

# The Civil March for Aleppo

## Zero-Level Protest or Networking in Action?

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### Introduction

In the late summer of 2015, record numbers of people sought refuge in Europe, eliciting a wide range of public responses. Included among these was an initiative that began a year and a half after the record influx of refugees and asylum seekers: The Civil March for Aleppo proposed participants walk from Berlin to Aleppo ‘along the so-called “refugee route”, just [in] the opposite direction’ (Civil March for Aleppo, 2016b). The March passed through Germany, the Czech Republic, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia, Greece, Bulgaria, and Lebanon (Fig. 13.1). While the main focus of the initiative was the ongoing war in Syria, the March can be understood within the context of the so-called ‘long summer of migration’ of 2015 (della Porta, 2018). It was this series of events that spawned the initiative, helped to mobilize participants, generated media interest, and elicited broad support for the March from local communities right across East and South-East Europe.

Arising in November 2016 out of a desire to respond to the then five-year-long war in Syria and the ineffective and hypocritical response to it by the international community, the Civil March for Aleppo intended to create a beacon for peace. Many people were spurred to action by their outrage over the siege of Aleppo and the human costs of the war. As the manifesto of the Civil March declared, ‘We can’t sit in front of our laptops and do nothing. [...] We’ve had enough of clicking the sad or shocked faces on facebook [sic] and writing “this is terrible” and “we’re so powerless”. [...] We refuse to take it anymore. We’ve just withdrawn our consent. We’re ready to deny powerlessness’ (Civil March for Aleppo, 2016b).

While participants’ motivations for and expectations in joining the walk varied considerably, the group was unified by a collective repudiation of the political situation in Syria. The evolving composition of the group was itself dynamically altered by the nature of the March. Attempts to channel the protest’s energy – against the war in Syria, the bombing of civilians, and the atrocities that forced people to flee their homes in the first place – into concrete political demands or towards a

Figure 13.1. The Civil March for Aleppo on the route from Rataje nad Sázavou to Zruč nad Sázavou (23km), Czech Republic, in January 2017.



Source: Janusz Ratecki.

specific goal caused controversy within the group. These efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. By highlighting the March's potential to promote and facilitate active engagement among communities and individuals en route, marchers sought to connect people, establish a cross-border network, and create a platform for exchange and dialogue all the way from Berlin to Aleppo. Thus, attempts were made by organizers to re-shape the initial protest into a peacebuilding project. Marchers reached out to activists and experts working in the fields of peacebuilding and community building. One group within the Civil March advocated understanding the protest walk within a larger context of social change. Others wanted to see the March address the precarious situation faced by forced migrants in Europe and challenge Europe's hypocritical migration policy. And, as the author of this essay – herself a participant in the March – learned, many participants had more personal motivations for walking. Overall, the activists were not successful in identifying a unitary aim for the walk, nor were they able to shape and communicate a common vision.

One might well question the meaningfulness of a protest that failed to define its purpose or articulate a vision. This discussion of the Civil March for Aleppo's meaningfulness draws on philosopher Slavoj Žižek's concept of a 'zero-level protest' and

on social movement theory. While this essay focuses on the Civil March for Aleppo, the observations it makes also hold true for other protests and civic initiatives.

The concept for the March was first articulated in November 2016 in response to news reports about the siege of Aleppo. And indeed, the initial energy of the protest was directed at the siege and the dire humanitarian situation in that city. When the siege was officially lifted a month later, the main focus of the protest dissipated, necessitating the identification of a new *raison d'être* for the protest, as Agnew (2017) has pointed out. In an effort to articulate a new aim, organizers justified the long-distance walk in terms of its value as a 'symbol of the biggest humanitarian crisis we are facing' (Civil March for Aleppo, 2016a). This emphasis on the symbolic dimension partly obscured the clarity and focus of the message among the public and even among March participants. Due to organizational shortcomings and the perceived urgency of the undertaking, the activists had elaborated neither a common goal and strategy nor a clear vision prior to departing on the walk in late December 2016. The main rationale behind the effort – whether the March was walking 'to' Aleppo, 'for' Aleppo, or 'to and for' Aleppo – was left unspecified. Most of the activists involved in shaping the idea for the walk considered Aleppo a purely symbolic goal from the outset, yet they presented a quite different image outside of the group in order to attract public attention and foster emotional engagement among people. Notwithstanding impassioned discussions about the purpose of walking thousands of miles in the direction of a war zone from which hundreds of thousands of people were fleeing en masse, no collective position was ever formulated. In the absence of a common vision, activists individually attributed purpose and meaning to the initiative, enriching the narratives about the Civil March with their own personal interpretations.

