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Anti-racism from the margins: Welcoming refugees at Schengens' northernmost border

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Introduction

Images of men, women, and children riding bicycles in a snowy-white Arctic landscape wearing sneakers, jeans, and light jackets captured international media attention in the autumn of 2015, as they crossed the northernmost external Schengen **border** from Russia to seek asylum in Norway. In a community of some 3,500 inhabitants, 5,542 asylum seekers arrived within a time period of a few months.

The so-called “**refugee crisis**” had already been a daily news topic in Europe for several years. The attention had, however, so far, been drawn further south, on fishing boats and rubber dinghies crammed with people in the Mediterranean Sea. This form of irregular border crossing had perhaps become such a familiar visual trope that it had become a normalized part of the refugee experience in the eyes of the publics in the global North. Were the images of **Syrian**, **Afghan**, and **Iraqi** asylum seekers cycling in the Arctic landscape necessary to wake these publics up to realize how bizarre European refugee politics were becoming? Just as the progressive closure of the border between Morocco and Gibraltar led smugglers to charge more money and migrants to take higher risks, leading to inflations of deaths by drowning (Pian, 2009; Migreurop, 2009, pp. 116-118; Anderson, 2014; Migreurop, 2017), the building of fences by Balkan and Eastern European countries led migrants and human smugglers to find alternative routes. The images of Arctic border crossers, hence, also symbolized the creativity of smugglers who organized flight tickets from Istanbul to Moscow, from Moscow to Murmansk, and adapted to local legislation by providing their clients with overpriced bicycles to cross the border. The banal reason for the necessity of the bicycle was a seventy-year old ban by Russians to pedestrian traffic on the border and a recent threat from Norwegian authorities to prosecute drivers who would transport passengers without visas.

As the inhabitants of the Norwegian border town **Kirkenes** discovered through news **media** that refugees had started crossing the border a few kilometers away from their town, completely unprepared for the arctic winter, several groups organized to gather warm clothing and other basic necessities to **welcome** the refugees. Their solidarity network soon expanded to networks in other regions of Norway and of Europe, through social media. Sympathizers, from as far as Italy, sent boxes with clothes and toys. Solidarity messages, but also hate mail, arrived from other parts of Norway.

Two years later, in February 2017, we were among nine academics of the Nordic network *Borderscapes, Memory and Migration* who visited Kirkenes, and had the chance to meet Eirik Nielsen, a former miner, and Merete Nordhus, a nurse, and other inhabitants of the region. When we met them, the Russian authorities had started to control the border again, and there were no longer any asylum seekers cycling to Kirkenes. The municipal sports hall, that had been a temporary shelter for the refugees, was back in use for the local Taekwondo and handball teams. Some refugees had been relocated in the town but most had been sent to various reception centers elsewhere in Norway.

The memory of the event, however, was still vivid. It had forged friendships, solidarity networks, and a new geography of **affect**. Inhabitants from Kirkenes told us how they now perceived news from afar much differently, whether bombings in Syria, bomb attacks in Iraq, or the war in Afghanistan (in spite of the involvement of Norwegian troops) were no longer distant events but touched them because the arrival of refugees to Kirkenes had created knowledge of and affective ties to these regions. Meeting these locals who had chosen to welcome refugees in spite of living in an economically challenged region of Europe. Kirkenes was built around an iron ore mine in 1906, and just before the arrival of the refugees, in 2015, the local mining company *Sydvaranger Gruve* had gone bankrupt (Gullvik & Mortensen, 2016). All the miners, including Eirik, lost their jobs. Meeting the inhabitants

of Kirkenes reminded both of us of encounters we have had with locals who have mobilized to help refugees in Lampedusa, Calais, or the marginalized neighborhoods of Paris (Horsti & Neumann, in press; Boe & Mainsah, 2017; Boe, in press).

Not everyone in these regions is supportive of refugees, and the communities are divided on how the so-called refugee crisis should be dealt with. Also, the nationalist populist Progress Party in Norway has grown in popularity in the North. Hate mail was either anonymous or came from people who didn't know them.

