

# Finding the voice of a protest: negotiating authority among the multiplicity of voices in a pro-refugee demonstration

Salla-Maaria Laaksonen, [salla.laaksonen@helsinki.fi](mailto:salla.laaksonen@helsinki.fi)  
Erna Bodström, [erna.bodstrom@helsinki.fi](mailto:erna.bodstrom@helsinki.fi)  
Camilla Haavisto, [camilla.haavisto@helsinki.fi](mailto:camilla.haavisto@helsinki.fi)  
University of Helsinki, Finland

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## Abstract

*The idea of organizations as polyphonic sites where the voices of heterogeneous members are articulated to become the voice of their organization, has been widely addressed by scholars taking a discursive approach to organizations. In this study we investigate the multivocality of organizational decision-making and meaning-making in the context of a sit-in demonstration called the Right to Live. The seven-month long demonstration was held in Helsinki, Finland, as a response to government politics during the so-called European refugee crisis. The protest collective consisted of three groups with diverging ethnolinguistic backgrounds: Afghans, Iraqis and Finns. Using interviews, ethnographic field notes and public statements communicated by the protest, we examine the interplay between the different voices within the protest. We explore processes of building an organizational voice that were involved in the constitution of RTL as an organization: formulating demands and external statements, and communicating about the protests online. The negotiations by which the voicing processes were sustained highlight that the activists cherished the idea of multicultural polyphony, yet regarded it necessary to filter the multiplicity of voices into univocality in order to create a recognized entity and to communicate strategically and effectively. Our findings show how authority was established and negotiated in communication: in an organization in which no authority seemingly or allegedly exists, authority was revealed through the process of generating the voice of the organization and forming a textual representation of it. The more traditional forms of authority such as meritocracy becomes intertwined with communicative authority in the process of authoring the organization.*

## Introduction

The 2015–2016 European refugee crisis led to a surge of citizen activism across Europe. It had an impact on domestic politics, fueling xenophobic political movements, and giving birth to social movements that support refugees and oppose government politics. One such movement was the *Right to Live (RTL)*, a pro-refugee sit-in demonstration (cf. Brown et al., 2018) held in Finland in several central locations in the city of Helsinki from February to September 2017. The RTL protest is an example of prominently local but still global citizen activism. Such forms of activism are local in the sense that they often tap into national political situations and debates, but remain global in their form: frequent sit-in demonstrations or urban “protest camps” organized by refugees/migrants across the globe during the 21st century (cf. Brown et al., 2018). Some of these demonstrations have been short-lived, independent and narrow instances of “street politics”, while others have been part of more centrally organized and wider pro-migration or anti-deportation movements (cf. Brown et al., 2018). As Feigenbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy (2013) show, the phenomenon of

organizing protest camps is far from recent, but they have been an increasingly frequent organizational form of opposition over the past 50 years. As such, protest organizations are not just a passing tactic and should be investigated on their own terms. They can be a driving force in the organizing process and form a focal point in larger political movements (Feigenbaum et al., 2013, p. 2).

In Finland, however, the protest was the first of its kind in terms of its magnitude and visibility. In the beginning, it was intended to last only four days, and the organizers had no clear aims or statements, merely a general notion of unfair handling of asylum processes and deportations. Soon it became clear the demonstration was collecting crowds and raising interest. The activities started to consolidate, with an emerging need to organize and negotiate the purpose of the protest. Through this process of meetings and negotiations, the two main demands of the protest soon formed: the ceasing of deportations of applicants who had been denied asylum, and the re-handling of the negative asylum decisions made by the Finnish Immigration Service, Migri, due to problems observed in the process. In this chapter, we investigate organizational voicing and related forms of authority by following the process of formulating the demands as well as other official communication by RTL.

From the perspective of organization studies and organizational voice, RTL demonstrated organizational multivocality tied to a multicultural, political setting: the protest team was organized around three somewhat separate ethnolinguistic groups; Iraqis, Finns and Afghans, during a period of heated debate on migration and asylum. The idea of organizations as polyphonic sites in which the voices of their heterogeneous members are articulated has been widely addressed by scholars advocating a discursive approach to organizations (e.g., Hazen, 1993; Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Boje, 2001; Robichaud et al., 2004; Cooren & Sandler, 2014). Following the conceptualization of organizations as communicative constitutions (CCO; Putnam, Nicotera & McPhee, 2009; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen & Clark, 2011), we are interested in the presence of various voices in RTL and the ways in which they become translated to a single organizational voice. At the same time, we explore the ways in which authority is negotiated in the process of formulating the voice of a polyphonic organization, which holds interests, experiences and knowledge as well as beliefs and values from a variety of backgrounds (e.g., Hazen, 1993; Boje, 2001).

