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Geographies of the European Border Regime

How borders shape the everyday lives of refugees and asylum-seekers

Edited by
ANTONIE SCHMIZ and SOFIA LEHMANN

Institute of Geographical Sciences
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Contact

Freie Universität Berlin
Department of Earth Sciences

Working Group 'Society, Space and Gender'

Malteserstr. 74-100
D-12249 Berlin

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Contents

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Preface

From a human geography perspective, borders and the accompanying phenomena of migration and flight are regarded as essential components of social structures and changes. Critical geographical migration research understands borders as being shaped by complex spatial, temporal, social and cultural processes, and thus as being both constructed and dynamic. This perspective emphasises the role of bordering and boundary-making as social processes rather than conceptualising the border as objective fact (Johnson et al. 2011; Mezzarda/Neilson 2012; Paasi 1998) or as a 'line in the sand' (Parker/Vaughan-Williams 2009). Understanding the border not as a research object, but rather as an epistemological viewpoint, allows to more fully comprehend the salient function of borders in creating and shaping new worlds rather than dividing existing ones (Mezzadra/Neilson 2012). To this effect, research within the framework of geographical migration and border studies is shifting its focus from borders and boundaries as objects of study to power relations and actors' agency in resistance. Such research approaches bring together transnational perspectives, engage with the policies of the European border regime and highlight important socio-political and ideological underpinnings of border regimes and boundary practices (Van Houtum/Van Naerssen 2002). The emphasis on processes of bordering and the concept of the border as method serves as an important theoretical framework for the student research projects and the resulting contributions presented in this issue of the Berlin Geographical Papers.

Shifting the focus of border studies away from the border itself to practices and politics of bordering makes the interrelated processes and power relations that uphold and perpetuate border regimes visible. The papers presented in this issue focus specifically on the European border regime and draw on key theories in geographical migration and border studies. This includes the concept of the post-migrant paradigm, which emphasises the significant role of us/them or native/migrant constructions in the creation and ongoing legitimisation of the European border regime (Foroutan 2022). In this context, practices of categorisation and discursive construction that seek to differentiate, discriminate and delineate a distinctive 'other' are identified as being deeply interwoven with implicit ideologies about deservingness and belonging (Borelli 2022; Crawley/Skleparis 2018; Foroutan 2022; Ratzmann/Sahraoui 2021) that interact with racialisation and colonial contexts (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018; Oliveri 2016; Quijano 2000). The student contributions to this issue connect such conceptualisations of deservingness and belonging to the processes and policies that determine which individuals or groups are welcomed and accepted – to whom access to care and services is extended –

and to whom such inclusion is denied. The powerful and detrimental potential of discriminatory discourse rooted in 'categorical fetishism' (Apostolova 2015) and racialised colonial hierarchies (Quijano 2000) is highlighted, as such discourse interacts with and impacts the lived realities of individuals (Borelli 2022; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018; Oliveri 2016; Ratzmann/Sahraoui 2021; Saltiel 2021). This perspective on the role of discursive and ideological power emerges as an important contribution to developing a more complete and meaningful understanding of the European border regime and is applied throughout the student research projects that comprise this issue.

Aligning with this focus on the role of discursive constructions and definitions of belonging in enacting the European border regime, the concept of belonging is used to conceptualise alternative forms of citizenship, participation and inclusive identification that seek to overcome or upend the exclusive bordering practices described above. Geographical perspectives in migration and border research offer an important contribution by highlighting moments and movements of creative and revolutionary resistance that emphasise the agency of individuals in navigating and counteracting the European border regime while drawing on transnational approaches that interrogate the connections between spatiality and identity. This can be seen in literature which focuses on activist engagement and practices of self-organisation in the socio-political (re)negotiation of roles, identities and histories through collective (counter)action and commemoration (Oliveri 2016; Tufekci 2017). Literature in this context focused especially on the urban scale foregrounds the transformative power of radical solidarity and community (Saltiel 2021), for instance in its place-specific manifestations as urban citizenship (Varsanyi 2006) or solidarity/sanctuary cities (Bauder 2016; Bauder 2021; Darling/Bauder 2019; Kreichauf/Mayer 2021). Applying a geographic lens in focusing on the spatial dimensions of differentiation or solidarity in this context underlines moments, processes and concepts that seek to provide alternative frameworks of belonging within, despite, or even outside of, the European border regime. Highlighting such place-based disruption of, protest against, or alternatives to the geographical and socio-political workings of the European border regime plays a significant role in students' theoretical and empirical contributions to this issue.

Against this theoretical background, students of the master's programme(s) Geographies of Global Inequalities and Geographical Development Studies (*Geographische Entwicklungsforschung*) carried out empirical research projects over the period of one year within the framework of a research seminar on geographies of the European border regime. This issue of the Berlin Geographical Papers presents six student papers emerging from these research projects in 2024 (5) and 2022 (1). These contributions facilitate a meaningful engagement with key academic concepts and draw on fundamental literature from the intersection of human geography and critical border studies. In particular, the differences between borders and processes of bordering are formulated. Related concepts such as racism and racialisation, post-migrant and post-colonial perspectives, social movement research and

both the externalisation and internalisation of borders are developed and explored in greater depth through an examination of several case studies. Five papers highlight everyday negotiations of the border in Berlin and Brandenburg; one paper focuses on the externalisation of the European border regime in Beirut, Lebanon.

Beginning with an empirical exploration of bordering practices at the urban scale, Lorena Unger and Lotte van Dijk examine the implications of the legal status of tolerated stay (*Duldung*) for labour market integration in Berlin. The authors' analysis highlights relevant political, bureaucratic and legal obstacles and their key impacts on experiences of economic and social exclusion. Through an intersectional lens, the multiple marginalisation of women, individuals with disabilities and their caregivers who hold the legal status of *Duldung* is emphasised, indicating the salient role of underlying socio-political systems and norms that uphold and perpetuate inequalities in labour market access and participation. Drawing on information gathered from interviews as well as existing knowledge from geographical migration research and labour studies, the authors show the role of both state-funded and independent non-state organisations in negotiating access to safe and sufficient forms of labour for individuals with a *Duldung*.

Along this theme of differential inclusion in everyday manifestations of the European border regime in Berlin, Sofia Lehmann and Elisa Mannes address the topic of unequal access to healthcare for migrants with precarious legal status, focusing especially on structures that aim to counteract these harmful and exclusionary bordering mechanisms. Based on interviews with local organisations that work to establish more inclusive and holistic practices in healthcare provision, the authors highlight key factors and challenges that impact the quality, capacity and sustainability of these healthcare structures, emphasising important inherent connections to underlying socio-political and ideological discourses and norms. In conversations with activists and healthcare providers in this context, the authors identify potential strategies for imagining and enacting more just systems of healthcare that serve all members of a society, regardless of legal status or migration experiences.

İdil Gündüz and Marielene Wicke adopt an analytical focus on moments and strategies of resistance against exclusionary practices of the European border regime, exploring how art and culture can function as meaningful tools in this context. Using the NO BORDERS_NO LAGERS festival in Berlin as a case study, the authors emphasise the vital role of artistic and cultural expression in resistance. The authors explore how such spaces can challenge dominant narratives of the European border regime, amplify marginalised voices, celebrate diversity and promote community. Grounded in theoretical frameworks on de-bordering as well as intersectional literature on embodied geographies and art, the authors' analysis identifies the transformative potential of such practices for counteracting experiences of isolation and marginalisation that are connected to mechanisms of the European border regime. Furthermore, the authors argue that these practices can be used to promoting alternative forms of belonging rooted in community which affirm the possibility for more just futures.

Centring their analysis on specific spaces and practices of resistance against the European border regime, Per Jannes Spix and Matthias Cano Urbanke examine the organisational and political landscape of activist groups, NGOs and other local stakeholders involved in the grassroots initiative against the planned Berlin Brandenburg Airport (BER) Deportation Centre. The authors identify the protest camp which took place on-site in 2023 as a starting point for analysing the methods and efficacy of the resistance initiative and its supporting organisations. Applying a theoretical perspective rooted in social movement research, geographies of resistance and abolitionist theory, the authors highlight several important socio-political factors that impact the resistance movements' success and long-term sustainability, such as a discursive shift away from a so-called 'welcome culture' (*Willkommenskultur*) toward an increasingly populist and right-wing rhetoric of securitisation. The authors develop their empirical arguments from a series of interviews with actors involved in the resistance movement, contributing to an in-depth understanding of the innerworkings of the initiative.

Following this focus on resistance and socio-political counteraction, Brenda Rodriguez Serrano and Maddalena Tartarini analyse the role of self-organised refugee and migrant groups in Berlin, developing their arguments through a case study of and with The Voice Forum. The authors employ theoretical frameworks on self-organisation and solidarity practices in their analysis of the initiatives' role, situating this work within broader theory on the coloniality of power and the coloniality of migration in order to contextualise this and similar forms of refugee and migrant organisation. Self-determination through independent financing and overcoming spatial barriers through digital forms of resistance emerge as key aspects that contribute to the efficacy and identity of The Voice Forum. These aspects are discussed in connection to an underlying commitment of the initiative to counteract the powerful colonial and racialising practices of the European border regime, as the authors expand the scope of their analysis across temporal historical and spatial scales.

Shifting the spatial focus away from Berlin-Brandenburg, Iman El Ghoubashy, Nadia Zoë Plönges and Arvid Sprenger focus on the externalisation of the European border regime, basing their analysis on a case study of the European-Union-funded Qudra programme in Lebanon. The authors assess key mechanisms and effects of this programme, as it represents a critical development cooperation effort of the EU aimed at furthering the integration of Syrian refugees into Lebanese society. The instrumentalisation of EU funding and economic support in such efforts to control or contain refugee populations outside of European borders, under the guise of humanitarian aid, is identified as a central method of the externalisation of migration management from the EU. The authors examine the efficacy and implications of such programmes in promoting the underlying political motivations of the European border regime, drawing on a comprehensive analysis of legal and policy documents as well as information gathered from a qualitative study taking place in part in Beirut, Lebanon.

Berlin, October 2025

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Lorena Unger & Lotte van Dijk

The Labour Market Integration of Duldung Holders in Berlin

Abstract: This study examines the labour market integration of individuals with a Duldung *status in Berlin, Germany. The* Duldung *status places individuals in a legal limbo, temporarily suspending deportation while denying long-term security and full rights. This research focuses on two key objectives: (1) identifying structural obstacles, including political, bureaucratic and legal barriers, and (2) examining intersecting ways of marginalisation among women, individuals with disabilities and caregivers holding a* Duldung. *Simultaneously, we analysed the role of state-funded and independent organisations in providing support. Drawing on existing research and qualitative interviews, our findings highlight how the* Duldung *status perpetuates economic and social exclusion, making individuals vulnerable to labour exploitation. While initiatives to support workforce participation exist, their effectiveness is limited by bureaucratic and legal hurdles. This paper advocates for policy reforms, including simplified access to work permits, expanded vocational training programmes tailored to diverse needs and stronger labour protections. However, without systemic change, individuals with a* Duldung *will continue to face cycles of exclusion and exploitation. These findings contribute to discussions on migration, labour rights and social justice in Germany and the European context.*

1 Introduction

At the end of 2022, 248,145 individuals[1] in Germany were registered under the category of a *Duldung*, also known as tolerated stay (Spindler et al. 2024). This is unlike other EU countries where this category does not exist and the number of individuals with similar legal statuses often remains in the three-digit scope. Since the early 2000s, several EU member states have introduced specific legal categories for non-deportable individuals. However, the German category of a *Duldung* is exceptional due to its extensive and complex policy (Schütze 2022; Schütze 2025). A *Duldung* is not a residence permit but a temporary suspension of deportation. It is issued if deportation is not feasible due to humanitarian reasons, legal obstacles or a lack of travel documents from their home country. Even though individuals are not forcibly deported from Germany, they lack a secure legal status. This creates a legal limbo that is highly precarious and exclusionary, also in terms of labour market integration.

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[1] Throughout this text, we primarily refer to individuals with a *Duldung* to reflect their specific legal status. When we refer to 'individuals', we are referring to *Duldung* holders. At times, we also use the term refugees when our discussion is not limited strictly to *Duldung* holders. In Germany, refugees are individuals who have undergone a successful asylum procedure and have been granted protection under the Geneva Convention. By contrast, *Duldung* holders have not been granted protection status; their deportation is only temporarily suspended. We understand these distinctions as being politically constructed and instrumentalised to regulate access to rights. In using these terms, we aim to critically engage with the structural inequalities and power imbalances that shape labour market access and broader social participation (Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung [BMZ] 2025).

This essay is guided by the following research question: How do individuals with *Duldung* status integrate into the labour market in Berlin? Specifically, we focus on two objectives: (1) identifying structural obstacles, including political, bureaucratic and legal barriers; and (2) examining the intersecting ways in which marginalisation in this context affects women, individuals with disabilities and their caregivers who hold a *Duldung*. Simultaneously, we analyse the role of state-funded and independent organisations in providing support. To address these research objectives, this paper is structured as follows: First, we provide contextual background information on the definition of *Duldung* and its policies and related labour market restrictions. This is followed by our theoretical background, drawing on critical migration studies. We then introduce our methodology, followed by the presentation of our findings based on interviews with organisations that support our target groups. In our discussion, we analyse these findings, highlighting both structural obstacles and intersecting aspects of marginalisation. Finally, we conclude with several key insights into the labour market integration for individuals with a *Duldung*.

2 The dehumanising nature of a Duldung

This section outlines the contextual background of the *Duldung* policies and related labour market restrictions. Introduced in 1965 in West Germany, the *Duldung* status is known for its exclusionary and bureaucratic nature (Schütze 2025). Scholars, including Schütze (2022; 2025), Castañeda (2020), Spencer (2020), Triandafyllidou (2020), Bartolini (2020) and Spindler (2024) outline its discriminatory effects. Since its implementation in 1965, labour market access under a *Duldung* was highly restrictive, reflecting conservative migration policies. However, since the early 2000s, economic needs have prompted reforms that increasingly favour young *Duldung* holders. For instance, policies since 2008 have established shorter waiting periods for work permits and vocational training opportunities for some individuals, thus combining integrative approaches with a neoliberal market logic. While such reforms suggest a shift toward greater labour market integration, they also reinforce present structural inequalities by keeping *Duldung* holders in a highly regulated and vulnerable position (Schütze 2022). Systematic reform focused on regularisation and social inclusion is essential to mitigate the long-term negative implications of the *Duldung* status (Spindler et al. 2024; Schütze 2022; Schütze 2025; Triandafyllidou/Bartolini 2020).

The *Duldung* functions both as a control mechanism and a tool for economic flexibility, creating systemic tensions. Scholars like Böcker and Vogel (1997) and De Genova (2002) argue that these policies institutionalise precarity and vulnerability, linking legal status to employment. This makes individuals highly dependent on (precarious) jobs to avoid deportation and thus creates a flexible workforce (Schütze 2022). *Duldung* holders' precarious status sustains a pool of cheap labour forces, particularly in gendered and informal sectors such as construction, agriculture, care work and hospitality (Böcker/Vogel 1997; Triandafyllidou/Bartolini 2020)[2]. Individuals' limited knowledge of their rights, language

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[2] While sectors like care work are heavily regulated in Germany, loopholes and grey areas persist, especially in private household arrangements (e.g., 24-hour care services). These arrangements are often informally or semi-legally negotiated

barriers and financial instability further increase the risk of exploitation (Triandafyllidou/Bartolini 2020).

There are four commonly referenced types of *Duldung*, each with different restrictions, adding to the complexity of the constantly changing migration policy:

1. '*Duldung* light' (since 2019): targets people with unclear identities and imposes a work ban (Bundesministerium für Justiz 2024 § 60b AufenthG),

2. '*Normale Duldung*' (Engl.: normal *Duldung*): offers no deportation protection but usually allows work upon application (Bundesministerium für Justiz 2024 § 60a AufenthG),

3. '*Ermessensduldung*' (Engl.: discretionary *Duldung*): grants temporary protection, e.g., for school or vocational training; includes the *Ausbildungsduldung* (*Duldung* for vocational training) and the *Beschäftigungsduldung* (Employment *Duldung*) (Bundesministerium für Justiz 2024 § 60c, § 60d AufenthG),

4. '*Anspruchsduldung*' (Engl.: entitlement *Duldung*): applies when a legal entitlement to stay exists but no residence permit can be granted, e.g., for parents of a child with legal residency (Bundesministerium für Justiz 2024 § 60a AufenthG).

However, these four types do not cover all cases. For example, a *Duldung* can also be issued during follow-up or second asylum procedures (*Folgeanträge* or *Zweitanträge*) or due to temporary legal or factual obstacles to deportation (e.g., missing documents, health reasons). In practice, especially the first category can be further broken down based on the specific reasons preventing deportation (Bundesministerium für Justiz 2022; I#8).

The *Duldung* creates a precarious 'fiction of temporary stay', often described as 'limbo status' or 'non-status' (Castañeda 2010; Schütze 2022). This 'limitless temporariness' (Schütze 2022, 417) restricts access to basic rights, economic and social participation. Normal *Duldung* and *Duldung* light holders are prohibited from working and are confined to living in specific regions under the residence obligation. Like asylum seekers, they receive reduced financial support, which is below a minimum subsistence level according to the Federal Constitutional Court (Castañeda 2010; Schütze 2025), during the first 36 months. Initially lowered to 18 months in 2008, this period was later extended back to 36 months due to political pressures (I#7).

Exit pathways from a *Duldung* include the Opportunity Residence Act (*Chancen-Aufenthaltsrecht*) from 2022, which offers prospects for permanent residency (I#7). Furthermore, in 2022, residence permits were introduced under § 25a AufenthG (for individuals who arrived as minors and apply before turning 27) and § 25 AufenthG, both of which typically require successful integration into school, vocational training or work. Before the introduction of these permits, temporary 'right to stay' policies focused strongly on financial self-sufficiency (I#7). Other options include the Hardship Commission (§ 23a

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through placement agencies, creating precarious working conditions despite regulatory frameworks (Lutz 2018). As Lutz (2018, 83) notes, 'legal frameworks exist, but the enforcement in transnational care arrangements often lacks teeth, enabling the persistence of informal structures under the guise of legality' (see also: Da Roit/Weicht 2013).

AufenthG) and the residence permit under § 25 AufenthG (in cases where departure is permanently impossible). While the former emphasises labour market participation, the latter focuses on the impossibility of departure (I#7). However, implementation varies greatly, leaving many individuals in states of prolonged uncertainty, sometimes for decades (Schütze 2022).

Limited prospects heighten exclusion and mental distress (Aslund et al. 2024; Jensen 2023; Schütze 2025; Stache 2024). A *Duldung* restricts access to healthcare, education, social life and family reunification, and exceptions are often based on subjective assessments of deservingness (ProAsyl 2024). Limited resources and restrictive eligibility reduce social counselling to the most promising cases, leaving the most vulnerable individuals or groups with little to no structural support. Social workers thus face ethical dilemmas between advocacy and bureaucratic compliance (Spindler et al. 2024). Furthermore, *Duldung* holders express that their regular visits to the immigration offices for status reassessments were dehumanising (Castañeda 2010). Such experiences contribute to the sense of civil death, where individuals are excluded from full social participation (Gibney 2000). This is rooted in long-standing postcolonial migration policies, in which individuals are systematically marginalised and denied a civil identity (Arendt 1968; Mbembe 2019).

Despite labour market demands, the inclusion of *Duldung* holders remains complex and challenging. In particular, youth and young adults face significant barriers to accessing education and vocational training (Spindler et al. 2024). Social work is vital in supporting these individuals, yet this work is highly restricted by migration policy. The *Ausbildungsduldung* protects individuals from deportation during their vocational training but ties legal security to career paths (Spindler et al. 2024). Furthermore, delays in obtaining work permits and the non-recognition of foreign qualifications limit access to and prevent timely enrolment in vocational programmes (Spindler et al. 2024). Despite efforts by social workers, many individuals remain excluded from integration courses and further education opportunities (Spindler et al. 2024). Systematic reform focused on regularisation and social inclusion is essential to mitigate the long-term implications of the *Duldung* status (Triandafyllidou/Bartolini 2020; Schütze 2022, 2025; Spindler et al. 2024).

This paper expands on existing research by analysing the complex obstacles faced by (multiply marginalised) *Duldung* holders into the labour market integration in Berlin. Using an intersectional and critical approach, we examine how structural inequalities shape the labour market access of *Duldung* holders. Drawing on interview-based policy suggestions, we propose targeted recommendations aimed at developing more inclusive labour market policies.

3 Methods

This study examines the complex challenges regarding the integration of individuals with a *Duldung* into the Berlin labour market. We employ a qualitative research design, combining empirical data from expert interviews with an analysis of relevant academic literature and

policy documents. The integration of primary and secondary sources allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the structural and legal barriers affecting labour market integration. Data collection was conducted during the summer of 2024 in Berlin. Semi-structured interviews allow for an in-depth exploration of the research question while maintaining flexibility in the interview process. Ten guiding questions structured the interviews, covering key themes such as bureaucratic hurdles, gender-specific obstacles and policy recommendations. Follow-up questions were adapted to each interviewee's expertise to ensure a nuanced understanding of the complex process.

We interviewed six participants based on their expertise in employment-related support and legal advocacy for refugees and individuals with a *Duldung*. Their insights provided our research with key perspectives, particularly on the challenges faced by individuals with a *Duldung* and employers in negotiating access to the labour market, legal restrictions and institutional support mechanisms. While the individuals we interviewed spoke in a personal capacity, their perspectives are shaped by their roles within organisations actively engaged in the field. The following individuals participated in the study:

- Johanna Boettcher works at bridge – Berliner Netzwerke für Bleiberecht: Supports refugees in accessing the labour market (I#1, I#7)

- Nicolas Chevreux works at AWO Kreisverband Berlin-Mitte e.V.: Provides legal counselling to refugees from Afghanistan (I#2, I#8)

- Nadja Türke works for an institution that supports employers in employing refugees (I#3)

- Mohammad Ismael works for an institution that offers labour rights counselling for all non-European migrants (I#4)

- Benedikt Nicolsky works for an institution that supports employers in employing refugees (I#5)

- Ceren Sengölge works for an institution that supports refugees with disabilities and their caretakers (I#6)

We are two white female students from Germany and the Netherlands living in Berlin. Our position as external observers influenced our research design. While we recognise the importance of centring and amplifying the voices of affected individuals, our research question, limited research timeframe and ethical concerns led us to focus on interviews with institutional representatives rather than directly engaging with individuals with a *Duldung*. This decision aimed to prevent potential retraumatisation while still capturing insights into the structural challenges and support mechanisms available. However, we acknowledge the limitations of this approach which excludes the first-hand experiences and perspectives from those directly affected.