Aside from the unwillingness to define a common purpose or clearly articulated vision, the organizers of the March took a conscious decision to remain apolitical due to the complexity of the Syrian conflict and a personal reluctance among many of them to take sides in the war. This, too, impeded the ability to articulate explicit political demands. Referring to the responsibility of 'the ones in charge of politics' to formulate political solutions to the conflict, the Civil March rejected positioning itself as anything more concrete than a group that would deliver the 'message' that 'this war has to stop!'. As stated on the homepage of the Civil March, 'We don't want to get into politics – we only want the end of bombing against civilians in Aleppo and other towns in Syria and open humanitarian corridors so that help can get to the people in need' (Civil March for Aleppo, 2016a).

The day-to-day organization of the March varied with time. The walking group itself changed constantly, as most marchers joined the walk for only a limited time. With around 30-40 people usually walking in Germany, the Czech Republic, and Austria, the walking group was larger during the first few weeks of the March, as compared to the 10-20 who walked with the March in the Balkans (Fig. 13.2). The

organization of the group has been vividly portrayed by de Rond and Hallett (2019), though their description of ‘a typical day’ on the March pertains only to the time in Serbia and Macedonia and the initial stages of the walk through Greece.

Figure 13.2. ‘Tea break’ in Croatia in March 2017.



Source: Janusz Ratecki.

In Greece, whence the March was supposed to cross into Turkey as the next country en route to Syria, major discussions about the purpose and nature of the March arose within the group. Focusing on the geographical goal of reaching Aleppo, many of the activists seemed to accord less importance to the political situation in Turkey. Following the coup attempt in June 2016, the country was in a perpetual state of emergency, which allowed the government to rule by decree. The result has been weakened parliamentary control and judicial oversight, intensified restrictions on the freedom of speech, and a flouting of human rights and the rule of law in the country. These developments, and the fact that peace activism in Turkey is inexorably connected with the Kurdish political movement and, as such, classified by the government as a ‘terroristic activity’, were pointed out to the group by various parties, including Konuk (2017) (see also Human Rights Watch, 2017; Shaheen, 2017). The Civil March group, faced with the decision of whether to walk through Turkey, was riven with dissent. The group split over disputes regarding its own claim to uphold values of peace and solidarity versus its silence about the Turkish involvement in the war in Syria, the treatment of refugees in Turkey,

restrictions on freedom of speech in the country, and the violent conflict between the Turkish government and the Kurdish civilian population. (An alternative and lengthier account of the discussions raised by this dispute is provided by de Rond and Hallett (2019).) As public demonstrations were prohibited under the Turkish state of emergency, the remaining participants in the Civil March decided in May 2017 to apply for a special dispensation from the government to cross the country. Many, however, perceived the Turkish government's stipulations for granting the permit as undermining the integrity of the March. Ultimately, the marching group, which spent almost five weeks on various Greek islands meeting local activists, refugees, and helpers and visiting places symbolic of Europe's political failure to adequately receive refugees, decided it was unwilling to wait any longer for a definitive decision from the Turkish authorities.

The remaining activists flew to Beirut to continue their walk through Lebanon (Fig. 13.3). Not wishing to create the impression that it was cooperating with the Syrian regime, which was in control of territory between the Lebanese border and the city of Aleppo, the Civil March decided not to enter Syria – an action that would have necessitated cooperating with the Syrian regime or employing the services of people smugglers. An official end to the March was announced in August 2017 at the Lebanon-Syria border (Fig. 13.4). What then are we to make of this undertaking, an undertaking that mobilized people against war and human suffering but was consumed by disagreements over its own ways and means? Further, we might ask what lessons are to be drawn for other protest movements.

