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# Visibility in mediated borderscapes: The hunger strike of asylum seekers as an embodiment of border violence

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## Abstract:

In 2012, two Afghan asylum seekers camped outside the Parliament building in Helsinki during a hunger strike that lasted for 72 days. Although the protest was very visible in the city space, the mainstream media and most politicians ignored it. This paper analyzes the protest and its mediation through the concepts of borderscape and visibility. Using methods of visual and discourse analysis, we examine the ways in which the hunger strike protest – and its mediation – negotiate the (in)visibility of borders. We show how the city can be a site for both policing and for politicizing asylum issues. In particular, we focus on the ways in which protesting asylum seekers embody borders and border control, making dis-located borders visible in spaces where citizens do not see them. The concept of “borderscape” is an example of the view on borders that sees bordering as a practice that disperses borders in physical and socio-political space. Moreover, we examine the mediated reactions of various agents, such as the Lutheran church, activists, politicians, and journalists, as well as the protesters themselves, focusing on visibility as social recognition. Our analysis of the hunger strike reveals the situated gaze of social actors. It shows how border struggles are situated within landscapes of politics of protection and politics of listening.

Keywords: hunger strike, visibility, intersectionality, asylum protest, border, urban space

## INTRODUCTION

Bordering practices are increasingly becoming a part of peoples' everyday lives (see, for example, Nicholls, 2016; Bürkner, 2014; Johnson et al., 2011; Lahav & Guiraudon, 2000). This paper offers an inverted perspective: instead of demonstrating how bordering practices become part of the everyday through border enforcement and migration legislation, we explore a case in which asylum seekers themselves bring bordering into the everyday consciousness of citizens by a hunger strike protest in front of Parliament, at the center of Helsinki, Finland.

This paper examines the ways in which the (in)visibility of borders is negotiated in urban space and in the media. We focus on how the protesting asylum seekers decide to disturb the everyday urban space and deviate from the expected behavior of non-citizens by embodying borders, and in doing so, make dis-located borders visible in spaces where citizens do not see them. This view on borders follows critical border studies that examine bordering as a social practice (Bürkner, 2014) that disperses borders in physical and socio-political space as a complex differentiation process (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002; Brambilla, 2015).

We distinguish two kinds of visibilities in protests in public spaces. First, there is the visibility of the protest in urban space. The city itself is a medium, a stage where the protest is performed. The buildings and monuments carry layers of meanings, and so the city offers various intentional and non-intentional references that also shape the protest. (See e.g. Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014; Darling, 2016; Dickinson & Aiello, 2016). Urban places represent both the formal and informal sphere, and can work as sites for counter-hegemonic struggle, but also as spaces of governmentality and control. Here, we conceptualize urban space in a way similar to what Jonathan Darling (2016) proposes, which is to follow Uitermark and Nicholl's (2014) perspective on how the city can be a site for both policing and for politicizing asylum issues. Second, there is the media visibility of the protest; the recognition of the protest in various kinds of mediated spaces (Cottle & Lester, 2011). In the present multi-platform media environment, we examine the interconnections and re-mediations between different media platforms (Couldry, 2012). In the re-mediation of a

protest, those who share images and interpretations of it offer a situated gaze (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2011) to the issue of asylum or to the protest itself.

The hunger strike has become an increasingly common protest strategy within the so-called “immigrant protests”, political mobilizations that bring together migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, as well as supporting activists of majority background (Tyler & Marciniak 2013). Asylum seekers and refugees in various border zones, such as Nauru, Calais, Paris, and Berlin have performed political agency by turning their bodies into vehicles of political claims. Most of these protests by non-citizens have been performed in spaces that are marginalized from the perspective of the everyday of the citizens. They take place in spaces that can be *seen and identified* as border zones: in detention centers or in more or less tolerated camps.<sup>i</sup> The protest that we analyze here, however, disrupts the everyday order of the citizens not only by making the perceived state violence visible in the hungry and suffering body, but also by transforming the everyday of the city space – and more precisely a symbolic site in this space – into a visible border zone.

The protest began on the sole initiative of two Afghan male asylum seekers, Javad Mirzayi (34) and Gholam Siddique Abdullahi (36), who had received negative responses from the Finnish state to their asylum applications. They camped outside the Parliament building in Helsinki in a 72-day hunger strike in fall 2012. Their decision was not influenced by any of the actors that later offered their support in the form of demonstrations, human chains, speeches, and charity. Mirzayi and Abdullahi ended their protest shortly after the minister of the interior, Päivi Räsänen, finally came and talked with them in the protest camp (Interview Mirzayi, 25.4.2016).

We analyze the protest itself, as well as the re-mediation of the protest, with a mixed-method approach that includes analysis of discourses and visualities. In addition to media content, we have analyzed our research interviews with different actors who were involved in the protest, such as the protesters and their supporters. We argue that this approach, which combines ethnographic interviews with discourse and visual analysis, is crucial for capturing the power

dynamics and the various intersectionally situated gazes of such protests. Listening to how various actors make sense of the protest broadens our understanding of the visuality of the protest and its mediation.

The dynamics of migrant- and refugee-led social movements are complex (Chavéz, 2013; Moulin & Nyers, 2007; Tyler & Marciniak, 2013), and through three research interviews conducted in 2016, we examined the ways in which the interests of different actors came together. We interviewed one of the protesters, Bass Mirzayi (previously known as Javad Mirzayi), an activist from the Freedom of Movement Network, and the key supporter from the Finnish Lutheran church.

Moreover, we examine how the mainstream media on the one hand embedded the framing offered by the migrants or their supporters into their articles, but on the other hand also re-framed the protest. The professional journalistic logic stresses equal treatment of both sides of a conflict. A protest, by definition, is a performance of a conflict in which the protesters oppose something, or claim certain identities and social relations. However, through (re)mediation, the media (re)construct a conflict in a way which may or may not be in line with what the protesters intended (see also Cottle & Lester 2011).

After first introducing the background of activism and social movements around asylum issues, we will give an account of the data and methods that we used in our analysis. Then, we will explore the places and spaces that became relevant in the protest. In addition to our own reading of the protest as communication in urban space, we analyze how others – those involved in the protest, and those mediating their view of the protest – understand the protest in this specific place. Last, we examine the intersectionally situated gaze of the actors who supported and contested the cause of the protest and its form, the hunger strike.

