

Enacting Citizenship

A Case Study of a Syrian Refugee Protest in Germany

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Abstract: In June and July 2015, a group of Syrian asylum seekers and local refugee supporters organised a protest camp in Dortmund, Germany. For 53 days, about 50 protesters at a time slept under open tarps on the pavement in front of the city's main train station, demanding a quicker asylum review process and reunification with their families. This article focusses on the refugees' interactions with different state actors on the municipal and state levels, and illustrates how the Syrian refugees were able to enact citizenship subjectivities. Through sustained and well-organised public protest, refugees claimed their place within the host community. Importantly, they became active contributors to the debate over Germany's response to the so-called 'refugee crisis' and proved that political activism can help promote political and legal change.

Keywords: acts of citizenship, Dortmund, Germany, protest camp, recent displacement, refugee activism, Syrian refugees

'It is quite a wonderful paradox to say that publicly self-identifying
as a non-status migrant is to engage in an act of citizenship.'
Peter Nyers, 'No One Is Illegal' (2008)

In the introduction to their book *Refugees Welcome? Difference and Diversity in a Changing Germany*, co-editors Jan-Jonathan Bock and Sharon Macdonald (2019) recall two arresting images that captured the news cycle at the height of the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015: a white refrigerated truck containing the corpses of 71 migrants who had suffocated inside en route from Hungary to Austria on 27 August and the lifeless body of a Syrian child, Alan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach on 2 September. The widespread reporting of the tragic deaths of so many and of someone so young led to public outcries,



which, so the co-editors argue, swayed Germany's leaders to embrace more humane asylum policies for the rest of that year. And indeed, Chancellor Angela Merkel's 31 August public pronouncement, 'We can manage this!' (*Wir schaffen das!*), which aimed to strengthen German citizens' resolve in accepting large numbers of refugees, appears to fit that timeline.

Yet even before these terrible news stories in the late summer of 2015, asylum policies had been quietly changing in Germany. At a 53-day-long protest camp in Dortmund that did not grab international headlines, Syrian protesters had managed to change the outcome of their asylum claims through sustained public activism. As a matter of fact, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees – known by its German acronym BAMF – suspended the Dublin Regulation in their review of Syrian applicants' files on 21 August, based on an interior memo that was leaked to the press and publicised in a tweet on 25 August (Keil 2017; Pearlman 2017). The Dublin Regulation requires that asylum seekers file their applications in the first country of entry into the European Union. That last week of August, BAMF stopped requiring the verification of a person's country of entry. By skipping this step of asylum review, Germany *de facto* allowed all Syrian refugees who made it to Germany via Italy, Greece, Bulgaria or Hungary to stay in Germany if they filed their application by the end of the year (Chazan 2015). What few people realised at the time is that a group of Syrian protest organisers had submitted in writing an official demand for the suspension of the Dublin Regulation to the Federal Police Office in Berlin, which, like BAMF, is under the supervision of the federal Interior Ministry, on 18 August.¹ The chain of events of 18, 21 and 25 August predated Angela Merkel's 31 August plea to her fellow citizens. On that day, she was catching up with policies already being practised by BAMF officials, rather than issuing new policy directives.

From 8 June until 31 July, over 200 Syrian refugees were engaged in a sustained public protest action, which was staged at first outside Dortmund's BAMF branch office and subsequently near the city's main train station, a more central location (Volk 2021). Of the 200 refugees, 50 would stay in the train station plaza on any given day and sleep in sleeping bags under plastic tarps, demanding that their asylum applications be processed faster. Their protest made the daily local news, and the Syrians received support and supplies from Dortmund residents sympathetic to their cause. This was not the first time that non-citizens were demanding to be seen and heard in a public place in Europe (see, e.g., Ilker 2016; Johnson 2015; Landry 2015; McGuaran and Hudig 2014; Nyers and Rygiel 2012; Rosenberger et al. 2018; and Tyler and Marciniak 2013). Forcibly displaced persons have repeatedly engaged in public protest action to appeal to politicians and the larger public to obtain their rights, despite facing significant logistical, legal and financial challenges (Odugbesan and Schwiertz 2018). In fact, marginalised communities around the globe regularly use urban spaces to execute protest actions, build networks of solidarity and gain visibility and recognition (Holston 2008; Hou 2010).