*Figure 13.3. The Civil March for Aleppo in Tyre, Lebanon, in August 2017.*



Source: Janusz Ratecki.

Figure 13.4. The official end of the Civil March for Aleppo at the Lebanon-Syria border in August 2017.



Source: Janusz Ratecki.

## Zero-Level Protest

The philosopher Slavoj Žižek introduces the term ‘zero-level protest’ to describe irrational outbursts of violence that carry a vague desire for justice, but which do not articulate any concrete programmatic demands. By way of example, he cites the uprisings in the Paris suburbs in 2005, riots in Ferguson in 2014 and in Baltimore in 2015, and ongoing violent acts committed by Palestinians against Israelis. The *gilet jaune* (yellow vest) protests, which emerged in November 2018 in France in response to President Macron’s announcement of a fuel tax, represent another instance of a ‘zero-level protest’. Žižek has criticized the yellow vests for making contradictory demands and for ‘not know[ing] what they want’ (*Slavoj Žižek on Yellow Vests. How to Watch the News, Episode 01, 2018*). In Žižek’s view, the violence used by the protestors does not itself further a particular goal; rather, it is simply a manifestation or expression of dissent over a particular situation. Drawing on philosopher Walter Benjamin, Žižek proposes classifying such protests as instances of what he calls ‘divine violence’. Benjamin introduces the notion of divine violence in his essay ‘Critique of Violence’. His considerations of the existence of a just use of violence afford him the opportunity to describe different categories of violence. Divine violence, according to Benjamin, escapes the means-ends relationship. Thus, discussions over whether violence can be legitimized by just ends does not apply to the category of divine violence (Benjamin, 1974–1989).

Again drawing on Benjamin, Žižek stresses that it is futile to search for a justifying cause for the outbursts of violence in the protests he identifies as examples of 'divine violence'. The use of violence does not betray a hidden or deeper meaning, he argues. The protestors simply do not see any viable alternative in nonviolent resistance or in articulating a meaningful utopian project. The fact that the protestors did not manage to articulate a meaningful project but saw 'blind acting-out' as their only recourse in the face of enforced democratic consensus reveals for Žižek the bankruptcy of the political system. He suggests, moreover, that questions posed by Benjamin about the possibility of a just use of violence cannot be answered on a purely philosophical level. According to Žižek, asking whether the individual's use of violence is justified in terms of a broader notion of 'global justice' articulates a dilemma that cannot be solved, as the discrepancy between individual interest and global justice is too great. Žižek neither justifies nor condemns the use of violence. Instead, he proposes that we accept the fact that divine violence is cruel and unjust, just as the situations in which it occurs are unjust. The only way to exit the 'vicious circle of horror and suffering', he argues, is through concrete social and economic analysis. In other words, if we are to overcome structural injustice, the structures themselves must be critically analysed and the systemic flaws tackled at their origins (Žižek, 2015).

### The Civil March for Aleppo as 'Zero-Level Protest'?

While Žižek focuses on violent protest, a zero-level protest in the Žižekian sense can equally be non-violent, since Žižek's criticism is concerned with the fact that zero-level protests, as incidences of 'blind acting-out', lack vision and a set of clearly articulated demands. Thus, Žižek has denounced the non-violent 2011 Occupy protests in the United States, Spain, Greece, and Italy for a lack of imagination and targeted demands, without, however, explicitly identifying them as zero-level protests (Žižek, 2012).

Translated into sociological terms, Žižek's zero-level protest constitutes an 'expressive action' (Klandermans, 2015, p. 222), an action by means of which people express their views. This expression is in itself sufficient a motivation to undertake a particular action. Expressive action is classically understood to stand in opposition to 'instrumental action' (Klandermans, 2015, p. 223), which aims to influence the social and political environment. For Žižek, protest needs to be instrumental. Specifically, meaningful protest needs to serve as a tool for attacking capitalism, since the origins of injustice, he argues, are rooted in the capitalist economic system. Ultimately, protest is assessed by its contribution towards overthrowing that system. Expressive protest, in contrast, stagnates at the zero-level. Thus, for Žižek protest must be more than a manifestation of emotions in order for the undertak-

ing to be meaningful. It remains, then, to assess whether the Civil March was a zero-level protest in the Žižekian sense and whether Žižek's concept allows for a full assessment of the meaningfulness of protest.

