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Emotions in Action: The Role of Emotions in Refugee Solidarity Activism^{1,2}

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This article investigates the different types of emotions that result from participation in refugee solidarity activism, investigating how they change over time and to what extent they explain why individuals remain involved in action in spite of unfavorable circumstances. By bringing together scholarship on collective action with the literature on emotions, the article delves into the emotional response of sustained engagement in refugee solidarity activism. The study is based on the analysis of 40 in-depth interviews with solidarity activists and volunteers involved in grassroots refugee solidarity initiatives along the Western Balkans route between 2015 and 2021, as well as on participant observation conducted between 2016 and 2021 in North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The diachronic perspective presented in the article suggests that contrasting reactive emotions emerged during the initial stage of mobilization, while moral emotions were activated at a later stage. In the long run enduring affective bonds that had been formed with both solidarity peers and people on the move proved decisive for keeping individuals involved in action.

KEYWORDS: borders; collective action; emotional impact; emotions; refugee solidarity activism; Western Balkans route.

INTRODUCTION

The intensification of the migratory influx towards Europe that occurred from the 2015 “long summer of migration” onwards provoked an upsurge in grassroots solidarity towards refugees⁴ (Cantat 2018; della Porta 2018). Individuals and groups

¹ I wish to thank the organizers and participants to the 5th Seminar of the Fringe Politics in Southeast Europe Research Network “Who is an activist? Biographical and transformative effects of protest” held at the Faculty of Political Sciences of Zagreb in June 2018, where an earlier version of this article was first presented. I am grateful also to Eduardo Romanos for his insightful comments on a previous version of the manuscript that helped to improve greatly its coherence, to Tamara Trost for the comments provided at the 2022 World Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN), and to Emmet Marron for the careful proofreading of the article. I am indebted to all the interviewees who dedicated their time to participate in this research.

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⁴ While mass-media reports usually adopt the term “refugees” to refer both to asylum seekers and migrants, I acknowledge that the terms “refugee” and “asylum seeker” have different meanings. Following the approach taken by Carling (2015), throughout this article the expressions “migrants,” “refugees,” “asylum seekers,” and “people on the move” will be used interchangeably to refer to individuals who have fled their countries in a bid to escape war, or as a result of economic deprivation, regardless of whether they have lodged an asylum claim or having been granted international protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention on the Status of Refugees (UNHCR 1951).

from civil society all over Europe engaged in solidarity initiatives in reaction to the inadequate responses of their governments to the growing influx of people into their countries. Refugee solidarity groups emerged and became active all over Europe, especially along the main nodes of the migratory paths. Their aim was to aid and provide immediate relief to people on the move. While previous literature has extensively analyzed the role of emotions in predicting refugee solidarity activism (Frykman and Mäkelä 2019; Maestri and Monforte 2020, 2022; Malkki 2015; Milan 2018), others have explored the ways in which solidarity groups organize at different points in time (della Porta and Steinhilper 2021; Steinhilper 2018; Zajak et al. 2020). However, the emotions elicited by participation in refugee solidarity initiatives and the different role that emotions play during and throughout specific actions has remained relatively under-researched.

The purpose of the present research is to examine the different types of emotions that result from participation in refugee solidarity activism, investigating how they vary over time and to what extent they explain why individuals remain involved in initiatives notwithstanding the unfavorable circumstances they are faced with. The diachronic perspective followed in this article suggests that during the initial stage of mobilization engagement in refugee solidarity activism sparked contrasting reactive emotions that ranged from joy to exhaustion. At a later stage, moral emotions were activated, which motivated individuals to continue in solidarity activity as they felt that they were “doing the right thing.” In the long run, the affective bonds that had formed with both solidarity peers and people on the move proved to be determining factors for individuals remaining active. By investigating the emotions that are produced through involvement in such action, this study outlines the interplay between different types of emotions and explains how their role varies over time. Specifically, the article draws on the case of individuals engaged in solidarity groups active along the Western Balkans migratory route in the period between 2015 and 2021.

The article strives to answer the following questions: which types of emotions emerge from sustained participation in refugee solidarity activism? How does their role vary over time? Which emotions motivate people to stay involved in action? On a theoretical level, this study builds on the work of social movement scholars who have researched “the micro-level effects of sustained participation in social movements” (Giugni 2004:491). It bridges this with the literature focusing on the centrality of emotions in social movements that emerged as a result of the emotional turn in social sciences (Jasper 1998, 2011), which maintains that emotions are culturally constructed rather than irrational, as had previously been assumed. By bridging these two strands of literature, this article advances research on the emotional dimension of activism, a field of investigation that has been growing in recent years (Ataç et al. 2016; Kleres 2018; Maestri and Monforte 2020; Milan 2018; Rosenberger and Winkler 2014; Steinhilper 2018). Furthermore, it makes a contribution to the sociological work on refugees and migrant-serving organizations (Arar and FitzGerald 2022; FitzGerald and Arar 2018).

