MIGRATION
LETTERS

FIELD NOTES:

Four voices of refugee solidarity along the Balkan Route: An exploratory pilot study on motivations for mobilisation | Nicolas Parent [±]

Abstract

Scathing critiques of the European response to what has been widely called a 'refugee crisis' are not in short supply. However, as many activist mobilisations and solidarities emerged along the Balkan Route, this is only one facet of the European response to forced migration. Having interviewed four migration activists from four countries along this route – Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary – this exploratory pilot study sought to investigate possible motivational factors for mobilisation in light of the fact that the participants had no prior experience in activism nor interest in the politics of migration prior to the European migration crisis. Through content analysis of interview transcripts, two factors emerged as having potential implications for mobilisation: media coverage and visibility of refugees. Hence, theories about the media effect and intergroup contact are used to explicate the findings. Possible future research avenues are proposed.

Keywords: refugees; perception; media; intergroup relations; mobilisation; activism; Balkans.

Introduction

The American psychologist Richard J. Gerrig defines 'motivation' as "the process of starting, directing, and maintaining physical and psychological activities" (Gerrig, 2013: G-9). Yet, contrary to the simplicity implied in its definition, motivation – its sources and mechanics – continue to puzzle psychologists, behavioural scientists, and social psychologists alike. Academic research, both empirical and theoretical, has yielded a vibrant spectrum of potential motivational factors for civic engagement at a range of scales: internal motivations such as self-defined personality traits, deeply ingrained values and long-standing moral principles (Jacobsson and Lindblom, 2013; Omoto *et al.*, 2010), the role of existing or a desire to build new relationships (Borshuk, 2004; Stuermer *et al.*, 2005; Stuermer *et al.*, 2006), political ideologies (Curtin *et al.*, 2016; Kende *et al.*, 2017), a sense of universal social responsibility (Boyte and Kari, 1996; Cole and Stewart, 1999), and expected gains on personal, local or societal goals (Clarly *et al.*, 1998; Snyder and Omoto, 2008; Theodossopoulos, 2016).

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One of the many ways researchers have sought to understand motivation has been through the study of volunteerism (Aydinli et al., 2015), activism (Borshuk, 2004; Jacobsson and Lindblom, 2013; Omoto et al., 2010) and social movements (Swank and Fahs, 2014; van Zomeren, 2016). As Borshuk (2004) recognises, the majority of these studies have looked at civic engagement for the benefit of activists or volunteers' own group (i.e. 'in-group'), and the outcome has been that scholars devote "far more research to the question of why people do not intervene in the lives of others than to the question of why they do" (Borshuk, 2004: 301). As a result, much remains to be discovered as to how and why members of an in-group mobilises to support an out-group. The context of the 2015 European refugee crisis, where a large number of local citizens supported refugees in their quest for safety and dignified livelihoods, is an ideal regional milieu in which to explore in-group motivations to mobilise in support of the lives, identities and aspirations of people who comprise an out-group as a result of their situation.

The aim of the following study was to explore what possible motivators have incited local people with no prior experience in activism to join in acts of solidarity with refugees[1]. The research design puts particular emphasis on giving the interview subjects an active voice (see Berg, 2007), rather than a passive one. As a result, the study is exclusively qualitative, and thus comes along with the limitations of this type of research. This first implicates the analysis of the results, where the researcher can rely too heavily on personal biases when establishing a coding frame and identifying trends within and between interviewee statements (Cohen et al., 2011). Providing strategies to reduce researcher biases in the interpretation of interview data, Savenye and Robinson (1996) note, "it is best to maintain the integrity of raw data, using respondents' words, including quotes, liberally" (Savenye and Robinson, 1996: 1056). This advice was fully considered during the drafting process. The second notable limitation involves the validity and reproducibility of the data itself. Whilst it is believed that the interview data generated outputs that successfully met the aims of the research and the validity criterion understood as "the degree to which a study reflect the specific concepts it aims to investigate" (Alshenqeeti, 2014: 43), it is nearly certain that a similar study would yield different results, hence limiting the scientific reproducibility of the findings herein. That said, this study was designed as an exploratory pilot study intended to discover possible future research opportunities, and therefore reliability and reproducibility criterion did not take primacy within the study design.

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[1] In this article, the use of the term 'refugee' is used in its cultural meaning, rather than in its legal meaning as outlined by the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol.

The specific goal of this pilot study was to get a sense of how people with no prior interest in migration and no experience in activist mobilisation find motivation to participate in refugee solidarity efforts.

