SOLROUTES

Antenna 2 - Belgium

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Introduction

The 2015 reintroduction of internal border controls has radically reshaped the social landscape of Europe as it had become after Schengen liberalisation of circulation [1] (Amigoni et al. 2020). Indeed, with the aim of stopping the circulation of refugees, some states including Germany, Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, France, Sweden, Norway and Denmark have undertaken permanent controls at their borders [2]. As a result, migrants arriving via West and Central Mediterranean and Balkan routes, with the need to reach different European countries, are often blocked, pushed back and forced into even more precarious conditions. The EU's 'Politics of crisis' (De Genova et al 2016) led considerable numbers of people into a daily struggle of illegal crossing attempts and the consequent development of a massive border control apparatus. The result was a slowing down of crossings, the increased difficulties and violences migrants are subject to, and a multiplication of crossing routes rather than a complete block.

In this country report we focus on the circumstances and related dynamics of the influx of refugees generated in Belgium as one of the four research fields of the Solroutes ERC project [3] we are part of. The first chapter aims to set Belgium into the context of the Long Summer of Migration and to highlight the challenges and struggles generated by the arrival of protection seekers. Subsequently, we will engage with the crisis of reception and restrictive asylum policies implemented as well as the main issues faced by refugees in Belgium. In the second chapter, we focus on the (re)emergence of civil refugee support acting in solidarity with migrants and on the conceptualisation of those actions and networks. Some authors have focused on the humanitarian versus political motives underlying the engagement of grassroots civil initiatives, others on the intersections and tactical coalitions between people on the move and their allies. To conclude the third chapter presents the main organisations and associations operating on assistance and support of migrants.

Set of Circumstances

Setting Belgium into the context of the Long Summer of Migration

In order to fully understand the recent refugee background in Belgium we must consider the wider European context of the 'crisis' triggered by the so-called Long Summer of

Migration. Displacement of people on the move from front-line EU countries (Spain, Italy, Greece) to northern countries have triggered the (re)activation of intra-schengen border control. Although systematic border controls had been removed in the framework of the Schengen Agreement of 1990, de facto 'Fortress Europe' still poses many internal and external barriers Walters, 2002). However, the visibilization of arrivals to EUrope can be traced way before 2015 and the Long Summer of Migration. In 2011, the displacement of people resulting from the uprisings in North Africa have challenged the Euro-Mediterranean border regime initiated through the externalisation of border control since 1995 (Hess and Kasparek, 2017). The parameters of the EU border regime shifted drastically. As some of the governments cooperating with EUrope in its externalisation of the border control collapsed (eg. Libya; Tunisia) and because of the ongoing conflicts in other regions (eg. Syria) the externalised border control had collapsed consequently. Crossings of the Mediterranean by boat have risen sharply, while the Balkna route has not ceased to be crossed by people on the move despite the 2016 EU-Turkey deal.

Belgium, being a country bordered by France, Netherlands, Germany, United Kingdom and Luxembourg it is willy-nilly a hub of circulation of many people on the move who did not manage to secure asylum in other EU countries. Belgium also had its share as it was confronted with an important number of arrivals of protection seekers. Along with that, the dismantlement of the Calais 'jungle' settlement (the camp hosted up to 10, 000 individuals at its peak) resulted in displacement towards Belgium with the aim to seek protection or to reach ports in West Flanders, alternative crossing points to the UK. Those who are pushed back from the ports in West Flanders often shift to Brussels' North – where buses and trucks depart to the UK and where support and facilitations are provided by citizens acting in solidarity with vulnerable migrants (Mescoli et al. 2019; Vandevoordt, 2019a). For those who aimed to acquire asylum in Belgium, their destination is Fedasile (Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) in Brussels. In fact, the administrative intricacies related to registration for asylum application and also the inadequacy of the existing reception structures in dealing with the numbers of applications have transformed a public park in the centre of the capital, located near the office in charge into a spontaneous "refugee camp" (Lou Vertongen, 2018). Far from hosting asylum seekers only, the Maximilian Park became a symbol and gathered varieties of people on the move and solidaristic actors following the visibilization of this park as an internal border zone in Belgium, where control and facilitations to migrants' existence are entangled. To deal with