Our analysis shows how protests work as attempts to bring invisible border struggles (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Nicholls, 2016) into the consciousness of the everyday. Two kinds of

politics are especially relevant for these border struggles: the politics of listening and the politics of protection. The supporters regularly listened to the protesters and engaged in conversation with them. This respected the protesters' agency and created a solidarity founded on human rights rather than humanitarianism. Important critical moments emerged from this practice of listening: those moments when asylum seekers disturbed the everyday understanding of bordering practices and when supporters not only offered humanitarian care, but also attempted to re-politicize the asylum issue. Therefore, the hunger strike intervened in what Nyers calls the politics of protection (2003) in ways that challenged the traditional understanding of who can be political and who has the authority to protect. The understanding of Muslim men as cultural others who do not qualify for protection dominated the politicians', the administrations' and the media's response to the protest. We identify an increasingly humanitarian rationale in the public understanding of asylum, which undermines claims to see political persecution as legitimate grounds for protection (Fassin, 2005).

#### ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS ON THE ASYLUM ISSUE – BACKGROUND

The Finnish Immigration Service makes asylum decisions based on laws that are drafted by the Ministry of the Interior and accepted by Parliament. In the case of negative decisions, asylum seekers have the right to appeal in court. At the time of their protest, the two Afghan men had appealed the decisions they had received from the Immigration Service, but the court had not yet given its decision.

When the hunger strike began, two groups mobilized and re-energized their own pro-asylum activism: a group of Evangelical Lutheran priests and a group of secular pro-asylum activists. These same groups had publicly advocated for asylum seekers in the past<sup>ii</sup> (Pyykkönen 2009; Horsti, 2013). Despite the high social recognition of priests in Finland and successful activism in the past, in this case the activists' efforts failed to create a widely mediatized debate. Mainstream media journalists and most politicians remained silent or explicitly dismissed the

protest. This is particularly telling because the protesters occupied a space on both journalists' and politicians' daily route to work: the main editorial office of *Helsingin Sanomat*, the most influential national newspaper, is across the street from the Parliament building.

Deportations and so-called “voluntary returns” rarely make news in Finland, unlike the arrival of asylum seekers and related administrative issues. Nevertheless, Finland, like the other Nordic countries, considers return and deportation policies to be crucial technologies of immigration politics (Kynsilehto & Puumala, 2016). They are seen as ways of discouraging asylum seekers from arriving in Finland; however, deportations and returns are events that happen outside the public realm. Only in some particular circumstances do the media and activists bring attention to deportations. These cases have concerned “suitable victims,” whose worthiness for “our” care is guaranteed by Finnish relatives or notable supporters such as a priest (Horsti, 2013; Horsti & Pellander, 2015; Pyykkönen, 2009).

The hunger strike is an uncommon protest strategy in Finland. Therefore, this case should be understood in the context of transnational immigrant protests, where those in powerless positions create a certain sovereignty: the power to do something within the often very limited opportunities that they have. Since the introduction of the hunger strike to the European social movement landscape in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by British suffragettes, the hunger strike has been characterized by its use by those in a position where few political opportunities exist (Scanlan, Cooper Stoll & Lumm 2008; Ziarek, 2008; Machin, 2016). Research on various hunger strikes, such as those in Guantánamo, as part of the Irish struggle and during anti-apartheid protests, demonstrates that, in addition to the use of the body as a vehicle for demanding attention from those who are responsible for the perceived injustice, the hunger strike also invites attention from potential supporters. In doing so, the hunger strike can be a powerful strategy in creating a collective identification for those who share the political aim of the protest. The suffering body and the prospect of slow death produce a common symbol for the protesters, and in case of death, the

body can turn into a self-sacrifice (Scanlan, Cooper Stoll & Lumm 2008; Ziarek, 2008; Machin, 2016). However, specific to hunger strikes in the realm of “immigrant protests” is that the suffering body belongs to a non-citizen. While the question of how race, class, and gender intersect is relevant in any hunger strike protest, the asylum protest calls for attention to a specific politics of solidarity that is aware of the power dynamics in the protest. In our case, it is crucial to ask how supporters negotiate their politics of solidarity when their own bodies and own lives are not subject to bordering in the same ways that the protesters are.

### METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH MATERIAL: FOLLOWING THE THREADS OF THE PROTEST AND ITS MEDIATION

By combining two kinds of visualities and textualities, the protest and its mediation, we move beyond a media-centric approach. We observed the protest personally as we moved around the city in 2012, but at the time we did not anticipate that we would do research on it. Our recollection of the protest is mainly based on visual and textual material available in the mainstream and activist media. In addition, we rely on the recollections of three interviewees: one of the hunger strikers, Bass Mirzayi; an activist from the Freedom of Movement Network; and an Evangelical Lutheran priest, Antti Siukonen. The interviewees also provided important additional evidence, such as their email communication with the media and politicians. The semi-structured interviews were conducted and transcribed in 2016, and they lasted from one to three hours. We looked for information on the actors’ motivations, negotiations, and their analysis of the visibility of the protest in the city space and in various media. In addition, we were interested in the actors’ evaluation of the protest in the context of asylum activism in Finland more broadly.

We ensured informed consent for the interview with Bass Mirzayi, who spoke with us on the condition that we were to discuss only the hunger strike itself, not the circumstances of his asylum application. We also agreed that he would only talk about issues that he felt comfortable



with. The interview with Bass Mirzayi lasted for three hours. It was conducted at his home in Helsinki in Finnish and Dari, with the help of an interpreter who is also from Afghanistan and speaks fluent Finnish. As the hunger strike and his current situation are still very sensitive issues for Mirzayi, it was vital that we let him choose an interpreter whom he trusts.

The interviews with the activist from the Freedom of Movement Network in Finland and with the priest Antti Siukonen each lasted for an hour. They also they gave their informed consent, and were offered the opportunity to choose to remain anonymous. All interviewees were able to read the final publication and, if necessary, withdraw any of their statements.