By protesting in a public space, Syrian refugees made use of a right afforded to citizens and non-citizens in Germany alike, and their sustained and well-organised action coincided with a major reformulation of German refugee policy. This article aims to acknowledge the refugees as active participants in and shapers of the asylum debates that took place in the summer of 2015, rather than as passive recipients of the ‘clemency of asylum’ (*die Gnade eines Aufenthaltstitels*) (Refugees Welcome Dortmund 2015). Moreover, it aims to show that refugee activism in coordination with citizen supporters can broaden our definition of citizenship.

Refugees, Activism and Citizenship in Times of Global Mobility

Public activism by non-citizens forms the basis of scholarly rethinking of the meaning of the term citizenship (Isin and Nielsen 2008). For instance, Etienne Balibar (2004) credited a group of 324 migrants and refugees without legal status in France – the so-called ‘*sans-papiers*’ – with demonstrating ‘active citizenship’ by organising a protest in March 1996 to obtain their residency. In Balibar’s view, most citizens in European societies had come to accept the state and obediently lived within its rules, and so he applauded migrants who attempted ‘to form a concrete articulation of the rights of man and the rights of the citizen, of responsibility and militant commitment’ (2004: 49). In this way, Balibar equated today’s migrants with the proletariat of the past, who similarly fought for access to and inclusion in a more just and equitable society. Organised struggle, according to Balibar, is the way for the marginalised and excluded to obtain their rights. Similarly, Aihwa Ong (2006) acknowledged that different kinds of global flows – migrants and refugees amongst them – had caused ‘mutations in citizenship’. She eloquently argued that ‘while in theory political rights depend on membership in a nation-state, in practice, new entitlements are being realized through *situated mobilizations and claims in milieus of globalized contingency*’ (2006: 499, italics mine). In Ong’s view, neoliberal logics as well as human rights regimes are platforms on which mobilisations for rights can take place. Because neoliberal logics demand that money circulate unimpeded within and across borders, clear distinctions between citizens and non-citizens have become blurred in favour of shared neoliberal subjectivities. This has been shown, for instance, in the context of refugees living next to citizens in urban spaces (Oesch 2017). Moreover, market forces have turned citizenship into a commodity for purchase by the rich (Mavelli 2018). For those less fortunate, citizenship is something that must be claimed as a right.

Invoking global human rights regimes, Engin Isin has stipulated that persons anywhere can ‘act *as citizens*’ and thereby ‘constitute themselves as those with the “right to claim rights”’ (2009: 371, italics in original). Here Isin quotes Hannah Arendt’s moral argument that refugees, whose rights are no longer

protected by their own state, still possess the right to ask that they be protected by other states based on our universally shared humanity. According to Isin, refugees can actively produce citizen subjectivities by making demands for rights, for instance by engaging in public protests, rather than by merely waiting for states to issue them citizenship papers. Yet their precarious legal situation also makes protesting risky: without valid papers, refugees can face detention or deportation as well as vilification and attack in the host society. Non-citizens therefore need to mobilise and present their claims by strategic engagements with agents of the host state as well as with its citizens.

By widening the definition of citizenship to include both citizens and non-citizens who ‘act *as* citizens’, Isin and other critical citizenship studies scholars redirect our attention from the absence of rights to what people do with the rights available to them: citizenship requires engagement. This turns the tables conceptually, replacing citizenship as bestowed by states from above with ‘citizenship “from below” – that is, from the perspectives, experiences, knowledge and voices of refugees, migrants and migrant rights activists’ (Nyers and Rygiel 2012: 2). In the case study below, refugees and refugee-activists do the hard work of organising and sustaining a protest with the support of local activist networks and local German politicians. Importantly, the local police protected the protesters throughout, and they are therefore part of this view of citizenship ‘from below’.

Scholars of contemporary meanings of citizenship are fundamentally interested in the rights that individuals get to exercise and the rights that they are denied in our globalised, neoliberal world. And to the extent that citizenship has become unmoored from the control of the nation-state, it has become more indeterminate:

Just what constitutes citizenship and its appropriate modes and forms of conduct are always objects of struggle among citizens, subjects, and objects through claims to citizenship as justice. (Isin 2009: 372)

The analysis of a public protest organised by Syrian refugees in Dortmund suggests that refugee activism and refugees’ claims for a fair asylum process can be a pathway not only to enacting new citizen subjectivities, but also to obtaining concrete asylum and residency rights.

