

## (CROSS-)BORDER ACTIVISM ON THE WESTERN BALKANS ROUTE TO EUROPE: IN SEARCH OF A DEFINITION

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This paper looks into the phenomenon of (cross-)border activism emerging as a civil society response to the inability of states to provide a viable, humane response to the humanitarian situation resulting in the course of the “refugee crisis” of 2015-2016. It identifies (cross-)border activism as a potentially new, emerging social movement which can be understood in close relation to migrant activism, global justice and other civil society struggles. The paper argues that (cross-)border activism is distinct from other social movements in at least two respects: first, there is a strong bifurcation between “helpers” and “those to be helped,” resulting in largely asymmetrical relationships on the ground. Second, the real or perceived exigencies of an immediate emergency situation lead to the prioritization of rather short-term short-term goals often limited to short-term goals direct humanitarian aid to persons short-term goals en route. Considering, however, the continuum of possible interventions the notion of (cross-)border activism is capable of encompassing, the paper suggests a scale for positioning and further theorizing individual acts within the broader field: witnessing-assisting-disrupting. The paper argues that the ability and the willingness of individual activists to engage in certain types of (cross-)border activism but not others derives from their positioning vis a vis the state and the other activists on one hand and their understanding of the European border regime on the other. Ultimately, the paper argues that the ability of (cross-)border activism to establish itself in the long term as a broad, impactful movement will be dependent upon two factors: its capacity to shape a common understanding of the European border regime and its skill in defining the activists’ position within and towards it.

### Introduction

Ever since the beginning of summer 2015, civil society has proven vital in providing assistance to refugees entering Europe on the so-called Western route. Every day, volunteers, human rights defenders and humanitarian workers filled the protection gap many of the states have proven unable or unwilling to cover. Their activities ranged from direct medical aid to provision of information, food or clothing. Albeit typically labelled as “volunteers,” the actors varied, as did their methods of organizations, level of institutionalization, goals or means employed.

With the emergence of the current, so-called “refugee crisis”, some have resorted to the term “border activism” to describe the actions of humanitarian non-state actors assisting refugees on the Western Balkans route. In the mainstream academic literature, however, a precise definition, and along with it a sufficient understanding of the term, seems lacking. Without it, any further research of the phenomenon seems questionable.

This paper attempts to fill the void by developing a basic framework for identifying and classifying different players—as well as their actions—who fall under the broad category of (cross-)border activism. The paper recognizes that any kind of classification bears the risk of being inaccurate, overly simplistic or at worst even arbitrary, with individuals or groups overlapping, fitting into multiple “boxes” or fluidly moving from one to the other. The paper argues, however, that positioning in a basic roster is important as it helps us understand the commonalities and differences between different “activisms”. The paper attempts to answer the following questions: first, how do the different players understand their role vis a vis the refugees on one hand and the current European migration and border regime on the other?; second, what are the typical actions and where are the lines for cooperation between the different agents?; and third and most importantly, are the differences irreconcilable or can they be overcome on the basis of a common, shared identity?

Given its brevity, the paper does not attempt at presenting the full spectrum of cross-border activism(s), nor does it aim at offering a final definition. Rather, it aims to lay down a solid basis for further research and to offer insight into how existing social science theories might help us frame and understand the activism(s) emerging in the course of the current refugee crisis at the Central and South-Eastern borders of the European Union.

## Methodology

The theoretical underpinnings of this paper are based on mainstream theories of social movements on one hand and recent critical academia on migrant activism on the other. Where theory is to be matched with empiricism, I make use of my own experiences of being involved as an activist in movements assisting refugees for the past five years. I take into consideration in particular my two short-term voluntary stays in Belgrade and Idomeni in January and March 2016, respectively. Considering that my experiences are in no way representative for the whole movement, I further rely on the online presence of activist groups, in particular in social media, as well as news articles as secondary sources. For considerations of academic honesty, I feel it is important to stress that I am aware that my position and my own experiences may have shaped the way I view the issues under scrutiny.