In our research context we use the term 'voicing' to refer to the process in which RTL aims to find and formulate a common, organizational voice to express its existence and demands to society—thus to talk as RTL instead of its individual members or sub-groups. As we show in this chapter, several internal meetings, as well as the help of an external communication officer working pro bono, were needed in order for the activists to agree upon the precise phrasings for their main demands (also Haavisto, 2020). These demands also reached the form of a concrete text, both virtually and in printed leaflets, thus becoming a stabilized

representation of the conversations that took place while they were crafted (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). As suggested by the CCO literature (e.g., Kuhn, 2009; Cooren et al., 2011), texts have agency in organizations, as they direct attention, orient interests, and discipline actors. Further, the process through which they are generated can be argued to be a process in which the organization is talked and written into existence, as its members position their interests to the collective in a process of *authoring the organization* (Taylor & Van Every, 2000) and generating a common voice (e.g., Vasquez et al., 2018; Langley & Lusiani, 2015 for strategy texts).

Using interviews, ethnographic field notes and textual data such as public statements and other external messages communicated by RTL, we examine the interplay between the different voices of the protest during its over seven-month-long life cycle, and investigate how they become to constitute a single organizational voice of RTL. More specifically, we ask how the organization was authored in and through the communicative process of forming the demonstration demands and external statements. How were the grassroots-level voices translated to form the voice of the multicultural and polyphonic protest organization?

Next, we first explain our theoretical starting points for studying social movement organizations as communicatively constituted organizations, in which authority is a communicative accomplishment that exists not only in talk but also in various forms of text. Next, we present our case and data in more detail before moving on to our analysis, which starts by discussing how existence of authority is denied in RTL, but still becomes visible through organizational practices. Then, we discuss two processes of voicing and authoring the RTL organization: the process of forming the protest demands, and the virtual voicing of the organization using social media. Our findings highlight how different forms of authority, viewed as a dynamic, communicational and relational property of organizational relationships (Benoit-Barné & Fox, 2017), are intertwined with the processes of voicing the multivocal organization.

### **Social Movement Organizations as discursive sites of polyphony**

The scholarship on new social movements has focused on the movements born after the mid 1960s, with postmaterialistic goals, and a focus on human rights issues or representation of marginalized groups (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). Such movements often pursue social goals instead of directly political ones, although the definition of “being political” has also changed over recent decades (Fenton, 2016). As organizations, new social movements are often single-issue based, local and relatively disorganized (Byrne, 1997). They are seen to foster forms of direct democracy, which includes an aim toward democratic forms of organizing (Polletta, 2002; Fenton, 2016). Such forms include ideas of distributed leadership and the practice of listening to all voices in the collective. Some

scholars highlight the social network nature of social movement organizations (SMOs): instead of hierarchies, they are based on mutual, organic connections among their members (e.g., Tilly, 1978; Diani, 1995; Krinsky & Crossley, 2014; Rao, Morrill & Zald, 2000). It can be assumed that an organization that emerges from such premises would retain and also show some aspects of organizational multivocality; the ideals of democracy and mutual connectedness contribute to the endeavor to retain visible heterogeneous voices that represent the diverse starting point of the organization.

The organizational scholarship that sees organizations as being communicatively constituted (CCO) sees organizations as essentially polyphonic entities, who emerge from the communicative interactions among their members, the organizational actors (e.g., Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Robichaud et al., 2004; Cooren, Brummans, & Charrieras, 2008). These organizational actors can be both human and non-human, such as technologies, documents or spaces (Cooren et al., 2011; Putnam et al., 2009). In particular, CCO theorizing emphasizes the interplay between the two modalities of communication, text and conversations, which together establish, sustain and dissolve the organization in recursive processes of articulation (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Cooren et al., 2011). Organizing as a communicative process involves constant translations between conversations and texts that describe, represent, and to some extent petrify those conversations (Taylor et al., 1996; Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Putnam et al., 2009; Taylor & Cooren, 1997). This means texts, or earlier conversations, can be used to incorporate other voices into the ongoing conversation, or to lend plausibility to the given utterance. For example, Benoit-Barné and Cooren (2009) show how principles and posted notes are mobilized to invoke authority in conversations, or Robichaud and colleagues (2004) describe how a mayor of the city summons other actors and previous conversations to constitute a collective voice of the city as he addresses citizens in a consultation meeting.