It is important to acknowledge that many of the refugees who participated in the Dortmund protest camp did not launch ‘claims to citizenship as justice’ for the first time. They had fled an authoritarian country, where they had been confronted with and participated in various kinds of struggles for their rights. For decades, the Syrian regime had forced citizens to accept severely curtailed civil rights through a ‘politics of *as if*’ (Wedeen 1999: 30–31, italics in original). By outwardly acting *as if* they believed in the legitimacy of their leaders, Syrian citizens forestalled more repressive surveillance measures by the state. This tacit agreement between authoritarian rulers and citizens broke down in the context of the Arab Spring, when Syrians publicly demanded their dignity and

their rights and the Syrian government responded violently (Lesch 2017). As such, Syrian refugees brought with them to Germany prior experiences and practices of engaged citizenship vis-à-vis the state.

Methods

This study is based on data gathered with the help of internet tools as well as in-person, telephone and Skype interviews with key informants, combining traditional and digital ethnographic methods (Coover 2004; Murthy 2008). Research began with a review of relevant German newspaper and local television news coverage of the Dortmund protest action, as well as blog posts written by the retired editor of the *Westfälische Rundschau* newspaper, Alexander Völkel, who founded an online volunteer news organisation called *Nordstadtblogger* in 2013 that focusses on local news. I met my Syrian key informant, protest co-organiser Sakher al-Mohamad, via the internet, where he maintains an active and activist presence on various platforms. I subsequently met him in Cologne, where he is currently pursuing a Master's degree in international media studies, for four in-depth, face-to-face interviews. Via his digital social network, Sakher put me in touch with four Syrians and four Germans who had participated in the protest camp. Of the eight, six responded to my request to be interviewed via Skype and by telephone for this academic study. With the help of these interviews, as well as their Facebook, Twitter and personal blog posts from the time of the protest, I was able to confirm and elaborate on the timeline established by my review of the news sources. Unless I received their permission to use their own first names, I used pseudonyms for my interlocutors: they were Majd and Mohamadali, both from Syria originally and currently enrolled in computer and international business classes in Dortmund and Cologne, respectively; Robert, a musician; Sigrid, a retired teacher of German as a second language; Jonas, a university student at the time of the protest; and Maria, a high school student in 2015. I directed further questions to Sakher via email and Skype after I had completed the interviews with the other protest participants. The interviews were conducted either in English or in German between June 2018 and August 2019.

Situating the Protest Camp in Dortmund, North Rhine Westphalia (NRW)

With more than half a million residents, Dortmund is the third-largest city in North Rhine Westphalia (NRW), Germany's most populous state. Because Germany practises a system of burden-sharing when it comes to the initial reception and accommodation of asylum seekers, different states are required to meet different federal quotas. Based on federal calculations of NRW's

population size and tax base, about one-fifth of the asylum seekers who arrived in Germany in 2015 were lodged in reception centres across NRW, making it the state that took responsibility for the largest share of refugees in Germany (Deutsche Welle 2015). A significant proportion of the refugees in NRW in 2015 came from Syria. After they submitted their required asylum applications with federal BAMF branch offices across the state, they had to wait for unusually long periods of time to learn about the adjudication of their status. A Dortmund city council member who had been sent to the city's BAMF branch office to investigate the reasons for the delays reported to the public that the offices were still processing asylum claims submitted to them two years earlier (Kolle 2015). From 2013 to 2015, asylum petitions more than doubled in NRW (MAIS 2016).

It is this administrative bottleneck that started the Syrian refugees' protest on Huckarder Street in a residential neighbourhood of Dortmund, where one of the regional BAMF branch offices is located. Fadi Khatib, who had escaped escalating violence in Aleppo, and who had left his wife behind in a refugee camp in Turkey, and co-organiser Sakher al-Mohamad, who had fled Syria after being arrested and questioned for his political activities at Damascus University, used social media to call on fellow Syrians and supportive Dortmund residents to join them. The organisers had planned for a one-day protest action on Tuesday, 9 June, to draw public attention to their situation, but because BAMF officials who met them outside the building insisted that the Syrians had to wait until it was their turn to be processed, the protest was extended and moved to a plaza near Dortmund's main train station (Bandermann and Bornemann 2015). After the decision to extend the protest was made in the late afternoon of 9 June, Fadi and Sakher used their social media networks to ask for logistical support. A testament to Dortmund's vibrant activist networks, the protesters were outfitted with blankets, sleeping bags, tents and water in no time. In this way, the refugees were able to spend the night on the sidewalk outside BAMF. Within days, they decided to relocate the camp to a large public plaza in the city centre near Dortmund's main train station, where they continued to protest until 31 July.

