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The Volatility of the Discourse on Refugees in Germany

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ABSTRACT

The anti-immigration continuum of public attitude-media-politics has undergone changes in the course of the “refugee crisis” in Germany. By examining migrant representations and discursive events taking place in 2015 and early 2016, we will show the volatility of the recent discourse on refugees. A historical/critical discourse analysis will show how new topoi arose and old topoi of the security/power paradigm have lastly reconquered the discourse. Using newspaper coverage, we discuss discursive events in three main sections: borders, arrival, and presence. Discursive shifts have taken place that have had an impact on the configuration of migration categories such as *migrants or refugees*.

KEYWORDS

Migration; discourse; politics; European Union; Germany; policy

In the course of 2015, over one million refugees arrived in the European Union. Thousands of them died on their way to seeking protection in the member-states of the European Union. The *problematique* of this situation is not new. What is new is how migrants have acted and how discourses in political/public arenas have corresponded with these developments, particularly in Germany.

Looking back, the fear of uncontrolled movement was very common in Western Germany, first in government discourses throughout the 1960s (Karakayali, 2008, Schönwälder, 2001) and increasingly in public debates in the context of the end of the guest workers recruitment system in 1973: “At the end of the decade [...] millions of Turkish people are threatening to get moving in the direction of the Federal Republic” (*Münchener Merkur*, September 9, 1973).

The term *million* has seemingly a particular power of drawing attention because, not only is it a large number, it also seems to be a significant threshold. *Der Spiegel* used the term in the early 1970s on its cover page,¹ simply stating: “One million Turks.” The image depicts a family in what seems to be an overcrowded apartment, because Turkish immigrants have many children. Similar connotations between numbers and the implicit threat by such masses of people have not disappeared

from the media discourse, as a quote from a newspaper in 2015 reminds us: “One million refugees? The atmosphere is threatened to change” (*Augsburger Allgemeine*, September 14, 2015).

It would be misleading however to take these similarities as evidence for a seamless continuity in the way issues around migration, refugees, and diversity are being framed. In the German context, one of the main reasons for this change is the transformation of migration policy discourse over the last decades—that is, from recruitment policies to an increasingly demanding integration policy agenda (Baringhorst, Hunger, & Schönwälder, 2006; Matouschek, Wodak, & Täniuschek, 1995). More-recent developments such as digitization and the emergence of new social media have also influenced the nature of discourses, both in terms of the very composition of the elements of a discourse and the regimes of their distribution (sharing, liking, re-tweeting and the mostly nontransparent algorithms with which the platforms govern the visibility of content). We will not provide a full account of the role of these new media and their relevance for discourse analysis, however it is a research field that becomes increasingly necessary to explore.²

The newspaper landscape in Germany, as in other European countries, still exerts substantial influence on public discourse, despite studies that suggest that public visibility in terms of circulation has fallen (Conboy, 2010). And thus, for our data we have selected the newspapers and news magazines with the highest sales figures in order to substantiate the claim of impact on public discourses. In our analysis, we will focus on a set of German newspapers and weekly magazines that can be seen as relevant in the sense of “*Leitmedien*” (leading sources of media; trend-setters for other media). Social agents, particularly the political elite, regard this media as “agenda-setters.” For our data set we have included the outlets *Der Focus*, *Der Spiegel*, *Der Tagesspiegel*, *Bild*, *Die Welt*, *Die Zeit*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

Having systematically screened this media (print and online) from March 2015 until March 2016, we have built a text corpus,³ analyzed it, and distilled our findings for this article. We have used computational screening employing the interface Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff, Rychly, Smrz, & Tugwell, 2004) and on the basis of this data set and applying critical discourse analysis (CDA) (see e.g., Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2016), we were able to draw conclusions about the general development of the discourse from March 2015 until March 2016. Prior studies have used Sketch Engine to derive word sketches of lemmas such as *Muslim* (Baker et al. 2013; KhosraviNik, 2010) or in more general analysis *woman* or *man* (Pearce, 2008). Specific kinds of verbs surrounded these groups of people, who carried certain prosody. However, considering the growing significance of images and visuals in ways of communication and the media (Haas & Wischermann, 2015), we find it important not to limit our analysis to content, expressed in textual form but to include the visual dimension (see e.g., Chouliaraki, 2006; Mitchell, 1987). This is only meaningful when one argues that visual representations of metaphors such as “the boat” or “the child” do not simply express the same thing as their

narrative counterparts or if it can be said that visual representations—both moving images and photographs—express different meanings. We used a sample of visualizations, which had an impact on the public discourse. As we will show in the exemplary case of the image of the dead body of Aylan Kurdi, images have the capacity to shift the focus in discourses and possibly lead to a shift of framing. These two layers of analysis (text and visualization) and, additionally, a series of expert interviews with politicians, journalists, and volunteers are tested against our hypothesis about the main factors of the public discourse toward migration, particularly refugee migration: The acceptance of refugees depends on their representation as “deserving.” Deservingness, as we will argue, negatively correlates with agency and choice on the side of the refugees. A survey among volunteers in Germany suggests that volunteers regard the quite generic expression “being forced” to migrate as the most legitimate reason (Karakayali & Kleist, 2015). Children and families, we argue, serve as narrative and visual markers for this condition, as opposed to men, who often represent the figure of the rational choice individual who (sometimes depicted with the term “asylum shopper”) tends to be seen as illegitimate—an economic migrant, who does not deserve protection. Coming back to our inclusion of visual analysis, it puts forward another point of justification: In textual content, journalists often generically write about refugees or asylum seekers, while photographs necessarily show concrete individuals or groups. The space of “imagination,”—that is, whether we associate “victims or villains” (Anderson 2013) when we read about refugees—literally depends on what we are shown.