## *Terminology and delimitations*

This section provides an overview of the terminology used as well as the potential research limitations of this paper. It shall help the reader understand certain terms the way I understand and apply them for the purposes of this particular paper. Nevertheless, this section does not attempt at providing a decisive argument or a final definition for each and every one of the terms used.

## Support en route

This paper focuses on assistance to individuals arriving in Europe on the so-called Western Balkans route, encompassing transit through countries such as Greece, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Hungary. Prior to the closure of the border between Greece and Macedonia, these countries served primarily

as countries of transit. Consequently, this paper focuses specifically on the assistance to refugees *en route*, i.e., while still travelling. As will be shown below, such assistance can take many forms and shapes. In this paper, I use the term “border” and “(cross-)border” activism interchangeably. Nevertheless, I use the latter in instances where I consider it important to stress that the activity at stake aims at or consists of assisting a refugee to actually cross a border. Support activities in the countries of final destination after refugees arrival are left out of focus of this paper.

The paper excludes any action involving any kind of financial transfer between the refugee and the actor under scrutiny for assistance or services offered. On the contrary, it encompasses primarily actions undertaken on a non-profit basis, in good faith and with the aim of assisting refugees. The author recognizes that the realities on the ground are far more complex and that, consequently, such delimitations are arbitrary and may lead to great simplification.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of finding a roster for classification, however, some level of simplification and abstraction seems necessary.

Time-wise, the scope of this paper is limited to events taking place between spring 2015 and autumn 2016. Again, such limitation is admittedly reductionist for at least two reasons. First, albeit in less significant numbers, refugees from the African continent were arriving to the coasts of Greece and Italy since the end of the 1990s, without gaining much attention from the European public. Second, even when focusing solely on the current “refugee crisis,” its beginnings can be traced back to several years earlier—i.e., the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the years 2012 or 2013 (Tinti & Tuesday, 2016, p. 243). Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, I focus on the rather short yet intense one-and-a-half-year period between 2015 and 2016, as this is the time frame in which the term “refugee crisis” emerged and started to resonate in the media and the public discourse. The majority of the activisms I am looking at emerged likewise in this period.

### Activists

A range of different terms has been used to label individuals assisting refugees on the Western Balkan route, ranging from “flight helpers” (Gkliati, 2016), “volunteers” and “humanitarian smugglers” (Tinti & Tuesday, 2016) to “traitors” (Culik, n.d.). In order to capture the multitude of activisms, this paper interprets the term EU “activist” broadly. From a legalistic perspective, an activist can be understood anyone falling under the category of “humanitarian non-state actor”. The paper focuses on actions of private persons, regardless of whether acting individually or as part of loose groups or well-established organizations. The term “non-state” is used to exclude actions by governmental officials or state agents. Derived from international law, the term similarly excludes private actors acting on behalf of the governments or whose actions are explicitly acknowledged by a government as its own. Thus, excluded are, for example, activities of private security companies who run detention centers in

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in the absence of coordinated state action, there can be situations where activists start taking over the role of police in order to ensure organized border crossing. Or, to the contrary, state security forces may refuse to follow the orders of their superiors and use their position to actually help refugees to cross the border.

some of the European Union Member States. The term “humanitarian” is used to exclude players who act with the aim of harming or exploiting refugees or otherwise profiting from their situation.

## Refugees

In this paper, I prefer referring to individuals arriving in Europe on the Western Balkan route commonly as “refugees”. Admittedly, the composition of arrivals can be best classified as “mixed flows,” including “refugees, asylum-seekers, economic migrants and other migrants” (IOM, n.d.). Nevertheless, I consider the term “refugee” better placed than that of “migrant” for the following reasons.