The protesters in the Dortmund camp had different backgrounds: a minority was Kurdish, the majority Arab; most were men between 30 and 50, both Muslim and Christian, but of varying degrees of piety and daily practice; almost half of the men had achieved some higher education, but the other half were shopkeepers, tradespersons or peasants. They came from every region of Syria. Some of them had arrived in Germany without getting fingerprinted along the way, while others had submitted asylum paperwork in another EU country. Some were still waiting for an answer to their initial asylum applications; others had already received rejections and had gone into appeal; and some had obtained notifications that they had to leave Germany, yet because of the ongoing war in Syria nobody enforced the deportation order. What unified the group was their opposition to Bashar al-Assad and the constant

worry about family members left behind. They all checked their cell phones frequently for news about the ongoing fighting in different parts of Syria and for messages from family and friends.

The city of Dortmund was similar to the rest of Germany in 2015, in that it witnessed two kinds of public responses to the large number of refugees arriving: on the one hand, Dortmund residents waited patiently with handwritten welcome signs, bottles of water, food and toys on train-station platforms in the middle of the night to greet tired and exhausted new arrivals (Mushaben 2017; Schiffauer 2019). On the other hand, there were those who opposed the acceptance of asylum seekers, whom they variously glossed as ‘terrorists’ or, equally problematically, as ‘freeloaders’ (*Schmarotzer*) on the German welfare system (Holmes and Castañeda 2016; McGill 2017). Dortmund’s supporters of the protest camp were members of Refugees Welcome Dortmund and Amnesty International, as well as supporters of left-leaning political parties, most prominently Die Grünen and Die Piraten. The supporters included a retired school teacher who offered German conversation classes, as well as high school and university students who felt the German state had to do more and had to do better in how they managed incoming refugees. The Germans in the protest camp belonged to different generations, had different prior protest experiences, and different opinions about political activism and protest strategies. They were unified in their will to help, and committed to letting the refugees decide what kind of actions they wanted to pursue. They considered the protest camp as “an act of self-empowerment of refugees” (*ein Akt der Selbstermächtigung von Geflüchteten*) (Refugees Welcome Dortmund 2015). Yet Dortmund is also home to a very active neo-Nazi network. In February 2015, a group of neo-Nazis brandishing burning torches rallied outside a Dortmund refugee centre chanting anti-foreigner slogans, one of an increasing number of far-right public protests in the city (Deutsche Welle 2015). According to Dortmund’s police chief, five murders, including three murders of police officers, had been linked to neo-Nazis in Dortmund since 2000 (Cottrell 2012). The neo-Nazi presence made Dortmund a particularly dangerous place for refugees to protest publicly, which explains why police officers were deployed to protect the Syrian protest camp against attacks.

Over the course of 53 days, the Syrian protesters created their own protest narrative (Volk 2021). They represented themselves as men who cared deeply about their family members left behind in Syria or in sites of transit in neighbouring countries, and who urgently wanted to bring them to safety (Figure 1). This image of the caring father, brother or son did not only challenge the negative stereotypes about them as single men who might pose a threat to German society, but emphasised the fact that they did not protest for themselves: instead, they wanted to help family members who were in much worse situations than they were. Moreover, Sakher, one of the co-organisers of the protest, stayed in the camp until the end of the protest action although he had received his temporary residency papers early on. He felt strong solidarity