4 Barriers to labour market integration for Duldung holders

4.1 Bureaucratic hurdles

This section presents the findings and explains the diverse structural obstacles that individuals face. One major obstacle repeatedly mentioned is the bureaucratic process for securing work permits, which is lengthy and complex. Individuals with a *Duldung* must navigate a system with numerous forms that are often only available in German or English (I#2). Part of this processing time is spent waiting for the approval of the contract by the Immigration Office and Federal Employment Agency, which was introduced to prevent individuals from working in places where they do not receive the customary local wage and/or work in a position that is below their qualifications. This review intends to serve occupational safety and health, as it is known how vulnerable this group is (I#7). However, delays at the Immigration Office and Federal Employment Agency can take up to six months or longer, causing job seekers to lose opportunities to candidates who can start immediately (I#1; I#3; I#6). These long processing times also discourage employers from hiring individuals with a *Duldung*, despite them receiving work approval, further limiting job prospects (I#6). In addition, the protection of the individuals through this process is only on paper; interviewees stated that it would make more sense if the respective company faced investigations that check whether migrants and individuals with a *Duldung* are being exploited (I#7). Effective collaboration between the Federal Employment Agency and other migration and work-related institutions is mentioned in addressing these challenges. Such cooperation can create opportunities for individuals hindered by bureaucratic barriers (I#1). Current policies impose significant restrictions on those seeking to integrate into the labour market, failing to integrate people and include their talents efficiently while disregarding Germany's growing labour demand (I#2). The public debate in Germany often frames refugees negatively, portraying them as a problem. This fosters stricter policies, tighter asylum rules and additional political hurdles for incoming individuals (I#5). Potential solutions include policy reforms, such as requiring immigration offices to respond to work permit requests within a set timeframe, with a system of automatic approval if the deadline passes (I#6). Additionally, allowing individuals to work without special permissions is suggested as a simple solution (I#2).

4.2 Employers' perspectives

Another key factor is the employer's familiarity with the process, as those with positive past experiences are more inclined to go through the process again (I#1). Employers may also be more inclined to hire someone they know, such as an intern, as familiarity increases confidence in the candidate's suitability (I#1). Internships help individuals with a *Duldung* to secure permanent employment as employers get to know them and are more willing to navigate the work permit process. Interviewees recommend increasing such opportunities (I#1). Further, employers' understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with a *Duldung* is crucial. Cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings in communication and work ethics (I#6). Counsellors play a key role in educating both parties, fostering mutual

6

understanding and addressing legal matters related to the *Duldung* status, such as explaining absences, for instance due to state-mandated appointments (I#6).

4.3 Legal and procedural misconceptions

Often, individuals with a *Duldung* are motivated to find employment to maximise their opportunities. This is evident for former bridge programme participants who have later become project leaders or succeeded in other professions (I#1). However, misconceptions about legal and procedural processes further hinder labour market integration. Many believe securing a job strengthens their right to stay, though in reality, it does not (I#2; I#4). This misconception drives individuals to seek work immediately upon arrival, often leading to stagnation in low-wage jobs, as work approvals are tied to specific positions (I#2).

4.4 Vocational training

A significant incentive for young people with a *Duldung* to pursue vocational training is the opportunity to apply for a more stable residence status before turning 25 and to receive additional financial support when enrolled in school or vocational training. However, *Duldung* holders face challenges in vocational training, primarily due to bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of early guidance. When in vocational training for one specific profession, it is difficult to change later on (I#1). Changing training placements is possible but bureaucratically burdensome. The *Ausbildungsduldung* can be extended once, but a failed second placement requires reverting to a normal *Duldung* and reapplying, which constitutes an uncertain and time-consuming process (I#8). Thus, instead of starting vocational training immediately, some individuals would benefit from an introductory qualification first. This could be possible if employers and individuals would seek professional advice earlier (I#3). Additionally, delays in work permit approvals create issues. Some trainees have a work contract but not the necessary work permit when the vocational training time starts in Germany, usually around September (I#3; I#5). If the individual secures qualified employment after vocational training, they may transition to a regular residence permit; otherwise, their legal status reverts to what it would have been without the training (I#8).

4.5 Exploitation and vulnerability

Individuals with a *Duldung* often try to hold onto their jobs as they fear deportation (I#4; I#6). This makes them particularly vulnerable to exploitation, as employers are aware of their dependence on stable employment. When unemployed, they are even more likely to accept exploitative jobs due to the urgency of securing new work (I#1; I#4). Bureaucratic hurdles also make employers hesitant to hire individuals with a *Duldung*, though exceptions exist. Temporary work agencies and physically demanding service jobs are more open to hiring but often provide little support or career prospects (I#6). Additionally, some employers in low-wage sectors exploit these workers by offering low pay, assigning undesirable shifts or demanding excessive hours. Many workers remain silent about such transgressions to avoid jeopardising their employment (I#2; I#6).

4.6 Intersectional marginalisation

The following sections present our findings on the specific difficulties faced by women as well as individuals with disabilities and their caretakers. Women with a *Duldung* face the same bureaucratic and legal barriers as men but encounter additional challenges due to gendered expectations and caregiving responsibilities. Many arrive with family, and cultural norms may assign childcare primarily to mothers, limiting their job prospects (I#2; I#3). The lack of accessible childcare and bureaucratic hurdles to navigating this problem further exclude them from work (I#1; I#2). When employed, women face a labour market with gendered sectors like care and cleaning, while men predominantly work in construction and security (I#2; I#3; I#6). Mixed-gender vocational courses can also be a barrier. Some programmes have introduced women-only care training, successfully increasing participation (I#1). Female counsellors with similar experiences, especially former *Duldung* holders, could effectively help to navigate employment and childcare challenges (I#1). However, the organisations we interviewed do not offer tailored programmes specifically for women, regardless of legal status. An outstanding best practice example is the initiative by the bridge programme at the vocational school Paulo Freire Gesellschaft e. V. and ARRIVO Berlin training workshops - Schlesische27 which includes career-oriented programmes for women (I#7).

Similarly, individuals with disabilities and their caretakers face significant labour market barriers due to bureaucratic complexities and a lack of tailored support. Navigating both the asylum and disability support systems is difficult, as institutions often lack cross-sector knowledge, leaving individuals stuck between agencies without clear responsibility (I#1; I#6). At the institution that supports refugees with disabilities and their caretakers, a representative observed that residence permit holders with disabilities often enter the labour market through internships or mini jobs, eventually transitioning to part-time employment. In contrast, those with a *Duldung* face far greater difficulties and limited job opportunities. Language barriers further restrict access, as specialised German courses for people with disabilities are scarce. Berlin offers only one German course for deaf individuals, and no technical support courses exist for blind individuals. Additionally, individuals with disabilities must complete language courses within the same timeframe as other candidates, despite different learning needs (I#6). The representative stressed that accessible language courses are crucial for improving education and employment opportunities (I#1; I#6). Additionally, strengthening collaboration among organisations appears is vital for supporting refugees in the labour market (I#1).

5 Discussion of findings

In this section, we integrate our empirical findings with the theoretical perspective outlined above to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by *Duldung* holders as they enter the labour market.

5.1 Systemic barriers and labour market precarity: The struggles of Duldung holders

We argue that the difficult integration of individuals with a *Duldung* into the labour market is a result of systemic policies that reinforce the precarity of marginalised groups. Work prohibitions, bureaucratic delays and legal insecurities create cycles of economic dependency and vulnerability. As Spindler et al. (2024) discuss, delays in obtaining work permits often prevent young people from entering vocational training. This aligns with the information gathered from our interviews, which identified this issue as a major barrier to labour market entry. Bureaucratic complexity leads to missed job opportunities, as employers prefer candidates who can start immediately. Language barriers further complicate the process, as forms are often only available in German or English (Reyneri 2001; Triandafyllidou/Bartolini 2020). Although social workers and advisors, including our interview participants, attempt to support applicants, restrictive migration policies limit their impact (Spindler et al. 2024).

While policy shifts have increasingly aimed to ease labour market access for *Duldung* holders, primarily to address labour shortages, current policies continue to uphold individuals' precarious status. Bureaucratic delays and legal restrictions function as mechanisms of differential inclusion, enabling labour participation under exploitative conditions (Mezzadra/Neilson 2013). This supports De Genova's (2004) view that legal precarity is a governance tool to maintain a vulnerable workforce. Consequently, *Duldung* holders remain in a cycle of dependency, with limited rights and uncertain prospects.

While vocational training is a key route to labour market integration as well as legal and financial stability especially for young *Duldung* holders, our interview findings and existing research highlight that this remains structurally constrained (Spindler et al. 2024; I#1; I#3; I#5; I#8). Bureaucratic rigidity, limited flexibility in switching training paths and delays in work permit approvals highlight the tension between integration goals and restrictive migration policies. These hurdles limit flexibility and pressure individuals to stay on unsuitable paths. Moreover, the link between successful completion of training and securing a qualified job places considerable pressure on *Duldung* holders, forcing them into specific career paths and limiting their aspirations. This underscores the need for better advisory services, more streamlined processes and greater flexibility in training transitions.

Interviewees consistently emphasised that systemic labour market barriers reinforce economic vulnerability. Many *Duldung* holders accept low-wage jobs quickly in the hope that employment improves their residency chances, leaving little room for advancement (I#1; I#4). Furthermore, since work permits are job-specific, changing roles is difficult. Processing time further discourages individuals from changing their jobs (I#2; I#6, I#7). Employers in low-wage sectors exploit *Duldung* holders by assigning excessive hours as well as night and weekend shifts, and by offering low wages (I#2; I#6). This aligns with research on how a *Duldung* functions both as a restrictive migration tool and as a mechanism to sustain a vulnerable labour force (Böcker/Vogel 1997; De Genova 2004). These findings underscore the urgent need for policy reforms to improve job mobility, ensure fair wages and strengthen worker

protections. Without structural changes, *Duldung* holders will remain trapped in cycles of exploitation, unable to achieve long-term stability or full labour market integration.

5.2 Intersections of exclusion: Gender, disability, and legal precarity

From an intersectional perspective, individuals belonging to multiple marginalised groups, such as women with a *Duldung* status or individuals with disabilities, experience multilayered forms of exclusion. Feminist scholars like bell hooks (1981; 1989) Thornton Dill (1996) and Hill Collins (1999a; 1999b) emphasise the need to address gender alongside other factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic class and ability, recognising the mutual reinforcement of structural inequalities (Samuels/Ross-Sheriff 2008; Symington 2004). Women often face additional caregiving duties. For women with a *Duldung*, these responsibilities limit their ability to work and to attend language courses, reinforcing economic and social exclusion (I#1; I#2; I#3). Mixed-gender courses further create barriers. One interviewee stated that the introduction of women-only courses in their organisation has proven successful in facilitating women's access to employment (I#1; I#6). Supporting women with a *Duldung* requires a multifaceted approach of increasing accessible childcare, ensuring gender-sensitive training opportunities across sectors and strengthening support networks from and for women (I#1).

Similarly, *Duldung* holders with disabilities face multiple layers of institutional obstacles. The migration system is poorly designed to accommodate disabled people, while disability support structures often fail to recognise *Duldung* holders' unique precarious legal and economic conditions (I#1; I#6). This leads to a bureaucratic limbo, where neither system takes responsibility, thereby reinforcing dependency and marginalisation. Addressing the issues presented here requires moving beyond individualised solutions, such as case-by-case employment support, to structural interventions, which include establishing full labour rights for all migrants and abolishing exclusive legal categories like the *Duldung* (I#1).

Through an intersectional lens, it is apparent that individuals belonging to multiple marginalised groups, e.g., women or persons with disabilities holding a *Duldung* status, experience multiple forms of exclusion simultaneously. While income-based exit pathways disadvantage women in particular due to the gender pay and care gaps, exceptions do exist for people with disabilities, especially under the Opportunity Residence Act and § 25b AufenthG (I#7). In the past 15 years, significant improvements have occurred. Alongside § 25a/b AufenthG, the priority check (*Vorrangprüfung*) was abolished, allowing *Duldung* holders to work even if German-/EU-citizens or preferential candidates are available (I#7). Access to federally funded vocational language courses has been made more readily available for refugees. These changes reflect a legal balancing act between integration goals and exclusionary controls which is continually shaped by political compromise (I#7).

6 Conclusion

The integration of *Duldung* holders into Berlin's labour market is hindered by systemic obstacles and restrictive policies that reinforce precarity and exclusion. Bureaucratic hurdles, legal uncertainties and overlapping marginalisation create significant barriers to stable

employment. As both existing literature on this topic and data gathered from our interviews show, obtaining work permits is often a lengthy and complex process, which can result in individuals missing out on key job and vocational training opportunities. Even when allowed to work, many individuals remain trapped in low-wage exploitative jobs due to employer reluctance, legal restrictions on job mobility and misinformation regarding the connection between employment and residency security. Vocational training is an attainable pathway toward long-term employment and legal stability. However, our findings show that individuals with a *Duldung* face significant barriers in accessing and completing such programmes. A lack of early guidance, inflexible legal regulations and administrative delays hinder participation. To improve outcomes, interviewees stress the need for simplified work permit approvals, expanded advisory services and more flexible training and employment transitions.

Particularly women, individuals with disabilities and their caretakers with a *Duldung* experience intersecting exclusions that are linked to care responsibilities, cultural expectations and the absence of gender-sensitive employment programmes. Interviewees emphasised the success of women-only language courses in addressing some of these barriers, underscoring the need for gender-specific interventions. Individuals with disabilities encounter compounded obstacles, as migration and disability support systems fail to accommodate their intersecting needs, thereby reinforcing cycles of dependency and marginalisation. These findings highlight the need for intersectional policy approaches that address the varied disadvantages that these marginalised groups face. Additionally, greater collaboration between government agencies, employers and support organisations is crucial to fostering a more inclusive labour market.

To conclude, while recent policy reforms attempted to lower some barriers to labour market access, a systemic exclusion of *Duldung* holders persists. This study displays the need for structural reforms that go beyond temporary solutions, extend full labour rights to all refugees and establish intersectional support systems. Without fundamental changes, *Duldung* holders will continue to face systemic exclusion, limiting their ability to achieve economic independence and long-term stability in Germany.

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Sofia Lehmann & Elisa Mannes

Counteracting Bordering Practices: Non-State Healthcare Provision for Migrants with Precarious Legal Status in Berlin

Abstract: This paper explores how non-state actors in Berlin counteract exclusionary healthcare practices that are conceptualised as urban bordering practices of the European border regime. Focusing on neighbourhood-based organisations offering healthcare to migrants with precarious legal status, we examine how these actors navigate the tension between immediate service provision and the broader goal of systemic reform. Drawing on five semi-structured interviews and a qualitative content analysis, we focus on two guiding themes: the neoliberal shift of care responsibilities away from the state, and the ideological reimagining of healthcare as a holistic, inclusive practice. Our findings highlight how these organisations operate under significant financial and structural constraints while striving to remain politically critical and innovative. Despite limited funding and challenging working conditions, strategies such as building networks, reducing barriers in accessibility and maintaining anonymity are used to expand the reach and effectiveness of their services. However, this dual role – providing care and pushing for change – reveals contradictions that place pressure on organisations' ideals and operational capacity. We conclude that while these non-state efforts offer inspiring models of inclusive healthcare, sustainable change will require political recognition, financial support, and structural reform at the state level.

1 Introduction

The right to health, and the appropriate care and services needed to access and maintain a healthy life, is one of the central human rights as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO 2023). Accordingly, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1976 demanded that access to this basic human right must be ensured and protected for all people, including individuals on the move, migrants with and without certain documents and refugees (UNHCR n.d.; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1976). Under German law, refugees and asylum-seekers do not have legal access to the general healthcare system but are instead afforded limited medical services under the Asylum Seekers Benefits Act (AsylbLG) (Integrationsbeauftragte n.d.). People not registered within the asylum-seeking process or those who have not been granted refugee status, whose living status is irregularised and illegalised (De Genova 2012) as 'undocumented' or 'illegal' migrants, cannot access even these limited services. This is enforced primarily as social service offices responsible for the negotiation of forms of access to healthcare in Germany are legally obligated to report people without a residence permit to local authorities, in accordance with the reporting obligation (*Meldepflicht*) laid out by the German Residence Act (§ 87 AufenthG). While medical personnel, bound by patient confidentiality, are exempt from this reporting

obligation, the legal situation of the social welfare system fails to ensure the confidentiality and protect the privacy and safety of migrants with precarious legal status[1] in accessing healthcare (Stingl/Wieland 2017, pp. 16-17). Such legal and bureaucratic hurdles are conceptualised as bordering practices (ibid., 16), as nation-state boundaries and borders are established and upheld through exclusionary practices that extend beyond the physical nation-state border to interact with urban scales (Fauser 2017). In the case of Germany and its specific legal and social welfare system regulations, bureaucratic mechanisms such as the reporting obligation are identified as especially restrictive practices of bordering in comparison to other European states (ibid.), granting access to this basic human right to certain groups while refusing and marginalising others. We identify a central problem in this current absence of safe, sufficient and accessible healthcare for all people in Germany, regardless of insurance or residence status.

Shifting from the scale of national and supranational (EU) policies, we emphasise that cities and municipalities can exercise their urban capabilities in implementing practices of the European border regime more restrictively or more inclusively on the local scale (Kreichauf/Mayer 2021). In the city-state of Berlin, efforts to move against such exclusionary bordering practices by providing healthcare to individuals without health insurance, as pertaining to migrants with precarious legal status, are taken on by non-state organisations (Kreichauf/Mayer 2021; Stingl/Wieland 2017). This small-scale student research project explores the work of such non-state actors in counteracting bordering practices of the German healthcare system. We understand such counteraction both in physical or structural terms, as providing direct care to those for whom access is otherwise denied, as well as in ideological or political terms, as challenging hegemonial understandings of healthcare systems and nation-state's responsibilities of care. Seeking to understand how bordering practices in the city of Berlin, in the form of unequal(ised)[2] access to healthcare, are counteracted in this dualistic sense, we ask the following questions:

In what ways does the shifting of duties of healthcare away from states' responsibility in current neoliberal realities create specific challenges for the work of non-state organisations in the healthcare sector? What strategies are employed by healthcare organisations in response to these challenges?

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[1] We employ the term 'migrants with precarious legal status' here to refer specifically to individuals with experiences of mobility and migration who do not possess legal status as refugees or asylum-seekers, and who are not in possession of a limited toleration (*Duldung*).

[2] We use the phrasing of 'unequal(ised)' access here to highlight the purposeful nature of such inequalities, so as not to fall into the trap of treating these as objective or natural. Throughout our project, we seek to continually emphasise the responsibilities and accountabilities of hegemonial sociopolitical and ideological power structures and their associated discourses which deliberately perpetuate and seek to normalise states of inequality. We reference here existing analyses on the power of language and discourse that produce and uphold hegemonial inequalities (see also: Hall 1992)

What role does a re-imagining of healthcare and/or the interrogation of current hegemonial understandings of healthcare systems have for organisations providing healthcare to migrants with precarious legal status?

We begin by introducing our broader research context and the theoretical frameworks that inform our study. Subsequently, we outline our methodological approach, accompanied by a critical reflection on our positionality. This is followed by an overview of our key findings, which we then situate and discuss in relation to existing bodies of research and theory. To conclude, we summarise our main insights and offer a critical reflection on the limitations of our study, alongside suggestions for future research.

2 Healthcare as a political field in bordering processes

2.1 Locating the border: Healthcare and (urban) belonging

A growing body of research connects bordering practices and the negotiation of the European border regime on urban scales to exclusionary and discriminatory conditions of unequal(ised) access to healthcare (Di Stefano 2024; Fauser 2017; Johnson et al. 2011; Lebuhn 2013). Di Stefano (2024) understands healthcare as a central migration control field while Fauser (2017) describes the salient role of healthcare policies as a control mechanism of states used to govern migration and migrants. Research on urban bordering practices in this context emphasises how cities and municipalities make use of their 'urban capabilities' in reacting autonomously to local place-specific contexts (Kreichauf/Mayer 2021, 985). In so doing, cities and municipalities determine how the European border regime is put into practice and experienced locally. While some cities use these capabilities to implement border regimes more rigorously and exclusively, other municipal governments follow a more inclusive practice by offering broader services and access than national governments require (Kreichauf/Mayer 2021; Kuge 2019). The work of non-state actors in response to or in contact with such practices of urban bordering is well-researched, especially within the framework of sanctuary or solidarity cities that aim to enact uniquely local forms of inclusion and belonging (Fauser 2017; Özdemir/Pisarevskaya 2024). Bauder (2016; 2017) and Kreichauf/Mayer (2021), among others, conceptualise such activist or alternative action in establishing more inclusive access to healthcare as a 'remaking' or 'reimagining' of cities and their role in healthcare provision.

While we find ample academic knowledge on urban citizenship and urban belonging in this context (Bauder 2016; 2017; García Agustín/Jørgensen 2021; Kron/Lebuhn,2020), we identify a gap in knowledge focused more specifically on actors and organisations working on the scale of the neighbourhood within the spatial context of Berlin. Especially in Berlin, the scale of neighbourhood, or 'Kiez' in Berlin vernacular, represents a uniquely important category of scale that encompasses not only a specific territory, but also a sense of belonging and community (Hochmuth 2017). Therefore, we aim to focus our analytical lens on organisations in Berlin who are active especially on a neighbourhood scale, who identify with a specific neighbourhood or who have a historical, logistical, strategic/political or other unique connection to the neighbourhood in which they are spatially located.

Returning to our dualistic understanding of 'counteracting' bordering practices, which acknowledges both a structural and an ideological interpretation of the verb, we formulate two guiding concepts to organise the theoretical frameworks that inform our research process and our analysis of results. The first guiding concept focuses on the structural politics that contextualise the shifting of healthcare responsibilities to non-state organisations; our second guiding concept addresses important theories and knowledge related to ideological and discursive underpinnings that inform hegemonial definitions of healthcare.

2.2 Guiding concept (1): Shifting responsibilities in neoliberal realities

As already indicated in chapter one, in many German cities, including Berlin, care duties of the state in providing healthcare to all people are taken on by non-state or civil society organisations (Kreichauf/Mayer, 2021, 987). This phenomenon can be readily connected to broader known mechanisms of a neoliberal state and its view on healthcare and welfare politics. For example, van Dyk/Miesbach (2016) explore the effects of neoliberal policies on volunteer work with refugees, while Haubner and van Dyk (2023) describe this shift of healthcare responsibilities to non-state actors as a 'civil-society-ification' of social care duties, highlighting the salient role of non-state actors' work to fill in where states take a step back in this context. Known problems connected to this kind of outsourcing from state to non-state capacities include that qualifications of service providers may be lacking and that services cannot be provided in the comprehensive, all-encompassing manner in which they are needed (Kreichauf/Mayer 2021, 989). Furthermore, non-state organisations filling in gaps in healthcare provision may result in state governments not adjusting their policies and budgets to more adequately take on these responsibilities (ibid.). We draw on this critical perspective to account for the active role of the neoliberal state and its capitalist tendencies in investigating the shifting of healthcare responsibilities to non-state organisations. This is reflected in our first research focus: In what ways does this shifting of duties of care away from states' responsibility create specific challenges for the work of non-state organisations? What strategies are employed by organisations in response to these challenges?

2.3 Guiding concept (2): Rethinking healthcare

Connected to literature on healthcare provision and its politicised function in current states and societies is a key body of theory on the concept of care itself. Conceptualising 'care' in this sense goes beyond providing medical services to understanding health and care also as supporting other necessities of human life, such as social inclusion and communal activity (Saltiel 2021). Saltiel/Strüver (2022) build on Joan Tronto's ideas on critical feminist care ethics in redirecting the focus of understanding inequalities in healthcare settings to underlying social structures, linking care provision to broader questions of social injustices. Literature on care in this context demonstrates how healthcare and social services are offered or made accessible to some, as a practice of caring, while being actively denied to other groups in a community or society, as actively uncaring (Gabauer et al. 2021). Uncaring in practice interacts with legal and discursive categorisations that marginalise and exclude, as pertaining also to those categorised and criminalised as undocumented migrant(s) (Saltiel 2021). Such

differential practices of inclusion and service provision that uphold un/caring mechanisms can be conceptualised in terms of care as an act of inequality (ibid.). This emphasises how care in this context is a deliberate action, and therefore neither neutral nor naturally occurring nor objective.