CCO scholars emphasize the constitutive power of communication; power is practiced through meaning production, as different issues are produced, framed, constructed and deconstructed (e.g., Cooren et al., 2011; Deetz & Mumby, 1990; Cooren, 2004). By emphasizing the role of communication in organizing, the CCO approach challenges the classical theoretical approaches to organizations that see communication merely as a means of transmitting information, inside an existing container known as the organization. By acknowledging the constitutive role of communication, CCO also helps us understand the constructivist, social side of the organization (Kuhn, 2008, p. 1230); communication is not only a means of transmitting information *within* an organization, but a fundamental force that calls organizations into existence. By emphasizing the complexity and processual nature of organizations, the CCO approach offers new theoretical tools for understanding the ways in which organizations come into being as precarious entities, and how different forms of

coordination and power are embedded in communication flows in organizational settings (Dobush & Schoeneborn, 2015). In this section, our focus lies on the meaning production and situated conversations that took place around the collective, multi-author process of producing a discursive representation of the RTL organization and its demands: a text that sought to describe the premises and mission of RTL.

### ***The communicative constitution of authority***

Studying authority and power in non-hierarchical organizations brings attention to the ways in which authority is performed and established in organizational action and communicative practices. It can be assumed that in a polyphonic organization, many competing voices exist, and that these voices are strategically used for authority (Cooren & Sandler, 2014). New social movement studies often emphasize the autonomy of these movements and the individuals within them, as well as the forms of new radical politics that they enable (Fenton, 2016). Fenton (2016), however, also suggests that these approaches fail to consider the broader relations of power and state politics. In a similar vein, the studies that emphasize the communicative constitution of organizations have been criticized for their lack of consideration for the manifestations of power in the process of organizing (e.g., Novak, 2016; Reed, 2010). Taylor and Van Every (2014) argue that while the notion of authority is concurrently present in organizational life, few studies explicitly focus on it. Following the premises of CCO, if organizations are considered to be entities constituted in communication, authority can also be studied as a communicative accomplishment (see Taylor & Van Every, 2014; Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009).

The discussion on authority connects with studies on leadership, but the concepts are not synonymous. Traditionally, authority refers to the power or right to give orders and make decisions, often possessed by leaders who occupy a position of power in the organizational system (Benoit-Barné & Fox, 2017). In social movement organization studies (SMOs), the classical notion posits that leaders are essential for SMOs (e.g., Michels, 1969), as they are the actors who make movements strive over time and accomplish action. However, some more recent works on digital activism highlight the diminishing importance of leadership in the new networked forms of social action (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Despite the fact that both of these contradictory perspectives still exist, a few authors (e.g., Sutherland et al., 2014; Barker et al., 2001) have claimed that both authority and leadership are underexamined areas in SMO studies. In particular, Sutherland and colleagues (2014) note that the theorizing of leadership in capitalist organizations is inadequate to understand the construction of leadership in horizontal, often anarchist SMOs. It has been suggested that the identification of authority in social movements calls for an investigation of the processes taking place, such as communication. As Krinsky and Crossley (2014, p. 2) remind us: “people designated as leaders in a community are not necessarily the real leaders; the

organizer has to find the real leaders by finding out who the people are to whom others talk and listen, and from whom others seek help and advice.” Thus, while an organization might seem leaderless, it is not necessary *leaderless* (Sutherland et al., 2014). Instead of direct control and command chains, leadership takes more subtle forms such as the management of meaning and a discursive definition of reality (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). The urge for democratic, flat organizations in SMOs might hence expose the movement to organic leadership structures. Fyke and Sayegh (2001), for example, suggest that if an organization aims to refuse leadership positions, it becomes exposed to the risk of re-creating informal hierarchies rooted in existing, social power relations.

Organizational communication studies have explored authority beyond formal authority positions as a process of communication. From this perspective, authority is the capacity to make decisions and create meanings, but also a performance in interaction or a dynamic, negotiated communicative process of coorientation (Benoit-Barné & Fox, 2017). In this study we follow the proposition of Taylor and Van Every (2014) and connect the question of authority to the communicative constitution or organization; we see authority as something that is negotiated through communication in the interrelations between the different agents in an organization. In their seminal book, Taylor and Van Every (2000) connect authority to the emerging thirdness of the organization: authority is established by speakers as they make the organization present in the discourse in order to act as its agents. For this to be possible, the organization must be collectively *authored*, assembled by people and mediated by text (Taylor & Van Every, 2014, p. 27-28). In line with this thinking, Benoit-Barné and Cooren (2009) talk about *presentification*, the practice of making various sources of authority present in organizational interaction. According to them, authority exists between entitlement (status, structure) and negotiation: locally and situationally accomplished authority is enacted as organizational members mobilize things and beings, such as ideas, other individuals or documents, texts, in micro-level interactions. Authority is hence strongly connected to things that are “not physically present, but influence the unfolding of the situation” (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009, p. 10; also Cooren & Sandler, 2014; Cooren, Brummans, & Charrieras, 2008). Most importantly, these things imbue authority when connected to the authored organizational “it”.