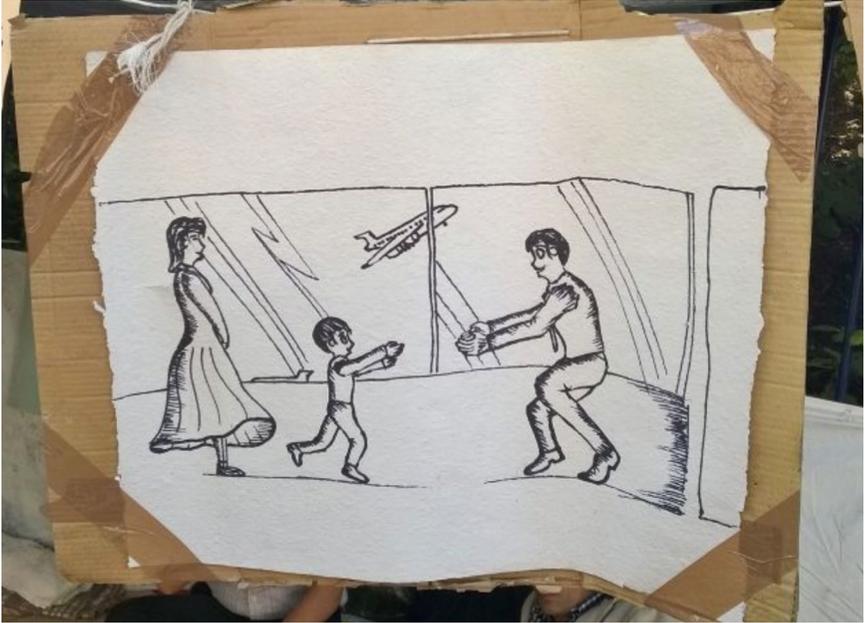


Figure 1: Dortmund Protest Camp Poster, 2015. (Photo by Robert Rutkowski, used with permission).

with other refugees who remained in more precarious legal situations than he was. The protest camp actions resulted in approvals of the Syrian protesters' asylum petitions, even some that had been previously denied.

From the Discourse of Deservingness to Acts of Citizenship

In July 2018, Sakher told me during an interview in Cologne that after he arrived in Germany he felt judged by his looks and by the colour of his skin for the first time in his life. He felt that he had to prove himself worthy to be in Germany. As has been argued by refugee scholars, 'the discourse of deservingness displaces responsibility from historical political and economic policies supported by powerful actors in Europe and the United States and instead locates it in displaced people themselves' (Holmes and Castañeda 2016: 13). When Germans make refugees feel like a burden on German society, they not only actively deflect from Europe's larger political and historical responsibilities for the refugees' displacement – that is, the fact that many of the problems in the Middle East today are the results of Europe's colonial and anti-Semitic policies of the early twentieth century – but they also deflect from the idea that claiming asylum is a human right individuals already possess, rather than a right granted in exchange for a particular kind of behaviour.

In claiming their rights to asylum in the summer of 2015, Syrian refugees in Dortmund pushed back against the discourse of deservingness. Their successful protest camp illustrates that ‘what is important about citizenship is not only that it is a legal status but that it involves practices – social, political, cultural and symbolic’ (Isin and Nielsen 2008: 2). The following sections focus on these political practices – in particular the interactions between Syrian refugees and German politicians and the police outside the BAMF building, in the protest camp and inside the state parliament in Düsseldorf – where rights were claimed, deflected and granted, in order to show what Ong has called ‘new spaces of entangled possibilities’ (2006: 499).

Engaging with the Police

By leaving their refugee reception centres and setting up a camp in a public place, refugees claimed their right to voice their grievances as well as their right to be protected against harm. The protest organisers made sure that their protest was legally logged with the Dortmund police, thereby enacting citizenship subjectivities. The city’s police were dispatched to protect the protesters, because already on the first day a group of 20 neo-Nazis tried to attack the refugees. Five of the attackers were arrested by the police, including a city council member from the neo-Nazi Die Rechte (The Right) Party (Bandermann and Bornemann 2015). Germans hostile to refugees repeatedly approached the camp during the 53 days of its existence, according to my interviews with all protest participants. According to the press, from the very start, the Dortmund police response to right-wing threats and attacks was unambiguous: ‘We will not permit that people who need our help are intimidated by Nazi methods’ (Bandermann and Bornemann 2015). Fadi went out of his way to express his appreciation for the Dortmund police, saying: ‘The police in our country would kill us. The police in Germany protect us’ (Bandermann and Bornemann 2015). Several German supporters emphasised during interviews that the relationship between police and protesters remained very – to some, surprisingly – cordial, as proven by occasional friendly soccer matches on the plaza between some members of the police force and the refugees.

Throughout the protest, the police demanded compliance with camp rules: that no more than 50 protesters stayed in the camp overnight on any given day; that everyone slept under open tarps that could be monitored, rather than in enclosed tents that would have afforded protesters privacy; that the camp was kept clean and trash properly disposed of; and that the portable toilet was installed and properly serviced. The toilet required a rental and service fee that needed to be paid weekly. In the protesters’ retelling of the initial organisation of the camp, the portable toilet requirement featured prominently, because the police were going to shut the protest down, if no toilet was put in place. When the portable toilet was finally delivered on a flatbed truck by activists of Refugees Welcome Dortmund, there was a true sense of relief (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Flatbed truck with portable toilet arrives on Huckarder Street, 9 June 2015 (Photo by Robert Rutkowski, used with permission).