What struck us during the first months of the migration crisis in the second half of 2015 was the difference relative to a similar experience 20 years ago, when hundreds of thousands fleeing the war in what was then Yugoslavia arrived in the newly unified Germany. Although many fewer refugees arrived in the years between 1990 and 1992 than in the current case (numbers peaked in 1990 at about 389,000), the German media and particularly the tabloid press has not employed the negative and hostile language toward newcomers as critical observers expected. The creation of hysteria and scandals (Butterwegge & Hentges, 2006) are not found to the usual extent. The standard topoi of anti-immigration sentiments, for example, that immigration in general may be defined as a “problem” or a “financial/economic burden,” or as a “threat” to the welfare state and the “indigenous” culture, and so forth (see e.g., Vollmer, 2011; Wodak, 2015; Wodak & van Dijk, 2000) did not entirely propel the negative standard topics of regarding refugees such as “bogus asylum seekers” or the accusation of “abusing the social services.” Up to a certain point in time, even the powerful topic of numbers or, as Vollmer (2014) argued the “Malthusian paranoia”—that is, the fear of “overpopulation”—did not gain momentum. For a remarkably long period of time, media outlets such as the newspapers of the Springer Press⁴ have covered the whole process in a language supportive of the cause of refugees and hostile toward right-wing populist movements such as PEGIDA.⁵ One can hardly overestimate the general euphoria that captured

large parts of the civil society for a few months, when numerous organizations (the press, companies, trade unions, associations, schools and universities, and so forth) joined in efforts to “welcome” the refugees.

However, the discourse did not remain to behave in this manner, it moved and fluctuated in its quality and productivity. Our analysis will reveal the distilled metamorphosis of the discourse and highlight the volatility in which the cause of refugees is being framed. For these reasons we will look at this very volatility and examine its effects and implications. We will refer to shifts in the public discourse, which implies that the described changes may also overlap, run parallel or interrelate; thus, we will not be able to pinpoint the exact moments of shifts. However, we can claim that changes have taken place and that effects on power relations can be cautiously denoted.

Observing migration discourses in the course of 2015, migration can be increasingly understood as an act—occurrences of acts—that, as we see it, were increasingly staged. For our analysis we will use the conceptual framework of *discursive events*. We do not use the concept discursive event in a causal relationship of discourse and event—that is, a discourse causes an event or events cause or start a discourse. We would like to take a different understanding than Foucault in his philosophy of language (1989), as we do not argue for a certain formation and development of discourse that we need to be discovered. We do not intend to discover a new “Big D-view” of discourse in which “historically specific systems of meaning [...] form the identities of subjects and objects” (Howarth, 2000, p. 9). Positioning each discursive element in relation to other elements in the series is not in the foremost objective of our concept, which would prioritize methodological constructions of contingencies or causal historiography, but we focus on the impact of *staging talk, speech, and imagery objects*. We use the concept of discursive event as a theatrical and at the same time rhetoric matter. It defines an installation of imaginary and realist configurations and representations. This may be given by text, image, context, and history. Performative quality of discursive events gains often most attention by the perceivers and, therefore, we use discursive events and their performative quality as producers of “critical discourse moments” (Chilton, 1987). Through these eventful and staged moments, as we understand it, meaning is mobilized (Chilton, 1987, p. 17) and the performance becomes visible and, therefore, registered and “processed” by the audience.

Discursive events are linked to “depth hermeneutics” (Thompson, 1990) that are designed to bridge performed text and historical social situations. Eyerman (2008) points out that the difference between occurrences and events is the framework of interpretation, which makes an event much more understandable, or that a process of “making an event” is at stake. “Agents positioned in a discursive field” create meaning by defining the situation of the, in our case, migration act and therefore preoccupy background narrative “genres and tropes,” which again introduce different levels beyond the situational. Yet, discursive events have more texture and more staging character. The discursive events that we will

discuss did not just happen, but they triggered and mobilized the growing flows and exchanges articulated by a plethora of institutional actors as well as the European/German public. People started to partake in these events and co-produced a certain discourse, which circulated through various kinds of media. The analytical concept of discursive events allows us to link media discourse and the event-making processes that have an impact on the public discourse. And by applying historical/critical discourse analysis, we will discuss three stages of discursive events: borders, arrival, and presence. Each of these stages is marked by one or several discursive events, which bring about a shift in the public discourse toward refugees.

Horried of the work of borders

This is all but a new event since people have been dying at EU borders for the past decades and people still die at borders. The visibility of these deaths highly depends on the circumstances though: While the many migrants and refugees whose boats sunk on their passage to the Italian shores mostly remain unnoticed, the situation is different at the mainland borders, as we will show in this article.

The European Union's external border is one of the most lethal borders in the world. Against the advice and recurrent requests by the academic community and the international NGO community, the European Union and its member-states have increasingly restricted their migration regimes and have strengthened their border control (Vaughan-Williams, 2015; Vollmer, 2014, 2016a). Yet, these migration flows were differently covered by the media; they were staged. For instance, the sight of boats crammed with people became an icon of migration and is one of the elements of the discursive event "borders." Taking a critical iconological approach (Belting, 2005; Bredekamp, 2003; Mitchell, 1987, 2005) points out how images are invented, mobilized, and re-inscribed by and through the discursive practices. Reading the images of boats crammed with people gives us a good starting point for our argument in this section: There has been a growing empathy among the European and German public, which has identified itself increasingly with the horror that takes place at its "own" borders; we follow this argument, looking at a particular picture of a 3-year-old boy, Aylan Kurdi, and show a public that has increasingly participated in migrants' fates and started to share their plight. Finally and moving along the migration trajectory, we discuss border fences.

Boats

One of the numerous images of "boat people of the Mediterranean" we refer to was made from the air and depicted a boat full of people who all were looking up at a flying vehicle. Nearly all of the people look up synchronically, almost as in a theatrical choreography created for the observer, who seems to be looked at. The refugees on the boat seem to cry for help; they look straight into the observer's eyes and wish to be in the flying vehicle bringing them to a safe haven. This look is, however,

accompanied by the horror of being on this boat: exposed to the sun, strong winds, and further adverse weather conditions or simply the exposure of this hazardous journey. Significantly, these kinds of images are entitled or are accompanied with text, which often sets critical undertones, such as “Refugee graveyard: The Mediterranean sea” (*Der Focus*, April 20, 2015).⁶ The right-conservative tabloid press follows the same lead with titles such as “The Mediterranean sea becomes a mass-graveyard” (*Bild*, September 20, 2015).⁷ By then, the term *mass migration* was not employed but, rather, *mass casualties*, which has different connotations and discursive consequences. Such media accounts not only put the border situation into a critical spotlight, they even support the idea that “we” should help “them” by, for example, using ferries. These image/text packages are then circulated, discussed and often re-framed in social media.

