

Conclusion

I began this project with a genuine interest in finding out what happened to the volunteers, activists, and diverse groups and organizations that became active during the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16. As highlighted in the introductory chapter, the initial pilot study in southern Germany indicated that the traces of that initial period had not been erased and that a community had survived the six years beyond the pro-refugee mobilization. Yet, this book demonstrates that the development and survival of pro-refugee communities is highly conditional.

Overview

My empirical findings reveal that in two of the four cities, pro-refugee communities emerged and sustained themselves over the six-year period. While Lauda and Loburg witnessed the development and survival of pro-refugee communities, Altenau and Neheim did not experience similar effects. These new pro-refugee communities in Lauda and Loburg were characterized by a continued interaction between the involved organizations and groups that went well beyond the peak of the mobilization. Following the end of the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16, many volunteers and activists withdrew, and media attention surrounding the proclaimed “welcome culture” dissipated. However, the members of the emerging communities continued to interact, consequently strengthening their networks and building new ones. On the one hand, recurrent informal gatherings and parties provided the opportunity for members of the pro-refugee communities to come together and share more personal experiences and frustrations related to their work. On the other hand, the pro-refugee communities came to participate in increasingly formalized interaction formats. These included expert groups established to

develop an integration strategy, a volunteer network, and a civic migration council.

In contrast, in Altenau and Neiheim, although organizations and groups mobilized during the refugee reception crisis in 2015/16, they did not lead to the emergence and survival of pro-refugee communities. Despite the unprecedented mobilization, there were few sustained forms of interaction with the potential to manifest in new and strengthened networks. A significant obstacle was the limited integration of volunteer-run groups into established forums, such as Altenau's migration roundtable. This roundtable failed to extend invitations to prospective members, such as volunteer-led refugee support groups, and continued to serve as an exclusive platform for well-established, professionalized organizations. Additionally, the ongoing tensions between members of civil society, such as the Refugee Council, and local government officials in Neheim and Altenau, hindered lasting collaboration.

Through paired comparisons, I identified three sets of factors and conditions that either drove or inhibited the development and survival of pro-refugee communities. I first highlighted the significant role of local brokers in sustaining interaction within local civic action communities. Local brokers are crucial in maintaining engagement by creating diverse opportunities for interaction. In Chapter 5, I reconceptualize brokers as active agents who continuously connect individuals, drawing on recent innovations in organizational sociology (Obstfeld, Borgatti & Davis, 2014). Moving beyond traditional definitions that focus on structural network positions (Burt, 2007; Gould & Fernandez, 1989), I emphasize brokers' behavior and strategies, portraying them as "matchmakers" (Stovel & Shaw, 2012) who ensure the longevity of networks. In my study, I identify three types of local brokers who gained recognition and appreciation by defending their communities and serving as mediators between activists, volunteers, and local government. Furthermore, I demonstrate the diversified interaction opportunities these brokers provide, distinguishing between activities related to "maintaining core work," "policy advocacy," and "broadening the issue scope." These diversified interaction opportunities were instrumental in keeping interaction alive once mobilization faded, as they catered to the needs of the various subgroups within the communities.

Second, I revealed the significant obstacles to collaboration and the organizational differences underpinning them. In particular, I identified three major mechanisms that hinder sustained community building: resource differences, differences in modes of coordination, and differences in interaction cultures.

In Chapter 6, I explore the challenges of building enduring networks between professionalized organizations and informal groups, addressing deep-seated organizational differences often overlooked in voluntarism/nonprofit studies. First, resource-rich organizations often overshadow informal groups, crowding them out of collaborative efforts (Guo & Acar, 2005; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Second, divergent coordination modes create barriers, with professionalized organizations adopting a coalitional mode focused on resources, while informal groups emphasize solidarity and community (Diani, 2015). Third, cultural norms influence interaction styles, as informal groups value independence and flexibility, whereas professionalized organizations prefer formalized, interest-driven approaches (Eliasoph & Cefai, 2021; Lichtenman, 2021). These factors make lasting collaboration and community building across organizational divides particularly challenging, as evidenced by cases where pro-refugee communities failed to emerge. However, these challenges can be addressed through greater appreciation for informal groups and the creation of more balanced power dynamics.