The media material includes television news and current affairs programs broadcast by the Finnish public broadcast service YLE (six items); four news items, three letters to the editor, and two columns that addressed the hunger strike in the national broadsheet *Helsingin Sanomat*; nine press releases by the Freedom of Movement Network; a blog post by Anna Kontula, member of Parliament from the Left Alliance party; and a story in the Evangelical Lutheran magazine *Kirkko & Kaupunki*. We also contacted the editor of *Helsingin Sanomat* several times for an interview, without success. The visuals in the media material allowed us to examine how the protest was situated in the city space during its various phases and what kind of visual communication, such as posters, were placed to attract the attention of citizens and politicians. In addition, the media material was examined as a representation of the protest. In this phase of the analysis we considered the question: How do the different media, and the actors speaking in the media, frame the protest, the actors involved, and the asylum issue more generally? Moreover, we were interested in analyzing what was not mediated. In order to uncover aspects of the protest that were not mediated, we read the interviews and the media material in conjunction.

The analysis of both the interviews and the media materials was guided by the theoretical frameworks of everyday bordering and situated intersectionality. The triangulation of our analysis took place between the various “threads” of our data (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006): the

interviews, the media content, and the public statements and written material by the relevant stakeholders. Thus, we did a close, side by side reading of both textual and visual material to look for the ways in which “border struggles” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) were enacted and how these were shaped by “situated intersectional positionalities”.

### THE PLACES OF INVISIBILITY AND BORDER STRUGGLES

The location of the protest was crucial for the re-negotiation of the (in)visibility of borders. By staging the protest in a politically important place, Mirzayi and Abdullahi (re)politicized public space in ways that revealed a “borderscape” (Brambilla, 2015), a landscape in which bordering and belonging take place (see also Nicholls, 2016; Darling, 2016, p. 2). When studying any political movement, it is critical to understand “action-in-place” (Kirby, 1985) and the performative and symbolic dimensions of the environment where the action takes place and through which the actors move (Dickinson & Aiello 2016, p. 1295). Most importantly, Mirzayi and Abdullahi decided to protest in front of Parliament. Located in the heart of the capital, Helsinki, Parliament is a prestigious site, and important in the national (imaginary) landscape of Finnish politics.

The hunger strike itself is a form of communication, a tool of “countervisuality” (Mirzoeff, 2011) that opposes the normative communicative modes of Finnish public culture. While demonstrations are sometimes held in front of the Parliament building, they usually do not last more than a day. The Occupy movement protesters, who had camped close to the Parliament building on Kansalaistori (“Citizens’ Square”) earlier in the summer of 2012, were an exception. Nevertheless, it was unusual to camp in a tent right in front of Parliament for an extended period, especially during the cold autumn. By persistently protesting in such a symbolic place, Mirzayi and Abdullahi (re)politicized the space, disturbing both the social movement tradition in Finland and the public space that was structured by certain viewing habits and gazes.

The Parliament building is a place of interest for tourists and touring school groups. It renders a certain sacred symbolism of nationalism, democracy, and the independence of Finland. Dominant viewing habits and gazes often reflect and perpetuate hierarchical power relations (Doerr, Mattoni, & Teune, 2013). In this case, the way the public had habituated itself in its everyday movement in the city and the way people were accustomed to looking at the parliamentary building were disturbed by the asylum seekers. Interestingly, however, while the protest was something unexpected in this space, it became part of the new everyday experience for the 72 days it lasted.

For some locals, the men's persistence in the public space provided an invitation to find out more about the condition of asylum seekers and Afghanistan. It also served as an invitation for humanitarian care. People brought water, blankets, and clothes, and offered their company. For instance, Ann-Louise Edström, a middle-aged Finnish woman, explained in the Swedish language television news that she had looked at the tents daily as she passed by on a bus: "This disturbed me every day – It broke my heart that some people have to starve to stay alive." (TV-nytt 7 November 2012)

However, others were outraged at the change to their everyday gaze, and altered their movements to avoid the place of protest. MP Anna Kontula from the Left Alliance, who stood out as the only politician to speak on behalf of the hunger strikers, revealed in the television news that some of her colleagues had begun to enter the Parliament building from a side entrance, "so that they wouldn't have to pass by starving people" on their way to work (YLE TV1 A-studio 21 November 2012).

The television news interviewed Anna Kontula outside of Parliament, close to the protest camp, and in doing so underlined how she positioned herself in the conflict. She did not stand on the side of the majority of her fellow members of Parliament (who decided to re-route their daily movement), but on the protesters' side. This stands in contrast with the interview the same current affairs program did with the minister of the interior at the time, Päivi Räsänen (Christian Democrats).

She was filmed speaking inside the Parliament building. She offered no sympathy to the protesting asylum seekers, and was particularly hostile to their mode of communication, the hunger strike, which she framed as a threat to democracy and to state sovereignty itself: “. . . if [they] come from a culture where people are used to corruption and where politicians intervene in the decisions of courts. Here, we don't do that. Here, court decisions are not political, and this is an important principle and we have to hold on to that.” (Päivi Räsänen in YLE TV1 A-studio 21 November 2012.)

In this quote, Räsänen draws a border between “us”, the Finns, and the hunger strikers, depicting “them” as culturally backward and therefore threatening. This distinction is also emphasised in her choice of words. Räsänen doesn't say “things aren't done that way in Finland”, but rather draws the border with a much stronger figure of speech, using *meillä* “at our place” to refer to “here, in Finland”. She has the role of the potent minister, filmed inside Parliament, who draws a line between herself as the protector of the democratic state, and the potentially undemocratic asylum seekers outside, indicating that they are uninvited guests who are not behaving according to “house rules”. Dismissing hunger strikers as backward and morally dangerous people is a typical reaction by those who are the target of such protests (Machin 2016, p. 159). The discursive strategy that Räsänen uses can be interpreted as an act of reinstating the sovereignty of the state – by reminding the protesters how to act within the state. Nyers refers to this as “sovereign retakings”, where even “radical takings can nonetheless be captured by the logic and practices of state sovereignty” (Nyers, 2003, 1087). Minister Räsänen reduces the protest to a misunderstanding of how a democratic and sovereign state functions, and in doing so frames the protest as a threat to democracy itself.

In an op-ed article in *Helsingin Sanomat* (9 November 2012), Räsänen reiterates the same frame of threat, which she presents as an outcome of cultural differences: “Based on their own culture, the applicants may assume that in Finland politicians could pressure the judiciary system or

public authority”. Räsänen follows the common administrative logic that self-harm is an act of manipulation rather than an high-risk act of resistance (Weber & Pickering, 2011).