Boat images became an icon as such, especially in Germany in the course of the “refugee crisis.” The image and also the metaphor of “sitting in the same boat” and this boat representing Germany as a country, has been used frequently in political discourse and long before the “refugee crisis” of 2015. In the discursive setting of the 1990s, the boat metaphor mainly expressed the notion of the limitation of space. “Boat” was a metaphor for capacity. This expression was frequently used in the 1990s by center-right parties (Vollmer, 2014). In recent debates in Germany the statement rather became featured as a critical request, such as: “Is the boat really full?” (*Der Spiegel*, April 15, 2014).⁸ Yet, similar to the 1990s, the conservative wing of the CDU/CSU used this well-known metaphor to criticize the policy of their chairwoman, Angela Merkel, as, for instance, the *Der Tagesspiegel* reported (September 23, 2015).⁹ Nevertheless, as more people arrived (as we will discuss below) the metaphor increasingly transformed to a threat metaphor transporting the meaning of sinking or drowning. Depending of the political spectrum of the newspaper outlet, the meaning of threat had been explicitly used already in March 2015 (e.g., *Junge Freiheit*, a far-right weekly newspaper)¹⁰ or less explicitly and yet exposing more frequently the reader to the expression “the boat is full” in February 2016 (e.g., *Der Focus*, center-right weekly magazine).¹¹

Apart from metaphorical images and the discursive framing of the event (as a threat or as a tragedy), beyond the outright positive or negative assessment, the mere fact that refugees were treated as if they were victims of a natural disaster and the language of a state of emergency that accompanied the entire event is worth an analysis on its own. It is part of the logic of modern mass media to focus on the extraordinary. This structurally induced selection bias goes hand in hand with the creation of the extraordinary circumstances of the migration wave of 2015. While many experts, including the European Commission and the Italian government, had called the European governments to prepare for increased numbers of refugees, almost no measures were taken.¹² The fact that several hundred thousand migrants had to make their way on foot, to camp in open fields and eventually to be sheltered in makeshift camps and school gyms provided precisely the landscape of catastrophe and extraordinariness, which then was largely the focus

of media coverage of that process. When it comes to the catastrophism of the migration crisis, a reality created by the political sphere in the first place was reinforced by the “spectacles of the journalists”—that is, the search for the sensational and spectacular (Bourdieu, 1998). Natural disasters require exceptional measures or, rather, the invalidation of those norms and regulations, which seemingly are only valid in “normal times”—which is probably why early in the crisis, several demands for the suspension of such regulations were raised (such as for the abolition of the minimum wage,¹³ and why the demand for an *Obergrenze*, a “cap” for refugees,¹⁴ seemed to be legitimate.

Similarly, images of boats became representations of people on the move or of an “invasion” from outside the EU. Yet, the violence that lies behind them and the plight that made them flee often remained invisible. Constellations of power are produced by this visibility, hence the depicted becomes foregrounded as the invisibility of other violence of the territorial border, such as deportation camps, are neglected (see also Bischoff, Falk, & Kafehsy, 2010). Indeed, Mitchell already pointed out that the critical understanding of pictures also requires one to “grasp the ways in which it shows what cannot be seen” (1984, p. 526). Arguing in favor of a pictorial turn in the 1990s, he stated that “although we have thousands of words about pictures, we do not have a satisfactory theory of them” (Mitchell, 1994, p. 9). We need to be careful not “to heal the split between words and images, but to see what interests and powers it serves” (1984, p. 530). Contextualization is the key, otherwise the “double consciousness” may take over: believing in the magical power of images and accusing images as manipulative in one go (Mitchell, 2005). A vivid exemplification is the image of Aylan Kurdi.

Aylan Kurdi

In a next iconographic stage, which became the most powerful picture and contributed to the discourse event of bordering, was the picture of the dead body of a 3-year-old boy, Aylan Kurdi. On September 2, 2015, the body of Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian of Kurdish origin, was found washed up on the beach at Bodrum, Turkey. His family tried to cross the Mediterranean to the Greek island of Kos but their boat capsized. The images of this boy became a sensation and represented the horrors of the refugee protection crisis of 2015. It mobilized people because it touched the perceivers of this image. Combined forces of mainstream media and social media demonstrated the power of virality in the digital age. It testified to the power of visuality at a scale similar to the images of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The images became—for a short period of time—representative of the EU border regime and its practices. Research of visual construction of subjects has shown how “non-verbal communication” that are visual articulations are vetted in the given discourse and how they offer “insights into the manner in which subjectivities—and realities—are constituted” (van Veeren, 2011, p. 1724). Making sense of a textual account becomes sidelined by the explicit power of visuality, especially

when it comes to the stories of plight, horror, and survival. The case of Aylan Kurdi and his image helps to shed light on three dimensions of the shift in public discourse about refugees.

The image, as we argue, supports the legitimacy of the refugee cause through the “innocence” represented in the child. The difference between this image and many others representing dead migrants’ bodies that usually circulate is that the latter are mostly almost “unbearable” (as a British newspaper¹⁵ put it), as they show human beings as disfigured, with open mouths or bloody wounds. What is so powerful about the Aylan Kurdi image is that we can look at it, it is not unbearable at first sight. It appears to be an unhurt, undamaged body.¹⁶

The sleeping child is at the same time the utmost symbol of innocence that childhood stands for. Regarding this image of Aylan Kurdi, therefore, is not regarding “pain” in the first instance. The impact of the image might be related to the contradiction transmitted in the emotions that it invokes subsequently: After the feeling of familiarity¹⁷ and innocence comes the painful realization that the child is actually dead. Massumi (2002), in his analysis of these types of seemingly paradoxical perceptions, comes to the conclusion that it is the subject’s inability to “make sense,” which renders these experiences to enter the realms of emergence and of transformation. The child simultaneously fits into the major frame that has governed the migration discourse for several decades, which divides the migrant population into villains and victims (Anderson, 2008).