Methods

Study context

Scathing critiques of the European response to what it has widely called a 'refugee crisis'[2] since 2015 is not in short supply across academic journals, international organisation reports, and news articles. Externalisation, securitisation and militarisation are all indicative of a broad approach to forced migration: that of 'Fortress Europe' (Carr, 2012). Although these critical perspectives may help us untangle the complex socio-political landscape of an entire continent, there is a need to consider that these manifestations of hostility towards migrants are only one facet of the European response to forced migration. For many other residents of Europe, and particularly those that became actively involved in the cornucopia of refugee solidarity initiatives along the Balkan Route, the large arrival of irregular migrants and the resulting media frenzy only served as a springboard for mobilisation. In as much time as informal camps materialised at the borderlands, so too did food distribution initiatives such as No Border Kitchen. When loss of life at sea persisted, organisations such as Sea Watch kept a watchful eye along the Greek coastline. As new legal frameworks, border closures and asylum regulations emerged along the migration route, digital activists and content curators on websites such as Welcome to Europe (w2eu) hurriedly prepared asylum guides available in several languages. The vast majority of these initiatives were the result of a coalescence of local people and energies, but quickly strengthened through support by a large number of international volunteers. In short, the refugee crisis not only produced hostility, but also a great deal of hospitality and solidarity through activist mobilisation.

While the major narratives about migration into Europe tend to gravitate towards the recurring themes of borders (Borg, 2014; Casas-Cortes *et al.*, 2015; Hess and Kasparek, 2017; Zajakala, 2017), migration policy (Carmel, 2014; Greenhill, 2016; Mihálik and Jankoľa, 2016), and public attitudes towards migration (Blitz, 2017; Kosho, 2015; Molodikova and Lyalina, 2017), minor narratives such as local mobilisation deserve to be explored if contemporary analyses on migration into Europe are to be comprehensive. The study outlined in this research article is an exploratory effort to understand the motivational

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[2] In this article, 'migration crisis' will be used to facilitate a common situational understanding, as it is an expression that has been extensively used politically and publicly. The author recognises that there are varying interpretations of what constitutes a 'crisis', and debate on whether or not this period was effectively as such. For an analysis on the conceptualisation of refugee movements in the creation of crisis, *see* Cantat, 2016.

factors that lead independent individuals to become engaged in refugee solidarity activities.

Sampling

During the months of November and December of 2016, the author travelled across the Balkan Route. Starting in Athens, Greece, the field investigation brought the researcher through Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria, terminating in Munich, Germany. Along the way, the researcher used purposive sampling strategies to contact and meet with a multitude of community members, either directly or by reference of others, as is appropriate in studies that are both qualitative and exploratory (see Etikan *et al.*, 2016; Palys, 2008). The majority of recruited participants were introduced to the author by civil society agencies which were typically contacted one week prior to his arrival in each of the countries' capital city. Through this initial contact, the author would provide a brief outline of the research aims, and would ask these civil society agencies to refer a few volunteers that would be potentially interested in sharing their experience in refugee solidarity activism. As the purposive sampling was based on suitability of research aims, agencies were free to refer anyone they deemed appropriate for the research, rather than based on pre-established socio-demographic (e.g. age, gender, employment status, education, etc.) requirements. In some cases, the participants would then refer the author to others that would potentially be interested in participating. In total, 32 individuals were interviewed for this study (Greece, 7; Macedonia, 5; Serbia, 6; Hungary, 6; Austria, 3; Germany, 5)[3]. However, from this sample, only four of these individuals proved to share characteristics in line with predetermined inclusion criteria: having citizenship in a country along the Balkan Route; having volunteered in refugee-solidarity actions, but not specifically affiliated to any organisation; having no specific interest in forced migration prior to the 2015 European migration crisis; and having no prior experience in activism. The four participants included in this study provided consent to use the collected information in a written report, article or publication.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face, guided by a central question: "What motivated you to become involved in refugee-solidarity activism?" In order for participants to focus their answer on motivational factors, rather than on how they described their activities, a pre-established

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[3] For all 32 participants, responses to the question, "What motivated you to become involved in refugee-solidarity activism?" were coded into themes. In total, eight motivational themes were identified: media exposure (4), family values (2), religious values (2), universal sense of social responsibility (5), friend or colleague asked for help (5), contact with refugee(s) (8), professional (work or school) duty (3) and political duty (3). Numbers in brackets indicate the number of interview participants for whom this theme was most recurrent in their respective interview transcript.

definition of 'refugee-solidarity activism' was provided[4]. Interviews lasted just over forty minutes on average. When relevant, probing was used to ask for clarification or to expand on a specific idea. However, as one notable strength of interviews is to "allow the interviewee to talk from their own perspective using their own frame of reference and ideas and meanings that are familiar to them" (Edwards and Holland 2013: 30), probing was kept to a minimum. All interviews were conducted either in English or with the use of an interpreter. Interview data was transcribed by hand in a notebook, then digitised and coded using Dedoose software.

