

# V!RUS13

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**Boas notícias**  
Good news  
for hard times

ano 2016 year  
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## AEGEAN SEA, FRONTIER ZONE: SELF-ORGANIZED REFUGEE SUPPORT Christoph Walther

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**Christoph Walther** is bachelor in Environmental Science and holds a Master Degree in Urban Design. He has been working as a volunteer around the world. He is interested in exploring and mapping spaces for making places at a scale where real work is creating new relationships between the human being and the world we inhabit.

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“Because I just need free feet, holding hands, and eyes wide open” (Guimarães Rosa, 1999, p.137, our translation).

*Good news for hard times* - I immediately could connect to this call because it resonated with an experience I had earlier this year. I would like to share some of it in form of an essay, that addresses the question of Europe's struggle with the increasing numbers of refugees over the past few years, or rather, the people's struggle with Europe's frontier regime: people, who experience hard times in their home countries to an extent that they decide to leave for another continent, in prospect of more humane living conditions. After a brief introduction to the present political conditions in Europe, the account on self-organized refugee support on Chios (Greece) this essay is about will be contextualized, presented, and finally reflected in regards to the call of V!RUS 13: *good news for hard times*.

What has been coined as Europe's *refugee crisis* refers to the phenomenon of an unprecedented rise of refugees seeking asylum in member states of the European Union (EU) in 2015 and early 2016: One million people, of which most crossed the mediterranean sea in 2015 only (UNHCR 2015). European bureaucracy had not been prepared at all times to handle the situation in two aspects (Kermani 2016): Firstly, the border protection regimes proved temporarily insufficient as the so-called Balkan-Route became a largely informal but highly organized track into central Europe for many. Secondly, a smooth transition into the legal procedures of asylum application could not always be ensured, sometimes with severe consequences for the newcomers.

Now, in late 2016, while less refugees have found their way into Europe due to a reinforcement of the border regimes, there are conflicting political views on how to deal with the *refugee crisis* (Bauman 2016): while some call for solidarity and a respective shift in migration politics, others reinforce nationalism and securitization by promoting fear and panic. However, some suggest that the peak of 2015 was merely the beginning of even

bigger migration waves still to come (Collier 2014) - yet there are some lessons to be learned from the *refugee crisis* so far.

Much of the EU's failure became evident on the Greek Islands in the Aegean Sea near Turkey, as the key region on the main refugee route into Europe in the beginning of 2016. It thus resulted in great media coverage and public interest. As of March 20, 2016, an agreement between Turkey and the European Union was established, which enables the EU to send new arrivals directly back to Turkey, aiming to discourage all illegal transitions into the EU (Rat der Europäischen Union 2016). The new element in EU border protection here is that the physical protection of the border is reinforced by a legal framework that relies on Turkey's collaboration as a strategic partner who in turn receives financial benefits. After a few disruptions, protests, and chaos on the islands, the media's attention is now gone at large, while many refugees remain stuck on the islands. Retrospectively, this agreement marks a turning point for the EU border regimes, numbers of illegal border crossings have greatly dropped. Figure 1 displays UNHCR data that shows how sea arrivals peak in October 2016, overpass the numbers of the previous year until March at large, while tending towards zero since April 2016. However, due to political tensions between the EU and Turkey, the situation remains explosive and could change at any time.



**Fig. 1:** Comparison of monthly Mediterranean sea arrivals to Greece. Source: Available at <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php> [Accessed 18 October 2016].

What I just summarized in this short paragraph was hard to predict while my friends and I were working on Chios, one of the islands. I arrived in the beginning of February 2016 and left just as the negotiations between the EU and Turkey got more concrete, in early March. Throughout this period, however, the above mentioned Balkan-Route was still open, it roughly functioned in the following way:

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People mostly from different regions of Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, but also Iran and Pakistan, among others, would make their way to Izmir by all means you can imagine. In Izmir around *Basmane Gar*, one central train station of the city, a vivid market of traffickers and refugees is prospering – one seat on a shaky boat to Europe is being negotiated at around 1.000 US-Dollars. This is quite an exclusive mechanism that ensures the direct passage to Europe of a minority only, which became clear to me, when talking to a Syrian activist in Izmir: he was starting an organization for volunteers to support those who would *not* be able to afford the ride directly, being so kind to show us around key places and his project's facilities. In fact, Turkey has taken significantly more refugees than Europe, due to its geographical position in vicinity with Syria and Iraq, two of the principal refugee-producing countries today. However, many of them do not want or cannot continue into Europe. In any case, people who arrived on Chios could not be any more diverse: for instance, I talked two young musicians from Iran who had taken a flight from Teheran to Izmir, finding themselves one week later on European soils. On the contrary, a family of 26 from Iraq lived for one and a half years in Turkey before having gained enough financial resources to move on. In that sense, when talking about the *refugee crisis*, we talk about super-diverse and fast-changing socio-spatial conditions along the migration routes. In addition, *the refugee* does not exist as such, but incredibly diverse biographies that went on a journey with similar motivation perhaps, from all strands of life, really.