And at the same time the medium itself (in the case of social media though), played its part in this image. When it comes to social media as carriers and hosts of images we might recall Belting (2005), who argued that images cannot reach us unmediated and, hence, the images’ visibility rests on their particular mediality and by which the perception of the observers is controlled for. However, this seems not to be case with social media wherein the power of virality governs the visibility of the image. This makes the depiction of, in particular the display of dead bodies, convoluted. Instead of posing with the corpse of the enemy, which has a long and rich history (Auchter, 2015), the meaning of this dead body is shame, failure, and shared pain. The power of this image comes from the discursive materiality of bodies (Shinko, 2010, p. 738) and how this has gained meaning of consternation and shared dismay.

Fences

Partially deterred by the sea route, increasingly, more migrants decided to take the longer but potentially safer land route, which also allowed more families and physically disabled migrants to make the journey; this in turn contributed to a more heterogeneous composition of the refugee as a group. As a consequence, both the land borders and the migrants became increasingly part of this discursive event exposing the work of borders through the endeavors of journalists and activists who documented every step and action of the migrants and the border guard. The

main reason for this is the visibility that the land border allows: other than with the sea route, the blockade leads to the amassing of refugees, resulting in encampments and, subsequently, to visual representations, protests, and violent clashes between border enforcement personnel and refugees.

A trajectory of border sites became the focus of this discursive event. Taking the Balkan route as an example, various border-crossing points in Turkey/Greece (e.g., Akcaale), Turkey/Bulgaria, Greece/Macedonia (e.g., Gevgelija), Croatia/Hungary, Croatia/Slovenia became frequently covered by the media. Accounts and images of people waiting at fences, attempting to climb them, squeezing themselves and their families through barbed wires while others ask for food or water were accompanied with reports that describe the proceedings of border practices by state authorities. Video snippets and images like Macedonian security officers teargasing refugees or of the Hungarian camerawoman that tripped a male refugee with his child in his arms were only possible at the land borders.¹⁸ Some media reports pointed to the consequences of the newly installed barbed-wire fences sending a signal of the uselessness of such new fences, by quoting a migrant response: “We will eat the fence” (*Die Zeit*, August 10, 2015). Earlier accounts had already tried to envisage the perspective of the people waiting at this fence and being kept off of EU territory. The *Neue Züricher Zeitung* (June 19, 2016) wrote: “Hope waits at the Turkish border fence.”¹⁹

In early 2016 the question of empathy with refugees became a critical public issue, with conservatives and right-wing populists accusing mainstream media for showing pictures of suffering refugee children. Alexander Gauland, a representative of the newly rising right-wing populist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) argued that Germans must be able to withstand the plight of “children’s eyes.” Thus, an image itself does not suffice to provoke a certain reaction, as Sontag has famously argued in her essay on “Regarding the pain of others” (2003). Enemies in war consider only their own suffering, as in the case of the war in Bosnia, for example, where both sides used the very same images of dead children to mobilize empathy and support for their cause. Images depicting the sufferings of the opposition are usually considered to be manufactured (see also Boltanski, 1999, or Chouliaraki, 2006). However, in the current debates in Germany, to denounce the images as manufactured or to frame children simply as enemies did not have the needed resonance. Yet, some traction of potentially emotionalizing images and, therefore, their impact on deservingness had found resonance in the public discourse which led the minister of home affairs, Thomas de Maiziere (CDU), to recommend that the German public has to “endure” tough images such as the encampments in Idomeni (Greece/Macedonia).

Empathy and solidarity on arrival

The refugee discourse up to the escalation at the train station in Budapest by the end of August, where hundreds and then thousands of refugees were refused further travel, seemed to have prepared the ground for what has been called the

“September fairy tale”²⁰ in Germany. All over Germany, volunteers showed up at train stations to welcome refugees cheering, singing, and applauding. They helped by providing basic needs but also with gestures of hospitality. German society, it seemed during the summer and autumn of 2015, was full of empathy for the cause of refugees. During those first weeks, representations of “welcoming” and hospitality dominated the discursive landscape. Similar to the function of the children’s body in the Aylan Kurdi theme, it was encounters with refugee children at arrival—prepared by media coverage in the preceding weeks—that came to represent the philanthropic relationship, in which German citizens performed acts of welcoming. Germany had become, in the words of the Green politician Katrin Göring Eckhardt, the “world champion of hospitality,” whilst adding a personal note stating that it was “the first time, she can say she is proud to be German.”²¹ An image depicted in the liberal newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on September 5, 2015 (with the second biggest circulation after *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*),²² we see a German police officer, member of the Federal Police, the authority responsible for border control, taking a child by the hand. When performed by representatives of the state the gestures and acts of welcoming become even more significant. While we can’t be sure who the volunteering citizens are—they might belong to a particular and even marginal part of the society—the police officer represents the “average man on the street” and symbolically tell us that the state itself stands with the welcoming population. What the police officer tells us additionally in this picture is this: “The refugee” is indeed not a threat since she as a security official is treating him/her rather as a guest or a friend.

Another image, printed this time in the conservative newspaper *Die Welt* in the first week of September 2015, shows a refugee child looking through a bus window.²³ The text of the article accommodating this picture, the *Die Welt*, described the scene:

“... tears of happiness, as arriving children receive their cuddly toys. One woman brought used toys from her own children. However she does not want to get her picture taken, stating: “Otherwise I will cry.” When some of the arriving children grab one of her cuddly toys, she started crying after all—she could not hide her emotions.