### ***Texts and authority***

In connection to authority and authoring, a particular focus in the CCO literature has been on texts, an important mediating object in the constitutive process (see Taylor & Van Every, 2000). As Timothy Kuhn (2008, p. 1323, emphasis in original) formulates: “In constitutive terms communication is defined as *a process in which contextualized actors use symbols and make interpretations to coordinate, and control both their own and others’ activity and knowledge, which are simultaneously mediated, and productive of, ‘texts’.*” Thus,

organizations exist through language use, but also in various manifestations of language in communicative events and interactions (Taylor & Van Every, 2000), according to Kuhn (2008) either as concrete texts, such as contracts, documents, and websites; or more abstract figurative texts, such as principles, values and tacit knowledge (Cooren, 2004).

Kuhn (2008, p. 1234) lists three central characteristics for concrete and figurative texts. First, they have relative permanence, meaning that the foundation on which the actors base their interpretations endures beyond the immediate time and setting of the conversations; text is seen as permanent and solid. Second, texts are not unitary or monolithic entities but rather networks of meaning built through intertextuality and symbols (Corman et al., 2002; Kuhn, 2008). In these networks, meanings can be activated by situational framing or by other texts. Third, the meanings attached to texts may be conflicting in practice because texts are reappropriated and recontextualized across practice sites. Nevertheless, texts perform various functions in organizations: they work as abstracted representations of the intentions or their creators, and later work as common objects that frame and coorientate conversations, direct attention and discipline actors (Kuhn, 2008, p. 1236; Fayard & Metiu, 2013; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Thus, on the one hand, texts are reliable and efficient devices that fix meanings, but on the other they are contingent, and open to several potential interpretations (Vasquez et al., 2016).

Further, Kuhn (2008) argues that certain types of texts exhibit more agency than others. In particular, he highlights the idea of an 'authoritative text' produced as a representation of the official organization (cf. Cooren et al., 2011). Kuhn (2008, p. 1236) writes "As cooriented conversations and texts become imbricated and validated by interactants, an abstract text is produced that represents the firm as a whole" and encourages "actors to subordinate personal interests to the collective good" (Kuhn, 2008, p. 1236). The resulting authoritative text is a conception of the organization, depicting and specifying its structure, activities and outcomes, legitimacy, and power relations in the firm's practice (Kuhn, 2008). An authoritative text functions as a reference point that represents, mediates, directs attention, disciplines, and links people and practices. In addition, it is a necessary component of coorientation within the organization and can therefore be a site of struggles over meaning, thus acting as a focal point for the constitution of authority.

With a focus on organizational voicing and authoring— the process through which RTL activists aimed to form a collective, organizational voice for RTL— this study aims to track the birth of such an authoritative text, both figuratively and concretely, by tracing how authority became embedded in the textual representations of the negotiated voice of the organization in the RTL demonstration.

## Data and method

Our empirical case is a social movement organization, the Right to Live, a pro-refugee sit-in demonstration (cf. Brown et al., 2018) organized in Finland between February and September 2017 to criticize the asylum processes and deportations of asylum seekers. A demonstration camp, occupied around the clock, was situated in the core of the city, first outside Kiasma, the Museum of Contemporary Art, then at the Helsinki Railway Square for the majority of the time (over four months), then again outside Kiasma, and finally on The Three Smiths' square, all very central and visible locations at the heart of the city. The demonstration team consisted of three somewhat separate ethnolinguistic groups; Afghans, Iraqis and Finns. This made RTL a multicultural and polyphonic organization formed by people with differing cultural backgrounds and multiple languages, English often being the sole common language, if any: although the shared language of the demonstration was English, not all team members could speak it. The Afghan group was composed of people fluent in the Dari language, the Iraqi group of people fluent in Arabic, and the Finnish group mainly of people fluent in Finnish. However, the groups were internally diverse and polyethnic. The Afghan group consisted of a variety of ethnicities, including Pashtun, Tajik and Hazara. The Iraqi group included ethnic Arabs and Kurds. The Finnish group also included some people not fluent in Finnish; settled immigrants in Finland.

Our data were collected during a participatory ethnography conducted as part of the demonstration. Access to the protest organization was possible because one of the authors had already been an active member of RTL since it began in February 2017. Having gained a trustworthy position within the organization, this author easily obtained research permission from the collective. The researcher's position as both activist and researcher (Couture, 2017), not activist researcher (Hale, 2001; Speed, 2006), made it possible to negotiate and re-negotiate ethical issues with the activists. This meant, in practice, being open and reflexive about one's own "ethical boundaries": about how to negotiate the changing roles between an academic and an activist (Couture, 2017), and keep academic and activist work clearly separate. While the activist position entails the aim of making a direct difference to society by working with the studied communities and engaging in public debates, the academic position follows critical scholarly traditions and aims for rigorous, transparent and data-driven work.

