

Beyond accountability? Exploring the promises and challenges of citizen collectives

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While humanitarian accountability has been a trending topic for quite some time, most of the debate has revolved around formal mechanisms that are used by large, professional (international) non-governmental organisations. In spite of the 'localisation of aid' agenda, only a handful of studies have explored how grassroots actors deal with questions of accountability, and how this differs or aligns with the practices of their professional counterparts. This article contributes to this emerging line of inquiry by zooming in on a specific type of grassroots actors: citizen collectives in Europe, who act in solidarity with people on the move. In spite of the apparent absence of scholarly and practical debates on accountability within such collectives, I argue that issues of accountability lie at the heart of what citizen collectives do, and that they deal with these issues in a way that distinguishes them from other actors. By drawing on a re-interpretation of several ethnographic projects, I formulate four exploratory theses on what accountability looks like within such collectives, and what promises and pitfalls their approach may hold for broader debates on humanitarian accountability.

Keywords: humanitarianism; accountability; grassroots; solidarity; migration; citizen humanitarianism

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, accountability has become a trending topic in the field of humanitarianism. Triggered by a series of scandals and a rapid process of growth and professionalisation, many organisations have borrowed corporate concepts and techniques to develop all sorts of standards, reports and

manuals to measure, evaluate and justify their performances (Barnett 2005, 2016; Hilhorst *et al.* 2021). While improvement has been most significant in terms of 'upward accountability' (i.e. towards donors such as national government agencies), it is widely recognised that 'downward accountability' (i.e. to beneficiaries receiving, for instance, material support from international non-governmental organisations (INGO)) remains the 'Achilles heel' of many humanitarian actors (Anstorp & Horst 2021). As this flies in the face of what the humanitarian promise ought to be about, accountability has remained on the top of the agenda.

At the same time, debates on accountability have remained tied to a specific corner of the humanitarian field, one that is dominated by large, professional non-governmental organisations (NGO). In a parallel development, discussions on the 'localisation of aid' have drawn attention to all kinds of grassroots actors (van Brabant & Patel 2017; Roepstorff 2020). Local communities are increasingly recognised as the 'first responders' to humanitarian crises, while people connected through faith, diaspora and kin are known to stay involved long after their professional counterparts have left the scene (Horst 2008; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2019; Hassouneh & Pascucci 2022). However, research on how these actors deal with questions of accountability, and how this differs or aligns with the practices of professional NGOs, remains scarce (Anstorp & Horst 2021). As accountability is typically viewed through the managerial, bureaucratic lens from which it has emanated, there is a double risk of, on the one hand, prematurely concluding that grassroots actors simply do not engage with accountability at all, and that, therefore, they should get out of the way and let the professionals do their work. On the other hand, there is a risk of romanticising grassroots actors by assuming that their independence automatically enables them to do better. Either way, their actions appear to be 'beyond' accountability, in part because they use different words to describe different practices. This article, then, contributes to an emerging line of inquiry on how grassroots humanitarian actors deal with questions of accountability (Anstorp & Horst 2021; Denniston 2021; Mogstad 2021). Are these actors being held to account at all? Or do they, by contrast, offer promising ways of doing things differently? And what are the distinct challenges and ambiguities they face?

My contribution zooms in on a specific type of grassroots actor: citizen collectives in Europe, who act in solidarity with people on the move. In this paper, I understand 'citizen collectives' as groups led by people with formal national citizenship, who organise themselves either loosely or more formally as a collective entity, and who use the resources they have as citizens to take concerted action towards a common purpose. For this article, I use '*citizen collectives*' rather than 'grassroots actors' (see Anstorp & Horst 2021) to articulate what is specific to them, as compared to other grassroots actors who may be organised collectively as diaspora, kinship, faith-based communities or refugee-led organisations. Lastly, the term 'solidarity' refers to these collectives' conscious effort to combine humanitarian with political action, mainly in the form of advocating for people on the move vis-à-vis the state and/or NGOs. This informed my choice to describe them as 'citizen collectives in solidarity with' people on the move, rather than 'citizen humanitarians' (Gabrielsen & Pascucci 2021) or 'volunteer humanitarians' (Sandri 2018).

While humanitarianism is often taken to refer to actors from the global North responding to crises in the global South, the rise of repressive migration policies has propelled humanitarian action right back into the heart of the European continent (Pallister-Wilkins 2022). As borders have been multiplied by processes of externalisation and exclusion from a wide range of rights (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013), professional NGOs such as Médecins du Monde and Médecins Sans Frontières have gradually taken up a permanent role in supporting undocumented migrants (Ticktin 2011). Once every few years, this fragile system breaks down and incites (new) citizen collectives to provide all kinds of stopgap help (Jumbert & Pascucci 2021). While scholarly interest in these collectives has flared up after Europe's 'long summer of migration' in 2015 (Della Porta 2018; Feischmidt *et al.* 2019; Vandevoordt & Verschraegen 2019a; Della Porta & Steinhilper 2021; Gabrielsen & Pascucci 2021; Schwiertz & Schwenken 2021), we know little about how accountability is debated and practiced within them (Denniston 2021; Mogstad 2021).

In this paper, I argue that questions of accountability lie at the heart of what these citizen collectives do, and that they deal with these questions in a way that distinguishes them from both professional NGOs and other grassroots actors, for better or for worse. By drawing on a re-interpretation of several

of my own ethnographic projects, and one study conducted by others (Knops & Severs 2019), I formulate four exploratory theses on what accountability looks like in citizen collectives, and what promises and pitfalls their approach may hold for broader debates on humanitarian accountability. As citizen collectives, they can use their status, resources and positions as citizens to hold their own states to account, to spur professional NGOs into (other) actions, and to root accountability in informal relations with the people they support. This distinctive power means that they also risk speaking for people on the move, and that they are liable to, at best, reproduce the paternalism inherent to classical humanitarianism and, at worst, to exacerbate it.