The article will begin by providing an overview of the context in which the solidarity activism in question took place. This will be followed by a conceptual overview of the literature on emotions in collective action, after which there will be a section dealing with the methodology and data collection. Subsequently, there will

be an analysis of reactive emotions, intended as the short-term emotional impact of individual engagement in refugee solidarity movements, following which there will be a section that delves into moral emotions, which emerge at a later stage of mobilization and provide long-lasting motivation to maintain involvement. Finally, a section will explore affective ties, namely long-term affective bonds that, having developed over time, connect people and prove important for keeping them involved in action. The concluding section outlines the findings of the study and introduces some avenues for further research.

THE 2015 LONG-SUMMER OF MIGRATION AND THE WESTERN BALKANS MIGRATORY ROUTE

Between 2015 and 2016 the former Yugoslav states found themselves along one of the most popular migratory paths, the Western Balkans migratory route. Ever since this period, the trail has been traversed by people on the move fleeing from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa to reach Northern and Central Europe. Escaping poverty, war and persecution, thousands of individuals attempted to gain access to Europe through the Turkish-Greek frontier, initially by passing through Serbia and Hungary (Milan and Pirro 2018), until the latter sealed its borders in September 2015 (Šelo Šabić and Borić 2016). Following the closure of the Hungarian-Serbian frontier, the migratory flow swerved westwards, leading migrants through Croatia and Slovenia with the aim of entering Austria. With the shutdown of the corridor in March 2016, which was followed by a controversial agreement between the European Union (EU) and Turkey, the passage of migrants was reduced and progressively became less visible. Since spring 2018, people on the move have been forced to cross the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), however, their migratory path is continuously being adapted to further border closures and transit restrictions.

Over the summer of 2015, the former Yugoslav countries received heightened media attention due to the fact that they were being traversed in record-breaking numbers by people seeking protection in the EU. The European Commission estimated that nearly 700,000 people had traveled across the former Yugoslav territory by the end of October 2015, a figure that peaked at 760,000 by the end of December of the same year (European Commission 2016). What the media termed the “2015-16 European migrant crisis,”⁵ as well as “the long summer of migration,” represented thus a challenge of unprecedented scale for countries still dealing with internal displacement from the conflicts of the 1990s, and affected for the first time in their postwar history by such a massive influx of people. Austria, which is located at the end of the Western Balkans corridor, faced a similar fate. In 2015, the Alpine state became a recipient country for almost 90,000 migrants (Milan 2018), registering a 233% increase in the number of people seeking international protection compared to the previous year (Eurostat 2016).

⁵ Although I use the notion of “refugee crisis” in this article, I acknowledge that this expression must be understood critically. In line with Maestri and Monforte (2022), I endorse the view that the notion of “crisis” reflects the failure of EU member states and institutions to respect the rights and dignity of people on the move.

The mass arrival of people that started in 2015 spurred a grassroots response by individuals and groups that mobilized in support of migrants, both at the local and transnational level. They did so as a response to the sealing of borders by their governments and the increasing restrictions placed on the transit of people. While political leaders proved unable to find a solution to the growing influx of people, a section of local and international civil society responded to the arrival of migrants with solidarity activities and humanitarian and political initiatives (for an account of solidarity initiatives in support of refugees in the broader European context see, for instance, della Porta 2018). In an attempt to compensate for the poor responses of their governments, individuals and grassroots groups mobilized to provide immediate relief to people on the move. As in other parts of Europe, the type of civic response along and at either end of the Western Balkans route varied over time and space, ranging from advocacy-oriented interventions and self-organized stopgap initiatives, to small-scale demonstrative actions at border crossings. Independently-run, volunteer-based organizations provided an immediate response to the increased number of arrivals. In several cases, solidarity groups reacted in a more timely fashion and at a faster pace than their governments. Volunteers and grassroots groups, who were active at the border crossings and in the main cities the migrants passed through, brought about an alternative system of humanitarian assistance. Yet as the crisis unfolded, and the measures imposed by their governments became increasingly restrictive, solidarity groups found the scope of their support initiatives progressively limited. Following the decision by governments to take over the task of assisting migrants, state-run registration camps underwent a process of securitization and professionalization that excluded grassroots solidarity groups.⁶ Consequently, these bodies found themselves precluded from accessing the transit camps hosting asylum seekers unless they did so within the framework of large official organizations. This was mirrored by a process of the criminalization of solidarity activism and the militarization of borders (Schwartz and Schwenken 2020). Nevertheless, the vast majority of grassroots groups and individuals continued to reach out to people on the move who were excluded from official assistance and continued to provide them with support in informal shelters and makeshift camps.