Reducing their protest to an act of cultural difference stresses the intersectional hierarchies of exclusion that Räsänen creates – she asserts that she and other Finnish actors know how political actions are to be taken and how the political and judiciary systems work, while the asylum seekers are outsiders who lack knowledge and whose claim is invalidated by their ignorance of Finnish culture.

By protesting in front of Parliament, which for the protesters symbolises the institution that makes the laws according to which they were being deported back to Afghanistan, the protesters framed the conflict as being one between themselves, as rejected asylum seekers, and the state. Initially, they planned to protest at the Finnish Immigration Service, but then realized that the location would have been too remote to attract public attention (Interview Mirzayi, 25 April 2016).

We argue that the hunger strike was significant in the way it transformed the everyday invisibility of Finnish bordering practices into something visible, and it did so in such way that many could not ignore. Even the acts of avoidance, such as the decision of members of Parliament to take a different route to work, were deliberate decisions. They had to change their everyday routines, but they were still *thinking* of the protest, although they were not directly *seeing* it.

The tent that was erected at the site marks a confined, private, and intimate space within public space, which nevertheless was made visible and public through the protest. The protesters brought this narrow intimate space of theirs into a space that is marked by professionalised politics and public decision-making. By putting up their tent, a temporary dwelling, the protesters underlined a different kind of politics: the politics of presence, in which their presence in the public space is used to claim political subjectivity (Darling, 2006).

Mirzayi describes how he and Abdullahi had to sleep outside the tent, because it was too small for both of them. This further exposed the men to the harsh weather conditions of the Finnish autumn (Interview Mirzayi 25 April 2016). The tent, which would have offered them some protection, began to symbolically materialize the way in which Finnish officials claimed that there was no room for them in Finland. Sleeping outside of the interim refuge that the tent might have offered underlined their non-belonging and the way the state treated them as non-protectable. By sleeping in the open, the men performed their abject position in Finland and intervened in the politics of bordering that denied their protection.

Another symbolically important visual element in the protest was the statue of the first regent and third president of Finland, P. E. Svinhufvud, which also stands in front of Parliament. When the men's blankets and pillows became wet during the night from sleeping outdoors, they needed to hang them to dry somewhere. The statue of Svinhufvud was used for this purpose, which was in strong contrast to Finnish expectations of the way respected monuments should be treated. The caretakers of the Parliament building were irritated, as Mirzayi describes:

“We put our blankets and pillows onto the statue that is outside of Parliament. The staff of Parliament came and complained, ‘Why are you doing this?’ Abdullahi explained that we need to dry our stuff, there is no other place to dry them. Then one employee of Parliament came and said this is our president, a very important person to us, you cannot put anything on top of him, but we had no other choice, no other place where we could put our blankets. Chinese tourists took a lot of pictures of that.”

(Interview Mirzayi 25 April 2016)

The Finnish caretakers interpreted the blankets spread out on a national symbol as direct insult against the nation and its sovereignty, while Chinese tourists considered them a curiosity. This conflict is an example of how urban space and the policing that takes place there tend to “align subjects with the state” (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2014, 975). Nevertheless, while this

statue underlines the historical significance of the place (Massey, 1979), it is probably true that most people do not even notice the statue or remember whom it represents. The statue becomes visible and important only through the act of (presumed) insult; the hanging of blankets over it re-energizes Svinhufvud's presence. Mirzayi and Abdullahi's tent itself was one interruption of the public space, but spreading out their blankets over the presidential statue created an even harsher contrast to the everyday. Their blankets became visible traces of their "bodies out of place" (Puwar, 2004) – bodies not accepted as belonging to Finland nor as legitimate political agents for protest.

Moreover, the phrase "our president" in Mirzayi's quote is also interesting. In his recollection of the episode he remembers how the caretaker deliberately made the distinction between "them" and "us" by indicating how the statue represents "our president", to whom the asylum seekers have no right to relate. Their intersectional situatedness as Muslim men with no permanent right to reside in Finland marks them as outsiders who have no right to appropriate national symbols, and who fundamentally are seen as having no understanding of symbols and the respectful treatment of them. The outrage over the fact that the asylum seekers reduced one of the main symbols of Finnish nationhood and democracy to a drying rack is in line with the outrage over the protest itself, which Päivi Räsänen framed as blackmail and as a threat to democracy based on ignorance of the system.

The reading that the asylum seekers were acting as aspiring citizens, capable of challenging the self-identification of Finland as a country founded on democracy and human rights, was completely beyond the public imagination. "Failed" asylum seekers are not understood as agents capable of political activism who could negotiate the politics of protection.

## BEING MADE INVISIBLE – MEDIATED BORDERSCAPES

Migrants sometimes consciously make themselves invisible in the everyday in order to hide from authorities or to avoid othering (see, for example, Rojas-Wiesner & DeVargas, 2004). Yet in our case, the migrants undertook a conscious and strategic act to make themselves and their vulnerability visible. During their hunger strike, Javad Mirzayi and Gholam Siddique Abdullahi welcomed reporters to the site of the protest. The activist Freedom of Movement Network, which supported the asylum seekers in their strike, explicitly invited the media and the general public to come and talk with the men. The activists referred the media to an interpreter by name, and provided regular quotes and updates on their website. While the website of the Freedom of Movement Network works as a medium itself, it also provides material and viewpoints for other media.

Despite these efforts, the protest was ignored in the mainstream media for a very long time, most notably in the national newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS), which has editorial offices close to Parliament, and whose journalists could actually see the hunger strikers from their windows every day. It was only towards the very end of the protest that *Helsingin Sanomat* and the national broadcaster YLE began to pay attention to the protest in their news sections. At that point, the hunger strikers were in close to critical medical condition, and it was precisely this framing that the mainstream media decided to take on the issue: they medicalized the protest. Instead of framing it as a political protest, *Helsingin Sanomat* in particular focused on what not eating would do to a human body. In her linguistic analysis of *Helsingin Sanomat* news articles on the hunger strike, Milena Solomun shows that the lexicon of the news reflected more the fields of medicine and biology than politics. Words referring to body parts and organs were accompanied by expressions describing bodily processes and physical weakness. Moreover, medical doctors and nutritionists were quoted as experts on the topic (Solomun, 2015).