From accountability to solidarity, and back

Accountability broadly refers to processes of ‘taking account’ (listening to and engaging with stakeholders), ‘giving account’ (communicating about one’s actions), and taking responsibility (i.e. taking credit and blame) (Hilhorst *et al.* 2021). In the field of humanitarianism, however, accountability is predominantly understood in two complementary ways: in a narrow, formal sense, and as a specific set of ethical principles. The *formal* understanding is associated with professional, mostly international NGOs — (I)NGOs — who are responsible for managing substantial budgets and personnel, and who need to maintain constructive relations with both the broader public and with powerful institutions such as the state. Hence their need to account for their actions ‘upwards’ (to donors), ‘downwards’ (to beneficiaries) and ‘sideways’ (within and between organisations). This formal understanding is reflected in realist or (post-) positivist tropes such as ‘mechanisms’, which suggest that humanitarian action functions as a technical, rational and bureaucratic enterprise. This understanding has crystallised into a whole battery of instruments to improve (I)NGOs’ accountability, including manuals on needs assessments and information strategies, reports and evaluations measuring the efficiency and effectivity of humanitarian operations, and best practices of formalised complaint mechanisms (Barnett 2016).

In addition to this formal layer, humanitarian accountability is guided by the ethical principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity (Anstorp & Horst 2021; Hilhorst *et al.* 2021). This holds assumptions on what humanitarianism represents, and where it draws its legitimacy from: an imperative to reduce human suffering, regardless of political contexts or people’s social identities. As a result of the principles of impartiality and neutrality, humanitarian actors are generally expected not to interfere with political processes, and to prioritise the immediate needs of suffering subjects. Despite its universalistic promise, this discourse is widely understood as being rooted in Western Modernity, and as being practiced, predominantly, by actors from the global North in the global South (Barnett & Weiss 2008; for recent criticisms, see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2019; Pallister-Wilkins 2022; Vandevoordt 2024).

Unsurprisingly, scholars exploring accountability practices among grassroots actors, have called for a different approach. They argue that if we want to understand how less formalised actors hold themselves and others to account, and how they make sense of these practices, we need to develop a more relational, interpretative understanding of their actions (Anstorp & Horst 2021; Brun & Horst 2023). Otherwise, we risk to prematurely conclude that these ‘alternative’ (Ishkanian & Shutes 2022), ‘vernacular’ (Brkovic 2023) or ‘citizen’ humanitarians (Gabrielsen & Pascucci 2021) do not deal with issues of accountability simply because they do not match our limited ideas of what accountability is.

Anstorp and Horst (2021, 16), for instance, propose to return to a broad definition of accountability as a two-way relationship in which subjects simultaneously take responsibility for something and hold themselves and others to account, based on overlapping layers of expectations.

Drawing on Chynoweth and others (2018), they emphasise that these expectations, “are typically fluid... and susceptible over time”, and that “[t]hey can ... be informal and develop out of interpersonal, social interaction” (Anstorp & Horst 2021, 16). This open definition enables them to zoom in on practices of accountability as they emerge from the mutual expectations among different types of actors, including those connected to each other through kin, faith, locality, and solidarity. Rather than discussing formal mechanisms of accountability in schematic models, they argue that notions such as

'reciprocity' and 'interdependence' may be more useful to grasp the nuanced ways in which mutual expectations shape the perception of who is to be held accountable for which actions, and under which conditions.

In this regard, it seems promising to expand upon the case of citizen collectives acting in solidarity with people on the move, in Europe. While the last few years have seen a rapid growth of academic work on such collectives (Della Porta 2018; Feischmidt *et al.* 2019; Vandevoordt & Verschraegen 2019a; Della Porta & Steinhilper 2021; Jumbert & Pascucci 2021; Schwiertz & Schwenken 2021), they have rarely been approached through the prism of accountability (see Denniston 2021 for an exception). And yet strikingly similar concerns have been at the heart of these discussions, both in academia and in collectives themselves.

Most scholarly debates have revolved around two complementary sets of arguments. On the one hand, these collectives are thought to harbour the potential of supporting people on the move in a way that breaks with the dominant *modus operandi* that is associated with humanitarianism, both on a social and a political level (Sandri 2018; Vandevoordt 2019b). Rather than de-humanising recipients of aid by reducing them to their biological needs — and by conceiving of humanitarians as professionals possessing a wealth of material and immaterial resources to address these needs — they are seen to engage with people on the move as social, biographical subjects through meaningful, affective ties (Sandri 2018; Vandevoordt 2019b; Stavinoha & Ramakrishnan 2021). This resonates with findings on other types of grassroots actors that have been analysed through different concepts: 'citizen aid' (Fechter 2019; Fechter & Schwittay 2019; McKay & Perez 2019), 'faith-based' humanitarianism (Feldman 2007; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Pacitto 2015), 'overlapping displacement' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2019) and 'refugee diaspora organisations' (Olliff 2018).

Whereas their distinctly social outlook sets these collectives apart from the formal processes of professional humanitarian action, their political potential distinguishes them from the dominant 'moral' discourses associated with humanitarianism. Partly as a result of their financial independence from institutional donors, they are able to adopt a more partial stance of standing with subjects who they believe are wronged the most by state actors and NGOs — under which conditions they effectively do so, and which exact strategies they develop, is of course a different matter (Cuttitta 2018; Stierl 2018; Vandevoordt 2021a; Vandevoordt & Fleischmann 2021). Even though many citizens and collectives initially claim to act out of a humanitarian imperative, many seem to undergo a process of politicisation, both individually and collectively, after witnessing the concrete effects of the European border regime (Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017; Feischmidt & Zakarias 2019; Sinatti 2019; Vandevoordt 2019b; Vandevoordt & Verschraegen 2019b). Translated to debates on accountability, this feeds the argument that citizen collectives hold a distinct potential to hold state actors accountable for their role in subjecting people on the move to systemic violence (cf. 'upward accountability'), and of being held accountable through informal relations characterised by some degree of reciprocity and/or interdependence (cf. 'downward accountability').

On the other hand, scholars have contended that such collectives reproduce, or even aggravate, some of the very power dynamics for which professional humanitarianism has been so often criticised. In the absence of formalised procedures to hold them to account for their actions, citizens are free to decide who to support, how and under which conditions. Hence the risk that they use implicit criteria of 'deservingness' based on their social proximity to white, middle-class values (Maestri & Monforte 2020), that they impose neocolonial, paternalist or maternalistic ways of viewing the world (Braun 2017; Mogstad 2023; Sluijs 2024), and that they may even abuse their relative power position. From this perspective, their citizenship status, especially when it is imbued with notions of morally 'good' and 'active' citizenship (Isin & Nielsen 2008; Horst *et al.* 2020), reinforces the distinction between them and people on the move who, in this context, lack this status.