Analysis

Written notes and transcripts were collated, organised and analysed using conventional content analysis, where "categories and names for categories … flow from the data" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1279). This was done by open-coding procedures outlined in Strauss and Corbin (1990). Through this inductive process, themes were established based on commonalities between interview transcripts. To refer to the participants in this study, the following pseudonyms are used in the next section: Stavros, Elena, Marija, and Péter. Demographic data of the study participants can be found in the table below (Table 1). Locations indicate where activism[5] was primarily conducted.

Table 1. Demographic data of study participants.

	Stavros	**Elena**	**Marija**	**Péter**
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Male
Age	36	45	31	26
Employment	Welder	Unemployed	Urban planner	Student
Education (highest achieved)	Secondary	Bachelor	Master	Bachelor
Family situation	Divorced	Married with children	Single	Single
Location	Thessaloniki, Greece	Velles, Macedonia	Belgrade, Serbia	Szeged, Hungary

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[4] 'Refugee-solidarity activism', based on the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) definition of 'volunteering and social activism' (United Nations Volunteers, 2015: 4), was defined as follows: Actively working to help and support refugees through efforts to improve services, access to such services, and recognition and fulfilment of refugee rights, while making efforts to tackle the root causes of poverty and injustice.

[5] Specific activist activities conducted by each participant are not outlined here as they are not deemed relevant to the present study, but included the following: regularly attending protests, providing humanitarian aid, doing advocacy and campaign work, publishing articles on human rights issues, fundraising, evening safety checks around informal encampments, or a combination of the above.

Results

Accounts on the navigation of mixed messages

Before Elena decided to fully commit her time to provide humanitarian aid to refugees walking along the railway tracks near her house, she was working for a local news station. Understanding the ebb and flow of the news cycle, she did the best she could to keep her mind clear:

> The intensity of news reports was frightening. Everything seemed extreme: loss of life of refugees at sea and along railways, the security risk of accepting them here, economic pressures, consequences of having all these Muslims here … As someone that worked in the media business … I saw this as something to be expected … so I just kept to my own values … It's sad but that's what news has become now, that's how money is made.

For Marija, navigating through the mixed messages about the migration crisis was less about news and information than about navigating her immediate social environment:

> I've got a really wide group of friends … some painfully conservative, others are hippy-like utopians [but] there's an issue that goes beyond this idea of 'political spectrum', and that's the issue of EU membership. Both people on the left and right have different opinions about the EU … those that want to join usually agree with opinions from the EU bigwigs, those who don't are very critical of their opinions and policies … Since I'm exposed to both … I stick to my own opinions.

Péter's ability to make conscious decisions about how to assimilate information about the migration crisis relied heavily upon his upbringing:

> Coming from a very traditional religious family, I was brought up on some values that are relevant here. One was acceptance of all who walk the Earth … Jews, Muslims, Atheists. Another was to be careful with the excesses of society [and] for me this includes news … I recognised that the mass coverage of migration along the Balkan Route was saturated in political biases … I just had to make a decision based on my values.

Stavros, an ex-member of the ultranationalist Golden Dawn party, initially guided his ideological compass according to party ideas:

> In the welding business, like most jobs that people call 'blue collar', we talk rough about lots of stuff. Doesn't matter the topic, but we can be pretty brutal … My friends [are] not super educated, and even if we're okay with that, we're pretty conservative and basically Golden Dawn is appealing to us [because] they're all about keeping Greek jobs for Greek

people … Migrants or refugees, or whatever, means that we're at risk
and I totally bought the Golden Dawn ideology … so I ignored all that
intense media coverage and just went to rallies and promoted nationalist
ideas as much as possible.

Personal anecdotes on the tipping point

As per the aforementioned inclusion criteria, the four respondents did not have
any explicit interest in forced migration or experience in activism prior to the
2015 European refugee crisis. During the interviews, each respondent provided
a unique anecdote on the precise moment, or tipping point, when they realised
that they wished to become engaged in migrant solidarity activism.