this situation, the Belgian authorities deployed their politics of exhaustion (Ansems de Vries and Welander, 2021) that consist of dismantling encampments, making-wait and suspending procedures related to asylum determination in order to reduce and discourage people from staying. The aim is to channel, filtrate and sort those to be "dublinized" [4]. That is to filter protection seekers and determine whether their claims for protection are to be examined by Belgium or by the State of the first arrival. In fact, through biometric registrations and technologies of surveillance and datafication EU member States aim to control secondary movement a priori, before its realisation, with the aim of exercising their sovereignty in trying to contain migrants movements. In fact if it is possible for the state to legally deport migrants back to the first country of entry, that can be effective only a posteriori via large and complex procedures (Amigoni et al., 2020).

In this vein "secondary movements" appear to be a prevailing issue in the Belgian context. As a matter of fact, many people on the move avoid asking for asylum as they aim to continue their journey, for instance to the United Kingdom. In order to tackle these occurrences, *Schengen intermittences* (Garellin 2013) have been activated to manage the circulation of illegalized people. One of its manifestations are the several joint Declarations signed between the Belgian and the British authorities in order to to hinder the crossing through the English Channel. Thus, the routes leading to the English Channel are becoming an arena where repeated evictions of self-constructed camps and occupied squats, push-backs and detentions are carried to contain 'unwanted' movements of unauthorised migrants (Annual report on migration and asylum in Belgium 2021)

Crisis of reception and restrictive asylum policies

It can be challenging to discuss the asylum policy history and outcomes with sensitivity and context. In Belgium, this is particularly true, given the country's significant and complex past of immigration and refugees. Statistics from Fedasil [5] and the Belgian immigration office reported by Myria (the Belgian federal migration centre) suggest that the arrivals of people on the move and asylum applications in 2014-2015 were considerably increased and required action. Indeed, the asylum request passed from 15.849 in 2013 to 44.760 in 2015 and the reception system was not able to handle the sudden increase. In the following years the arrivals remained consistent (18.710 in 2016; 19.688 in 2017; 23.443 in 2018) with another peak in 2019 with 27.742. There will be a slight decrease in 2020 with

restrictions due to measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic counting 16.910. The following year the requests started to grow again, arriving at 25.971 and reaching the number of 36.872 in 2022 with the arrivals of Ukraine refugees.
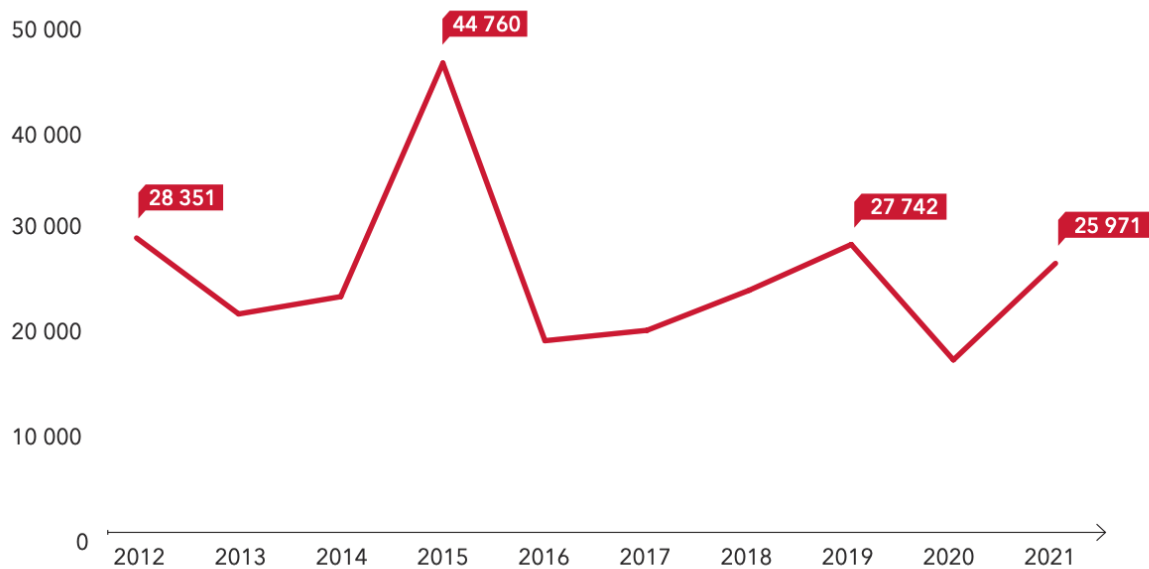
Number of persons who applied for international protection (asylum) in Belgium in ten years 2012-2021 (Source CGRS) / Graph asylum request