Imaginations of deservingness in healthcare contexts run parallel to and interact with binary conceptualisations of identity/other or belonging/not-belonging which are inherent in upholding border regimes (Gabauer et al. 2021; Korteweg/Yurdakul 2024; Saltiel 2021). This is also identified in Foroutan's (2019) postmigrant perspective on constructions of a 'native-migrant binary' as a discursive mechanism of differentiation in German popular discourse.

These arguments suggest that counteracting bordering practices in the form of unequal(ised) access to healthcare requires rethinking the systemics of healthcare provision itself in two ways: first, by inviting to reimagine and re-define healthcare as caring in its broader, more holistic sense, which includes a multitude of life aspects; and second, by directing specific focus to the discursive and ideological underpinnings of care provision as an act. Recalling our second research focus, we ask: What role does a re-imagining of healthcare and/or the interrogation of current hegemonial understandings of healthcare systems have for organisations providing healthcare to migrants with precarious legal status?

3 Methods and process

This student research project draws on qualitative research methods, centring around five semi-structured interviews conducted in October and November 2024. These interviews were conducted with three organisations in Berlin who, according to their online presence, provide healthcare services to individuals without regularised access to healthcare in three neighbourhoods, namely: open-med in Steglitz-Zehlendorf, open.med in Lichtenberg and Gesundheitskollektiv (Geko) in Neukölln. These conversations with a project assistant (I#1), a project manager (I#2), a practicing physician (I#3) and a doctor in further training (I#4) enabled us to gain a broader and more nuanced perspective on our research topic. For the interviews at open.med in Lichtenberg and Geko in Neukölln, which were conducted in person at their respective locations, additional experience logs (L#A; L#B) were drafted to document our own observations and impressions of the spaces. Additionally, we interviewed a researcher and activist (I#5) familiar with our research focus and with extensive expertise in this field.

To create meaningful and relevant prompts for our semi-structured interviews, we conducted a preliminary literature review as well as basic research on the organisations of our interviewees. We adopted a semi-structured approach in the form of an 'interview guide' as opposed to the more structured 'interview schedule' (Dunn 2021, 151), with the aim to more fully benefit from and respectfully acknowledge the expertise of our interview partners. Interview topics related to the work of the organisations in providing healthcare services – including their goals, challenges they encounter and strategies they employ – as well as their visions or suggestions for a more adequate or inclusive healthcare system.

All interviews were analysed after transcription using the computer-based software MAXQDA and employing a qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2018). Our research method utilised a deductive-inductive approach, beginning with deductively defined main categories that corresponded to the central themes of our interview guide as informed by our research questions. This was followed by several cycles of open inductive and in-vivo coding to identify relevant subcategories, which represent important aspects and key arguments emerging directly from the data collected. The structure and content of resulting subcategories and subcodes, as well as relations between these, constitute our empirical research findings, which are presented in the following chapter.

An essential aspect of our considerations on research ethics is recognising and reflecting on our own positionality and privileges as well as potential power imbalances inherent in our research setting. We as student researchers and authors of this paper possess both German citizenship as well as general health insurance, which represents a form of power in spaces in which our research was conducted. We aimed to remain continuously aware and critical of our own implicit bias and subjectivities when formulating research questions, entering the spaces of the organisations we spoke with, interacting with staff and users of these spaces and throughout our coding process and qualitative analysis.

4 Findings

4.1 Navigating contending objectives

Our findings highlight a challenge faced by healthcare providers who navigate contending objectives as they establish on-the-ground healthcare structures while simultaneously advocating for necessary systemic change in healthcare provision overall. As one interviewee noted, organisations 'are taking on social welfare responsibilities' even as this is identified clearly as the state's 'duty as a welfare state' (I#5). Another interviewee stated: 'We [opened] with the slogan, "too bad, but we're opening" … because actually we're not supposed to exist; the responsibility is supposed to lie somewhere else entirely' (I#1). This critical viewpoint on the necessity for taking on healthcare provision despite it being the responsibility of the state was consistently expressed throughout all interviews, indicating the importance of this dynamic for organisations and providers of healthcare in this context. Interviewees described that while taking on this acute responsibility of care, they remain at the same time committed to advocating for systemic change through political work, ultimately aiming to render themselves obsolete (I#2; I#4). Navigating these two intentions is described as no easy task: 'That you provide concrete assistance and at the same time [organise] political campaigns … that is really exhausting' (I#5). Conversations with I#1 and I#4 describe a unique approach to this dilemma which seeks to establish an alternative way of providing healthcare centred around servicing all residents in the organisations' neighbourhood or Kiez, regardless of socioeconomic factors such as legal or insurance status, or experiences of migration and mobility. Instead, this approach emphasises a sense of belonging to a neighbourhood community and shared living space, as opposed to a definition of belonging rooted in

nationality or documentation. In this way, the interviewees connect their objective of providing more inclusive and just healthcare services to their broader goal of pursuing critical political advocacy. This 'lighthouse project' (I#4) serves as an important precedent that demonstrates viable potential for more meaningful and inclusive practices in healthcare provision.

4.2 The salient role of financial challenges

Our findings reveal core challenges experienced by non-state organisations that relate to financial struggles which limit the scope and qualification of care provision. Interviewees refer to financial dependency and uncertainty due to time-limited grants (I#1; I#2; I#3; I#4), reliance on donations (I#2) or disruptions in public funding throughout changes in governments (I#5) which make it 'impossible to plan for the future' (I#2). As care for uninsured individuals, including migrants with precarious legal status, is not funded or subsidised by the general insurance system nor by city or state law, organisations who offer this type of care must rely on the aforementioned more informal sources of income, and are therefore 'under immense pressure just to survive financially' (I#4) as such funding is often insufficient in covering all costs.

Overworked structures and experiences of disillusionment resulting from such fraught financial and political conditions are cited as negatively impacting the sustainability and long-term well-being of organisations and their workers. Volunteer-based staffing structures, which are often necessary for organisations to navigate financial limitations, complicate planning efforts and the ability of organisations to ensure the continuity and regularity of service provision (I#1; I#2). Several interviewees connect this precarity and irregularity to potential negative implications for recipients of services for whom services may be more limited in scope and frequency than for recipients of regularised healthcare (I#1; I#2; I#3; I#4). Such negative implications are especially severe in cases of chronic illness or when prescription medications, medical specialists or surgical operations are necessary. These represent concrete situations where non-state organisations providing healthcare to individuals without access to the regularised system, including migrants with precarious legal status, arrive at the limits of their capacities.

4.3 Building networks, expanding support, reducing barriers: Strategies for success

One key strategy of all organisations we spoke with that is employed to strengthen and expand the available scope of care despite insufficient financial and political support is the establishment of professional and organisational networks. This includes the exchange of best practices to 'learn from each other and not "reinvent the wheel"' (I#4) as well as the initiation of cooperations with specialist medical practices 'to which [one] can refer in case of an emergency' (I#1) or in case specific medical expertise is needed. Because general practitioners are unable to address all needs, and as comprehensive healthcare 'significantly improves the treatment for the person' (I#1), organisations rely on such collaborations to ensure more holistic care. This includes also the spatial collaboration of diverse medical, psychological,

therapeutic and social work services in the space of the health centre itself to reduce geographical and organisational barriers in access to further treatments for patients requiring ongoing or complex services, as well as to improve the quality of service itself as personnel with different specialist expertise share and assist one another with their unique qualifications, perspectives and professional experiences (I#1; I#3).

Organisations also employ various practices to reduce both physical and bureaucratic barriers in accessing healthcare services, for instance by increasing their visibility and accessibility. This is achieved in part by situating medical practices within residential areas close to the living, working and transit spaces of potential patients. For example, open.med Lichtenberg is readily accessible via public transportation as it is located within a short walking distance to a main subway station (L#A), while Geko is located in a densely populated residential area in northern Neukölln (L#B). Barriers to accessible and safe(r) healthcare services are also reduced by maintaining the anonymity of patients, for instance by assigning patient numbers so that 'when we send blood test results to the lab, we use their number, not their name' (I#2) and 'the treating doctors do not know the person's name' (I#1). To reduce language barriers, organisations use video or telephone interpreting services, or an on-site interpreter when available (I#1; I#2; I#4).

5 Discussion

Connecting our research findings to our theoretical framework introduced in chapter two reveals how both guiding concepts of (1) shifting responsibilities within a neoliberal state as well as (2) reimaginings of healthcare are reflected in the work of the organisations we spoke with.

5.1 Navigating contending objectives within neoliberal realities

As described in chapter four, the absence of inclusive state healthcare provision that should not exist in a 'responsible society' (I#3) is readily perceived as state and municipal policy actively neglecting their own responsibilities of care. Related to this, our findings suggest an uneven relationship between the financial and political power held by state governments on the one hand, and the responsibility for providing healthcare services which lies with non-state organisations on the other. In other words, while the responsibility for healthcare provision that serves all individuals in a society may be shifting, the necessary financial and political support for actually carrying out this responsibility is not. For the organisations we spoke with, this results in underfinanced and overworked structures that cannot consistently service all needs, echoing the challenges described in existing literature (Haubner/van Dyk 2023; Kreichauf/Mayer 2021; Stingl/Wieland 2017).

The negative impacts of this shifting of care responsibilities to non-state structures echo known problems that exist for healthcare provision in neoliberal states. Existing literature describes how non-state actors' filling in the gaps may reinforce the agendas of government policies to not adequately adjust their policies and allocate more funds, as the problem is perceived (or intentionally and strategically reframed) by the latter as already solved

(Kreichauf/Mayer 2021, 989). Haubner and van Dyk (2023, 126) position the role of community and volunteer social service provision as a potential resource within the context of capitalist and neoliberal healthcare policies. The recurring references to challenges experienced in balancing or navigating contending objectives between service provision and political or advocacy work, which were apparent throughout our findings, expand upon existing understandings of the difficult relationship between neoliberal political agendas and non-state organisations' role. Clearly, for organisations taking on healthcare responsibilities identified as the duty of states and municipalities, it becomes increasingly difficult to challenge this unsustainable practice due to already limited capacities, especially with regards to limited financial and political support. This results in a cyclic reinforcement of overburdened and at the same time insufficiently supported structures, whose ability to advocate for the political changes necessary to improve their situation therefore is in turn increasingly undermined.

5.2 Reimagining healthcare in practice: Possibilities and limitations

Interviewees describe how strategies aimed at providing safe(r) and more accessible healthcare for all potential patients are connected to their aim to enact a form of healthcare that serves the needs of all members of a society in a more holistic sense. In conversations with healthcare workers from Geko, we identify a unique framework for healthcare provision centred around servicing all residents in the neighbourhood or Kiez, regardless of legal, socioeconomic or insurance status. This neighbourhood-based focus represents a shift away from defining care provision according to legal or discursive frameworks toward a framework grounded in shared spatialities and communal lives. This represents an important discursive and structural move toward undoing and destabilising categories of differentiation grounded in nationality or documentation, the importance of which cannot be underestimated, as such categorisations are rooted in harmful assumptions on deservingness, belonging and the racialisation or other discriminatory hierarchisation of individuals (Borrelli 2022; Foroutan 2019; Hall 1992). The alternative practices described here indicate a broader definition of healthcare that encompasses not only medical services but also social aspects of community, belonging, participation and respectful inclusivity (Saltiel 2021; Saltiel/Strüver 2022), as organisations emphasise community-building, empowerment and individual agency in connection to healthcare provision (I#1; I#2; I#4).

However, an acute awareness of the discrepancies between the goals of healthcare providers aiming to provide more holistic and inclusive healthcare for all, and the goals of the current healthcare system within current neoliberal political frameworks, is present throughout all our conversations with organisations. This aligns with broader theoretical frameworks on unequal(ised) access to healthcare as a bordering practice (Di Stefano 2024; Fauser 2017; Johnson et al. 2011; Lebuhn 2013) and as a form of active systemic neglect and uncaring (Gabauer et al. 2021; Saltiel 2021; Saltiel/Strüver 2022). In this way, the active role of legislative systems, government bodies and political ideologies in enacting unequal(ised) access to healthcare for migrants with precarious legal status is clearly visible as playing an important part for organisations' understanding of their own role and their broader

ideological goals. Implementing more inclusive and caring forms of healthcare is cited as highly limited by financial challenges which inhibit organisations' ability to act outside of existing definitions and imaginings of healthcare. This presents a conflict between the aim to embody and enact a new form of healthcare, while being restricted by financial and political factors rooted in hegemonial understandings of healthcare provision, as described by one interviewee:

'We're under a lot of pressure to survive financially ... We want to have this ambition to respond to people in a more human way, but unfortunately that's a bit contradictory. ... The pressure on our ideals is growing, [on the one hand], how we would like to do it, what we think is right, and [on the other hand], how do we get through the day and through the year.' (I#4)

Practising more holistic and inclusive forms of healthcare which focus on the needs of patients is critically inhibited by a lack of government support, for example in the form of state-organised health centres and increased or more readily available public funding (I#3). Just as structural (i.e., systemic financial or political) factors limit non-state organisations' ability to provide more accessible healthcare, as described in the previous section, it is also evident here that without significant political measures to support these organisations and their work, it will remain difficult, if not impossible, for alternative imaginings of healthcare to be pursued long-term.

6 Conclusion

This small-scale qualitative research project examines how non-state actors navigate and challenge exclusionary bordering practices of state healthcare regimes in providing basic healthcare services to migrants with precarious legal status within the spatial context of Berlin. The arguments presented here emphasise the salient role of financial struggles for negotiating contending objectives in a neoliberal landscape of shifting responsibilities as well as in pursuit of a reimagined understanding and practice of healthcare. Framing our central findings around the navigation of contending objectives between providing healthcare services on the one hand and political and advocacy work on the other through the lens of our two guiding concepts on (1) shifting responsibilities and (2) rethinking healthcare highlights the important role of financial support and political power in both cases. However, a pronounced awareness for the role of political ideologies and bordering mechanisms in shaping the healthcare system, as well as a profound emphasis on highly necessary, and in some cases already existing, implementations of reimagined and reconceptualised definitions of healthcare which were apparent throughout our research, indicate viable potential solutions and provide inspiration for alternative futures.

Within the scope of this research project, it was only possible to engage with a limited range of perspectives and insights. Broader or more thorough conclusions on the challenges and strategies of non-state providers of healthcare as well as their work toward reimagining healthcare would require including a wider range of knowledge and experiences than we were

able to incorporate into this student research project. We emphasise that while this paper focuses on the challenges and strategies of non-state organisations in providing healthcare, it is essential to acknowledge that migrants with precarious legal status are not passive subjects but rather exercise their own agency in this context. Consequently, further research that centres the perspectives, challenges and strategies individuals excluded from regularised healthcare in general would be both valuable and necessary.

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İdil Gündüz & Marielene Wicke

Art and Culture as Resistance: Challenging the European Border Regime at the NO BORDERS_NO LAGERS Festival

Abstract: This paper explores how art and culture function as meaningful tools of resistance against exclusionary border regimes, using the NO BORDERS_NO LAGERS festival, which took place in August 2024 at Oranienplatz in Berlin, as a case study. The festival was organised by the feminist activist group Women in Exile & Friends and aimed to challenge dominant narratives, amplify marginalised voices, celebrate diversity and promote community through the power of art and culture. Using qualitative methods, including participant observation and group interviews, we examine how the festival's artistic and cultural activities resist the European border regime (EBR). We argue that the festival's activities not only offer counter-narratives to the systemic isolation, erasure and marginalisation imposed by the EBR, but also actively imagine and promote alternative forms of belonging rooted in care, warmth and togetherness. In doing so, the festival's activities affirm the political significance of coming together and expressing identities and emotions through art and culture. Our study contributes to geographical and feminist research on migration, borders, art and resistance, highlighting the importance and potential of embodied practices in challenging exclusionary border regimes and creating a more just future.

1 Introduction

The European border regime operates through a complex system of external*ised* [1] and internal*ised* borders and border*ing* practices that extend far beyond traditional notions of borders. Border enforcement mechanisms such as visa restrictions, borders controls, surveillance and offshore procedures function as external*ised* borders that aim to prevent and contain migration outside the geographical borders of the European Union (EU). Meanwhile, internal*ised* borders manifest within national territories, shaping the everyday lives of migrants and refugees* [2] (Barwick-Gross et al. 2023, 153). In Germany, these internal*ised* borders take the form of restrictive asylum, family reunification, deportation and integration policies, as well as exclusionary practices in key social areas such as housing and the labour market (Togral Koca 2019, 553). Beyond such legal and structural mechanisms, the European border regime also operates through discourses and narratives that, for instance, construct

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[1] In line with queer-feminist research and critical border and migration studies, we emphasise the social practice and performativity of borders throughout this paper. This is reflected in our language, as we will continuously emphasise the act of 'doing border' by using italics.

[2] In this paper, we use refugees* as a collective term for individuals with different (legal) statuses. This includes, for example, asylum seekers, tolerated persons (*Geduldete*), illegalised persons and undocumented individuals. We add an asterisk (*) to indicate the grouping of people with different statuses. We do so for the sake of easy and fluent reading.

migrant men*[3] as violent, predatory and 'hyper-masculine', while portraying migrant women* and LGBTQ+[4] individuals as vulnerable, helpless and passive victims in need of Western salvation (Hiller 2021, 863). These border*ing* practices reinforce social inequalities by hierarchising migrants and refugees*, determining who gains access to rights, resources and belonging. Furthermore, these practices shape social relations by influencing how we relate to one another.

Refugee* women* and LGBTQ+ refugees* navigate multiple intersecting layers of dis-crimination and oppression shaped by race, gender, sexual identity and refugee status, making them particularly vulnerable to exclusionary border regimes. Border policies, for instance, exacerbate their marginalisation by not providing gender-sensitive protections and inclusive spaces (Sarkin & Morais 2025, 294). At the same time, the lived experiences of these individuals highlight the pressing need for collective resistance and solidarity. Migrant-led movements actively resist and challenge systemic oppression and create alternative spaces that promote community and envision a more just and inclusive future. Within this broader landscape of migrant-led resistance, art and culture emerge as powerful tools.

This research investigates how the artistic and cultural activities at the NO BORDERS_NO LAGERS intersectional arts and culture festival at Oranienplatz in Berlin resist the European border regime. We draw on critical migration and border studies, which conceptualise borders as socially constructed and maintained through social practice, and connect to geographies of art and resistance, which highlight the potential of artistic expression for political activism. To address this overarching question, this study examines two sub-questions:

1. What narrations and narratives of the European border regime appear in the artistic and cultural activities of the festival and how do they reflect and represent the lived experiences of refugee* women* and LGBTQ+ refugees*?

2. How do festival participants (including organisers, collaborators, guests and artists) experience the impact of these artistic and cultural activities on their understanding of and engagement with the European border regime?

The NO BORDERS_NO LAGERS festival (23 August 2024 - 25 August 2024) serves as a significant example of migrant-led resistance. Organised by the feminist activist group Women in Exile & Friends (WiE) – founded in 2002 'by refugee women for refugee women' (Women in Exile & Friends 2024c) in Brandenburg, Germany – the festival embodies WiE's mission to expose the oppressive conditions in refugee accommodation camps (*Lagers*) and advocate for their abolition (ibid.). Their slogan 'Breaking Borders to Build Bridges' reflects a commitment to dismantling both physical and symbolic borders while fostering inclusivity and empowerment. The festival aimed at creating a space to challenge dominant narratives, amplify the voices of

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[3] As part of our gender-sensitive and queer-feminist research we use the asterisk (*) after terms like 'men' and 'women' to indicate the social production of these categories.
[4] An initialism for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other people with sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions that do not conform to heteronormative social norms.

BIPoC women* and LGBTQ+ individuals, share stories and build community through the transformative power of art and culture (Women in Exile & Friends 2024b).

In the following paper, we first outline our theoretical perspective, which brings together critical geographical perspectives on borders, geographical engagements with (border) art and interdisciplinary scholarship on the political potential of artistic and cultural expression. We then present our research methods, followed by an analysis of our findings. Finally, we discuss our key findings in relation to our theoretical framework, highlighting the role of art and culture as tools of resistance within the broader context of migration and border studies.

2 Theoretical Perspective

Critical border and migration studies question the traditional understanding of borders as fixed and static demarcations of state territories at which the reception or rejection of migrants and refugees* takes place (Barwick-Gross et al. 2023, 156; Newman 2006, 173; Togral Koca 2019, 547). Rather, critical border and migration scholars view borders as the result or effect of social practice. The so-called practice of border*ing* – of '*doing* border' – is understood as a (permanent and dynamic) social and performative practice carried out by a wide range of human and non-human, state and non-state actors (Vey 2023, 185; Lehner/ Rheindorf 2018, pp. 42-43; Heinze et al. 2016, pp. 1-7; Parker/Vaughan-Williams 2012, 729; Parker/Vaughan-Williams 2009, 586). From this perspective, borders are never fixed, static or 'simply present; they are always in the state of becoming' (Vey 2023, 186). In this sense, borders are constructed, (re)produced and maintained through (ongoing) *re*-border*ing* practices, which also implies that borders can be challenged, disrupted, transformed and deconstructed through *de*-border*ing* practices (Lehner/Rheindorf 2018, 43; Vey 2023, 190).

In our research project, we want to address the latter practice of *de*-border*ing*, using the NO BORDERS_NO LAGERS festival as a case study in asking how migrant and refugee* activists use the medium of art and culture to confront and resist borders and border*ing* practices of the EBR. Applying the theoretical lens of '*doing* border' to the European border regime reveals that border*ing* practices operate not only at the external*ised* borders of the EU but also within national territories and everyday spaces. In other words, borders do not only materialise as physical fences or as lines on a map; they are also enacted in our social interactions, institutional practices and the ways we treat each other. This view aligns with the feminist assertion that the personal and everyday are inherently political. As this research positions itself within a queer-feminist framework, we understand borders as geopolitical realities that are felt, embodied and negotiated in everyday life.

Regarding the relationship between geography and art, Hawkins (2011) discusses some of the ways in which the study of art (practices) can enrich geographical inquiry (Hawkins 2011, 464). Geographers engage with a variety of art practices – including paintings, photography, performance, public art, sculpture, sound art and participatory art – as they explore different geographical themes (Hawkins 2011, 465; Richardson 2013, 125). Rather than treating art as static objects, Hawkins reconceptualises art as an ensemble of practices, performances,

experiences and artefacts (Hawkins 2011, 456). In this view, geographies of art approach art as 'living' rather than mute objects of study, 'as *constitutive* rather than reflective of meaning and experience, *productive* rather than representative of culture' (ibid., pp. 473; emphasis added by the authors). Such a reconceptualisation allows for an understanding of both the creation and experience of art as socially embodied processes (ibid., pp. 472). For our research, this perspective underscores the potential of the festival's artistic and cultural activities to create new social and embodied experiences, meanings and understandings (ibid., 468). At the same time, it refers us to the festival's participants, who, through their embodied engagements, become active 'sites of meaning-making' (ibid., 471).

In the field of migration and border studies, Friederike Landau-Donnelly (2022) examined a 2014 performance of the Berlin-based artist collective *Zentrum für Politische Schönheit* as an example of artistic engagement at, with and against borders (so-called border art) (Landau-Donnelly 2022, 587). The performance consisted of artist-activists temporarily removing white crosses from a Berlin Wall memorial, then mobilising activists to travel to a southern EU border to dismantle existing borders fences and to temporarily install replica crosses (Landau-Donnelly 2022, 586). Landau-Donnelly (2022, pp. 585-587) used this example to explore the politics of (dis)assembling borders within Europe and the often-paradoxical contradictions of art-activist interventions.