HS never explained to their readers their editorial decision not to cover the hunger strike. They also did not respond to our enquiries about the decision. While the news sections remained silent, the topic emerged on the pages of *Helsingin Sanomat* through opinion journalism: columnists touched on the topic, and three letters to the editor were published (from Minister of the Interior Päivi Räsänen, a refugee lawyer, and an Evangelical Lutheran priest). All of these authors, except Räsänen, wondered why the mainstream media and politicians kept silent about the hunger strikers. The silence of the mainstream media became the topic that commentators began writing about – and this created enough pressure that eventually HS had to address the hunger strike.

One such commentator, independent journalist Elina Grundström, wrote a commissioned column for HS raising the silence of the press and politicians on the hunger strike as an example of “the new immorality”: “Now the atmosphere has changed to an odd toughness. Some want to prohibit begging. Obviously, the Afghan asylum seekers are left to die in their hunger strike in front of Parliament without anyone paying attention, except for a few priests.” (Elina Grundström HS 30 October 2012). The public acknowledgment of silence in the media – even in the mainstream media itself through columnists and letters to the editor – directed some critical attention towards Finnish society and its reactions to the hunger strike. Finally, HS did publish two news articles on the Afghan asylum seekers. The first was published in the foreign news section, and addressed the hunger strike as a transnational phenomenon. The second covered the end of the hunger strike.

The Freedom of Movement Network activist we interviewed also wondered why the newspaper decided not to report on the issue. The activist suggests that this form of protest, the hunger strike, was simply too unusual in the context of Finnish activism. The activist explained that in the period from 2006 to 2009, it was rather easy to take individual stories of human rights violations in asylum cases to the public, while in recent years, it has been much more difficult to get journalists interested in these cases (Interview Activist 2 March 2016).

The protesters themselves also became aware that the mainstream media in Finland was ignoring their protest:

“Many times we saw how YLE television reporters walked into Parliament and did not notice us there, and my friend Abdullahi went up to them several times to tell them ‘Look, we are here’, but they said that ‘We are not interested.’ I was thinking why were they not wondering what was going on here, maybe this was normal to them? There we were with our mouths stitched and in very bad condition, didn’t this look a bit abnormal to them?” (Interview Mirzayi 25 April 2016)

Mirzayi suspects that there was a conscious decision behind this silence. “I got the impression then that they had decided that we were not visible. I got the feeling that the media and journalists were told that nobody is allowed to go and see this situation.” (Interview Mirzayi 25 April 2016.)

Pastor Antti Siukonen developed a similar interpretation of the media’s non-treatment of the topic based on his experience with journalists, confirming Mirzayi’s gut feeling. Siukonen recalls that he once received a phone call from a journalist writing for *Helsingin Sanomat*, who interviewed him about the hunger strike. However, the same journalist called again later to let Siukonen know that he had not gotten permission to publish the article. Siukonen assumes that there was a request from the Ministry of the Interior not to publish anything on the topic – a claim that we have not been able to verify by the time of writing, as the editors of *Helsingin Sanomat* have not responded to our enquiries. However, Siukonen provided us with evidence showing that the Ministry of the Interior had circulated the recommendation that public interest in the protest be kept low, so it could well be that the ministry also offered this opinion to the media. We were not able to verify whether coverage of the protest in *Helsingin Sanomat* was affected by a recommendation from the ministry.

Antti Siukonen read an email to us that the Ministry of the Interior had sent to a group called Women for Peace in Finland (Naiset rauhan puolesta). The group had expressed their concern about the hunger strikers. The ministry's response stated,

Thank you for your feedback to Minister Räsänen. Minister Räsänen shares your concern for the health of the protesters, and certainly does not underestimate their distress. As both a government minister and as a Christian, she by no means wants to send them to their deaths, but rather has ensured that the Afghan men have access to medical treatment and that they are aware of this. However, it is important to be careful that we do not encourage those who are dissatisfied with their decisions to undertake activities that would endanger their health. . . . It is now vital to inform the hunger strikers by all means possible that they should end their strike and seek medical help and, with the help of others, rely on the channels of influence available in Finland. For the sake of the health of other asylum seekers in Finland, it would be dangerous to send the message that a hunger strike is an effective means of making an impact. (Email by the Ministry of the Interior, read out by Siukonen at the interview, 15 March 2016)

When Siukonen delivered to Minister Räsänen a petition signed by 385 priests urging the Finnish Immigration Service to re-evaluate the case of these two men, she repeated this message, and stated that she wants to keep a low profile on the topic, in order not to encourage others. Siukonen tried to bring the issue of the hunger strikers to the Church's General Synod, where Räsänen's husband Niilo Räsänen was present as a doctor of theology and a voting member of the Synod. "He came to me personally and said, 'Don't keep bringing this up, you are killing these men.'" (Interview Siukonen, 15 March 2016.) This resembles what Fassin calls an oscillation between a politics of pity and policies of control (Fassin, 2005). The wish of the ministry to make

the protest invisible is an attempt to control the political activism of asylum seekers, but Räsänen uses pity and concern for the health of the men as a justification.

This low-key approach was impossible to maintain as the protest went on, and finally Minister Räsänen began to give statements to the media. In a letter to the editor (Räsänen, *Helsingin Sanomat* 9 November 2012), she takes a patronising position and criticises the form of protest: “The most important thing would be to get the men to understand that jeopardizing one’s own health is completely unnecessary and harmful as an attempt to influence [decisions], both for themselves and for other asylum seekers.” As in her communications towards the church actors, she implicitly accuses the asylum seekers of pressuring politicians and attempting to bring dangerous methods from the outside into Finland. Moreover, the medical framing that she draws on individualizes the protest and considers only these two suffering bodies and not the broader cause. The fact that Räsänen is a medical doctor also facilitates this particular attention to medical issues. This response, “the medical gaze” towards the protesters, is typical across hunger strike protests in general (Machin 2016, p. 170), which also complicates the supporters’ politics, as we will discuss in the final part of the article.

These actions imply that, within the politics of protection, Räsänen denies the political agency of these asylum seekers. Implicitly, she distinguishes within the category of asylum seekers between more vulnerable migrants that are more deserving of protection, and “illegitimate” asylum seekers. These divisions are typical in the treatment of asylum seekers more generally (see Czajka, 2013; Horsti, 2013). To be recognized as a victim, one should be passive and “suitable” for compassion and protection. There is no space in the imaginary of asylum seeking for an active and resistant figure, particularly if that figure is a young, presumably Muslim male. Again, it is the intersectionality of different categories, positioning and situating the protesters as outsiders, that is at play here.

