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# Informal citizen volunteering with border crossers in Greece: the informality double-bind and intimate solidarity

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## ABSTRACT

This article introduces the concept of the informality double-bind, arguing that informal citizen volunteers must choose between helping border crossers in less formal and more intimate ways due to the lack of formal response, or leaving them to receive the inadequate aid of state-sponsored and formal organisations. Either choice entails multiple risks to both border crosser and volunteer. Drawing on fieldwork in Athens, Greece, in 2017–2018, we expose how volunteers engaged in ‘intimate solidarity’ with border crossers, giving out personal phone numbers and inviting them to stay in the volunteers’ personal apartments. The article argues that (a) the cause of the informality double-bind was the very lack of formal service provision which propelled volunteers to get involved in the first place, (b) organisational bureaucracy shelters government actors, aid workers and more formal volunteers from facing such ethical dilemmas, and (c) while these bureaucratic procedures appeared to produce precarity, they may have at the same time protected the border crossers and aid workers from risks associated with informal aid.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Citizen volunteer; intimate solidarity; informality double-bind; border crosser; Greece

You feel that sometimes there is no place this person can go and sometimes you just have to do it yourself. You have this idea that there’s some organisation or the state that can deal with it. But after asking everyone for help with no luck, you get to a certain point and you realize: if I don’t do anything, then nothing’s going to happen. – Julia, legal aid volunteer, June 2017, Athens

## Introduction

Due to policies and practices of the EU and Greek governments, thousands of border crossers have been left homeless in Greece; overcrowding on island camps persists to the extent that severe psychological distress and suicidal ideation are commonplace; and border crossers wait many years before hearing the outcome of an asylum claim

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(GCR 2018; MSF 2019). It has been reported that Greek state actors have been unable to 'guarantee access to [even] basic forms of protection' for unaccompanied minors, and have relied largely on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to fulfil this role (Synthesis Report for the EMN Study 2018, 26). Likewise, large organisations have been generally unable to offer immediate solutions, leaving border crossers on the streets (UNICEF 2017). It is important to note that other EU states have largely failed their commitments to relocating refugees from Greece. The EU government, furthermore, has not enforced states to live up to their quotas (Zachová et al. 2018).

Civil society organisations, international and local NGOs, and volunteers from around the globe welcomed border crossers and offered immediate life-saving services such as food and shelter as well as legal services, solidarity initiatives, and political advocacy (Guribye and Mydland 2018). Citizen volunteers, by virtue of their flexibility and informal roles, have taken responsibility in finding solutions for various issues, even through hosting border crossers in their personal apartments, an action we classify under the term 'intimate solidarity'. This has led to what we term an 'informality double-bind' in which volunteers find it difficult to make informed ethical decisions: on the one hand, intimate solidarity may be considered necessary because without it in certain situations border crossers are left on the streets with little or no aid. On the other hand volunteers who engage in intimate solidarity can put border crossers and themselves at various forms of risk.

Our conclusions are based on fieldwork conducted by author A in Greece in 2017–2018 with informal citizen volunteers. First, we argue that the cause of the informality double-bind was the very lack of formal service provision which propelled the volunteers to get involved in the first place. The lack of bureaucracy allowed these volunteers the space to respond spontaneously and without much oversight, while it also *forced* volunteers to respond to certain situations rather than embedding the response in formal processes. Our second argument is that organisational bureaucracy shelters government actors, aid workers and more formal volunteers (those volunteering within [usually large] structured organisations) from facing such ethical dilemmas. Our third, and somewhat converse argument is that while these bureaucratic procedures appeared to produce precarity (by, for example, neglecting border crossers' homelessness) they may have at the same time protected the border crossers and aid workers from risks associated with informal aid. Following these arguments, we conclude that informal volunteers are forced to act in subversive ways to state-sponsored and formal responses precisely because they are informal. Our purpose is to (a) introduce the concept of the informality double-bind and bring attention to its productiveness in better understanding the volunteer/solidarity landscape writ large, and (b) expand upon intimate solidarity to consider its risks and benefits.

We begin by defining and clarifying the terms that we use due to the many contentious and overlapping terms in the literature. Recent literature has explored different aspects of informal volunteering, in both the Global South and the Global North. Fechter and Schwittay (2019) call this 'citizen aid', and categorise it as such on the basis of individuals helping out with private funds and on-the-ground support. Other scholars describe similar groups of citizen volunteers under a range of labels (see Castañeda 2013; Guribye and Mydland 2018; Sandri 2018; Haaland and Wallevik 2019; Vandevordt and Verschraegen 2019; Schack and Witcher 2020). What all authors have emphasised in their categorisations is the independent and informal nature of volunteering

without state funding, oversight, nor usually, NGO involvement. We acknowledge, as others do, the unstable nature of these categorisations; the umbrella terms represent a fluid set of practices that may change over time, and citizen volunteers may later find work with NGOs or even government (Fechter and Schwittay 2019; Lewis 2019).