First and foremost, the term refugee stresses the particular vulnerability of a specific category of migrants who have suffered or are at particular risk of suffering serious human rights violations. While acknowledging that migrants and in particular migrant workers from countries outside of the EU often find themselves at risk of exploitation, trafficking or other human rights abuses, I argue that in the context of the current “refugee crisis” the term refugee captures the protection need better than that of the term migrant.

Second, applying the term refugee recognizes that the official recognition of refugee status in bureaucratic procedures is only declaratory and not constitutive for a person’s “refugee-ness”. From the perspective of public international law, for a person to be a refugee, whether he or she has been officially recognized as such by a state is irrelevant. In other words, a person is a refugee the moment he or she fulfils the conditions anchored in international (“Refugee Convention,” 1951), EU (“EU Qualification Directive,” 2011) or domestic legal instruments for identifying refugees.

Third, the statistics about the composition of arrivals and average recognition rates lead to the assumption that an important proportion of those arriving on the Western Balkan route last year were genuine refugees and will be recognized as such in the upcoming months or—depending on the length of the procedure—years. In 2015, Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans and Eritreans were the top four nationalities arriving to Europe, together representing 84% of the total Mediterranean arrivals (“Global Trends: Force Displacement,” 2015). All of these are either countries at war, characterized by generalized violence and human rights violations or, in the case of the latter, dictatorships.

Last but not least, from the perspective of persons working with individuals entering Europe, a clear distinction between refugees and migrants proves not only impossible but also redundant in practice but also redundant. When facing a person presenting himself or herself as a refugee, an activist will only hardly have the possibility, means, time or will to verify his/her claim. Moreover, he or she will also lack much of a reason to do so. Rather, the environment of an emergency situation will require the activist to assume the person he or she is facing is a refugee or, at the very least, at the moment of encounter in genuine need of assistance and support. The activist will thus typically act as if the person was a refugee.

As has been shown above, a range of practical, legal, statistical as well as moral arguments speaks in favor of referring to individuals arriving on the Western Balkan route to Europe as refugees. Moreover, I refuse to use the adjective “illegal” in relation to individuals and I also do not further categorize the nature of the entry or the stay of refugees. Any such classification is not only highly problematic from an ethical point of view.

### European border regime

I use the term “European border regime” to describe the sets of rules, policies and practices on the level of the European Union as well as individual member states, which aim at controlling, regulating and managing the entry and, to some extent, the movement of third country nationals within the EU.

Adopting a critical approach towards such a regime of control, I choose to use the term “refugee crisis” in quotation marks. While the language of crisis has been instrumentalized in order to categorize the period under scrutiny, I find it important to stress that in my view it is not the refugees who are a “problem” to be “solved” or “managed.” Instead, I understand the current crisis rather as a crisis of bad policies, or a lack of coherent policies or a crisis of empathy in the EU (Gunesch et al, 2016).

### Literature review

Migration studies have, themselves established as a self-standing academic discipline in the past couple of decades, followed by the field’s further diversification into subfields focusing on specific questions of citizenship, mobility, cosmopolitanism or multiculturalism and many others (Garelli & Tazzioli, 2013). Particularly the question of securitization and criminalization of migration has received significant academic attention in the past couple of decades. Likewise, a great deal has been written on the resistance against “immigration” policies, accompanied by the emergence and development of a refugee and migrants’ rights movement, including migrant activism or the European No Borders movement.

Meanwhile, despite the fact that the current “refugee crisis” has been unfolding for at least two years today, the majority of the literature seems to continue focusing on activities for, with and by refugees or migrants already *sur place*. Assistance to and actions taken by the people *on the move* remain uncovered in mainstream academia, with the gap slowly starting to close only in the last year (Stierl, 2016). In the following, I present a brief overview of selected theories of social movements and migration studies, which might pave the way when trying to academically analyze and categorize the phenomenon of today’s border activism. Given the brevity of the paper, I do not attempt to cover the entirety of the vast field of migration or social movement studies.