EMOTIONS IN COLLECTIVE ACTION: A CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

Until the advent of the cultural turn in social movement studies, emotions had been regarded as an irrational force of action that held little explanatory power in comparison to other concepts such as identity, frames, and movement culture (Jasper 2008; Pearlman 2013). The latter were considered to be more apt in explaining the emergence and unfolding of collective action. By contrast, scholars such as Aminzade and McAdam (2001) emphasized the complementarity of rationality and emotionality in political action, while Flam (2005) stressed the explanatory power of emotions by disclosing how cognitive liberation goes hand in hand with emotional liberation. Since the late 1990s, emotions have thus been at the center of scholarly attention for the effect they have on the fate of movements. Previous research on

⁶ Interview with a member of Refugee Aid Serbia, Belgrade, July 28, 2016.

participation in collective action has illustrated how emotions can drive individuals to engage in activism (Giugni 1998, 2008). In particular, scholars have pointed to emotions as “a prerequisite for protest” (Flam 2005) and “emotional work” as necessary for triggering protest (Jasper 1998). Feelings and emotions like anger, for instance, have been recognized as “necessary for mobilizing in protest” (Flam 2005:28). Consequently, social movements have been investigated in relation to their role as actors that instigate emotions (Flam 2005). Other scholars have focused on the role of emotions in driving personal decisions to join or support movements (Goodwin et al. 2004), and have explored how emotions circulate and accumulate over time among protesters (Ahmed 2004, 2014; della Porta and Tufaro 2022). With regard to refugee solidarity activism, previous scholarship has investigated the emotions and values that motivate individuals to engage in solidarity action (Milan 2018, 2019), while other studies have explored how external factors such as “soft repression” can lead to the depoliticization of the narratives of participants relating to their engagement (Maestri and Monforte 2022). Similarly, scholars have examined the emotions that social movement action provokes in bystanders (Frazzetta and Piazza 2021). Nevertheless, the emotional impact of participation in collective action and the protest engagement of individuals has been far less researched (Becker et al. 2011; Drury and Reicher 2000, 2005). While previous studies have addressed emotions that foster involvement in social movements (Flam 2005), thus far little has been written on the emotions produced in action, albeit with some exceptions (Artero 2019). In order to fill this gap, this study focuses on the emotions that are produced during action, and how they change over time.

Consequently, this article explores different types of emotions that derive from engagement in refugee solidarity activism, and how they vary over time. While in previous work I have explored the emotions that motivate individuals to engage in solidarity action (Milan 2018, 2019), in this article I will shift the focus to emotions that emerge through participation in collective action, that is to say, the emotions that stem from engagement in solidarity activism and the extent to which they contribute to keeping people involved in action. The case of refugee solidarity movements constitutes a vantage point from which to explore the relevance of emotions, since these types of movements have a strong relational dimension and are deeply related to the personal and emotional spheres of their members (Giugni and Passy 2001). Indeed, Giugni has defined solidarity movements as driven by altruistic and charitable motivations, as well as characterizing them as distinct entities whose members do not benefit directly from the outcome of their involvement (2001), and whose actions can be defined as “collective, altruistic, and political” (Giugni and Passy 2001). As the scholar contends, “people who are engaged in solidarity movements often do so not on the basis of political motives, but rather guided by the goal of bringing relief to those who suffer from some kind of injustice” (Giugni 2001:236). Solidarity activism entails a relational aspect, as solidarity has been defined as “a relational practice generative of political subjectivities and collective identities, and inventive of new mobilizing imaginaries” (Fischer and Jørgensen 2021:161).

This study also draws on the previous work of Jasper (1998, 2011) who was the first to distinguish between reactive emotions, i.e., automatic responses arising in reaction to information and events, and more stable affective bonds. Jasper also

introduced the notion of moral emotions, understood as “feelings of approval and disapproval based on moral intuitions and principles” (Jasper 2011:143), which previous scholarship had argued played an important role in driving individuals into solidarity action (Karakayali 2017; Kleres 2018; Milan 2018). Moral emotions encompass feelings such as pride, shame, and outrage, and can be relevant during the initial stage of mobilization (Artero 2019). However, emotions are not only triggers, but also evolve and transform throughout a specific action. Building upon previous studies, this article intends to advance the scholarship on emotions and collective action by providing a dynamic perspective on the relationship between solidarity action participation and emotions. It does so by illuminating the extent to which emotions transform over time and sustain collective action differently throughout time. In what follows, I thus argue that reactive emotions are formed in the initial stage of mobilization, a phase that is followed by the development of moral emotions. As they are tied to moral values (Jasper 1998), these help individuals to establish a moral boundary distinguishing “us” from “them”. Finally, long-lasting affective and emotional bonds that have formed over time help individuals to stay involved in action notwithstanding the difficult circumstances.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This article is based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals engaged in solidarity initiatives in support of people on the move along the Western Balkans route between 2015 and 2021. The solidarity activities in which they were engaged mainly encompassed direct actions such as service-provision activities (medical assistance, food and clothes distribution) performed at border crossings and in the towns and urban centers that migrants passed through. Some individuals were also involved in hosting people on the move (through the “Welcome! initiatives”) and/or engaged in advocacy initiatives aimed at supporting the safe passage of people across borders. Aside from conducting interviews, this research has also drawn on participant observation, carried out between 2016 and 2021 in the countries of North Macedonia,⁷ Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Austria, through which the migratory path known as the Western Balkans route passed in the period between 2015 and 2021. Whenever possible, I took part in the activities in support of migrants and in protests and sit-ins demanding free and safe passage.