At a later stage and as a corresponding response to these reported developments of a “September fairy tale” in Germany and the political stance that the German government had decided to take, the same conservative newspaper (*Die Welt*) stated that “the world is praising Germany: heart-warming!”²⁴ A subliminal element of pride can be noticed that may also have had a mobilizing effect on the German public to help those arriving, which is related to the proudness-narrative mentioned earlier. *Das Handelsblatt* (a newspaper focusing on trade and macro-economics) underlined Angela Merkel’s determination, even if her policies could split the European Union, in this moment in time to offer a helping hand—her own and Germany’s as a nation reaching out to the people fleeing their countries (“Merkel please help me!”²⁵). The motto that Merkel has famously announced in a

press conference has poignantly reached the German public's hearts and minds: "We can do this."²⁶

A recent representative study (Ahrens, 2015) revealed that around 8 million Germans were in some way involved in the welcoming, at least donated something to refugees during the first months of the so-called refugee crisis. Above all, it might be meaningful to relate to the concept of "atmosphere," as it has been discussed recently by scholars such as Anderson (2014) in a Spinozian framework, by scholars in the realm of aesthetics or with a phenomenological approach (Löffler, 2013). It is bound to spatial and material situations and constellations. These might be architectures and public spaces and other forms of complex cultural environments, in which meaning (as a mere content analysis would be confined to) is combined with "sentiments," with affective states and emotions. In our case, the atmosphere was established in the physical encounter with arriving refugees at train stations all over Germany and the distribution of images, stories, and short videos about these events through the media. Also, an accelerative dynamic of institutions and organizations, who publicly declared their support of the cause of refugees contributed to the atmospheric change. However, as the meteorological metaphor suggests, atmospheres are not stable and subject to sudden change, which will be discussed later in this article.

When it comes to the diverse elements that contributed to the emergence of this atmosphere, the conventional press played a significant role. Most importantly, media outlets, which have a broad readership and are usually regarded as the "people's voice," such as the *Bild*, made an impact. *Bild*—up to about April 2016—had adopted the slogan "Refugees Welcome," which formerly was exclusively used by radical (refugee-supporting) groups, also published a supplement in the Berlin issue in early September 2015 in Arabic,²⁷ particularly addressing refugees who had arrived in Berlin. In terms of its representational value, similarly to the police, newspapers like the *Bild* address and speak in the name of the "average man on the street." Its influence is widely accepted among politicians and opinionmakers in Germany.²⁸

Another indicator of this atmospheric change accelerated by media channels such as the *Bild* is the spread of welcoming practices in German civil society. As Karakayali and Kleist (2015) have shown, volunteering work for refugees increased continuously over the last few years, since the beginning of the war in Syria. This growing field of civic engagement might have prepared the grounds for the volunteering and welcoming practices to increase under certain circumstances. Their data suggest that the discursive event of August and September 2015 mobilized a population that was hitherto not active in terms of refugee support.

Disappointment and betrayal?

The atmosphere of hospitality was always fragile and in trying to understand the volatility of the discourse toward migrants and refugees, the seemingly sudden

ruptures and changes in attitude and tonality, we want to focus in this section on two particular discursive events. While we analyze discursive material on the one hand, we need to emphasize on the other hand that the metamorphosis also includes a relational and affective dimension—that is, the changes in the emerged philanthropic relationship.

As Boltanski (1999) convincingly argued in his book on *distant suffering*, our empathy (and consequential help) toward strangers depends not only on their deservingness but also on a specific type of reaction on the side of the recipients of help. When German citizens provide hospitality, it is implicitly expected and required that refugees respond with gratitude. It is quite clear that such a philanthropic relationship is highly precarious since it depends entirely on the constant repetition of an asymmetric pattern in which refugees need to act according to the needs of the emotional investment of the providers of help. This can be observed both on the level of face-to-face-interaction and on the level of the public discourse. Interviews and other accounts with, for instance, volunteers, provide useful insights about the pitfalls of these patterns, such as when an elderly woman who worked in a shelter in Berlin reflected about her indignation when a young refugee from Eritrea did not conform to these patterns (see Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2016, p. 11). The “disappointment” can be even more intensive when there is no direct and personal involvement with refugees—that is, when the welcoming attitude was entirely based on the image of the innocent and grateful refugee.

In November 2015, the Paris terror attacks took place, which have foregrounded an uneasiness about the new arrivals for some parts of the German society. The topos of an infiltrated risk and fear of terror swiftly appeared as soon as the message trickled through that one of the involved terrorists recently arrived disguised as a refugee. “Paris changes everything,” the magazine *Der Focus* proclaimed.²⁹ The *Wall Street Journal* anticipated that the “Paris terror attacks [would] transform the debate over Europe’s migration crisis.”³⁰ The far-right party, AfD, instantly used the opportunity and made Angela Merkel also responsible for the terror attacks in Paris, as *Der Spiegel*³¹ reported. Other media outlets published warnings, for example, the *Rheinische Post*: “Don’t make the mistake and compare terrorists with refugees”³² and right-conservative TV stations regretted that the Paris attacks had started “an attack on the welcoming-culture.”³³ Yet, the topos (fear and panic) that had been influential in political discourses in the past (Huysmans & Buonfino, 2008; Vollmer, 2014, 2016b) seemed to be back in charge. Although, it comparatively gained less power and the discursive effects had only moderate implications for the overall discourse in Germany; the negative trend mentioned above, however, continued. Representative surveys have shown that the fear of new arrivals has not substantially increased among the German population,³⁴ neither did the numbers of volunteers decrease.³⁵

The discursive shift took place 1 month later, after New Year’s Eve of 2016, when hundreds of (allegedly) northern African men sexually assaulted women in

and around Cologne main station. According to reports, some of the men had arrived in Germany during the course of summer 2015. In other words, the assaults were seemingly performed by the very group that was newly welcomed and previously framed as help deserving. It is no coincidence that the shift in the discourse went along with a shift in the representation regime, from families and children (as a vulnerable and help-deserving group) to young male adults. The notion or the *concept*³⁶ of the young male adult ranges at the opposite end of the vulnerability-deservingness scale and more easily fulfills the requirements of a discursive pattern in which migrants are framed as evil-doers.