Through the case of Kirkenes, we will first analyze some more general trends that relate to the analysis of humanitarian actions and solidarity with asylum seekers and refugees. We will then analyze what happens when citizens discover and act upon law and legal practice, which they find unfair, engaging in moral arguments, illegalities, and legal struggles to redefine justice. Finally, we will discuss the pitfalls of explaining racism with social class: white working-class or persons with shorter education from rural or formerly industrialized regions of the Nordic countries are often represented as allegedly more prone to xenophobia and racism. A common analysis is that their experiences of dispossession and marginalization go hand in hand with xenophobia and a feeling of threat from sexual minorities, women, migrants, and the specter of a multiculturalist society that has taken away their former privileges. Politicians, at least, often argue that it is to protect these voters that they are forced to become more and more populist and create increasingly repressive laws that favor border control and strict immigration policies. Yet, the example of Kirkenes tells us another story. Drawing on the analysis of French collective *Cette France-là* (2012), we ask, what if xenophobia stems less from "below" than from "above"?

From Humanitarian Involvement to More Political Human Rights Activism

Merete Nordhus was one of the first locals of Kirkenes to start organizing a solidarity network. When she learnt of the refugees from the media, she was shocked that they weren't

dressed appropriately for the weather: “I saw them on the news at the Storskog Border, and thought, “these people must be freezing to death.” She started to collect winter clothes and boots through Facebook and donated them to those who had arrived and those who were waiting for the border crossing in **Nikkel** on the Russian side. As an inhabitant of the border region, Merete has a multiple entry border visa that makes it possible for her to travel 30 kilometers into the Russian side as often as she wishes to. Such visas allow frequent border crossings for Norwegians and Russians of the region alike. While the Norwegians mostly use the visas to buy certain commodities such as cheaper petrol, alcohol, and cigarettes in **Russia**, Russians from the other side of the border enter Norway regularly to sell their handicrafts on the market square in Kirkenes. As Merete and other inhabitants responded to the arrivals of refugees, their visa took on new significance and provided invaluable support for their humanitarian effort.

Humanitarian responses to the arrivals or transits of refugees in local communities had been happening across Europe that same summer and autumn. A regional group, **Refugees Welcome** to the Arctic, followed the Refugees Welcome movement that was spreading across Europe, and their reactivity was often made possible by the swift constitution of groups on various social media. The stencils of a family holding hands and running started to appear not only in the liberal neighborhoods in Berlin, Copenhagen, and London, nor just at border localities such as Lampedusa, Calais, or Idomeni, but also in small towns in the Nordic countries.

The group continued their engagement with those who had crossed the **border** or were about to do so. Donating clothes to the aspiring asylum seekers who were staying at a run-down hotel in Nikkel was only the beginning for Merete and several others from Kirkenes. While doing their humanitarian work, they became more and more engaged with the legal conditions of the people whom they were helping. As Merete says, she has two lives, the one

before refugees and the one with them. As she became more engaged, then friends, with some of the asylum seekers, it was soon obvious to her that warm clothes were not enough. The gap between the helper and the helped can be, at least partly, bridged by the encounter and engagement.

Another major change occurred as she and the other inhabitants of Kirkenes became witnesses of the treatment of asylum seekers whether by human smugglers, corporations, or state authorities. The more they knew, the more unjust they found the position of the asylum seekers. One of the issues that shocked Merete and others in the Refugees Welcome to the Arctic movement, was their poor housing conditions for the asylum seekers. The reception of asylum seekers was organized by a private company, Hero, which had been hired by the Norwegian state. The Norwegian Hero is the largest private operator of **asylum reception centers** in the Nordic countries. They run centers in Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Germany. What disturbed the activists was that the asylum seekers were stored in an unused military camp next to the airport, 15 kilometers from the town. By isolating them, they thought, the Norwegian state tried to make them invisible for the locals and for the tourists who had come for the Arctic experience. The asylum seekers had no access to the internet, were served insufficient food and had few toilets and only two showers that could provide a maximum of 40 liters of hot water a day for 200 persons. The asylum seekers had no space except their bunk beds, as the cold weather made it impossible to stay more than a few minutes outside of the center.

