

Sans-papiers on their March for Freedom 2014: how refugees and undocumented migrants challenge Fortress Europe

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Abstract

From 27 May to 27 June 2014 I followed on the Internet the March for Freedom, a transnational protest campaign of around 400 refugees, sans-papiers/undocumented migrants, and their supporters. At the end of their 500 km march, starting in Strasbourg, I joined them as a sympathiser in Brussels for a week of protest. I filmed their powerful final demonstration in front of the headquarters of the European Union. I highlighted some of the issues and problems of the campaign with a blog and asked myself how citizens, students, researchers, artists and other potential allies could become more involved in supporting human rights campaigns such as the March for Freedom 2014. In this case study I document the activities of the March for Freedom 2014, examine its use of media and show how the struggle for freedom of movement, utopian as it may seem, embodies a promising vision for deepening democracy.

Keywords: sans-papiers, undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, activism, grassroots organising, Frontex, European migration policies, border politics, democracy, human rights, social movements

Introduction

The March for Freedom began on 17 May 2014, just before the European Union Parliament elections. About 100 migrants from across Europe met in Strasbourg. Among the many groups represented were the *Coalizione Internazionale dei Sans-Papiers e Migranti (CISPM)* of Italy, the *Collectif des Sans-Papiers* (France), and the *Refugee Movement Oranienplatz Berlin* (Germany). I became interested in the march because the electorate of many EU countries – and also of Switzerland, where I come from – was clearly moving towards a national conservatism hostile to so called “illegal” or “irregular” migration, not least because of a nebulous fear of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, stirred up by right-wing populist parties. As a visual anthropologist and community artist who has done several projects for inter- or transcultural understanding in multicultural Switzerland during the last years¹ I

¹ In the Swiss community arts project *Here and Away. Living in Two Worlds* I brought together people directly and indirectly affected by migration in many ways, through collective recollection in oral history workshops and the exhibition of video portraits (Nigg 1999) Online: <http://www.migrant.ch/en/here-and-away-living-in-two-worlds/view.html> (DE/EN/FR/IT)

felt alarmed and challenged in this moment of crisis to support the sans-papiers movement in Europe in their struggle against discrimination. I became aware of the march through contacts with researchers and activists in Berlin and decided as a first step to follow the march on its website², record and blog my observations in order to win support for the march in my circle of friends. The March for Freedom 2014 touched key geographical sites of European border policy, places whose names have acquired tangible meanings in the lives of many refugees and asylum seekers, such as *Schengen*. Different symbolic actions and events marked the main stops of the march, which concluded with a week-long series of actions from 21 to 26 June 2014 in Brussels, seat of the European Union. More activist groups, human rights organisations, refugee and migrant solidarity groups supported the march and were organising solidarity actions in other European cities as well.

Both activists and researchers may profit from this case study on two levels:

- How and with what means of communication can campaigns like the March of Freedom make the voices of sans-papiers and undocumented migrants visible and heard?
- Is transnational organising an option for sans-papiers movements, and if so, what are the benefits to be gained and obstacles to be overcome?

The case study also shows how research can monitor the web activities of a social movement and combine the findings with an ethnographic approach of interacting with the movement in order to draw an in-depth picture of a movement. In this paper I look at the historic background of the transnational sans-papiers movement in Europe and examine its demands, forms of action, media strategies and the outcome of the March for Freedom 2014.

Historical context

Let me first have a look at some important steps in the development of the sans-papiers movement in Europe. In 1998 a first camp of the transnational campaign *No one is illegal* was set up at the German-Polish border. That protest was directed against European migration policy and the newly established border controls in Eastern Europe to shield the Schengen countries from migrants and refugees. In the following years activists began to develop the concept of *border camps* as a new method of resistance against Europe turning into a fortress to deter immigration from non-European countries, especially from east and south of Europe. This struggle is well documented on the website of the *noborder network*³, an umbrella organisation for the border camp movement and other struggles in Poland, the Ukraine, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, the US-Mexican border (Akers Chacón & Davis, 2006), Australia and other countries. To understand the dynamics of transnational mobilisation of the March for Freedom 2014, one implication of

² March for Freedom website: <http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org>

³ <http://www.noborder.org>

this historical context has to be especially considered: up to the present, struggles of sans-papiers always have been across borders, nations and continents, supported by grassroots groups, NGOs and by artists focusing their work on problems of border crossing⁴.

The struggle against Frontex, the European agency for external border security founded in 2004, also goes back some years. In a 2008 NGO statement presented to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) a large coalition of organisations expressed their concern that asylum seekers were blocked from claiming protection by Frontex's campaign of deterrence and discriminatory border regime⁵. In the same year a campaign was launched under the name *Frontexplode* at a rally in front of the headquarters of Frontex in Warsaw, when a representative of the Mauritanian Human Rights Organisation emphasised the deadly consequences of Frontex operations along the West African coastline, and demanded an immediate stop to Frontex's *Operation Hera*. Activists from Poland, Italy, Greece and the Netherlands participated in this first round of protests. Out of this developed a transnational chain of actions against the European border and deportation regime⁶.