The increased influx of asylum seekers in recent years exceeded the capacity of the existing reception centres generating thus a 'crisis of reception'. In 2015 the total number of places available was around 17.000 against more than 44.00 arrivals. In order to respond to this the Belgium government first opened new reception centres reaching 33.659 at the beginning of 2016. When the crisis became less acute Fedasil decided to decrease the reception capacity closing 13.000 reception sites between 2016 and 2017. Subsequently, a way to 'solve the situation' in a context of continuous arrivals was to restrict the access to asylum. For instance, since October 2021 access to the asylum procedure is not evident anymore. Waiting in line for days before being able to make asylum applications or the constraints linked to the appointment to introduce an asylum request through digital platforms is becoming the new normal. In fact, since those waiting to apply are not yet considered 'asylum seekers', they could not claim rights linked to this status, be that the right to

reception, to legal assistance and so forth (ECRE, 2021) [6]. As a result, many migrants are sleeping rough and camping outside the registration centre, waiting to be able to submit their asylum application. This controversy had been taken to the Brussels Court of first instance, and thus the Belgian State was ordered to ensure access to the asylum procedure in January 2022 (AIDA, 2023). An improvement was noticed up until March 2022. However, following the activation of the European Temporary Protection Directive, an increase of applicants surging from the outbreak of the war in Ukraine has resulted in denial of access to the asylum procedure and reception conditions to many non-Ukrainian protection seekers (mainly single men).

In January 2022, the government launched a 'five-point action plan' to counter the 'growing issue of asylum seekers crossing into Belgium' [7]. One of the aspects targeted by this plan is to give priority to "first time applicants' who have not yet applied for or/and received asylum in another EU Member State. Eurodac checks were deployed to sort, filtrate and manage what had been framed as 'worthy' protection seekers and 'counterfeit' protection seekers. The narrative on 'worth' and 'counterfeit' asylum seekers stems from the assumption that only applicants coming from unsafe countries of origin are entitled to protection, and if so, they have to remain in the first safe country they arrive in. Therefore, those deemed to have applied for asylum in another EU Member State were denied access to the reception network and requested to contact Fedasil to be included on a waiting list. Most of the reports claim that a large number of displaced people have been and still are in the country, including families and unaccompanied minors, with difficulties to regularise their situations and living in degrading conditions.

The duration of the asylum procedure in Belgium can vary widely based on individual circumstances, changes in policies, and the number of pending cases. As we know, the process involves several stages, including registration, interview to determine the applicant's eligibility for asylum, and potential appeals if the initial decision is unfavourable. Moreover NGOs claim a widespread lack of access to information and support in making asylum applications (RRE 2018; AIDA 2021). This situation is described as a reception crisis severely affecting the possibilities to access the asylum procedures and their rights. This protracted state of limbo has had a negative effect on the physical health and mental wellbeing of the people involved, says the 'Exploring Vulnerability's Challenges and Pitfalls in Belgian Asylum System' [8] report. This is exemplified in the legislation regarding asylum and reception implemented during March 2018, which has lowered the Belgian asylum-

related standards on several counts, reaching the absolute minimum as prescribed by EU Directives. Sometimes the application procedure lasts for several years with the consequences that people feel as if they have been forgotten (RRE 2018). Fedasil reported several times the need of personnel in order to shorten the procedures, manage the centres and guarantee protection needed to people.