A useful contrast may be made to two different cases that drew far more media attention, in which two elderly grandmothers with children and grandchildren in Finland were under the threat of being deported. The women were Christian, and there was a nationwide, media-driven campaign to support them (Horsti & Pellander, 2015). In opposition to Mirzayi and Abdullahi, the intersectional positionality of these women was that of elderly Christian women who were sick and in need of care, while Mirzayi and Abdullahi became positioned as threatening figures that use bodily self-violence, such as lip stitching and starvation, to further their cause. Thus, their pain and illness is not taken as genuine suffering that qualifies for humanitarian protection.

While in the realm of asylum the issue of protection is increasingly legitimated on humanitarian grounds (rather than on the grounds of human rights) (Fassin, 2005), the public imagination of victimhood more generally *does* include a conception of victim allowing for certain forms of agency – that of the prisoner of conscience (Meyers, 2014). Nevertheless, the understanding of an active victim does not seem to be available in the context of Muslim male asylum seekers. Mirzayi and Abdullahi aimed to take political agency and to disturb the positioning of asylum seekers as silent, passive, and grateful recipients of either protection or deportation (see also Isin, 2012; Darling, 2016). This, however, proved to be difficult.

The minister's attempt to end the hunger strike protest by ignoring it was countered not only by supporters of the asylum seekers, but also by an act that several scholars, activists, and the protesting men themselves interpreted as racist and humiliating. Activists and journalists circulated a video on Facebook that had been published as part of a Nordic youth film project, Doxwise[1]. In the project, youth are given cameras to “bring out their own voice”, “from human to human” (Doxwise 2013). A video titled “Welcome to Finland” presents two presumably marginalized, drunk, Finnish young males, who go out to grill at the protest site. The men explain their adventure in the film (transcriptions from Titley, 2012):

Male 1: “Our cause today is to support these hunger strikers who are on hunger strike because they think that criminals, shit stomachs and enemies...

Male 2: and rapists...

Male 1: ... and rapists shouldn't be deported from Finland in any case because it is unhumane. That's why we want to be humane and support the hunger strike eating huge quantities of grill delicacies and enjoying beer...

Male 2: In the Finnish way! Like the Finns do!

These explicitly racist acts and speech are directly connected to European-wide right wing anti-Muslim propaganda. The discursive trope of a ‘Muslim rapist’ circulates widely in the ‘counter Jihadist’ blogosphere (see e.g. Horsti 2016). Similarly, the insulting offering of bacon and beer for the hunger strikers refers to trans-European Islamophobic acts.

Mirzayi commented on this film and the barbeque during the interview conducted for this research “It feels so bad, how can they humiliate us so much, we were so humiliated. My friend hates pork, he is very religious and he was offered pork. I am not religious, but my friend, he suffered a lot. The smell of that grill made us suffer, it was in our tent and all around us.” (Interview Mirzayi 25 April 2016.)

It is a widely used strategy in European media debates to present the actions of asylum seekers in cultural rather than political terms to draw symbolic boundaries, particularly in connection to Muslims, which has become a politicized identity category that swallows other identity markers (Yilmaz, 2016; Adamson, 2011; Fassin, 2005). A claim for protection against political persecution presented by a Muslim male becomes incomprehensible and goes unheard in Finnish society. This is emphasized in the context of an asylum politics that is more grounded on humanitarian rationale than that of human rights (Fassin 2005; Ticktin 2011). To qualify as a worthy humanitarian protégée, an asylum seeker or refugee needs to fit into a certain category: an intersectionally produced figure of a suitable victim (about Finnish cases see Horsti 2013; Horsti &

Pellander 2015). This is more often a woman than a man, a girl than a boy, an elderly person or a small child than an adult, a Christian than a Muslim, a family than a single adult. The hunger strikers' claims for protection were not accepted because of the lack of interest in cases of political persecution and because they were seen as "others". Minister Räsänen's public commentary on the hunger strike protest exemplifies this discursive strategy well: she implicitly suggested that these asylum seekers are bounded by their cultural (Muslim) understandings of how society works and their culturally (Muslim) violent behaviour. Here, the categories of religion intersect with that of gender, and Räsänen situates these young male asylum seekers as a threat to other, presumably genuine asylum seekers and to democracy. Self-destruction and self-mutilation of their bodies is seen as a hoax, particularly because the body of a Muslim man is treated as incapable of suffering.[2] This framing of the protest as a question of cultural difference prevents reading the protest as political – as criticism of the Finnish asylum process and its transparency, for example.

#### ATTEMPTS TO SUPPORT AND TO END THE STRIKE - THE EVERYDAY BORDERING IN BORDER PROTESTS

As the previous examples illustrate, the protest prompted both concern for and outrage towards the asylum seekers; conflicting gazes toward suffering bodies are typical for hunger strikes in general. Here, the protest site in front of Parliament was interpreted as a conflict between these individual asylum seekers and the state of Finland. This was also the message the asylum seekers wished to communicate with the visuality they created around the tent. The protesters' placards, which were spread out around the statue of President P. E. Svinhufvud, were visible to the busy Mannerheimintie street. The placard "Hunger Strike Against Deportation" informed passersby of the number of days the men had been without food. Other placards stated, "It is not safe to return to Afghanistan; We have been on hunger strike since 10/9/2012; Don't play with our lives." These placards framed the protest as being between the state and the two individuals, or perhaps more broadly between the state and asylum seekers from Afghanistan. The initial visual expression of the

protest did not, however, include an appeal to a broader cause: the fact that Finland deports people to conflict areas in general, the stressful experience of waiting for decisions, or other human rights problems related to the Finnish and European asylum regime. The placards appealed to both humanitarian and human rights concerns, but they did so at the individual level. The men seemed to be concerned only with their own lives. They identified themselves as victims awaiting torture in Afghanistan if deported by Finland.

The supporting activists framed this individualized suffering in broader human rights terms. Pastor Siukonen explains, “We stressed that the country information produced together with other European states is not fully comprehensive. There they do not take into account that, for some people, there can be a tribal chief who has power across borders. With the country information alone you cannot check what is safe for individuals.” (Interview Siukonen 15 March 2016.)