### Selected theories of social movements

We may want to conceptualize border activism as a new, emerging social movement *per se* or likewise simply as a new layer of already existing struggles. In both cases, well-established theories of social movements might be useful when trying to extract elements which may help us understand what border activism is, what

its individual components are and what its relationship with other kinds of movements or activisms and state structures might be.

McAdam defines social movements as “those organized efforts, on the part of excluded groups, to promote or resist changes in the structure of society that involve recourse to non-institutional forms of political participation” (McAdam, 1999). According to Blumer (1939), social movements can be viewed as “collective enterprises to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in the condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system of living.” Kornhauser (2008) claims that “[m]ass movements mobilize people who are alienated from the going system, who do not believe in the legitimacy of the established order, and who therefore are ready to engage in efforts to destroy it.”

Gerlach and Hine (1970) identify five factors which “must be present and interacting before a collectivity of whatever size becomes a true movement.” These are: (1) a segmented organization composed of individual units; (2) face-to-face recruitment; (3) personal commitment separating the activist from the established order; (4) an ideology codifying the movement’s values and goals and (5) an existing or perceived opposition (Gerlach and Hine, 1970).

And finally, following Tarrow (1994), social movements are “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities” (Tarrow, 1994, p. 2). The basis of all movements is then “contentious collective action, ...which takes many forms—brief or sustained, institutionalized or disruptive, humdrum or dramatic. Most of it occurs within institutions on the part of constituted groups who act in the name of goals that would hardly raise an eyebrow. It becomes contentious when it is used by people who lack regular access to institutions, act in the name of new or unaccepted claims and behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others” (Tarrow, 1994, p. 2).

#### [Selected theories of migrant activism, autonomy of migration and mobile commons](#)

Border activism can be placed at the intersections of refugee rights, migrant activism, no-border, global justice and possibly other movements. It seems hard to trace the exact origins of the use of term “border activism.” However, it appears that the term can be linked to critical scholarship centered around the *International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* and, at latest, a 2010 meeting of the Association for Borderlands Studies conference (Kramsch, 2010). It is in particular Nick Gill (n.d.) who uses the term consistently, often times in plural as “activisms,” and who also applied it most recently to the context of the current refugee crisis. The term “border activism,” however, appears to be condemned to certain circles, labelling themselves “critical,” yet has not really entered mainstream academia. Alas, this discrepancy could also be due to the fact that most of the scholars who actually use the term appear to understand it as somewhat self-explanatory without the need to ever clarify it in the first place.

The literature on migrant activism distinguishes between, among others, “integrationist approaches” of migrant support groups and an “autonomy of migration” approach. The integrationist approaches are grounded in critical citizenship studies. With their focus on citizenship as main analytical category, they bear less significance for the analysis of the current refugee crisis, let alone the study of refugees on the move.

On the contrary, the scholarship on “autonomy of migration” might be a potentially good starting point for considerations of who can be an activist. It places in its focus the “subjective practices, the desires, the expectations, and the behaviors of migrants themselves” (Mezzadra, 2012). It is in particular the “mobile commons” approach which can be particularly fruitful when examining the current “refugee crisis”. It precisely takes as its starting point migrants on the move, or “transmigrants” (Papadopoulous & Tsianos, 2013). Papadopoulous and Tsianos (2013, pp. 192-93) identify several dimensions of mobile commons, including: the knowledge of mobility, the infrastructure of connectivity, multiplicity of informal economies, forms of transnational communities of justice and politics of care. According to them, care is the most important aspect of mobile commons and may include “mutual cooperation, friendships, favors that you never return, affective support, care of other people’s relatives and children, transnational relations of care, the gift economy between mobile people” (Papadopoulous & Tsianos, 2013, p. 192).

