opposite, another way to compromise is by bypassing policies one disagrees with. There, loyalty to the rules leaves place to disobedience.

When a woman and her son burnt alive in Moria, our team snuck in, knowing we could be arrested for doing what we were doing. But it didn't matter at that point to us. We went tent by tent to check that the gas canister were safe and to teach people

how to use them. [...] This shows that we exist in a system, but we do not always cooperate with it.

There, the only type of loyalty that remains is the one towards people on the move and to a form of 'civil disobedience' (Thoreau 1849). As per Thoreau, 'under a government which imprisons any unfairly, the true place for a just man is also a prison'(1849). Here, in the face of death, it is decided not to follow the rules as the injustice would be too large. Nonetheless, the humanitarian imperative remains present. It is in order to provide aid that one is ready to bypass official rules. According to Helen and Mark, the British couple, complying with rules is also seen as the wrong path to go down as an *ad hoc* non-professional organisation:

Now the problem with [this organisation] is that they have become professionals. So they need authorisation for everything, which makes them useless to deal with arrivals because they are afraid of breaking the law. Technically, everything we do is against the law. [...] But in Greece it's better to do something and then ask for forgiveness than try and get permission in the first place. [...] They became professional. So now even if a boat lands, first thing they do is ring the police. If you've got to get permission in advance you've got no chance.

Such attempts to professionalise are considered negatively by some fellow *ad hoc* organisations. Professionalising means increasingly following the law, and the British couple regards law, in this context, as fundamentally bad. A last measure that one volunteer humanitarian mentioned as a way to go against complicity is to refuse discrimination based on the criterion of nationality, often imposed by the humanitarian system of control and care (Pallister-Wilkins 2016b).

One thing we do different that shows our refusal to be complicit is that we refuse to discriminate. We don't say: 'because you're Algerian, because you are not Syrian, because you are not the attractive refugee, we won't help you'.

Here, the racialised border is being torn down by the room for manoeuvre that *ad hoc* organisations have. However present, the impact of the disobedience strategy might remain limited. Although these actions give back agency to volunteer humanitarians obliged to work in a restricted and politicised environment, they can be considered as one way to feel ethically in line with oneself and have the impression not to be complicit. Going back to Hirschman's framework, the next section will explore another archetype of response: voice.

4.2.2 Voice: 'We are the watchdogs'

While explaining that they need to collaborate with authorities and coast guards in order to operate, the *ad hoc* organisations conducting search and rescue operations also outline another way of responding. Operating, they have the possibility to witness the working ways

of said actors, and possibly denounce them: “The officials and the coastguards act differently when we are here or not. If there is something that goes wrong we take pictures, we raise our voices and tell the world what is going on here”. In case of important violations, this *ad hoc* organisation resorts to the ‘voice’ option. This seems to be a way to maintain agency. However, their field coordinator also admits that “if we go to the media for everything, we might have to leave the island. So sometimes it’s better to talk to them and do a little compromise in order to be able to do our work”. Hence, given the highly politicised environment, the possibility of voicing concerns remains restricted and limited, as it is likely to result in forced exit. The interviewees explained that since the EU-Turkey deal, their search and rescue operations are subject to the coastguards’ approval. Not only does it restrict their ability to go out when spotting a drowning dinghy; it also limits the democratic option of speaking up. Another organisation, whose work is not dependent on official authorisations, is less concerned about irritating the authorities:

We have no problem going to the press and saying that there is a problem in this place that is not being addressed fully. It obviously makes the authorities irritated, but we have spoken out as the watchdogs so many times, so I don’t think we are complicit.

The lack of status and often recognition provides *ad hoc* organisations with the capacity to negotiate their presence and voice concerns with less fear of consequences. As discussed in previous sections, this capacity to navigate one’s way through the imposed rules probably diminishes the more professional an organisation becomes, when it has to ensure long-term relations with the authorities and other organisations, in addition to funding concerns. Loyalty and voice are not mutually exclusive: oftentimes, actors indicate a willingness to operate within the system whilst the option of voicing concerns when deemed absolutely necessary remains. Thereby, a combination of the two responses provides a coping mechanism in face of the compromise they perceive to be forced upon them.

4.2.3 Exit: Ethical red lines

Striving to provide a neutral and independent humanitarian action in a politicised borderland prompts ethical questionings. Where does one draw the line between collaboration and complicity? Are there risks of being instrumentalised? The interviews demonstrated that *ad hoc* organisations have, after lengthy discussions, set themselves ethical red lines. They represent Hirschman’s ‘exit’ mode of action and are examples of volunteer humanitarians setting agendas which are different from the official ones (Ranci re 1998). Having to reflect on how far one is ready to go obliges volunteer humanitarians to realise that their roles go beyond merely providing material assistance and mental support; it can also have political implications. Interviewed *ad hoc* organisations have mentioned the following actions as

posing ethical questions: doing police work, helping during deportations and working in Moria. For most of them, it seems that collaborating in these tasks would bring them to infringe the ‘do no harm’ approach, which consists in preventing and mitigating ‘any negative impact of [one’s] action on affected populations’ (UNHCR 2015a). Exiting takes several forms: it can mean literally leaving a camp and stopping an activity, or exiting from part of a collaboration about which one had so far agreed to compromise. However, perceptions of where to set the red lines are nuanced and vary among individuals.