There are also alarming reports (Left In-Between, Refugee Rights Europe, 2019; AIDA, 2022) that incorrect information has been circulated that seems to be designed to deter people from claiming asylum in Belgium. Those attempts aim to dissuade asylum applicants from seeking to remain. However, the Interior Minister and the Immigration Minister have made clear their view that the state cannot take any responsibility when individuals do not claim asylum on Belgian territory. Indeed, Belgium and particularly the city of Brussels represent an important migration hub where people on the move either pass, stop for a while and if possible continue. For instance, many migrants recently arrived, mostly originating from Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, are not interested in applying for asylum in Belgium but they are staying in the territory either to find the way to continue or to get the resources to afford this. In this situation the risk of being arrested and sent back to Italy or Greece under the Dublin III Regulation negatively affects the mental health of these people (MSF 2019). Moreover, they are not asylum seekers and so they are not entitled to any accommodation or forms of support. Indeed many people (either asylum seekers and undocumented migrants) are effectively homeless, whilst others are living in refugee camps. With the reception crisis several small camps are now dotted around the city in places such as Namur and Liege, whilst citizens have also stepped in to house refugees in their homes, mainly through the invaluable work of the Plateforme Citoyenne de Soutien aux Réfugiés (RRE 2018; Clarbout, 2020). Civil society organisations, however, also claim that the long-term mismanagement of the reception network has to be regarded as a main cause of the shortage, in particular due to the fact that centres have been systematically closed and staff dismissed in periods of lower occupation rates.

Another factor of great concern denounced by UNHCR is the arbitrary detention of several categories of asylum seekers that may happen at the border, on the territory and even during the Dublin procedure. Belgium has a total of six detention centres, in which migrants are detained. The total capacity of the six detention centres (*124bis; Caricole; Bruges-CIB; Merksplas-CIM, Vottem and Holsbeek*) was 635 [9] in 2022. It is expected that the detention capacity in Belgium will reach 1145 places in 2030 (see Annual report on migration and

asylum in Belgium 2021). Asylum seekers arriving without travel documents at the Belgian borders are automatically detained (Ibid., 2021, p, 126), and the detention can go up to six months. These detentions are conducted on the basis of the Article 51/5/1 of the *Aliens Act* entered into force in July 2019 to implement the articles on detention of the Dublin III regulation for applicants who were registered in another Member State. At the same time asylum seekers randomly found without travel documents at the border are automatically detained and they don't have any guarantees and an exhaustive list of reasons for detention. Asylum seekers can also be detained during the asylum procedure if there are indicators that other EU countries might be responsible for handling their request. The current government, however, has agreed that it can no longer detain children in closed centres, as a matter of principle [10].

Belgium can be shown to have violated the international principle of non-refoulement on several occasions, and there are ongoing reports that this practice continues [11]. Removal orders can be issued to foreign nationals who are staying in the country irregularly, pose a threat to public order and security, have been readmitted to Belgium or are about to be removed, present false information regarding their situation to authorities or are awaiting the fulfilment of a removal order and are considered likely to impede the fulfilment of that order. In 2022, 3,300 persons were forcibly returned. It concerned 1,174 repatriations, 795 Dublin transfers, 1,329 refoulements at the border and 2 voluntary returns facilitated by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

State of reflection:

The moral-humanitarian and the political motives and actions in civil refugee support.

The discussion surrounding the "European refugee crisis" has resulted in a reconfiguration within the European border regime, as it has become a highly visible and politically contentious issue. If the EU's frontline borders are increasingly fortified to counter migrants' arrivals, some other inner-EUropean countries were more concerned with intra-Schengen border-crossing of the so-called "unauthorised" migrants. To that, we witnessed the (re)emergence of fortified intra-EU borders. In fact, migrants arriving to front-line EU countries and aim further north (to inter alia reach a better reception environment, to escape deportation when denied asylum, to seek better opportunities) are often faced with Schengen

intermittences (Garelli, 2013), an on/off functioning of the border control attempting to block and channel their 'unwanted' movements.

Notwithstanding the multiplication of migration management practices and the proliferation of borders many people on the move manage to arrive in northern EU countries. It is in this landscape, and to its geographical location that we can see Belgium as a crucial space for secondary movements and a hub of circulation of many people who did not manage or not desire to secure asylum in other EU countries. Before engaging with the existing debate on solidarity with migrants, it is relevant to bear in mind the two key moments: as mentioned above, the long summer of migration, where displaced people from Syria sought Balkan routes to Austria, Germany, Italy, and Belgium, and the dismantlement of the Calais settlement. These events have shaped Belgium into a border zone *par excellence*, where mobilities of illegalized migrants and various forms of politics of exhaustion (Ansems de Vries and Welander, 2021) are entangled.