From the moment the siege of Aleppo was lifted, prior to the start of the March, the Civil March for Aleppo could no longer articulate programmatical demands or a vision – meeting Žižek's definition of a zero-level protest. The marchers called for an end to the war in Syria, yet this desire to express opposition was stronger than the desire or ability to articulate a means to bring it to an end. All the more pronounced, then, was the desire to demonstrate solidarity with the civilian population. The March intended to show that people cared about those affected by the Syrian war, that they had not forgotten about them and were not indifferent to their fate.

The strong emotional response elicited by the March can be understood against the backdrop of the failure of European politics during the long summer of migration in 2015 and in 2016. The authors of the March's manifesto wrote that the protest walk was intended to help to dispel feelings of powerlessness and helplessness, to 'transform tears and anger into some action' and challenge what people 'have been taught – submission to war, fear of the powerful, a division of people into "good" and "bad"' (Civil March for Aleppo, 2016b). For many, the Civil March was not only an opportunity to oppose the war in Syria, but also a means to challenge European migration policy. Having started in late 2016, the March took place amid the obvious political breakdown of Europe's migration policy. Most states refused to fulfil their humanitarian and legal obligations to receive asylum seekers, leaving civil society to momentarily step in to fill the void. In this context it was relatively easy to use strong emotional appeals to mobilize people to join the March. At the same time, this target of criticism shaped the perception of many participants, who understood the March to be an opportunity to challenge European migration policy.

The organizers of the Civil March did not draw a clear distinction between opposing the war in Syria and tackling European migration policy. As has been pointed out, the March explicitly intended to follow the same route along which people were fleeing to Europe, but in the opposite direction (Alboth, 2016). In many places the March was hosted by communities and organizations set up to help refugees and asylum seekers. The March repeatedly posted on its Facebook page comments critical of European migration policy and shared postings about social initiatives that helped people who had fled their home countries. In January 2017, the Civil March for Aleppo donated money to Fresh Response, an NGO that provides humanitarian support to refugees and migrants on the Serbia-Hungary border. Once it had left its intended route and crossed the Greek mainland, the March visited sites on Lesbos, Chios, and Samos symbolic of the humanitarian tragedies

in 2015 and 2016 and of the collapse of a common European asylum system (Fig. 13.5).

*Figure 13.5. The Civil March for Aleppo at the ‘Cemetery of Refugees’ near the village of Kato Tritos on Lesbos, Greece, in June 2017.*



Source: Janusz Ratecki.

To the extent that the Civil March was an emotional response to the war in Syria and to European migration policy and lacked programmatic demands and a common vision, it can be accurately characterized as a zero-level protest. Žižek's concept offers a framework for a critical analysis of the protest walk and helps to elucidate its lack of programmatic demands. Yet Žižek's concept does not allow for an assessment of the overall impact of the March. Taking a purely instrumental view, it cannot grasp any potential outcomes, outcomes that are invisible as direct political consequences of the protest. For this reason, we might look to social movement theory as a framework for a broader assessment of the protest's impact.

## **Social Movement Theory and Social Change**

The definitions of social movement vary in the scholarly literature. Amongst other things, social movement has been defined in terms of 'informal networks based on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about conflictual issues through the

frequent use of various forms of protest' (della Porta and Diani, 2006, p. 16). Others define it as a 'collective, organized, sustained, non-institutional challenge to authority, power holders, or cultural beliefs and practices' (Goodwin and Jasper, 2009, p. 4). Another alternative describes it as a 'loosely organized, sustained effort to promote or to resist change in society that relies at least in part in noninstitutionalized forms of collective action' (McAdam and Boudet, 2012, p. 56). Social movements are thus typically comprised of an extra-institutional or non-institutional collective or joint action that promotes change-oriented goals directed at a specific target. Further, social movements contain some degree of organization, temporal continuity, and a sense of shared solidarity and/or collective identity (Flesher Fominaya, 2014).