‘Doing Police Work’

Before the deal, we had a lot of refugee boats and no military and no police. Now we have no refugee boats and a lot of police.

One of the consequences of the EU-Turkey deal is a sharp increase in the number of law enforcement officers in Lesbos, be they from Frontex, the military, police, border patrol or immigration officers. Across Greece, the number of ‘deployed experts’ from Frontex and EASO amounts to 1206¹⁹ (European Commission 2017). Their role is notably to ensure the smooth implementation of the deal, as well as enforcement of national and European laws. Amidst this array of actors, the proportion of volunteer humanitarians has decreased. Willing to compromise and collaborate in order to ‘help’, there is a risk that their humanitarian borderwork ends up conflated with the aims of law enforcement officers. When asked about his ethical limits, the field coordinator of an *ad hoc* organisation underlines the importance that their activities are not those of the police. Should it be the case, he withdraws from part of the collaboration.

We don’t do police work. When [the coastguards] ask: ‘do you know who is the driver of the boat? Because he is a smuggler’, I say that I don’t know. When on the beach someone is running away from the group, even if we received an order from the coastguards to do so, we will not run after him or her. This is not our business. I would never do it. Our task is rescuing people and not doing police work – this is an ethical thing. I would not go so far, cooperate so much with the authorities.

This type of response is situated between disobedience and exit. It does not explicitly go against the rules, yet it is just decided not to follow them. Not doing police work is a way to partly refrain from the system and to gain bits of personal agency among all its restrictions. Within the ‘exit’ response, two other actions trigger different approaches along the continuum between degrees of complicity and the humanitarian imperative: working in Moria and helping in deportations.

‘Helping During Deportations’

¹⁹ In July 2017.

Deportations have taken place as part of the EU-Turkey deal, and are normally executed by Frontex and the Greek police. During interagency meetings, the UNHCR casually enumerates the number, nationality and age of the people who have been deported to Turkey, while recognising the lack of monitoring processes and the little knowledge at hand about their fate after deportation. For most *ad hoc* organisations, participating in deportations is a red line. “I will always challenge deportations. [...] That’s my refusal to close my eyes to this place.” For some, the line is dependent on whether one is aware of being a ‘contributory agent’ (Lepora and Goodin 2013, 134):

If I were asked to help in deportations because there is no service, I would naturally agree to escort them; they will be deported anyway no matter what we do. It is better for them to be deported in good conditions. It is precisely because I am ethical that I am providing. [...] Unless I am being told ‘if you escort him to the scaffold we will kill him. If you do not, we will not kill him’. Only then naturally I would not escort him. However, as soon as you can facilitate and relieve the lives of these people you have to do so. It is the only purpose of the things I do. And the ones who are to be deported will be deported anyway.

Provided the deportee’s death does not depend on him, this founder of an organisation would accept to take part in deportations. In seeking to alleviate the needs of people on the move and possibly making the deportation process sound more acceptable, this founder of an organisation risks hiding the violence thereof. If more information about the humanitarian consequences of deportations were available, it might possibly show that helping in such processes actually brings people to the scaffold and constitutes a very strong element of border-making. However, if this person was told that ‘if you escort him to the scaffold, we will kill him’, he would realise the extent of his role as a contributory agent. Thereby, aware of his participation to the plan laid out by the ‘principal agents’ (Lepora and Goodin 2013, 134), who constitute the wrong, he would exit. Essentially, limits to complicity are drawn by self-imposed red lines. Personal perceptions of these lines ensure that volunteer humanitarians support an agenda that can differ from the one imposed by states (Ranci re 1998), thus possibly reducing their impact on the construction of borders.

‘Working In Moria’

As a detention facility, a hotspot and a militarised space, Moria is a camp where hard and soft borders (Eder 2006) are made. More than anywhere else on the island, humanitarian borderwork is accomplished between its high barbed-wired fences. As Exteberr a argues, as soon as aid is militarised, ‘even tangentially – it becomes politicised, [...] the designed neutrality – and often impartiality – breaks down’ (2001, 95). Several interviewees mentioned that “because Moria is just a closed area, it was not an option for me to go there”. When the EU-Turkey deal entered into force in March 2016, many NGOs and *ad hoc* organisations

decided to leave Moria to oppose measures of detention and avoid becoming complicit. At this occasion, MSF released the following statement: 'We took the extremely difficult decision to end our activities in Moria because continuing to work inside would make us complicit in a system we consider to be both unfair and inhumane' (MSF 2016). According to Pallister-Wilkins, these spaces are suitable as hotspots because they 'are spaces outside the control of humanitarian practitioners' (2016b). There, the 'state of exception' described by Agamben (2005) is particularly strong. Most of the *ad hoc* organisations followed the same logic and left the detention facility:

When the [EU-Turkey deal] was released and Moria turned into a detention facility, it happened very quickly. That was a huge shock for us. We chose not to come back. It was a very difficult decision to make. What should we focus on? The moral issue was: what is humanitarian help? Does working in detention facilities actually mean that we make things easier for authorities, which is not what we want? It's one of the most difficult situations, to decide what to do in a situation like that: leave people more vulnerable or help facilitate detention if you continue working?