In total, 40 interviews have been conducted as well as one focus group with grassroots solidarity actors. All of the respondents were involved in refugee solidarity initiatives that started during the so-called “long-summer of migration” in 2015–2016. The sample aimed to maximize differences in terms of the age, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds of volunteers. However, it should be noted that the majority of participants self-identified as white, middle-class, and female. The degree of involvement of the solidarity actors interviewed can be evaluated as sustained, while the tasks they performed throughout their engagement as well as

⁷ At the time the research was undertaken the country was still known as the “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (FYROM). The country changed its name to North Macedonia in 2019, following the resolution of a controversy with Greece regarding its naming.

their prior biographical experiences varied. The sample includes strongly committed activists; some of whom were undergoing their first experience of activism, while others had a long history of engagement in the field of migration and refugee support. The vast majority of respondents had engaged in activism for the first time in the 2015 “long summer of migration.” Other respondents had been employed in organizations involved in migration-related or citizenship rights activism prior to the 2015–2016 migrant crisis; others still were members of social movement collectives. Their involvement spanned a time frame of several months and started at the height of the “migrant crisis” in 2015.

The respondents were selected from various places located along the Western Balkans route, from its starting point to its end point (namely North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Austria), which helped to include a range of actors stemming from different contexts. The majority of the organizations interviewed in this project were independent and grassroots bodies, some later formed themselves into nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), while others opted to remain informal. In order to grant a fair representation of all the different operators active along the migratory path, a conscious effort has been made to interview self-organized groups presenting their engagement as driven by both humanitarian and political values. Resorting to the categorization of Agustín and Jørgensen (2018), some of these organizations belong to the category of *autonomous solidarity*, understood as a kind of solidarity that “is based in forms of horizontal participation such as direct democracy and assemblies to invigorate the equality among their members” (2018:40). These types of organization refuse cooperation with both the state and with NGOs. Other solidarity groups belong to the typology termed *civic solidarity*, which “indicates ways of organizing produced as civil society initiatives to include refugees” that manifests itself through NGOs, local communities and individuals (2018:41). The latter includes a vast number of manifestations and actors, such as NGOs, local communities, and individuals. Among the respondents there are also independent individuals who had initially volunteered for governmental organizations, only to later continue in their activism when the state had withdrawn from assisting people on the move.

Interviewees have been recruited through snowball techniques. Participants were approached by means of gatekeepers, building upon the personal contacts that had already been developed in the region, where I have been conducting research since 2010. In other cases, activists were directly approached in the field. When it was not possible to resort to personal networks, the groups were directly contacted online and the interviews began with the group’s spokesperson, and then later proceeded to other volunteers. The interview guide was organized around questions related to the personal life trajectories of the activists, their practice of activism, and the reasons and values motivating their decision to engage in solidarity activity. Other questions focused on the emotions they felt during and after the solidarity activity and the impact this experience had on their personal history and beliefs. All of the interviews were conducted in English and Italian (where respondents were native Italian speakers), and were mostly carried out in person, although during the COVID-19 pandemic or when preferred by the interviewee they also took place online. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, except for the informal

talks, for which field notes are relied upon. Given the sensitivity of the topics and owing to the potential for the informants to be identified easily, it has been decided to not report the private data of the interviewees, except in the cases of public figures and well-known activists who have agreed to have their names published.

The field research carried out in North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia was conducted between July and October 2016. The research also draws on participant observation in the cities of Belgrade (Serbia), during one of the peaks of the refugee crisis in late July 2016, in Graz (Austria) during the winter of 2016 and in Bihać (BiH) in the autumn of 2021. On that occasion, I also conducted informal interviews and spoke to stranded migrants and refugees and with volunteers in the field. Finally, I also draw on written data, given that I consulted the existing literature on mobilization in support of refugees, press releases, articles, and newsletters issued by solidarity groups, as well as official reports of national and international institutions and research centers.

Questions of positionality and power were matters of concern and reflection throughout the research. My positionality as a white, English-speaking female working in the academic sector facilitated interaction with the respondents, who were often well-educated and came from a middle-class background. On the other hand, however, it may have limited my interaction with male migrants, especially those originating from more conservative contexts; although it must be said that unless they were directly involved in solidarity activity, people on the move were not among the interviewees for the present research. As regards the ethical aspect of conducting participant observation, the ethical guidelines elaborated by advanced scholars dealing with irregular migration (Düvell et al. 2010) have been followed, and in particular the “do not harm” principle has been adhered to. Thus, throughout my participant observation I have approached both the people and the settings where they were acting in a respectful manner, creating a relationship with the interviewees based on trust and negotiating my presence with the groups I observed in advance. My long-term involvement in the Western Balkans region, and my in-depth knowledge of the area, coupled with the contacts I have developed over time, have allowed me to access the field more easily and have contributed to creating a sense of trust and confidentiality with the interviewees. Furthermore, my research was driven by the commitment to not disclose information that was not relevant for the study and that could potentially harm the interviewees or the individuals they supported, as suggested by, among others, Krause (2017). In order to protect their identity, all of the data relating to interviewees have been concealed and their names have been anonymized.