Inhabitants from Kirkenes started to visit the center and drive some of the asylum seekers to town for coffee and a shower in their private homes. As one of the former asylum seekers, an economist Ashraf Alio from Syria, told us, these small actions of solidarity were very important, as they gave hope, warmth, and countered the dehumanizing effects produced by state bureaucracies and the **privatized reception system** at an individual and a one-to-one

level. Attentiveness to asylum seekers as human beings was driven by **humanitarian** ideals but also by solidarity in front of injustice. And those engaging with the refugees felt that the injustice by the state, the European Union, and by the industry profiting from the crisis was directed also to them and their community. Acts of solidarity were also the means to counter the central authorities.

The volunteers in Kirkenes increasingly wanted to express their solidarity in more public ways and they staged a protest on the 23 January 2016 in freezing -30°C weather “to show our solidarity,” as Merete describes. A group of about 50 locals dressed up in their outdoor outfits, drove to the camp, and approached the gates holding torches and signs saying “Not Us and Them but We”, “UNJUST” (URETT), “Not Human”, “How is it with human rights?”. Silently they waited at the fence and the asylum seekers began to come out, join them, start conversations, and hold torches. The volunteers took pictures and videos of the event and published them on the Refugees Welcome to the Arctic Facebook group, from which they were spread to other **social media** sites, and in the general media. While the first demonstration with torches at the camp was a peaceful expression of solidarity, a performance where the locals expressed that they were with the asylum seekers and that they didn’t accept the private company’s and the government’s treatment of them, it prepared for a second moment of public and mediated protest, which was more confrontational. Moreover, another turn had come when the local authorities took a stance against national policy and supported the **activists’** position. The mayor of Kirkenes, Rune Rafaelson, publicly stated that he was “ashamed” of the ways in which the asylum seekers were treated at the reception center. He stated that it was an insult to the reputation of the North’s tradition of **hospitality**. This distinction between the people in the North and the central government in Oslo also came up frequently in the conversations we had with people in Kirkenes, as we will discuss later.

The **humanitarian** actions (donating food and clothes) that Merete, Eirik and the other volunteers started out with are based on the idea of a common humanity and dignity and on the moral responsibility to help those who are suffering, whoever they are. Such humanitarian action nevertheless often constructs a hierarchical relation between the one who helps and the helpless victim, keeping them distinct and distant. The one who feels responsible and compassionate has already identified the other as being in need of care, and this may allow her to feel distinct and even better. The politics of compassion, therefore, are not contrary to or outside of the politics of inequality.

This paradox of **humanitarianism** often contrasts with rights-based solidarity, a practice that strives for a more equal relation between the two (Ticktin, 2011; Fassin, 2012, pp. 2-4). At one end of the continuum of politics of solidarity there is a naïve humanitarianism (Squire, 2014) that perceives the Other as different and separate, yet in a stereotypically positive way (Horsti, 2013; Andersson, 2014; Squire, 2014). In this process of making someone deserving of compassion, racialization intersects with other categories of gender, age, and class. A suitable **victim** who can be “saved” is often a woman who accepts Western values. In this dynamic, humanitarianism does not carry reciprocity but it is a gift, and the one who receives compassion is forever in debt to the one who gives (Mauss, 1923-4; Neumann, 2013, p. 4). At the other end of the continuum of solidarity, the Other is perceived, fundamentally, as an equal human being, and the suffering and injustice that one meets is taken as a common fight against injustice. The actors involved are aware of the power dynamics and the privileges that one has and **the Other** lacks. There is no illusion of similarity, but the fight against injustice unites the different actors. This division between discourses on rights and **humanitarianism** manifests what Lilie Chouliaraki (2013, pp. 11-13) calls two forms of solidarity: revolution and salvation. The humanitarian solidarity of salvation is based on the morality of altruistic benevolence and compassion, whereas

revolutionary responses to suffering take a more political form of solidarity that calls for attention to social justice and rights for all.

What we learn from the story of the **activists** of Kirkenes, however, is that **humanitarianism** is not always entirely apolitical, as many critics often claim, but that it is possible for a critical rights-based agency to develop from humanitarian action. The phase of engagement and friendship that followed the initial phase of basic humanitarian care not only shows a shift from one kind of moral response to another, but we also witness an entanglement of humanitarianism and solidarity. Further, the first engagements prepared the volunteers in Kirkenes for the more confrontational ways of demanding justice that we will examine in the next section.