Another example of geographical engagement with art in the field of migration and border studies is Antonella Patteri's (2024, 330) study on mural paintings as an 'art of dis-bordering'. She argues that murals have the potential to disrupt state-centric categorisations of migrants and challenge dominant narratives about migrant agency and life (ibid., 344). In this way, murals initiate a dialogue about borders and migration and forge 'connections between what can be seen and what can be thought in the everyday life of everywhere borders' (ibid., 330).

Other examples of art challenging hegemonic discourses can be found in the work of sociologist Maggie O'Neill. In pieces such as 'Global Refugees' and 'Making the Connections: exile, displacement and diaspora', she uses ethno-mimesis – a blend of ethnography and artistic expression – to explore questions of exile, displacement and belonging among migrants and refugees* (O'Neill 2008; 2009; 2019). Her approach emphasises the transformative role of storytelling and participatory arts for marginalised communities to reclaim their narratives and disrupt dominant discourses that marginalise migrants and refugees*, thereby reshaping societal perceptions of 'the Other' and advancing social justice through creative expression (O'Neill 2009).

Beyond migration and border studies, interdisciplinary scholarship on the political potential of artistic and cultural expression offer further valuable insights. One such example is Maria José Bejarano Salazar's (2023) study on the role of a community dance project for women* in Los Santos, Costa Rica, a region that is marked by some of the highest rates of femicide and female* suicide in the country (Bejarano Salazar 2023, 126). The dance project emerged as a means to make normative gender roles and embodied repertories (such as gestures, body postures and the use of space) visible, and to question and reconfigure them (ibid., 126). Her

work highlights how body-centred activities, such as dancing, can constitute a form of micropolitical activism and how the community setting created an atmosphere of care and validation in which women* rehearsed alternative ways of being in the world (ibid., 139).

Complementing this focus on body-centred activities, Mona Lilja (2017) draws attention to the role of emotions and embodiment in resistance practices. She argues that gatherings and demonstrations in public space signify something more than the verbal and written articulation of demands (Lilja 2017, 346). Rather, emotional and bodily presence allows emotions (such as frustration, anger and sadness) to circulate between individuals, thereby intensifying them and leading to what Lilja calls an 'affective up-scaling' of resistance, where individual discontent turns into collective mobilisation (ibid., 347). From this perspective, resistance is not only about what is said or demanded, but also (or especially) about the emotional and embodied act of coming together (ibid., 345).

Taken together, these scholarly contributions demonstrate how art and culture function not merely as forms of representation, but also as active social practices that can disrupt dominant narratives and power structures. They further emphasise the transformative potential of embodied and emotional engagement, showing how artistic and cultural practices can reconfigure social relations. For our research, these insights underscore the potential of the artistic and cultural activities at the NO BORDERS_NO LAGERS festival to operate as *de-*border*ing* practices.

3 Methods and positionality

Feminist methodology seeks to move away from extractive research practices and instead fosters research embedded in reciprocal and caring relationships (Clark-Kazak 2023, 1166). With this in mind, we chose to collaborate with Women in Exile & Friends (WiE) to conduct research *with* refugee* women* and LGBTQ+ refugees*, rather than simply researching *about* them (Lopes Heimer 2024, 4). In the spirit of fostering a reciprocal partnership, we decided to support the festival organisation and assist in documenting (filming, photographing) the festival as part of our research. The festival documentation was conducted by a working group in which we actively participated, alongside other festival supporters. In this context, we navigated multiple roles: as supporters and volunteers in the festival's organisation, as researchers and as participants. This required us to carefully balance the priorities of our research with the practical needs and goals of our activist partners (Jenkins & Boudewijn 2020, 9).

At the festival itself, our fieldwork combined participant observation and informal conversations with festival participants. As participant observers, we actively engaged in panel discussions, performances (choir, music), workshops and general activities (food, dance), immersing ourselves in the atmosphere while also interacting with artists, organisers and participants (see Figure 1). Through our active participation in the festival's activities, we engaged with art and culture both as lived experiences and subjects of our research. A

reflexive approach shaped our documentation process, as we recorded our impressions and emotional responses, using our own bodies as tools of observation.

Figure 1: Festival programme with listed activities (author: Women in Exile & Friends)

In the next section, we will present our findings[5], which relate more directly to the panel discussion on EU and German politics, the traditional Dominican Black percussion workshop, the co-creation of the mural led by the artists and activists Vicky Shahjehan and Chuu Wai and the artworks presented in the embroidery exhibition by Experts of the World Unite! (Fieldnotes).

Following the festival, we conducted three group interviews, the findings of which we will also present in the next section. One interview was in person with about 15 members of WiE (I#1) during which we applied photo elicitation, a method that uses photographs to prompt discussion and evoke memories in a more interactive and engaging way. Additionally, we conducted two online interviews. One was with seven members of the activist group Experts of the World Unite! (I#3), whom we met at the festival, where they exhibited their embroidery. The other was with Vicky Shahjehan and Chuu Wai (I#2), two artists who co-created a mural at the festival through a participatory workshop, inviting people to share their stories and collaboratively shape the mural's message and imagery. For the group interviews as well as informal conversations at the festival, we asked interview partners for consent and their preferences regarding anonymity.

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[5] Due to limited space in this paper, we can only discuss a few examples of the artistic and cultural activities of the festival.

4 Findings: The NO BORDERS_NO LAGERS festival

Regarding our first sub-question of how the European border regime is portrayed and reflected in the artistic and cultural activities of the festival, our analysis identifies four key narratives shaping the experiences of refugee* women* and LGBTQ+ refugees*: isolation, exile and displacement, erasure and invisibility, and longing for home and childhood.

Isolation emerges as a defining aspect of the experiences of refugee* women* and LGBTQ+ refugees* in Germany. In the panel discussion on EU and German politics, the physical remoteness of the camps (*Lagers*) where refugees* are placed is identified as a major source of this isolation. Panellists describe these camps as often being located in rural areas with limited transportation access and frequently near military bases. Additionally, German asylum law reinforces severe mobility restrictions (*Residenzpflicht*), confining residents within their assigned federal states. Within the camps, constant surveillance and control intensify the sense of isolation, with frequent police inspections and a lack of privacy in living spaces. This is particularly harsh for refugee* women* and LGBTQ+ refugees*, as they often face multiple discrimination within these already isolating conditions (Fieldnotes, 24.08.2024).

Exclusion from the labour market and education system deepen this experience of isolation. Participants in the panel discussion report that they are prohibited from working or attending school and are forced to rely on state financial assistance. As mental health disorders, particularly depression, become increasingly common, exclusion from the healthcare system and systemic neglect worsen this sense of disconnection (Fieldnotes, 24.08.2024).

Closely linked to isolation, the theme(s) of exile and displacement are central to the narratives present in the festival's activities. The narrative of safety in Europe is met with profound dis-illusionment when facing the harsh realities of systemic discrimination and violent asylum regimes (Fieldnotes, 24.08.2024). Refugees* encounter numerous social, legal and bureaucratic barriers that undermine the promise of protection and opportunity. Zuena, a member of WiE, captures this sense of false hope with a powerful metaphor: 'You think it's sweet, but when you open it, sometimes it doesn't have water... it's just dry. So, watermelon is tricky, it's like life. You're in, you're out. For us asylum seekers, it's hard when we come to

Europe. We think it's easy, but when we stay, it's another case. I always said, asylum for us is like a watermelon' (I#1; see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Watermelon at the festival (photo: Marielene Wicke)

At the festival, participants also speak about erasure and invisibility, particularly in relation to the criminalisation of Black and migrant cultural expressions. Facilitators of the Black Percussion workshop share how state authorities suppress Black musical traditions through police violence and persecution in the Dominican Republic and how musicians risk arrest, deportation or even death for performing in public spaces. This crackdown on indigenous and Black musical expressions parallels the erasure of migrant identities in the European border regime, where migrant communities are surveilled, incarcerated, criminalised and excluded for expressing their cultural identities (Fieldnotes, 25.08.2024).

Finally, the festival's activities surface a deep longing for home and childhood. Many describe how engaging in familiar practices, such as henna, evokes memories of home and reinforces their sense of identity. Kalsoom, another member of WiE, recalls while looking at the picture below (see Figure 3): 'Henna on my hand... It reminded me, long long time ago, when we were in Pakistan. I miss my culture. It reminded me of my culture' (I#1). Such practices serve as acts of cultural survival in participants' narratives, allowing memories of the past to fuse into the present moment of displacement.

The artistic and creative activities with children at the festival contribute to this sense of longing. The past is reimagined through reenacting memories of childhood and sharing cultural knowledge and practices with children (I#1; Fieldnotes 25.08.2025). As such, the festival allows participants to re-engage with the past, to revisit pieces of one's identity, and to reconnect with cultural roots through artistic and cultural expression.

Figure 3: Doing henna during the festival (photo: Marielene Wicke)

In terms of the perceived and experienced effects of the festival's artistic and cultural activities on the participants, our findings emphasise that art and culture serve as powerful means of self-expression, empowerment, connection and joy. For instance, members of Experts of the World Unite! describe art and more specifically embroidery as a means of storytelling, which allows them to process and share their own experience, reclaim their narrative and assert their cultural identity. As member Aryan explains: 'Personally, art projects empower me by giving me a voice to express my identity and culture as an activist from Afghanistan. Through art, painting and embroidery I can share my story and resilience of my people, turning struggles into creative expression. Honestly, it allows me to connect deeply with others, sharing our stories and building understanding and solidarity' (I#3; see Figures 4-7). In this way, artistic and cultural expression – whether through embroidery, mural painting, music or dance – acts as a universal language that enables connection and dialogue.

Similarly, Vicky Shahjehan and Chuu Wai highlight the collective mural-making process as a deeply personal, emotional and empowering experience, with the mural itself being a visual testament to identity and resilience (I#2; see Figures 8 and 9). They emphasise, much like members of Experts of the World Unite!, that making art collectively creates an empowering sense of belonging and community, with the group setting providing emotional support (I#2; I#3).

Figure 2: Embroidery by 'Experts of the World Unite'
(photo: Marielene Wicke)

Figure 3: Embroidery by 'Experts of the World Unite!'
(photo: Marielene Wicke)

Figure 4: Embroidery by 'Experts of the World Unite!'
(photo: Marielene Wicke)

Figure 5: Embroidery by 'Experts of the World Unite!'
(photo: Marielene Wicke)

Figure 6: Mural in the making (photo: Marielene Wicke)
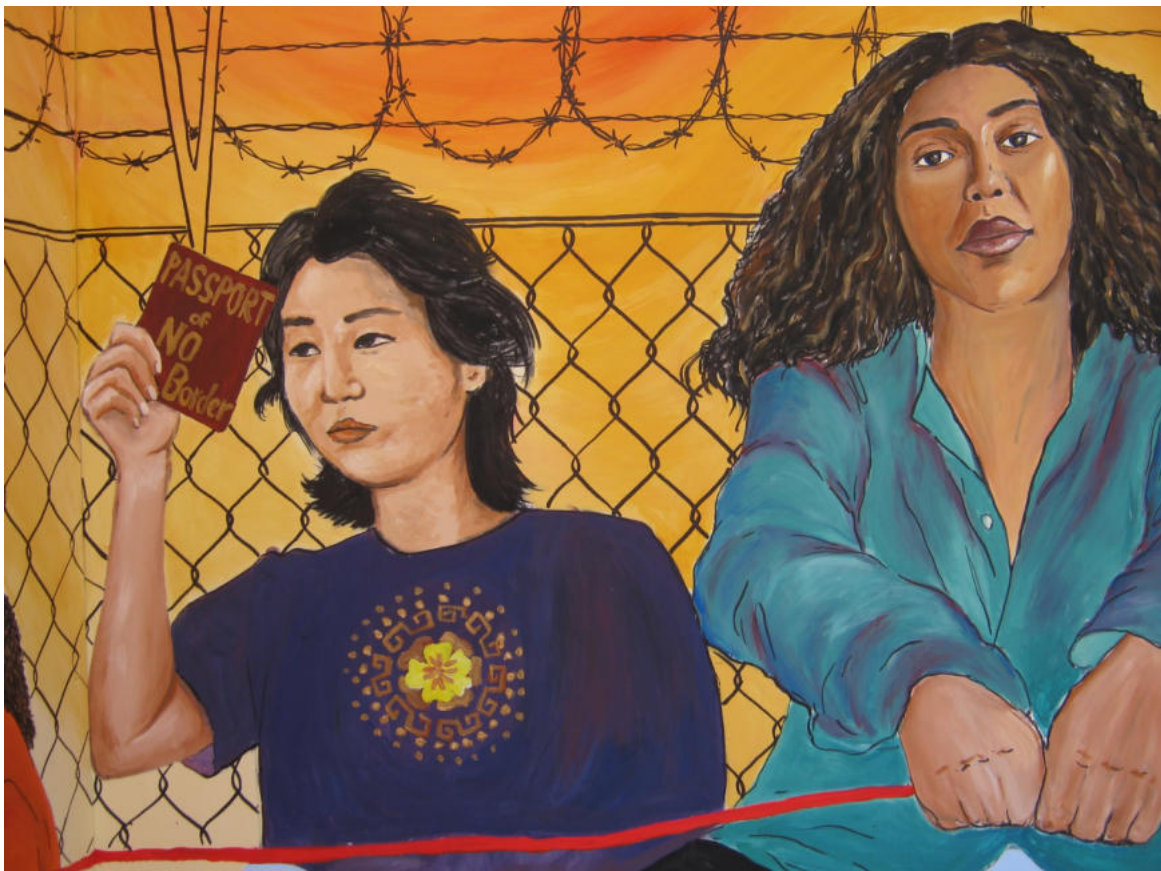
Figure 9: Details of the mural (photo: Marielene Wicke)

Figure 10: People gathering at the festival (photo & edit: Marielene Wicke)

Our findings also highlight that art and culture play a crucial role in individual and collective healing. Participants describe the festival's activities as both a sanctuary and a source of strength, helping them to transform pain into beauty, resistance and joy (Fieldnotes, 26.08.2024). Joy, in this context, is not just an emotional response, but an act of resistance, both personal and deeply political: an affirmation of life, identity and solidarity in the face of systemic oppression. As Judy from WiE expresses in our group interview: 'Having such a gathering on that day, with the women in exile, it felt warm. The sadness goes, the loneliness goes (...)' (I#1; see Figure 10). The coexistence of joy and sadness is a recurring theme throughout the festival, as one workshop facilitator also expresses: 'I think art is a very important way of resisting without losing our minds or being sad. Even being sad but in a joyful way, if that is something' (Fieldnotes, 24.08.2024). The festival allows individuals to come together and celebrate, proving that creative expression is not just about resistance, but also about care, restoration and hope.

In this sense, the festival itself – and the seemingly simple yet profoundly meaningful act of coming together – creates a space for cultural celebrations, exchange and identity assertion. Through activities, such as music, dance, food, fashion or embroidery, participants share their (cultural) identities, affirm their presence and strengthen connections that transcend language and borders (Fieldnotes, 25.08.2024; see Figures 11-14). In doing so, the festival's artistic and cultural activities not only address political issues and tell stories of struggle and resilience, but also cultivate spaces of care, belonging and joy. Art and culture then not only function as a means of personal or collective representation, but also as powerful tools for building community and advocating for social change (I#1; I#2; I#3).

Figure 11: Dancing chain during a performance (photo: Marielene Wicke)

Figure 12: Women in Exile Choir (photo: Marielene Wicke)

Figure 13: Dancing (photo: Marielene Wicke)
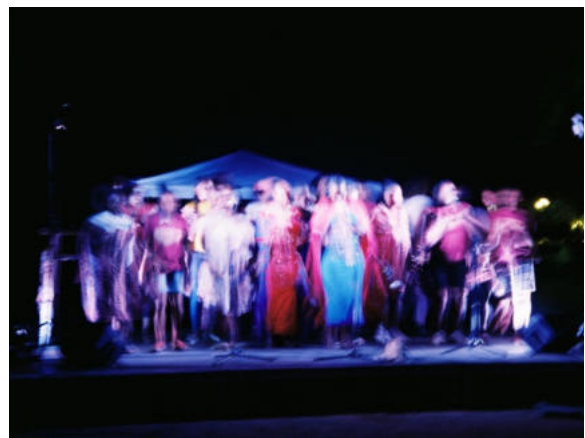
Figure 14: Kenyan Group Singing (photo: Marielene Wicke)

5 Discussion: Art and culture as tools of resistance

Returning to our research question of how art and culture, as practiced and experienced at the NO BORDERS_NO LAGERS festival, can be forms of resistance against the European border regime, we find that the festival's activities serve as meaningful examples of *de*-border*ing* in action. Connecting our findings to the theoretical perspective of '*doing* border' and border*ing* practices (Vey 2023; Lehner/Rheindorf 2018; Heinze et al. 2016; Parker/Vaughan-Williams 2012; 2009), we argue that the festival's activities not only resist the external*ised* borders of the European border regime but also challenge the internal*ised* ones.

Fundamentally, the festival as an event itself provides a platform for refugee* women* and LGBTQ+ refugees* to share their stories and experiences through diverse artistic and cultural activities. In doing so, it amplifies and empowers marginalised voices and perspectives, ultimately resisting the erasure, invisibility and isolation imposed by the European border regime. By expressing their identities, emotions and struggles, participants not only challenge dominant narratives that discriminate against refugee* women* and LGBTQ+ refugees*, but also actively de-construct them. They provide powerful counter-narratives – narratives that

celebrate identity, culture, agency, resilience, connection and joy. This finding resonates with insights of O'Neill's work (2008; 2009; 2019) on the transformative role of participatory arts for storytelling and reclaiming narratives, as well as Patteri's (2024, 344) argument that art has the potential to disrupt dominant narratives about migrant agency and life.

Moreover, the festival's activities not only question the status quo, but also envision alternatives. They ask: How could it be? How do we want to live? How do we want to relate to one another? In our group interview, Chuu Wai describes the power of counter-narratives present in artistic works as a soft and subtle yet powerful force: Art can provoke thought and question existing structures, subtly embedding itself in people's consciousness. As she puts it, the messages of art won't be as obvious as building a house and seeing results after one or two years. Rather, art's transformative power lies in slowly dissolving in people's minds, and once the message is received, it will last a long time (I#2). The festival's artistic and cultural activities, by centring creativity and community, adopt these same tools: They may not dismantle physical fences, but clearly challenge dominant narratives and imagine alternatives.

Furthermore, by providing a space for people to come together, to share food, to dance and sing together, the festival creates an environment of care, warmth and belonging. This stands in stark contrast to the systemic isolation and alienation imposed by the European border regime and actively counteracts the latter by building community, bridges and networks of survival and resistance. As Marianne, a friend from WiE expresses: 'It is the rhythm that unites us. That's why, it is the rhythm that they are trying to take away from us. We need to come together and find the rhythm in all of us' (Fieldnotes, 26.08.2024). This care, warmth and togetherness is constantly expressed in an open invitation to join, to be part of, to co-create, to celebrate and to connect. In this sense, the festival and its artistic and cultural activities not only imagine but also actively enable alternative ways of being together.

When asked about what art and culture mean to her, Doris from WiE emphasises how they embody how we relate to one another: '(...) my culture will not relate to maybe yours, but [that] doesn't mean (...) I don't respect, you know, what we all believe in. So, for me, arts and culture is, you know, respect, tolerance, having fun' (I#1). Her understanding highlights the deeply embodied and relational nature of artistic and cultural practices, an understanding which resonates with Hawkins' (2011, 473) conceptualisation of art as lived experiences and a social practice that shapes, redefines and produces cultural and political landscapes.

Building on this relational and embodied view, the festival's activities, such as movement, rhythm, music, food and fashion, which are often dismissed as mundane and apolitical, carry deep political significance. They de-construct internal*ised* borders that manifest in tacit expectations on how to move, speak, or take up space, and that discipline refugee* women* and LGBTQ+ refugees* into silence, compliance and invisibility. In this sense, the festival's activities create ruptures in the everyday performativity and normativity imposed by the European border regime by reclaiming space, voice and agency, and by centring joy and celebration (Bejarano Salazar 2023, pp. 134). This resonates with Bejarano Salazar's (2023) work on community dance as a body-centred activity that acts as a means for micropolitical

activism. The festival and its participants similarly disrupt dominant narratives, assert alternative ways of being and belonging and thus become 'sites of meaning-making', actively reshaping cultural and political landscapes (Hawkins 2011, 471).

As such, the festival's artistic and cultural activities not only articulate the lived experiences and struggles of refugee* women and LGBTQ+ refugees* through language but also express them on a bodily and emotional level (Lilja 2017, 344). The political messages 'NO BORDERS NO LAGERS' and 'Breaking Borders to Build Bridges' are not only communicated linguistically but also deeply intensified through shared emotionality and bodily presence. This reflects what Lilja (2017, 347) calls 'affective intensification' and 'up-scaled resistance'. Where festival participants come together as resisting bodies in physical space (Lilja 2017, 343), art and culture not only become meaningful tools for bodily and emotional expression but also gain new significance through this collective sharing and resonance. This also illustrates the importance of the community setting for validating and politicising personal experiences (Bejarano Salazar 2023, 134). It is precisely this shared bodily and emotional presence that powerfully affirms the right of refugee* women* and LGBTQ+ refugees* to exist, to be seen and heard and to stay.

In sum, the NO BORDERS_NO LAGERS festival is far more than just an artistic and cultural event; it is a deeply political one. It showcases and embodies the meaning and urgent necessity of creating spaces of belonging, resistance and solidarity. Through the making, experiencing and sharing of art and culture, the festival's activities become meaningful *de*-border*ing* practices that de-construct dominant narratives, build communities and dismantle internal*ised* borders.

6 Conclusion

The NO BORDERS_NO LAGERS festival demonstrates how art and culture act as tools of resistance against exclusionary border regimes. As we have shown, the festival combines distinct yet interconnected practices of *de*-border*ing*. First, the festival's artistic and cultural practices create counter-narratives, thus opposing the erasure, invisibility and isolation imposed by the European border regime. Moreover, they not only question the status quo but also actively enable alternative ways of belonging and relating to each other centred in care, warmth and togetherness. Finally, the seemingly simple acts of gathering and engaging in artistic and cultural expression reclaim emotional and bodily presence as a political force, where celebration and joy become tools of resistance in the face of systemic oppression. These *de*-border*ing* practices challenge the normativity of the European border regime that discipline and discriminate refugee* women* and LGBTQ+ refugees* in multiple intersectional ways, and instead open space for new forms of community and solidarity to emerge.

Our findings are in line with the existing scholarly literature at the interface of borders, migration, art and resistance (Bejarano Salazar 2023; Landau-Donnelly 2022; O'Neill 2019; Patteri 2024). In this way, our research not only supports an understanding of borders as a social practice embedded and embodied in everyday life, but also reinforces the feminist

assertion that the personal and the everyday are inherently political. Moreover, our research contributes a distinct perspective by emphasising the political significance of emotional and bodily presence through artistic and cultural activities. In doing so, we extend feminist approaches and foreground how resistance is not only spoken but also emotionally felt, shared and embodied in collective spaces, with the NO BORDERS_NO LAGERS festival serving as a profound example.