While the support for Merkel's course remained relatively high until January, after the event, the number of people who said that Germany could not handle the high numbers of refugees rose from 46 percent to over 60 percent.³⁷ After Cologne, particularly social media platforms (and commentary sections on online editions of magazines and newspapers³⁸) were flooded with anti-immigration and outright xenophobic and racist indignations. Anti-refugee sentiment was not confined to the virtual sphere: Buses with arriving refugees in some places were stopped and refugees in them attacked by anti-immigration groups, people expressed their opposition at town hall meetings, gatherings, and political manifestations. Attacks on refugee accommodations (mostly uninhabited) increased from 199 in 2014 to 1,005 in 2015, according to a report of the Federal Bureau of Crime (BKA).³⁹

The event in Cologne fueled the association of refugees as potential harbingers of terror and violence. While on the extremist end of the political spectrum violence both against refugees and their German supporters was promoted, those associations became increasingly legitimized in the mainstream (the "interdiscourse," as Link [1997] would put it): Members of the democratic parties seemed to support the idea that refugees are to be seen as a potentially dangerous group of people, when they wanted the text of the German Constitution to be distributed in Arabic or when a teachers' association recommended that German girls restrain from engaging in sexual relationships with male refugees.⁴⁰

And this shift in the public discourse was noticed by a number of media outlets; for instance, on January 2 the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* noted that "trust has been lost" and that citizens are getting more "sceptical than politicians," giving the "refugee crisis a new spirit."⁴¹ Initially, *Der Focus* (January 6, 2016) talks about "a fragile climate"⁴² and questions whether one should draw consequences regarding the incidences in Cologne for the debate about refugees but soon after publishes a title page: "the night of disgrace" (January 8, 2016).⁴³ The subheadlines indicate not only who the perpetrators are ("After the sex assaults of migrants: Are we still tolerant or already blinded?"), they also broach the issue of betrayal as "our tolerance" (which can be interpreted as particles of one chain of signifiers with "our gestures of welcoming," "our hospitality," and so forth), which was to be questioned.

Der Spiegel reported that the "friendly face of Chancellor Merkel has vanished. Not a word about welcoming gestures with which newcomers looking for shelter

were received.”⁴⁴ This shift was also noticed by volunteers in interviews led between February and March 2016 (Karakayali & Kleist, 2016), where volunteers in different German cities voiced their discontent about the lack of media coverage since the beginning of the year. Thus, a discursive shift was in process which diluted the formerly so clearly framed label of “refugees that need help” with suspicion. Questions arose that revisited the genuineness: Are they after all “bogus refugees” and “economic migrants” that mainly intend to exploit the German empathy, welcoming culture, and welfare state?

Acts of hospitality displayed both by very high numbers of individuals and the vast majority of media and civil society including many large companies in Germany was remarkable, yet they were about to change again. Members of the German parliament (e.g., Philipp Lengsfeld, CDU) started criticizing the media to frame issues as “too emotional,” which would “invite” refugees to come to Europe, while journalists such as the editor of the *Bild* online (Julian Reichel) rejected these accusations. Further critics of the seemingly new emotional trend in politics (Robert, 2016) have argued that citizens become passivized by merely emotionally reacting to media-driven events instead of referring to reason. What comes immediately into mind in the case of public support for refugees is instability. Once the representation of refugees, or immigrants at large, as deserving is damaged, the whole procedure might be reversed. This volatility perfectly resonates with the dichotomy between victims and villains (Anderson, 2008) that has governed the politics of migration for decades.

Similarly, the discourse in Germany seems to have shifted back into the social norms of the “undeserving non-members”—that is, the “undeserving stranger” as Bommers and Geddes (2000) have argued. Citizens of countries with an affluent welfare system see immigrants as a group of the “new undeserving poor” (Bommers & Geddes, 2000), yet less deserving (for help by the state in form of benefits etc.) than other “full members” (citizens) of the host society such as elderly or disabled persons. A large proportion of Europeans argue that citizenship is the requirement for “deserving help” made possible by their tax contributions (Mewes & Mau, 2012).

However the attitude changes concerning refugees (deservingness for help is attributed) and yet again stays unchanged concerning “economic migrants” (see e.g., O’Rourke & Sinnott, 2006). Transferring this pattern of deservingness to the question of “when help and compassion is *deserved*,” it becomes the focus of the present discussion. The previous section has demonstrated how compassion and the threshold of “deserving help” can change through discursive events such as a “welcoming euphoria” and how it generates solidarity and empathy. However, the change in attitude is seemingly of a volatile nature: whether refugee or economic migrant, the discourse event of New Year’s Eve of 2016 has contributed to a change in the view toward refugees as “deserving help” (apart from volunteers whose activities continue).

This discursive shift raises questions about the symbolic-expressive nature of the surfacing discourse of empathy (Edelman, 1971, 1977) and the first conceptual

shift from “migrant to refugee” as we can find it in the course of the summer 2015. We need to ask the question of how far the trend of the discourse was used and instrumentalized by the political elite that would in part explain the sudden change and highly volatile nature of it. The driver of the political elite can be explained to some extent by strategic moves within the field of party politics (e.g., Cicero & Carville, 2012) and with regard to European politics⁴⁵ whilst the response of the German public as such is a much more complex puzzle. Its volatility may come from the classic barriers of empathy that have gained prominence and that is egoism.

The driver of the discourse of empathy might never have been morality or compassion but a form of egoism-motivated empathy or, as Boltanski (1999, p. xiv) put it, that served as an “opportunity to cultivate themselves through absorption in their own pity at the spectacle of someone else’s suffering.” Arendt (1990) took this problem up in “the social question,” where she contrasts pity and compassion. Where the latter is of a practical nature and is based on face-to-face encounters between those who suffer and those who help them, pity seems to be a particularly political procedure, which, according to Arendt (1990), is heavily invested with the mobilization of emotions. In this sense, the rise of refugee-supporting activities might be explained through the very nature of the emotional drive behind them.

Questions arise if the emerging increase of empathy was in a Rousseauian sense driven by compassion and a motive of egalitarianism creating henceforth more-egalitarian conditions of living for members of the society and potentially new members of the society. Clearly, the subliminal work of a media-driven empathy has played a part in this (Rifkin, 2009). The function of distance in this media-driven empathy has had its effects (see above social media effect), a multitude of empathetic and compassionate responses were expressed from a distance and through various channels. The developments of this distant participatory compassion reminds us of interactions as Collins (2004, p. 85) described as “the spirit of the performance by not questioning it but by taking it in a situational mood.” However, in the case of this exemplification taking place in Germany, a number of people not only communicated compassion from a distance while also supporting the elites’ politics and especially the ones of Angela Merkel, but also acted upon the source of empathy. A number of people not only felt pity and compassion with people on their journeys (which works from a distance), but also, seemingly, started to express their empathy by action and making some investment of their emotional self. They gave “attention to the particularities of the concrete situation” as Rehg (1994, p. 17) would argue. Their sense of collective solidarity went “beyond being passive observers to actively taking part” and responding to people, in fact, “affecting them thus becoming more of a part of the mutual entrainment by throwing oneself into it more fully” (Collins 2004, p. 82).