The March for Freedom 2014 from Strasbourg to Brussels marked a further milestone in transnational organising in its attempt to make the demands of the refugee and sans-papiers movement not only heard in some border regions of Europe but in the European capital itself. Here is a brief chronology of the March for Freedom based on its website, «Freedom not Frontex»:

27.12.2013:	Ideas for logos and slogans
03.02.2014:	Our demands
05.02.2014:	Map of people killed at European borders
13.02.2014:	Call for support
25.02.2014:	Mobilisation video
03.04.2014:	Let's crowdfund ourselves
28.04.2014:	Materials needed
03.05.2014:	Departure from Berlin to Freiburg/Kehl/Strasbourg
07.05.2014:	Creactivism Days (until 09.05)
15.05.2014:	Mobilisation video
16.05.2014:	Call for demo from Kehl to Strasbourg to cross borders
26.05.2014:	Arrival in Saarbrücken
28.05.2014:	Our stops to Brussels will be Weiler la Tour, Luxemburg, Steinfort, Heinsch, Leglise, Libramont, Libin, Wellin, Beauraing, Hastiere, Mettet Charleroi, Pont a Celle, Nivelles, and Sint Genisius Rode
29.05.2014:	Visit in the Lager Lebach, a holding camp for asylum seekers
29.05.2014:	Call for Action in Schengen

⁴ About art contributions: Projects *Performing the border* and *Europlex* by Swiss artist Ursula Bieman, website Geobodies: <http://www.geobodies.org/art-and-videos/europlex>

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frontex#cite_note-11

⁶ More about *Frontexplode*: <http://w2eu.net/frontex/frontexplode/>

01.06.2014:	Border Crossing and Action Day in Schengen
12.06.2014:	March attacked by police in Luxemburg
12.06.2014:	Demand for the destruction of a colonial memorial in Arlon
16.06.2014:	March to Charleroi and bridge crossing in Dinant
23.06.2014:	Actions in Brussels
25.06.2014:	20 people arrested in German embassy
25.06.2014:	Invitation to press conference in the action camp
26.06.2014:	Demonstration against Summit of European Council

Demands of the March for Freedom 2014

How successful were the sans-papiers and activists of the March for Freedom in making the aims and demands of the March visible to a wider audience? Here an extract from the call for action published on their website *Freedom not Frontex*:

Let's March for our freedom! We are asylum seekers, refugees, undocumented migrants, migrants from many European countries, we are Europeans with a "migration background", we are all those who have no full privileges of citizenship, but also citizens who share a common anger against the racist EU migration policy.

The call for action concludes with a set of demands:

We have a dream:

- Freedom of movement and of residence for all asylum seekers
- Stop the Dublin trap and the obligatory residence in Lagers (holding camps) throughout Europe
- Permanent documents without criteria
- Stop the imprisonment and deportation of migrants
- Same working conditions for all
- Same political, social and cultural rights for all: right to study and to work
- Stop the European imperialist policies: no more free trade treaties and NATO wars
- Abolish Frontex, Eurosur and other anti-migration policies and measures.

Join us!⁷

⁷ Website of the March for Freedom:
<http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org/post/2014/02/03/lets-march-for-our-freedom-may-june-2014/>

These demands are clearly stated, leaving no doubt what the activists were fighting against (EU anti-migration policies); and what they were fighting for (political, social and cultural rights for everybody). But I do not like terms like "racist" or "imperialist" repeatedly used as a kind of mantra for revolutionary change, without putting them in context. Militant rhetoric maybe helpful to stimulate group identity but it conceals the fact that many sans papiers/undocumented migrants may not share the specific worldview of some of their supporters, but may cherish values rooted in other conceptions of the world and politics. Another element of rhetoric used in the same call for action can be traced in the phrase "We have a dream". It refers back to the famous 1963 speech of Martin Luther King, which laid the ground for the modern civil rights movement in the United States. This kind of rhetoric appeals to a much larger community of people interested in the protection of human rights. And it is this larger community, which, in my opinion, has to be won over to show their solidarity with the sans-papiers in Europe today. Since the tragic shipwreck of 2013 when a boat carrying migrants from Libya, Eritrea, Somalia and Ghana sank off the Italian island of Lampedusa with 366 deaths⁸, the number of people in Europe becoming more critical of European asylum and migration policies has grown considerably. And it is indeed true that critical debate about the European border regime is much stronger now than at the beginning of the sans-papiers movement in Europe more than twenty years ago.

Human rights: A vision for deepening democracy

The demands of the March for Freedom focused on issues of human rights: freedom of movement and of residence for all sans-papiers. This call for basic human rights played an important role in the mobilisation of the March for Freedom. Each message of solidarity began or ended with the call for freedom of movement. But does this rallying cry for freedom reach all potential allies for a democratic Europe? Probably not, because it sounds too utopian to many ears, not appropriate for winning European elections. But this argument misses a point. The slogan 'Freedom for Movement' is primarily aimed at sans-papiers themselves and their supporters: it is a campaign slogan to unite, to make their voice heard in the struggles to come. And it is a warning to all politicians, from left to right: don't shove us around; we want to be equal partners at the negotiating table when it comes to decisions about our future in Europe. It can be assumed that all groups involved in the March for Freedom 2014 shared these basic values of inclusion and participation. In this respect they are also one with other social movements in Europe: the squatters, the unemployed, and the working poor.

⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/22/lampedusa-boat-tragedy-migrants-africa>

Who is in and who is out?

The fact that sans-papiers have no say whatsoever about border regimes and migration policies constitutes a severe lack of democratic legitimacy in European countries. Asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants are denied political rights and are being criminalised. People crossing borders without papers are called "illegal", "illegal immigrants". From a democratic point of view it can be argued that the state has the right to determine its borders, that citizens of a democratic state have the right to determine who comes in and out of its territory because of the right of self-determination. That assumption needs to be questioned because it is fundamental to the idea of democracy that all who are subject to political power must have a democratic say. In the case of borders between countries the state exercises its political powers over both insiders and outsiders. If the principle of democratic legitimacy is applied to border control, then the straightforward conclusion is that all people subjected to border regimes, including the foreigners, should have a democratic say over it. This dream of including marginalised groups in society is far away from what can be achieved in the short run, but it provides democratic societies with a vision and a direction for deepening the process of participatory social change.

Forms of action

Surprise visits

On 17 May the March for Freedom started in Strasbourg. The marchers crossed the border between France and Germany to arrive for a two-day stay in Saarbrücken. The marchers set up a protest camp, expressed their demands with a demonstration and a street theatre performance. A first highlight of the March for Freedom was the visit of a "lager for refugees"⁹ in the German town Lebach. This visit is well documented in a video¹⁰ where activists can be seen talking to residents of the lager about their living conditions. They show solidarity with the residents, dancing with them on the street and celebrating their common fight for human rights. The video looks at the refugees not from an outside journalistic point of view but through the eyes of the activists exploring issues of human rights through their visit to the lager.

⁹ Sans-papiers and their supporters often use the term *lager* to refer back to the Second World War, when Jews, Sinti and Roma, homosexuals and opponents to the Nazi regime were imprisoned and killed in *Konzentrationslagern* (concentration camps or holding camps). The official terms in the German-speaking countries for refugee housing are *Asylunterkunft*, *Asylbewerberheim*, or *Flüchtlingsunterkunft*.

¹⁰

<http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org/post/2014/05/29/March-for-freedom-visits-lager-lebach>



The March for Freedom visits a lager in Lebach, Germany





One room for a family. One toilet for 1 to 4 families. No shower in the apartment.

On day 13, the march reached the town of Schengen by crossing the border from Germany to Luxembourg. Schengen is the city in Europe where the so-called *Schengen Agreement* was signed in 1985. Out of it developed the *Schengen Area* consisting of 26 European countries. The Schengen Area has no internal borders and operates with external border controls for travellers and immigrants entering the area. The marchers demonstrated for the freedom of movement for everyone and exposed anti-migration policies in Europe. Before crossing the bridge over the river Mosel, a press conference took place to explain the reasons behind the protest march. A group of activists crossed the river by boat to make the danger visible for refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea to reach the coasts of Europe. Just before reaching the other side of the river, activists jumped out of the boat and symbolically swam to their rescue. There, demonstrators had already decorated a sculpture commemorating the Schengen Agreement with barbed wire and the photos of dead or missing sans-papiers. Its aim was to expose the European border regime responsible for the deaths of thousands of migrants. The demonstration continued to the Schengen museum, where an exhibition told the story of Frontex. Tunisian activists displayed pictures and listed the names of missing persons and of people who had died in the Mediterranean Sea. Another group of activists climbed to the roof of the museum to hang up a banner that read 'Frontex, where are our children?' Another banner read 'Frontex kills!' Activists described the dramatic situation for refugees in Greece. The afternoon of action ended with food and a cultural event. Videos and photos of events such as border crossings and the action day in Schengen were also meant to serve as an invitation to the followers of the march on the Internet to join and support its activities.



Border crossing in Schengen

A few days later, another intervention shed light on how discrimination against migrants and sans-papiers, especially coming from the South, can be traced back to colonial times. When the marchers passed through the Belgium town of Arlon, they were surprised and enraged to encounter a memorial honouring King Leopold II, who was responsible for the exploitation of the Congo and the killing of thousands of people¹¹. He is remembered there as the Hitler of Africa. The demonstrators spontaneously wrote a letter of protest to the mayor of town announcing that they would destroy the memorial if he would not do it himself. Here an excerpt of the letter to the mayor:

And this [memorial to Leopold II] is especially dishonourable because people of African origin live close by the monument. To what horrors are they exposed every

¹¹ Leopold II extracted a fortune from the Congo, initially by the collection of ivory, and after a rise in the price of rubber in the 1890s, by forcing the population to collect sap from rubber plants. Villages were required to meet quotas on rubber collections, and individuals' hands were cut off if they did not meet the requirements. His regime was responsible for the death of an estimated 2 to 15 million Congolese. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leopold_II_of_Belgium

day! As if you would put a statue of Hitler in front of a Synagogue! We come from all regions of the world. We had been colonised and still suffer from the consequences. Take Sudan as an example. The colonial regime created a border separating north from south. This causes violent conflicts up till now and forces us to flee the country.

