INTRODUCTION TO THE THEMATIC SECTION

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The predominant response to recent refugee arrivals to Europe has been one of paranoia and fear of depersonalised masses of people disrupting Europe's cultural and social welfare landscape, triggering (further) political crises, violence and the rise of nationalistic movements. It therefore came as no surprise that the mainstream political focus has been on tightening external European Union borders in a desperate attempt to keep them out.

Some intriguing strategies to reach this goal have been put forth. For example, legal obligations to provide protection to *anyone* fleeing persecution and war have been rhetorically undermined by introducing the argument of 'exception' in the public debates over deservingness of protection. In a blog post on the emotions of solidarity with refugees, the sociologist Serhat Karakayali (2016) evokes Immanuel Kant's Perpetual Peace argument that the protection of strangers is not a question of philanthropy but of right. Yet public opinion on the recent refugee arrivals, he notes, has been less informed by reason or reference to the Geneva Convention and more by the mobilization of feelings of empathy towards refugees. Noting that these days Kantianism is not a very powerful paradigm when it comes to migration politics, he warns against deservingness becoming determined by public opinion – which can be based on flawed assumptions and can, if the representation of refugees as deserving is damaged, be reversed. Indeed, the protection of the vulnerable should not depend on the presence of raw, visible need reflected in injured, sick, starved, disabled bodies (Malkki 2015) and the ability of those seeking protection to evoke feelings of empathy and acts of solidarity. Seemingly healthy and young male refugees are in this respect most often cast aside from the humanitarian gaze, which has recently prompted calls to put the spotlight on our gender biases (Hilhorst 2016).

There is of course no denying that the language of immediate need is more eloquent, expressive and mobilizing than the legal lingo on abstract commitment to rights (cf. Englund 2006). This is not only true in the case of mainstream public opinion on deservingness, but can also be observed among humanitarian workers and volunteers working with refugees. A hungry and inadequately clothed child can evoke a surge of empathy and the need to help much more pointedly than a dispute over the legal documents of a seemingly self-confident man with a border official. And the effects of doing good in the case of the former are much more immediate and satisfying. During my fieldwork on humanitarian and development workers in Kosovo, conducted some years ago, I observed an overwhelming motivational drive and sense of accomplishment among the individuals whose tasks involved sorting out immediate problems, such as providing a missing piece of clothing, bandaging a cut, arranging a dentist appointment or comforting a crying child by providing a new toy. Bringing immediate relief to the most vulnerable refugees gave them a sense of what Stamm (2002) labels as compassion satisfaction, i.e. the pleasure derived from being able to do your work well. More frustration and feelings of helplessness and defeat were observed in the case of humanitarian and social workers assigned to individual cases, since this type of help requires continuous interaction and long-term engagement that goes beyond patching physical wounds. A UNHCR case worker whom I met in Pristina told me that her greatest work-related challenge

has been working with unaccompanied refugee children with disabilities or severe post-traumatic stress disorders, because those cases did not make her feel rewarded for doing good, but have instead increased her own anxieties and made her put up emotional walls. Building resilience is of course an essential component of every aid worker's job, but she feared that she was heading towards numbness and indifference, adopting the 'I've seen it all' attitude. Such compassion fatigue (Figley 1995) can not only affect individual aid workers working with refugees on a regular basis, but can be symptomatic of large populations exposed to aggressive media campaigning that may result in their indifference to humanitarian appeals.

The inherently volatile societies should therefore be continuously reminded of the existing normative frameworks, but they should also be encouraged to preserve and revive philanthropic endeavours – by all means within the realistic limits of ability and capacity to help. Karakayali (2016) believes, based on data from his recent survey, that face-to-face interactions in particular are one way to break out of the cycle of volatility, and calls for investing in the volunteer movement, "where citizens do not depend on mass and social media when it comes to the emotional dimension of their relation to migrants and refugees." The most vulnerable of the vulnerable in particular should not escape the humanitarian gaze or become victims of lingering compassion fatigue. Research can be of paramount importance in this respect. It can throw light on refugees' multiple vulnerabilities and facilitate development of evidence-based strategies, mechanisms and tools for the advancement of a coherent and efficient response to help ease their struggles. It can also illuminate the wider structural frameworks and political agendas that contribute to constructing vulnerabilities in the receiving countries.

In an attempt to encourage relevant research, the purpose of this thematic section is to open the floor to explorations of various aspects of vulnerabilities lived and experienced by refugees. In the first article, Claudia Schneider uses Freeman's framework for the study of admission policy, which acknowledges the wider socio-economic and closer party political structures but also emphasises the mediating role of politicians who interpret and maintain or change these structures, to explore the developments leading to the response of the German government to refugee arrivals. She discusses the political debates on the 'deservingness' of refugees to be admitted to Germany and brings attention to the emergence of the discourse that calls for the hierarchical classification of the groups of migrants and refugees more and less needy of protection.

The article by Synnøve Bendixsen builds on the research findings gathered within the framework of an extensive research project that was initiated in order to examine how policies affect practice in welfare institutions and the everyday lives of irregular migrants in Norway. She brings attention to the increasingly restrictive asylum and immigration policies across Europe and argues that irregular migration is constructed by governments' utilization of complexly interrelated techniques. The purpose of the article is not to argue that migrants cannot be irregular or 'illegal', but rather to explore the various forms through which being irregular (and therefore subject to deportation) is produced. It also touches upon an important issue that has been relatively underexposed in academic debates, namely the use of research findings and discussions to legitimize specific political stances and decisions. Bendixsen therefore calls for caution in regard to how research questions are framed and how results are presented.

Darja Zaviršek brings attention to the processes of militarization of borders on the Balkan route and institutionalization of refugees across Europe. She is critical of the

ideologies of eurocentrism, culturalisation and cultural racism that have pervaded many debates on refugee arrivals, and of the construction of refugees as a national threat and health risk. She argues that spatial confinement and segregation are unnecessary and inappropriate in this respect. The response to the humanitarian crisis should not be a crisis of humanity reflected in the militarization of borders and pathologisation of those wanting to enter, but rather enforcement of the notion of the universal values of humanity.

The final two articles address the important issue of unaccompanied minors seeking international protection in Slovenia. The articles are complementary in that they cover the same problematic from two different viewpoints. Mateja Sedmak and Zorana Medarić build their argumentation on the empirical research of the experiences and views of unaccompanied migrant children conducted as part of the international project "In whose best interest? Exploring Unaccompanied Minors' Rights through the Lens of Migration and Asylum Processes". They explore migrant children's perceptions of different life transitions experienced on their journey, including transition across geographical spaces, institutional transition, transition over time and psychological transition. The narratives reveal their multiple personal vulnerabilities, but they also expose inconsistencies in relation to the formal admission procedures that may further exacerbate their insecurities. The authors argue that durable solutions for unaccompanied minors in Slovenia do not exist and call for an efficient, child-oriented system of protection.

The article by Tjaša Žakelj and Blaž Lenarčič is also concerned with the determination of the best interest of unaccompanied minors in Slovenia, but uses a different lens. The authors explore the inclusion of the principle of the best interest of the child in Slovenian legislation and other formal regulations that determine this principle in various formal procedures, and discuss the understanding and utilization of this principle in formal procedures by a variety of experts. One of the important arguments brought forth by the article is the need to improve the system response in a manner that will support the endeavours and engagement of legal representatives.

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