The dataset included in-depth interviews (N=18), field notes, photographs taken at the site (N=40), and external communication material produced by RTL. The ethnographic data were collected between May and July 2017. Field notes of 23 single-spaced pages were written onsite at the demonstration as well as during circa 60 hours of observation in the meetings related to the demonstration. The meetings were attended by and open to all the active members of the demonstration. The topics covered ranged from very practical issues such



as maintaining the demonstration to more strategic ones such as the future and scope of the activities. The photographs depicted everyday life and events at the demonstration, the demonstration site, and the participants.

Eighteen semi-structured interviews of the organizers and supporters of the RTL demonstration were conducted in May–August 2017. The interview questions covered the interviewees' own paths to becoming an active member of the demonstration, their own activities and tasks during the demonstration, their views on leadership and decision-making in the demonstration, and their experiences of and narratives about the communication practices of the demonstration. Six of the interviewed organizers were part of the Iraqi group, three of the Afghan group and five of the Finnish group. Five of the interviewees were supporters of the demonstration (a term used by the interviewees). The informants were selected on the basis of their roles in the demonstration, and the level of their activity observed during the ethnography. We wanted to interview informants who played key roles in the strategic and intellectual work as well as others who were on site but played a less prominent role in terms of brainstorming and decision-making. The interviews lasted from 20 minutes to 1 hour and were all transcribed verbatim. In the case of the Iraqi and Afghan protesters the interviews were conducted in English, but with Finnish protesters and supporters they were conducted in Finnish. The authors translated all the quotations from the Finnish language interviews into English.

Finally, social media material and press releases published by the RTL demonstration organization (published under the brand StopDeportations) were collected. This dataset included 78 blog posts and 2,857 tweets posted in May–Dec 2017. The longer time period was chosen for the communication material in order to track the activities of the organization after the demonstration ended. This dataset, however, was only used for reference purposes to chart out the timeline; no in-depth textual analyses were conducted using the data.

Our main research questions aimed to determine how the organization was authored in and through the communicative process of forming the demonstration demands and external statements. How were the grassroot-level voices translated into the voice of the multicultural and polyphonic protest organization? In this context, as an analytical definition, we identify voice in a two-fold way. Through voice individuals and collectives can have a *de facto* possibility to articulate meaningful demands in the organizational context, with an aim to influence processes such as routines, codes of conduct and communication practices. This can be done in print, through speech and/or by gestures, mediated or not, and it acquires active listening by several parties. At the same time, voice functions as a metaphor for the authored organization, assembled by the members through text and conversation (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). On this more publicly visible level, the voice of the organization matters

for how the organization is seen, related to and interacted with. These two identifications are intertwined, yet together relevant for the study of a polyphonic organization.

To answer these questions, we used the interview transcripts as our primary data, but also used field observations, field notes and the external communication material of the RTL as support data. The first author conducted an inductive analysis of the interview material using Atlas.TI. The first round of open, thematic coding yielded 37 codes describing the interview content. The next round of analysis focused on passages that concerned authority and forming the organization's voice. First, we concentrated on the passages with explicit discussions on decision-making and leadership in the demonstration, and the interviewees' stories about organizing and responsibilities (coded as *hierarchies*, *decision making*, and *participation*). Second, we analyzed the interviewees' stories and views on the process of formulating the official demands and their descriptions of the external communication practices of RTL (coded as *demands*, *external messages*, and *social media dissemination*). Such focus allowed us to explore how the activists described the practices through which RTL spoke as an organization, as well as the decisions and negotiations behind the communication outcomes. During the final round of analysis, we re-read these sections of the material and compared them to the realized practices visible in the field notes and RTL's public communication, and discussed our notions together and agreed on three central perspectives: first, the presence of hidden forms of authority related to cultural and practical issues in RTL; and second and third, their interplay with the two central voicing processes of the protest organization: formulating demands and communicating online about the protest.