And this is how the mayor replied to the letter: “But then should we destroy all symbols of Leopold II in Belgium? This is impossible!”¹²



Memorial of Leopold II hit by mud, slung by demonstrators

Violence

Nonviolent methods of action are a powerful weapon for social protest¹³. The March for Freedom based its tactics on civil, nonviolent resistance, on marching, peacefully crossing national borders, or visiting *lagers*, singing and shouting slogans to identify and unmask authorities for their inhuman migration policies. Slogans such as ‘We are here and we will fight - Freedom of Movement is everybody’s right!’ and ‘No border crossing is illegal!’ Fortunately the march was not attacked by bystanders or hostile groups. The only clash with authorities

¹² Website of the March for Freedom:
<http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org/post/2014/06/12/destruction-of-colonial-memorial-in-arlon>

¹³ About the use of strategic nonviolent action in conflict see Sharp 2005.

happened on 15 June in Luxembourg during a demonstration at a European Council meeting dealing with Schengen¹⁴. Police and security forces removed the demonstrators from the conference building. A video shot by a demonstrator and uploaded on the website¹⁵ shows demonstrators being carried or pushed away from the entrance of the building. In a press statement the organisers of the March for Freedom described the behaviour of the police as a brutal attack:

During their whole operation the police was not communicating with us in any way, even though most of the officers speak three languages (English, French and German). They ignored all our attempts to talk with them (...). Pepper spray attacks, beatings with batons, kicks and bites of the police dogs were the only answer we received. Then they started to arrest the people from the March, targeting mainly refugees. The protest March followed the arrested comrades to the police station escorted by dozens of police cars and police officers who on the way harassed over and over again those individuals from the March that were spreading flyers to the passing people. The March arrived at the front door of the police station and started a rally there. After several hours of protest our 13 comrades finally got released.¹⁶

On the Facebook page of the March for Freedom the "police attack" was hotly debated in French, Luxemburgish and English. Some commentators described the police intervention as harmless ("they just did their job"). Other commentators attacked the demonstrators for "complaining about heavy repression" whereas in their countries of origin they would be treated much worse. Again others questioned the relevance of the uploaded video because it did not show what happened before and after the scenes depicted. Other commentators took a stand for the demonstrators: "This was an abuse of power against them!"

A more detailed account of how it begun, can be found in a diary entry (in German) on the website of the March for Freedom:

On a small path we (demonstrators) walked towards the big glass building. Two policemen in white shirts with weapons, batons and teargas at their belts positioned themselves immediately in front of us. Because of how they moved we realised that they thought we would stop at once and turn back. But it turned out differently. We passed between the two policemen and headed towards the building. We started to run. We entered the building through the first open door. Inside escalators were leading downwards. We all went down there, not knowing

¹⁴ The Justice and Home Affairs Council of the EU was discussing among other issues the implementation of operational actions within the context of the Task Force Mediterranean and a report from the Commission on the functioning of the Schengen area. See 'meetings': <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/homepage?lang=en>, meeting calendar 5 and 6 June 2014

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=644924665594373>

¹⁶ Website of the March for Freedom:

<http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org/post/2014/06/06/luxembourg-the-5th-of-june-2014>

where this would lead us. We didn't know where the conference room of the members of the European parliament was. We asked a woman from Luxembourg, who supported us, where to go. She said that the meeting was upstairs. We all went up. The doors to the conference were closed. We wrote Anti-Frontex slogans on the windows. (...) After shouting our slogans in front of the closed doors, the police began to push us to the outside. We held on tightly to each other, so the police could not separate us. A policeman brought in a dog. The policeman pointed with his finger towards a person the dog was supposed to bite. The dog went off to this person. This fight went on for a while. The police made use of teargas, hit us, and the dog charged at us. Of course we defended ourselves. During the skirmish a policeman fell in front of our feet. His eyes were wide open. He probably thought that he would get lynched now. We stumbled and fell on each other. We lost our shoes and photo cameras. The police didn't manage to get their revenge. But they dragged us down the stairs and kicked us out of the building. Our eyes and lungs were burning from the teargas. Our friends from medical aid gave us water and eye drops. (...) Later the police attacked us once again without warning. They pointed to several persons, one after another, pushed them on the ground, and handcuffed them. First they arrested 11 people, then another four friends who had joined us by car, altogether 15 arrests. We notified our lawyers to get our friends released from their arrest.¹⁷



Clash with police in Luxembourg. Photo by Carole Reckinger (UK)

¹⁷ Website of the March for Freedom, daily reports:
<http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org/daily-reports-journaux>

The challenge

The March for Freedom culminated in Brussels with a week of action from 20 to 28 June. It was an astonishing event. More than 500 people lived and worked together in an improvised camp with tents, kitchens, toilets, medical help, and a media centre, discussed and prepared protest action while at a summit of EU heads of state the latest decisions on migration policies were taken. The fact that the marchers made their long way to Brussels and managed to set up their protest camp was a success by itself. Feelings of victory and self-esteem found expression in celebrations of solidarity and hope, in the camp and during the demonstrations in the streets of Brussels. Brussels was a highly symbolic city to stage the week of action. Ranking between third and fifth in Europe (measured in Gross Regional Product), Brussels is one of the richest regions in the world. As a small world city it highlights the problems between rich and poor people in multicultural European societies: 15% of its population live below the poverty line¹⁸. It is a fragmented and segregated city. More than 50% of the population has roots or strong connections outside of Belgium. There are many political refugees and sans-papiers living in Brussels. This has led to a growing cultural diversity - a globalisation from below. Rich immigrants are to be found in the southeastern part of Brussels and in the suburbs. Poor immigrants live in the central part of the city, in the working-class neighbourhoods. The camp of the March for Freedom was located near Schaerbeek, a typical neighbourhood in Brussels with poor migrants.