Breaking the **Law to do Justice**

When the government (Conservatives and nationalist populist Progress Party), decided to deport those who had valid Russian visas back to Russia, the volunteers in Kirkenes took to more explicit political action and defiance of the state. Merete explains, “The Norwegian government deported 13 men on 19 January 2016 by bus. They just dropped them off in Murmansk ... in -38°C with nothing else than a sandwich. The ones we heard back from were either sleeping rough in the street or living in the hallway of a building, some had made it to Moscow. The government now planned to let another bus drop a new group of refugees including families with children off in Russia, and what would happen to them? They were stripping these people off their rights to have their asylum applications examined and wanted to drive them back to Russia, which had suddenly become a safe third country. We had to do something.”

The asylum applications of those to be returned forcibly to **Russia** were hastily examined. After the negative decisions, Norway bussed those people who had valid Russian visas back to Russia.

The locals had heard rumors of when the second bus would leave for Russia. Several of those active in the Refugees Welcome to the Arctic had already arrived to the center and tried to prevent the returns. The local and national media was there, too, and a large **police** gathering, including support from other regions. Merete spontaneously took a family of asylum seekers from Syria into her car, in front of policemen and journalists. “A policeman stopped me. I said ‘I am just taking this family for a cup of coffee in Kirkenes, are they under arrest?’ The policeman answered yes. I demanded to see their arrest warrant. When he didn’t show me one, I just acted on pure adrenaline, I didn’t think but drove. I hadn’t reached Kirkenes yet when I saw a human chain of policemen blocking the road. I didn’t want to be a murderer, so I stopped the car. I cried. The mother was hysterical, ‘No Russia!’ she cried, ‘No Russia!’ The policeman told me I was banned from going back to the camp and that I should follow him to the police station, the family, too — they had a 1-year old! I was so angry! I yelled at him that he was a MF.”

At the police-station, Merete was told that she was under arrest: “He said, ‘You have trespassed paragraph so-and-so of the foreign-law,’ or something.” Merete was submitted to a strip-search, which she found as humiliating and demeaning as pointless: “I said to the police: ‘Do you think I have a refugee up my bum?!’ I was then taken to a cold cell. I have never been arrested before, but I know from the movies that you have the right to call a lawyer. I could hear one of my friends getting arrested, too. If you don’t know her, she has a very strong voice and knows a lot of swear words. We were scared.” The two women and Eirik, who also took asylum seekers into his car and drove them to Kirkenes, was also prosecuted for “helping undocumented migrants in Norway.” After the asylum seekers sought **refuge** at the local Lutheran **church**. People from Kirkenes came with food, clothes, money, and a local supermarket sponsored food for them.

The national and international media attention, spurred by Merete, Eirik, and other volunteers' actions, the condemnation by human rights organizations, and finally the Russians' unwillingness to allow the people to return made the immediate forced returns impossible.

Three activists, including Merete and Eirik, were sentenced to pay a 5,000 NOK fine (approximately 546 Euros). While Merete and the other woman paid their fines thanks to donations from concerned citizens from Kirkenes and from all over Norway, Eirik refused to pay his and has appealed his case. He told us that he wouldn't pay because he hadn't done anything wrong. Judging his acts as criminal were not fair, nor just. Eirik eventually won his case in July 2017.

Several scholars have shown how **deportation** can be stopped and legalizations obtained due to the activities of pro-immigration groups within civil society (Balibar, 1999; Coutin, 2000; Lippert, 2004; Nyers, 2003), who "become border guards" and "gatekeepers of the nation-state" (Ticktin, 2011, pp. 24-25). As Susan B. Coutin stresses, the **law** should not be perceived as monolithic or entirely determinant, as it can be contested and negotiated. This leads to a processual understanding of the relationship between the law that creates illegality and illegal practices and the laws' implication in the redefinition of identities, and in generating new forms of citizenship (Coutin, 2000, p. 23). This understanding is prevalent among the inhabitants of Kirkenes, as it is in many other communities who have experienced various kinds of class-based legal and economical vulnerabilities, often due to their geographical distance from the power centers of the capital.