This resonates with long-standing criticisms of humanitarianism as a purportedly 'universal' endeavour that, when put into practice, is guided by a logic of caring for exceptionally vulnerable victims, rather than one of standing with people who claim their rights (Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2012). What is described in formal terms as 'downward accountability', then, could be seen as the 'Achilles' heel' (Anstorp & Horst 2021) of citizen collectives, as much as those of their professional counterparts

(Denniston 2021; Mogstad 2021). In other words, whether and under which conditions citizen collectives offer promising examples to address issues of accountability, remains to be seen.

Four ethnographies of citizen collectives

This paper draws on several of my own ethnographic engagements with citizen collectives in solidarity with people on the move in Europe, as well as a reinterpretation of one study conducted by other scholars (Knops & Severs 2019). I will first sketch the general context of people on the move in Europe, before zooming in on specific sites and cases.

In this paper, I use 'people on the move' to refer to persons crossing borders irregularly, who end up in a variety of legal statuses and trajectories that cannot be reduced to clear-cut categories without problematic scholarly and political implications. Despite a general tendency among policymakers and academics alike to distinguish refugees from economic migrants, people's motivations to seek protection, acquire essential livelihoods or look for better opportunities are often interrelated (Crawley & Skleparis 2018). Many apply for international protection, and some receive a positive or negative answer relatively quickly, while others have to wait for years. In addition, persons that are eligible for international protection typically need to cross borders irregularly to claim protection, which means that they are subjected, though not always to the same degree, to the same violent policies that seek to deter economic migrants from crossing borders (de Vries & Guild 2019; Welander 2021).

In this context, communities, citizen collectives, and NGOs have offered stopgap support to people on the move. The relations between these actors are complicated, partly because they are subjected to different logics of (in)visibility. On the one hand, most of the actual support is arguably being provided by and among people on the move themselves, yet within a context in which they try to stay 'under the radar' as much as possible (Khosravi 2007; Atac *et al.* 2015). Their mutual support thus remains largely 'invisible' to state actors, academics and the broader public. NGOs, on the other hand, tend to present themselves as neutrally as possible, partly to avoid a direct political confrontation with European states (Scott-Smith 2016; Stierl 2018). Citizen collectives, lastly, tend to be 'hyper-visible' in border zones for different reasons: because their relative independence from state donors makes it easier to take a critical stance towards the policies implemented by state actors (Scott-Smith 2016; Stierl 2018), because they attract a certain type of mass media attention (Cantat 2020), and/or because they tend to engage in more personal forms of witnessing through social media (Knops & Severs 2019).

These 'tendencies' are, of course, a highly schematic representation of a messy, hybrid reality: some humanitarian NGOs are less hesitant to adopt a more political stance than others (Stierl 2018); even relatively radical (citizen) collectives have refocused towards address humanitarian needs (Rozakou 2016, 2017); and some of the support networks led by people on the move themselves increasingly seek public attention as refugee-led organisations (Aden 2025, Agook *et al.* 2025, Gabiam 2025, Godin & Heritier 2025). As a heuristic device, however, this schematic representation should help to articulate the specific positions they tend to start from within a complex field of human movement.

In this paper, I draw on ethnographic work I have conducted with four citizen collectives in different periods between 2017 and 2022. These include: *BelRefugees* — *Citizen Platform for the Support of Refugees* (henceforth Citizen Platform), a collective supporting, amongst others, persons that have 'stranded' in Brussels, most of whom are trying to reach the U.K. (2017–2019) (Vandevoordt 2019a); *Humain*, a Belgian collective that has supported people on the move that were 'stranded' in Dunkirk, near Calais in the North of France (2018–2020) (Vandevoordt 2021a); the *Welcoming Network*, a Flemish network of volunteer organisations working with people on the move, including rejected asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who have settled for a longer period in Belgium (2019–2023) (Vandevoordt 2019a, 2021b); and *Europe Must Act*, a pan-European collective mobilising for the rights of people that were immobilised on the Aegean islands as a result of the EU-Greece's hotspot approach (2020–2022).

In each collective, I conducted ethnographic interviews mainly with their individual members and with other actors in their vicinity, including municipalities, NGOs and people on the move. In BelRefugees, participant observation took the form of acting as a volunteer in several spaces: two reception centres, the humanitarian hub (see later), marauds in public spaces (see later), and partaking in public protests. Regarding BelRefugees, it is important to note that towards the end of my fieldwork, the collective was transforming into a large public service provider, in which the role of citizens was gradually reduced. In Humain, I volunteered during field visits to Dunkirk as part of the research team to document changes in living conditions, support systems and police actions. In addition, I took part in 'outreach' activities to inform a broader public of Belgian citizens on what 'really' happened in Dunkirk. In the Welcoming Network I took up a role in its steering board to coordinate its activities to connect local groups, and to engage in advocacy towards NGOs and policymakers. In *Europe Must Act*, I acted as a member of its coordination team, which essentially entailed participating in discussions on advocacy and public mobilisation.

While each of these collectives operated in distinct physical and social spaces, they are tied together by a common thread: within a hostile political environment, they have sought to combine humanitarian (i.e. stopgap support) with political action (defined broadly as advocating for structural change with policymakers and the broader public). None of these ethnographic endeavours had accountability as their main focus. The reason is simple: neither within the field nor academia, were debates revolving around this term in its predominant formal and ethical understanding. For this article, which is part of a special issue on this topic, I thus re-analysed and re-interpreted some of my older work in the light of debates on accountability. As this renders the findings presented in this paper of a rather exploratory nature, I present them as theses that are grounded in extensive fieldwork, yet in need of more systematic research to develop them into robust claims.

In addition to my own fieldwork, I have also drawn on a re-interpretation of Knops and Severs' (2019) article which draws on an analysis of the Citizen Platform's Facebook posts to examine how they 'represented' people on the move during the period of my fieldwork. While their analysis is guided by political theories of representation, it dovetails with how the Platform uses its resources as a citizen collective to hold the state and NGOs to account for their actions. Hence, I felt it was useful to translate their analysis to debates on accountability.

In a similar vein, I re-interpreted my own fieldwork in the light of debates on accountability. Originally, the main research question guiding this fieldwork has been how citizen collectives have tried to combine humanitarian with political action: the challenges they faced, the strategies they developed, and the ambivalent relations that emerged between them and different persons on the move. This has several implications for this paper. First, the collectives I worked with represent a specific sub-set of collectives that may be more prevalent in some countries than others. United Kingdom (UK) charities, for instance, have a reputation in the field for being more pragmatic and less inhibited to identify with classical humanitarianism, whereas collectives hailing from France and Belgium seem to be more at ease with taking a political stance.¹ Reversely, the collectives I worked with experienced less of a 'taboo' on offering humanitarian support, as compared to, for instance, autonomous collectives in Greece (Rozakou 2016). In other words, the specific examples I draw upon are undoubtedly shaped by the particular actors and contexts I have worked with.