The week of action included demonstrations at the German, Italian und Dutch embassies against Frontex. The most spectacular action took place on 26 June in front of a European Union building¹⁹. In a press release the March for Freedom summed up its position as follows:

We began marching by foot 500 km from Strasbourg to Brussels by crossing the border from Germany to France. At every stage of our March, we carried out political actions: In Schengen, we rewrote the Schengen Agreement, in Luxemburg we demanded to take part in the Summit of the Ministers of the Interior of the member states of the EU, in Arlon and again in Brussels, we denounced the colonial memorial honouring King Leopold II of Belgium. (...) Here, in Brussels, we will demand that the European Council [at its meeting] from 26 and 27 June 2014, sets a new agenda for migration with the collaboration of us refugees, sans-papiers and migrants²⁰.

¹⁸ The International Network of Urban Research and Action (INURA), a transnational NGO, monitors and compares the development of cities worldwide. How INURA portrays Brussels as a small world city:

http://www.inura.org/v2/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/INURA11_Brussels.pdf

¹⁹ It was the building of the European Union External Action Service (EEAS).

²⁰ Website of the March for Freedom:

<http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org/post/2014/06/25/invitation-to-press-conference-26062014-1300-action-camp-boulevard-simon-bolivar-opposite-immigration-office-brussels>

A symbolic act of confrontation

This is what I saw through my camera lens filming the event: the entrance to the EU building was fenced off with barbed wire. That prompted one of the speakers to comment: "Okay, this barbed wire stops us now from getting into the building, but not from voicing our protest." The tension between police officers in front of the building and a big crowd of angry demonstrators expressing their frustration with the European Union did not explode into violence. Some demonstrators, marked as security personnel, calmed down the situation by shouting: "It's not the police, it's the EU we are fighting!" Many speakers crowded around the open microphone to explain the reasons behind their protest. One speaker summed up the position of the March for freedom with a passionate accusation:

Today this is the policy of the European Union, according to its bilateral contracts: the freedom of hundreds and thousands of young people is constricted, be they from Africa, from Syria, from Palestine, Libya, Tunisia – from anywhere in Africa: Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Mali, just to name a few examples. It is the consequence of this criminal policy called regulation 'Dublin II'. How frightened you must be! We are unarmed. Our weapons are our voice and our will power. And even if you place armed forces at the border of the Mediterranean Sea, you will not be able to stop the free movement of people. At the same time weapons are sold to Syria, weapons are sold to Mali in the desert, weapons are sold to Algeria, weapons are sold to Palestine, weapons are sold to anybody and anywhere. And if you sell weapons, you organise war. And if you sell weapons, you kill people. And if you sell weapons, you have people dying in the Mediterranean Sea. This is not a misfortune. This is a crime committed by the European Union. This is a crime committed through the bilateral contracts. This is a crime committed by the International Monetary Fund. This is a crime committed by The World Bank. And this is also a crime committed by organisations which continue to exploit resources worldwide. That's why we are here: to demand the global regularisation of all sans-papiers and migrants!²¹

²¹ Video: <https://vimeo.com/99355697>



We demand the global regularisation of all sans-papiers and migrants.

Media strategies

Need for documentation

I thought it important to document the March for Freedom 2014 and write up this case study because it shows how sans-papiers can take a stand against oppression even with little resources and without powerful allies in the political arena. Let me first have a look at the web platform of the March for Freedom 2014. The number of activities during the march and the action week in Brussels looks impressive. Altogether 139 messages were posted (Table below). They fall into different categories: testimonials of sans-papiers, solidarity messages from and to other movements in Europe and Mexico/USA, calls for mobilisation and support, and self-generated media output such as posters, flyers, photos and videos documenting the March. I also found posts on the preparations for the march in Berlin, about spectacular actions and interventions during the march and posts on violent clashes with authorities in Luxembourg. The website also contains a list of media coverage, diary notes and links to groups and organisations of a loose solidarity network. Altogether the website of the March for Freedom constitutes a rich source of information to learn more about grassroots organising of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in Europe.

Categories of 139 posts on the web platform of the March for Freedom					
Preparations / beginning	3	Aims / demands	9	Background information	5
Resources and funding	2	Mobilisation	15	Own media output	11
Media coverage	1	The march and activists	14	Actions and events	9
Solidarity with other movements	29	Solidarity from other movements	6	Violence	3
Testimonials	37	Analysis	4		

Categories of posts on website

Mobilisation: Video and photography for self-representation

How did the March for Freedom mobilise for its campaign in 2014? Napuli Langa, a 25-year-old Sudanese asylum seeker living in Berlin said in a short motivational video message:

We have to stand up and say: Enough is enough! It's the time for realising the problem: That the Europeans have their hands on those countries [in Africa]. So it is very important to march to Brussels. Every one of us: whether you are an individual or a group. You have to make use of your ability, this time: whether financially, or whether you are an artist. We need all abilities that we have...whether you are tall, short, black or white: we are one! And this is the beauty we have! Catch up with me and let's march to Brussels²².