One can speculate that the active supporters of the refugee movements and arrivals in Germany are not the ones that lost their faith in their actions and beliefs after the incidents in Paris and Cologne and that there is a different cohort of people that was possibly driven by the media and instrumentalized to some extent by

the political elites, who suddenly revisited their former framing of the notion of “the migrant.” Tendencies of creating a cosmopolitan solidarity (Karakayali, 2013) seem to have dampened or come to a standstill, leaving them to have remained acts of “episodic solidarity” (Holzer, 2008). Ongoing developments point to opposite directions, of symbolic politics, of hypocritical humanitarian measures, and policy practices, which is of course not a novum (see e.g., Vollmer, 2016a, b, c).

Conclusion

In this article we have outlined how the initially unexpected positive discourse toward refugees in Germany has been challenged, tumbled, and eventually disintegrated, however, without having fully reversed. One of our assumptions was that the positive attitude toward refugees was mainly a result of a particular form of mediatized representation of refugees, which prepared the ground for the welcoming practices and atmosphere during the first weeks. The land route facilitated the migration of more women and children and this had the effect of more *deserving migrants* moving into the spotlight of the media. We have discussed the impact of this shift focusing on “deserving migrants” and how it transformed the mediatization and how it politicized the public discourse in its own way. By these particular processes of mediatization and politicization of the “deserving migrant,” a positive attitude and a new degree of empathy has evolved that led to an intricate and interdependent *philanthropic relationship* between the host country’s population and the refugees. Ticktin (2011) commented earlier on such relational structures, which she understands as “humanitarianism” or “humanitarian power,” and which has become, as she argues, hegemonic especially with the end of the East-West conflict and has put forth a new militarily-inclined humanitarian complex (Moyn, 2010). Under the rationale of humanitarianism, we can also speak of a political economy of “humanitarian crisis” based on the ability of the European border regime to recode incidents as emergencies (Calhoun, 2004), calling for ad hoc, exceptional actions. Fassin (2012) characterizes such exceptional politics as a central dimension of humanitarianism. And indeed, if we look back, we can see that this kind of emergency policy was highly productive and one of the main driving forces in transforming Frontex into a major organization with an ever-increasing budget.

Because of global events and the ones taking place in the context of the German migration discourse in which the groups’ representation as innocent and deserving became questionable, attitudes have changed again and revived older patterns of hostility and suspicion toward refugees. The shift in the public discourse we critically discussed in the last part of the article, revisiting questions of the power of the media, practices of journalism, and the critical impact of social media and the digitalization of social spaces. Yet, the most crucial point is the re-demonizing process of refugees and their labeling as undeserving migrants or “*economic migrant*.” This presented a window of ideological opportunity that has opened for right-wing parties across the European Union. However, the inherent and more acute danger of

this discursive shift and the implications of this relabeling process is the expansionary character of the category “economic migrants.” This category potentially encompasses a high number of people forced to leave their countries as a result of socioeconomic conditions and the threat of poverty or malnutrition. Demonizing and illegitimizing an even broader category of forced migrants is alarming and represents a new form of categorical processes of exclusion in Germany, the rest of Europe, and across the globe.

Notes

1. *Der Spiegel*, July 10, 1973.
2. One of the popular methods of including the impact of social media are analyses based on Twitter data (see e.g., Barberá, 2015). For the German context this did not seem plausible to employ, firstly, because Twitter is not very popular in Germany (the number of users is significantly lower than in the UK, for instance) and, secondly, because the available software to analyze content (including “sentiment analysis” software) does not include the German language. Other social media platforms such as Facebook do not provide data to researchers at all. Thus, although we are aware that discourses cease to be only operated through the channels of mainstream media, such as newspapers and television, our analysis will be based on such media sources.
3. Our method of building our text corpus is similar to the one developed and used by Baker et al. (2008) or Vollmer (2017). After cleaning the data set, we have included 72 articles in our final corpus.
4. Not to be confused with the Springer Verlag founded by Julius Springer, the Springer Press is a term related to the Axel Springer publishing company that is mainly associated with tabloid/right-wing newspapers such as the *Bild*.
5. The acronym PEGIDA stands for Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West. PEGIDA is a right-wing populist movement particularly strong in parts of *Sachsen*, but also *Sachsen-Anhalt* and other eastern German *Länder*. PEGIDA organized marches in the city of Dresden, which were drawing ever-increasing numbers of participants (allegedly up to 30,000, which it turned out later to be extremely overestimated). It drew particular attention through hostility toward media—journalists were regularly shouted at with the slogan *Lügenpresse* (lying press). The enmity concerning the press was related both to the mostly critical coverage about PEGIDA itself and to the often positive coverage of refugees.
6. But also already stated in 2013 by for instance the liberal *Die Tageszeitung* (October 12, 2013), yet also similarly by the right-conservative TV station *RTL* (October 12, 2013).
7. <http://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/fluechtlingskrise/fluechtlingssticker-42646244.bild.html>
8. <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-126511946.html>
9. <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/gegenwind-fuer-merkel-das-boot-ist-voll-kritik-in-der-fraktion-an-fluechtlingspolitik-der-kanzlerin/12359920.html>
10. <https://jungfreiheit.de/debatte/kommentar/2015/das-boot-ist-voll-2/>
11. <http://www.focus.de/schlagwoerter/themen/d/das-boot-ist-voll/>
12. The apparent indolence can also be interpreted as a result of the asymmetric structure inscribed in the asylum system of the European Union, in which the states of first arrival (Spain, Greece, Italy) according to the Dublin regulations have to shoulder the administrative, financial, and political costs of refugee migration.
13. <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article146977925/CDU-erwaegt-Ausnahmen-vom-Mindestlohn-fuer-Fluechtlinge.html> <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article146977925/CDU-erwaegt-Ausnahmen-vom-Mindestlohn-fuer-Fluechtlinge.html>