Regarding the limitations of our research, the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the festival meant that we could not participate in every activity or engage with everyone as much as we would have liked. Our multiple roles – as researchers, supporters, and participants – often divided our attention, making it difficult to fully immerse ourselves. Another significant limitation is the sheer volume of data we collected. Given space constraints, we are unable to present all our findings, which is a necessary but an unfortunate trade-off.

Ultimately, the NO BORDERS_NO LAGERS festival reminds us that resistance is creative – it reclaims, imagines and connects. It demonstrates how art and culture, as tools of resistance, build and strengthen the very connections and bridges that exclusionary border regimes seek to dismantle and oppress.

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Per Jannis Spix & Matthias Cano Urbanke

Networking and Place-based Resistance against the Deportation Centre at the International Airport of Berlin through a Civil Society Lens

Abstract: This paper contributes to migration studies and social movement research by highlighting the tensions between grassroots resistance and the institutionalised border regime. It examines the resistance movement against the planned Berlin Brandenburg Airport (BER) Deportation Centre with a particular focus on the Abschiebezentrum BER verhindern! *protest camp, which was held in 2023, and which represents a crystallisation point of activist groups, NGOs and local stakeholders. The BER Deportation Centre is a key site within the evolving German (and European) border regime as it embodies a broader political shift towards increasingly restrictive migration policies. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, participatory observation and document analysis, we investigate the interventions of the camp, its central aims, its role as a temporary resistance movement and its discursive positioning within the contemporary debate on migration and related struggles in this context. Our findings suggest that while the initiative effectively mobilised public attention and facilitated a safe-space for exchange, skill sharing and reflection, it struggled to maintain long-term cohesion as a movement as well as consistent or long-term political influence. Applying a theoretical framework grounded in social movement research, place-based resistance and abolitionist perspectives, we argue that the initiative meets key criteria of a social movement but remains limited in sustaining its efforts due to the increasing criminalisation of activism and the shifting political discourse on migration. This study further contextualises such resistance within the post-2015 transformation of German asylum policies, emphasising the securitisation of migration and the retreat from the so-called 'Welcome Culture'. While the initiative's impact remains significant in terms of raising awareness and exposing systemic injustices, its inability to prevent the construction of the BER Deportation Centre underscores the structural challenges facing contemporary migration activism in Germany.*

1 Introduction

The planned Berlin-Brandenburg Airport (BER) Deportation Centre (*Gemeinsames Ein-und Ausreisezentrum am BER*) is intended to serve as an integral focus facility for the contemporary policies of the German and European border regime. This centre represents a contested space in migration politics in the wider context of a continuous shift toward right-wing narratives of migration and asylum as well as emerging resistance against this development. Since its conceptualisation in 2018 and subsequent execution of the BER Deportation Centre (BER DC), it has received increasingly negative public attention, in part due to growing opposition from diverse social actors. The initiative *Abschiebezentrum BER verhindern!* (Engl.: Prevent the BER Deportation Centre) was founded in December 2021, shortly after the announcement of the DC's planning process in the federal parliament of

Brandenburg. The initiative has since been a main actor of opposition against deportation practices and infrastructure in the Berlin/Brandenburg region. As a conglomerate of a wide variety of different stakeholders, local activist groups and (inter)national non-profit organisations (NGOs), the initiative has facilitated a loose network of actors whose activities of resistance culminated in a week-long protest camp in June 2023, which took place near the BER International Airport in Schönefeld, Brandenburg. We consider this physical manifestation of resistance to be a central moment of cohesion between the diverse members of the initiative, which resulted in a variety of collaborations and direct actions against the 'Fortress Europe'. Nevertheless, the development of the deportation centre has not been obstructed, and the initiative appears to have lost momentum. In conceptualising our research project, we identify the following knowledge gaps in this context: What was achieved over the course of this initiative's protest efforts, and what are resulting perspectives for more just and human rights-based migration policies in Germany? Furthermore, especially with regard to the 'Welcome Culture' often cited as emerging from the 'long summer of migration' in 2015 (Hess et al. 2016): What does the inside perspective of activists show us about the development of public discourse on this subject? Adopting an initial orientation around these research questions, we seek to establish a more complete understanding of how democratic and critical spaces for migrant activists and solidarity activism are affected by these and similar protests. These questions guide us throughout the preparation of this study, during the interviews as well as when writing and analysing our results.

The following paper summarises our conclusions regarding the formation and long-term collaboration of the resistance against the BER DC, drawing on semi-structured interviews, participatory observation during field visits as well as the initiatives' online presence and a variety of relevant theoretical concepts. When beginning this project, we were especially interested in the exact innerworkings, best-practices and successes of the initiative. However, during our process we realised that ethical considerations regarding the impact of such publication on the work of the initiative prevented us from publishing our findings in full length.

Consequently, we decided to focus our research on those aspects that didn't risk impeding the initiative's work while still adding to the body of knowledge of migration studies, social movement research and research on the European and German border regime. From the many insights we gained during our research project, the present paper will narrow the two previously introduced research questions to focus specifically on two aspects: First, we pose the question whether the initiative, as a temporal conglomerate of several individual activist groups, NGOs and other actors, can be defined as a social movement. Second, the paper aims to elucidate how the shift in attitudes over the past decade has affected the work of such solidarity or resistance initiatives, especially in the face of growing hostility towards asylum seekers, migrants and their allies. Given the limited scope of the paper as well as ethical considerations, the present work will focus on these aspects, although we emphasise that this contested field of potential research topics offers many more insights that could be explored in future studies.

In this paper, we will first explore relevant theoretical concepts, as well as introduce the general context of the case. We then present the findings of our own research in relation to relevant theory in order to derive case-specific insights. Finally, we reflect on the limitations of the present study and suggest prospects for future research.

2 Theoretical framework

The given topic is embedded in a wider academic discourse on restrictive migration policy and deportation facilities, centring first around the connected themes of infrastructure, discourse and political influence (Borelli 2023). A second theoretical consideration is on what constitutes a contemporary social movement (Nicholls 2007) and its place-based manifestations of resistance (Dirlik 1999). We decided to flank this with perspectives on the contemporary development towards more fluid, adaptable forms of activism in response to above mentioned repression (Rosenberger et al. 2018) as well as abolitionist frameworks in the face of increasingly restrictive state policies (Gilmore 2020).

Borelli (2023, 458) proposes the perspective of three different types of contemporary deportation infrastructure, of which one is the airport. This is especially relevant for our case study, as the BER Deportation Centre will be located inside the logistic infrastructure of an international airport. This overlap of deportation and transportation infrastructure creates a unique legal and logistical situation that allows for fast-tracking the denial of asylum and connects these systems to exceptional transit practices, as observed also in Austria (Küffner 2022, 104). Placing the detainees' cases away from more publicly accessible infrastructure can serve to inhibit potential public scrutiny as well as prevent easier access to legal support that subjects of detention and deportation might be eligible to, according to Borelli's analysis (Borelli 2023). This distinct strategy reinforces migration deterrence policies and drastically restricts migrants' access to much-needed resources. While the contributions presented above provide a better understanding of the infrastructure involved in deportation practices, Nicholls (2007) provides the foundation for our analysis of 'resistance movements'. The author generally defines a resistance movement as a collective form of contentious politics with the goal of achieving political goals through non-traditional means. More precisely, such a movement is *collective* in how it combines and channels the abilities of its constituent parts towards a shared goal; it is *contentious* in how it conflicts with other, usually mainstream, beliefs and practices, and finally; it is *political* in how its goal involves a political change and involves a political entity of governance in one form or another (Nicholls 2007, 31). This definition is relevant for our work as it extends the framework of analysis beyond central actors like political parties or individuals and clarifies the interplay between media, public opinion and protest. Moreover, classifying an initiative as a movement explains its persistence beyond elections and how mobilisation evolves through networks, counter-movements and shifting contexts (Rucht 2018, pp. 225).

Additionally, we adopt the definition of Rosenberger et al. (2018) of a social movement which consists of two elements, as movements emerge 'in reaction to particular issues', as emphasised by Tazreiter (2010, 204) and encompass 'sustained and intentional efforts' to

achieve legal or social change, as highlighted by Jasper (2014, 5). Rosenberger et al. (2018, pp. 91) distinguish between (1) 'Self-Interest Versus Solidarity Protest', (2) 'Aspiring Political Claims Versus Individual Enforcement Solutions' and (3) 'Local, National or Transnational Protest', a distinction which guides our interview structures. This means that in order to classify protests, it is important to identify

1. whether a person protests against their own deportation or whether a group of people protests for an affected person or group,

2. whether the protest is intended to change political policies and practices or to prohibit the actual deportation of one person,

3. which perspective is brought into place.

Centemeri (2017) elaborates on a more specific account on the place-based resistance movements in her case study of the civil opposition against the Malpensa Airport extension in Milano. In her example, she shows how local initiatives that resist distinct infrastructure projects can widen their perspective on global trends and issues to include, for instance, climate crisis and racism as manifested in border regimes or global exploitation along the value chain. In the case of the resistance against the BER DC, the critique on the construction and the whereabouts of the centre as a specific local phenomenon is linked to a critique of the 'Fortress Europe', of global exploitation and of racist practices within EU internal politics. In this line of thinking, we emphasise that no matter how local the protest, it is linked to a global phenomenon, and no matter how abstract the issue, it manifests locally.

Furthermore, this understanding of resistance challenges material manifestations of state power and sees space not only as a physical location, but rather as a contested sphere of the political (Dirlik 1999). Our understanding of the relevance of local, and often marginalised, place-based resistance is extended by Gilmore's (2020) concept of 'pop-up universities' in their function as spaces of political education and skill-sharing, and in their contextualisation as local struggles that are embedded within wider, globally relevant discourses such as colonialism and the 'Fortress Europe'. From this perspective, we view the protest camp as an intervention through the lens of a pop-up university. Furthermore, Gilmore's (2020) abolitionist framework serves to understand how resistance movements might not only oppose a specific project, such as the construction of a singular deportation centre, but rather may question the overall system of restrictive border regimes beyond their physical manifestations, challenging the notion of deportation in general. In the long term or as overall objective, abolitionist theories question an understanding of the current criminal justice system as given and eternal, focusing instead on community-based approaches of justice under humane and just conditions.

The ambivalence that lies in a more progressive approach grounded in community-based justice can be grasped through Bimji's (2020, 247) observations on the internal contradictions of migrant solidarity networks, as eventually certain hierarchies and divisions emerge even within solidarity networks that advocate for an explicitly anti-discriminatory position.

Resistance movements might struggle with internal tensions around questions like 'Who speaks for whom?' or whether migrants themselves are in charge or the local activists that advocate for them.

These chosen theoretical concepts facilitate a differentiated engagement with the complex research topic of resistance against state violence and allow for a representation of a variety of perspectives of different actors involved. These include individual activists, organisations as well as media collectives who publish (write, film, etc.) anonymously. This promotes an understanding of resistance as very local and at the same time highly influenced by global conditions and events. To account for the diversity of protest and resistance moments, we draw on impressions from a wide range of theory in order to engage with our research topic.

3 Context

The 2015 'long summer of migration' (LSM) marked a culmination point in pro-refugee sentiments in Germany. Following the widespread acknowledgement of the inhumane living conditions of people on the move along the 'Balkan Route', Syrians were allowed to move towards Austria and Germany. Beyond that, a popular movement consisting of individuals, civil advocacy groups and organisations welcomed people arriving at train stations, helped by housing people on the move, formed networks and created a social, grass-roots response to the challenge of state failure. All this is commonly summarised as a so-called 'Welcome Culture'. German society was mobilised in grassroots initiatives, volunteer networks and NGO efforts to such an extent that this was termed a temporary 'refugee solidarity movement' (Merhaut et al. 2018).

While civil society proceeded with outstanding engagement, this political openness was only short lived. Political and discursive pressure from so-called conservative or especially right-wing parties soon dominated media discourse, a standpoint that was underpinned by an unequal coverage of legal violations by refugees (Mediendienst Integration 2021, 4; 2023). Politically relevant actors, for instance from the conservative party (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union, CDU/CSU) instrumentalised public perception to further establish law and order practices, thus rewinding the then so short LSM. Generally, this shift can be summarised as a movement away from humanitarian and human rights concerns towards an increased securitisation of migration management (Weima/Hyndman 2019). In Germany, this shift was solidified by the Minister of the Interior at the time, Horst Seehofer (CSU), in his 'Masterplan Migration' (Bundesministerium für Inneres, Bau und Heimat [BMI] 2018), which institutionalised such restrictive policies and paved the way for physical manifestations of this new border regime. Among these manifestations was also the so-called 'European lighthouse project' of the BER DC. Besides this conservative call for repression, it was Chancellor Scholz' (Social Democratic Party, SPD) claim 'to finally deport on a large scale' (Hickmann/Kurbjuweit 2023) that further promoted the social rejection of people on the move.

The BER DC which from the very beginning was conceived of as a pilot project to gain experience in the emerging field of anti-migration infrastructure, was considered a central, systemic component of such anti-solidarity or anti-migration governance (Frag den Staat 2018). Like other European projects, the centre was justified by state representatives to 'streamline deportation procedures' and 'increase efficiency', as the new facility would triple the number of detainees that could be processed at the same time (Bundesministerium für Inneres, für Bau und Heimat [BMI] 2021). Shortly after the national and local states' Ministers of the Interior announced the project in October 2021, the counter-initiative *Abschiebezentrum BER verhindern!* (Engl.: Prevent the BER Deportation Centre!) was founded in December 2021, consisting of a variety of stakeholders with diverse backgrounds, such as local activist groups, refugee organisations and both national and international NGOs. The initiative's actions include independent researching on the investors and the obscure procurement of contracts, publishing about stakeholder misconduct, generating petitions, organising (online-)protests and cultivating an increased visibility of the project in general. Through these multiple resistance strategies, the formerly loosely affiliated members of the initiative increasingly collaborated more closely. This cohesion culminated in the 2023 'Prevent the Deportation Centre' protest camp (Initiative Abschiebezentrum BER verhindern! 2024). The weeklong camp has been portrayed by its participants as a great success, as it further increased the visibility of the issue by wide media coverage, attracted a variety of relevant actors, such as politicians, and served as a ground for networking, skill-sharing and awareness-raising among the camp participants (I#1; I#2).

4 Methodology and positionality

Our study builds on semi-structured interviews (Hay/Cope 2021, 158), balancing a structured approach with enough flexibility for conversations to evolve naturally. This allowed interviewees to steer discussions toward their own experiences and highlight their own perspectives. We considered this to be a balance between accommodating our own research interests and the interests of our interview partners. The general interview guideline was adapted to the interviewee's positionality, if known or communicated ahead of time. The creation of this guideline was inspired by Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz's (2018) considerations on qualitative research in migration studies and the relevance of tailor-made interviews in order 'to unravel the "multi-layered links of global connectivity"' (Zapata-Barrero/Yalaz 2018, 171). Alongside this process of data collection, we engaged with a range of literature to establish a theoretical foundation and compare our findings with related case studies. We also supplemented our research with media coverage and the initiative's own publications, including flyers, online articles, social media material for sharing and social media accounts. These included the material available through the initiative's website as well as from Instagram accounts like @abolish.deportation.prison.ber, @stopdeportationcentreber and @ihrseidkeinesicherheit. Additionally, we conducted participatory observations at community events, demonstrations as well as the actual location at the BER international

airport to gain deeper insights into the field. We also visited one organisation for a short, spontaneous meeting.

However, following a restrained response to interview requests, and in the context of a growing public hostility towards migrants and their allies by mid-2024, we came to suspect certain reservations about our project by potential interview partners and especially activists. The majority of interview requests were unsuccessful, and we encountered a noticeable level of distrust during field visits. We were aware of this risk from the beginning of our research process, but the potential for suspicion appeared to have grown during this time, most likely due to the increasing criminalisation of activism and especially of 'freedom of movement' activism. When approaching NGOs, they often mentioned constraints in their capacities to facilitate an interview due to already overburdened structures.

Given the limited number of successful interviews, one with a worker in an international NGO (I#1) and one with a grassroots activist (I#2), we decided to shift our focus towards analysing public narratives surrounding migration and the BER DC rather than attempting a broad comparison of the experiences of protest camp participants. Due to the sensitivity of the research field and the potential risks to our interview partners, we took extra precautions in handling their anonymity. To prevent exposing participants to potential legal or personal threats, we refrain from detailing their identities or experiences.

For methodological reasons and to put our findings into perspective, we disclose our own positionalities. As cis-male, middle-class male socialised students from a country in the EU, and with secure legal status, access to higher education and an awareness of our nation's colonial legacy, we recognised that our positionality shaped our research in ways that require careful reflection and consideration. Germany itself, through its close alliance with nations engaged in neo-imperial foreign policy, plays a direct role in the displacement of people, many of whom migrate to Europe and Germany. Furthermore, continuities of racial and fascistic categories in German society post-1945 very much create the foundation for post-2015 anti-migration discourses. Acknowledging this reality, we aimed to approach the topic with sensitivity and respect.

To ensure ethical integrity, we carefully prepared for interviews by discussing our research concept and interview guidelines with our supervisor beforehand. Additionally, we provided participants with detailed information about our backgrounds, research objectives and the full interview guideline well in advance. This transparency aimed to build trust and ensure that everyone involved felt comfortable and secure throughout the research process. Ultimately, our priority was to protect the dignity and safety of our interview partners, as well as their professional or activist endeavours, while still contributing meaningful insights to the broader academic discourse on migration and resistance as of our partners' interest. Out of this consideration, no strategic or sensitive information will be presented in this paper.

5 On favouritism, organising and emancipation: A presentation of our findings

Throughout our research, we gained increasing insights into the hidden processes, motivations and power structures behind the BER Deportation Centre (BER DC). What initially seemed like isolated data points coalesced into a more comprehensive image of the political and economic interests involved. For example, our desk study revealed that, beyond its legal and ethical pitfalls, the process by which the property contract for the DC was awarded was marred by opaque negotiations and favouritism. A politically well-connected investor ultimately secured the contract by purchasing the last available plot on the designated site, leveraging his position to coerce the state into granting him the construction and maintenance contract (Initiative Abschiebezentrum BER verhindern! 2024). The personal ties between this investor and key political figures raise questions as to how and why the acquisition was possible or even considered before the project was publicly announced. Furthermore, it appears astonishing how easily regulatory procedures of the federal parliament of Brandenburg and a left-led federal ministry of finance (ibid.) were bypassed. This hidden and opaque awarding process aligns with Borelli's (2023, 458) notion of deportation infrastructures deliberately shielding certain practices from public scrutiny, thereby enabling exceptional procedures without accountability. To address our first research interest in assessing the character of the resistance initiative as a possible resistance movement, we examine several findings related to the structure and achievements of its efforts. Increased public awareness of this obscure contracting process fuelled activist organisations' optimism and promoted the formation of the resistance initiative, which saw the public exposure of these irregularities as a means to halt the building project (Initiative Abschiebezentrum BER verhindern! 2024; I#2). The inter-agent networking and cooperation between political parties, media coverage and grassroots or activist groups described by Rucht (2018, pp. 255) emerges as a central tactic employed in this case by the resistance initiative in their efforts to establish transparency and accountability surrounding the materialisation of this deportation infrastructure.

The decentral and multi-location actions to this effect that followed, in the form of a digital "action week" campaign, focused on disseminating information about the investor's questionable practices (AKUT+[c] 2022). Throughout these activist endeavours, the initiative framed itself as a grassroots response to powerful and corrupt political adversaries (Initiative Abschiebezentrum BER verhindern! 2024). The next step for this resistance was then to organise a public mobilisation, leading to the conception of the protest camp, a week-long event designed to increase visibility, facilitate networking and grow the movement's capacity (I#2).

From the beginning of the initiative's work, tasks and responsibilities were distributed among members based on resources, capacities and existing networks. The initiative brought together diverse actors, from local activist groups and regional solidarity organisations to national (and international) NGOs. Contributions ranged from capacity support and event organisation to on-site workshops and advocacy efforts (I#1), resulting in the crystallisation of

a diverse activist mosaic working together to advocate for constitutional and international human rights. While the initiative maintained flat hierarchies, key figures who had invested significant time in planning often had the final say, leading to occasional perceptions of lack of transparency and power imbalances, particularly in the unexplained cancellation of certain workshops (I#2).

Despite these internal challenges, our results indicate that at the time of the camp's active presence, both the interviewees we spoke with as well as representative media coverage portrayed the protest camp as a success in several points. The camp connected activists across different scales, created a safe space for skill-sharing and political discourse, and generated significant public attention, as in the media coverage by Memarnia (2023), Häußler (2023) and Zeit Online (2023), based on dpa (*Deutsche Presse Agentur*). As one interviewee highlighted, the camp provided a curated programme for a diverse audience, covering topics such as BIPoC solidarity, legal counselling and queer resistance, alongside cultural programmes like a drag show (I#2; Instagram Programme). It also received official recognition in local political structures, with political representatives from two parties attending the camp (I#2), namely the left party (Die Linke) and green party (Bündnis90/Die Grünen).

However, post-camp reflections revealed growing disenchantment within the initiative. While the camp successfully strengthened networks, it failed to produce a concrete and comprehensive strategic alignment for future actions. No large-scale follow-up initiatives emerged, and only loosely affiliated subgroups continued sporadic collaborations (I#2). Some members engaged in smaller-scale protests, such as demonstrations against Brandenburg's newly elected conservative government (I#2). When asked whether the initiative constituted a social movement, one interviewee responded hesitantly, acknowledging that while it might meet formal criteria, its short duration and fading affiliations made it feel less like one (I#1).

The second focus of our inquiry concerned the impact of shifting political and public discourse on activism in the migration field. Interviewees confirmed their perception of a dramatic shift toward right-wing and conservative narratives in response to violent incidents involving refugees since the LSM (I#1). Public debates were identified as increasingly dominated by populist voices, often amplifying isolated events while neglecting rational discourse on long-term policy solutions (I#2; I#1). The individuals we spoke with connected this to disproportionate policy responses that incurred severe rollbacks on human rights protections, particularly in the areas of child welfare and asylum law (I#1).

The growing dominance of right-wing rhetoric has pressured centrist parties into adopting stricter migration policies (Bundesministerium für Inneres, für Bau und Heimat [BMI] 2021). Politicians like Friedrich Merz (CDU/CSU), now Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, position migrants as scapegoats for systemic failures of the state, such as housing shortages, healthcare (in)accessibility and education gaps, despite the absence of evidence linking these issues to migration (I#1; I#2). This narrative shift was identified as having direct consequences for migrants, for example due to the significant reduction of social and legal supportive services, as one interviewee noted how legislative reforms have rolled back protections to

pre-2005 levels with family reunification policies once again being severely restricted (I#2). In a grimly humorous reflection, one interviewee suggests that they might as well reuse old protest banners from 2005, as the struggles remain the same (I#2). Others, however, took a more dire perspective. One interviewee cited public discussions about a return to the 'baseball bat years', referencing the 1990s' wave of racist street violence against migrants and thereby emphasising the intensification of hostility towards migrants and activists. The media's role in this shift was also heavily criticised, as coverage predominantly highlights migrant-related crimes, which reinforces negative perceptions of foreigners while ignoring positive stories (Mediendienst Integration 2023). As a result, public perception is identified as becoming increasingly desensitised to xenophobic rhetoric and demands that would have once sparked outrage are observed as now being largely unchallenged (I#1).