Second, these collectives perceive and portray themselves as progressive and egalitarian — and often as aiming to be more egalitarian than their professional counterparts. They bring together individuals that can be situated on a continuum between liberal, humanitarian volunteers on the one hand, and autonomous solidarity activists on the other, with a tendency of politicising the former and drawing the latter into stopgap support. While they explicitly seek to avoid paternalistic attitudes (e.g. by refusing to take a position on the decisions of people on the move), the skewed power relations between them and the people they seek to support, constantly puts them at the verge of lapsing into tropes of white saviourism (Picozza 2021; Pallister-Wilkins 2022). Hence, their actions as 'good', 'active' citizens inadvertently reproduce a moral distinction between them and people on the move.

Third, while I have included the perspectives of other actors (most importantly, people on the move), the practices of citizen collectives have been most central in my fieldwork. This has entailed extensive participant observation within these collectives and in-depth interviews with their members,

as well as a small number of in-depth interviews and a larger amount of informal conversations resulting from 'hanging out' with the other actors involved. While there were, in my view, valid reasons to make this choice², it is not without problems. By putting citizen collectives at the centre, the views of other actors are represented in lesser detail. This may, in turn, contribute to differences in their degrees of visibility and to an unintentional othering of people on the move as a homogenous entity characterised by endemic victimhood (Picozza 2021). Ethnographic studies that have been centred around the experiences, trajectories and strategies of people on the move (Orsini *et al.* 2021; Wyss 2022), for instance, would without doubt add much depth to the reflections I offer here, and nuance or refute some of my interpretations.

Holding states to account

Thesis one: citizen collectives have a distinct power to hold their states to account. They tend to use strategies that are associated more with social movements than professional humanitarian NGOs, and, to justify their actions, they draw on discourses of civil disobedience and direct action rather than impartiality and neutrality.

Citizens are implicitly bound into a mutual social contract with a state, which gives them a distinct power to hold their state³ to account. There are roughly two ways in which they can do so: by contesting that elected officials adequately *represent* their 'general will', and by demonstrating that *citizens are doing what their governments are supposed to do*. Regarding the former, Knops and Severs (2019) have analysed in detail how *BelRefugees*⁴ has made such counter-representational claims through their public Facebook posts. According to them, *BelRefugees* has sought to

channel the voices of citizens who do not identify with this trend [of repressive migration policies] and who prefer a more humane approach to asylum and migration. It reclaims citizens' right to speak for themselves and, through contestation, prevents office holders from claiming to speak on behalf of the Belgian population in a definitive way. (Knops & Severs 2019, 5611).

By doing so, the Platform

aim[s] to uncover the false homogeneity (of the people) assumed by electoral representation, which primarily seeks to aggregate citizens' preferences (expressed as votes) into a general will (Knops & Severs 2019, 5612).

To give a concrete example, *BelRefugees*' Facebook posts often claim to represent a wide diversity of citizens in terms of political leanings, gender, age, class and ethnic backgrounds (Knops & Severs 2019; Vandevoordt 2020). This resonates with what Schwiertz & Steinhilper (2021) have described as 'strategic humanitarianism': by drawing on notions of a shared humanity, they unsettle the claim that elected politicians are the sole representation of 'we, the people'. Such a discourse aligns them firmly within humanitarian logics. Yet, the repertoires of action on which they draw to make these claims, are more typical of social movements than professional NGOs.

In January 2018, for instance, federal Belgian police forces intensified their attempts to arrest people on the move dwelling in train stations and parks. When the Citizen Platform was informed that a large-scale action was about to take place in the Maximilian Park in Brussels, they mobilised their members to inform people on the move about the impending raid. By the time the police arrived, all people on the move had been dispersed, and replaced by 3,500 citizens forming a human chain around the park. This act of 'civil disobedience' received considerable attention from the mainstream media and sparked a public debate that spanned several weeks (Vandevoordt 2019b).

Europe Must Act, a collective advocating for more humane policies towards people arriving on the Aegean islands, drew on a different set of social movement strategies. In response to the rising threat of violence against people immobilised on the islands (Tazzioli & Garrelli 2020), in early 2020 they launched a petition that soon reached by 100,000 signatories and was handed over to European Union commissioner Ylva Johansson in a formal meeting. To counter Johansson's rebuttal that there was, unfortunately, no popular support for more welcoming migration policies, Europe Must Act mobilised the signatories to the petition to establish 'city chapters' across Europe and the UK who

participated in various pan-European campaigns and organised a variety of local actions targeting both local policymakers and their constituents.

Underlying much of these mobilisations is the figure of the ‘good’ (Horst *et al.* 2020) or ‘active’ citizen (Isin & Nielsen 2008) who takes action to address social and political problems. This figure made these collectives attractive candidates for public prizes. Thus, Humain and its leaders were granted awards for Human Rights (PVMR 2016) in 2016, the European Citizens Award (EU 2016) in 2018, and the Ultima award for Social-Cultural Work (De Federatie 2020) in 2020 by the Flemish Government; BelRefugees received, amongst others, the prize of the ‘Bruxellois of the year’ (The Bulletin 2018) in 2019 by a consortium of Francophone media platforms, and the Ultima award for Social-Cultural Work (Bruzz 2019) in 2019; and lastly, the Welcoming Network (PVMR 2023) was shortlisted for the Human Rights Award in 2023 by the Flemish League for Human Rights. In a characteristic reaction to receiving the Ultima award for Social-Cultural Work, Mehdi Kassou, the BxlRefugees’ spokesperson, described it as a ‘schizophrenic experience’ to receive such an award from the Flemish government. “We [the Citizen Platform] are doing this for three years now, while it’s actually the responsibility of the government.” (Bruzz 2019). In a similar vein, on repeated occasions I heard one of Humain’s coordinators’ explain to volunteers and journalists alike how they “kindly refused” the European Citizen of the Year award. “It’s mad that citizens are doing this. This isn’t the job of citizens. It’s the government’s job!” (Fieldnotes February 2019).