Whilst Žižek is solely concerned with the instrumental purpose of protests, social movement theory recognizes instrumental social movements that aim to achieve an external goal as well as expressive social movements that focus on the expression of views or emotions. Scholars of social movement theory have developed distinctive or combined models of expressive and instrumental social movements (Klandermans, 2015). In contrast to Žižek's claim, collective action in social movement theory does not necessarily imply the articulation of explicit political demands (della Porta and Diani, 2015).

As a field, social movement studies is broad. In general, however, it could be said that social movement studies offers a framework for the study of 'social change' (della Porta and Diani, 2015). A useful definition of 'social change' is offered by Harper and Leicht, who characterize it as 'the significant alteration of social structure and cultural patterns through time' (2016, p. 5). Social structure refers to 'persistent networks of social relationships where interaction between people or groups has become routine and repetitive'. Culture, in turn, refers to 'shared ways of living and thinking that include symbols and language (verbal and nonverbal), knowledge, beliefs, and values (what is "good" and "bad"), norms (how people are expected to behave), and techniques, ranging from common folk recipes to sophisticated technologies and material objects' (Harper and Leicht, 2016, p. 5). Furthermore, a distinction can be made between non-intentional social changes or trends (e.g. urbanization), and intentional social changes, which are driven by human agency. The latter are either brought about by planned elite decision-making processes or by social movements involving broad segments of the population (Harper and Leicht, 2016, p. 5). The underlying assumption here is that social movements can, with time, significantly influence social structures and cultural patterns.

In a similar way, Flesher Fominaya (2014) uses the term 'prefigurative politics' to highlight the ways in which social movements can transform broader social practices by enacting models of organization, concepts, and conventions that reflect the vision of society to which they aspire. In this sense, social movement theory offers a theoretical framework that allows for an assessment of single instances of civic

engagement, such as a demonstration, sit-in, or protest walk, in a broader context and recognizes the non-linear or long-term effects of social actions.

## The Civil March for Aleppo as Social Movement?

While not in itself constituting a social movement, the Civil March for Aleppo included a number of elements characteristic of social movements. It was the result of non-institutional collective action undertaken by around 3,000 people who were physically engaged in the undertaking, with many more supporting and following it online. It pursued a change-oriented goal insofar as it aimed to improve the situation in Syria for civilians and to stop the war. The Civil March for Aleppo targeted different groups of people with its insistence on the need for a cessation of hostilities, articulated in the March's manifesto in the simple phrase 'this war has to stop!'. The Civil March addressed official representatives directly by contacting embassies along the route and more extensively by encouraging participants to communicate with their own governmental representatives. From the very beginning, March participants actively sought contact with the media to promote the March's animating idea. People were inspired to join the March or take some action in solidarity with people in Syria, to spread awareness about the humanitarian suffering in Syria and war in general, and to encourage broad media coverage so as to gain credibility in the eyes of political representatives and exert pressure on governments to end the war.

The protest walk itself lasted approximately nine months between December 2016 and August 2017. The organization registered under the name Civil March continues to exist. Since the official end of the March in August 2017, one follow-up event has been organized by the Civilmarch e.V. Activity on the Civil March Facebook page has significantly declined since 2017, and by 2019 it was barely active. In this sense, no active network directly promoting the endeavours of the Civil March for Aleppo has outlasted the protest walk.

The Civil March for Aleppo had different levels of organization. Though open to participation by all (except for a few instances in which people were asked to leave because their behaviour was obstructing the March), the Civil March was characterized by a dynamic, but strict organizational frame, composed of a changing number of activists. In a simplified form, the organizational structure included groups of activists 'on the ground' and online. From a hierarchical point of view, the base of the structure comprised the 'marchers' or 'the March', consisting of a constantly changing group of people who were physically present on the walk. One level higher, there was 'the team', a small group of activists, many of whom intended to support the March during its entire duration and who participated both on the ground and online. Finally, there was the 'leadership', which modified its structure

several times. As noted above, the Civil March is a legal entity (Civilmarch e.V.) registered in Germany. As such, it has the right to determine the specific use of its own intellectual and material property, along with the right to articulate 'official' positions or empower certain people to voice them.