As our results show, the 2021 BER DC protests also reflected this shifting discourse. Unlike in previous years, merely standing in solidarity with deportees was no longer viewed as sufficient to gain widespread support. Instead, activists had to highlight financial and political scandals, such as corruption in the contract awarding process, in order to mobilise public attention (Frag den Staat 2022). This suggests that public discourse no longer responds to human rights arguments alone but requires tactical framing for instance by exposing state misconduct.

This growing social ostracism has direct implications for such activism. Many activists fear that public support for migrant rights may shrink, leaving only those directly affected to continue the struggle (I#2). One interviewee expressed fatigue with the endless fight for basic dignity, particularly at the national level, where the political climate feels increasingly hostile (I#2). While some cities continue to provide progressive policies, even these local safe havens are under pressure from federal policies (I#1). A major difficulty in migration activism, as highlighted by one interviewee, is the incompatibility of governance scales, where local progressive initiatives can be overruled by national and EU-level decisions (I#1).

However, not all interviewees saw these developments as entirely negative. One noted that despite the increasing hostility in political rhetoric, their movement had gained new allies, and suggested the escalating situation might even mobilise further support (I#2). The organisations and individuals we spoke with identified a need for stronger political positioning from social and human rights-oriented parties, urging them to counter populist shifts with a firm insistence on existing legal protections for asylum seekers and migrants (I#2).

6 Discussion of findings

The present case study of the BER DC enables a thorough engagement with the initially stated research interests and in relation to current academic perspectives in this field, following two research foci. First, we aim to position the associated resistance movement within social movement theory, as well as related place-based resistance models. Secondly, we ask in which ways the shift in public and political discourse might have influenced resistance activism and the work of our interview partners.

Overall, one main takeaway from the interviews conducted was that while the initiative *Abschiebezentrum BER verhindern!* was able to engage a variety of diverse actors, it lacked the long-term cohesion that many hoped for, and which was in some cases also initially reported. Considering whether the initiative constitutes a movement, we recall the criteria that Nicholls (2007, 31) puts forth and relate them to our case. First, we observe that the resistance initiative at BER DC represents a collective endeavour, as it involves several organisations from different scales and backgrounds that collect and combine their individual abilities towards their shared cause. Second, the initiative is clearly contentious, as it challenges a prevalent status quo which it tries to overcome, in this case with an increasingly abolitionist stance on deportation. And lastly, its endeavours are political in how they directly contest the German state's decision to upgrade its deportation abilities through policy regression and infrastructural capacity expansion (ibid.). However, in adding Rosenberger's (2018, 90) premises that a movement emerges in reaction to a specific political issue and that they engage sustained and intentional efforts to achieve the desired change, the picture becomes more nuanced. While we consider Rosenberger's first premise to be fulfilled, as the initiative arose in direct response to the announcement of the deportation project and the nepotism involved in its contract awarding process, the second premise is not so clearly identifiable. As the initiative was founded in 2021 and collaborated consecutively until the summer of 2023, one could argue that during this period, it constituted a movement. However, since its defining and most effective moment, namely the protest camp in June 2023, its collaborations on such a wide scale have largely faded (I#1). Only smaller sections of the initiative have continued to work as closely together since this time (I#2). As the initiative fulfils four of five criteria put forth by both Nicholls (2007) and Rosenberger (2018), we conclude that it did indeed constitute a movement, if only a temporary one. All collaborations will eventually come to an end, but we argue that the limited longevity does not necessarily impede the extent to which this collaboration was effective during its time.

The BER DC resistance movement is very much rooted in a specific and politically charged local space, but at the same time is enmeshed in global issues of migration, inequality and hegemony, echoing Centemeri's (2017) observations of the place-based resistance movement against the Italian airport infrastructure project. Another relevant perspective for the engagement with our case study has been Gilmore's (2020) conception of pop-up universities, as the initiatives' protest camp offered safe spaces for political education, skill-sharing and the contextualisation of the local struggle both within wider colonial perspectives of 'racialised securitisation' as well as within the idea of the European border regime as the 'Fortress Europe'. This connection was created through acts of internal solidarity, for example, through group photos and shared presentations of statements, and through the incorporation of diverse actors and organisations from other regional backgrounds and perspectives into resistance efforts. Furthermore, we repeatedly encountered what Gilmore (2020) terms the 'abolitionist framework' during our research, which emphasises the initiative's position within wider migration discourse and as one component within different specific and sometimes opposing nuances of political opposition. For example, the initiative comprised both of actors

working specifically toward the protection of the current status quo of refugee rights, as well as actors from the 'No Borders' movement, both of which represent actor groups with unique thematic foci.

Considering a perceived discursive shift to the right surrounding the political context of the protest camp, Borelli's (2023) perspective on deportation infrastructure in the forms of prisons and airport facilities becomes especially relevant. The location of the BER Deportation Centre in an international airport creates a unique legal situation that allows for both the fast-track denial of asylum (*Schnellverfahren*) and for exceptional transit practices (*Sondertransit*) similar to processes in Austria (Küffner 2022, 104), as described in chapter two. Our case study supports Borelli's (2023) argument that such infrastructural location may hide detainees' cases from public scrutiny and prevent access to solidarity as well as public or even legal support, as we could identify a perceived lack of public knowledge on the BER DC as experienced by interviewees (I#1; I#2). This deliberate lack of transparency due to the DC being spatially removed from more publicly accessible spaces and placed into a location directly embedded within international transit infrastructure thereby clearly reinforces migration deterrence strategies and restricts access to essential resources (Borelli 2023). Countering such practices, resistance movements like *Abschiebezentrum BER verhindern!* not only challenge the immediate legal consequences but also expose the broader socio-political mechanisms of racialised exclusion (Initiative Abschiebezentrum BER verhindern! 2024).

The organisational hierarchies and a perceived resulting lack of transparency during the protest camp also emphasise a point made by Bhimji (2020, 247) on the internal contradictions of migrant solidarity networks and highlight an inherent tension within resistance movements. We see that even those initiatives or organisations with explicitly anti-discriminatory goals can develop hierarchies and divisions over important grounding questions of authority and representation. In the case of the protest camp, such tensions manifested in decision-making imbalances, where key organisers had the final say on important matters despite an otherwise horizontal hierarchical structure (I#2). For example, in preparation of the camp, while mandates and task were otherwise ordinarily distributed according to the different capacities, hierarchies in decision-making were nonetheless perceived and reported (I#1). Such structural challenges run parallel to a contemporary shift toward more fluid, adaptable forms of activism in response to growing repression (Rosenberger et al. 2018), where movements prioritise flexibility over rigid organisational structures to navigate an increasingly hostile political landscape.

7 Conclusion and outlook

This study provides insight into the dynamics of resistance against the BER Deportation Centre, illustrating how local activism interacts with shifting political discourse and structural repression. The findings indicate that while the *Abschiebezentrum BER verhindern!* initiative meets many definitional criteria of a social movement, including collectively, contention and political engagement (Nicholls 2007; Rosenberger et al. 2018), its lack of sustained coordination beyond the protest camp limits its classification as a long-term movement. Even

though decentral protest was carried out afterwards on the same topic in Potsdam (Süddeutsche Zeitung 2024) and Heidelberg (Kommunalinfo Mannheim 2024) and different modes of online publishing were being used (Kontrapolis 2024; Frag den Staat 2024), the scope of collaboration never matched that of the protest camp again.

Despite its initial impact, the absence of continued large-scale mobilisation underscores a common challenge in contemporary resistance, suggesting a relevant difficulty in maintaining momentum under increasingly restrictive political conditions, for example, when facing the increased criminalisation of activists. One of the key takeaways from this research is the importance of specifically place-based resistance in shaping protest dynamics. The movement analysed here was not only ideologically grounded but also deeply tied to the specific geographical and infrastructural realities of the BER DC. This can be connected with Dirlik's (1999) assertion that place-based movements contest global power structures from specific localities, which is explored and further expanded upon in Centemeri's (2017) study. The protest camp in particular functioned as a temporary site of resistance, similarly to Gilmore's (2020) concept of pop-up universities, where activists engaged in knowledge-sharing, strategic planning and abolitionist discourse in local settings. However, while this approach at the BER DC facilitated short-term mobilisation and solidarity-building in this context, such efforts did not translate into lasting structural opposition, nor prevent the further planning and physical manifestation of the DC infrastructure. In this vein, the resistance initiatives' lack of lasting potential runs parallel to a shift in current political climate away from solidarity practices, which includes a decline both in public support and in the capacities of individual involved actors to establish and uphold a consistent movement. Nevertheless, we emphasise that the initiative succeeded in influencing popular and media discourse, especially at the time of the protest camp and on a local scale as pertaining to the specific site of the DC, which in turn widened the protests' scope of visibility.

Shifting political and public discourse on migration is identified as playing a crucial role in shaping not only the protest's longevity but also its effectiveness. Over the past decade, the public debate on migration has transitioned from a discourse of humanitarianism to securitisation, fuelled by populist rhetoric and right-wing policy shifts (I#2). This has forced activists to adapt their mobilisation strategies, as direct solidarity efforts were perceived as no longer sufficient in generating public attention and support. Instead, activist efforts felt they had to frame their resistance around exposing corruption and systemic injustices (I#1). Despite these adaptations, mobilisations struggled to maintain their scale and urgency beyond the protest camp event itself.

In conclusion, the BER DC resistance initiative highlights both key strengths and limitations of contemporary resistance movements. While place-based activism can generate strong temporary and spatially focused mobilisation and collaboration, its longevity depends on sustained collaboration, strategic adaptability and broader institutional alliances. Future research could examine how decentralised and fluid activist models can be transformed into lasting movements and seek to explore ways to counteract the increasing political and legal

pressures that hinder long-term resistance efforts. While the present research enables an insight into the contemporary condition of the resistance against the BER DC, our inhibited access to interview partners due to a growing hostility against activists and therefore their growing perception of threat, as well as the limited timeframe of a student research project, have restricted a more elaborate and profound engagement with the field in relation to our theoretical framework and its wider sphere of relevant perspectives. Future research could make use of a longer or more sustainable temporal engagement to build dedicated and deeper relationships, in order to gain further trust and thus access a wider range of perspectives and experiences. Furthermore, the scope of study could be widened to include a wider variety of theoretical perspectives or even engage in a comparative analysis with similar cases within the European border regime.

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Brenda Rodriguez Serrano & Maddalena Tartarini

Resisting the System: The Role of Self-Organised Refugee and Migrant Groups in Berlin. A Case Study of The Voice Forum Berlin

Abstract: The German border regime has established a range of border mechanisms that restrict the freedom of movement of refugees and migrants. In response, self-organised groups in major cities like Berlin, where a large number of refugees and migrants are concentrated, have emerged to challenge and confront these movement restrictions. This research aims to explore how a self-organised group can resist the limitations imposed by the German asylum system. Based on a case study, we seek to apply a methodology that prioritises the narratives of the participants, in order to better understand their socio-spatial positioning, the framing of their struggles and their collective forms of action. Some of our findings suggest that among group members there is a strong identification with past struggles, a commitment of solidarity with the current situation of migrants and refugees, as well as a varied use of tactics ranging from protest to digital activism. This research highlights the role that self-organised groups can play in shaping resistance to restrictive migration policies in Germany.

1 Introduction

European migration policies are significantly shaped by securitisation processes and governance strategies that restrict migration and selectively permit entry, often at the expense of migrants' rights. Those who manage to cross the EU's fortified external borders face further challenges due to internal border controls (Odugbesan/Schwiertz 2018). In Germany, the asylum system has followed a restrictive pattern since the late 1970s. The introduction of policies such as the Asylum Procedure Act (1982), which allows state governments to regulate the distribution of asylum seekers through statutory orders (Asylverfahrensgesetz 1982, §22), reflects a perceived need to 'protect' the social order. This has led to contested rights, precarious legal positions and limited social inclusion for non-citizens (Bosswick 2000).

These restrictive policies have subjected migrants to limitations across three main domains: the freedom of movement, the right to remain and settle and the right to decent work (Oliveri 2016, 265). This study focuses on the first: freedom of movement. In Germany, internal border mechanisms such as the informally named residence requirement (*Residenzpflicht*) (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung n.d.), also referred to as the regulation of #geographical limitation' (*räumliche Beschränkung*) (Asylverfahrensgesetz 1993, §56), prohibit asylum seekers from leaving designated areas.

In response to these constraints, self-organised groups of refugees and migrants have emerged in various German cities to contest these restrictions. Berlin, in particular, offers a

valuable context for studying such resistance due to its role as a key site for migrant activism. These groups engage in various forms of activism, including grassroots organising, advocacy campaigns, public demonstrations and other forms of protest, which aim to challenge legal and social limitations while demanding improved living conditions and rights (Toğral Koca 2024).

Based on these insights, this research investigates the question: How do self-organised groups of refugees and migrants in Berlin resist the movement restrictions imposed by the German asylum system? This project focuses on the case of The Voice Forum, exploring its methods, motivations and broader implications for migration politics in Germany. The structure of the paper is as follows: It proceeds with the context of the research, then introduces the theoretical framework, research design and ethical considerations. This is followed by the presentation and discussion of findings and concludes with final reflections.

2 Research context

This chapter explores the context surrounding self-organised groups of refugees and migrants who seek to challenge and confront various mechanisms of border control. Drawing on a review of the relevant literature, we examine how these collectives emerge and operate across different geographical scales of continental, national and local levels, in responding to increasingly restrictive migration policies. This analysis helps to identify patterns and strategies that resist the logics of exclusion and control imposed by border regimes.

At the continental level, the European Union's migration policy has become progressively more exclusionary, resulting in the deaths of thousands of people at its borders and subjecting asylum seekers and refugees to institutionalised detention (Ruiz-Gimenez Arrieta 2017; Perocco 2023; Webber 2014). In response to these policies and measures, refugees and migrants have initiated mass mobilisations to protest arbitrary detention and inhumane treatment in countries such as Germany, Austria, France, Hungary, Italy and Greece. These protests have been articulated transnationally in reaction to the repressive conditions of asylum systems (Kirchhoff 2018; McGuaran/Hudig 2014; Mokre 2018).

At the national level, in the case of Germany, scholars such as Jakob (2016) have shown how self-organised groups of refugees and migrants have resisted state migration policies for over two decades. These groups stand out not only for their active opposition, but also for their contributions to the country's cultural and labour diversity. From a historical perspective, the literature identifies the 1990s as a turning point, as mobilisations shifted from focusing on refugees and migrants' countries of origin to forms of resistance directed at host countries (Odugbesan/Schwiertz 2018, 190). Groups such as The Voice Forum, Karawane and Refugees Emancipation emerged as new forms of solidarity and collective action, opposing the residence requirement, collective refugee camps and deportations. Slogans such as 'We don't have the right to vote, but we have a voice' and 'We are here because you are destroying our countries' encapsulated their political stance (Jakob 2016, pp. 18-21).

At the local level, cities such as Berlin have become key sites for the self-organisation of refugees and migrants (Fadaee 2015). In this city, significant movements have taken place, such as the 2012 Refugee Protest March at Oranienplatz, which called for the abolition of the *Residenzpflicht*, the closure of refugee detention centres (*Lager*) and an end to deportations (Ünsal 2015). Recent literature has also highlighted the emergence of new forms of migrant activism that combine symbolic protests, occupations, hunger strikes and public campaigns, and that employ increasingly collaborative strategies among self-organised collectives and non-governmental organisations (Toğral Koca 2024).

In summary, the literature we have reviewed reveals that research on smaller-scale self-organised groups of refugees and migrants remains limited, as it tends to focus more on large-scale movements and mass protests. However, it is important to highlight the sustained resistance of these collectives in Germany, as well as the spatial significance of Berlin, which has become a key meeting point for various migrant movements and groups.

3 Theoretical framework

The principal motivation behind the epistemological framework of this research lies in the respectful acquisition of knowledge from perspectives that have historically been marginalised or overlooked. This motivation responds to the need to question hegemonic frameworks of knowledge production and to bring visibility to approaches that destabilise dominant narratives surrounding issues such as migration and asylum. In this context, we consider it essential to incorporate postcolonial perspectives as a starting point for the development of our theoretical framework, as they enable us to identify and problematise the persistent power structures that continue to shape our societies.

One of the central contributions of postcolonial studies is the notion that these power structures are historically rooted in colonial processes and continue to manifest systematically in the present. In this regard, Aníbal Quijano (2000) argues that colonialism established a power structure based on a hierarchical social classification determined by racial criteria. He refers to this classificatory logic as the coloniality of power, which he argues did not disappear with the formal independence of the colonies but rather was transformed and continues to operate in new forms (Quijano 2000).

This concept is central to understanding how power relations are configured in the field of migration and how policies that discriminate against and exclude the racialised other are legitimised. In line with this perspective, Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2018) extends the analysis of coloniality to the field of migration by proposing the concept of the coloniality of migration. According to the author, asylum and migration regimes are shaped by a mode of governance rooted in economic interests and cultural dynamics that are deeply embedded in the historical production of the racialised other (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018, 20). Within this colonial logic, individuals are transformed into objects of management that are then regulated through restrictions, control devices and administrative categories such as 'refugee' or 'asylum seeker' (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018, 24). In this way, the coloniality of migration

enables us to understand how contemporary migration policies reiterate the racialised objectification reminiscent of colonial times (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018, 24).

This pattern of power can be observed in the various disputes and obstacles faced by asylum seekers and refugees throughout their migratory journeys. In this regard, Federico Oliveri (2016) identifies at least three major areas of conflict, one of which is the freedom of movement against border mechanisms. These mechanisms are identified as involving not only a set of rules and practices but also extending the function of borders to the entire society (Oliveri 2016). Their purpose is twofold: on the one hand, to deter those considered to be 'undesirable' from undertaking unauthorised mobility; and on the other, to establish criteria for selection, classification and control in accordance with the political and economic needs of host states (Oliveri 2016). Moreover, these mechanisms are not limited to immobilisation and expulsion, but also operate temporally, slowing down or suspending migration processes in order to rank migrants according to shifting criteria of usefulness and belonging (Oliveri 2016).

In this context, self-organised groups of refugees and migrants play a crucial role in resisting border mechanisms and restrictions on freedom of movement imposed by migration policies. Following Odugbesan and Schwiertz (2018), this self-organisation is understood as the process by which social groups affected by specific structures of power and domination build resistance through political acts and initiatives. Self-organisation involves the direct participation of affected people, who create groups that establish collective structures of support, empowerment and political visibility. In this process, group members identify and prioritise the issues they consider essential, deciding for themselves how to structure and articulate their demands. Self-organisation is practised by those who take the risk to organise and resist, including through every day and political forms of resistance that often remain invisible (Odugbesan/Schwiertz 2018, 186).

Building upon this understanding of self-organisation and resistance, Odugbesan and Schwiertz (2018) propose a three-category interpretive framework that we find particularly suitable for our case study. The first category on socio-spatial positionality examines how refugees' social identities and physical locations influence their experiences of resistance, which in turn shapes both power dynamics and internal tensions in this context. The second category, focused on the framing and narratives of initiatives, highlights how social movements use storytelling to articulate their goals, mobilise resources and challenge dominant power structures. The third category addresses forms of collective action and protest, encompassing a range of tactics from visible demonstrations and civil disobedience to digital interventions. This framework will guide our analysis of the specific strategies and dynamics of resistance employed by a self-organised refugee and migrant group in Germany.

4 Research design and ethical considerations

4.1 Research design

For the design of our research, we drew inspiration from scholars like Dina Taha (2018) and Clelia O. Rodriguez (2017), who emphasise prioritising participants' narratives over predetermined agendas. We also considered Thambinathan and Kinsella's (2021) work on decolonising methodologies, which highlights the importance of centring non-Western perspectives and respectfully engaging with marginalised viewpoints.

Our initial ideas envisioned a collaboration with other organisations. However, our interactions with The Voice Forum highlighted the need to choose between a decolonising approach, which recognises the value of their 'shared realities' and aims for the 'co-production of knowledge' (Barnett 2014), and a more traditional research model. Opting for the former implied a direct engagement with the group, valuing their perspective and their work as crucial. This process required adapting the initial research idea and exercising the flexibility necessary to research *with* the group, rather than simply researching *about* it, an approach that reflects the importance of involving diverse perspectives in the production of knowledge (Barnett 2014; Radcliffe/Radhuber 2020)

Our methodology went beyond merely extracting information; it involved establishing a reciprocal research relationship with The Voice Forum. We collected empirical data through narrative interviews and participatory observation, while also supporting the group during their 30 Years Commemoration Event. Online materials of the group, such as videos, blog entries and podcasts, were also essential for understanding the self-organised group's activities and perspectives.

Implementing this approach was challenging due to time constraints that limited our engagement with the group. Building trust throughout this process was slow and conflicted with research deadlines. Our efforts to challenge traditional academic practices frequently collided with institutional constraints, such as rigid deadlines and prescribed requirements for the number of findings or data to be presented within specific timeframes. Navigating power dynamics with the self-organised group also proved challenging, as we were concerned that our actions as researchers might inadvertently undermine the trust we had established. Communication was unclear at times, with the group initially supportive but later expressing resistance towards academic involvement. Moreover, the group's expectations for our ongoing participation conflicted with our intention to remain non-active members, creating further tension around our roles. These challenges highlight the complexities of applying decolonising methodologies in academic settings. However, we believe that academia needs to decolonise its approaches, and for this reason, we are glad to contribute to this process.

4.2 Ethical considerations

Our research was guided by the principles of critical reflexivity, reciprocity, respect for self-determination and transformative praxis, as proposed by Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021).

Critical reflexivity involved examining our epistemological assumptions and addressing power dynamics throughout the research process. Establishing reciprocity in this context led us to emphasise trust and mutual respect to ensure ongoing consent and participants' self-determination.

Respecting diverse ways of knowing required our engagement with different cultures while unlearning dominant discourses to reimagine knowledge construction (Thambinathan/Kinsella 2021). To establish a transformative praxis, we pursued decolonising academic practices by listening to those who have experienced colonial oppression. Implementing these principles was challenging due to complexities within existing academic structures, such as rigid deadlines or prescribed requirements such as a specific number of interviews and amount of data. Carrying out our research as students from Southern Europe and Central America, our positionalities introduced specific biases that required constant reflection. Indeed, we experienced that participants' perceptions of us and our project varied based on our identities as migrants in Germany. Navigating these dynamics demanded ongoing ethical reflexivity to maintain our own respectful accountability.

Throughout this approach in working with The Voice Forum, we aimed to foster a transformative praxis by reimagining researcher-participant relationships. Our data collection resulted from investing time in building trustful relationships and listening to those who have experienced colonial oppression.

5 Presentation of findings

5.1 Socio-spatial positionality

The Voice African Forum, founded in 1994 by African refugees in a transit camp in Mühlhausen, emerged with the aim to combat discrimination, racism and inhumane conditions in Germany (The VOICE Forum 2003a). Initially an ethnically specific group, it soon broadened its scope in recognition of the fact that these laws affected all refugees equally, changing its name to The Voice Forum and mobilising people from various regions (The VOICE Forum 2014a). Members shared not only similar situations of living in Germany but also a common history of colonialism and European exploitation (The VOICE Forum 2003b; 2014a; 2014b). Thus, the organisation grew into a national network with branches in cities such as Jena, Berlin, Hamburg and Munich, united by challenges such as restrictions on movement. One of the founders emphasised: 'The *Residenzpflicht* criminalises refugees by allowing racial profiling of black and brown bodies, while isolation denies them community ties' (I#1). Collective action transformed personal struggles into a movement for social justice.