Memories from the Margins

What turned the two locals, Merete, a nurse, and Eirik, an iron miner, who had recently been laid off due to the closing of the mine, into human rights activists? And when

they were both sentenced to pay a fine for preventing the forced return of asylum seekers, what made Eirik decide to meet the state in court for not paying the fine?

The identity in Kirkenes is open to multiple identifications. We already mentioned “the traditional **hospitality** of the North,” which both the mayor and the inhabitants of Kirkenes often stressed. Sometimes, this narrative identity of hospitality and strong community spirit, *dugnadsånd*, is explained by a rough climate where survival depends on helping one another. However, this sense of helping the neighbor isn’t necessarily unconditional. In this case, it is particularly interesting to examine how these narratives of the Northern identity translate into arguments for **welcoming** responses to refugees. Oftentimes, these same arguments of community spirit are used in anti-immigration actions. Therefore, we explore further how this Northern hospitality is constructed. What are the memories and shared notions behind this hospitality that made such movement of solidarity possible?

First of all, Kirkenes needs to be understood in the framework of **borderland**. All inhabitants of Kirkenes are aware that the tracing of the **border** was somewhat accidental, that Kirkenes might as well have ended up in Russia, Finland, or Norway, and that this tracing came from “above”, and artificially traced into local allegiances. We were often reminded that many of the indigenous Sami who inhabited the area upheld a semi-nomadic lifestyle, but also that all have friendly daily exchanges across the border. Intermarriages, friendships, and business relations are common and visits frequent for those who hold a multiple entry borderland visa, whether they have Norwegian, Finnish, or Russian citizenship. While the end of the Cold War increased cross-border connections, perceptions of the neighboring Russian citizens had been positive even before. There were cultural contacts when the Soviet border was closed and the elderly locals in Kirkenes recalled Russians as allies in the partisan battles against the Germans in the war 1939 – 1945 (Viken, Granås & Nyseth, 2008, p. 27). The sense of borderlessness or open borders goes back much further. The European idea of

nation-state borders reached the North relatively late, in the early 1900s. In addition to these memories and sense of the region's history, people have other family memories of more or less voluntary movement in the region, due to wars and nation-state boundary-making.

The inhabitants of Kirkenes experienced **displacement** and **disposition** during World War II. Merete explains that her response might be inspired by her grandmother who experienced the destruction of Kirkenes during WW II when the Germans and Russians fought in the area and German troops ended up burning everything as they withdrew. Both she and Eirik tell us how during the fighting, 3,000 locals hid in the tunnels of the local mine for three months with their cows and other animals, with the snow providing them with clean drinking water. Eleven children were born in the tunnels. They said that everyone in Kirkenes knows this story, and part of the narrative is that the villagers were saved only because they took care of one another.

The winter of 2015-16 was not the first time Kirkenes has welcomed refugees. The locals still remember the stories from 1939 – 1940 when the Finns arrived to seek protection during the Winter War against the Soviet Union. Moreover, the same sports hall where the cycling refugees were housed had already been used to house refugees from Kosovo in the late 1990s. “We have a long history of protecting people,” Eirik and Merete explain.

Eirik, as all the other miners, lost his job when the mine went bankrupt in 2015. He was part of the worker's union, which had been a fundamental part of the community since the mine was opened in 1906. Throughout the turmoil with the mine, the workers stood together, as they had done for a century. In the 1980s and 1990s, the workers struggled against the closing of the mine. As Eirik walked Carolina through the section concerning the mine at the local Varanger museum, he explained the rough working conditions, the tragic accidents that could occur in the mines, and the fear they stirred among the miners. He paused, and Carolina asked, “Do you miss it?” Eirik's face lit up in a mild smile, “Every

single day!” Eirik had been part of the workers’ solidarity movement for years, and now, thinking back in time, he believes that that experience contributed to his response to the refugees. “I couldn’t see other people’s rights being violated, I couldn’t, and I had to show my solidarity,” Eirik says.