Harper and Leicht (2016) draw a distinction between 'social movements' and 'social movement organizations' (SMO). Defining social movements as 'unconventional collectivities with varying degrees of organization that attempt to promote or prevent change' (Harper and Leicht, 2016, p. 134), they understand 'collectivities' as collections of people that are only loosely structured, if at all. The low degree of organization differentiates them from structured SMOs. Unlike SMOs, social movements include all sympathizers, supporters, adherents, and activists.

Applying Harper and Leicht's distinction between social movements and social movement organizations to the Civil March in Aleppo, it becomes clear that it was not in itself a social movement since, with the exception of a few select events, all actions and events around the March were organized either by a central organizing body that was entitled to articulate 'official' positions in the name of the Civil March or by local groups and individuals cooperating with the Civil March.

As Flesher Fominaya (2014) points out, a protest ought to be differentiated from a social movement. Protest, the 'act of challenging, resisting, or making demands upon authorities, power holders, and/or cultural beliefs and practices by some individuals or group' (Goodwin and Jasper, 2009, p. 3), is one possible strategy employed by social movements. Most protests are connected with social movements, but social movements comprise much more than individual protests (Flesher Fominaya, 2014). In this sense, the Civil March for Aleppo was a protest but no social movement. In fairness, the Civil March never claimed to adhere to a larger social movement. Rather, the Civil March can be seen within the context of the mobilizations that occurred during the 'long summer of migration', when many civil initiatives emerged in response to the failure of European migration policy and the war in Syria (see della Porta, 2018). The Refugee Tales Walk in the UK is another example of this type of initiative, and it serves as a useful comparison to the Civil March for Aleppo.

The Refugee Tales: A Walk in Solidarity with Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Detainees, initiated by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, took place for the first time in June 2015, prior to the arrival of unprecedented numbers of migrants and refugees later that year. Since 2015 the walk has been repeated annually. The Refugee Tales Walk issued a call for an immediate end to the use of indefinite immigration detention in the UK, an instrument covered in that country's Immigration Act. Further, the initiative demands formal recognition of the right of immigrants to work and to education as well as the entitlement to 'a life not (...) held brutally in suspense' (Herd, 2017, p. 143). It aims to raise awareness among a wider audience of the inhuman conditions of detention and post-detention and seeks to exert

pressure on officials and change public discourse. The initiative further intends to be an act of welcome in contrast to the hostile environment created by the legal system, and it aspires to give voice to those who are structurally silenced under this system (Herd, 2017; *About Refugee Tales*, n.d.). The walks are framed by cultural events, during which ‘tales’ – anonymized real stories – of former immigration detainees, refugees, or people working with asylum seekers in the UK, such as lawyers or interpreters, are told and collected. This storytelling is modelled on Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. In 2016 the Refugee Tales project compiled a book of *Refugee Tales*, with a second volume appearing in 2017.

A comparison between the Civil March for Aleppo and the Refugee Tales Walk is interesting since both initiatives took place around the same time and against a similar backdrop. While their motivations were different, both projects chose the form of a walk: both groups of activists claimed to walk as an expression of solidarity with displaced people and immigrants more generally, and both walks criticized migration policies in European countries. Whilst the Civil March explicitly rejected the formulation of political demands (other than a vague call for a stop to the war in Syria), the Refugee Tales Walk articulates a precise aim: to end indefinite immigration detention in the UK and, additionally, to improve the situation of immigrants by changing hostile public discourse.

Despite clearly articulating its aims, the Refugee Tales project did not achieve its main political objective. It did not put a stop to indefinite immigration detention in the UK, nor did the use of this practice significantly decline between the start of the project and the time of writing (Amnesty International, 2019). Certainly, the Refugee Tales Walk created awareness about the practice of indefinite immigration detention and the precarious situation of asylum seekers in the UK. Its political impact is nevertheless difficult to assess. Increasingly, the rights of asylum seekers and refugees are being curtailed in many European countries as well as in other parts of the world (Amnesty International, 2018). The Immigration Act of 2016, for example, significantly worsened the legal situation for refugees and immigrants in the UK (Ali Khan, 2016).

However, if we assume that protests – whether as part of a social movement or individually – can contribute to social change, and that they can do so not only by accomplishing immediate political goals, but also by transforming broader social practices and affecting cultural patterns over time, then the meaningfulness of protests ought not solely be determined in terms of their political success or failure. What might be considered instead is the longer-term impact of protests.