**Fig. 2:** Basmane, Izmir (CW). Source: Christoph Walther, 2016.

After registration with the Greek authorities on one of the islands, refugees would get permission to purchase a ticket for the ferry to Athens. Most people I talked to intended to



head for Germany, trains and busses through be Balkan-States and Austria would complete the journey. Much has been reported on this route, an excellent report has been delivered by German-Iranian writer Navid Kermani (2016), for example. Key element though, both financially and legally was, and still is, the transition into the EU. The Balkan-Route, with all its challenges and dangers, made obvious how many people want to move at the moment. It was possible to somehow move and make it all the way to Germany or elsewhere, and people would take the risk of an overcrowded boat on a rough sea, would pay with all they have, to simply move. This tells us a lot, how hard times really were (and still are).

Right now, the obstacles to move have gone beyond that which a human being can handle, while the causes for migration in the respective countries have not been solved at all. So just before things started to shift towards the above mentioned new control mechanisms of the European Border, whose stability and consequences are yet to be confirmed and assessed, my friends and I worked on Chios. Our intention was to support the *People's Street Kitchen*, the largest self-organized kitchen on the island with a capacity of up to 1.000 Liters of soup per day. This would be the equivalent to 2.000 hot meals for lunch and dinner each. We had come by invitation of a friend who had been involved with the kitchen from it's very beginning in December 2015. While being engaged with this work, we could learn much about the situation, the people's stories, as shared above, and most of all, how to make a difference in these hard times.

This, really, is the good news: While public agencies and larger non-governmental organizations were not capable to provide nutritious food for the arriving people, this service was organized by private individuals who freely associated around the physical space of a kitchen, and the aim to feed the refugees. Funded by friends, realized by volunteers: thus establishing an effective infrastructure, against all obstacles that occur in moments of disruptive change.



**Fig. 3:** Serving soup from van outside at one of the camps (CW). Source: Christoph Walther, 2016.

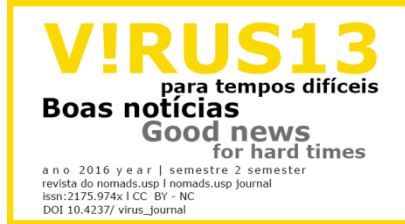


**Fig. 4:** Serving soup from van outside at one of the camps 2 (CW). Source: Christoph Walther, 2016.

Our lose, but highly committed community around the *People's Street Kitchen* is just one example of how individuals can come together to make a simple, but fundamental difference. I remember one night, when more and more boats would come but the soup was already finished and despite all, more soup was being prepared until very late. Such actions can either be taken, or not. It means a hot soup upon arrival, or not, to large numbers of people. So, who could let this opportunity go, really?

This, I guess, is the fundamental choice the volunteers would be challenged with, time and again, while taking night shifts along the shore to rescue boats, deliver warm clothes, hot tea, etc. Our job was only a little piece in a huge web of solidarity, that only got punctual recognition in mainstream media, while fulfilling an important task to make people's arrival in Europe a little more humane, warm, and welcoming. One collective of self-organized volunteers from Switzerland that united under the name of *Be Aware And Share (BAAS)* even founded a school on the island recently, after the EU-Turkey deal did come into action, with thousands of refugees remaining on the island. Only through the initiative of volunteers, their children are now being able to attend school.

It is frustrating to witness a situation in which the public authorities fail to fulfill their job. Surely, there are individuals in all parts of the government who work hard within their constraints. We had Frontex officers to assist with the soup, silent agreements with local authorities to enable our work, etc. Still, it actually should not be our job to feed the



arriving refugees in camps they are forced to go to. So there is a systemic problem here, which needs transformation. But first of all, when such systemic fragility becomes that visible, it challenges our capacity to act, it invites our friends back home to show their support in whatever way they can, and it results in an incredible amount of humanness and love for the moment. Of course, all this was not easy at all times, there were struggles and conflicts to be solved, but all this is part of being human in society.

I have been speaking about our work and my experiences to different audiences after the journey in March, April, and even May. With the distance now of almost half a year, I gain more clarity of what I have taken away from this. Sharing the stories and experiences, struggling for an appropriate language, forms of expression has been as essential to me, as the action itself. Times are hard in some corners of the world and it is easy to feel powerless by witnessing the amount of suffering and pain. Ignoring all this and pretending that things are ok is no long-term solution, I guess.

How our human capacity to act is always bound to our capacity of speech, is one of the key arguments political theorist Hannah Arendt puts forward in *The Human Condition* (1981). This is due to the political nature of our actions, which are always performed in a social context. Therefore, I suggest to not only view language as our means to negotiate our actions in society, but to explicitly think of it as a certain literacy towards the world. We should dare to see, be a witness of the hard times, that we cannot negate: this the the precondition for a true solidarity between humans to evolve, argues Zygmunt Bauman (2016), reflecting on humanity's present crisis in relation to the resurgence of populist xenophobic movements that promote panic and fear.

Action, in terms of Hannah Arendt, is one of our highest human virtues. So if we accept this challenge, being a witness of hard times can remind us of what it really means to be human. Good news in hard times should thus indicate ways to get there: I believe that action, even by the simplest means, can be a way to better understand the time that we live in. In other worlds, witnessing the situation on Chios with such intimacy was only possible for us, because we were already trying to change it for the better. My question now remains: what's next?

Detailed data, both visual and statistical, on refugee movements in the Mediterranean regions are available at: <<http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>>.

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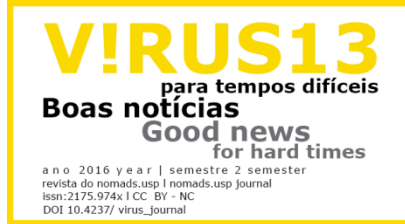
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