Furthermore, insights from literature on “border interventions” and immigrant protest might be useful when considering the different types and strategies of border activisms. Tyler and Marciniak look at immigrant protest and stress the resistance against the regime of control in them. They define as immigrant protest “acts’ against the exclusionary technologies of citizenship which aim to make visible the violence of citizenship as regimes of control” (Tyler & Marciniak, 2013).

The actors’ position towards the regimes of control seems a valuable point of observation as well. While the integrationist approaches bear less overall significance with regard to the current “refugee crisis,” their critique might prove valuable when assessing current border activism. Typically, it has been argued that the integrationist approaches, while to some extent resisting the current border regime, risk “remain[ing] captured within the existing legal frameworks” (Tyler & Marciniak, 2013, p. 148).

## Analyzing border activism(s)

Following on the theoretical basis delienated above, I argue that (cross-)border activism is an emerging social movement which is distinct from migrant activism given the specific context within which it is taking place. The border activism context is crucially shaped by two factors: First, the fact that persons with particular protection needs find themselves still *en route* to a place they consider a safe heaven. Second, it is shaped by the amplitude and duration of arrivals, which further exacerbate or mediate the perception of the situation as an “emergency”.

Given the limitations of this paper, I further focus on two aspects of border activism which might be well analyzed with the help of existing theories and which, given their relevance for the possible development of a new movement, might be worth researching further: (1) actors who can and do label themselves activists and the (2) the clusters of activities. Below, I show how the nature and/or the perception of the situation as an “emergency” creates asymmetries which first, translate into distinctions between “helpers” and “those to be helped” and second, crucially influence the scope of possible action for all actors involved. This in turn increases the demand for one-dimensional humanitarian aid to the detriment of other types of intervention, including decisive, common political action.

### ***Activists: volunteers, aid workers. And refugees?***

When defining activists as humanitarian non-state actors, this paper deliberately opted for a rather broad and vague category. While a typical idea of an activist is that of an independent volunteer or humanitarian worker, the question poses whether refugees can and should be considered as part of this category, as well.

From the autonomy of migration approach, one could argue that already the act of migration as such, i.e., the arrival to Europe, can be considered a form of activism. Studies show that majority of the refugees did not wish to come to Europe in the first place, yet decided to do so as a response to the prevailing conditions in the refugee camps and urban areas in countries like Lebanon, Jordan or Turkey (Dearden, 2016). Besides, from a migrant activism point of view, them being on the move can be understood if not as a form of activism, then possibly as a form of protest or resistance. By being on the move, refugees expose and render visible the regimes of control to which they are confined (Conlon & Gill, 2015).

Moreover, the view that refugees are to be understood as activists in the current refugee crisis can be supported when considering the mobile commons approach and its care and knowledge aspects, as stressed by Papadopoulous and Tsianos. It has been widely evidenced that, for example, knowledge sharing in particular via social media and the possession of smart phones played a key role in navigating refugees on their journey. In this regard, it might be worth considering the perspective of the refugees themselves. There is at present not enough research to sufficiently evaluate whether refugees view themselves as activists when migrating or not. While a view on refugees only caring for and supporting each other might be too romanticizing or generalizing, the range of instances of care and mutual support one could witness cannot be neglected either. The reality is that some refugees always support others, disrupting narratives of passivity and victimhood.

Meanwhile, activist networks focusing on direct humanitarian aid might argue that a clear division between the “helpers” and “those to be helped” is necessary in order to ensure the aid worker’s complete impartiality and thus legitimacy. Aid workers or volunteers might thus sometimes rather view refugees as clients, as passive recipients of aid, instead of seeing them as either partners in a common struggle or fellow activists fighting their own struggle.

At the same time, the asymmetry between the two groups is inherent, as the refugee-activist position towards the state he or she aims to transit is without doubt more vulnerable than that of a non-refugee activist. And yet, previous research shows that the asymmetries can be to some extent overcome by the practice of solidarity on the part of non-refugee activists. For example, when in Calais non-refugee activists started camping alongside the refugees, they became an irregular element in the eyes of the state, comparable with that of the migrant (Rigby & Schlembach, 2013).