Currently, active members have regularised their status and are no longer asylum seekers, with only a small number of original founders and new members maintaining regular contact. Internal differences make consensus difficult, and the organisations' main activities are concentrated in Berlin. Digital activism has been key to overcoming physical and legal isolation in documenting struggles and coordinating actions on a national scale (The VOICE Forum 2003a; 2003b; 2004a; 2004b; 2005b; 2006a; 2006b; 2007; 2014a; 2014b; 2024a; 2024b). The

spatial trajectory of The Voice Forum, as it transitioned from specific actions against marginalised refugee accommodation to a decentralised yet digitally connected network, highlights how activism is shaped by and responds to both geographical and legal constraints. While its physical presence has become concentrated and individuals' participation more spatially fragmented, the Voice Forum's continued mobilisation across spaces indicates a resilient form of political engagement that transcends physical borders and legal categories.

5.2 Framing and narratives of The Voice Forum's initiative

The narrative of The Voice Forum is based on an anticolonial perspective that challenges the racialised power structures of the postcolonial world. One example includes their campaign against the residence obligation in Germany, which they view as a colonial legacy used to control and criminalise refugees and migrants (The VOICE Forum 2004a; 2004b; 2006a; 2006b). Their central motto, 'We are here because you destroy our countries' (I#2), criticises Europe's historical role in global political and socioeconomic destabilisation.

The principle of self-determination is fundamental for this initiative: The Voice Forum is not a traditional NGO, but a self-organised collective that empowers its members to defend their rights. Unlike other initiatives that have become institutionalised (Toğral Koca 2024), this group has endured for 30 years thanks to individual donations, allowing it to maintain a more critical and independent stance. In other words, by not relying on public funding to support its activism, the collective enjoys greater freedom to express its opinions and political positions.

The group advocates for the commemoration, not the celebration, of refugees' and migrants' struggles, emphasising a critique of global power dynamics that perpetuate marginalisation. As one member said in a recent podcast episode: 'I'm glad to be here today, remembering the last 30 years... It helps me analyse and see more clearly what I face every day' (The VOICE Forum 2024a). The 30th anniversary of the initiative was marked with a commemorative event highlighting the ongoing fight for existence and organisation (I#1). Focusing on collective memory turns commemoration into a tool for political education, contextualising current struggles within a history of oppression and resistance.

5.3 Forms of collective action and protest

Over 30 years of activism, The Voice Forum has combined direct and indirect strategies to challenge the German asylum system. Their campaigns address racism, exclusion, discrimination and criminalisation in Germany and refugees' countries of origin, highlighting colonial injustices. Examples include the closure of refugee camps, the commemoration of the murder of Oury Jahlloh (The VOICE Forum 2024b) and opposition to the residence obligation (The VOICE Forum 2004a; 2004b; 2006a; 2006b). The group participated in the Oranienplatz (O-Platz) Movement, which demanded the abolition of the residence obligation (O-Platz, n.d.), and brought the issue before the European Court (The VOICE Forum 2005c).

Some activists have chosen to employ civil disobedience and face legal consequences such as trials and imprisonment as a result. For example, Cornelius Yufanyi was prosecuted for resisting the residence obligation and received legal support from the group (The VOICE Forum 2006a). Akubuo Chukwudi was nearly deported for opposing refugee camps (The VOICE Forum 2004c), and Ahmed Sameer was imprisoned for 90 days for defying the residence obligation. In response, The Voice Forum assisted with legal fees and the payment of fines (The VOICE Forum 2004d). Such acts of solidarity are not isolated interventions, but rather part of a broader, long-standing practice of mutual support and political resistance. The Voice Forum's commitment to grassroots self-organisation is reflected in how it mobilises collective resources to support members who are facing legal and institutional barriers. As they state: 'For three decades, The Voice Refugee Forum has been a powerful testament to self-organisation among marginalised communities. Our resistance shows that real change can only come from within these communities' (The VOICE Forum, 2024a).

Although the groups' dynamics have changed in recent years, their initiative remains active through digital activism and radio. To this end, they have used their website as a platform for activism and information, with the aim of making the experiences of refugees and migrants visible, organising collective events and fostering political autonomy. This site serves as their main channel for sharing up-to-date information, in contrast to social media platforms such as Facebook, where they do not maintain an active presence. Radio has been a vital space for their activism, particularly through the programme *The Voices*, (The Voice Forum 2025) which is broadcast on Reboot FM. The programme features interviews, discussions, and reflections on topics such as racism, migration, and post-coloniality. Each recorded episode is available on the platform Mixcloud. As one founder noted, radio remains vital for 'documentation, community and space' (I#2).

These digital tools have expanded the initiatives' campaigns against deportation and racism, allowing activism to continue even when members relocate. As one member emphasised: 'Information is also an instrument... the radio must be our instrument to continue our activities... It does not always have to be in the streets' (I#2). Thus, The Voice Forum demonstrates how marginalised communities can mobilise beyond physical protest.

6 Discussion of findings

The research has demonstrated how the interpretive analysis framework proposed by Odugbesan and Schwiertz (2018) applies effectively to the case study of The Voice Forum in order to answer our main question: How do self-organised groups of refugees and migrants in Berlin resist the movement restrictions imposed by the German asylum system? Through the three categories, focused on socio-spatial positionality, the framings and narratives of initiatives as well as forms of collective action and protest, we have gained insight into the internal and external dynamics that have influenced their activism. Our key findings reveal that The Voice Forum's resistance is built upon connecting historical anti-colonial struggles with contemporary refugee experiences. They also leverage digital activism and self-determination to challenge the German asylum system

The resistance strategies of The Voice Forum, when viewed through the theoretical lens of the coloniality of power, the coloniality of migration and border mechanisms, reveal a profound decolonial praxis that challenges systemic structures of racialised oppression embedded in migration governance. The German asylum system's restrictions on movement, such as the *Residenzpflicht*, exemplify Quijano's (2000) concept of coloniality of power, where racialised social classifications continue to function as instruments of subordination and exclusion that are employed in the governance of racialised subjects. The Voice Forum's explicit linking of their present struggles to historical colonial exploitation, which is captured in their assertion 'We are here because you destroy our countries', exposes how contemporary migration policies reproduce and extend colonial logics of domination (Jakob 2016). This is consistent with Gutiérrez Rodríguez's (2018) framework of the coloniality of migration, which highlights how asylum systems are racialised mechanisms that differentiate between 'wanted' and 'not wanted' mobilities, thereby perpetuating global inequalities that are deeply rooted in colonial histories. The group's anti-colonial solidarity and framing of refugeehood as a structural outcome of neocolonial exploitation reposition migration struggles beyond humanitarian narratives, situating them within a broader critique of ongoing colonial power relations (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018; Quijano 2000).

Oliveri's (2016) concept of border mechanisms further elucidates how The Voice Forum's activism confronts both the spatial and temporal dimensions of control which are imposed by the state. The confinement of refugees in camps, for example, functions as a strategy to immobilise and hierarchise migrants according to shifting political and economic interests. The Voice Forum's protests residency requirements, and their innovative use of digital activism disrupt these mechanisms by reclaiming control over movement and time. Their digital platforms, such as their website or radio station, serve not only as tools for information dissemination but also as spaces of counter-memory and political visibility, exemplified by their commemorations of events such as the murder of Oury Jalloh or the 30 Years Commemoration of The Voice Forum (The VOICE Forum 2024a). This digital resistance challenges the state's attempts to erase migrant narratives and highlights the adaptability of self-organised groups in navigating and contesting border regimes (Oliveri 2016; Tufekci 2017).

Central to The Voice Forum's praxis is the principle of self-organisation as a form of political empowerment, as theorised by Odugbesan and Schwiertz (2018). By prioritising self-determination and rejecting institutional co-optation, the group resists the paternalistic humanitarian frameworks that often reproduce colonial power dynamics. Their sustained independence, maintained through grassroots donations rather than state funding, reflects a conscious effort to preserve critical positioning and autonomy (Toğral Koca 2024). The group's critique of whiteness and the call to 'decentralise whiteness in Germany' challenge the Eurocentric universalism underpinning asylum policies and expose the racialised foundations of the German state's migration regime. This stance highlights the ways in which coloniality persists not only in overt policies, but also in the cultural and symbolic orders that shape societal inclusion and exclusion (The VOICE Forum 2024a; Quijano 2000).

Through their multifaceted activism, The Voice Forum not only contests the immediate restrictions imposed by the German asylum system but also interrogates the broader structures that underpin contemporary migration governance (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018; Oliveri 2016).

In summary, The Voice Forum exemplifies how a self-organised refugee group enacts a praxis that destabilises the coloniality of migration by centring anti-colonial memory, leveraging digital tools for solidarity and maintaining political autonomy. Their resistance illuminates the interconnectedness of border regimes, racialised classifications, and historical colonial power, underscoring the necessity for dismantling these systems as part of a global project of decolonisation. By reimagining mobility as a collective right rather than a privilege conditioned by race and geography, The Voice Forum's activism points towards a decolonial horizon where freedom of movement and political self-determination are reclaimed by those most affected by the legacies of colonialism and exclusion.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research confirms the effectiveness of Odugbesan and Schwiertz's (2018) interpretive framework in analysing how The Voice Forum, a self-organised refugee group in Berlin, resists German asylum system restrictions. Through the lenses of coloniality of power (Quijano 2000), the coloniality of migration (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018; Jakob 2016) and border mechanisms (Oliveri 2016), the Voice Forum's activism emerges as a decolonial praxis. It links historical anti-colonial struggles with current refugee realities, employs digital activism (The VOICE Forum 2024a) to overcome spatial limits, and centres self-determination (Toğral Koca 2024) to challenge racialised oppression in migration governance. By opposing state controls like the *Residenzpflicht* and critiquing Eurocentric norms (The VOICE Forum 2024a), The Voice Forum reimagines mobility as a fundamental right, exemplifying grassroots resistance toward political autonomy and free movement for those affected by colonialism and exclusion.

Our ability to engage with and interpret these dynamics was also shaped by our own position within the research process. In terms of our research experience, we faced significant challenges from the outset in establishing contact and building trust with The Voice Forum, as well as in gaining a clear understanding of how the group operates. This was partly due to a lack of accessible information and guidance from their side, which made it difficult for us to navigate the group's internal dynamics. The ambiguity of our roles – as both researchers and migrants yet potentially seen as future members of the group – complicated interactions. We were mindful of not wanting to engage merely as extractive researchers, yet our personal and academic commitments limited our ability to offer long-term participation.

Finally, as a single case study, our findings may not be applicable to of relevant for all refugee groups, given Berlin's unique political and social context and The Voice Forum's distinct history. We believe that research should be conducted with an awareness of historical and ongoing power imbalances, and this includes reflecting on the researcher's role within these dynamics.

This is why we call for the future decolonisation of research, emphasising the need to move beyond traditional academic structures that often marginalise the voices of those we study.

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Iman El Ghoubashy, Nadia Zoë Plönges & Arvid Sprenger

Production and Perception of the EU Border Regime in Lebanon: A Case Study of the EU-funded Qudra Programme and its Impact on Syrian Refugees and the Lebanese Host Community

Abstract: The European Union externalises its migration management under the guise of development cooperation, aiming to contain refugees outside its borders. This strategy is implemented in Lebanon through crisis response planning, development policies and funding projects that promote social cohesion between Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities. Economic support tied to Syrian refugees serves both as the EU's perceived 'fair share' and a strategic tool for the Lebanese government, which leverages its negotiation power despite weak state structures, often functioning as NGO-state where external funds primarily flow to local NGOs. Using the EU-funded Qudra programme as a case study, this research project examines the programme's implementation and its impact on Syrian refugees, assessing whether NGO-led economic and social support influences their migration decisions. Based on qualitative interviews from 2022, our findings indicate that refugees benefiting from EU-funded assistance are more inclined to remain in Lebanon, while those without such support exhibit stronger intentions to migrate. These results affirm the partial success of the European border regime in containing Syrian refugees through targeted funding while leaving them in vulnerable environments. The EU's involvement in the refugee crisis response and the Qudra programme is contested by Lebanese actors – including NGO workers and government institutions – who challenge this external influence, fostering discriminatory sentiments and undermining sustainable social cohesion.

1 Introduction

The contemporary European Union (EU) border regime increasingly emphasises externalisation as a strategy designed to contain refugees outside of EU territory. This involves the application of foreign policy tools with third countries and interference in foreign migration governance. The EU uses its economic and political influence to shape the migration policies of non-EU states, aiming to intercept refugees before they reach European borders. This often includes the use of economic support, development aid and political pressure to implement policies that are in line with EU interests, shifting the responsibility for managing refugee populations to countries outside of the EU and containing refugees in third countries.

With many Syrians seeking refuge in Lebanon since the outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011, 25% of the Lebanese population are Syrian refugees, making Lebanon the state with the most refugees per capita worldwide in 2022. Lebanon is of strategic interest for the EU border regime that aims to contain Syrian refugees in Lebanon to prevent them from moving on to

Europe. This paper discusses the findings of research conducted to understand the production, implementation and perception of the border regime in Lebanon. The authors analyse how the EU and an international community consisting of EU-funded actors, international organisations and the Lebanese government endorse their interests through policies and crisis response plans, and how EU-funded projects contribute to implementing these interests, using the Qudra Programme as a case study. By examining the perceptions and perspectives of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the authors assess whether the programme functions as an effective tool in upholding the EU's containment strategy.

As a case study that exemplifies how the EU's interests are implemented on the ground, this project focuses on the programme 'Qudra – Resilience for Syrian Refugees, IDPs and Host Communities in Response to the Syrian and Iraqi Crises'. Funded mainly by the EU through the EU Regional Trust Fund Syria (EUTF) and Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the programme is commissioned by the French cooperation agency Expertise France. Its successor, Qudra 2, focuses its support on four components in the fields of education, employment, local governmental institutions, civil society organisations and social cohesion. Reaching out to Syrian refugees in Lebanon and members of the Lebanese host community, our research examines how the programme affects their perspectives and whether the containment strategy is successful.

The paper is structured as follows: It proceeds with a review of existing studies and outlines the key theories informing the analysis. The methods chapter explains the research design, data collection and analytical approach. Results are organised into three levels consisting of the production of the EU border regime in Lebanon (state level), the implementation of the EU border regime in Lebanon (NGO level) and the perception of the EU border regime in Lebanon (individual level). The discussion chapter interprets these findings in the context of the theoretical framework. Finally, the conclusion summarises the main insights and suggests directions for future research.

2 State of the art and theoretical framework

Border externalisation encompasses a range of border management practices that extend beyond territorial limits, conceptualising borders as dynamic systems shaped by multiple actors, institutions, and policies. This approach blurs the distinction between the actions, territorial sovereignty, and jurisdiction of both outsourcing states and third countries. Increasingly, borders are not defined by geographic boundaries but by the mechanisms governing migrant mobility, operating wherever the migrant is located (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015).

Building upon this understanding of externalisation practices, this theoretical framework emphasises how such policies enforce the involuntary immobility of refugees, confining them to so-called 'regions of origin'. These policies function as 'containment strategies', predominantly employed by Global North states toward the Global South. They are often implemented through humanitarian aid, coupled with conditionalities that emphasise

eventual repatriation. Refugees in protracted displacement, meaning those with refugee status for over five years, are particularly affected (Etzold & Fechter 2022; Weima/Hyndman 2019). Such 'remote-control' measures fail to address the root causes of migration, instead exacerbating refugees' precarity by keeping them in a state of limbo and exposing them to systemic abuses (Zaiotti 2016). Such containment mechanisms create structures of differential inclusion and exclusion. This results in a selective system where certain narrowly defined social groups receive humanitarian aid while others are strategically excluded (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015; Mezzadra/Neilson 2012). The mechanisms described here thus function as methods of 'preventive dissuasion' that aim to prevent the decision to leave the country from the outset (Collyer 2019).

The EU's strategies for managing forced displacement in its 'southern neighbourhood' are driven by the security-stability nexus and the concept of 'resilience' (Fakhoury & Stel 2023). Resilience- and capacity-building are framed as essential policy objectives, facilitating refugee integration within host states to prevent onward migration. A key manifestation of these broader strategic aims is apparent in the EU's response to Syrian displacement: Resilience-building initiatives are specifically designed to contain refugee populations within proximate host states, thereby preventing secondary movements toward Europe. This containment strategy seeks to confine Syrian refugees within host countries near Syria while simultaneously shifting responsibility to exact states (Anholt/Sinatti 2020). Both national and EU policies emphasise social cohesion and the mitigation of tensions between refugees and host communities. Qudra 1 and 2, co-managed by GIZ and Expertise France, operationalise EU interests by embedding resilience frameworks into their social cohesion and stability initiatives (GIZ 2024).

Lebanon serves as a relevant case study for illustrating these dynamics. Tsourapas (2019) applies the 'rentier state' concept, where states derive external income from resource extraction to the 'refugee rentier state', which secures financial support in exchange for hosting refugee populations. Unlike Turkey, which leverages migration as a geopolitical bargaining tool, Lebanon employs a cooperative approach, seeking sustained economic aid rather than using refugee flows as a direct threat (Tsourapas 2019). The Lebanese government instrumentalises the presence of refugees to negotiate broader financial support, extending these beyond refugee-related needs to benefit the state and Lebanese host population (Fakhoury 2022).

Institutionalised cooperation with Lebanon ensures the EU's influence extends beyond its own borders. However, Lebanon's multiple crises have altered the nature of this partnership, necessitating a shift from development cooperation to humanitarian assistance: The arrival of more than 1 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon since 2011 has created demographic pressure and highlighted the structural weaknesses originating from the creation of the modern Lebanese state and its 1975-1990 civil war. Adding to over 450,000 long-term Palestinian refugees, displaced people made up around one-quarter of the Lebanese population in 2020, making it the state with the highest concentration of refugees per capita in the world. While

most of the Syrian refugee population lives in precarious conditions, as 69% fall below the poverty line of US$3.84 per day per person, the Syrian civil war further deteriorated the Lebanese economy as the real GDP per capita dropped by 8.3% from 2012 to 2015, further worsening Lebanon's average standard of living (Beaujouan/Rasheed 2020).

In combination with the dysfunctional political system built on structural mismanagement, corruption, cronyism and political gridlocks, a financial crisis started in October 2019. Additionally, the Covid-19 Pandemic outbreak in early 2020 and the Beirut port explosion in August 2021 further aggravated the dire socio-economic situation: The total poverty rate tripled from 25% in 2019 to 74% in 2021 as the listed events resulted in a 90% devaluation of the Lebanese pound (Abubakar Siddique 2022; Daher 2022).

Therefore, Lebanon increasingly demands that aid address not only refugee-related challenges but also the growing vulnerabilities of its own population. These deep-cutting changes suggest a complication of EU-Lebanon relations, growing divergence in policy objectives as well as a more challenging situation for Syrian refugees in Lebanon[1].

3 Methods

Our research focuses on three levels: state, NGOs and civil society. The state level serves to examine policy frameworks constituting the ground for the cooperation between the EU, the international community and the Lebanese government. The NGO level looks at how these policy frameworks are implemented on the ground through programmes funded by the EU, exemplified in the Qudra-programme as a case study. The civil society level looks at the beneficiaries of the programme, Syrian refugees and the Lebanese host community.

For the state level, our research is built firstly on a document analysis examining the relevant international policies on state level that link development cooperation directly or indirectly to the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Three relevant policies were identified: the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) and the Lebanon Reform Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF) (EU 2006; EU et al. 2020; UN & Ministry of Social Affairs Lebanon 2021).

Funded by both the EU and the German government, the programme 'Qudra – Resilience for Syrian Refugees, IDPs and Host Communities in Response to the Syrian and Iraqi Crises' serves as a case study to analyse the implementation of these political frameworks on the ground and to assess its impact on beneficiaries, Syrian refugees and the Lebanese host community. As it is facilitated through NGOs and aims to promote social cohesion between Syrian refugees

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[1] At the time of the case study in 2022, the Assad regime in Syria was still in power. Ist overthrow, led by HTS on the 8th of December 2024, was made possible by shifts in regional and international power dynamics, including Turkish support fort he HTS, the weakening of Iran and the Hezbollah and Russia's changing priorities. After this regime change initially led to a wave of enthusiasm within the Syrian population and diaspora, it remains unclear by the time of writing (mid-2025) to what extent this development influences the return of displaced Syrians from countries of refuge such as Lebnanon (Adar et al. 2025; Pinfold 2025). In early 2025, the security situation in Lebanon was precarious, as Israeli airstriked were hitting Beirut along with other cities across the country, prompting evacuations and displacements (Beirut Urban Lab 2024).

and the Lebanese host community, this case study covers the NGO and civil society level of our research (Expertise France 2019; GIZ 2024).

We conducted interviews on all three levels of state, NGO and civil society to portray the structure and the effects of the Qudra programme. Using actor-mapping, we visualised key actors and thereby showed relationships and resulting hierarchies that shape existing power structures at the time of the conducted research (Desai et al. 2017). As shown in Figure 1, Qudra represents a direct link between supranational, EU and Lebanese institutions as well as local NGOs, which then connect to Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees. We approached organisations in every actor-cluster, however, several important actors like the GIZ, Expertise France and a part of the implementing NGOs did not respond to our interview requests.
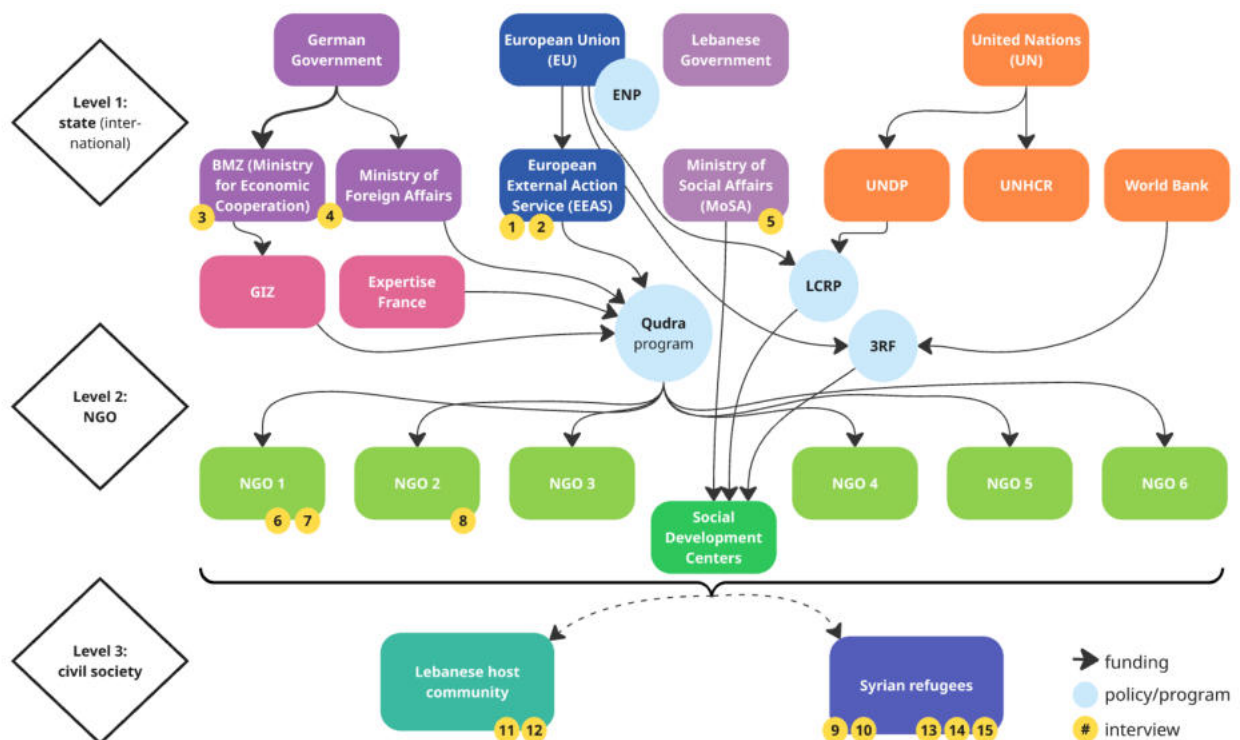

Figure 1: Actor mapping of institutions and actors in migration management, policy making and the EU-funded Qudra programme in Lebanon in 2022, created for operationalisation purposes (authors' own illustration 2022)

As shown in Table 1, we conducted five qualitative semi-structured interviews on the state level with officials of the European Delegation to Lebanon, the German Ministry for Development Cooperation and the Ministry of Social Affairs in Lebanon (I#1-5). Through purposive sampling, we accessed the relevant officials in charge of cooperation matters with or in Lebanon. Semi-structured interviews explored the dynamics, priorities and limitations of the cooperation and how the EU and international community are using policies and crisis plans as a tool to assert its interest. Furthermore, two of the six NGOs within the Qudra programme agreed to participate and serve as a purposive sample (I#6-8) to gather problem-centred expert insights through the three qualitative semi-structured interviews (Patton 2015; Stratford/Bradshaw 2021).