The above-mentioned occurrences have triggered the (re)emergence of civil refugee support acting in solidarity with migrants. Civil solidarity concerns the actions and the initiatives taken by individuals, communities or organised collectives to provide support, assistance and protection to illegalized migrants. However, in Belgium these forms of solidarity often clash with government politics and practices related to the enforcement of immigration and border control provisions. Despite the accusations directed towards solidarity actors, many have assumed their capacity in replacing large humanitarian organisations famously involved in the migration industry (Flieschmann and Steinhilper, 2017; Fleischmann, 2020, Mescoli, Roblain et Griffioen, 2020; Vandervoordt, 2020). Following these forms of solidarity, many scholars have directed interest to the diverse practices implemented, focusing on the inner intentions and the political orientations of the diverse actors involved. While primarily these forms of action were framed according to some humanitarian reasons, it has been recognized that these forms of solidarity are rooted in relationships among migrants and citizens. The later dynamics stimulated a conceptual shift; from accounting *humanitarian actions* to *solidarity* that implies both moral-humanitarian and political motives as a motivation in mobilising citizens for the favour of illegalized migrants (Lafaut and Coene, 2018; De Backer, 2018; Vandevoordt, 2019; Mescoli et al., 2019; Mescoli, Roblain et Griffioen, 2020; Ballet, 2021).

Considering that the reflection on migratory solidarity has passed through different moments of reflection and a variety of conceptual shifts, scholarship observing the Belgian context has mainly revolved around problematizing the motivations to act in solidarity with migrants (placing these on a spectrum ranging from the moral-humanitarian to the political). The practice of measuring intentions and motivations has dominated this moment of reflection, leading to the production of ideal-types around civil refuge support mobilisation: (1) *humanitarian* logic of formal civil society actors that keep their political stance 'neutral' (Lou Vertougen, 2018), to (2) forms of aid occupying a grey zone between traditional humanitarian aid and political action (Mescoli, Roblain and Griffioen, 2020). However, the encounters of these assumed-to-be differentiated intentions on the fields of action produce interpersonal relations among various subjects in contexts of support and solidarity (Mescoli et al., 2019), generating thus a third posture, that is of (3) *subversive humanitarianism* (Vandervoordt and Verschraegen, 2019, p.17). According to the authors this situation refers to "*a setting where humanitarian actions in support of refugees does not only aim to transform forced migrants into mere recipients of aid, it is a form of solidarity that allows more room for civil society actors, activities and migrants' socio-political subjectivities*". However, it is noteworthy to mention that the *subversive humanitarianism* is rather an exploratory concept, useful to explore not only the dichotomy between humanitarian and political action in grassroot civil refugee initiative but also to compare forms of solidarity in migratory contexts through underlining the key characteristics shaping these actions. All in all, the above-mentioned typologies have sought, first and foremost, the conditions that bring these pro-migrant mobilizations to place and the repertoires animating their actions. Up to this date, the various solidarity gestures observed are the provision of food, shelter and care appear to be ranged as humanitarian aid, while the legal, social and political support are seen to accommodate a politicising potential (Vandervoordt, 2019b). Be that as it may, if civil humanitarianism is claimed to remain neutral in action, citizens' acts are assumed to be contentious, ranging from social migrant support to civil disobedience.

Beyond the prefigurative politics in analysing solidarity in Belgium?

The urge to explore the prefigurative politics (Leach, 2013) of civil refugee support have obscured the interest in the variety of solidarity actors that are involved in Belgium's transit spaces and border zones. By prefigurative politics in this context we mean the way solidarity

groups organise themselves and behave according to some values and intentions of structural-reformism and/or structural-abolitionism of borders. The thing that may or may not align with the intentions of people on the move or established migrants involved in such solidarity dynamics. If we consider that solidarity dynamics and actions in todays' Belgium involve not only EURopean citizens but also migrants, it is relevant to direct attention to ways intentions and motivations for solidarity actions are weaved beyond some prefigurative politics. Often, in the existing knowledge, the resources, scoops and directions of solidarity actors are often compromised for an account of inner intentions and logics of action. Notwithstanding the growing recognition of the social spaces weaved when citizens and migrants are encountered in some setting of solidarity and their transformative potential (Ataç, Rygiel and Stierl, 2016; Hamann and Karakayali, 2016) scholarly knowledge remains, to a large extent, confined to the polarisation between the citizen and the migrants. What we see here is the primacy of the figure of the citizen with their subversive actions and the recency of the migrants (averting attention to the relevance of networks of mutual aid, information and facilitation). It is the modes of organisations and social relations attempting to implement a change on border configuration, always on behalf of the migrants, that occupy centre stage of the academic attention. This gaze obscures the unsettled and often multidirectional solidarities and the potential of coalitions among people on the move (migrants, protection seekers, refugees, diaspora), and the forms of support and facilitation transpiring from it.