In addition to the struggles to keep the mining going, there are numerous other historical examples of local defiance to state-planning (Scott, 1998) in Kirkenes, as historian Marianne Neerland Soleim at Kirkenes’ Barentsinstitutet has written about. Many locals told us of such examples of the ways in which official history making can take away the heroism of some or rehabilitate others, as in the case of **Sami** people who guided refugees in the wilderness over the border during World War II, and who have been treated both as heroes and as traitors to the nation. Another example of struggles over hegemonic politics was the management of Russian prisoners of war, and, later, their graves. While the POWs were presented by state authorities as dangerous, local Norwegians who lived near the prisoner camps had great sympathy for them. When the Norwegian state decided to move to centralize POW graves during the Cold War, many locals refused to undertake the task, out of criticism of the state’s rewriting of history (Soleim, 2015; 2016).

Such examples of state defiance that had taken place in their parents’ or grand-parents’ life-time had been transmitted through family stories much more than in official school programs. The notion that what the school and national television tells us is not always in accordance with the history we know from our elders may also explain why the people of Kirkenes hold a certain suspicion towards the mainstream narratives. Eirik Nilsen told us how he’d always heard on national television that **Muslims** were bad people, but how his skepticism towards Muslims disappeared very quickly when he met the first Muslim asylum seekers personally.

Criticism and defiance of state regulations are commonplace in the region, and not only in regards to the refugees, as when discussions turn to the amount of fishing of king crab or tax-free goods that one can take from the Russian side to the Norwegian one. We heard many stories of small-scale illegalities, of trafficked trunks and glove compartments that made it possible to bring over an extra liter of alcohol or a cartridge of cigarettes for friends and relatives, which **border** or police authorities often know about but do not enforce. The notion that Oslo or Brussels has supported laws that the people thought were arbitrary and absurd and that it is legitimate to circumvent them with micro-arrangements, may also explain the reaction caused when the inhabitants of Kirkenes saw injustice and irresponsible public expenditure towards asylum seekers.

A contemporary example of the people in the North criticizing the central government includes responses to the building of the 200 meter (660 ft) and 4 million Norwegian kroner “grensegjerde”- a **border fence** built by the Norwegian state on the border between Norway and Russia in 2016 (Johnson, 2016). First of all, the Russians control the border on their side and already have an old fence in place. Second, the new Norwegian fence was built 1 cm too close to Russian territory, according to international law, and the Norwegian state had to spend additional money to move it, which only added absurdity to an already-senseless and costly project. The passing of refugees in the zone had already stopped. The **fence** was only symbolic and could easily be circumvented, as most border fences can. The locals saw the fence as a waste of tax money decided by a government that makes wrong decisions, either out of a lack of knowledge or deliberately, to instrumentalize refugees as a dangerous group, which politicians protect them from. In other words, xenophobia from “above” (Cette France-là 2012) disregards the experiences of a local community. The “grensegjerde” became a topic of ridicule in Kirkenes: people equaled it to the U.S. President Donald Trump’s dreams of a wall at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Many inhabitants of the border region further believe that the 5,542 persons who crossed the border had been too perfect an opportunity for the Russian regime to threaten Norway and other European countries that had put sanctions in place due to **Russia's** military intervention in the Ukraine. As in the cases of Mediterranean diplomacy, such as readmission agreements (Migreurop, 2009; 2017), exiles were once more pawns in geostrategical considerations, which neither the exiles themselves nor the local population of the **border** region had any take on.

Norwegian-ness in Kirkenes is thus, in many ways, a distinct kind of identity, a position from which the center and the capital can and must be challenged. As we exchanged in Norwegian and Danish with people in Kirkenes, the fact that neither of us belong to the capitals of our countries of citizenship, not Copenhagen nor Helsinki, was a distinct asset. This awareness of a local, regional identity that opposes the “capital” and the governing elites, may, then, partly explain the defiance of the law and the center, and that local allegiances extended to the refugees. These identifications among the locals in Kirkenes reflect the historical continuities at the Norwegian-Russian border: self-understanding of the region as a “dynamic frontier” or “wild North” and the desire for open borders. These desires and imaginaries have been in constant conflict with the concerns of nation state logic and the international power blocks (Niemi, 2009; Schimanski, 2015).