## Eventful Protest

Taking a non-instrumental view of protest, political scientist and social movement scholar Donatella della Porta (2008) highlights the transformative capacity of what she, with Sewell (1996), calls 'eventful protest': a 'by-product' of the protest is the cognitive, emotional, and relational impact it has on its actors as well as on any associated social movements. First and foremost, protests build networks to increase their impact. These networks, *inter alia*, produce knowledge, collective identities, and social ties, something della Porta (2008) describes as 'networking in action'. She suggests that protests are particularly 'eventful' and therefore bear an even larger transformative potential when they last for a long time, bring together people from different backgrounds, stress the importance of communication, and engage participants emotionally.

Isin and Nielsen (2008) drawing on the work of della Porta (2008) to highlight the symbolic dimension of collective action as 'collective or individual deeds that rupture socio-historical patterns' (p. 2) insofar as they challenge existing power structures through cultural change. Monforte and Dufour (2013) show how participating in long-term marches of undocumented migrants in Canada, Germany, and France in 2005, 2007, and 2010 has generated a sense of empowerment, pride, and solidarity amongst the participants, and so may be said to have constituted an act of symbolic emancipation of undocumented migrants from their marginal position in society. Della Porta's and Monforte and Dufour's findings are worth considering in relation to the Civil March for Aleppo.

Eventful protests serve as spaces of encounter, spaces in which knowledge and ideas are generated through interaction and exchange. This is all the more true if protests are inclusive and pluralistic (della Porta, 2008). Della Porta (2008) shows that participation in the European Marches, which took place between 1997 and 2002 and targeted EU summits in Amsterdam, Cologne, and Nice, allowed participants to recognize cross-national similarities and so enabled the construction of transnational identities. Monforte and Dufour (2018) argue that the participation of undocumented migrants in the protests had cognitive effects: it raised awareness of their ability to exert claims in the public sphere and act like citizens with legal residency status. In this way, participation in the protests conferred a sense of empowerment. Refusing to be 'invisible', they emancipated themselves from their position in a legal system under which they were not recognized.

The Civil March for Aleppo and the Refugee Tales Walk similarly served as platforms for exchange and dialogue. The daily walk stimulated debates. In the case of the Civil March, the group often started the day with a 'news flash' on the situation in Syria, after which a 'question of the day' could be posed by anyone (Fig. 13.6). The intent was that the question would be discussed in small groups during the day's walk and then addressed by the larger gathering in the evening. Some days

participants organized workshops to discuss an issue in depth or to share their knowledge in a specific field with the rest of the group.

*Figure 13.6. Morning 'news flash' before the start of the walk from Knežica to Kozarac, Bosnia, in March 2017.*



Source: Janusz Ratecki.

As stated in the manifesto, the March intended 'to deny powerlessness' and to challenge what the marchers 'ha[d] been taught': submission to war, fear of the powerful, a division of people into 'good' and 'bad', 'better' and 'worse' (Civil March for Aleppo, 2016b). Individual motivations for joining the March differed greatly, as mentioned above. Yet we can conclude that taking part in a collective action, whatever the motivation for doing so, gave participants a strong sense of empowerment. Maybe this is also what de Rond and Hallett mean when they write that the Civil March 'was also about the participants in the march and their very real existential angst', which the marchers could assuage by walking day in, day out (de Rond and Hallett, 2019).

In her work on protests against the construction of a high-speed train line in Val di Susa, Italy, and the subsequent occupation of the construction sites by protesters in 2006, della Porta (2008) has shown how protests can create communities. The experience of acting together for a protracted time helped generate feelings of solidarity, trust, and belonging amongst the protesters. The occupied site was transformed into a space that allowed for experiments in alternative ways of

living, directly affecting the daily lives of the participants. The meaning of the occupation thus transcended opposition to the railway line, turning the occupied sites into common spaces that enabled the growth of a community. We can find other examples of the potential of protests to create community in the airport construction site at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, France, occupied between 2009 and 2018, and in the 2011 occupations of central squares by the so-called Occupy Movements or Movements of the Squares. The latter emerged in Northern Africa, Europe, and the United States and were characterized by a pronounced rejection of neoliberalism, an explicit claim to inclusivity, the absence of leaders and clear programs, the refusal to affiliate with any particular ideology or organization, and the rejection of any form of representation (Fernández-Savater et al., 2017).