As a trained urban planner, Marija explains that her involvement was in
response to the social consequences of emerging development trends in
Belgrade's Savamala district:

> The Belgrade Waterfront project … is basically a gentrification project
> [and] the municipal government now sees Savamala as a tourist hotspot
> … kicking out refugees from the parks around the bus and train stations
> because they think its visual pollution … They eventually stopped
> NGOs from distributing clothes, food, blankets and even medical
> supplies … It's basically a siege to push the refugees back to the camps
> where they'll be sent back to Macedonia. … I couldn't stand this kind of
> violence against people, so I started helping out.

Similar to Marija, it was Péter' academic background that played a role in him
deciding to become a migration activist:

> Seeing refugees around Budapest and their devastation was the main
> reason, but one event definitely pushed me to get involved. In
> September [2015] there was that event when Petra László, a journalist
> for N1TV, was filmed kicking some refugees at the border with Serbia
> … As a master's student in journalism … To stay silent would mean
> accepting that this is normal for journalists, which is why I now do
> advocacy work.

The vivid imagery of large groups of refugees walking along roads, passing
borders or staying within the confines of cement walls and barbed wire at transit
zones is one that news agencies have helped create. There are some, however,
that witnessed such realities for themselves. These experiences instilled a sense
of urgency to act in solidarity. Elena described her experience as such:

> Our family home is right next to the train tracks … sometimes we see
> twenty five people walking here in one day, but at one point there were
> hundreds … One day I didn't go to work, to make bread [to distribute]
> to refugees walking here. I haven't gone back to work since then, almost

> a year now … Just seeing people walking here, seeing some of them
> wounded and hungry … was enough to just focus on distributing
> humanitarian supplies.

Also resulting from seeing the life conditions of refugees along the Balkan
Route, Stavros' decision to join migrant solidarity actions had a slower onset
than Elena's:

> As part of my work, there was a welding contract at the Softex factory
> that housed refugees. It was a short contract, maybe a week or so, but
> seeing all of those families that looked poor and suffering … changed
> my whole perception about refugees … My girlfriend's son has leukemia
> [and] I had a realisation … At least we can get help for our young boy
> … not like refugees that have difficulty getting health services … That's
> when I realised I had to change my attitude away from all that nationalist
> stuff and start going to protests to say something about this injustice
> [because] we're all human and we're all responsible for each other, it's
> simple.

Discussion

The above pilot study was limited in scope, only collecting qualitative data from
four interview subjects. Although it would be unwise to make overly confident
inferences and any attempt at drawing concrete conclusions, the responses
provided some interesting perspectives of which can have larger implications.
As is typical of exploratory pilot studies, these possible implications provide
potential avenues for future research.

The media's role in perception development and mobilisation

Although no explicit question about the mediatisation of the refugee crisis was
posed to the participants, all four interviewees commented on how they
navigated the many messages being transmitted through mainstream media,
local news, and social media. Choosing to make a statement about this is
perhaps indicative of the perceived and real impact that media plays on the
development of opinions and how these intermingle in public discourse on
forced migration.

Multiple studies have looked at the impact of media on the development of
public perception vis-à-vis refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants. These
studies have typically underlined the media's role as a contributor to negative
perceptions of minorities and 'outsiders' such as migrants (Kosho, 2016;
Montali *et al.*, 2013; Tsoukala, 2005). In Cohen (2002), the media's role in the
development of public perception of migrants is extensively discussed. That
media manufactured perception has historically resulted in what he calls 'moral
panics'. Yet, one notable area of debate produced by these analyses is in respects
to how much they consider the general public impressionable and passive in its

consumption of media. Conversely, Cottle (2006) contends that through the use of what he calls 'mediatised rituals', periodic "performative media enactments in which solidarities are summoned and moral ideas of the 'social good' are unleashed … [contributing] to the formation of plural solidarities or 'publics'" (Cottle, 2006: 411). Considering the results of the present study, analyses which place the viewer in an active role undoubtedly carry stronger explanatory potential. They also suggest that other variables may play a role in the way mediatised messages are interpreted. What is more cryptic, however, is how such 'solidarities' can push individuals or groups to mobilise on issues of public interest.

In all cases, subjects separated themselves from mass media, indicating that an overly saturated coverage of the migration crisis led them, in one way or another, to make their own value judgements and form opinions based on other non-media variables. Be it Stavros' surroundings, predominated by blue collar workers, Péter's religious background, Elena's employment history as a news station employee, or Marija's regular exposure to a diversity of political opinions, it is evident that interviewees relied heavily on pre-existing factors – either identity-based or environmental – to actively interpret media coverage on the migration crisis. As Internet-based media can effectively be considered "a murky entity because there are often multiple layers of sources in online transmission of information … leading to a confusing multiplicity of sources of varying levels of perceived credibility" (Sundar, 2008: 73), it appears that interview subjects in this study – of whom confirmed through probing that they mostly consumed news via Internet sources – predominantly evaluated the available information through what social psychologists call the 'central route', whereby attitudes towards media are dependent on "a person's diligent consideration of information that s/he feels is central to the true merits of a particular attitudinal position" (Petty *et al.*, 1983: 135).