We have chosen to focus on author A's group of interlocutors as 'informal citizen volunteers' following Castañeda's (2013) 'acts of citizenship' and Fechter and Schwittay's (2019) 'citizen aid'. Castañeda (2013, 228) explains that these 'citizens express solidarity with migrants beyond the traditional bounds of political community' in which the citizen allies dissent from the state to offer aid to non-citizens. This mirrors the main characteristic of 'citizen aid' (Fechter and Schwittay 2019), which is that citizens engage with beneficiaries outside of NGO and state organisations; personal agency and decision-making are key to this informal type of aid. Although many of the interlocutors were not Greek citizens, their citizenship in the Global North granted them social capital – a powerful resource in which members of certain groups have greater access to resources for personal benefit – that aided their cause (Bourdieu 1980). Our choice of label thus denotes the symbolic power exercised by these volunteers, which is inherently tied to their citizenship. For ease of reading, we refer to them simply as 'citizen volunteers' or 'volunteers'.

This article attends particularly to the intimate solidarity of citizen volunteers – coined by Scheibelhofer to analyse his female interlocutor's actions of taking young male refugees<sup>1</sup> into their homes in Austria (2019, 215). While Scheibelhofer does not explicitly define the contours of intimate solidarity, 'emotional attachment' (2019, 204), 'intense closeness' (2019, 207) and 'intimate and emotional bonds' (2019, 206) are terms used to describe the concept. Scheibelhofer juxtaposes intimate solidarity with 'sponsorship', in which interlocutors aided refugees on a personal basis and still had to 'negotiate closeness', but whose aid was not as intensely intimate, as with the refugees who lived outside the interlocutor's homes (2019). I employ this concept of intimate solidarity to analyse the close relationship and aid that was offered in the form of cohabitation between two female volunteers and two male unaccompanied minor border crossers in Athens. However, we also consider smaller actions, such as giving personal phone numbers and meeting up for late nights chats, offering money, and engaging in less professionally distanced ways as forms of intimate solidarity. We define intimate solidarity as both social closeness and emotional attachment. It goes beyond sponsorship or solidarity and requires a leap of faith and trust of the other (from both sides). Its intimacy places both parties in a vulnerable position – as violence, criminalisation, and attachment are possible risks.

We employ the term 'border crosser' when speaking about migrants. This term encompasses undocumented migrants, would-be asylum seekers (those who are trying to seek asylum but face barriers to accessing the asylum service), asylum seekers, and refugees. It does not include international tourists, businesspeople, or aid workers and volunteers. The reasons for choosing this label are manifold though centre on the desire to avoid symbolic and epistemic violence associated with value-laden labels (Schack and Witcher 2020). For example, the border crossers within this research migrated for multiple (sometimes overlapping) reasons, including but not limited to: state persecution, religious persecution by armed groups, state-sponsored conflict, generalised violence, and economic insecurity. A border crosser may not be granted refugee status, but may have fled extreme violence or a slow death through poverty. Calling

someone an ‘economic migrant’ or a ‘refugee’ adds a layer of judgment about their deservingness, and obfuscates the historical, political, and structural factors that have culminated in their decision to migrate (Malkki 1996).

Before presenting the data, it is important to contextualise informal citizen volunteering (which falls under a range of labels) in the literature. Our analysis assumes an understanding of contemporary solidarity in the Greek context and springs from much of the literature regarding citizen volunteers. Our arguments, however, stem from the dearth of scholarly work exploring the specific double-bind in which these volunteers found themselves.

### Informal citizen volunteers and (intimate) solidarity

There is a blurred line between the interlocutors, the citizen volunteers, who were international, and the local Greek solidarity movement. These citizen volunteers were largely socialised and influenced by ‘solidarians’ – a neologism meant to capture the essence of solidarity – and at times worked with or alongside them. Therefore, it is essential to begin with an explanation of Greek solidarity. Solidarity, in its contemporary form in Greece, transitioned in 2009 from a little-known form of horizontal helping to its current role as an oft-discussed social phenomenon. Due to the catastrophic economic crisis and subsequent years of austerity, there was a collapse of the middle class and the welfare state. Solidarity began with ‘anti-middlemen initiatives’ whereby farmers sold directly to customers and transitioned their focus to soup kitchens, social pharmacies, and other services that responded to specific on-the-ground needs of locals (Rakopoulos 2015; Papataxiarchis 2016; Rozakou 2016). Scholars have variably described solidarity as spontaneous (Leontidou 2014), informal and inclusive (Rakopoulos 2015), disinterested, and non-hierarchical (Rozakou 2016). In 2015, a plethora of solidarity initiatives transitioned to helping the new border crossers, nearly one million of whom passed through Greece that year. These initiatives helped with housing, food and service provision, and advocacy (Rozakou 2016). When citizen volunteers began to arrive, largely in 2015, they were influenced by, and often began volunteering with, solidarity initiatives.