The Civil March for Aleppo, too, turned into something that had the quality of a community. Although only a few participants remained with the March for its entire duration, and the rest of the group changed dynamically, the March constituted a space in which people felt welcome and to which many returned. Once on the March many participants, who had planned to join for only a short period of time, postponed their departure. Some quit their jobs or their rental contracts to remain on the March until its end. A number of people re-joined multiple times. The experience of walking together, day in, day out, through the seasons of the year, crossing from one country to the next, created intense engagement amongst the participants and bound them together. As de Rond and Hallett (2019) observe, the March was something that seemed ‘deeply meaningful’, a space in which ‘a set of rare human qualities – of generosity and kindness and physical intimacy’ could prosper. The feeling of connectedness with other ex-marchers has remained for many former participants to this day, two years after the protest walk (Fig. 13.7).

Eventful protests carry the potential to create networks. The European Marches and the aforementioned protest walks by undocumented migrants all serve as examples of how protests strengthen connections and foster relationships of solidarity amongst participants and between participants and others. Monforte and Dufour (2013) have shown how the protest marches in Canada, Germany, and France produced social ties not only amongst the migrants, but also between migrants and other social groups.

Throughout the months of walking, around 3,000 people actively participated in the Civil March for Aleppo. Along the route, the marching group engaged with a significant number of individuals, communities, and organizations engaged in social work. The protest forged connections amongst people with different backgrounds, nationalities, and political and religious orientations, and it established a broad trans-national network. Drawing on this network, some former participants set up the initiative Civil Action Network (Civil Action Network, n.d.), which promotes dialogue and solidarity and aims to connect communities in Central Eu-

Figure 13.7. The marching group in Glashütte, in Teupitz, Germany, in December 2016.



Source: Janusz Ratecki.

rope, the Balkans, Turkey, and Syria through realizing common projects, sharing experiences, and exchanging information.

What the Civil March for Aleppo achieved by generating ideas, creating a sense of empowerment, forging community, creating solidarity ties, and fostering connections and friendships was not its principle aim but rather its by-product. These outcomes do not change anything about the lack of a vision and common goal, nor should they obscure organizational shortcomings and the conflicts that existed within the group. Nevertheless, this aspect deserves equal consideration in any assessment of the Civil March.

## Conclusion

The Civil March for Aleppo was a nine-month-long protest march dedicated to the civilians in Syria, and Aleppo specifically, which promoted the idea of peace and solidarity. The March took place in the context of the mobilization of large numbers of people during the so-called 'long summer of migration' in 2015-2016. Intending to follow the so-called 'refugee-route' in the opposite direction, participants in the

March walked from Berlin towards Aleppo, ending at the Lebanon-Syria border on 14 August 2017.

The Civil March for Aleppo has been analysed in this essay in light of Žižek's concept of a 'zero-level protest' and social movement theory. With 'zero-level protest' Žižek denotes a type of social protest with no programme or purpose. Zero-level protest can be understood as a manifestation of dissent and anger, a 'violent protest act that demands nothing'. Amounting to nothing but expressing emotions, this type of protest stagnates at a 'zero-level' in contrast to an instrumental protest, which aims to influence society and politics. This essay has extended Žižek's concept of zero-level protest to non-violent protest to engage in a critical analysis of the aims and coherence of the protest walk and to highlight the absence of programmatic demands articulated by the Civil March.

Social movement theory has been posited as an alternative to Žižek's concept. Social movement theory allows individual instances of civic engagement to be assessed within a broader context and takes into consideration the non-linear, long-term effects of social actions. Working from the assumption that protests may have an impact that extends beyond tangible political outcomes, and that protests can contribute to social change by transforming cultural patterns over time, the essay has argued that transformative potential should also be considered when evaluating a protest. This potential is to be found in the ways in which the protest affects its participants on a cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal level. In keeping with della Porta's concepts of 'eventful protest' and 'networking in action', both the Civil March and Refugee Tales Walk might be thought of as powerful potential contributors to long-term change.

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