²² Motivational video message from Napuli Langa, Sudan:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCmsABvfsuk>



Napuli Langa



Omar

Videos and photographs played an important role in the mobilisation for the March for Freedom. Napuli Langa's call for participation is a good example for how the March for Freedom appealed to its audience with conviction. Refugees with their stories placed themselves centre stage. They were the anchorpersons for the web audience to identify with the aims of the march not on an abstract but more personal level. These refugees know what they are talking about. Their statements reflect the multifaceted realities of the lives of refugees and undocumented migrants better than statistics and official documents on migration policies can do. The website of the March for Freedom contains a large number of such statements; one could call them *presentations of oneself*.

Motivational statement by Omar, June 16, 2014:

European citizens have to remember that refugees are no danger to Europe, and migration is not a crime. They need to be granted a chance to contribute to the society where they live. I hope you can support laws that give equal human and civil rights for refugees, and bring social equality by sharing the same human rights, that European people are enjoying right now, with immigrants and refugees²³.

First-hand accounts

In a video on the website of the Dutch branch of the March for Freedom²⁴, refugees and asylum seekers anonymously talk about their experiences. Here some excerpts of what they have to say:

²³ Excerpt from <http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org/post/2014/06/15/statement-omar>

²⁴ Excerpts from video *Voices For Freedom* were shown on the Dutch website Freedom not Frontex: <http://freedomnotfrontex.nl>, which is not online anymore.

Voice 1:

I can't call it horrible, but it feels horrible in my mind. It's like... I see bombs in my home or some bullets in my street. And as a human being I run away just to survive. And someone will block and ignore me, to cross the border. And he will tell me: Go back to your country! But how can I go back to my country if I will die there?

Voice 2:

I say racism is a wind that blows nobody any good. Maybe you try to seek asylum? It's not really easy the way you are treated.

Voice 3:

I was one of the Syrian refugees in Egypt. In 2012 Syrian refugees were very welcome there. Then the president was ousted and the Syrians weren't welcome any more. I believe it is the same in any other country. Refugees are always used as a tool in politics.

Voice 4:

The more lucky places in this world have the right to love their lifestyle and the way they live. But at the same time they should help other people, because we are all human beings. And this is more than enough reason to help each other.

Voice 5:

In all countries of the European Union we can apply for asylum. But we do not receive anything. They give you nothing. And if you are transferred to a remote province you still must pay the bus ticket to get there. Even for the ones with papers it is difficult to renew them. And the jobs are bad. They make people work for 20 hours, for ten hours. It's really hard here. So I ask the state to review its laws, to develop new laws regarding migrants or refugees.

Voice 6:

I am not sure if it's disturbing or funny, how one barbed wire and a few kilometres from each side of it can make such a difference; like between hell and just another peaceful and quiet day. And when you manage to cross this border you still have all the papers to do. You only have an identity if you have papers; then you are a human being, with rights and with possibilities to do this or that. It's very disturbing to be without papers. But to be able to meet new people [during this March], who are interested in these problems and are aware of them, that really gives me hope, and power to say: Okay, I still don't have papers, but, hey, I am not alone. I still have people who recognise me as a person. And that is really a good thing. No Borders. No Nations. Just people!

Call for support

The website was used as a platform for the activists of the March for Freedom to call for material and financial support. From an outside position it was not possible to see whether the calls for support were successful or not. But it is interesting to see from the list below what materials are needed to organise an extraordinary event like the March for Freedom:

sleeping bags / sleeping pads / tents, buses / transporters (trucks) / trailers, mobile phones / charging cables (additional), laptops, printers (good and quick), sim-cards for mobile phones, internet access, walkie-talkie, good generators, energy-saving lights, cables and distributors for high voltage currents, mobile sound system, megaphones, tables / benches, water pipes / water hoses / water pumps (also for 1000 litres), canvas covers / ropes, fire extinguishers, 2 big tents for kitchen and a plenary room, water canisters, bins / bowl for water, plastic bins, disinfection material / soap, clothes for rainy weather, shoes and pairs of socks, washing lines, patches for blisters / pain-killing tablets, creative material / colour for textiles / cloth, technical tools (cordless screwdriver / screws), scoops, spades, brushes, plumber's helper, cleaning material²⁵

As a follower of the March for Freedom on the web I was invited to give financial support. The March for Freedom made use of *betterplace.org*²⁶, a state-of-the-art platform for crowdfunding. 94 donors spent 2844 Euro for food, water and gas cookers. That was 85% of the sum needed. For the action week in Brussels an additional sum of 2480 Euro was needed to cover the costs for actions and infrastructure. But no donations came in. Was it because of a lack of communication, or because the activists did not find time to take care of their donation platform?