Many scholars highlight that informal volunteering emerged as a response to state and NGO inaction. For example, Sandri explains that ‘volunteer humanitarians’ stepped in to offer aid to border crossers in the Calais camp in France because of government and NGO inaction (2018). The state is able to ‘maximize powers by withdrawing from social responsibilities such as welfare, while minimizing economic costs’ by outsourcing the responsibility to civil society actors and NGOs (Sandri 2018, 71). Citizen volunteers have furthermore shown a lack of trust in governing institutions to properly aid border crossers ‘due to their top-down agendas’ (Guribye and Mydland 2018, 360).

Some authors have gone further to highlight the subversive quality of informal citizen volunteering as something that offers aid and solidarity to border crossers whom the state or large organisations may deem ineligible, such as undocumented migrants and those who are to be deported (Castañeda 2013; Vandevordt and Verschraegen 2019). Haaland and Wallevik analyse these initiatives as ‘challeng[ing] the so-called humanitarian aid machinery’ (2019, 1870). Informal volunteering ‘stands as a symbol against the strict and violent policies of migration across Europe’ by ‘contesting the state and its practices at the border’ (Sandri 2018, 66). This is in line with Shack and Witcher’s

assertion that ‘civil society actors’ ‘challenge state policies and practices of hostile hospitality’ by offering aid to border crossers in ways that are more inclusive than the state and often deemed better by the border crossers (2020, 15).

There are many positive and negative representations of informal volunteering in the literature. In the former camp, scholars highlight that citizen volunteers are flexible and responsive to what the beneficiaries actually desire and need (Appe and Telch 2020), offering quick responses (Haaland and Wallevik 2019) because they are not beholden to government funding (Haaland and Wallevik 2017). Citizen volunteers are generally not afraid to denounce state actions that larger aid organisations would not (Haaland and Wallevik 2019; Sandri 2018). They can act as watchdogs and report on illegal government actions and human rights abuses. For example, by monitoring the sea, they keep authorities from performing illegal pushbacks of refugee boats into Turkey – an occurrence that has been reported on multiple occasions (Schack and Witcher 2020). There are often new forms of collaboration that include non-hierarchy, group decision-making, and affective communication (Rozakou 2016; Sandri 2018). This includes the ability to connect with the beneficiaries and to see directly where the donation money is going (Haaland and Wallevik 2017). Some citizen volunteers, furthermore, remain in border crossers’ lives for years, sometimes becoming more like family (Scheibelhofer 2019).

However, informal volunteering has faced skepticism from aid organisations (Helsloot and Ruitenberg 2004) for perceived lack of building strong, sustainable relationships with local government; a lack of accountability (Guribye and Mydland 2018); and offering ‘amateur aid’ (Haaland and Wallevik 2017). Citizen volunteers sometimes face criminalisation from authorities for offering aid outside of the state-sponsored response (Rosello 2001; Haaland and Wallevik 2019; Schack and Witcher 2020). And in some cases, a rift between volunteers and locals has arisen; in one case in Greece, the locals blamed the volunteers for the continuing arrival of border crossers and a decrease in profitable tourism (Guribye and Mydland 2018).

We analyse the interlocutors in keeping with the analyses of informal citizen volunteering presented above, conceptualising them as separate from, and often antagonistic to, government and NGO aid. While we don’t refute some of the criticisms aimed at informal volunteering, it is often the lack of formal response that forces volunteers to respond informally, thereby denying them the ability to forge strong connections with government. For example, in research describing the challenges of ‘HIV buddies’, who were volunteers working intimately with HIV patients, governments and healthcare systems saved millions of dollars by relying on free work, while volunteers were expected to work more intimately and during non-office hours with HIV patients (Claxton, Catalan, and Burgess 1998). These HIV buddies felt guilt at not being available at all hours and encountered burnout (Claxton, Catalan, and Burgess 1998; Maslanka 1996; Stolinski et al. 2004). This research shows that informality and intimate solidarity could lead to exploitation of volunteers and exposes the tricky situation of navigating conceptions of responsibility, similar to our concept of the informality double-bind.

We aim to focus the remainder of the article on the concept of intimate solidarity. In what follows we show how: (a) the lack of necessary aid created the informality double-bind, forcing some volunteers to offer intimate solidarity rather than embedding this type of aid in formal processes (b) organisational bureaucracy protected aid workers from this informality double-bind, and (c) the very act of neglect by aid organisations could be seen

to protect the border crossers and aid workers/volunteers from risks associated with informal aid. We conclude by exploring the productiveness of the informality double-bind as a framework with which to analyse the humanitarian landscape and expand upon the concept of intimate solidarity.