The stories of Eirik and Merete show how attentiveness to the suffering of strangers can be prompted by past experiences of one's own or that of others by stories that have become collectively shared memories. In Kirkenes, the response to the cycling asylum seekers extended from **humanitarianism** towards human rights, a solidarity that became increasingly politically challenging. For Eirik and Merete, these were not two different moralities but entangled into one. Also, they refused any sort of categorization that opposed foreigners to Norwegians in their merit. Eirik explains: “We got so much shit from people

who disagreed with us for helping refugees and not Norwegians. For instance, we collected reflectors so that the refugees would be visible when walking in the dark, and people said that we ought to give them to Norwegian children instead. We got so much of that “Norwegians first”.”

As both national and international media started reporting on the strange case of bicycling refugees in the Arctic, the humanitarian work taking place in the border region became more and more known. Merete was interviewed by Norwegian and foreign-national media, a visibility that quickly made her vulnerable to hatemongers. She received calls, texts, and emails from strangers, both anonymous and ones who did not even care to hide their identities. Merete stresses that no locals in Kirkenes ever attacked her directly. The hate mail was anonymous or came from outside of Kirkenes. Some Norwegians called Merete a “traitor” to the national community, “a disgrace to your country.” The messages entangled misogyny and nationalism in a way that shocked Merete deeply, and it was the first time that she experienced such bullying and hate. Eirik even received a letter with a death threat at his personal address, which had been posted from Southern Norway.

Merete’s and Eirik’s experience of being unjustly treated by hate mongers and police officers positioned them at the margins of mainstream Norwegian society. Nevertheless, in that position, they felt privileged. From the people that mattered to them, they received prizes and praise, encouragement and support. Furthermore, as Eirik explains, the tradition of worker’s solidarity extended to solidarity with asylum seekers and to an anti-racist stance. These Northern identities and histories of solidarities transformed into an ability to bear witness to injustice being done to others, whom they saw as guests, or possibly as fellow citizens in an international community of citizens who, sometimes, are separated by populist politics and who suffer from the arbitrary decisions of central governments. As a Syrian

refugee who crossed the Arctic border told Carolina, “It is always the same who suffer, civilians, and never the governments who decide. It is the same everywhere.”

As Merete and Eirik look back on the experiences they had a little over a year earlier, they realize that the events changed them. As Merete says, she has two lives, the one before refugees and the one with them. They are both very invested in the friendships they have created with asylum seekers who are now refugees, while staying involved in **refugee** activism. Eirik has volunteered in the infamous Idomeni refugee camp in Greece several times. Because staying abroad means that he loses the monthly benefits that his status as a former miner provides, he must live on his savings when he is in Greece, but he would be there most of the year if he could.

News from the world’s war zones have suddenly become personal, while phone calls from unknown people who accuse them of betraying their country no longer hurt as much as they did in the beginning. Their emotional landscape has changed. “Every time I pass by the Airport and the place where the police stopped me and forced a Syrian family out of my car, I remember and I get the chills,” Merete recalls.

Conclusion: Aftermath

Refugees Welcome networks across Europe have responded to the arrival of refugees mainly by humanitarian actions. Though **humanitarianism** is often depicted as and criticized for being an entirely de-politicized action towards populations that are given clothing, food, shelter, medical care and other strictly basic help, this is often more true in theory than in practice. Though many ordinary citizens with no previous history of politicized civil society engagements joined the **Refugees Welcome** movement and did strictly humanitarian work, such as cheering in train stations, bringing home baked pastries or children’s toys, as in the case of the Venligboerne in Denmark, many quickly got a sense of some of the injustices of the asylum system and went from more humanitarian action to more politicized action.

Humanitarian and politicized pro-migrant activism, we argue, are less opposites or strictly two poles on a specter, and more entangled forms of engagement.

In Kirkenes, the local activists not only offered humanitarian assistance but also voiced their solidarity with the refugees and their criticism of the **asylum industry** as well as the unjust treatment of asylum seekers. These speech acts took the movement towards a more politicized position, which started in the form of a protest with torches and signs. However, when the forced returns began, the locals in the **Refugees Welcome** to the Arctic movement raised their voice and put themselves on the line. To be heard in public and in the spheres of politics, Eirik Nielsen went even further and chose to confront the state in court, through legal action.

Second, through humanitarian actions, activists are often made aware of the differences between the law, legal action, and their own sense of what a just asylum system should be. Before encountering asylum seekers Merete and Eirik, for instance, had not been so aware of international human rights law, asylum law and the rights of non-citizens. Through humanitarian action many become conscious that their state and legal system does not respect the country's own laws nor the international treaties signed by the government. Some get involved in actions that are in the grey-zone of the law and experience being persecuted for having broken the law that criminalizes the actions of human smugglers.