This excerpt shows that confrontation with restrictive policies triggers politico-ethical reflections, notably on the notion of collaboration with authorities. In agreeing to carry out humanitarian action in Moria, this organisation could enter into Lepora and Goodin's understanding of collaboration, 'which requires the collaborator to conform his actions to the wrongful plan laid down by the principals' (2013, 131). Yet deciding whether to leave or remain is an intricate question, as it goes against the humanitarian imperative to provide assistance whenever needs arise. It is a clear example of a moment when 'one and the same action might contribute paradoxically to a wrong, but at the same time be effective in mitigating negative consequences of the wrong' (Lepora and Goodin 2013, 145). Mitigating such consequences is the approach chosen by another *ad hoc* organisation:

When the deal was struck, Moria became a sort of entrenched camp; NGOs were leaving one after another. I have been asked why I was not leaving. I said why would I? I am here to help people, not to do politics. If you leave they will be punished twice. I was told "but you do not make things change that way." I am here to help people. Until we were told to stop, we distributed meals to refugees while being jailed with them, because we are here to do humanitarian action, not politics or religion.

The founder of this *ad hoc* organisation acknowledges that working in Moria is an ethical red line for many others, although he differentiates himself from them. In his statement, the action is justified again by the humanitarian imperative, and refusing to collaborate would be a political act. He follows the idea that it is better to 'deal with evildoers, maybe even in ways that contribute to their wrongdoing, if that is the only way to get humanitarian assistance to those in need' (Lepora and Goodin 2013, 145). In adopting a

strictly needs-based approach, without reflecting on what created them in the first place, there is a risk to overlook the political roots of a crisis presented as humanitarian.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter stresses that volunteer humanitarians operate in a politicised space, by outlining several of the political dynamics and their ethical implications on the volunteer humanitarians' response.

The first section traces some of the elements that differentiate *ad hoc* from professional organisations. The incorporation of people on the move in their staff allows for an inclusive and more horizontal approach. Thereby, *ad hoc* organisations are likely to operate closer to the interests of people on the move. Moreover, their independence in terms of funding and mandate is presumed to facilitate operational independence, loosely translated as allowing them to do 'what they believe in and what they want to do'. The interviewees indicate that they perceive that professionalisation of *ad hoc* organisation leads to an erosion of those differences. Therefore, based on the independence and 'grass roots' nature of *ad hoc* organisations, I envision that *ad hoc* organisations are less likely to participate in the construction of borders.

Following Hirschman's (1970) framework on 'loyalty, voice, exit', the second section discusses ethical considerations and differentiates the responses that arise when operating in a borderland – where policies aim to clamp down on mobility, discourage people from coming and contain the ones already there. The extent to which actors accept compromise shapes their operational responses. 'Loyalty' is the response chosen when one is ready to 'compromise to help', for instance by holding one's political opinions back or collaborating with coast guards. In this readiness to compromise we undoubtedly see the internalisation of the administrative border – when a search and rescue organisation witnesses a "boat full of people sinking" in the Turkish waters without acting upon it, it unintentionally participates in border-making. A different way to compromise is to show loyalty not to the rules, but to people on the move, by disobeying rules. Refusing to differentiate between people based on their nationalities is an example of how to avoid complicity by protesting the implied racial border. 'Voice' describes the decision to publicly denounce or record phenomena, as well as conduct interpersonal negotiation to actively bring change to their operational capacity. 'Exit' describes the red lines that volunteer humanitarians refuse to cross: most notably 'doing police work', 'helping during deportations' and 'working in Moria'. They are considered to be beyond ethical limits and thereby leading to withdrawal - literally leaving a camp and stopping an activity, or exiting from part of a collaboration about which one had so far agreed to compromise. However, not all individuals set the same limits, therefore revealing the ethical continuum between the refusal to be complicit and the 'humanitarian imperative'; in –

hypothetically - accepting to work in Moria and help during deportations, one founder of an *ad hoc* organisation provides a striking demonstration of the role of humanitarian actors in hiding the violence of borders and even participating in their making and shaping.

The discussion of some of the politico-ethical implications of carrying out humanitarian borderwork triggers further questioning. What impact could such interactions with the politicized borderland, its political dynamics and the ethical questioning it prompts, have on volunteer humanitarians? Such interactions are likely to expand their awareness of political dynamics underlying the crisis. By seeing the hierarchy between and among political and humanitarian actors, they might understand the extended room for manoeuvre of *ad hoc* organisations and the importance of acting from below. Moreover, by having to reflect on their personal ethical limits, they can internalise the possible implications of their humanitarian acts and realise that their roles go beyond merely providing material assistance and mental support; it can also have political implications and impact border construction. Thence, volunteers previously only motivated by moral sentiments might become more politically conscious, whilst those who were already politically conscious are likely to expand their consciousness. Both might be nudged to transform this consciousness into a political engagement directed at the crisis' root causes upon return in their home countries. Confronted with these elements, the representation of the crisis as purely humanitarian is likely to be undermined.

5. IMPACT OF ENCOUNTERS WITH PEOPLE IMMOBILISED IN LESBOS

It has become more pressing than ever, today, to know and recognise the stranger from the site where he finds himself – blocked at the border, retained in the camp, growing up in the ghetto – and from where he watches, him, the world and my otherness.