Outcomes of the March of Freedom 2014

Impact

How effective were the actions and interventions during the march from Strasbourg to Brussels? Local people on the way took notice of the demands and of the fact that migrants and sans-papiers were taking to the streets to demonstrate for their rights. The media coverage on the March was considerable²⁷. The national press reported on the March for Freedom as follows: in Belgium, 6 articles; Germany 8; Luxemburg 8; and Greece 1. There were 15 articles in the local and regional press in the countries that the march passed through. *Arte*, a transnational European television station, covered the event as well as a major German TV station. Radio stations reported as follows: transnationally 1 programme; nationally 3; and at regional and local level 4. There were 12 entries on blogs and online magazines. I counted 61 media items in total: 17 were short news articles and 33 in-depth accounts. Videos (13), and particularly photos (99), contributed to the coverage of the march. Not least

²⁵ Website of the March for Freedom:

<http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org/post/2014/04/28/materials-needed>

²⁶

https://www.betterplace.org/de/projects/18002?utm_campaign=ShortURLs&utm_medium=project_18002&utm_source=PlainShortURL

²⁷ Press reviews: <http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org/press>

because of the wide media coverage, the March for Freedom may well be remembered as an important step for the sans-papiers movements in Europe in attracting more attention for their demands. The march coincided with a sharp rise in the number of people dying in the Mediterranean²⁸. Because of these alarming facts and the strengthening of protest by sans-papiers, the European public may have become more aware of the connection between the European border regime and the rising death toll of people trying to come to Europe. In 2014 journalists and commentators in newspapers such as the *Guardian* and *Die Zeit* showed increasing dissatisfaction with European migration policies that did not solve problems but rather created them. Angry and frustrated refugees and undocumented migrants probably have received more media attention in 2014 than a few years earlier. I could well imagine that with refugees and undocumented migrants fighting for the dignity of their lives more desperately than ever, and with the multiplication of campaigns like the March for Freedom, it might be possible for the sans-papiers to strengthen their cause and win more allies.

Ambivalent media response

It is not surprising that the violent incidents during the March for Freedom received much media attention. Did this help the cause of the March for Freedom? In the newspapers of Luxembourg, the *Tageblatt*, the *Luxemburger Wort* and *RTL-Lëtzebuerg*²⁹, the incident was treated as shocking news: How was it possible for demonstrators to enter a EU building? Comments from readers showed little sympathy for "violent refugees". They said refugees should "be thankful for staying in Europe" and not cause any troubles; and that activists should stop blaming the "bad West" for the many boats of desperate people trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. They should protest "against the corrupt regimes of their countries"; "Please solve the problems at the roots", and so on. But there was also a positive aspect about the media reporting in Luxembourg. Activists got an opportunity to explain their feelings behind their protest to a wider public. In a video interview with Amir, a spokesman for the demonstrators, published in the *Luxemburger Wort*, he said at the end furiously: "We are not considered to be human. We are the trash of capitalism!"

²⁸ Since 2000, 22,400 people have died trying to get to Europe. 2014 was by far the deadliest year since 2000. See IOM:
<http://www.iom.int/files/live/sites/iom/files/pbn/docs/Fatal-Journeys-Tracking-Lives-Lost-during-Migration-2014.pdf>

²⁹ *Tageblatt*:
<http://www.tageblatt.lu/nachrichten/story/Ausschreitungen-bei-Minister-Treffen-26455230>

Luxemburger Wort:
<http://www.wort.lu/de/lokales/freiheitsmarsch-wir-sind-der-abschaum-der-gesellschaft-53909a1ab9b39887080312f8>

RTL-Lëtzebuerg: <http://www.rtl.lu/letzebuerg/541817.html>

Backing accusations with facts and figures

It was a considerable achievement of the March for Freedom to remind the EU authorities in Brussels that since the year 2000 more than 23,000 people had lost their lives trying to enter the EU. These facts were updated continuously by a group of committed journalists with research data published in 'The Migrants Files'. According to this collective research project the number of dead and missing migrants in 2014 was 50% higher than official estimates indicate. Mortality rates between migration routes varied widely, from 2% in the Canaries to 6% near Malta and Lampedusa. EU member states constantly have been closing the routes with low mortality, pushing migrants towards the more dangerous ones³⁰. No EU member state or EU institution has sufficient data on migrants' deaths. It is these sad facts and figures about migrants coming to Europe, and many of them dying on their way, that backed up the accusations of the refugees and undocumented migrants voiced during their demonstration in front of the EU.

Solidarity from local to transnational struggles, and back

What role did the solidarity and support network play in the successful completion of the March for Freedom from Strasbourg to Brussels? The march was initiated by group of asylum seekers and their supporters in Germany who for two years had occupied *Oranienplatz*, a square in Berlin, as a sign of protest against German migration policy and for the right to stay of all sans-papiers. Activists from Berlin were joined on their way from Strasbourg to Brussels by other groups from Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, and Belgium. More solidarity actions took place in the UK, Switzerland, Sweden, Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco and Mexico. The solidarity messages travelled both ways, between the March for Freedom and movements elsewhere. In all 26 messages were posted on the website in solidarity with other groups and six messages from other groups in support of the March for Freedom. The exchange of messages was a simple but effective method for mutual information and encouragement. Here is an example: the Dignity March in the UK³¹ left Bristol on Thursday 29 May 2014 and marched to Cardiff, arriving on 2 June. On their way they sent a message of solidarity to the March for Freedom. The activists of the March for Freedom replied to the solidarity message of the activists in

³⁰ It is helpful indeed for journalists and researchers to continue their fact-finding mission. The journalists of *The Migrants Files* noted that data sources often lacked compatibility since each organisation structured them differently. This requires data cleaning and fact-checking. The data for The Migrants Files are based on previous work by *United for Intercultural Action* and Gabriele Del Grande's *Fortress Europe*, as well as on additional research.