Drawing on research and fieldwork we have conducted in other border zones in EURope (e.g., French-Italian borders) and immersive interactions with people on the move and their communities we have noticed complex and underground forms of support, assistance and facilitations. These gestures of solidarity transgress the dominant narrative on solidarity in EURope: a narrative assuming solidarity as essentially flowing from civil society and EU-citizens towards the so-called non-citizens (people on the move), following some sort of humanitarian and/or political intentions or an entanglement of the two (Della Porta, 2018a; Vandervoordt, 2020). What we have seen are rather ethnic and diaspora where different kinds of facilitators and middle men provide resources, contacts and expertise to cross borders, settle or survive in a place. In fact, the social capital that each migrant community has accumulated over time is made available to other migrants. Solidarity is then conceived as a complex and conflicting space of interactions revealing and generating porosity and shifting hierarchies and boundaries (Barth, 1998) across and within social groups in transit

space (Amigoni and Palmas, 2023). A situated and multifarious set of practices and forms of alliances driven by ethical and/or economic motivations with blurred and contradictory traits. In this context, the "migrant" is not the passive subject or aid receiver and the "citizen" is the active subject providing help. What we have noticed is that gestures of assistance, facilitation and information to border-crossings are stemming from different "knowers" and "conductors". Their logics of action are not rooted in prefigurative political or moral intention, rather, they refer to some situated relations "inside the shell" of the border configuration. Here, border configurations were not contested in the words of some encountered people. They were considered as a situation that constitutes ground to strengthen relations and coalitions. These solidals draw on the instrumental efficiency of their actions, privileging the immediate action and the immediate effect on the moments of solidarity. Away from a structural-reformism and/or structural-abolitionism, these solidals implement direct actions such as "conducting" people on the move through the trails to circumvent hostile border control; information about moments of passages and nodes of support situated in the other side of the border; provide safe houses or squatted places to rest and hide from police; equipe people with tools and resources needed to survive in hostile context; give emotional and psychological support to people were passing through critical and violent circumstances. .

Now, if we shift the focus from the account of intentions and motivations of pro-migration EUropeans to looking at the relational particularities of solidarity gestures in border zones we will be able to encompass the material occurrences producing gestures, networks and routes of solidarity around border zones. Thus, the research team in Belgium will be concerned with the complex solidarities built around settlement and movements of migrants in transit through and across Belgium. There the complex setting of solidarity is not considered as an empirical insight, but an analytical starting point to go beyond the moral and the political assumed obligations, and embark on the relational realms and the practical outcomes steaming from multiple nodes and poles. By redirecting the gaze from civil refugee support (where the primacy is allocated to the citizen) to intersection and the tactical coalitions between people on the move and their allies (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola, 2021) solidarity cannot not be any more seen as an outcome to which we have to define the intentions, but rather a space of encounter where the complex setting, the tensions and the multidirectional form of facilitation are unpacked. In particular, a close

attention will be directed to the ethnic and transnational support networks of migrants providing different contacts, expertise and valuable information necessary to settle, to access to legal status but also to move when the politics of exhaustion (Ansems de Vries and Welander, 2021) are deemed to be unbearable.

Organisations, citizen platforms, and grassroots networks of solidarity with migrants in Belgium

This section provides a snapshot of the main organisations, associations and grassroots networks operating in assistance, support and solidarity with migrants in Belgium. Considering that the situation is evolving, new dynamics and actors emerge, both formally and informally. Moreover, this mapping did not include all informal actors in solidarity with migrants and it will be a concern of the intervention of SOLROUTES research team in Belgium.. It is also important to keep in mind that the field of solidarity with and among migrants is a contentious one. The relationship between solidarity and the enforcement of immigration laws can be complex, against the law and often prevented to be seen. While solidarity efforts aim to provide support and protection to vulnerable migrants, they can sometimes be met with opposition from authorities who view them as interfering with immigration enforcement. This tension raises important questions to be tackled when following the nodes where control and facilitation are entangled in the Belgian context.