## **Results**

### ***The hidden voice: The story of no leader***

Our investigation reveals an emerging protest organization that negotiates authority in a context in which those with authority persistently deny it. In their discourse and organizational routines, the interviewees fostered a concept of a leaderless organization (cf. Sutherland et al., 2014). When directly asked, the interviewees generally described the organization as democratic and flat. Our ethnographic notes confirmed this characteristic, as they did not record any discussions on a specific leader of the demonstration. Rather, the negotiations, in meetings for example, revolved around practical issues, such as the division of work, or who would make tea or wash the dishes. Within the organization, leaderlessness seems to have been taken for granted, already—perhaps wordlessly—agreed upon. Thus, the concept of a leader seems to be an issue brought in from the outside (in the form of the interviewer) rather than emerging from the inside. Some interviewees did mention the existence of a core team, and referred to certain leader figures, but at the same time stated

that no clearly demarcated groups exercised leadership. Almost all the interviewees denied the existence of leaders, but said that their group had *representatives* or *specific duties*:

*“There is not a leader, but there are representatives. - - because in demo there’s hundreds of people so, everybody cannot talk in the media, everybody cannot, (go in the) meetings so that is why there is need to be some, specific person to, represent. - - And we all are working togetherly”* [Afghani protester]

*“I think there is no leader in the demo. ‘Cause every person he, know his job, in the demo, and we cannot continue without him. - - So, we are just one family, trying to, fix this misery in Finland.”* [Iraqi protester]

Despite the overarching narrative of a leaderless demonstration, status positions emerged, as the practical role divisions still inadvertently created status and even leader roles. On the one hand, they reflected the existing hierarchies of the asylum seekers’ cultures and communities; on the other, specific skills, such as language skills and local knowhow, built status positions. Thus, authority became visible in connection to practices and spaces: in meeting practices and when greeting camp visitors, but also in the more mundane activities of fetching water or occupying the kitchen tent. In all the subgroups, hierarchies were formed organically through different levels of participation, which were constantly renegotiated in action:

*“...for me, it’s been to some extent unclear what the decision-making system actually is and who has influence over what. There is, on the one hand, a lovely anarchistic side where everybody’s voice is equal, or that’s what it looks like, but in the asylum seeker community, among the Afghan and Iraqi, there are some characters who have a lot of power by nature, those who the members of their group listen to and follow, and what they say carries more weight.”* [Finnish supporter]

The different authoritative roles also became visible during the participatory observation. For example, one of the members of the Iraqi community called an emergency meeting after being away for a week. The justification was that he needed to get back on top of things after being gone, and others complied with this—which indicates a significant status in the demonstration organization. The field notes from that meeting support the interpretation: he mainly led the discussion in the meeting and was also the one who mainly spoke for his own community, while the floor was shared more evenly between the members of the other two communities. This was not a question of language skills, since the Iraqi group had several other members with proficient English skills, but it shows he was generally a person of status in the demonstration and specifically within his own community. However, neither he himself nor anyone else aimed to give him a leader status. It seemed more a matter of necessity:

somebody had to call the meeting, raise the matters to be discussed and lead the discussion. In the meeting, other people were also allowed to bring new matters to the table.

Within the demonstration organization, however, there were differing views on protest ownership, which also was reflected in voicing practices. An overarching principle advocated particularly by the Finns was that the demonstration was organized and decisions were made by and for the asylum seekers, and that they should represent the face of the demonstration outside (see Haavisto, 2020). There was an aim, for example, to push the asylum seekers to talk to any journalists who visited the camp. This ideal can perhaps be traced back all the way to the *sans-papiers* movement, a series of protests organized and led by migrants, for migrants starting from France in 1990s (Freedman, 2008). However, what is interesting is that the emphasis on this issue seemed to come from the Finnish organizers more than from the Iraqis and Afghans: whereas the latter emphasized the equality and flatness of the organization, the former further focused on the active role of the Iraqis and Afghans. While these aspirations connect to authority, they are more related to practices of representation and public image of the protest.

However, a few interviewees mentioned that despite this principle, the Finns ended up acting as the main communicators on the ground, since they had a shared language with most visitors. The ethnographic notes indicate how this was visible in both daily interactions, for instance at the tea tent, and in more strategic communication, such as during negotiations with the city. Further, according to one of the interviewees, the Finns often led the talk in meetings and were also asked to do the same by other subgroups, who liked to follow the structured meeting style adopted from the somewhat institutionalized practices of progressive movements (cf. Polletta, 2002). At the same time, this setting, combined with cultural differences, seemed to generate tensions in the decision-making process, as some members regarded the advice given by the Finns as orders – which might also be related to personal communication styles. Thus, it seems that although the idea of a democratic, flat organization existed as an ideal, the organizers of the demonstration ended up taking different roles for practical reasons, whether it was washing the dishes or trying to maintain the bigger political picture of asylum seekers' situation in Finland. These roles then overlapped with status within the demonstration organization. Hence, authority was not necessarily embodied by a person; it was performed and acquired in interaction (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009; Taylor & Van Every, 2014), in connection with the epistemic authority positions of the Finns (Benoit-Barné & Fox, 2017). In addition, as we will discuss next, practical authority was also reflected in the process of voicing the organization.