## Methods

The body of work that we draw on here is comprised of interviews, observations, and author A's own volunteer work within organisations in 2017–2018; although part of a larger project in which she also interviewed aid workers and government actors, this article focuses solely on the volunteers. The volunteer work she herself engaged in was crucial to understand the complications that volunteers faced. In Athens, the site we focus on in this article, author A volunteered within an informal legal aid association that was comprised of international and Greek lawyers and volunteers, some of whom were not legally trained. The volunteers travelled to Greece, where they lived for months or years, some only returning to their home countries on occasion to make money in order to continue their unpaid work in Greece. They often volunteered in two or more organisations, creating collectives and ad hoc solidarity initiatives. Some of the interlocutors presented here have now been in Greece on and off since 2015.

This article draws on semi-structured interviews with sixteen citizen volunteers and one aid worker as well as one focus group interview with seven citizen volunteers. The volunteers belonged to the legal aid association in Athens or to the wider association that was the umbrella for this legal team. The interviews, conducted in English, ranged between thirty minutes to two and a half hours, with some interlocutors interviewed twice, one year apart, to garner additional information. Among other questions, interlocutors were asked to describe their roles; challenges they and border crossers faced; interactions with, and conceptions of, other service providers; and motivations.

While coding in the field for the larger project, the issue of a double-bind emerged, prompting a purposive sampling strategy in which casual conversations with tens of volunteers narrowed author A's focus to the interlocutors presented in this article. Analysis was employed through thematic coding using NVivo software, and occurred iteratively, with interview questions adapted based on new insights in the field. Informed consent was gained initially at the outset of research, at the beginning of each interview (both written and audio), and throughout the volunteer placement, as it was common for volunteers to view author A as one of their own, and she wanted to ensure they remembered she was conducting research.

As a researcher, author A, too, was part of the social interaction in both interview and participant-observation settings. The types of questions she asked, her background, her own aims, and even her appearance and mannerisms possibly affected the way a participant responded. She wants to acknowledge that her volunteer involvement and close relationship with the volunteers may have inadvertently affected the ways in which they related, shared information, and aided border crossers in her presence. However, we also believe that through her continuous presence as a volunteer, the interlocutors



regarded her as a colleague and often let down their guards to speak candidly, while knowing that she was recording and analysing these conversations.

The findings below are based on personal observations, repeated interviews, and informal conversations with citizen volunteers. Ethical approval was gained through the University of Amsterdam and participating organisations. All names, nationalities, and personal characteristics have been changed to preserve anonymity. We have given the quotes a location, date and pseudonym for clarity.

### Informal volunteers and forced intimate solidarity

The legal aid project, situated in the Omonoia neighbourhood of Athens, was formed by informal citizen volunteers who had been, or were actively practicing, lawyers in their home countries or had studied law, and others who were not trained in any legal profession. In 2016 it started with the objective to give legal aid in the form of interview preparation and legal representation for issues such as family reunification and appeals cases. However, the complexity of the border crossers' needs quickly became apparent – from requesting medical treatment to legal aid and accommodation. Because they were part of an informal organisation with many volunteers and had contact with other formal organisations around the city, these informal volunteers operated with a certain level of flexibility. They soon began to offer various services, such as physically accompanying unaccompanied minors to the Regional Asylum Office, the officially designated bureaucratic site to begin the asylum process, helping border crossers find accommodation, and connecting them to doctors and psychologists affiliated with national and international NGOs and local hospitals. If legal aid was required, the volunteers would book an appointment with one of the rotating lawyers from elsewhere in Europe or a Greek lawyer if the case was particularly complicated.

One of the most striking and pervasive requests from border crossers who approached the legal team was for shelter. David, a legal aid volunteer from the UK, noted, it was 'every day—many times a day!'. And cases involving homeless unaccompanied minors were common; in author A's time there, at least a few times a week the legal team encountered a number of minors with no space in a minor shelter, apartment, or even camp. Often this was due to these minors' lack of legal asylum documentation, but could even be possible when minors were legal refugees. Therefore, once a week, one of these volunteers met a group of unaccompanied minors and brought them to the Regional Asylum Office to register for asylum in person.<sup>2</sup> This office was reserved for 'vulnerable' asylum seekers and those from specific countries. Being under the age of eighteen and travelling alone was considered a vulnerability, and the minors were therefore able to register at this office. However, it took roughly one to three months for the registration to be complete before the minors were called back to pick up their trifold document, which acted as a formal ID and conferred eligibility to sign up for state housing (which could then take another few months, depending on their age and situation). Therefore, citizen volunteers on the legal aid team tried to come up with alternative solutions to accommodate unaccompanied minors while they were in this transition phase. The volunteers usually went through the list of 'official' agencies to help border crossers with their issues. However, organisations were overburdened, sometimes hard to reach, and usually unable to offer services outside office hours or any immediate



solutions. A typical solution for accommodating unaccompanied minors usually involved calling all of the shelters in the city to see if there was space. In rare situations, housing could be secured, mainly because the minor was particularly young or vulnerable, or was female – but in most cases, adequate accommodation was hard to find, and minors were left to sleep on the streets or stay with friends.