Third, I emphasized the importance of trusting relationships between local government officials and volunteers for co-production and community building. I highlight how positive civil society-state relations lay the foundation for formalized interaction formats, such as integration-strategy and civic-council meetings. Drawing on the concept of linking social capital – trust built across power divides (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004) – I show that its production requires continuous effort. Structural tensions, power asymmetries, and the perception of whether efforts are taken seriously shape these relationships. Viewing shared challenges, like refugee intake, as mutual concerns foster cooperation, but trust remains fragile and dynamic. While mediation and institutionalized exchanges can strengthen ties, unaddressed frustration and suspicion risk undermining linking social capital over time. Volunteers can intuitively gauge whether their efforts are valued, or in terms of social capital, whether vertical ties are “responsive” or more instrumental, or even “exploitative” in nature (Putnam, 2004, p. 669). The experience of feeling disregarded is a key driver of discouragement, often leading volunteers to disengage, which in turn results in a swift erosion of these ties.

These driving factors and obstacles not only operate independently but also have meaningful interdependencies. Brokers, for instance, build trust and create interaction opportunities for their communities, while also serving as key mediators between volunteers, activists, and local government. They play a crucial role in strengthening the bonds between civil society and local

government by translating the diverse concerns of civil society to government officials, thereby fostering trust. Additionally, brokers can help mitigate established power dynamics between informal volunteer groups and professionalized organizations by maintaining positive relationships with both groups and addressing conflicts. Moreover, the mechanism behind linking social capital formation—establishing responsive ties rooted in listening and respect—can contribute to bridging organizational divides. By acknowledging each other's perspectives and respecting differing interaction cultures, volunteers, activists, and local government officials are better able to collaborate and build trust.

Conceptual and Empirical Contributions

This book has made four major conceptual and empirical contributions. First, this book has made an innovative contribution to current civil society research by introducing the concept of local civic action communities and demonstrating their significance in contemporary civic landscapes. Second, the book makes essential empirical contributions that further the study of pro-refugee mobilization, of the potential for remobilization, and of the changing nature of volunteering,

Local civic action communities

First, I advance civil society research by introducing the concept of local civic action communities in today's civic landscape, borrowing and adapting Suzanne Staggenborg's (2013, 2020) concept of social movement communities. Mobilization periods today often involve a broad range of actors, from typical membership-based voluntary and welfare organizations to more politicized grassroots associations and informal groups. To understand community building in this civic landscape, I introduced the concept of local civic action communities. They differ in their emergence and survival to movement communities because actors may not follow a global vision with concrete policy changes in mind and may not be involved in classical social movement campaigns and protests.

Local civic action communities instead emerge through a collective focus on local problems that the members of the communities are convinced must be addressed. As may typically arise following mobilization periods such as

the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16, the actors in my case were, on the one hand, quite broad involving organizations that were typically not part of largescale protest events (not as politicized). On the other hand, they focused on local problems and were most interested in solving these. Unlike social movement communities, such communities are generally not necessarily bound by a collective identity, even though these identities may form later in some local civic action communities, too.

Existing civil society research, however, had not adequately address community building in this way. While, for instance, scholars in voluntarism/nonprofit studies had provided rich insights into more formalized network formation and collaboration (e.g., Hawkins & Maurer, 2010; Nolte & Boenigk, 2013; Shaw & Goda, 2004), they had rarely explored the community aspect behind such developments. This especially holds true with regard to the outcomes of heightened mobilization. Social movement studies, on the other hand, while offering many conceptual insights, are still more movement-centered and do not fully address the contemporary, differentiated civic landscape in which mobilization periods such as the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16 take place (but Corrigall-Brown, 2022; Diani, 2015; Licherman, 2021). As a result, neither voluntarism/nonprofit studies nor social movement studies have provided sufficient tools to study community building as I have done in this book. Consequently, the concept of local civic action communities represents a crucial building block, one that can be used to bridge the gaps between these fields of civil society research and studies of today's differentiated civic landscapes.