### ***The negotiated voice of the RTL: formulating demands***

According to the Finns we interviewed, the protest was not very organized or goal-oriented at first, a matter over which they expressed frustration. Thus they initiated a process to formulate clear demands for the demonstration and to find a shared voice. The demands were prepared in a series of meetings, accompanied by heated Facebook discussions, and a workshop held by an NGO worker. There were first four, then two main demands, which were later followed by several sub-demands and releases targeted at specific organizations. The main objective was to start communicating externally as clearly as possible, and to disseminate the message. On another level, however, the activists and their allies aimed for politically realistic demands. The process of formulating the demands was connected to the questions of dissemination and effectiveness (*How to get the message out there?*), but as we will show, it is also related to the process of negotiating RTL's organizational identity (*What are we here for?*).

*“A few people from the Iraqi team and the Afghan team wrote [the statements], because they were allowed to form them themselves. So there were multiple items, in my mind, at the time when... [an NGO] held training for us where we went through the demands and then made a timeline of what would happen. What can happen, what is realistic, what can happen when, what needs a new government... [Finnish supporter]*

Natalie Fenton (2016) maintains that in social movement, participation itself is often seen as the main purpose and outcome of the political protest rather than the actual policy impact. This was clearly different in the case of RTL: the demands were formulated with a clear political purpose and concrete means to achieve the goals were planned. The interview data show that this was mostly a concern of the Finns, who considered the more general statements acknowledging the difficult situation of refugees too vague. Finally, the protesters agreed upon four main issues to object to: The random, unjustified negative decisions made by the immigration services; the compulsory return policy for refugees in Finland and the violent treatment during the process of deportation; the removal of asylum seekers—especially families—with negative decisions from the refugee centers and the cutting of their financial aid. While everybody eventually agreed with the demands, the interviews clearly show that the process by which they were formulated was not easy:

*“[It was not easy to come to these demands] because we had to talk about it for a very long time - - and, a few of the Afghan organisers - - we were talking about it (over a week), writing drafts after drafts after drafts after drafts and we came out with one, that we all had to agree on.” [Afghan protester]*

Formulating external messages forced the group to discuss their goals and, at the same time, revealed cultural tensions and communicative practices of authority. Again, the practical skills intervened with the process: the professional skills and merits of the Finns were involved in these negotiations and even mobilized as arguments. In the following statement, an Iraqi protester explains how the Finns invoked their professionalism as an object of authority in a conversation while planning the demands:

*“R: Yeah. It was really hard and we got many troubles because of that. Some people from the Finnish they, said, we got some, problems between us inside. Because some of them they advised “No we should, put these demands. I know about this ‘cause that’s my professional thing.” - - But finally everything’s good and we have the demands.”* [Iraqi protester]

Indeed, the interview data demonstrates the vital role of the Finnish volunteers and organizers, particularly because of their knowledge of the Finnish political and administrative system, and also because the Iraqi and Afghan participants were distracted by the constant threat of deportation during the process. The refugees agreed that the formulation of the protest’s demands and the lobbying efforts would have been impossible without the help of Finnish volunteers. But in addition to their local knowhow, the Finns also brought in a discourse of efficacy, in regards to both realistic goals and the process of formulating the actual messages. A Finnish supporter explains how the group became increasingly smaller and how no longer everybody approved all the changes:

*“We organized meetings with the asylum seekers, meetings in which we tried to formulate them together, because that was the only possible starting point. But then what often happened was that it was difficult to move forward, and the groups got smaller, and then in the end the actual writing might have been done by the Finns only. The main content was there, but the contextualization and how things were presented was pretty much left to the supporters and activists, because of language skills and contextual understanding.”* [Finnish supporter]

Texts can indeed be sites of struggles over meaning, as the CCO literature reminds us (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Kuhn, 2008; Cooren, 2004): Not everybody in RTL agreed with or settled for the demands. A set of additional claims were made by the Afghan community, who did not get all they wanted to say into the final version. To preserve multivocality, they formulated their own demands that were then published via the official virtual channels. The original demands were, although practical, quite generic because they aimed to represent all asylum seekers in Finland—not only those from Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore, although partially overlapping with the general demands, the additional demands of the Afghans aimed to address the specific situation in Afghanistan, and that of Afghan asylum seekers.