This contrast between citizen collectives’ hands-on actions and the lack of adequate government responses, was constantly used to put both public and direct pressure on the latter. A particularly well-documented example is the practice of ‘hosting-at-home’ (Hébergement) that emerged in August 2017 and that quickly turned into a self-sustaining system that lasted until the Covid-19 pandemic hit in 2020 (Vandevoordt 2020; Kekstaite 2022). In the Summer of 2017, several people active in the Citizen Platform were confronted with a rising number of persons who got ‘stranded’ in Brussels. Most were trying to cross the channel into the UK, but were now sleeping in the public parks and train station in the Brussels-North quarter (Carlier 2020). To no avail, the Citizen Platform tried to secure spaces in shelters for homeless persons that were run by NGOs, and to the Federal and regional government. In response, the Platform launched an emergency call among its volunteers to accommodate at least the most vulnerable persons into their own homes (mainly minors and women). Yet due to repeated controversies arising from the policies and discourses of State Secretary of Asylum and Migration, Theo Francken, more and more citizens opened their homes. This turned hosting-at-home from an ad hoc response into a dynamic system that offered shelter for the night to approximately 7,000 migrants by the end of 2018 (Vandevoordt 2020).

From the beginning, the Platform’s coordinators advocated for state actors to establish a centre that would provide shelter, as well as adequate information on the rights of people on the move (e.g. on the processes and procedures of applying for international protection within Belgium and the EU at large). As it soon became clear that the Federal government was hostile both to these plans and to the actions of BelRefugees as a whole, they shifted their efforts to the regional government and municipalities of Brussels. Again, the fact that citizens were hosting people on the move, instead of either the state or NGOs that were providing similar public services to other groups (e.g. the local homeless population during Winter), was systematically used as an argument to convince elected officeholders (Vandevoordt 2020) and to mobilise their constituents into action. This combative spirit was captured by one of the Platform’s main slogans, usually accompanied by a visual of a fist clenching a heart: “Face a l’immobilisme, le mouvement citoyen(ne)!” translated freely as “In face of immobility, the citizen movement!” This was used to demonstrate that it was perfectly feasible to organise a more humane reception policy — if citizens can do this, why can’t the government — and that there was enough popular support to put this into practice.

Listening to and speaking for people on the move

Thesis two: citizen collectives claim to listen to and speak for people on the move in a more authentic way than professional NGOs and state actors. On the one hand, the social proximity between citizens and people on the move, and the expertise the former develop through this proximity is used as a strategy to hold states

and NGOs to account. On the other hand, by speaking for people on the move in public spheres to which the latter have limited access to and little desire to participate in, citizen collectives are rarely held to account for how they speak about the people they support.

In the context of development, McKay and Perez (2019) have argued that ‘citizen aid’ initiatives try to legitimise their actions by reporting on their work directly to the public through their social media accounts (see also Musa & Horst 2024). When read through the prism of accountability, this appears as a form of ‘upward accountability’ to public donors. Similarly, the collectives I worked with communicated strategically about their actions, mostly through social media. However, rather than informing the public on how they were spending donations, they tended to circulate testimonies on what was ‘really’ happening on the ground. This strategy serves to make two claims: one of being socially proximate to people on the move, and a second one of deriving expert knowledge from their regular presence in the streets. Both were regularly contrasted — explicitly in private encounters, implicitly in public statements — to state actors and established NGOs’ ‘distance’ from, and ‘lack of knowledge’ on what was ‘really happening’ on the ground.

As Knops and Severs (2019) have shown, one of the arguments with which BelRefugees justifies its ability of speaking for people on the move, is its social proximity. This is most tangible in BelRefugees’ active re-circulation of testimonies of ‘hosting-at-home’, initially under the term ‘TémoignAnge’ — combining *Témoignage* or testimony with Ange or Angel) (*ibid.*). In a later stage, these stories were collected on a website, in a book and in an exposition as Perles D’acceuil (Pearls of welcome). These testimonies typically fused the personal experiences of hosts with the stories of people on the move in a way that was designed to underscore their shared humanity in a highly personal, affective way (*ibid.*).

This strategy was also common in the other collectives I worked with: they all claimed to engage in more genuine, informal relations with people on the move, as compared to their professional counterparts. They emphasised that they spend more time together in public and private spaces, and that they listened *better* to the stories of persons on the move. Humain, for instance, regularly visited Dunkirk — a small municipality in the region of Calais — with the twofold aim of providing humanitarian support and collecting information on the conditions in the makeshift shelters. Upon their arrival, Humain’s volunteers split up into a humanitarian team that engaged in more casual conversations, and an advocacy team that engaged in more systematic conversations with the aim to document changes in the overall conditions of the camps (including access to sanitation, food, shoes), access to legal information, encounters with professional NGOs and government agencies, and incidents of police violence. After the advocacy volunteers had returned, they used this information to ‘sensitise’ the broader public in different ways: they thus gained a regional reputation for giving high-quality talks in secondary schools and universities, civil society organisations, art-based projects, and media events. This was one of their main goals: to inform the public about what was ‘really’ happening in Dunkirk, and, by doing so, to counter the discourse of securitization spread by elected officials in this period (Vandevoordt 2021a).

In addition, Humain consciously cultivated close relations with journalists and politicians, whom they would ‘feed’ or ‘weaponise’ with information, with the aim of putting pressure on those in power. This put them into a position where, for Belgian actors at least, they were, for a long time, the most reliable source for up-to-date information, testimonies and background analysis on the makeshift camps in Dunkirk.

This diffuse mode of holding states to account occasionally resulted in formal reports and complaints, usually in collaboration with professional NGOs. On one of their visits to Dunkirk, for instance, Humain’s volunteers spoke with several unaccompanied minors who had been arrested and released by Belgian police forces. Legally, this constitutes an act of negligence, as Belgian officers are obliged to inform care agencies of the presence of unaccompanied minors, who then would be appointed, in principle, and if the minors desire so, a legal guardian, as well as suitable legal and psychosocial support. Humain subsequently gathered several such testimonies and submitted these in a formal complaint to the Belgian police (Vandevoordt 2021a).

A more silent strategy was used by several volunteer groups that together form the Welcoming Network in Flanders. These groups advocated with their municipalities for the effective inclusion of

different sub-groups of people on the move, including recognised refugees, rejected asylum seekers and long-term settled undocumented migrants (Vandevoordt 2019a). As people on the move typically face a number of administrative barriers to access their social rights, the Network's volunteer groups tried to ensure their access to health care, education, leisure associations, and (social) housing. As concerned citizens, they presented themselves as mediators between people and the state. In the event of upcoming municipal elections, for instance, many of these volunteer groups wrote memoranda to raise a number of points — often after having checked these in advance with local civil servants to maximise the chance that their proposals would be turned into practice. In other words, the Welcoming Network's volunteer groups strategically used their personal networks, bureaucratic navigation skills and symbolic capital to speak on behalf of people on the move.