During the summer of 2017, unaccompanied minors were the responsibility of the Public Prosecutor, who acted as a guardian for thousands of minors (Presidential Decree (P.D.) 61/1999[18] and the Civil Code [articles 1589–1654]). The government had also begun appointing paid guardians, who could be trained social workers, psychologists, or have other qualifications. But, in practice,

usually, there [was] no further action by the Attorney for the appointment of a permanent guardian or other actions as to the person of the minor [...] [due to the] the large number of unaccompanied minors that District Attorney offices are called to protect. (EMN Focused Study 2014, 15)

This system was updated in 2018 and, according to Greek law under Article 18 L 4554/2018, each unaccompanied minor shall be temporarily given a guardian, who is a paid government employee. This person's responsibilities (for the full list, see Greek Council for Refugees (CGR) 2018) include but are not limited to:

- ensuring decent accommodation in special reception structures for unaccompanied children;
- representing and assisting the child in all judicial and administrative procedures;
- accompanying the child to clinics or hospitals.

However, as we will show below, the government-appointed guardians were unable to fulfil all of these duties. This is in line with the findings of CGR, who have reported as much (Greek Council for Refugees 2018). This institutional neglect of border crossers, especially minors, led to the informality double-bind, as volunteers, who had flown to Greece to help, were faced with homeless border crossers living in precarity. In what follows we share a case in which two volunteers on the legal aid team hosted two unaccompanied minors during three months in the summer of 2017.

Nastasha, a volunteer lawyer from the Netherlands, and Hilde, a psychologist from Germany, rented a large apartment in the Exarchia neighbourhood of Athens. In addition to their volunteer work, Nastasha and Hilde were hosting Anwar, seventeen, from Iraq, and Hakim, also seventeen, from Afghanistan. Both were registered as asylum seekers and waiting to hear the outcomes of their asylum claims. Anwar had self-harmed and had been brought from the minor shelter to the psychiatric ward of a local hospital, where he met Hilde. Eventually, he was discharged, but the shelter would not take him back. They reasoned that he was a danger to himself and possibly to others. If not for Hilde, he would have gone from the psychiatric ward of the hospital onto the street. Instead, she brought him to her apartment. Hilde reflected upon her decision saying, 'Of course I didn't want to take him in at first. I understand the commitment and the risk. But in the end, I was afraid of what he would do to himself if he was released onto the streets'.

Hakim, likewise, was facing homelessness. Even as a registered asylum seeker and an unaccompanied minor, there were no places in a shelter or a camp open for him. Nastasha, having helped him with a legal issue, decided that he could share a room with Anwar. The women called every child protection agency they knew of – from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Save the Children to the shelters for unaccompanied minors – to explain the situation. They disclosed that these youth, both registered asylum seekers, were facing homelessness and that the women themselves were hosting them. None of the organisations was able to accommodate either of the boys. Hilde and Nastasha contacted the government and were told that Hakim had a guardian, who was paid for by the state, to help unaccompanied minors. The woman later learned that she had met with Hakim shortly before he was to be released onto the streets from the hospital and had ostensibly done nothing about it. And through repeated calls to the government, the women were also able to secure a guardian for Anwar. However, both of these guardians were unable to secure the youths housing.

It was relatively common among citizen volunteers in both Athens and Lesbos to host border crossers in their houses. The number of unaccompanied minors living on the streets during this fieldwork in the summer of 2017 was officially reported to be over a thousand (UNICEF 2017). Camps were overcrowded, and most were not registering more residents. Even the illegal squatted settlements were full and required months of waiting. Being underage could be a detriment to their ability to secure housing because of the limited spaces in shelters for unaccompanied minors. Furthermore, there was a hierarchy of deservingness for minors based on age: the younger were considered more vulnerable. For example, when speaking with a social worker at Time's Up (a pseudonym), an organisation offering accommodation, education, and other services to locals and border crossers in Athens, author A asked how it was possible that Anwar and Hakim, after months of waiting, still had no possibility of state accommodation. Upon hearing their age, the social worker shrugged his shoulders and responded with a half-apologetic, half-defensive facial expression.

What can we do? We know there are not enough spaces for minors. We have waiting lists months-long. Who is more vulnerable, a seventeen year-old or a fifteen year old? Because today I have to find accommodation for a fifteen year-old. (Tryfon, August, 2017)

We found that a widespread explanation among citizen volunteers for their placement in the informality double-bind was the gap in services left by the Greek state and large humanitarian organisations. As shown, this resulted in thousands of homeless border crossers living in precarity. Citizen volunteers argued that the lack of services forced them to act, regardless of whether they had the resources or the institutional capability. The collaboration between organisations and informal volunteer groups could be helpful yet, as shown in the quotes above, the resources of nearly all organisations were so strapped that border crossers often bounced from one organisation to another, arbitrarily and usually dependent on human connections, sometimes only to end up back at the first organisation from which they started, without any resolution. Amanda, a volunteer on the legal aid team in Athens, described this 'like the Kafka novel, the jungle of impossible administration and pushback [...]. There are a lot of people, there are not a lot of workers. It's a failed system' (August 2017).