The pattern in which individual suffering in the form of suicide or hunger strike is later generalized by activists for the broader cause is common all around the world. For some, bodily suffering and death is seen as a strong message, testifying that the violence of the bordering practice, such as the consequence of deportation, is authentic (Khosravi, 2010). For others, like Päivi Räsänen, self-harm represents manipulation.

A central question for supporters was the balancing act between supporting the protesters, and not prolonging the strike, which would endanger their lives. Both supporters of the strike that we interviewed, the Freedom of Movement Network activist and the priest Antti Siukonen, pointed out these complexities that emerged when they listened to the concerns of both the protesters’ and the supporters’:

“Many NGOs had trouble with this case, as they feared that people would start hurting themselves. All the supporters who were there had to constantly consider how to relate to this. [. . .] How does supporting the strike prolong the strike? [. . .] It was interesting that the church related to this in the most natural way. Many different



actors were afraid of this issue, but the church and the doctors were actually the easiest to work with here.” (Interview activist 2 March 2016.)

Pastor Siukonen, who was a central figure in initiating the Church’s support for the protest, voiced similar concerns:

“The hunger strike was the means that the men chose to promote their cause. This soon created the question of how to balance between bringing the strike to an end, so that their health would not be in danger, and in which way we could support their cause so that we can get their message through without them having to endanger their lives over it.” (Interview Siukonen 15 March 2016.)

This particular protest was unique in the sense that it was generated and maintained by the asylum seekers themselves, rather than the supporting activists. Despite this dynamic, the chief of the migration unit at the Ministry of the Interior later argued that the NGOs and activists “took vulnerable persons as shields to promote the agendas of the organizations” (Sirku Päivärinne, Chief of the Migration Department, Ministry of the Interior as quoted in Lehti, 2012).

The intersectional positionality of the supporters of the strike is difficult and ambivalent. On the one hand, they stand on the side of the protesters: they “support their cause”, and want to “get their message through”, in the words of Antti Siukonen. On the other hand, the supporters are also aware that the hunger strike as a form of protest has its complexities and risks, as those who support it become identified as a community (Machin 2016). In case of death, the supporters might be blamed. However, death may also become a very powerful symbol for the movement. If a positive decision on the asylum applications were to be received during the protest, hunger striking could be read as a successful form of protest, triggering more hunger strikes, which again would increase the risks. The minister of the interior shared the last concern – albeit for different reasons. The question for the supporters, the ministry, and Immigration Services actually was how to resolve the hunger strike in such a way that they would not lose institutional face. A

resolution to the immediate paradoxical conflict around the hunger strike was finally achieved when Minister Päivi Räsänen came out of the Parliament building to the protest site. Her presence satisfied the protesters although it did nothing for their cause as such, but it was symbolically important.

After the hunger strike ended, the supporters' actions in the realm of the politics of protection did not end. Siukonen searched for locations to offer church sanctuary in case deportation orders were put into practice, and informed the men about this option. However, Siukonen stresses that the activities he organized to support the hunger strikers (the petition, the possibility of sanctuary) started at the grassroots level, and took more of the form of citizen's activism from below, rather than activities planned at the higher decision making levels of the church. This apparently caused some tension within the church. Nevertheless, the church has agenda setting power in the public life in Finland, and Siukonen decided to use it.

The police were the agent that continuously appeared at the protest site to manage the space and the visibility of the protest. While Mirzayi and Abdullahi had beforehand requested and received permission to pitch the tent and protest in front of Parliament, the exact spot had to be negotiated with the police officers that came to the site. The police indicated the precise piece of lawn where they were allowed to stay, but, nevertheless, there was continuous disagreement about hanging the blankets and displaying the placards, a constant battle over where to draw the border of protesting against border regimes. When the men were initially denied permission to camp overnight, they moved the protest across the street to the Helsinki Music Centre. When the police ordered them to leave that premises, Mirzayi and Abdullahi went back to the original spot. Finally, they ended up carrying their tent to the front of the Parliament building during the day, and back to the Music Centre for the night. At the very end, when they were too weak to move, they stayed at the Music Centre (Interview Mirzayi 25 April 2016; Interview Siukonen 15 March 2016; Interview Activist 2 April 2016). The attempts of the police to make the protest as difficult as possible show

how the city space, which the protesters used to politicize their asylum decisions, can also turn into a space of policing and control (Darling 2016; Uitermarks & Nicholls 2014).

In addition, the Parliament's caretakers made the men's stay as uncomfortable as they could:

“Even though it was fall and it was raining, they watered the lawn deliberately, so that we would get wet. I asked ‘Why are you doing this?’ He said that ‘This is my job.’ But I said ‘It is raining here,’ but he said that ‘This is my job.’ And our clothes were always wet and the entire tent was wet. We were so angry that if they want to get rid of us this way, we won't leave. There were the blankets, pillows, our stuff, everything was wet, we slept under wet blankets.” (Interview Mirzayi 25 April 2016.)

The way in which different authorities tried to force the protesters off the site, and in fact tried to deny their political agency, shows how bordering extends to myriad practices and is not restricted to deportation orders or not granting asylum. In the everyday life of these asylum seekers, bordering did not only take the form of the daily fear of a negative decision on their asylum cases, but the form of an active attempt to stop them from making their causes visible (see Rigby & Schlembach, 2013). In the moral landscapes in which certain kinds of people belong to certain places (Cresswell, 1996), Mirzayi and Abdullahi did not belong to the space outside of Parliament, nor were they considered legitimate for political agency. The watering of the lawn and the police orders to remove the tent are part of the “spatial practices of abjection” (Nyers 2003, 1080).

Mirzayi explained that, throughout the protest in front of Parliament, he continuously felt ignored by people, including journalists walking by, and medical professionals not paying proper attention. Even during a hospital visit during the hunger strike, Mirzayi felt he was not attended to as the other patients were, and that his suffering was not taken seriously. The suffering body was his political act to make borders and border related violence visible, and the fact that it was treated as a “body out of place” (Puwar, 2004), and that the suffering was interpreted as not

genuine and therefore not visible to the eyes of (most) Finnish institutions and (most) citizens remained a painful memory for him: “I was in bad pain. Nobody was interested in helping me there. I fell down and was on the floor and they just went past me, just as if nothing had happened. I always wonder why they reacted this way.” (Interview Mirzayi 25 April 2016.)