From their perspective, the collectives I worked with used their voice as citizens to speak on behalf of people on the move. While they tried to involve people on the move in the heart of their organisation, most of these actors readily acknowledge that this has not been a success. When people on the move do become involved in these collectives, it is usually on temporary basis and in the capacity of volunteers or interpreters, rather than in political advocacy or steering groups. This meant that, as far as the 'speaking out' is concerned, citizen collectives tend to *listen to*, and then *speak for* people on the move. Paradoxically, one could argue that the power difference between citizens and people on the move grew, as collectives moved from offering ad hoc support to political advocacy. In settings where they provide ad hoc support, there was usually some space for people on the move to negotiate power relations either through dialogue, or by making strategic use of this support in a way that supports the 'projects' of people on the move. When it comes to advocacy strategies, however, this dialogue and the opportunity to make strategic use of citizen collectives, seemed completely absent. In other words, the lack of participation in the design of these advocacy strategies — in the sense that it would go beyond using the stories of people on the move as testimonies — these collectives seem to be more in line with their professional counterparts.

There are several reasons for this. For one, as people crossing borders face a constant risk of being criminalised and thus detained and deported, their main strategy revolves around not making themselves too visible, especially if they aspire to continue their journeys. Second, as long as they are in precarious positions, people on the move face a number of practical barriers to engage in advocacy, including access to specific public spheres where citizen collectives speak out (domestic mass media, social media, schools, meetings with policy-makers and so on). And third, many of these citizen collectives are culturally and socially structured (e.g. highly formalised meeting procedures that are partially caused by legal requirements for non-profits) in a way that de facto excludes people with different class or national backgrounds (Vandevoordt 2019a).

Influencing professional NGOs

Thesis three: citizen collectives have the potential to influence both the operational and the advocacy actions of professional NGOs.

When citizen collectives and professional NGOs operate in the same place, they are bound to shape each other's way of working. In Brussels, for instance, the 'humanitarian hub' developed out of a sustain collaboration between different actors, each providing their own services: *Doctors of the World* offers medical support, *Doctors Without Borders* offers psychosocial care, the *Red Cross* takes care of family tracing and phone-charging, the Platform's volunteers run a social shop offering clothes and sanitary items, and *Refugee Action Flanders*, *Ciré* and *service d'information sociale et administrative (SISA)* — a separate service offered by the Citizen Platform — provide legal information on asylum procedures. While the hub changed location and constellation a few times throughout the years, it gradually turned into a permanent public service for people on the move.

In the period of my fieldwork (December 2017 – March 2019), there were constant negotiations on how the hub ought to operate. One of the recurring points of contention was the organisation of the social shop for clothes and sanitary items offered by the Platform's volunteers. The professional NGOs felt that its opening times should be limited, as they wanted to make the hub as tranquil as possible. Whenever it was open, the confined space of the hub quickly became overcrowded, and tensions

arose as desired goods were scarce. To regulate the access to the hub, a ticketing system was used on a first come, first serve basis, which meant that one or two persons had to 'supervise' the queue outside – this was initially done by volunteers, then by NGO staff, and eventually by a professional security organisation. At one point, the NGOs managed to convince the Platform to reduce the social shop's openings times to a few hours a week.

This was opposed by the Platform's volunteers, who felt that the hub also ought to function as a safe environment where people could spend time, especially during Winter. In addition, they felt that the reduced opening times put more rather than less pressure on people to get in. After a few weeks, the shop's opening hours were expanded again. When the hub eventually moved into a different building, considerable efforts were put into creating spaces where people could spend time even if they did not want to make use of specialised services.

Besides influencing the *modus operandi* of professional NGOs, citizen collectives can contribute to the sideways accountability of NGOs by influencing their advocacy strategies. Again, these collectives drew on their proximity to 'real people' in 'real situations' to hold NGOs to account for their political work. As mentioned before, both the Citizen Platform and Humain, for instance, have collaborated closely with NGOs by providing input into joint research reports and formal complaints with state actors.

In a different way, the Welcoming Network influenced part of the agenda of Refugee Action Flanders, the region's main advocacy NGO on refugee rights. Both organisations were entangled in a complicated relationship: the Welcoming Network was established in 2015 as a separate non-profit by Refugee Action Flanders, in an attempt to bring together local volunteer groups and to apply for separate funding. In the previous years, Refugee Action Flanders had seen substantial budget cuts, mainly due to their oppositional stance to concurrent migration policies. As Refugee Action Flanders went through a period of internal reorganisation, the Welcoming Network sprouted into an independent NGO run entirely by volunteers. The Network held its own meetings and regional network days, and produced a set of outputs such as a toolbox for volunteers, memoranda for policymakers and internal memos for Refugee Action Flanders. By consistently trying to involve Refugee Action Flanders in the work of volunteer groups, and by signalling the main issues they were faced with, the Network sought to influence the advocacy agenda of their sister NGO. Arguably, the most palpable outcome they achieved, was to put the sub-group of undocumented migrants back onto the agenda of Refugee Action Flanders.

In yet a different way, for a prolonged period, EMA engaged in grassroots advocacy work itself. By drawing on their extensive networks of collectives on the Aegean islands as well as testimonies from camp residents, they published several reports that were occasionally picked up by bigger NGOs. This included, most significantly, the 'Aegean grassroots report' (Europe Must Act 2020) on the humanitarian crisis and its political causes before the islands' gradual evacuation in the summer of 2020, as well as several 'situation reports' (Europe Must Act 2022) documenting the establishment of the Closed Controlled Access Centers on Samos afterwards. In addition, EMA partnered with NGOs from Italy and Belgium to organise visits of Members of the European Parliament (MEP) to the Aegean islands, thereby using their grassroots connections to facilitate contact between residents, local collectives and EU-parliamentarians.

Negotiating power: (in)dependence, informal social control, and political reflexivity

Thesis four: while the lack of formal checks and balances may pose an obvious risk for power abuse by individual citizens, these risks can be mitigated by a relative independence of people on the move vis-à-vis citizens, an organised form of informal social control, and a cultivated sense of political reflexivity.