Effectively, the results showed that interviewees played an active role in the interpretation of highly saturated and politicised media coverage of the refugee crisis. Mentioning this outside of the interview's pre-established line of questioning suggests that this may have played a role in their decision to mobilise, but this link remains unclear and is one possible avenue for future research.

Intergroup contact and mobilisation

One inclusion criteria for the selection of interview participants was that they not have any prior experience in activism, let alone a specific interest in the politics of migration prior to the European refugee crisis. Thus, one particular point of interest was the specific moment or precipitating event that instigated these individuals to mobilise and join in refugee solidarity actions. Interestingly, three of four interviewees identified the mere physical presence of refugees as

a major motivational factor. In Péter's concluding remarks, he noted that "there were so many and they all looked so poor and sick … since I've got a good and healthy life it would be inhumane to ignore and not participate." In one particular case, that of Stavros, the visual presence of refugees at the Softex camp in Thessaloniki created a chain reaction of self-reflection and, eventually, a radical ideological shift away from nationalist anti-immigrant values. Similarly to Péter, Stavros internalised the visual cue of precarious refugee livelihoods. This led him to not only change his perspective on migration, but also to actively participate in refugee solidarity activism. As for Elena, seeing large groups of refugees passing next to the railway tracks adjacent to her family home was cause enough for her to quit her job and make a full time commitment to humanitarian work.

These anecdotes raise interesting points in respect to how visibility and proximity of refugees may affect the perception of local residents. This closely tracks well-established findings on intergroup contact theory (Caspi, 1984; Everett and Onu, 2013; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006), whereby "opportunities for and frequency of contact with immigrants … lead to more tolerant attitudes through a reduction of perceived threat" (Green *et al.,* 2010: 179). Furthermore, interview transcripts suggest that increased contact between members of an 'out-group' (i.e. refugees) and those within an 'in-group' (i.e. local residents) can act as a possible catalyst for mobilisation, a trend that has been previously established in the literature on intergroup contact (see Reimer *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, given the limited scope of this research, no assertive claim can be made here, particularly considering alternate findings on similar processes of intergroup contact. Literature that challenges these observations include the work of Stephen Wright and Gamze Baray (2012), which suggests that intergroup contact preserves social inequalities by disarming the potential for collective action. Equally relevant and contradictory to the conclusions of this paper are the findings of intergroup threat theorists, who claim that increased contact leads to higher exposure to realistic and symbolic threats. These threats in turn lead to anxiety, violence and aggression between 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' (Murray and Marx, 2013; Zárate *et al.*, 2004). Nevertheless, the potential intersection at the visibility-mobilisation nexus is worthy of further exploration in future research projects.

On the theme of politically-motivated mobilisation

Interview transcripts suggest that participants were primarily interested in discussing media politics as opposed to party politics. Politics to them was indistinguishable from how the media participates in the creation and distribution of politicised representations of both migration and refugees. The collected data indicates that media politics were largely rejected, and participants generally found the representation of the migration issue distasteful and inaccurate, leading them to make independent decisions about how they

should respond to this issue. Other than anecdotes on the mediatised politicisation of migration, politics were not central themes to participants' discussion on motivation for mobilisation. As is consistent with empirical studies that demonstrate the weak link between volunteerism and politically-motivated activism (van der Meer and van Ingen, 2009; van Stekelenburg *et al.*, 2016), the interview transcripts do not suggest that refugee-solidarity activism was motivated by political views. From what can be inferred from interview statements, motivation to mobilise would be the result of rejecting politics rather than politics themselves.

Sense of duty as motivation

One common trend in all interviews was the participants' deep sense of duty towards individuals and groups facing hardship. The exact rationale driving interviewees' sense of duty as motivation for solidarity actions was discernibly varied form one participant to another: Stavros' values in regarding family, Elena's daily contact with refugees as a result of the geographic location of her family home, Marija's professional background, and Péter's religious upbringing. Tracking down the origins of the sense of duty which compels a member of an in-group to feel responsible for members of an out-group is of great importance here, and thus presents another potential area for future research.

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