The emergence and survival of local civic action communities is incredibly important for civil society in light of recent societal changes. First, local civic action communities that survive over time provide citizens with the opportunity for lasting involvement in effective policy-making at the local and regional level. In the pro-refugee communities that I examined, the various actors involved came together in regular interaction formats to influence local policy-making in the field of migration.

Second, local civic action communities that continue to exist for years become a sphere where people from different organizations and groups build professional relationships but also friendships. The activists and volunteers active in the pro-refugee communities looked forward to meeting each other across organizations and groups at summer parties, get-togethers, film screenings, and protest actions. They were excited when, sometimes after

a few months, they got the opportunity to meet again and do something together.

Third, local civic action communities provide viable foundations for new mobilization periods as the networks that form and become stronger through continued interaction can be activated to cope with other local and regional problems. For the pro-refugee communities, the mobilization in solidarity with Ukrainian refugees was such a period. The foundations built in 2015/16 were used in 2022 to provide new emergency support for Ukrainians and collaborate across organizations and groups. Knowing that this foundation was in place gave the volunteers and activists, who had been active in the pro-refugee communities for years at that point in time, a sense of peace and pride.

Finally, it is also important to note that the factors that underpinned local civic action communities also underpinned the bridging form of social capital. Various studies have investigated whether and under what conditions bridging social capital is created and facilitated. Most studies refer to surveys on norms of trust (e.g., Gidengil & Stolle, 2009; Paxton, 2002) or on the heterogeneous composition of volunteers in associations (e.g., Geys & Murdoch, 2010; Hooghe & Stolle, 2003). Less attention has been paid to relationships between organizations (i.e. between associations, church congregations, political groups) (but see Baldassarri & Diani, 2007), although it is these very interorganizational networks that promote trust and cooperation between heterogeneous groups (Smith et al., 2004, p. 509f.). This book has shown how bridging social capital can be promoted at the local level. In addition, social capital research has paid little attention to interaction dynamics (Lichterman, 2006) in local contexts (Edwards et al., 2001, p. 267). In this book, I highlight how the structures of the local civic landscape, the behavior of local governments, and the quality of local interaction dynamics can enormously influence social capital. This does not just enable us to show where social capital exists and where it does not but also allows us to identify which forms of interaction are particularly conducive or unfavorable to its development. To put it in a nutshell, the concept of local civic action communities provides a useful lens through which civil society scholars can analyze community building in the contemporary civic landscape.

The pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16

Second, I expand on the empirical research regarding the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16 by examining the evolving activities and interaction dynamics of mobilized actors six years after the mobilization. Although significant research has been done on the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16 in Germany, most studies have only focused on the mobilization period itself (but see Dinkelaker et al., 2021). As a result, there is limited knowledge of the trajectories of the mobilization period and refugee support. With regard to the trajectories of the pro-refugee mobilization of 2015/16, I have provided significant empirical insights into what came after the media attention decreased and the mass of volunteers and activists withdrew at the end of 2016.

Recent studies have focused on the lives of volunteers and activists and on their motivations and struggles (Carlsen et al., 2022; Feischmidt & Zakariás, 2020; Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Gundelach & Toubøl, 2019; Karakayali, 2016; Schwierz & Steinhilper, 2020) and on the experiences of refugees and the effects of refugee support on refugees themselves (Bagavos & Kourachanis, 2022; Bergfeld, 2017; Easton-Calabria & Wood, 2021; Funk, 2018; Zick & Preuß, 2019). However, studies have rarely shed light on how the volunteers and activists and the collective actors involved were affected and how it strengthened communities involved in refugee support and advocacy.