Citizen Platform- RefugeeBXL - Brussels: http://www.bxlrefugees.be/en/

RefugeeBXL is a collective transpiring from the 'crisis' of refugee reception in Belgium. It deals mainly with issues relating to reception and temporary housing in Brussels and beyond. Over the years BXL Refugees has become a structured NGO 'providing, within its means, an unconditional welcome, a response to requests for information, training and assistance to exiles, migrants, asylum seekers, newcomers and undocumented migrants, in full respect of the individual and his or her choices'.. They operate on a basis of federation of citizens and associative energies to include vulnerable migrants in the context of the 'crises of reception in Belgium.

Association Européenne pour l'Information sur le Développement Local (AEIDL) - Etterbeek : https://www.aeidl.eu

After 2015, the AEIDL engaged in promoting citizen's initiatives for migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. They operate in networks of visibility and promotion of citizens' initiatives with the aim to deliver a counter-narrative on the hostile environment for migrants. They act to reshape the narratives around the criminalization of migrations and reinforce compassion. Moreover they reflect on how European,national and regional policies can facilitate the integration and empowerment of migrants and refugees.

CIRÉ (Coordination et initiatives pour réfugiés et étrangers): https://cireold.cire.be

This organisation operates in the Brussels-Capital region and focuses on the rights of refugees and migrants. They provide legal aid, support and advocacy.

Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM): https://picum.org

PICUM works to uphold the rights of undocumented migrants across Europe and they collaborate with local organisations in Belgium as well.

Serve the City - Leuven: https://www.servethecityleuven.be

Serve the City is a global movement of volunteers acting on the needs of vulnerable people, including migrants. They weave partnership with homeless shelters, refugee centres, orphanages and other associations, offering help and support. It is a coalition of volunteers that act on, among other issues, migratory challenges in the city of Leuven.

The Refugee Taskforce - Ghent: https://stad.gent/en/migration/refugee-taskforce

The Refugee Taskforce is a cooperation between policy, administration, civil society and citizens to facilitate reception and integration of people on the move. They draw on a pro-migrant approach. The build on weaving contact between new-comer asylum seekers and

relevant organisations. Besides legal aid and information, they also involve asylum seekers in networks of volunteer work and language courses. The aim is to integrate the newcomers with the citizens and the existing organisations in Ghent and beyond.

Booms Welkom - Brussels: https://welkomenco.be

Booms Welkom is a transnational civil refugee support initiative providing various kinds of support and advice around the legal, the social and the economic dimensions. They also provide intermediate access to suitable accommodation for asylum seekers and refugees and intermediate, as well, in assisting migrants in their bureaucratic and administrative procedures.

Caritas International Belgium: https://www.caritasinternational.be/en/

Caritas is a Catholic organisation that offers support to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. They operate on a humanitarian frame providing basic needs to people on the move and vulnerable migrants. Their actions range from reception to social support for asylum seekers and integration of recognized refugees. They also operate on the behalf of unaccompanied foreign minors. Caritas shows its involvement both in visits to detention centres and intermediate for voluntary return.

Conclusion:

This report is concerned with Belgium as a space where refugees aim to settle, to move forward and where various and blurred forms of solidarity come into play. If conventionally Belgium is seen as a hub for decision fabrication over migration and asylum management, this report shows different manifestations illustrating it as a border zone where the nexus between solidarity and migration is to be explored from non-western centred perspective and underground forms of resistance and new coalitions.

The first section gives a general picture of the refugees' context in Belgium and underlines the recent development of the attempt to govern people on the move under the Schengen border regime and its extensions. In fact, we have shown how the heterogeneity of the movements animating this space is reduced, to a large extent, as that becomes understandable and classifiable as "secondary movement" or "unauthorised movements"

driven by migrants' intentions to find a better place to settle. As we look at the occurrences transpiring from this context, we see a set of circumstances shaping the battleground to access international protection and to reach desired destinations. . Indeed, the main issues we identify from the literature are the insufficient reception system for asylum seekers and the risk of being prevented from travelling to other European countries, either being sent back or being stuck there.