In response to the ‘no-more-than-50-protesters-at-a-time’ rule, the camp organisers assigned everyone who wanted to participate in the protest to different shifts. They also assigned different cooking and cleaning tasks to groups of protesters who took great care to keep the camp clean. They kept checking in regularly with the police to ensure that they were in compliance with the rules. While the refugees thus enacted ‘good citizenship’, the police in turn enacted ‘good policing’ by allowing the protesters to run their own daily affairs, and by conducting their own evening headcount to make sure no more than 50 spent the night. At the end of the protest action, the police went on record, stating that the Syrian refugees had protested peacefully and that ‘communication channels never broke down’, which led to an ‘entirely positive conclusion (*ein durchweg positives Fazit*)’ (Bandermann and Thiel 2015).

The supportive stance by the Dortmund police needs to be understood within the context of the prior far-right protests against refugees and the firm stance against neo-Nazi activities by the state’s Interior Minister Ralf Jäger. Jäger was responsible, in 2012, for shutting down the right-wing group *Nationaler Widerstand* (National Resistance), calling it ‘xenophobic, racist and a threat to peaceful coexistence’ (Deutsche Welle 2015). In 2015, Jäger publicly expressed his support for the Syrian refugees on the second day of their protest in Dortmund, criticising the slow asylum review process, and he later paid a

surprise visit to the camp to show his solidarity in person (Volmerich 2015). The Interior Minister oversees and enforces guidelines for the police force, and it was important to Jäger to take a strong stance against neo-Nazi groups. The Dortmund police department shared his views, and they protected the refugees' rights to act *as* citizens.

Engaging with Municipal Politicians

In 2015, no elected political representative on the municipal or state level in NRW could ignore the plight of refugees, as their attempts to flee the war in Syria continued to dominate the daily news. Especially politicians in a state that prided itself on taking in a significant share of asylum applicants, a six-week-long protest camp, which received regular coverage on the local TV channel, was something that needed a response. So on 15 July, the Syrian protesters received a visit from a delegation of Dortmund's municipal council, including the mayor of Dortmund, Birgit Jörder. They came to the city's train station plaza with an official resolution in support of the refugees' right to protest (Völkel 2015b). The delegates belonged to the main parties – Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, Die Grünen, Die Piraten and Die Linken – and they sat with the refugees and listened to stories about their family members suffering from the ongoing violence in Syria: two relatives of protesters had been killed during the time of the protest, several more wounded, children among them. The council members expressed their dismay over the extended asylum processing time, which prevented the protesters from applying for asylum for their relatives. Several council members signed the refugees' petition urging BAMF to act faster. The council members inquired about what the refugees might need, and were pleased to hear about the many Dortmund supporters – individuals and community groups – who had been providing them with food and water, and a communal kitchen where they could cook. The city's fire department had sent a truck on a particularly hot day to provide cooling relief to the camp residents.

Wanting to show more tangible support than merely a written resolution, Jörder asked how the council could help. Learning that the weekly maintenance fee of 125 euros for the required portable toilet exceeded the protesters' budget, she pledged that the city council would cover that cost. While a rather symbolic sum of money from the point of view of the city of Dortmund, the 125 euros was a significant sum for the protest organisers, who had to depend on voluntary financial contributions from protesters – each camp resident gave 1 euro a day to contribute to expenses – and the occasional donation from passersby in order to provide the basic necessities to the protest participants. While the mayor of Dortmund could not promise to expedite the asylum process, since that was under the purview of BAMF, she promised the protesters that she would personally advocate an increase in BAMF staff in order to improve the situation.

Before they left, the municipal council members had their photographs taken at the protest camp, indicating that they wanted to broadcast their protest camp visit to their own left-of-center constituents who supported more refugee rights. Importantly, the local politicians did not urge the protesters to go back to their assigned refugee centres and wait quietly for the result of their asylum petitions. Instead, they reaffirmed the refugees' rights to make their demands, publicly took the refugees' side and promised to put pressure on the federal government, which oversees BAMF. Individual council members dropped by the protest camp throughout its duration, and each time they expressed support. Their public, but not always publicised, visits strengthened the message that Syrian refugees were indeed welcome in Dortmund. And it confirmed the Syrians' right to demand their rights.