REACTIVE EMOTIONS: THE EMOTIONAL EFFECT OF ENGAGEMENT IN REFUGEE SOLIDARITY ACTIVISM

In his attempt to explain how emotions accompany social action, Jasper (1998) distinguished between affective and reactive emotions, which he posits to be at “the two ends of a continuum with a grey area in the middle” (p. 402). Reactive emotions are defined as short-term emotional responses, such as the trauma and pain that were

expressed by several individuals involved in solidarity activity at the border between Austria and Slovenia during the winter of 2015–2016. One respondent described her engagement as a traumatic, painful but also powerful experience, which brought her to the verge of exhaustion and burnout.⁸ Another young woman originally from Lebanon who operated as translator and cultural mediator during the winter of 2015 in the state-run transit camp of Preševo, in southern Serbia, explained how this activity turned out to be particularly emotionally charged, to the extent that at times she felt on the verge of a breakdown as she was absorbing all of the pain and suffering of the people she was aiding. As she explained in the following words:

As a cultural mediator, I was taking all their pain on me. I was trying to get the answers. I was sucking their sorrow; sometimes I thought I would sink.⁹ Another young volunteer describes his involvement as particularly challenging, as the following excerpt discloses:

I have been both in the office and [refugee] camps since June, it has been very challenging to see so many people and hear so many stories of war and tragedy and traumatic experiences.¹⁰

A sense of alienation, exhaustion and disconnection emerged from the engagement in refugee solidarity activism, but other emotions were reported, such as joy and relief. The analysis of interviews thus reveals that contrasting reactive emotions stemmed from engagement in refugee solidarity action. In certain cases, being in contact with the drama experienced by people on the move brought up traumatic memories of the Yugoslav wars, which several volunteers from the Western Balkans had experienced first-hand. This had a painful emotional impact on them, while at the same time the perception of sharing the same experience of displacement constituted a drive for engagement, sparking feelings of proximity and similarity, as the following account reveals:

It is difficult to see people fleeing and dying from countries where previously they had good lives. When they come here the main thing is to treat them as human beings, like people or friends you see every day. (...) Twenty years ago, the war ended in Croatia. I remember I had to live in the basement. When I remember my situation and that of my friends, I can hardly look away and say that this is not my problem.¹¹

The closure of borders and the agreement signed between the EU and Turkey in March 2016 also represented a turning point for refugee solidarity activism at an emotional level. Concretely, the pact brought about the closure of borders and the progressive transfer of people on the move to state-run camps where independent volunteers were forbidden to enter. At an emotional level, feelings of outrage, hopelessness, and powerlessness have prevailed among respondents ever since, coupled with the frustration derived from witnessing the deportations and pushbacks against people on the move that were reportedly taking place on a daily basis. Many volunteers faced burnout and had to resort to psychological support, as one of them recalls:

⁸ Interview with B., volunteer of Border Crossing Spielfeld. Graz, November 9, 2016.

⁹ Interview with a member of NGO Adra, Belgrade, July 25, 2016.

¹⁰ Interview with a spokesperson of Macedonian Young Lawyers Associations (MYLA), Skopje, July 21, 2016.

¹¹ Interview with a volunteer of Are you Syrious?, Zagreb, July 24, 2016.

We were emotional, not rationalizing, just being human, crying every night, trying to do something. Now we are burnt out, we are working without holidays. This exhaustion is partially the crisis of self-organization. After the closure of borders, in particular, we felt powerless.¹²

Some respondents reported experiencing contrasting emotions at the same time: the feeling of powerlessness was counterbalanced by the sense of pride and joy they felt from having contributed to improving the situation, as the following account reveals:

On the positive side, you realize how many people you helped. You give a toy to a child, and a kid is not traumatized anymore, you feel thankful. But there are also negative feelings, when you can't fulfill everybody's needs. I did not have any guidebook about how to distribute food, it was stressful. And the number of stories you hear, the self-harm marks you see, the post-traumatic stress you witness, you feel like you're living in a war zone. We would not be here if the benefits were not higher than negative sides.¹³

Other excerpts illustrate the extent to which reactive emotions at times provoked a sense of alienation from relatives and peers who were not engaged in solidarity activism, as the following quote elucidates:

We, as helpers, have been quite traumatized by the events. There is a kind of disconnection between you and your family and people who have not been down there [at the borders], because they really do not know what the hell you are talking about! (*laughs*) But if you have lived through this stuff . . . all of us have seen things there that are quite hard to process. We noticed every time we met with people who had been down there, this big need for people to talk and discuss things: there was a lot of talks and crying going on.¹⁴

Overall, the analysis reveals that contradictory reactive emotions emerged at the first stage of mobilization, especially as a result of the close contact with human beings who were suffering.