Michel Agier, 2011, 11



In the following, I pose the question of the impact of volunteer humanitarianism on the volunteers. Through interviews, discussions, and observations, I have identified two main factors of change: the interactions with the politicised borderland, its actors and the ethical reflections it prompts; and the encounters between volunteer humanitarians and people immobilised in Lesbos. This chapter will focus on the latter encounters; encounters in which volunteer humanitarians learn about the immediate impact of life in Lesbos and the structural factors responsible for this immobility. Through these interactions and encounters, it seems that most volunteers humanise the debate surrounding the ‘refugee crisis’, yet become frustrated that their day to day operations – often carrying out basic tasks day in, day out – only respond to humanitarian concerns focusing on bodily needs of people on the move. Based on these findings, it appeared that at least part of the volunteers deconstruct the common-sense notion of a humanitarian crisis as they engage with its political causes and deepen a perception of the circumstances as ‘unfair’. By spending time in the camp and forming relationships with people on the move, many talk about a shift in perspective from people on the move as bearers of physical needs to bearers of rights. Fassin considers that ‘recognising a face also means recognising a right beyond any obligation, and hence a subject beyond any subjection [...]’ (2012, 254-5). Hence, I will contemplate if ‘borders can give rise to novel types of citizenship and subjectivity (Jansen, Celikates, and de Bloois 2014, 192) among volunteers, and discuss the potential long-term implications thereof. In a time when nationalism and political apathy make the development of humane asylum policies in the EU difficult, it is crucial to consider the spaces and relationships from which an alternative political engagement can arise. Here, I argue that borders do not only create novel types of citizenship and subjectivity among people on the move, but possibly also among those who come to Lesbos as volunteers. Those who experience the lack of European political will in Lesbos seem to leave the island with an enhanced political consciousness.

5.1 Humanising the debate

Just got home after ten hours of work. I can feel the cold inside my bones, my shoulders are so tense that I can barely move them and even my hips are hurting. But the most painful thing is to think about all the people who have been sleeping under tents for months in these conditions and who, unlike me, can't turn the heating on, jump under a hot shower and enjoy a warm tea under a pile of blankets.²⁰

This is what I wrote in my field diary, one evening, after having shared my day with people on the move. Here, my empathy is not triggered by pictures or articles, but

²⁰ Field work notes, 25.01.2017

encounters, and the sharing of – only one very limited part – of their daily lives. I do not happen to be the only volunteer humanitarian having experienced a growing feeling of empathy; the interviews have shown that these interactions have effects on numbers of volunteers: faces replace numbers, stories become real, and the shared humanity becomes more than an abstract concept, it is realised through relationships.

The emotional intensity of everyday life is high in Lesbos and several volunteers emphasised that they were “completely blown out emotionally”. Indeed, it is still difficult to remain composed when hearing stories about the injustice with which people on the move are treated. Alongside exhaustion and feeling overwhelmed, the volunteers I spoke to also talked about how their interactions with people on the move had turned the subjects of newspapers headlines into real human beings, and led them to relate with singular stories, as individuals. “I feel pleasantly surprised to be finally meeting the people I’ve read about in the news so far, and addressing them as people instead of headlines or numbers, explains a volunteer. Finally meeting the people” one has read about in the news allows volunteers to get to know individuals, not a shapeless mass often negatively portrayed. Similar to the way Alan Kurdi’s picture shifted the debate in Europe towards recognising ‘singular subjects fleeing war and terror’ (Prøitz 2017, 2) instead of ‘endless flows of unstoppable migrants’, personal encounters can also humanise the debate. Moreover, the sentiment of injustice that motivated some people to come is no longer solely rooted in media outlets or in statistics: it is rendered vividly real by stories, people, friends, which ground and anchor injustice in volunteers’ subjectivities in a more personal way. Volunteers referred to simple tasks, such as providing tea and coffee, as “the most enjoyable”, because they allowed for interactions with people on the move. Many sought out these encounters, sometimes even to the point where Suzanne, a 58 year old Irish woman, admitted that “there was also a macabre curiosity... I needed to know who these people are and how they came here...” This curiosity, apparently partially prompted by a desire to understand the tragic incidents scattered along the life paths of people on the move, finds many occasions to be satisfied in Lesbos.

Although snow covered the island in January 2017, there was no hot water for people immobilised in Kara Tepe. The *ad hoc* organisation I worked with provides hot water in the camp, and set up a tent where tea was served. Soon, it became a place of social gathering. When camp residents assembled to wait for tea and hot water to warm up for the day, the tent becomes the site of constant comings and goings. People filled up their thermoses, chatted and laughed. Mixing English, Arabic, French, or Farsi, often aided by hand gestures and facial expressions, volunteers and people on the move exchanged jokes and glimpses of their respective personal lives. Working at the tea tent allowed me to observe such interactions and their immediate effects on volunteers. Evenings were particularly conducive to such exchanges. Once night has settled down over the camp and only a few volunteers

keep the tea tent running, stories were told between smiles. I am at the back of the tent preparing tea for the following morning, listening to a conversation on the other side of the tent. Malik, a Yazidi man who fled Sinjar with his parents and younger siblings, recounts to a volunteer how ISIS attacked his city in 2014. He omits no details of his family's flight, and days and nights of waiting in the Sinjar Mountains, without neither food nor water. When the story comes to an end and Malik walks back to his tent, the volunteer turns to me with tears in his eyes: "This is not fair. He is a man just like me, we are the same age, yet he has been through so many more difficult events. And we, Europe, don't even treat him and his family like human beings deserving rights".