14. The demand for an upper limit was raised soon after Merkel's decision by many delegates of the CDU in preparation for a party convention. However, Merkel was able to achieve a compromise that did not contain the critical term *upper limit* (which would have been in conflict with both constitutional law and European Asylum law).
15. For instance, the *Daily Mirror*, September 3, 2015.
16. The decisive point here is that the horror of the image does not reveal itself immediately but is built upon an association that seems to emerge for spectators at first sight—that is, the image not of a dead but sleeping child. We arrived at this interpretation through various comments of social media users, which we systematically scanned for the time span in question. This is assumingly also one of the reasons why the image resonated strongly with the public and reached very high circulation rates. It has shifted public opinion toward more empathy, as Vis and Goriunova (2015) have argued.
17. Familiarity was expressed, e.g., in statements such as “This could have been my child.” See <http://time.com/4022765/aylan-kurdi-photo/> or: “Aylan, I have a son who's not much older than you” <http://www.mamamia.com.au/refugee-toddler-aylan-kurdi-has-touched-hearts-worldwide/>
18. See <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/09/europe/hungarian-camerawoman-migrant-firing/>
19. <http://www.nzz.ch/bildstrecken/bildstrecken-international/bildstrecke/syrische-fluechtlinge-an-der-tuerkischen-grenze-1.18564072#&gid=1&pid=1>
20. The term was coined by Katrin Göring Eckhardt of the Green party. See <http://www.bayerische-staatszeitung.de/staatszeitung/politik/detailansicht-politik/artikel/ein-september-maerchen-mit-fluechtlingen.html>)
21. The proposition “to be proud to be German” in the German context is particularly associated with nationalist ideologies and usually rejected by social democrat, left-wing, and liberal speakers. <http://www.bayerische-staatszeitung.de/staatszeitung/politik/detailansicht-politik/artikel/ein-septembermaerchen-mit-fluechtlingen.html>
22. Unfortunately we were not given permission to use the image.
23. Unfortunately we were not given permission to use the image.
24. <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article146079572/Die-Welt-bejubelt-Deutschland-herzerwaermend.html>
25. <http://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/fluechtlingspolitik-spaltet-die-eu-merkel-bitte-hilf-mir/12284548.html><http://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/fluechtlingspolitik-spaltet-die-eu-merkel-bitte-hilf-mir/12284548.html>
26. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2015/08/2015-08-31-pk-merkel.html>
27. Unfortunately we were not given permission to use the image. Please go to: <http://www.bz-berlin.de/berlin/fluechtlinge-sagen-danke-fuer-die-b-z-sonderbeilage>
28. In a critical study of the role (Arlt & Storz, 2011) the *Bild* played in the Euro crisis and the debate about Greece's debts, while Arlt & Storz (2011) also analyzed to what extent *Bild* had an agenda-setting function in the political arena. Both politicians and journalists, the authors claim (based on expert interviews), follow the newspapers' agenda on a daily basis.
29. http://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/paris-aendert-alles-markus-soeder-polarisiert-mit-seinem-tweet-zum-thema-fluechtlinge_id_5088422.html
30. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/paris-terror-attacks-transform-debate-over-europes-migration-crisis-1447608944>
31. <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/anschlaege-von-paris-afd-gibt-merkel-mit-schuld-a-1063676.html>
32. <http://www.rp-online.de/politik/eu/politiker-warnen-terroristen-nicht-mit-fluechtlingen-gleichsetzen-aid-1.5563716><http://www.rp-online.de/politik/eu/politiker-warnen-terroristen-nicht-mit-fluechtlingen-gleichsetzen-aid-1.5563716>

33. http://www.n-tv.de/politik/politik_kommentare/Der-Angriff-auf-die-Willkommenskultur-beginnt-article16358301.htmlhttp://www.n-tv.de/politik/politik_kommentare/Der-Angriff-auf-die-Willkommenskultur-beginnt-article16358301.html
34. Infratest Dimap, November 2015, see also *ZDF Politbarometer*.
35. In a survey conducted by the online edition of the weekly journal *Die ZEIT*, a huge majority of volunteers (more than 90% of 3,486 participants) said the Paris attacks did not affect their engagement; some answered that they were even more motivated. See <http://www.zeit.de/2015/50/fluechtlingen-helfen-umfrage-weiteres-engagement>
36. This is emphasized here, since in the case of war refugees, young male adults might be considered as equally or maybe even more in danger of being victimized, as warring parties are particularly interested in recruiting them.
37. http://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/zdf-umfrage-offenbart-so-haben-die-silvester-uebergriffe-beeinflusst-was-deutsche-ueber-fluechtlinge-denken_id_5213962.html
38. At *Spiegel Online*, online edition of the most influential weekly magazine in Germany, the commentary section of many articles regarding the refugee issue were closed by the editors due to the flood of hate speech. Other media outlets utilize software to filter content. Out of 117 news outlets, 27 declared that they took censoring or filtering measures. See e.g., <http://meedia.de/2016/03/01/ueberfordert-vom-leser-hass-zeitungsredaktionen-schraenken-kommentarfunktion-ein/>
39. <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/fluechtlingsheime-bundeskriminalamt-zaehlt-mehr-als-1000-attacken-a-1074448.html>
40. <http://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2015-11/sachsen-anhalt-sexualitaet-muslime-maenner-maedchen>
41. <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/jahreswechsel-und-fluechtlingskrise-das-verloren-vertrauen-13993219.html>
42. http://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/deutschland-vor-schwierigen-debatten-fragiles-klima-die-uebergriffe-von-koeln-und-die-folgen_id_5191989.html
43. http://www.focus.de/politik/focus-titel-die-nacht-der-schande_id_5198275.html
44. <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/koeln-und-die-folgen-angela-merkels-neue-haerte-a-1071150.html>
45. What comes to mind here is the increasing realization towards the end of 2015 that there would be no political solution on the European level, mainly through the rejection of any meaningful re-distribution scheme by a critical minority of member states.

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