Many scholars have shown how citizen collectives co-create spaces where people with varying backgrounds encounter one another, including the homes of citizens (Vandevoordt 2020; Gunaratnam 2021; Merikoski 2021; Kekstaite 2022; Bassoli & Luccioni 2024; Mogstad & Rabe 2024), social centres (Braun 2017; Schmid 2019; Mogstad 2021; Garny & Murru forthcoming) and makeshift camps (Sandri 2018). In these spaces, a striving for equality inevitably clashes with the persistence of material and

symbolic inequalities. And precisely these recurring clashes can, under certain conditions, give rise to a diffuse form of accountability.

To understand how accountability works in such spaces, it is useful to turn to a rather extreme case, in which there would seem to be an astute lack of downward accountability: BelRefugees' practice of hosting-at-home. For a long time, this was coordinated through the Citizen Platform's closed Facebook groups: every day, coordinators launched a poll asking who was willing to host that night, whether they needed a driver to bring people to their home, or if they could act as drivers themselves. In the evening, a team of coordinators entered the Maximilian Park to match people in need of shelter to the day's hosts and drivers. The system was characterised by a high degree of *flexibility* (e.g. by launching emergency calls or by bilaterally contacting hosts when needed), *informality* (i.e. there were little formal procedures and mechanisms to file complaints), and by its large scale (after one year, ca. 10,000 persons had hosted someone for at least one night).

At first sight, these spaces of encounter — situated in the homes of citizens — create an obvious risk for the abuse of power by citizens. Even though the Platform's coordinators circulated guidelines that spelled out what hosts should and should not do, they had little power to enforce them. Once hosts, guests and drivers were matched, it was difficult to control what happened within these homes. Some of the interlocutors I engaged with for a longer period of time, and with whom I had thus developed a bit more trust, told of fellow travellers, typically young men, who had been exploited by hosts in other regions in Europe. Persons that were 'in transit' seem to be occasionally expected to 'work' in the households, farms and dilapidated houses in which they are staying. Two persons mentioned that several of their fellow travellers had been exposed to transgressive sexual behaviour by hosts of all genders. It was a common understanding, they explained, that in certain regions you were more or less expected to do 'whatever the host wants you to do' in return for shelter (Fieldnotes July 2020).

While I did not encounter instances of this in my own conversations and research, it seems unlikely that such abuse did not happen at all. That I did not encounter such instances is at least partly due to my research focus and my role as a volunteer-researcher within the Citizen Platform. However, based on my fieldwork, I think it is plausible that the particular context of the Platform offered at least a minimal form of downward accountability, which mitigated — rather than cancelled — the risk of exploitation. The people on the move I engaged with, seemed to appreciate precisely the three features of the hosting-at-home system that I mentioned above: its *flexibility* (they could make use of the system when they needed to, and leave when they wanted), its *informality* (i.e. they could usually seek out hosts with whom they felt comfortable), and its *large scale* (which enabled them to switch between hosts if needed). This seems to have created a degree of *independence from* their hosts, which could be understood as a form of diffuse accountability.

The cases of exploitation my interlocutors mentioned, were all set in remote regions that offered little to no alternatives to escape the demands of their hosts, if they wanted to avoid sleeping rough. By contrast, the persons on the move I spoke with, said they appreciated the *flexible* and *informal* character of this system. They generally preferred to alternate between private hosts coordinated by the hosting-at-home system, dwelling in the Porte d'Ulysse, the collective shelter established in December 2017 by the Platform, and other temporary accommodations (mainly offered by people with migration/refugee backgrounds themselves). Private hosts were often used to recover for a few days in between intensive periods of trying their 'chances' — that is, to reach the U.K. In general, staying with private hosts gave them, relatively speaking, an opportunity to withdraw, rest, and charge their batteries. Over time, most of my interlocutors preferred to stay in touch with a small number of hosts with whom they felt comfortable. This enabled them to avoid going to the Maximilian Park, where they'd have to wait for the Platform's coordinators to fix a shelter for them.

In sum, their ability to navigate the landscape of different shelters may have provided using hosting-at-home with a relative independence vis-à-vis individual hosts and their demands. Translated to the issue of "downward accountability", this would hardly represent a way of holding hosts to account, yet it may have offered a route of escape or "exit" (Hilhorst *et al.* 2021, 396) in a situation where hosts might otherwise abuse their power.

In addition, the Citizen Platform engaged in at least two strategies to make hosts hold themselves to account. First, hosts were organised in several dozens of closed Facebook groups that were organised around regions, and coordinated by a handful of long-term volunteers who kept in touch with each other and the dispatching team in the Maximilian Park. Whenever new hosts were introduced, the coordinators would set up a first meeting — in later stage, this was preceded by an online form — and they would be matched to people on the move that were well-known with the dispatchers in the park. The coordinators typically kept in touch with the hosts, and both coordinators and dispatchers shared their phone numbers with hosts and guests alike. In case of any issues emerging, hosts and guests were subsequently matched to others, or banned from the system in case of repeated complaints. By organising themselves in this way, the coordinators created an — albeit limited — form of *informal social control*.

Second, while BelRefugees strategically presented itself as a humanitarian enterprise (cf. Schwiertz & Steinhilper 2021, it consciously functioned as a political movement, both in terms of its interventions in public debates and in a sustained effort to politicise its members (Vandevoordt 2019b). The Platform thus consciously strove to build a sense of community among its members which revolved around an ethos of political action and care. In addition to regular interventions in mainstream media and the organisation of protests, they did so through multiple posts per day in their closed Facebook groups (often counting thousands of members) (Knops & Severs 2019; Vandevoordt 2019b; Vandevoordt 2021b). In these interventions, the group coordinators underscored the fundamental equality of 'hosts' and 'guests', and the need to, at all times, respect the decisions of people on the move regarding their journeys.

Together, these dynamics — the relative *independence* of people on the move towards citizens, the organisation of *informal social control*, and the cultivation of *political reflexivity* — constitute a context that seem distinct from those in which exploitation did occur, according to my own conversations and the available scholarly publications. Exploitation would indeed seem more likely in a context where hosts are unattached to any collective that enforces some degree of social control or reflexivity, and where there are limited alternatives for people on the move in search of shelter. However, none of this altered the fact that the Platform had little control over what happened inside people's homes.