Local manifestation of refugee support and advocacy

Second, this book sheds light on how activities around refugee support and advocacy have manifested in specific localities. In recent years, pro-migrant and pro-refugee groups have intensified their advocacy efforts and protest activities on a global scale (Bloemraad & Voss, 2020; W. Nicholls, 2019; Zepeda-Millán, 2017). However, research has predominantly concentrated on the national level, which has meant that crucial insights into local grassroots dynamics have remained uncovered. Scholars have criticized the lack of attention paid to particular localities in research on pro-migrant and pro-refugee work (de Graauw et al., 2020; Nicholls et al., 2016; Triviño-Salazar, 2018). Nicholls et al. (2016, p. 1038) have emphasized the lack of research on cities as “important hubs in national-level struggles”. In Europe, several notable movements have emerged in recent years, including “Barcelona Refugee City” in Spain (Garcés-Mascareñas & Gebhardt, 2020), “City of Sanctuary” in Great Britain (Squire & Darling, 2013), and “Create Safe Havens” (German: “Seebrücke”) in Germany (Schwierz

& Schwenken, 2022). These movements have campaigned for improved social care and political rights for refugees. While cities and towns have become important sites for immigration debates and conflicts (Nicholls et al., 2016), the local emergence of pro-immigrant and pro-refugee movements has, with a few exceptions, only received minimal attention (Boersma et al., 2019; Hoppe-Seyler, 2020; Monforte & Maestri, 2023). By shifting the focus from the national to the local level, this book outlines how grassroots actors provided emergency aid in 2015/16 while subsequently transitioning to a focus on integration in the years following the refugee reception crisis. I demonstrate how the different actors built and strengthened networks among themselves and built pro-refugee communities.

Structural changes in civil society

Finally, this book extends the current scholarly debate on the recent transitions in civil society. This book highlights the potential for conflict between the more traditional sphere of associations and the “new world of initiatives and projects” (German: “die neue Welt der Initiativen und Projekte”) (Grande, 2021, p. 173). In recent decades, the number of initiatives and informal groups with a project-based character and a stronger political orientation, also known as new voluntarism, has increased (BrandSEN et al., 2017; M. Edwards, 2014; Evers, 2005; Evers & von Essen, 2019; Hustinx et al., 2014; Hyde et al., 2016). At the same time, studies indicate that civic action in traditional civil society entities, such as trade unions, churches, and charities, is on the decline. However, these structures continue to coexist with the new structures (Grande, 2021). This diversity within contemporary civic landscapes is evident in the four cases that I examined in this book. While existing research has produced rich insights into the phenomenon of new voluntarism and the decline of the traditional civil society sector (BrandSEN et al., 2017; Hustinx et al., 2014), there are few studies that show how these different actor types interact. This book demonstrates that new, more informal refugee-support groups and more traditional welfare organizations face challenges in collaborating with each other. The power imbalance between these more informal groups with fewer resources and larger welfare organizations can result in the formation of exclusive sub-networks that exclude informal initiatives and groups. This creates parallel structures that separate traditional and new informal actors.

Political and Societal Implications

The study has highlighted the great potential of mobilization periods for community building but also pointed to the difficulties for the development and survival of pro-refugee communities in the post-mobilization period. My research has significant social and political implications for civil society practitioners and policymakers.

Democracy promotion

First, my research has significant implications for policymakers and civil society practitioners who seek to enhance democratic values and societal cohesion. My work demonstrates the efficacy of community building across diverse sets of actors. Building broad-based communities that include actors from different sectors and with varied societal convictions is crucial for the sustained success of democratic institutions.

In Germany, heightened mobilization against the far-right “Alternative for Germany” (AfD) (German: Alternative für Deutschland) in 2024 has emphasized the power of people working together against democratic threats. Despite their differences, participants in large-scale protests have collectively stood up against the AfD’s inhumane, racist, and antisemitic agendas (Diez, 2024).

Today, right-wing extremism is on the rise globally and Germany is no exception. We have witnessed attacks on Muslim minorities, National Socialist Underground (NSU) murders, and assaults on Jewish-owned businesses and synagogues (Bennhold, 2020; Eddy, 2020). With the AfD’s electoral successes, Germany has seen the first far-right party since the end of World War II to hold increasing influence in public institutions. Due to the AfD’s danger to Germany’s democracy, members of the German Bundestag are currently examining a legal ban procedure against the entire party (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2024; Kathe, 2024; ZDF heute, 2024). However, many observers agree that banning the AfD will likely only be one of the steps needed to protect democratic institutions (and improve social cohesion) (Laudenbach, 2023; Reinbold, 2024; Zeit Online, 2024).