It can be concluded that refugees can be understood as activists alongside volunteers and humanitarian aid workers in the current refugee-crisis. While the inherent asymmetries can be to some extent overcome, both activist groups might be willing to take upon themselves different levels of risk, depending on their position toward each other and toward the state on whose territory they operate.

### *Types of activities: between witnessing, assisting and disrupting*

The types of activities that can be viewed as border activism vary widely. Departing from the literature on migrant activism and social movements, this paper argues that most of the activities can be generally situated on the scale between witnessing, assisting and disrupting.

Under witnessing I mean instances where activists collect and eventually pass over testimonies of what they saw “at the borders”. The forwarding of information can take many forms, be it through photographs, personal stories, newspaper interviews or artistic performances. Although this role might seem rather passive, it can prove important in collecting shared knowledge and possibly a shared narrative about the “refugee crisis”.

In the present “refugee crisis,” social media has played a crucial role in creating and spreading such knowledge. And while migrant narratives have been observed as a practice of resistance for some time, it is precisely social media that opened new spaces for participation for refugee activists as well (Caraccioli & Wright, 2015). The flip side of the coin is that it has also opened up space for large-scale privacy violations and potential state surveillance of activists and refugees by state authorities. Moreover, the general moral implications of publishing or not publishing pictures of refugee children surviving in undignified conditions would definitely deserve more attention and debate from both academia and the activists themselves.

Under assisting activism, I understand instances of direct support to the refugees, be it through the provision of medical aid, information, food, clothing, hygienic items, legal advice, train tickets, a ride, a place to sleep, or any other kind of support. One particular aspect of assistance which could be an interesting object of further study is activist-organized management of large groups of people, so-called crowd management. For example, when the crisis was at its peak in autumn 2015, Czech volunteers loosely organized in a group called “Czech Team” took charge of ensuring an organized transfer of refugees across the border between Serbia and Croatia. Typically, these activists claimed they had the impression of being forced to replace the police and other state organs, which proved non-functional in the given situation (“Europe Please Act,” n.d.). At the same time, they also believed

that the crowd management was necessary in order to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable. From an academic perspective, the issue is intriguing. We are facing a paradoxical situation in which activists by their very presence question state capacity to effectively regulate border crossing and at the same time, in instances where the state-organized control of the borders fails, they themselves assume the role of regulatory agents.

In contrast, with disruptive activism I refer to instances where activists challenge dominant discourses, practices or regulations. A typical form of disruptive activism would be protest. However, I argue that disruptive activism can also mean discourses as such, in particular in instances where they challenge the dominant narratives which homogenize refugees or present them as a danger. Meanwhile, the space for collective disruptive activism is crucially shaped by the asymmetries mentioned above. In situations where the refugee's primary concern is to move further ahead or where the situation escalates into a wide-spread humanitarian crisis—as was the case in autumn 2015—the space for collective action involving refugee and non-refugee activists will be drastically reduced to the provision of humanitarian aid. On the contrary, the space for the political re-emerges mainly at times when the refugee decides to discontinue the journey or is forced to do so by the policies of the transit state.

Moreover, one should not neglect other, more radical forms of action going beyond mere protest. These could be, for example, the appropriation of technologies enabling refugees to cross the border irregularly (Gill et al, 2014) or non-refugee activist aid to refugees in irregular border crossing (Landry, 2016) or even material destruction of border fences (“Artworks, First Fall,” n.d.). All these acts can be understood as activities aiming at disrupting state control, and in my understanding, constitute a potential form of border activism.

To conclude, this section has shown that border activism can take a variety of shapes. In the final section, I will show that the classification of the activities on the scale between witnessing-assisting-disrupting is less conditioned and influenced by the activist's position vis a vis the state and more by his or her understanding of the European border regime.