Such experiences can profoundly alter the traditional trust in the authorities that has characterized majority populations of the Nordic region, who are otherwise known to show high levels of belief in the goodness and of the fairness of the state. For example, in the Eurobarometer opinion survey, citizens of Finland and Sweden rank among the highest in trust to national parliament and government in Europe. The confrontation and suspicion of the central government in the Northern part of the Nordic countries that we discussed earlier needs to be understood in this context. Distrust in state institutions and politicians has of

course been prominent in extreme right-wing and left-wing discourse for quite some time, but experiences of an unjust asylum system and illegal actions from state authorities themselves spur anti-political and anti-system rhetoric at the center, on the liberal left and the moral pro-migrant right. This is an aspect that has been much less explored and the case of Kirkenes and the axes of Northern identity and engagement with asylum seekers point to the need to further examine the complexities of the relations between the state, non-citizens and citizens from the margins.

The solidarity shown by a community of 3,500 who welcomed 5,542 asylum seekers questions certain assumptions and stereotypes concerning the values and ideologies of white **working-class** (males) from economically and culturally disenfranchised regions of the North. Further, as enchanted as we were by the actions taken by the people and municipality of Kirkenes, their example is not unique. All over Europe, locals, who are often living precariously, have helped migrants and asylum seekers, whether upon arrival in Southern Spain, Italy, **Greece**, or at border crossings in la Vallée du Roya on the Italian-French border or in **Calais** at the French-British border. These regions, just as the neighborhoods in which exiles gather in **Paris** (Boe & Mainsah, 2017), are also those where locals are among the most marginalized and precarious; and it may be the awareness that history favors powerful elites that drive them, not to vote for populist parties, but to welcome other precarious populations. The experience of the locals in Kirkenes resonated with the stories which we have both heard from locals in other **border** zones, such as Lampedusa and Calais.

These regions where European borders are policed and enforced are often considered as the **periphery** when seen from the urban and political centers. From an economic perspective, they are, indeed, often places that are characterized by low income or high levels of unemployment whether they have a subsistence economy from fishing, agriculture, mining, sometimes tourism or (post-)industrialization. Places such as the Greek islands, Lampedusa,

and Calais are considered borderlands like Kirkenes in the public imaginaries, though they have often traditionally been places of passage, the sea being more of a waterway than a border. In these places, locals have responded in similar ways as in Kirkenes (Puggioni, 2015; Gerbier-Aublanc, 2017). In some instances, humanitarian response by locals has attracted media attention, and both Lampedusani and the people of Lesbos have been nominated for the Nobel peace prize. Recently also, scholars have paid attention to the networks of solidarity and confrontation that emerge in response to arriving refugees and the security and humanitarian industry that follows. Raffaella Puggioni (2015), for instance, examines how the locals in Lampedusa refused to be complicit in the detention industry that has grown on the island. Through such acts of dissent, people who are expected to respond negatively to the arrival of others, more often than not develop politics of equality. Puggioni argues that by aligning with the migrants, the Lampedusani positioned themselves in disagreement with the central government in Rome and the European Union. While the elite response to the arrival of asylum seekers across the Mediterranean was militarization, security measures, and cooperation agreements with third countries, the Lampedusani advocated for an alternative that treated migrants more humanely. Many locals protest and speak against securitization and militarization of the island (Tucci, in print) and in doing so have cultivated a discourse and practices of attentiveness to the migrants as human beings who have social lives. As in Kirkenes, humanitarian assistance entangles with solidarity and politicized action against the European border regime and against xenophobia, which is perceived to be generated by politicians from the political centers who care little about the experiences of locals in the margins.

As in other groups in society who experience cuts in welfare and unemployment benefits, or the financial and cultural marginalization of their regions, the notion that the law is no longer just is becoming more and more mainstream. This notion often goes hand in hand with

skepticism towards economic globalization, and the idea of an “elite” of politicians and citizens who vote for them, who are privileged and care little about those who are not, whether they are nationals or foreigners.

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