To assess the impact of the NGOs economic and social support, we accessed some of the beneficiaries of the Qudra programme through snowball sampling via the implementing NGOs, including Syrian refugees as well as families from the Lebanese host community. The staff of NGO 1 facilitated access by accompanying the team on home visits. This sample bias is inevitable since only the NGOs know who their beneficiaries are. Narrative interviews were conducted with two Syrian families and two families of the Lebanese host community (I#9-12). This approach enabled the research team to document individual experiences and illustrate the personal impacts of political decisions (Dunn 2021; Strübing 2018). The researchers also interviewed a group of three male Syrian refugees in the research process to further assess whether the economic and social support by NGOs is an impacting factor for the migration intention of Syrian refugees. Through convenient sampling, the researchers conducted narrative interviews with three male Syrian refugees who did not receive any economic or social support from NGOs funded by the EU (I#13-15). It is important to highlight that this research is qualitative, and that results are not representative for all beneficiaries or Syrian refugees who do not receive funding through the programme but rather offer explanatory insights.

Table 1: Overview of interviews conducted

Interview Title	Date, Place	Abbreviation
State level		
EU Delegation to Lebanon, European External Action Service	10.08.22, Berlin & Beirut (hybrid)	(I#1)
EU Delegation to Lebanon, European External Action Service, Beirut Office	16.08.22, Beirut	(I#2)
German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ): Anonymised employee	10.08.22, Berlin	(I#3)
German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ): Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany Beirut	17.08.22, Beirut	(I#4)
Ministry of Social Affairs Lebanon (MoSA)	29.08.22, Berlin & Beirut (hybrid)	(I#5)
NGO level		
NGO 1: President of the NGO & Social Worker	17.08.22, Beirut	(I#6)
NGO 1: Project Manager	17.08.22, Beirut	(I#7)
NGO 2: Anonymised employees	16.08.22, Beirut	(I#8)
Civil Society level		
Syrian family living in a Lebanese host community in Beirut (F1)	18.08.22, Beirut	(I#9)
Syrian family living in a Lebanese host community in Beirut (F2)	18.08.22, Beirut	(I#10)
Lebanese family living in a Lebanese host community in Beirut (F3)	18.08.22, Beirut	(I#11)
Lebanese family living in a Lebanese host community in Beirut (F4)	18.08.22, Beirut	(I#12)
Syrian refugee (single, male, 20-35) (M1)	16.08.22, Beirut	(I#13)
Syrian refugee (single, male, 20-35) (M2)	16.08.22, Beirut	(I#14)
Syrian refugee (single, male, 20-35) (M3)	16.08.22, Beirut	(I#15)

4 Results

This section explores the findings about the production, implementation and perception of the EU border regime in Lebanon regarding Syrian refugees. The state, NGO and the civil society levels form the three dimensions of analysis.

4.1 State level: Production of the EU Border regime in Lebanon

To analyse the cooperation between the EU, the international community and the Lebanese state regarding Syrian refugees, three key policies were examined: the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) and the Recovery, Reconstruction, and Reform Framework (3RF). Discussions with officials of the EU, Germany and Lebanon provided further insights on challenges, limitations and contestations of political cooperation.

The EU, along with international actors, frame their externalisation policies as stability and security measures, ensuring that refugees remain in Lebanon by linking financial aid to long-term reforms. The LCRP and 3RF policies channel funding for immediate needs while conditioning support on structural changes. This approach strengthens external influence over Lebanese policymaking, often at the expense of Lebanese sovereignty. Increasingly, aid also targets vulnerable Lebanese host communities. Cooperation is disputed: EU and German officials point to Lebanon's political deadlock, lack of accountability and weak governance (I#1-4). In contrast, Lebanese officials see recent changes as an effort to regain control from international actors (I#5).

Policy and interview analysis reveal four possible scenarios for Syrian refugees in Lebanon: (1) integration, (2) resettlement to third countries, (3) return to country of origin and (4) irregular migration. The EU favours the approach of integration through financing resilience-building projects, despite Lebanese opposition. Lebanese authorities reject integration by citing legal barriers and political infeasibility, while some EU officials label this strategy as the instrumentalisation of Syrian refugees for political leverage (I#1; I#5).

Resettlement faces EU-level resistance due to political constraints. Return remains contentious: While the EU and particularly Germany rule out involuntary return, Lebanon advocates for it as an urgent solution, emphasising the deterioration of the national economy together with social tensions within society. Irregular migration via the Mediterranean is increasing (I#2), reinforcing EU arguments for on-the-ground and urgent assistance. The EU promotes integration through its implementation of various development projects, while Lebanon opposes it, though through its weaker negotiating position it can hardly draw clear boundaries. The contested 'fair share' concept, meaning economic support in exchange for hosting refugees, remains a key point of friction amid Lebanon's deepening crises.

4.2 NGO level: Implementation of the EU border regime in Lebanon

In Lebanon, NGOs are functioning as an implementing actor of EU interests. Our qualitative evaluation of Qudra at the implementational level focuses on collaboration between the EU

Delegation, MoSA and six local NGOs in Lebanon, including NGO 1 and NGO 2 (Expertise France 2019). Interviews with NGO 1 and NGO 2 revealed key insights into the Qudra's implementation. NGO 1 focuses on child protection and gender-based violence and operates in Beirut and northern Lebanon, where the target group has shifted from 70% Syrian refugees and 30% Lebanese families to a 50/50 ratio (I#6). NGO 2 runs projects in humanitarian aid, healthcare, child support, microcredit and vocational training, particularly in the Lebanese capital of Beirut. A key project within the Qudra programme was the development of a mobile activity centre to reduce working hours for street children (I#8). Main challenges voiced in conversation with NGOs include funding shortages, increasing needs within Lebanese society and administrative barriers within organisational structures. Local NGOs face declining donations and lack sufficient government support. Difficulties concerning the registration of Syrian children were mentioned by all interviewees, as many of these children lack official documents, further complicating or even restricting school enrolment and therefore leading to growing social exclusion (I#6). Furthermore, discriminatory attitudes by staff members of NGO 1 towards Syrian refugees were evident in the interviews, with some respondents expressing clear resentment and advocating for their return to Syria rather than supporting integration and social cohesion (I#6). These testimonies contrast starkly with NGO 2's stance, which downplayed social tensions and underlined the duty of humanitarian aid for all vulnerable groups, regardless of nationality (I#8).

Analysing various statements about governance structures and state frameworks, the concept of Lebanon as an 'NGO state' was frequently mentioned, meaning international funds primarily flow directly to local NGOs working on the ground and not to Lebanese state institutions (I#7). Deep-cutting dependence on external donors is seen as a threat to the sustainability and longevity of humanitarian efforts, as long-term structures are lacking. Therefore, projects are often reactive, rather than strategic and future-oriented, preventing long-term sustainable impacts. Criticism has also emerged regarding Qudra's effectiveness:

'The whole approach of dealing with refugees and host communities, in my opinion, is wrong. Unfortunately. Millions of Euros are spent. And if you measure the outcome, I say it's 30% or 25% maximum of your target. [...] The change you are doing is minimal to the resources you are allocating. Because it's allocated in the wrong place.' (I#7)

It was pointed out that interventions often fail to respond to the urgent basic needs of vulnerable populations such as food security and stable living conditions by focusing instead on soft interventions like psychosocial support or positive parenting. As one interviewee stated: '[T]hey don't need positive parenting. They need to put food on the table' (I#7), highlighting the disconnect between project design and ground realities. Furthermore, short-term interventions addressing issues like child labour were seen as ineffective, as children return to the streets once sessions end, due to the lack of structural, long-term solutions like education, housing and family reintegration. As a result, large financial investments are perceived to yield minimal sustainable outcomes, with resources allocated in ways that do not address the root causes of vulnerability (I#7; I#8).

Despite critical voices, a fragile yet persistent sense of hope remains for a more stable future on an economic, political, and social level. While one interviewee expressed deep frustration with Lebanon's political leadership, which was described as corrupt, criminal and incapable of reform, some still hold on to the belief that the country might eventually recover. One interviewee articulated this hope with symbolic gestures, like 'crossing all ten fingers' (I#6), reflecting both the uncertainty and emotional investment in a better future. Yet this hope exists in tension with a growing fear that humanitarian funding will continue to decline, making long-term recovery even more difficult to achieve (I#6; I#8).

4.3 Individual level: Perception of the EU border regime in Lebanon

Narrative interviews were conducted with Lebanese and Syrian families as well as Syrian individuals to gather insights into the lived realities under the current circumstances and the relations of individuals in society among each other as well as with Qudra-funded NGOs and state institutions (see Figure 16). These narrations give exemplary insights into the emerging fields of conflict and the impact of the externalised EU border regime on individuals. All interviewees portrayed their living conditions as uncertain and precarious and reported that their situation has been exacerbated in the recent past through the events listed in chapter two. Families that previously belonged to the middle class skidded into poverty, causing parents to selflessly resign from their individual life goals while investing all their earnings as day labourers into their children's future (I#9-12). This is represented in the statement of one of the families' mothers:

'I hope for the best for them [her children], not for me. For me it's over, I mean, for me as a grown woman […] there is no future, there is no life […]. For my children I hope it gets better. So, they can live a good life, a rich life.' (I#12)

As noted in Figure 2, the interviewed persons were partly supported by state institutions and Qudra-supported NGOs: NGO 1 provided long term support to all of the interviewed families while NGO 2 focussed its support on street children, mainly Syrian refugees and partly members of the Lebanese host communities. Furthermore, the interviewed families reportedly received no support from the Lebanese government and only one Syrian family was receiving support from the UNHCR (I#6-12). Regarding potential conflicts between the beneficiary groups, differentiating statements were made: On the one hand, the Lebanese families expressed discontent regarding the perceived preferential support of Syrian refugees through state and non-state actors, making partly discriminatory remarks in their accounts that originate from their increasingly precarious life situations. Noticeably, these remarks stand according to the attitudes expressed by the employees of NGO 1 (see section 4.2), which underlines the need for increased measures to foster social cohesion but also further questions the effectivity and integrity of Qudra-supported NGOs (I#6; I#7; I#11; I#12).

'When the Syrian people came here? [...] For me personally I feel like that they live here with the help of maybe the UN or something. [...] I mean they live a more comfortable life than us. They earn dollars. [...] They live better than the Lebanese, more comfortable than us.' (I#12)

The second Lebanese family expressed their discomfort in a similar way, when they reported about their financial situation and how it affects their nutrition:

'They live better than we do. [...] It's wrong that this happened to the Lebanese people. Specifically, to the ones who have children. [...] My son comes to me and says: "Mother, I want to eat meat". And I can't cook him a meal with (red) meat or chicken. Nor cheese or Labneh. Not even fruits. [...] I can't buy it, it became increasingly expensive. This affected us in a very bad manner.' (I#11)

These tensions with the Lebanese society were not shared by both the Syrian families and the employees of NGO 2 (I#8-10 and section 4.2). When asked if they feel that they are discriminated by the Lebanese society, one of the Syrian families answered:

'In my experience, no. [...] No one said a bad word, not one word. No matter if you're a Syrian, from Bangladesh or any nationality no one is saying something bad about the people.' (I#9)

Furthermore, the lived realities of three young, male and single Syrian refugees who have fallen through the established support systems of NGOs and (inter-)national structures provided insights into the lives of excluded persons. They received no assistance from Qudra-funded NGOs and were rejected by UNHCR and governmental institutions. Some reported having threatening experiences with members of the Lebanese society, which caused them to restrict their movement to stay unnoticed. All individuals have lost hope for improvement and were solely awaiting the chance to obtain a rare visa to the EU or the US (I#13-15). Their discontent turned into despair:

'There is a shitload of NGOs all over [...] the earth and if they were actually doing something, I wouldn't be here. [...] They just talk. [...] The future is always in Europe for Syrian people and it's really bad because nobody is welcoming you. [...] You're just waiting for something to happen. For a miracle.' (I#13)
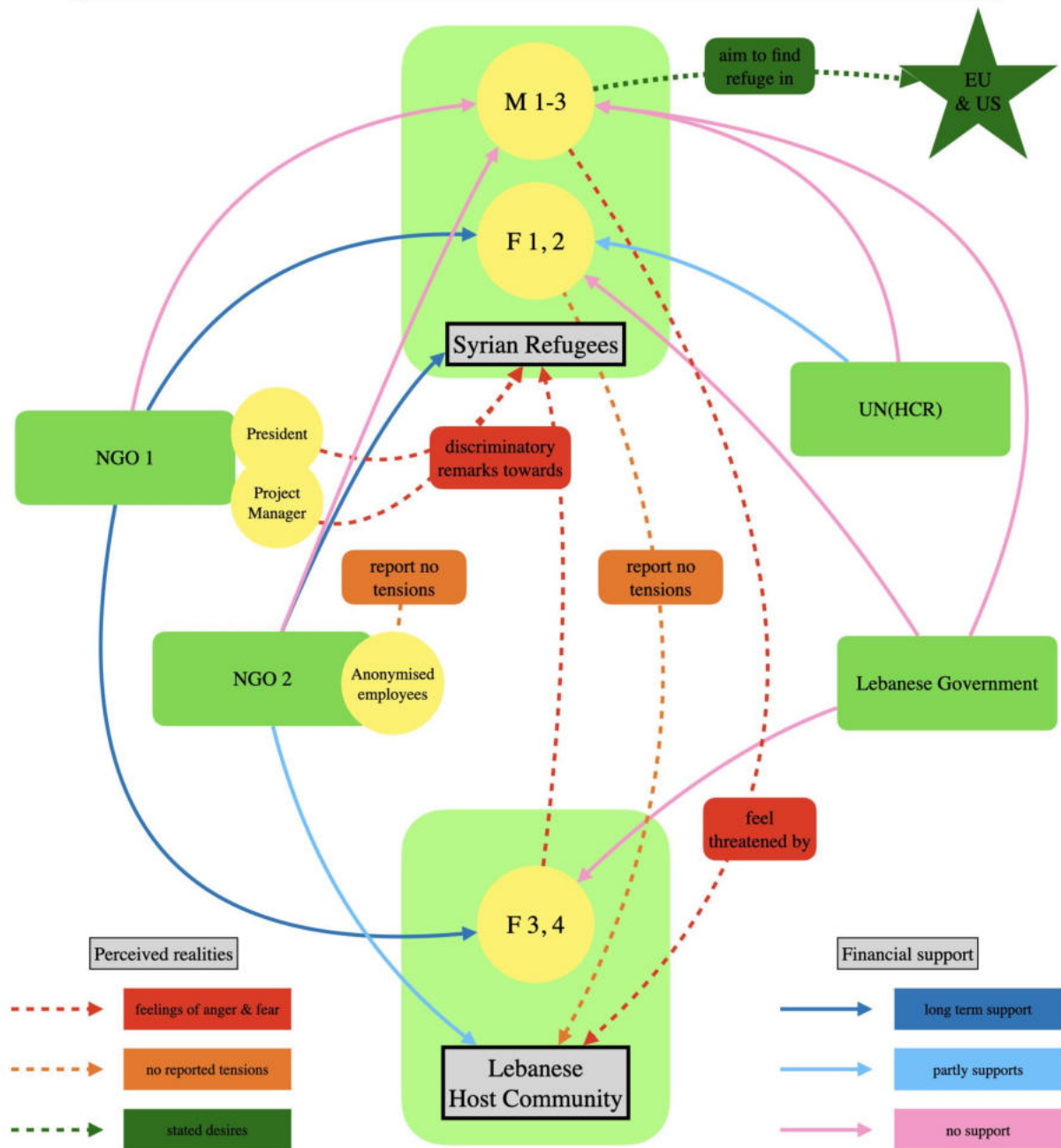
Figure 2: Interrelations of interviewed members of Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees, with Qudra-funded NGOs and state actors (authors' own illustration 2022).

5 Discussion

These findings illustrate how the Qudra programme, as a case study for EU-funded projects, operates within the broader framework of migration management and thereby reinforces existing externalisation strategies. By embedding these insights into migration theory, it becomes evident that Qudra maintains refugee immobility through development aid, aligning with EU containment objectives. This section discusses the interplay between international

actors, Lebanese governance structures and Lebanese local NGOs, highlighting the tensions and limitations of 2022 policy approaches.

The EU, together with an international community consisting of EU-funded actors, IOs and the Lebanese government, uses policies and plans to insert their objectives whenever applicable, even going so far as to stretch these tools according to their current interests. The momentum of crises and increasing vulnerability is instrumentalised to anchor long-term goals like policy reforms in acute crisis response plans. By prioritising and conditionalising economic support through policies, plans and projects, the disclosed migration regime funded by the EU lobbies for the integration of Syrian refugees into the Lebanese society, or at least for containing refugee individuals within Lebanese borders. This approach is contested by the Lebanese government, which attempts to reclaim leadership over crisis responses. Despite growing legal and social exclusion, Syrian refugees are left with no viable alternative to staying in Lebanon. At the time of research, Lebanon was partly described as an 'NGO state' (I#7) in which international funds sustain NGOs rather than the respective state institutions. While NGOs fill governance gaps, they remain donor-dependent, limiting their ability to enable long-term impacts. This reliance creates a fragmented system where humanitarian organisations provide essential services but lack the authority for systemic reform.

The analysed Qudra programme foregrounds this dynamic by channelling monetary resources to local NGOs via GIZ and Expertise France. Qudra supports, among other objectives, humanitarian aid, development, education and the establishment of safety nets, but struggles to provide a sustainable long-term goal. This finding reflects broader migration management trends on a global level. In Lebanon's case, local NGOs act as proxies in migration control, connecting humanitarian aid with containment strategies (Weima/Hyndman 2019). EU policies reinforce these procedures by funding and collaborating with NGOs in transit countries, keeping refugees in one place without addressing root causes or providing long-term solutions.

Donor-dependencies through external fundings and bureaucratic hurdles weaken NGO effectiveness as short-term projects dominate, thus limiting sustainability regarding structures, institutions and systemic reform. Additionally, internal NGO tensions emerge, with some fostering inclusion while others echo discriminatory narratives, reflecting broader societal divisions and weakening social cohesion as biases against Syrian refugees affect integration efforts. Without stable, state-led frameworks, NGOs provide crucial aid but cannot replace systemic governance. Through donor-driven priorities, reactive policies are perpetuated at the cost of lasting positive change, therefore maintaining a cycle of dependency rather than fostering durable solutions (I#4).

Regarding the limitation of the research, it is crucial to highlight that the credibility of the findings is strengthened through the engagement with multiple institutions and including various perspectives, revealing both official narratives and underlying tensions. However, a comprehensive analysis would require a broader inclusion of additional stakeholders, representatives of the international community, other Lebanese actors, other NGOs involved

in the Qudra programme, and other EU-funded projects. Expanding the number and scope of interviews with Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities would give further comprehensive insights into the practical impact of state policies, cooperation between international organisations and governments as well as implementation processes.

To increase methodological validity, further research would need to deepen the assessment of the NGOs impact on migratory decisions. This should include the measurement of the beneficiaries' intention to migrate *before* and *after* the intervention of the NGOs. It should also include the measurement of the intention to migrate of a comparison group that is not benefiting from any NGO support to evaluate the relevance of NGO support as a factor in migration decision-making. Additionally, the reliability of certain refugee testimonies (I#9,; I#10) must be critically assessed. The presence of a social worker of NGO 1 during the interviews with the Lebanese and Syrian families (I#9-12) may have influenced responses, as NGO 1 was their primary support provider, potentially leading to an overly positive portrayal of NGO 1 and Lebanese society. Furthermore, the social worker, serving as both translator and interpreter, may have inadvertently influenced responses. This sample bias was due to the necessity for accessing these individuals through their beneficiary NGOs, as the latter had an important function as door-opener and most likely also wished to maintain control over the contact process, thus acting as gatekeepers, too. In interviews with NGOs, distinguishing between personal views and public narratives was particularly challenging. Notably, the claim of NGO 2 that no tensions exist between Lebanese society and Syrian refugees contradicts statements made by NGO 1, pointing out the political sensitivities of the issue and highlighting possible efforts to destigmatise Syrian refugees.

Another aspect worthy of further exploration is the contested role of the Lebanese government. Beyond the EU, Lebanon's exclusionary mechanisms play a pivotal role in refugee containment, directly shaping the EU's externalisation strategies. Despite assertions of a quasi-absent Lebanese government in terms of functioning ministries and departments highlighted by most of the interviewed state representatives (I#1-4), the Lebanese government pursues a re-appropriation of the refugee crisis response in an effort to position the Lebanese government as an active agent in the border regime on the ground. A better understanding of these dynamics would offer deeper insights into the multi-layered governance of forced displacement.

6 Conclusion

This research contributes to critical border studies with its insights on a concrete case of externalisation within the EU border regime. It examines whether the economic support provided by the EU, implemented through projects by NGOs, influences Syrian refugees' migratory decisions. Our findings confirm that the EU is applying a containment strategy for Syrian refugees in Lebanon which is, to some extent, successful. The EU assures through its conditional economic support that the externalisation of migration management and containment interests are imposed through policies, plans and projects. Further implemented by NGOs on the ground, the EU tries to promote Syrian refugees' integration into Lebanese

society, rather than supporting other perspectives such as resettlement to a third country or return to Syria. The case study of the Qudra programme showed that Syrian refugees supported by NGOs working within this programme tend to consider their stay in Lebanon as their best option. However, it is important to highlight that further research is needed to gather more multifaceted results on the direct impact of economic support to Syrian refugees through NGOs on their migration decisions.

This research further showed how the EU's containment strategy is contested by the Lebanese government, which tries to regain leadership in its refugee and crisis responses and opposes the idea of permanent integration of Syrian refugees into Lebanese society. The implications of this containment strategy materialise in growing legal and social exclusion. Syrian refugees who do not benefit from economic support through NGOs were more favourable to further migrate, implying either a return to Syria or the uncertain waiting for legal opportunities to migrate to the Global North. It is important to question whether the EU can maintain its strategy of externalisation and containment within the current context of decreasing funding and a growing vulnerability among a significant portion of Lebanon's population.

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