Medicalization of the protest was the framework within which *Helsingin Sanomat* finally addressed the hunger strike. It was also a strategy that the Immigration Service and the Ministry of the Interior used in their attempts to end the protest. The head of the Finnish Immigration Service visited the tent several times with medical doctors. Mirzayi and the interpreter of our research interview, Amir, told us that the head of Immigration Service tried to persuade the doctors to diagnose the men as being in need of forced medical care, so that they would have to be forcibly removed from the site.

As the men got weaker, their supporters also tried to find a way out of the situation. They came up with the idea of a surrogate hunger strike: activists would go on hunger strike on their behalf. This idea was never tested since it was born around the same time that Minister of the Interior Päivi Räsänen came to the tent to listen to the protesters’ concerns. This happened after 72 days of protesting, and, for Mizaryi and Abdullahi, this marked a successful end of the hunger strike. At that moment, they felt that they had received the recognition they wanted. The men stopped the hunger strike protest and waited for the court decisions, which in the end were negative. Nevertheless, through the protest they had gained access to supportive networks and connections to asylum lawyers and experts, and the men finally did receive residence permits in 2016. This process took almost five years.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Bass Mirzayi and Gholam Siddique Abdullahi made bordering practices of the Finnish state visible in everyday life, a practice that created a critical moment in Finnish asylum activism. Their protest differed from the public culture of social protests in the country. Finland, along with other Nordic

countries, holds a self-understanding that migration management and deportations are done in accordance with human rights. Border related pain has largely been absent from the public awareness. By making their experience of this kind of pain visible in their bodily performance in public space, Mirzayi and Abdullahi exposed the in-betweenness, the “mezzanine space of sovereignty”(Nyers, 2003, p. 1080) and the violence this non-status does to their bodies. The protesters are not members of the Finnish society or state; they are not fully “inside,” but neither are they “outside”. This is the difficult position from which their activism and claims-making becomes disturbing, what Peter Nyers (2003, 1079) terms “impossible activism”.

More broadly speaking, hunger strike as a form of protest emerges from such impossible positions. Self-harming the body is silent speech that calls for attention from those who are responsible for the condition and from those who might share the political claim of the protest, that is, from potential supporters. The protesters themselves may also speak, but in the case of “immigrant protest” in particular, it is often the supporters, who do not share the harsh conditions of those who suffer, who begin to speak for them. Our analysis shows that in circumstances where the hunger striking protesters are non-citizens, the categories of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and age intersect in specific ways that shape relationships in the community of protesters that forms around the suffering bodies.

However, migrant protests and the politics of solidarity are not only about who speaks and for whom, but also about who listens. For the supporters, listening played a crucial role; they were very much aware of the complex power dynamics in the protest and discussed them among themselves and with the hunger strikers. For the supporters, continuous listening, conversations and reflection *with* those who had put their bodies on the line were crucial in the practice of being part of an “impossible protest”. Moreover, listening is crucial for us who study migrant protests (see also Back 2007). It is important to listen to the various actors and analyze their interpretations of the situation. We argue that both in “immigrant protests” and in research about them it is necessary to

be attentive to the hunger strikers' condition and political aims. These acts that require listening are key practices towards a solidarity that is founded more on political human rights than on humanitarian care. Thus, migrant protests are not only shaped and influenced by a politics of protection, politics of pity, politics of control, politics of presence and politics of belonging, but also by a politics of listening, which closely relates to the politics of (in)visibility that is crucial for any political activism.

Furthermore, it is important to look at "immigrant protests" as a broader category, particularly as 2016 can be marked as the year when many European countries, Finland among them, have tightened their politics of protection in the aftermath of the so-called "refugee crisis". Nevertheless, as our analysis demonstrates, each protest needs to be examined in its local, cultural and political context. While hunger strikes and immigrant protest can be understood as mobilizations that have commonalities, we argue that the specificities of each protest, such as the location, its intertextualities and the intersectionalities of the people involved, need careful attention.

Certain figures, such as the minister of the interior, the police, and the staff of Parliament, act as everyday border guards who narrow the spaces in which everyday bordering can be politically challenged. Their verbal and physical attempts to change the asylum seekers' activism were forms of sovereign retakings (Nyers 2003). As "spatial practices of abjection" (Nyers 2003, 1080), the acts of the everyday border guards drew borders of acceptable political practice in the city space. Thus, we furthermore argue that while it is important to analyze urban places as sites of politics or policing, their potential to function as political arenas strongly depend on the different actors and their intersectional power relations.

Our analysis shows how the intersectional situatedness of the actors involved shape the ways in which belonging is negotiated in borderscapes. The activists and church representatives stand between the protesters and the everyday border guards. It is vital to note that the key activists

who we interviewed were white Finnish male citizens, a position that gave them authority to speak for the refugees. The priest, in particular, had specific symbolic capital to speak in the public sphere and counter the framing pushed by the media and the authorities, most notably the minister of the interior. It is clear that the discursive context in which the protesters and their supporters voiced their claims was so densely dominated by understandings of Muslim others and by humanitarian understandings of asylum that there was no real space for transformation of the politics of protection. Nevertheless, moments of contestation and rupture, moments that, by the disturbance of the ordinary gaze of the urban space, reveal to citizens in their everyday environment borders and the violence they cause, should not go unmarked in present day European societies. This particularly holds true at a time when European identity and community are increasingly being constructed along the notions of security and militarization of borders.

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[1] Kalle Kinnunen, Nuoren Suomen ääni Doxwise-sarjan videolla, Suomen Kuvalehti, blogit 24 October 2012. Media professionals edited Doxwise-documents with the young people for publishing online. The project is funded by the Nordic cultural institutions such as the Nordic Cultural Foudation (Norden), the Svenska Filminstitutet, Suomen elokuvasäätiö. The video produced by ‘Joonas’ was deleted from the site when the activists and journalists began asking the institutions about their position on the racist video. There is no mark on the issue in the Doxwise website.

[2] It is worth noticing that Mirzayi himself identifies as an atheist.

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<sup>i</sup> There are examples of hunger strikes in other city spaces which are in many ways comparable to the case analyzed here, like for example Lampedusa in Berlin.

<sup>ii</sup> Asylum seekers first came to Finland in the early 1990s and the numbers have been comparatively low, 3000 – 4000 yearly until 2015 when 30 000 asylum seekers arrived.