The Migrants Files: <http://www.journalismfund.eu/migrants-files>

Gabriele Del Grande:

http://fortresseurope.blogspot.ch/2006/02/immigrants-dead-at-frontiers-of-europe_16.html

³¹ March for Dignity 2014: <http://asylumseekersinbristol.blogspot.ch> (Website is still available, but the detailed account of the March for Dignity 2014 is missing.)

Bristol:

We greet all refugees and supporters in the UK and in every place in Europe. Thank you a lot for your courage to fight this struggle and for your empowering words. To know that you are with us, gives us even more power. Also we support you with our whole heart and we send you from Luxembourg a lot of love and energy. Even if you are far away from us, we share the same heart, we fight the same struggle and we have the same goal: to revolutionise the European asylum and migration system. We are one! Together we are strong!³²



³² Website of the March for Freedom:
<http://freedomnotfrontex.noblogs.org/post/2014/06/04/dear-fighters-of-the-dignity-march-from-bristol-to-cardiff/>



Solidarity pictures from the Dignity March 'Bristol to Cardiff', UK

Forging links across borders

What impact did this solidarity network have on the March for Freedom? And how was it organised? Collective actions by, with or on behalf of refugees, migrants and sans-papiers can take place in different places and on different levels, be it NGOs directly lobbying institutions internationally, or grassroots movements active at local, regional and national levels. Groups and organisations of the network around the March for Freedom 2014 belong to this second type of collective action, with fewer resources than big NGOs. More astonishing for me was to realise how easily and efficiently the activists of the march managed to forge links to groups in different countries to raise their local/regional struggles to a more transnational level. From this case study I tend to conclude that transnational organising seems to become an everyday reality for locally and regionally active grassroots movements involved in human rights issues. Activists from grassroots movements such as the March for Freedom are well enough equipped to mobilise on a transnational level. They are now in a position to challenge power holders everywhere: in small provincial towns as well as in hotspots of power such as the German capital Berlin, or centres of European institutions such as Luxembourg or Brussels. Organising through web platforms and the use of audiovisual communication tools through social media make it possible to cross national borders more effectively than at the beginning of the sans-papiers movement in Europe some 20 years ago. Autonomous or grassroots social movements may thus become part of a new European public sphere of a multitude of social, cultural and political actors challenging fortress Europe against undocumented migration. I see this emerging Europe as a kind of public sphere based on social movements, political opposition from different civil society groups, intellectual debate and independent media. What all actors have in common is a genuine interest in the democratisation of Europe from below.

Conclusions

In this case study of the March for Freedom 2014 I have tried to show that a campaign by several groups of sans-papiers and their supporters from different countries can make itself heard even with little resources and without powerful allies in the political arena. The demands of the March for Freedom 2014 were clearly stated, leaving no doubt that the activists were fighting against inhuman EU migration policies and for the freedom of movement for everybody. The website of the March for Freedom constitutes a rich source of information to learn more about the grassroots organising of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in Europe. The language used by the activists to draw attention to their cause and to mobilise supporters ranges between militant anti-racist and anti-capitalist slogans and a more inclusive civil rights rhetoric addressing a larger community of sympathisers. Videos and photographs played an important role in the mobilisation for the March for Freedom 2014, with refugees and undocumented migrants serving as anchorpersons for the audience to identify with the march's goals. Their statements reflect the multifaceted realities of life for refugees and undocumented migrants better than statistics and official documents on migration policies can do. The website was used to call for material and financial support. Crowdfunding helped to raise money to cover minimal costs for food, water and material. The repertoire of action ranged from demonstrations, happenings, a surprise visit to a "lager" in a German town and a symbolic border crossing in the town of Schengen, to radical acts of symbolic decolonisation in a Belgium town.

The impact of these interventions and the final week of protest in Brussels can be guessed by the media coverage on the march. The considerable media coverage in local, regional and national media will make the March for Freedom 2014 one of the better remembered manifestations of the sans-papiers movement(s) in Europe in the last few years. A violent clash with the police in Luxembourg triggered even more response in newspapers, but with mostly negative comments from angry citizens about "violent refugees". Whether this was helpful for the cause of the March for Freedom 2014 is difficult to say. Overall it was a great achievement of the march to remind the EU authorities in Brussels that since the year 2000 more than 23,000 people had lost their lives trying to enter the EU. It also was astonishing to realise how easily and efficiently the activists of the march managed to forge links of solidarity with groups in different countries.

I conclude from this case study that transnational organising is becoming an everyday reality for locally and regionally active grassroots movements involved in human rights issues. They are now in a position to challenge power holders everywhere: in small provincial towns as well as in hotspots of power such as the German capital Berlin, or centres of European institutions such as Luxembourg or Brussels. Autonomous or grassroots social movements may thus become part of a new European public sphere of a multitude of social, cultural and political actors challenging the fortification of Europe. The fact that sans-papiers have no say whatsoever about border regimes and migration policies constitutes a severe

lack of democratic legitimacy in European countries. The dream of including marginalised groups in society may be far away from its realisation, but the March for Freedom 2014 has provided democratic societies with an exciting vision for deepening the process of participatory social change.

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