## Bureaucracy as protection from the informality double-bind

Nastasha and Hilde were in constant turmoil about their decision to host Anwar and Hakim, felt confused about the right course of action, and desperately wanted the youth to have a structured and formal response. The women had disclosed to other volunteers as well as humanitarian friends about their hosting, and some did not condone it. ‘But what are the alternatives? I don’t know that Anwar would be alive today if we didn’t take him in’, Nastasha admitted one day over coffee.

Similarly, Amanda described how she met a number of unaccompanied minors who had been sexually assaulted when sleeping on the street. She took the boys to her home for safety and then went to a large protection agency to report the incident and to find them alternative accommodation.

I went to Save the Children, and [they asked me], “Where are [the boys] staying right now?” [I told them], “In my house.” “Oh then it is not so urgent,” they said. That was the response of an organization. I could be a pedophile, and they wouldn’t care. (August, 2017)

It was difficult for volunteers to come to terms with the bureaucracy of large protection and government agencies. According to Amanda, ‘[Aid workers] are all just handing [asylum seekers] around saying, ‘What are your connections, what are your connections?’ (August 2017). Solutions took time to sort out, as described by Jane, an informal aid worker on Lesbos: ‘Even if you’ve got someone who has just been sexually assaulted sitting in front of you and is completely homeless, [the organisation] will be like, “Yeah so you’ve got an appointment in a week”’ (July 2018). In speaking with government actors and aid workers at structured aid organisations, I learned that they largely have codes of conduct and bureaucracy that slows down their reaction time. These codes of conduct, for example, may forbid an aid worker from speaking with or helping a border crosser outside of office hours, using their personal phone numbers, or giving aid that is unstructured or considered unprofessional (such as paying for a meal, rent, or other resources). These rules protect the employees from even having to consider intimate solidarity, thus shielding them from the informality double-bind. For example, when author A met with the government-appointed guardians, it was clear that they had specific rules that forbid them from helping in ways that could be deemed unprofessional.

Without further research, it is difficult to know how often these codes of conduct are abided by, and how much this formal bureaucracy works as a protective measure. As author A has reported elsewhere, a volunteer for a formal aid organisation on Lesbos brought a fifteen year-old minor into her house after seeing the deplorable conditions in which he was living in Moria camp. In this case the woman grew fatigued of his neediness and had been complaining to others about his presence, which alerted the organisation of the situation. The woman was let go, as this action had violated their code of conduct (Witcher 2019).

At the same time, it was almost expected that citizen volunteers would have more flexibility to offer certain forms of aid; and in our observations and interviews, it appeared that these organisations regarded a case to be less urgent if they knew a volunteer had taken a border crosser into their home, thus further forcing the volunteer to offer intimate solidarity, as was the case with Amanda and Save the Children. The informal nature of much of author A’s interlocutors’ volunteering meant that volunteers did

not have strict rules for how to engage with border crossers outside of office hours. For example, author A sometimes witnessed citizen volunteers giving out personal mobile numbers to border crossers who came to the legal aid desk for help. This resulted in a multitude of late-night phone calls, texts, and pleas for help for various complications, including suicidal ideation, requests for money, and help accessing health, legal, and social services. Their intimate solidarity with border crossers meant that citizen volunteers often became more than just service providers; sometimes they became personally invested. They often came to believe that if they did not do anything, then the border crosser would go without services.

### **Institutional neglect as violence *and* protection**

Anwar and Hakim had their own keys to the apartment and came and went as they liked while Hilde and Nastasha volunteered on the legal team for many hours each day. One of the minors began to volunteer at an organisation himself, while the other chose to stay home during the day despite the women's insistence that he attend classes. The minors and the women often ate dinner together while sharing the duties of cooking and cleaning. The women even took the minors on trips to nearby islands, hoping to encourage stress relief and joy. Although this experience created a lasting bond between the women and the minors that continues today, Hilde and Nastasha faced many complicated issues while hosting, and there were risks to both the women and the minors.

Due to their intimate solidarity and overwork, Hilde and Nastasha expressed burnout at some points in their hosting. This is in line with the research regarding 'HIV buddies', which shared that because the buddies were available at all hours and felt personally responsible for their beneficiaries, they became overworked (Maslanka 1996; Claxton, Catalan, and Burgess 1998; Stolinski et al. 2004). This responsibility could be especially challenging, as the minors had a range of physical and psychological issues. For example, Anwar continued to self-harm, sometimes in the presence of the women.