'Contact theory' argues that – under certain circumstances – contact with disliked groups 'can and does have a significant impact on the reduction of prejudice' (McLaren 2003, 911). The experience of volunteers like the one recounted above, of personal encounters, replacing numbers with faces, speak to contact theory's thesis. Clearly, conversations with people like Malik have a powerful effect on volunteers. The point is not that volunteers were prejudiced against people on the move before their departure, but my understanding is that personal contact and relationships reinforced my interlocutors' open-mindedness and their belief that tolerance among different groups is possible. McLaren further suggests that peaceful cohabitation between majority and minority groups is more likely when groups think of each other as equals and that 'one way to encourage more peaceful relations may be to encourage friendships between members of the different groups' (2003, 929). Hence, getting to know people on the move and forming friendships might enable a firmer acceptance of the Other, resulting in more harmonious living-together.

5.2 Triggering frustration

Clothes distribution takes place under a metallic structure covered by used UNHCR tarps, across the square from the tea tent. Tickets in hand, people enter to choose clothes. John, a long-term volunteer, is responsible for the distribution. In the volunteers' common house in downtown Mytilene, he spends some of his evenings at the kitchen table, doing the inventory of the day's distribution on an old computer. Everything must be ready when camp residents arrive for their appointments. John knows exactly how many volunteers he needs for an efficient and swift distribution, depending on the number of family members, which was written in the blue notebook during appointment hours. As described in the previous chapter, the tent's extension increasingly allows for a better display of the clothes, on wooden shelves, and lets people on the move choose. Instead of presenting three or four items to choose from, volunteers increasingly stand by, discuss styles and taste and reflect together with residents whether the red or orange shirt suits them better. Intimate incursions into a semblance of normal life. For a moment, borders recede into the background and differences

in status vanish. Thrown back into a time when these people did not depend on humanitarian actors for their food, clothes and shelter, without having a say or the possibility to express their preferences. Yet, after these moments it is even harder to face the reality of the situation, Borja recounts:

Once I was providing clothes to Leyla, a young girl from Iraq. We started speaking about Spanish football teams and players that she liked and at some point she looked at me and said: 'maybe you and me can go together to a match in Spain some time?' I said yes, but I felt horrible. I thought 'probably in some months, I'll be in Spain and you'll be in a plane on your way back to Iraq.' The most I can give her is hope. But I can't help her in the long term, which is what I would actually like.

This is not an isolated anecdote in the camp. One after the other, volunteers live through moments of intense frustration about the circumstances. As Zora describes it, the atmosphere can shift dramatically. "The normal situation is very stable and everyone is in a good mood. [...] And the other phase happens when seeing something that really touches me inside. I have had my moments when I really wanted to cry because of the situation or the discussion I had." When abstract descriptions of the crisis transform into human stories, volunteers are deeply touched and struggle with these accounts.

5.3 From empathy to injustice

On Sundays, clothes distribution in Kara Tepe is closed – a hint of the bureaucratisation of volunteer humanitarianism at play. Volunteers use the time to organise donations, check the inventory and prepare for the week ahead. In practice, this means spending the day moving boxes of clothing items. We pass them from hand to hand, from one warehouse – a simple container – to another. The repetitive physical work leaves time for introspection. While handing me a heavy cardboard box labelled 'Women winter long sleeves XS/S', Louis suddenly bursts out:

Moving boxes around is great, distributing a cup of tea and a warm jumper as well, but it won't get them out of here! I've been here for a while now, residents are starting to trust me, they tell me their stories and it touches me! It's frustrating not to be able to help more.

Such frustration and the feeling that one's help is not enough frequently arise, and 'usefulness' was a recurring theme among interviewees. Could these feelings of helplessness and frustration encourage volunteers to act upon the situation when returning home? Another element comes to increase the likelihood of a subsequent engagement: placing these encounters and experiences into the broader picture of the crisis. Several volunteers recounted that simply being in Lesbos made them read a lot and inform themselves on the topic in order to expand their understanding of the situation. "I now have a

better understanding of people's situation and of the process, the governmental shutdown, the policies... The lack of involvement of the world. The control..." According to Suzanne, these are some of the elements rendered more legible in Lesbos. Volunteers like her deepen their understanding of the political dynamics at play. More specifically, I found that my interlocutors made explicit mention of the political nature of the crisis. Even if they arrive merely wanting to 'do something' for the suffering bodies they heard of in the news, many volunteers are confronted with and try to make sense of the structural dimension of the situation. Hence, I argue that volunteer engagement, and particularly the personal encounters it allows, can lead to the deconstruction of a crisis initially presented as humanitarian and shift the focus on its political root causes. Although initially the volunteer whose engagement sounded the least political, after several months in Lesbos, Suzanne considered that "the better system is opening borders. All the countries will have to open their border". The *no-borders* slogan becomes thinkable for more apolitical volunteers. Other volunteers, who arrived in Lesbos convinced of the deadliness of borders, find their convictions reinforced: "Before coming here I already knew a lot of people from other cultures and I had an open mind. I was a supporter of the idea of opening borders. But being here makes me corroborate and reiterate my belief in opening borders and welcoming these people in European countries".