DRAWING (MORAL) BOUNDARIES: THE SALIENCE OF MORAL EMOTIONS

At a later stage of mobilization, reactive emotions made way for moral ones. According to Jasper (2011), moral emotions depend on cognitions and are therefore culturally constructed. If reactive emotions qualify as automatic responses, moral emotions imply cognitive work, entail “feelings of approval and disapproval based on moral intuitions and principles” (Jasper 2011:143) and are “the result of moral judgments of what is right or wrong, good, or bad” (Goodwin et al. 2004:422). From the analysis, moral emotions appear to emerge at a later stage of mobilization and to play an important role in keeping people involved in action. Previous scholarship has stressed how moral emotions motivate people to engage in solidarity activism (Karakayali 2017; Milan 2018). According to Artero (2019), moral emotions can play a relevant role during the first stage of mobilization. However, this does not explain when they emerge and how they develop afterwards. The analysis of interviews shows that moral emotions surface at a later stage of mobilization, being

¹² Interview with a member of the Anti-Racist Front without Borders, Ljubljana, October 6, 2016.

¹³ Interview with a member of Refugee Aid Serbia, Belgrade, July 28, 2016.

¹⁴ Interview with B., volunteer of Border Crossing Spielfeld. Graz, November 9, 2016.

grounded in an individuals' attribution of what is right or wrong (Jasper 2011), a judgment that is formed over time in individuals engaged in solidarity activism. Moral emotions contribute to drawing a boundary between "us" and "them"—the "us" being composed of the group of peers engaged in solidarity activism, and the "them" identifying the others, those perceived as not being on the right side.

The role played by moral emotions becomes evident in the words of a respondent who, facing emotional hurdles, claims to use the feeling of doing the right thing and being involved with a group of the "right people" in order to motivate himself to continue his activity in support of people on the move. He justifies his stance as grounded in moral considerations, stressing the "rightness" of his engagement with the following words: "The activists, those who go to the streets to take care of people in the squares or in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they are not normal people, meaning that 'normal people' stay at home."¹⁵ In saying this, he draws a moral boundary between those doing "what is right," whom he ironically defines as "not normal people," and "normal people," who are those who are not engaged. Similarly, another respondent stressed: "I have never felt like being in the 'wrong' place—knowing there could be so many things to do to support refugees and back society".¹⁶ Another person, active at the Austrian-Slovenian border, claimed that this activity provoked in her a sense of relief as she felt like she was fulfilling a moral duty, that of supporting refugees. As she said: "This work has to be done! I never ask myself if I should do this, if it must be done: this was the feeling! And when you step into it, I cannot say I won't do anything. I could not say 'I could not do it': [the border crossing of] Spielfeld was an emergency, everyday it was cold, I went home and thought that I was so happy nobody was freezing outside, we should do everything for no baby to die on our streets".¹⁷ In a similar fashion, the moral component of engagement strongly emerges from other interviews, where not only emotions such as exhaustion and burnout were used to describe the emotional impact of engagement in solidarity activism. Other excerpts illustrate the extent to which reactive emotions sometimes provoked a sense of alienation from relatives and peers not engaged in solidarity activism, as the following quote elucidates:

We, as helpers, have been quite traumatized by the events. There is a kind of disconnection between you and your family and people who have not been down there [at the borders], because they really do not know what the hell you are talking about! (*laughs*) But if you have lived through this stuff . . . all of us have seen things there that are quite hard to process. We noticed every time we met with people who had been down there, this big need for people to talk and discuss things: there was a lot of talks and crying going on.¹⁸

Particularly in the case of Austria, the so-called refugee crisis was depicted as having consequences on a societal level, constituting an experience that split Austrian society in a way that an interviewee described as drawing a boundary between those individuals "doing right", meaning siding with refugees, and those who did not, as the following excerpt elucidates:

¹⁵ Interview with a spokesperson of *Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche Alto Vicentino* (Balkan Routes Collective of the Northern Province of Vicenza), online, October 29, 2020.

¹⁶ Interview with W., volunteer of Border Crossing Spielfeld, Graz, November 13, 2016.

¹⁷ Interview with S., volunteer of Border Crossing Spielfeld, Graz, November 14, 2016.

¹⁸ Interview with B., volunteer of Border Crossing Spielfeld, Graz, November 9, 2016.