The second section delves into the construction of solidarity in Belgium as an academic research interest and the state of knowledge we have up to date. One salient element was that Belgium is seen as an inner-European border zone. In it, both attempts to govern and discipline migration and aims to de-border the constraints to movement and settlement are apparent. In this configuration, the academic attention has allocated an important part of its production to the pro-migrant mobilizations and forms of action in solidarity with migrants. The repertoires of action were the main elements reflected in this state of reflection. This practice to measure intentions and motivations has dominated this moment of knowledge. Ranging from humanitarian logic to the political actions of civil society actors, scholars have focused on prefigurative politics shaping and animating solidarity actions by linking them to some intentions of structural-reformism and/or structural abolitionism.

The third section is concerned with a quick mapping of existing organisations, associations and grassroots networks working to support migrants in Belgium. The interest is to gain sight of the actors in order to navigate the context when carrying out research under the frame of the SOLROUTES project.

In this perspective, as we examine the Belgian context, we will follow ways solidarity unfolds and the particular relational and experiential aspects it triggers. To do so, we will privilege a gaze into the different forms of solidarity among diasporas linked to both movements and settlement in Belgium (see nodes research plan). A general objective is to observe how gestures and acts of support to people on the move take place in Belgium and across its borders, and accounting the " spaces of encounters where social boundaries (ethnicity, class, gender, generation) are contested and blurry the assumed dichotomy between "providers" and "beneficiaries"' (SOLROUTES project).

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[1] The border-free Schengen Area guarantees free movement to more than 400 million EU citizens, along with non-EU nationals living in the EU or visiting the EU as tourists,

exchange students or for business purposes (anyone legally present in the EU). Free movement of persons enables every EU citizen to travel, work and live in an EU country without special formalities. Schengen underpins this freedom by enabling citizens to move around the Schengen Area without being subject to border checks. (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/schengen-agreement-and-convention.html).

[2] Belgium closed all its borders from 20/03/2020 to 14/06/2020 and subsequently from 27/01/2021 to 18/04/2021 citing prevention of the coronavirus pandemic as the reason.

(https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-08/Full%20list%20of%20MS%20notifications%20of%20the%20temporary%20reintroduction%20of%20border%20control%20at%20internal%20borders.pdf)

[3] SOLROUTES' core research question is: how can the turbulence, persistence, and intensity of unauthorised movements and of the production of migrants' routes across "Europe at Large" – originating from the externalisation of EU borders to non-EU countries – be understood? The project addresses this challenge from an innovative angle, through an ethnographic exploration of the nexus between unauthorised movements and the networks of solidarity with migrants in transit, which involve actors and practices that have been overlooked in migration studies. This will be achieved by mapping and observing crucial nodes in migration routes within Europe (Belgium), in selected countries on its fringes (Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco) and in the Outermost Regions of the EU (French Guiana, Mayotte).

[4] First countries of arrival into Europe are expected to readmit asylum seekers on their territory in application of the Dublin II Regulation: they may be migrants who just passed through these countries without applying for asylum, or they may be rejected asylum seekers, or others who did not await the final outcome of the asylum procedure.

[5] Fedasil, the agency responsible for the reception of applicants for international protection and certain other categories of people, verifies if people are entitled to and interested in reception. In case they will allocate asylum seekers in a reception centre where they will benefit from assistance (i.e. accommodation, meals, clothing, medical, social and psychological assistance, a daily allowance - pocket money - and access to legal assistance and services such as interpreting and training).

[6] ECRE, 'Belgium: Asylum Seekers (Once Again) Left Destitute', 29 October 2021, available at: https://ecre.org/belgium-asylum-seekers-once-again-left-destitute/.

[7] MO Magazine, 'Ongoing reception crisis in asylum policy, while humans are concerned', 17 February 2022, available in Dutch at: https://bit.ly/3lZhaY.Q.

[8] https://www.vulner.eu/80233/VULNER_WP2_Report1.pdf

[9] Getting the Voice Out, 'What are the detention centers in Belgium?', available at : http://bit.ly/1GxZAJd.

[10] https://www.jrsbelgium.org/IMG/pdf/2022_11_rapport_monitoring_nl.pdf

[11] https://ecre.org/belgium-ecthr-condemns-belgium-for-the-unlawful-deportation-of-a-sudanese-national/