However, this evolution of perception does not seem to solely apply to physical, interstate borders. As the discussion on contact theory has examined, the encounter also reduces social boundaries. In addition to the 'national border which separates different nation-states' (Hage 2016, 43), another type of border appearing more saliently is the one 'dividing the global world, the racialised class border, which separates two different experiences of mobility in the world of national borders' (Hage 2016, 43). This appears clearly in the excerpt reproduced earlier in this analysis, where a very concrete discussion with an Leyla allows Borja to painfully realise these different experiences of mobility (Mbembe 2016): "in some months, I'll be in Spain and you'll be in a plane on your way back to Iraq". The notes that I jotted down in my field diary during my last day in Lesbos also speak to my realisation of the political nature of the crisis. Moreover, they further exemplify the different experiences of movement:

My last day at camp has come. Quickly bonding with volunteers and people on the move has a price: it makes it harder to say goodbye. However sad I feel about returning home, I cannot voice it in front of people immobilised in Lesbos. It is such a strong example of inequality and injustice. While my freedom of movement allowed me to decide when to come and leave, they are denied this right to movement. [...] On the plane back home, I look at the landscape passing by below me. With my red piece of paper called a passport, it took me a few minutes to board the plane and I'll be with my family and friends in a couple of hours. Just because I was lucky enough

to be born on the side of the fence where more economic wealth is concentrated, I received the right to move that others are denied.

The element justifying these opposite experiences is nothing but what Mbembe labels the ‘accident of our place of birth’ (2016, 175). The author argues that this accident signs who we are, how we are perceived, what other people take us for, the rights we are granted and in particular the right to move (Mbembe 2016). Encountering people on the move situated on the other side of this racialised border allows to measure the accidental nature of nationality. Bonding with them through a common humanity, and not the differentiating element of birthplaces, renders the latter irrelevant and reconfigures traditional understandings. In Lesbos, racialised and class borders become perceived through the prism of their unjust consequences. This injustice, understood before arriving as ‘an unfortunate but tolerable situation [...] becomes inexcusable, unjust or immoral’ (Snow et al. 1986).

I’m happy to distribute clothes all my life if that allows them to go to Athens. But if they don’t get papers it won’t change anything for them. We attack the symptoms, not the disease itself. It’s frustrating. So now it’s this ‘getting the paper’ that I want to work on.

Confrontation with ‘the intimacies and engagements that tragedy engenders’ (Cabot 2014, 221) might have the potential to become transformative. Humanising the debate around the ‘refugee crisis’ and realising the unfairness of the situation do, as I have discussed here, deepen the feeling of frustration. The borderland becomes a place where ‘subjectivities appear, are called into question, assert themselves and are transformed’ (Jansen, Celikates, and de Bloois 2014, 191). One can imagine that it will subsequently result in a political engagement directed towards the root causes of the crisis. Upon return in one’s home country, these evolving subjectivities might have longer-term consequences, as Nik exposes:

I think that we have to work short-term and long-term, work on the ground and change the policies. The good thing I saw is that many volunteers were young people of whom many were never involved in politics before. But this crisis made many of them become involved in it and advocate for refugee rights. This is bigger than just people coming over here.

5.4 Conclusion: Humanitarian borderwork inspiring subsequent engagement?

This chapter argues that through interactions and encounters, volunteers replace numbers by faces and can thereby humanise the debate surrounding the ‘refugee crisis’. Such contact can potentially reinforce their belief that tolerance among different groups is possible. The volunteers’ frustration with the situation in Lesbos can allow for the deconstruction of a crisis initially presented as humanitarian, and create or strengthen a political consciousness. Additionally, an evolution of perceptions by encountering the Other, facing the consequences

of the ‘accident of our place of birth’ (Mbembe 2016), can result in erosion of socially constructed borders. The injustice of the situation appears clearly and may replace initial feelings of empathy. The question that remains, then, is whether volunteers translate that potential perception of injustice and understanding of political root causes into ensuing action once they return – did their engagement in Lesbos inspire volunteer humanitarians’ action towards the political causes of the crisis?

The idea is supported by several of the founders of *ad hoc* organisations, who have seen many volunteers come and go, and therefore emphasise that humanitarian borderwork in Lesbos has led former volunteers to a political engagement in their home countries. In the interviews, one *ad hoc* organisation explicitly stated that inspiring and generating subsequent engagement is its goal. The will to go beyond one’s volunteer engagement, for instance through militant advocacy, was also mentioned by several interviewees. Most of them demonstrate that they have gained an enhanced political consciousness through their experience. Hence, they are likely to be nudged into a specific form of political engagement, not through the governmental channels, but from below. In the light of this, I hypothesise that volunteers participate in a process of dissemination of an alternative *forma mentis* – mindset (Gramsci 1971).