Another crisis I see is inside Austrian civil society, not in the functioning of the Austrian state systems. [The refugee crisis] was a challenge for the system, but the system was never in danger, in my opinion. But society has now arrived at the point where we are facing a deep split in this society: personally, I have no idea how to overcome it. To me, it is a crisis of Austrian society, perhaps in other countries as well, I do not know. (...) We know from these old and new friends we have now inside civil society that this split in Austrian society separates families, former friends, you find new friends and loose old friends. This is deep, it is a deep process and sometimes it hurts, but you cannot change, you go your way. To me, this is one of the most important years of my life, because of all the events and what is happening inside of myself.¹⁹

The formation of what could be perceived as a group of “right people,” which Jasper would term the creation of “we-ness” (1998:418), is also stressed in the account of an activist from “Are you Syrious?”, a grassroots group formed in Croatia in 2015 to help migrants transiting across the country. The respondent, who was involved in supporting refugees and also maintaining contacts with similar groups along the Western Balkans migratory route, expresses as follows the feeling of belonging to a group of morally “right people”:

You do what you think it is right to make a change. One person can do it, and now there are hundreds of us. This kind of opinion is starting to be widespread. I do not even see the other side of the story, the one in which people hate other people.²⁰

Although reactive emotions propelled people into action, the moral judgment seems to provide a long-lasting motivation to stay active, especially when it was closely linked to a political interpretation of migratory phenomena, as the following excerpt elucidates:

When you get to the emotional level, and as I said, you talk to these guys, or these families who are going through it, I think it becomes very personal in terms of the motivation, but for me, it is also political (...). As an American, I also think a lot about the US-Mexico border. And I think that the way that borders work in the Western world, the way that they are allowed to work it doesn't make any sense. The asylum system does not make any sense. The way in which officers are allowed to work with impunity, does not make any sense. And I think that, for me, in my position, I found myself able to work in a way that draws attention to the fact that none of it makes any sense. Working on that, for me is an important way to make use of my time (...).²¹

This interplay between reactive and moral emotions constituted an important element that kept individuals active in the early and more advanced stages of activism.

AFFECTIVE TIES: THE RELEVANCE OF LONG-TERM AFFECTIVE BONDS

Over time and as a result of working closely together, friendship and affective bonds were created both with other activists and with people on the move. The feeling of “being on the same side,” and the pride expressed and shared with others, proved to have a cohesive effect among engaged individuals, to the extent that peers were described as becoming “a huge family, a tribe,”²² which at times felt closer than family members. The great majority of respondents acknowledged that emotional

¹⁹ Interview with G., volunteer of Border Crossing Spielfeld. Graz, November 13, 2016.

²⁰ Interview with a volunteer of Are you Syrious?, Zagreb, July 24, 2016.

²¹ Interview with a member of No name Kitchen/Border Violence Monitoring Network, online, November 25, 2020.

²² Interview with a member of NGO Adra, Belgrade, July 25, 2016.

bonds and new solidarity ties activated by the encounter with both people on the move and other volunteers and activists motivated them to stay active. The following excerpt reveals the extent to which relationships of friendship and affective ties proved decisive in overcoming the sense of alienation and disconnection felt towards others, meaning those not engaged in refugee solidarity initiatives, and/or those in their close circles that opposed it:

What I do find is a great disconnection: the world has split into people who understand the problem [the refugee crisis] and those who do not. I am lucky with my family and my circle of friends, but there are people to whom part of the family or neighbour do not speak to anymore. (...) It can be a bit scary because you do feel very different and kind of alienated from the community around you who does not give a s*t about certain news. At the same time, there is that feeling that you find your tribe around there somehow. (...) P. [another volunteer] is now one of my best friends, and she became such in a short period of time.²³

As has been outlined in the previous sections, reactive and moral emotions proved to play an important role in activating people and in keeping them involved in initiatives, as well as in countering the emotional burden that solidarity action provoked in respondents. Subsequently, sustained engagement in refugee solidarity activism contributed to forging social bonds and creating collectivities of similar peers. It was, therefore, the formation and maintenance of social and affective ties that motivated people to tolerate the fatigue of their engagement notwithstanding the unfavorable circumstances for refugee solidarity activism, such as the closure of borders and the criminalization of solidarity. Indeed, affective ties of friendship and solidarity bonded people together in collectivities of similar peers, whose boundaries are based on moral values. The data collected reveals that although reactive and moral emotions played a determining role in the initial phase of engagement, the affective bonds that developed over time were important for keeping people involved in action at a later stage. Affective bonds are, in fact, emotional responses linked to the relational sphere and social interaction of individuals. They, therefore, are related to other people, to whom individuals have become connected by means of social proximity and personal bonds that have developed through close contact. In this regard, a respondent engaged in activity at the border between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina after 2016 expressed feelings of defeat and discouragement due to their long-term engagement in supporting people who were no longer allowed to transit following the 2016 border closure. However, he explained that he continued to do so due to the fact that in the meantime the individuals who were stranded at the border crossing had become his friends.²⁴

In her account, a female activist portrays her participation in solidarity actions as not always fully understood in her private life, i.e., by the members of her own social circles, such as acquaintances, family members, or friends. She argues that her intense engagement in refugee solidarity activism had at times encountered opposition and hostility from her family and peers. She describes her engagement in helping refugees as divisive and even as having emotionally separated the group of people supporting the refugee cause from those opposing it. Similarly, she portrays her

²³ Interview with B., volunteer of Border Crossing Spielfeld. Graz, November 9, 2016.