In addition to fearing for the safety of the minors, the women feared for their own safety after Hakim experienced a psychotic episode. Nastasha admitted that she began locking her bedroom door at night. As author A has reported elsewhere, at the same time these volunteers were hosting the minors, two members of the same legal aid team decided to place two male Pakistani unaccompanied minors into a hotel for a couple of nights. The boys had been sleeping on the streets and the volunteers wanted to give them respite and allow them some amenities such as a hot shower and a warm bed. The teenage boys drank alcohol, snuck into an adjoining room, and sexually assaulted a female traveller (Witcher 2019). In another interview, a volunteer disclosed that she had hosted a border crosser family in her home and the family's teenage son sexually assaulted the host's friend, who had come to stay the night. Clearly border crossers, even unaccompanied minors, could be a danger to volunteers who hosted them.

Here, an additional double-bind is exposed: the border crossers whom the volunteers aimed to help could be both 'at risk and a risk' (Pallister-Wilkins 2015, 54). Border crossers who sleep on the streets, especially unaccompanied minors, may be at risk of various forms of violence. For example, it has been widely reported that unaccompanied male minors in Athens have been selling sex to survive and have been victims of sexual violence and exploitation (Fili and Xythali 2017; Sarantou and Aggeliki 2019). However,

as shown in the examples above, these same border crossers may themselves be a risk to others.

The hosting of unaccompanied minors, furthermore, may have posed a legal threat to the host and many of the volunteers were uncertain whether or not the hosting of unaccompanied minors was legal. This information was hard to come by as the volunteers neither spoke nor read Greek, and they could not find reliable answers from any actors they asked. Instances of civil society actors being criminalised for aiding border crossers were not uncommon. For example, search and rescue volunteers on Lesbos have been arrested and charged with human smuggling (Schack and Witcher 2020). Although we have not come across instances of criminalisation for hosting border crossers in Greece, it is possible that had something happened to the youth while in the care of the volunteers, the volunteers may have faced serious consequences. In France, for example, Jacqueline Deltombe was found guilty in 1997 for hosting an undocumented migrant and faced up to five years in prison (Rosello 2001).

Hilde and Nastasha were also internally conflicted as to what this intimate solidarity would do to the minors. Research has shown there is a detriment to children's long-term well-being through repeated attachments to short-term caregivers. Furthermore, '[t]here is consistent evidence that for children who are institutionalized at a young age, a variety of emotional, social, behavioural and educational problems develop and persist over time' (Richter and Norman 2010, 222). At seventeen, these boys could barely be considered children, and their independent journeys to Europe likely catalysed their adulthood. Yet a chief stressor was the fact that Hilde and Nastasha would eventually return home, thus leaving behind Anwar and Hakim.

There was also an implicit power imbalance; the women were easily able to travel elsewhere in Europe, making use of their citizenship in the Global North, while the minors desperately wanted to travel west of Greece but were unable to do so without fake documents. Furthermore, as both minors were still awaiting the outcome of their asylum claim, it was a possibility that once they turned 18, they could be deported back to their home countries. The women also had power to change their minds about hosting at any moment. It is unclear if this was an added stressor to the minors, but having lived in such precarity, it is a likely assumption. And as mentioned by Amanda, a volunteer herself, the volunteers could have been pedophiles. Amanda mentioned this in passing, in her frustration at the lack of interest Save the Children seemed to have over her hosting of minors who had already been sexually assaulted on the streets of Athens. Taking Pallister-Wilkin's concept of 'at risk and a risk' further, we can see that volunteers, too, could pose a risk to border crossers. Considering both the risks to volunteers and border crossers, it could be argued that the bureaucratic systems in place at government agencies and aid organisations protect border crossers and aid workers/volunteers from these risks of informality. We take up this argument further in the discussion.

It has been three years since Hilde and Nastasha hosted the two minors. Before the women left Greece, they helped the minors attain accommodation, which was costly and required repeated pleading to the government-appointed guardians for help. Anwar and Hakim are now twenty-one and considered legal adults. Anwar is living with roommates in Western Europe, where he awaits the decision to his asylum

request. He has learned the language of his new country and volunteers his time to refugee-related issues. Hakim has attained refugee status in Greece, yet remains in economic precarity, doing illegal street jobs for survival.

### Informality, intimacy and forced subversiveness

Commenting on the French and EU governments' response to border crossers in Calais, France, Sandri describes the outsourcing of certain responsibilities to civil society organisations as a 'violent *inaction*'. She considers the 'institutional abandonment' a form of structural violence and laments the precarious positions that border crossers were left to live in, forcing these volunteers into action (2018). Our research mirrors this conclusion. For example, in the case of guardianship in Greece, the government-appointed guardians, when even available, were unable to secure housing or resources for the minors. Instead, this responsibility fell to the volunteers who had chosen to host them. Had it not been for these volunteers, the minors would likely have been on streets for many months, resulting in a host of added physical and psychological problems.