Beyond accountability? Some concluding thoughts

This article has set out to explore what accountability looks like within a specific type of grassroots actor: citizen collectives in Europe, who act in solidarity with people on the move. I have argued that questions of accountability are central to what these collectives do, and that they deal with these questions in a way that distinguishes them from other actors. I have structured my findings around four exploratory 'theses' on the promises and pitfalls that citizen collectives hold for doing accountability differently.

First, citizen collectives have a *distinct potential to hold state actors to account*. This is both because of their specific relation with their states, which enables them to dispute the democratic legitimacy of repressive migration policies, and because of their proximity and expertise to what 'actually' happens to 'real people' on the ground. Second, in the context of repressive migration regimes, citizen collectives may claim to listen to and speak for people on the move. While their social proximity may offer an opportunity to listen more carefully to the needs and demands of people on the move, the act of speaking out seems to increase the risk of speaking for the people they seek to support, without substantially involving them in decisions on how they are represented. Paradoxically, this implies that power imbalances increase as citizen collectives move from offering material support to political advocacy. Third, due to their proximity and grassroots expertise, citizen collectives can *shape both the operational and advocacy actions of professional NGOs*. Fourth, these collectives create spaces where power relations are negotiated through relations of (in)dependence, informal social control and political reflexivity – or the lack thereof.

While it is obvious that more systematic research across different contexts and collectives is needed to turn these theses into robust claims, I believe that they do help to imagine how accountability is already being done differently. Citizen collectives — or at least those that combine humanitarian with

political action — have the capacity to cultivate an ethics of care which, far from cancelling power relations, unsettles and transforms them.

So, how exactly can we imagine accountability to take place within such citizen collectives and grassroots actors more generally? In line with recent calls, I contend that the most fruitful way to do so is through a relational approach that zooms in on the messy encounters between citizens, their states, people on the move, and NGOs (Anstorp & Horst 2021; Brun & Horst 2023), rather than assume that accountability is necessarily a matter of formal mechanisms or procedures. The concept of (asymmetrical) reciprocity may work particularly well to foreground the complex nature of these relations. Hence grassroots actors such as diaspora, faith-based communities, and people with overlapping histories of displacement may be bound in a relation of reciprocity to people on the move — and vice versa — through a sense of responsibility towards members of the same community (Anstorp & Horst 2021; see contributions in this special issue). Evidently, analyses of such practices of accountability could then be informed by both the established literature of power analyses through the prism of ‘reciprocity’ and ‘the gift’ (e.g. Rozakou 2016) and by more recent approaches that draw on feminist theories of an ethics of care (Brun 2016; Kekstaite 2022; Pagès 2024).

Another concept that may be useful is that of ‘kinship’ — understood as a social construction rather than an essential, fixed part of one’s identity (Andrikopoulos & Duyvendak 2020). Several scholars have indeed pointed out how, in the context of repressive migration policies, hosts and guests use tropes of kinship to describe their relations (Gunaratman 2021; Merikoski 2021; Kekstaite 2022; Bassoli & Luccioni 2024). As argued by Mogstad and Rabe (2024, 1503), in “the current political climate where refugee and human rights are increasingly disregarded”, claims based on kinship could be “more effective than appeals to rights or charity”. Hence, they propose to explore “what possibilities exist for refugees to demand care and protection when movement and aid are criminalised, and asylum is reconceived from a right to a favour”. This argument could easily be extended to accountability: how can the prism of ‘kinship’, especially in its emic uses, be used to reimagine how actors can be held to account?

Similarly, thinking of such relations as a form of kinship may help us to better understand the complicated power dynamics that are at play within them. The relations that emerge between those providing and offering support in an increasingly private context, can perhaps be likened less to the fleeting encounters between humanitarian NGOs and their ‘beneficiaries’, than to the recurring engagements between parents and children, older and younger siblings, or aunts and cousins. One would imagine that ‘kindred’ people — regardless of whether they are tied together through ethnic ties — would also hold each other account in a different way: by cultivating relations of care, rather than through formal mechanisms.

What is perhaps even more specific to how accountability takes shape in citizen collectives, is its reorganisation of what is made visible, and what is not. On the one hand, citizens can use their resources to *bring to light* the effects of repressive migration policies. As ‘local first responders’, they are quicker to take action in face of emerging needs. As actors that are independent from major donors or distant steering boards, they are, in principle, less hampered to adopt an openly partial stance that is critical towards powerful institutions. And as ‘citizens’, they have resources at their disposal to mobilise their quick response and independence into a strategy to draw public attention to their own actions, and to the (lack of) actions by policymakers and NGOs.

On the other hand, the hosting-at-home system shows how the social relations between ‘citizens’ and ‘people on the move’ take place *outside* of public control and scrutiny. What happens there, is difficult to control and impossible to formalise without transforming it into something else. The relations between these actors will ultimately be shaped by their informality, their flexibility and the scale of the support that is being provided. All of this this contradicts how we typically imagine accountability: it requires *opacity*, rather than transparency (cf. Khosravi 2024, drawing on Glissant 1997). This opacity is anything but a side-effect of a lack of professionalism: it offers a fertile ground for both relations of dependency *and* independency, as well as for addressing *and* exacerbating relations of power. Given the current political climate, in which (support to) unwanted forms of migration is increasingly criminalised, such practices of support have little alternatives but to escape state control.

Notes

¹ This may explain why, to my knowledge, the sole publication that explicitly focuses on accountability within such collectives has been provided by a UK scholar working with UK charities (Denniston 2021).

² Ethically, when I entered the 'field' as a researcher in 2017, many of my interlocutors that were on the move expressed a form of research fatigue, as they were already being subjected to multiple inquiries by academics, journalists and NGOs. Hence, I decided to limit the number of systematic, in-depth interviews I conducted. Politically, it made sense to refrain from rendering 'visible' the mutual support provided among people on the move in a context where they sought to remain 'under the radar' to avoid criminalisation.

³ In this article, I am focusing on citizens that hold their own state to account. In practice, the relations between these citizen collectives and state actors are more complicated, especially when these collectives operate outside the state of which they are citizens. Mogstad (2021), for instance, discusses how the Norwegian volunteer group 'Drop in the Ocean' engaged in advocacy towards the Norwegian state, while remaining mostly silent about the role of the Greek authorities on the refugee camps where they were active themselves.

⁴ At the time Knops and Severs (2019) wrote their article, BelRefugees was still called BxlRefugees. In this paper, I refer to the platform's current name, which indicates its regional expansion beyond the context of Brussels ('Bxl').

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