²⁴ Interview with a member of No name Kitchen/Border Violence Monitoring Network, online, November 25, 2020.

engagement as resulting in the development of a strong connection with other activists and volunteers, which led her to develop new friendships. Networks and ties were formed with individuals who in many cases she had never met before, and led to relationships that lasted beyond the solidarity experience. In the long run, the perception participants had of people on the move also changed, with a shift from viewing them as people in need to seeing them as friends, as one respondent elucidates, “[Along the route] two years ago we met people who are still there, they became friends and are not ‘migrants’ anymore. When they make it [across the border], it is a reason to celebrate”.²⁵ In this regard, another young respondent active in Serbia explained that for her the close contact with people on the move had the effect of building trust and opening up her mind, and that the close relationship with people on the move changed her attitude to the extent that she feels affected by what happens in their countries, as the following excerpt highlights:

You become close to them, and everything happening to them affects you. Now I see it more personally than I should. Anything happening in Afghanistan and Pakistan affects me more than before. Getting closer to them had a strong impact. Hearing that people die is not easy and always so distant, until you meet this culture.²⁶

This change of attitude emerges with evidence in the case of young individuals from the Western Balkans states who had previously had few opportunities to meet individuals from Africa or Asia prior to 2015.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has aimed to unpack the emotional effects of engagement in refugee solidarity activism and the role that emotions play at the different stages of engagement. It did so by analyzing the narratives and discourse of 40 volunteers and activists involved in supporting people on the move along the Western Balkans route in the period between 2015 and 2021. Drawing on existing theoretical work on emotions in collective action, it has provided insights into the engagement of individuals in solidarity initiatives, where solidarity is investigated as relational practice. The grassroots solidarity groups that emerged during the so-called European migrant crisis along the Western Balkans route in 2015–2016 have offered a concrete case study that makes it possible to delve into the topic and to provide new insights into an emerging strand of literature.

The analysis found evidence that engagement in refugee solidarity activism initially provoked contrasting reactive emotions, which ranged from outrage to joy. At a later stage, moral emotions were activated: based on cognitive understandings, individuals engaged in refugee solidarity activism drew a moral boundary between themselves, who they perceived as “doing the right thing,” and others, who were seen as not guided by the same moral principles. In the long run, the affective bonds created with peers and people on the move proved definitive in maintaining participation in such activities, effectively counterbalancing feelings of frustration and

²⁵ Interview with a spokesperson of *Collettivo Rotte Balcaniche Alto Vicentino* (Balkan Routes Collective of the Northern Province of Vicenza), online, October 29, 2020.

²⁶ Interview with a member of NGO ADRA, Belgrade, July 25, 2016.

powerlessness. This allowed people to continue in their solidarity activity and contributed to transforming their attitude towards people on the move, which shifted from regarding them as people in need to perceiving them as close friends.

The findings of this study advance the research on the role of emotions in collective action by providing a twofold contribution: on the one hand, this article moves scholarship beyond considering emotions as merely triggers for social action. On the other hand, the diachronic perspective offered contributes to distinguishing between the role that different emotions play at diverse stages of mobilization. By exploring emotions that are created in the action itself, this study advances research investigating emotions as mobilizing factors, to show that emotions are also produced and modified during action and can motivate individuals to continue in their engagement, especially when affective ties and emotional bonds are activated. Indeed, emotional bonds, enduring friendship, and personal ties emerged as determining factors in keeping people involved in action, counterbalancing the strength of potentially demobilizing emotions such as rage, anger and powerlessness. To sum up, this study has revealed that in the case of the so-called European migrant crisis, different kinds of emotions emerged and played diverse roles at distinct points in time. While reactive emotions contributed to driving people into action, moral emotions motivated further engagement at a later stage. In the meantime, the formation of affective bonds, which developed as a result of participation in collective action, increased the likelihood that participants maintained their involvement in solidarity activities notwithstanding the difficult circumstances they faced.

Finally, it should be noted that engagement in solidarity movements has been said to have changed the perception individuals had of their surroundings. In several cases, respondents argue that they have become more politically radical as a result of having developed greater awareness of the injustice of the ban on free travel and the violence exercised by border police against migrants. Thus, engagement in solidarity groups has had a remarkable impact on the life experience of individuals, who in certain cases switched from conceiving their action as a humanitarian act to describing it as a political action, challenging the current migration governance policies. While this article has focused on the role of emotions in action, further research might explore the long-term impact and broader life-course effects of participation in refugee solidarity activism. Additional studies could advance research on the effect of engagement in solidarity actions in other border contexts beyond the Western Balkans migratory route, while a comparison of multiple case studies is likely to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the emotional impact of solidarity activism. Finally, there needs to be further scrutiny of how emotions evolve over time and how they adapt to the changing context and atmosphere, which can become either more or less favorable to the arrival and reception of migrants.

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