One crucial step is the promotion of local community building. Based on the findings in my book, I strongly advocate for supporting network formation and community building across organizations and groups at the local level. Diverse local civic action communities encompassing a broad range of actors can

address concrete problems such as refugee support and advocacy. They can also broaden their scope and pursue related goals, such as anti-far right actions.

Renowned scholars such as Putnam (2000; 1994), Stolle and Hooghe (2003) and Newton (1997) have highlighted that broad actor networks can reinforce democratic values and social cohesion. Broad networks are vital because they can improve communication between the organizations and help build trust as different organizations share problems, concerns, and potential solutions. While heterogeneous networks among individuals can be established within associations, broader group cohesion is significantly improved by the relationships between different informal groups, organizations, and clubs.

In times when democratic societies are at risk, it is imperative to reinforce these heterogeneous relationships. Policies that facilitate collaboration between diverse organizations and groups should support collaborative roundtables and expert groups. These roundtables and groups should include informal initiatives and groups as well as more professionalized and experienced organizations. This type of co-production benefits local governments but also encourages interactions between diverse sets of civil society actors.

Civil society practitioners should create new ways of adopting diverse interaction formats to cater to different actors. Many groups and organizations have their own ways of doing things. These ways include their unique culture of interaction and networking strategies regarding collaboration. Showing sensitivity concerning these different cultures and preferences will likely enable more collaboration, even across organizational differences.

Migration policy

Second, my findings suggest that local civil society can contribute to social cohesion in times of conflict around increasing immigration. Research indicates that migration to Europe will likely be one of the key policy issues in the next ten to twenty years (OSCE, 2020). Policymakers in Germany and other European countries have increasingly expressed the fear that migration will lead to divisions in host communities (Guardian, 2023; Le Monde, 2023; Tagesspiegel, 2023). Empirical evidence regarding this issue is mixed at best (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Mau et al., 2023). With regard to local civil society, my research suggests that increased migration to Europe in 2015/16 actually reinforced community building in some places.

Indeed, contrary to the aforementioned expectations, my research findings indicate that the high inflow of refugees in 2015/16 did not lead to divi-

sion, at least not within local civil society. During that time, over one million refugees arrived in Germany (Schiffauer, 2022). This did not necessarily foster discord; in two of the four cities I explored in this book, new and thriving pro-refugee communities emerged and survived well beyond the peak of the mobilization period in 2015/16. In these cities, the pro-refugee communities—consisting of volunteers, activists, organizations, and groups—have been more closely connected since the mobilization than before. Even in the other two cities, where similar pro-refugee communities did not develop, the increased influx of refugees in 2015/16 nevertheless did not significantly increase conflicts within local civil society.

Though my period of study was one in which a skeptical or even hateful atmosphere emerged towards refugees, the increasing number of refugees did not result in a breakdown of social cohesion in the four civic communities. Hence, rather than exacerbating concerns about the potential decline of social cohesion due to migration, policymakers who participate in public debates on migration should highlight instances where migration has a constructive impact on community building. By focusing on circumstances in which cohesion is not undermined but rather reinforced, policymakers can enhance legislation and local structures that facilitate community-building within civil society.

In addition, policy makers and civil society experts should improve the conditions under which community building is facilitated and improved. Volunteers, activists, and employees of local organizations who stand up for refugees often face hostility from the far right. Advocating for migration in times of skepticism is not easy. At the local level, policymakers should, for instance, support local community building through financial support for projects and the provision of spaces for civic action, especially in times of rising rents.

As I have shown in my research, cooperation between local governments and civil society was an important step towards sustainable community building. For example, local politicians and government officials should include individuals from civil society in their strategy meetings and policymaking (for example, when planning a new integration strategy for the district).

Civil society is central to the management of migration. My research underlines the need to support civil society groups as actors that are indispensable for social cohesion. Such support at different levels is an investment in a democratic and inclusive society where diversity is seen as a strength.