Engaging with State Politicians

The Syrian refugees not only constituted their citizenship subjectivities by presenting their claims to and receiving recognition from local politicians, they also took their demands to the parliament building in NRW's capital Düsseldorf. The protest organisers followed an invitation to attend an NRW state parliament session as guests of the pro-refugee party Die Piraten. At the end of the session, Minister President Hannelore Kraft agreed to meet with them for an in-person discussion, and so Fadi Khatib and Sakher al-Mohamad, and their translator Elhakam Sukhni, had the opportunity to convey a list of demands to NRW's head of state (Völkel 2015a). Hannelore Kraft, the Social Democratic Minister President of NRW at the time, headed the state parliament in coalition with the state's Green Party on a pro-environment, pro-immigrant platform. So she was sympathetic to complaints about delays in asylum processing, but she immediately pointed to a backlog of over 200,000 applications and the high number of new submissions, 10,000, every month. But the head of NRW told Fadi and Sakher through their translator Elhakam Sukhni that the federal government in Berlin had taken notice of the existing bottleneck (*'In Berlin sei die Dringlichkeit mittlerweile angekommen'*) (Völkel 2015a). Even BAMF officials themselves admitted repeatedly that they lagged behind (Bandermann and Bornemann 2015).

By federal law, the review of asylum petitions of newly arriving refugees involves a particular distribution of labour, whereby the federal government accepts and adjudicates each individual petition through the BAMF offices it oversees; meanwhile states and municipalities as well as charities and civil society organisations are responsible to house, feed and provide small weekly stipends and medical care to the refugees during the entire asylum review process (Katz et al. 2016). The states receive some subsidies from the federal government, but have to pay a significant share of the costs out of their own state tax revenues, as well as rely on the volunteer labour of their own citizens. In 2015, that meant the longer the federal government took in making its asylum

decisions, the larger the expenses that NRW's Social Democratic politicians had to defray out of their state budget. In the case of the Dortmund protest camp, the state also incurred the cost of the 24-hour-a-day police protection. That explains in part why NRW's Interior Minister Ralf Jäger publicly criticised BAMF during his visit at the protest camp and called on the government 'to hurry up' (*'eine Schippe drauf legen'*) (Bandermann and Bornemann 2015). His words stood in stark contrast to those of the federal Christian Democratic Interior Minister at the time, Thomas de Maizière, who had famously penned a front-page article in the *Bild am Sonntag* newspaper demanding that refugees assimilate to Germany's alleged *Leitkultur* (lead culture) (Pearlman 2017). De Maizière coincidentally visited Dortmund to attend a meeting during the time of the Syrian refugee protest, and chose not to visit the camp (Völkel 2015b).

While Social Democratic politicians were publicly more supportive of refugees than their colleagues in the Christian Democratic Party, they also insisted that asylum applications proceed through proper channels. In their meeting, Minister President Kraft declared that she opposed 'helping protesting refugees specifically', because, if she did, 'we will have protest camps everywhere'. Her rationale was that 'we don't want to pit different groups of refugees against each other' (Völkel 2015a). In other words, NRW's Minister President recognised that refugees had the right to take to the streets – and even empathised with their demands – but the idea that more refugees would set up protest camps in cities all over her state clearly did not appeal to her. Citizens as well as non-citizens had to exercise their rights in certain state-approved ways and follow the rules. On their part, the Syrian refugees wanted to avoid starting a discussion of who was the most deserving refugee. Instead, they wanted all refugees to be treated equally and receive their asylum decision in a timely fashion. The Syrians saw their protest action in Dortmund as part of a larger push to improve German asylum processes and asylum rights nationally. By speaking with the Minister President of NRW, they were part of the larger national discussions.