Interviews conducted in 2016 after volunteers had left Lesbos and regular exchanges with fellow volunteers upon our respective returns in 2017 hints at the modalities of this process. It seems that the dissemination of an alternative mindset happens within one’s direct environment, among family and friends, for whom former volunteers become trusted informants – “I see now that my friends and family listen much more to what I say because they realise that I saw the situation”, explains Clara. It also develops beyond such networks. Upon return, many volunteers resort to ‘educational talks’ or ‘awareness campaigns’ to strengthen people’s understanding of the crisis and share stories from the ground. They go to schools, write articles in newspapers, or organise discussions. In the interview, Louis mentioned that his motivation to come out to Lesbos was to give consistency to his activism. He has now created a campaign to raise awareness on the situation in Lesbos and its causes. Catherine, the 56 year old British volunteer, has been to three schools where children and parents were reunited to better their understanding of the crisis. In her presentation, she tried to pass on the stories she heard in Lesbos – asking notably “if Aleppo were your city, what would you do? Would you stay? Or would you go?” Thereby, she potentially recreates the process of humanising the debate she underwent. Indeed, it seems that people bring home stories about people that they encountered as human beings, give a humane face to an otherwise impersonal situation and in so doing counter narratives about an invasion of ‘swarms’ (Elgot and Taylor 2015), sometimes spread by the media. Beyond sharing people’s stories, they can now explain the structural and political issues that

triggered people's movement in the first place and then deprive them of their human and political rights. Subsequently, they are likely to diffuse this renewed understanding of migration, as a political act against global inequalities. Spreading, disseminating and distilling this alternative *forma mentis* could be a way to, in the long-term, act upon the political root causes of the crisis.

6. CONCLUSIONS

What are the dynamics at play between humanitarianism and politics in the volunteer humanitarian response in Lesbos? This work set out to analyse the different instances and forms in which these dynamics manifested.

Due to its location on the external border of the EU, Lesbos has been affected by migration for a long time. Attempts to prevent movement of people have progressively constructed the EU border regime; on its outmost limit, where varying political stakes converge, Lesbos became a borderland. As the arrivals of people on the move increased, politicians declared it a 'refugee crisis' – an unexpected emergency calling for a humanitarian response. Considering it to be a crisis allows a depoliticisation of the situation and provides a humanitarian response as a substitute for political action shifting responsibility from governments' onto humanitarian organisations' shoulders. Reacting to this feeling of siege, the EU-Turkey deal turned Lesbos into a zone of non-rights, at the periphery of Europe, outside of the community. Besides restricting their mobility, borders impact people on the move, modifying their affects and undermining their mental health. In response to this human suffering, presented as a humanitarian crisis, volunteer and professional humanitarians fly in to help, thereby potentially hiding the violence of borders.

Volunteer humanitarians depart for several reasons. Among them, are intrinsic motivations, moral sentiments of empathy triggered by said images and an impression of responsibility as nationals of former colonial powers or of countries conducting foreign military interventions, and as Europeans, born on the side of the fence where a disproportionate amount of wealth is concentrated. While volunteer humanitarians interviewed were all, at varying degrees, motivated by these elements, for some of them, humanitarian engagement also originated from a disconnection with political representatives and governmental processes in their home countries. Part of said disconnection is due to the perceived insufficient response to the crisis, whilst the other is directed at politics in general – a disbelief in the efficacy of politics and the idea that "the governmental way is not the way". Whilst a considerable share of the volunteer humanitarians seems to have been politically conscious before their departure, this disconnection appears to have prevented them to engage in traditional politics. Thence, the need to do something is fulfilled in Lesbos through the alleviation of the consequences of the crisis. This volunteer humanitarian engagement may thereby be perceived as a form of *hors-cadres* political engagement.