This inaction was not limited to government actors, but included large aid organisations as well. This comes into greater relief when we look at Amanda's experience after having brought a number of unaccompanied minors into her home due to their sexual exploitation on the streets. As expressed from her quote, Save the Children, arguably one of the most powerful child protection agencies working in Greece, encouraged her to continue hosting the minors in her personal apartment. This finding was also mirrored in the literature (Guribye and Mydland 2018; Sandri 2018; Lewis 2019). This could have put both host and border crossers at risk of violence, attachment, or even criminalisation.

Those who chose to host did so under the assumption that they could have been arrested and charged for this intimate solidarity. Indeed, many scholars have problematised the increasing trend of criminalising solidarity (Rosello 2001; Haaland and Wallevik 2019; Schack and Witcher 2020). And with the criminalisation and exclusion of border crossers by the state, volunteers are forced to act subversive to the state simply by aiding border crossers the state would wish to exclude. For example, we consider these volunteers to engage in 'acts of citizenship' (Castañeda 2013), by including border crossers in services who are otherwise excluded. Vandevoordt and Verschraegen (2019) describe this type of political activism as 'subversive humanitarianism' because it aims to include people into the polity that even humanitarian organisations largely exclude, such as undocumented migrants. These informal citizen volunteers interrupt the normalisation of border crosser exclusion and fetishisation of illegality by offering solidarity in intimate ways to border crossers who may be considered 'illegal'.

Throughout this paper we have shown how informal citizen volunteers faced the informality double-bind; on the one hand their informality meant that they were able to attend to situations almost immediately, in contrast to the state and large organisations, and could help border crossers avoid homelessness, a risk of violence, and a long wait for institutionalised aid. On the other hand, this informality could pose difficult quandaries, like the decision to offer intimate solidarity such as taking a border crosser into one's personal home which could result in other risks to both host and border crosser. In the case shown, the volunteers were well-versed in humanitarian



ethics, understood the potential repercussions of short-term hosting, and employed due diligence to ensure the minors would be cared for after their departure. They also arguably offered better housing than the government (see Schack and Witcher 2020). However, this due diligence was not a requirement from any organisational code of conduct, but rather based off the volunteers' own ethical, moral, and professional ethos. Therefore, it is worth questioning if the gaps in services, which we've shown forced informal volunteers into the informality double-bind, have the potential to lead to much more dangerous situations, especially as volunteers' acts of solidarity are increasingly criminalised.

This makes it important to further consider the productiveness of the informality double-bind as a concept to analyse further study. We argued that bureaucratic organisations were protected from this double-bind, as it appeared in part, due to these organisations' inability to offer sufficient aid. Yet more research exploring this idea further could nuance this argument, perhaps even offering potential solutions. As we have shown, both border crosser and volunteer can be considered 'at risk and a risk' (Pallister-Wilkins 2015, 54). Therefore, interdisciplinary study aimed to reduce instances of this informality double-bind could prove productive.

With the new Greek government's neglect and even outright aggression against border crossers and volunteers, these informal volunteers may be forced even further underground, adding to the risks associated with informal solidarity and creating more informality double-binds. For example, just after its election in the summer of 2019, the New Democracy party 'revoked access to public healthcare for asylum seekers and undocumented people arriving in Greece, leaving more than 55,000 people without medical care' (MSF 2020). Citizen volunteers are increasingly tasked with aiding border crossers who express severe psychological issues and suicidal ideation because there are not remotely enough NGO staff to attend to the thousands of border crossers suffering from psychological distress (Witcher 2019). This puts extra strain on volunteers, who are usually not trained as psychologists, to offer support in any way that they can. This can include advocating for border crossers in hospitals and NGOs, and offering other more intimate forms of solidarity such as late-night meetups and repeated phone calls (Witcher 2019).

Informal volunteers offer aid and solidarity far beyond this particular geographic context. They are present in countries around the globe, often filling gaps where state actors and aid workers fail. The concept of the informality double-bind may be a useful framework to analyse how and in which contexts informal volunteers make important, potentially risky, decisions. Furthermore, as these decisions may lead to intimate solidarity, the concept of 'at risk and a risk' could be a productive tool of analysis.

## Notes

1. I term the border crossers as refugees here to stay consistent with how they were termed in this study.
2. On one occasion, a volunteer from the Global South (the only on the team), attempted to accompany the minors to this Regional Asylum Office. This was the only instance in which the volunteer was refused entrance. On many other occasions this volunteer faced



barriers to accessing services for the purpose of aiding border crossers due to the fact that she was misidentified as a border crosser herself. These acts highlight the institutionalised racism that was inherent, even in humanitarian spaces, and they accentuate the aptness of the term ‘citizen volunteer’. Productive further study could explore how volunteers from the Global South experience power dynamics in their aid work and solidarity.

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