Conclusion

By the end of 2015, Germany had granted 95.8 per cent of all Syrian asylum applicants refugee status, which meant that most applicants obtained temporary residency rights between one and three years, which entitled them to free language classes, medical care, housing and job training (BAMF 2016). That makes 2015 an important year to investigate when it comes to understanding Germany's refugee and asylum policies. It is important to recall that in mid-July 2015 Merkel had declared in a public town hall meeting in Rostock in front of a group of high school students including several refugees that Germany was unable to accept all the displaced people who wanted to come (Holmes and Castañeda 2016). Members of her own Christian Democratic Party strongly

opposed accepting more refugees (Brady 2015). And yet in late August 2015, Chancellor Merkel decided to open Germany's borders to refugees and to welcome them (Mushaben 2017). In the context of the seismic shift in national asylum policy, what occurred on 31 July 2015 in Dortmund's BAMF office matters: officials announced that they would once more review denied asylum petitions of protest camp participants who had their fingerprints taken in Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria or Spain – *de facto* suspending the implementation of the Dublin Regulation (Bandermann and Thiel 2015). That decision came three weeks before federal BAMF officials in the headquarters in Nuremberg made the internal –and later leaked – decision to suspend the Dublin Regulation in their review of Syrian applicants (Keil 2017; Pearlman 2017).

This article highlighted factors and conditions that may have contributed to the changes in federal asylum policy that may have been previously overlooked, and it did so by looking at a case of refugee activism. Syrian refugees organised and carried out an extended public protest that required negotiating differences amongst refugees, coordinating with committed citizens who supported them and the local police who protected them. The Syrians enacted citizenship in a variety of ways; this article highlighted some of the political engagements that aimed to change Germany's asylum policy at large. Despite a variety of challenges and states of exhaustion, the Syrian protesters were successful at enacting citizenship inside and beyond the protest camp, which showed that refugees possess and can exercise their limited power effectively.

While it is crucial to recognise the work that refugees do to be accepted as citizens in host societies, is it necessary to acknowledge that a discussion that focusses on refugees' rights and their acts *as* citizens has its pitfalls:

Citizenship is a paradigm that is built fundamentally on exclusion and othering, upon the lines that divide. In translating noncitizen agency into a framework that remains described by citizenship, we lose the capacity to understand and engage noncitizenship as a political subjectivity that exists in an autonomous way. (Johnson 2015: 957)

This astute critique points to the larger paradox that the fight for citizenship rights takes place within and cements the system that excludes refugees in the first place. And in that sense, a protest for access to citizenship cannot and does not alter larger political regimes of legal exclusion.

Indeed, five years after Angela Merkel's welcoming '*Wir schaffen das!*' proclamation, on 31 August, 2020, the BBC's Visual Data and Journalism Team produced a report on the current state of the refugee crisis. The report began with the sobering news that boats with migrants and refugees kept sinking in the Mediterranean, increasing the already horrific death toll amongst people fleeing to a place of safety. It then described some of the hurdles refugees who were given the right to reside in Europe have had to face. Relating to Germany specifically, another study found that only 49 per cent of a group of 8,000 refugees had found steady employment within five years of arriving, and that the

employment situation had become more challenging during the coronavirus pandemic (TVDJT of the BBC 2020). Only 44 per cent had obtained 'good' or 'very good' German language skills in 2020. A 2017 study had found that '22 percent of refugees said they never spent any time with Germans', painting a troubling picture of the cultural isolation experienced by some of the refugees (TVDJT of the BBC 2020). Also in 2017, NRW moved to the right politically, following national trends. The anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany Party (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) was able to obtain seats in the NRW state parliament after the elections of 2017, which coincided with the Christian Democrats' ascent to the helm of state power, replacing the Social Democrats (Smale 2017). The Christian Democrats and Angela Merkel returned to a policy of restricting entry into the country.

In spite of this turn of events, in the spring of 2020 Sakher al-Mohamad told me that he had obtained his unrestricted residency permit, which allowed him to remain in Germany indefinitely. He no longer needed to fear the possibility of deportation and so he felt relieved. In the era of rising populist sentiments and economic uncertainties, 'the right to *genuinely* permanent residence can be seen as one of the few remaining privileges which separates citizens from settled non-citizens in contemporary liberal states' (Anderson et al. 2011: 548, italics in original). Still without a German passport, Sakher is nevertheless confident that legal citizenship is within his reach. He continues to be an activist, as well as a student, but now he organises and dispatches support to Cologne residents who need help navigating the city's coronavirus restrictions (CGN Coronavirus Fighters 2020). In other words, enacting citizenship can take many forms beyond public protests in urban spaces. Through such acts of citizenship, non-citizens can exercise their political and moral agency within the larger collective and contribute to the construction of new and critical meanings of contemporary citizenship.

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Note

1. Personal communication, Sakher al-Mohamad, January 2019.

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