## Understanding of the European border regime

The last section of this paper shall analyze whether border activism is codified around a clear set of values and goals, identified by Gerlach and Hine (1970) as one of the characteristics of a movement. Following Blumer (1939), I look into whether border activists aim at establishing a “new order of life.” Considering Kornhauser (2008), I look into border activists' view on the legitimacy of the established order, in this case the European border regime, and try to estimate whether they are “ready to engage in efforts to destroy it.”

In migrant activism, activist organizations were for a long time typically considered a counterweight to the state, with the human rights agenda and discourse being instrumental for their cause (Briones, 2011). Similarly, in the context of the current refugee crisis, activists, including refugee activists, often resorted to the language of rights and international obligations in order to render legitimacy to their actions.

Moreover, a critical approach towards the “European” management of the “refugee crisis” was possibly one of the preconditions and the triggers in the non-refugee activists’ decision on whether to go to offer assistance in the Balkans. Admittedly, the willingness to come to the Balkans during one’s holiday break must imply a somewhat more critical approach toward the European border regime. However, the readiness to engage in long-term political activism aiming at the disruption of the regime seems to vary greatly among the different activist groups.

It is only natural that in the context of the highest emergencies of summer and fall 2015, most of the activists focused on providing direct humanitarian aid to persons in immediate need. As the demand for direct assistance was high, there was at the same time in practice only very limited space left to think about any “new order of life.” Meanwhile, a range of non-refugee activists still understand their role as possibly merely humanitarian workers. The reason they come to volunteer is precisely that they feel alienated from the present system, or at the very least the fear-mongering in their home societies (“Europe Please Act,” n.d.). And yet, in the long-term, they would also be ready to leave regulation of the openness or closeness of borders completely up to politicians.

In contrast, certain humanitarian organizations did manage to adopt a more principled and clearly political stance. For example, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have shown several times that they have the willingness and possibly also the capacity to influence political decision makers. Following the adoption of the EU-Turkey deal, MSF refused to accept further funding from the EU, hereby clearly challenging EU policies and the European border regime. In this regard, the MSF illustrate that established organizations can overstep their role as mere “humanitarian” agencies and become (disruptive) activists (Scott-Smith, 2016).

To conclude, can we thus say that both the witnessing-assisting and the disrupting type of activism can simply co-exist one next to the other? Following Tarrow’s understanding, one could argue that what is important is not the differences between the different kinds of activisms but rather the existence of sustained interaction between the different activist groups and a common understanding of each other as allies. In contrast to Tarrow, I argue that while the two named activisms could easily co-exist in the beginning of the crisis, developing a common understanding of and position towards the European border regime will be decisive for the movement’s development in the future.

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that (cross-)border activism is a potential, new, emerging social movement which can be understood in close relation to migrant activism, global justice or possibly other movements. Border activism is, however, distinct from previous movements, due to the nature of the situation to which it reacts and the context in which it takes place.

The border activism context is crucially shaped by two factors. First are the asymmetries between “helpers” and “those to be helped” resulting from the exigencies of an immediate emergency situation. These are structurally

different than situations of long-term systemic disadvantage, discrimination or exploitation which are the typical trigger factors for classical migrant rights groups. Second, border activism has thus far been characterized by rather short-term activities, which arise from the humanitarian character of the situation and are often reduced to acts of direct, humanitarian aid to persons *en route*. Despite these limitations, refugees can legitimately be regarded as possible border activists, bearing in mind their particular vulnerability and asymmetrical position vis a vis other, non-refugee activists.

Furthermore, the notion of border activism encompasses a variety of actions which can be typically classified on the scale between witnessing-assisting-disrupting. The ability and willingness of different actors to engage in different types of activism derives from their position vis a vis the state and the other volunteers on one hand, and their understanding of the European border regime on the other.

Ultimately, the ability of the movement to establish itself in the long term will depend upon its ability to shape a common understanding of the European border regime and to define the border activist position within and towards it.

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