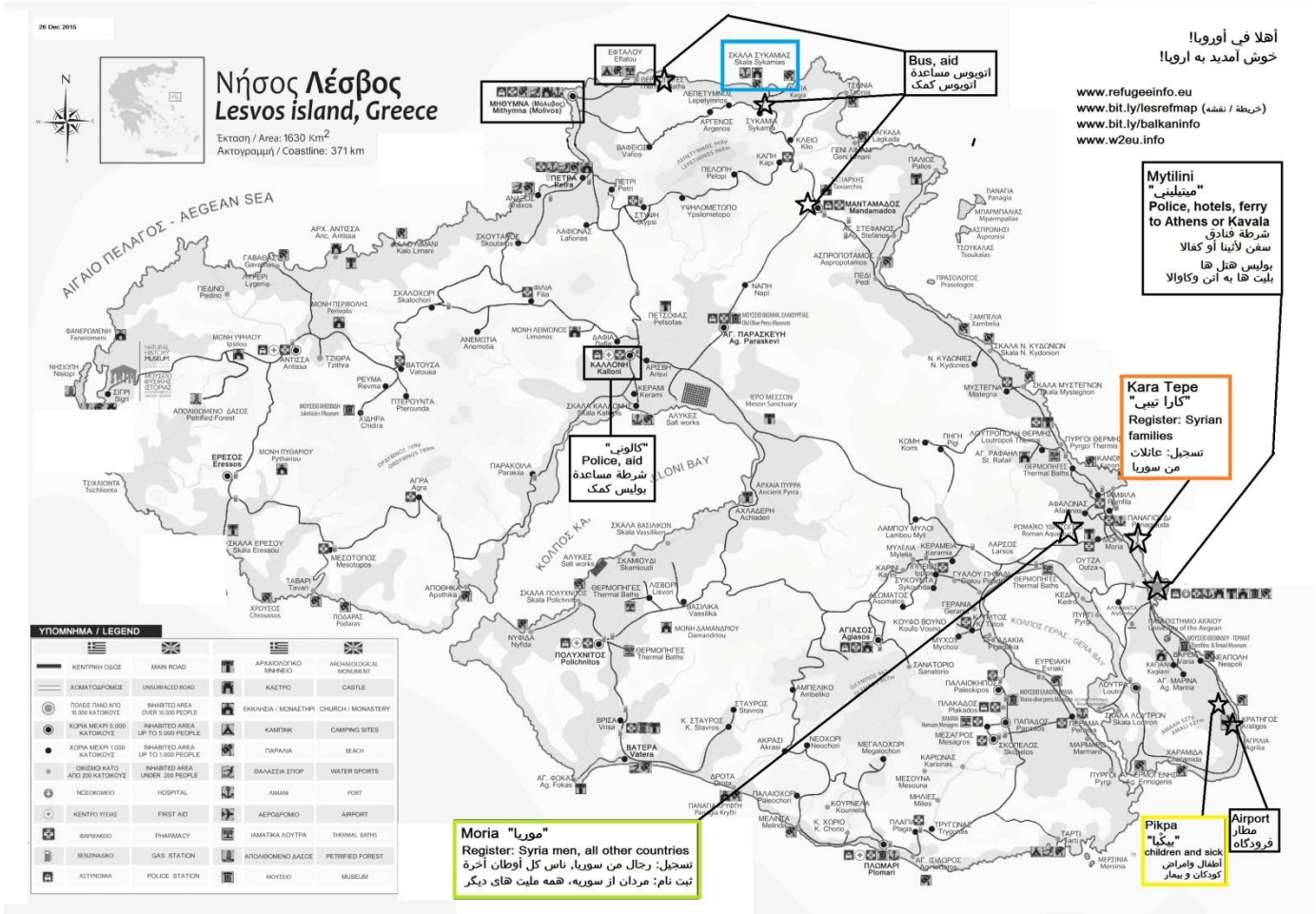
This form of *hors-cadres* political engagement, taking the shape of volunteer humanitarian borderwork, has a myriad of politico-ethical implications. Power dynamics influence relationships between political and humanitarian actors of the borderland. On the road to professionalization, the organisations risk reproducing governmental procedures and

racial discrimination by internalising certain discourses and practices, such as modes of categorisation. In humanitarian borderwork, remaining completely apolitical proves to be difficult. The likelihood of political implications of their actions apparently triggers ethical questioning among volunteer humanitarians. Said pitfalls are navigated through different responses: loyalty to people on the move, by compromising or disobeying; voice, in publicly denouncing degrading treatments of people on the move; and exit, the refusal to be complicit. Interviewees mentioned several actions during which collaboration could slip towards complicity: doing police work, helping during deportations and working in the Moria immigration detention centre. Differentiated responses to these elements reveal the ethical continuum between humanitarian imperative and refusal to be complicit. One can argue that these interactions with the politicised borderland and its actors impact volunteer humanitarians. By grasping the hierarchy and power dynamics between and among political and humanitarian actors, they might understand the extended room for manoeuvre of *ad hoc* organisations and the potential of acting from below. Having to reflect on their personal ethical limits, they can internalise the possible implications of their humanitarian acts and realise that their roles go beyond merely providing material assistance and mental support; it can also have political implications and impact border construction.

Beyond these interactions, encounters with people immobilised in Lesbos may also have an impact on volunteer humanitarians. Replacing numbers by faces allows them to humanise the debate surrounding the 'refugee crisis'. The injustice of the situation is rendered obvious by stories, people, friends, which ground and anchor this perception in volunteer humanitarians' subjectivities. Being confronted to fellow human beings with completely different life experiences also seems to reveal the 'accidental nature of our place of birth' (Mbembe 2016). It helps placing these encounters and experiences into the broader picture of the crisis, herein gaining an increased comprehension. Finally, while volunteering in the camp, frustration and the feeling that one's help is not enough as it fails to address the political root causes of the crisis frequently arise. The injustice of the situation appears clearly and may replace initial feelings of empathy. One can imagine that volunteer humanitarian engagement in Lesbos allows a deconstruction of the notion of 'refugee crisis', possibly nudging people towards a subsequent engagement aiming to address its political root causes. I hypothesise that upon return in their respective home countries, volunteer humanitarians participate in the dissemination of an alternative mindset. Could this dissemination of an alternative mindset, over years or decades, set the ground for a paradigm shift?

APPENDIX

Map of Lesbos, 26 December 2015



This map of Lesbos was used by volunteer humanitarians before the EU-Turkey deal, which prompted a change in the functions of the various camps. The village of Skala Sikamineas (indicated with blue) is where most of the boats were landing in 2015. This is the village where I volunteered during most of my first stay in 2016, as well as in Moria (indicated with green). In 2017, my demand to access Moria having been refused, I volunteered in Kara Tepe (indicated with orange).

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