The process of formulating the demands was the first tangible organizational task in which the members engaged. Despite the problematic process and the lack of consensus in the writing phase, the interviewees regarded the demand statements as the textual reference point for the whole protest. The claims became a stabilized text, the principles of the demonstration that made the organization present by acting on its behalf. Because they were formulated through a seemingly democratic process, they began to embody the “family” of the demonstration and hence carry polyphonic authority. By this we mean that through their cooriented formulation, the demands were, somewhat paradoxically, considered to represent all voices, even though it was acknowledged that all voices were not always present or equal in the process:

*“- no I haven't heard anyone being particularly against them, so they are clear in that sense, that they have risen from joint consciousness and from all the conversations and the main problems.” [Finnish supporter]*

Thus, as the form of the demands was formulated and accepted, the original disagreements, long meetings and negotiations were forgotten and replaced by a shared satisfaction over the communally produced voice of the organization. Thus, the demands were not only stabilized but also a *stabilizing* element for the protest. The demand statements and the tangible flyers on which they were printed became objects that made the organization present: the written claims and statements began to act as textual agents performing on behalf of the organization, both within and outside it. They became a text through which bystanders could be approached, a text by which the politicians could be contacted, and a text that made the organization present not only in the public sphere but also as an entity for the protesters themselves. Hence, it was a tangible text that built agency for the protest, and, following the theorizing of Timothy Kuhn (2008), an authoritative text that represented the organization as a whole and encouraged its members to work for the collective good.

### ***The public voice: Virtual communication practices***

Once the demands were formulated, they also boosted the external communications of the demonstration, particularly on social media. Official organizational channels were founded for strategic external communication and for virtual lobbying. Both official Facebook and Twitter accounts were used for communicating to Finnish citizens, raising awareness about the refugee situation and reaching virality (see Figure 1). Direct communication and tagging were used to influence Finnish decision-makers and authorities. To some extent the lobbying also used the activists' personal accounts, in the case of the Finnish supporters in particular. Both the refugees and the Finns expressed a feeling of responsibility to disseminate information about the demonstration:

*"I try to post information all the time and have conversations - - I think it's important to use social media to build the community, to share information, influence opinions, and also that the communication officers tell those who are not active that this is happening!" [Finnish supporter]*

As mentioned in the quotation above, a dedicated group of people started to work as communication officers due to their previous experience in media communications and copyediting texts. Their work included formulating the messages sent by the demonstration: social media posts, press releases and statements. In addition, they acted as contact persons for the media and sometimes other actors, such as the city of Helsinki. Our interview data also indicate that they tried to urge all members to communicate using their own channels.

To some extent, forms of virtual communication allowed all members of the demonstration to voice RTL: anybody with the necessary technical and language skills could post about the event and its demands using various channels and dedicated hashtags. However, in this kind of diverse organization, linguistic and communicative skills vary as greatly as the organizational members themselves, from multilingual to illiterate people. Some protesters, especially those from Afghanistan, were indeed multilingual, speaking, for example, Pashto and Dari, although not necessarily English. Therefore, the demonstration members used several unofficial channels, many of which were targeted toward a specific language or cultural group. For example, separate Facebook groups existed for the Arabic and Dari speakers. A Finnish-English support group was founded for local supporters, i.e. people who were not part of the most active core group of supporters but who wanted to offer practical support such as providing coal, food or clothing. All these groups were used to communicate about the progress of the demonstration and more generally about the refugee situation in Finland. Some channels not directly related to RTL were also used, such as the ones mentioned by an Afghani protester in the following:

*"We have some, - - social media by Facebook, and, by Twitter - - with the name of - - Demonstration of Refugee in Helsinki. And we explain about that, and we have some, other, A Voice of Refugees, we have that page, and, one is Home of Refugees - - And we have, active members (-) about our situation and, every day they, which news, which thing that happening in our home country, and they put it on that group."*  
[Afghani protester]





**Figure 1.** A tweet from the official account showing a visual message that points to the practices of the Immigration Authority, which was accused of working with refugee quotas: “On the flip board of Migri this would be me.”

To some extent, the virtual communication channels of the protest organization offered space for true polyphony: all members of the demonstration were allowed and encouraged to communicate in their own channels and groups—in the various languages represented in the demonstration. Nevertheless, professionalism and skills again generated authority and a position from which to speak for the organization, or concretely *in* the organization’s voice and profile as afforded by the social media tools. The following quotation from a protester shows how online communication was rather left to the “professionals”:

*“Yeah, I use Facebook, but sometimes when I have (shift night), at morning - - But it’s not all the time. There is, some guys they are, professional with these things.”*  
[Iraqi protester]

In this regard, the practicalities were intertwined with the voicing practices, as the people who organically started acting as communication officers also administered the RTL accounts. Particularly for the general public in Finland, the voice of the demonstration was heard through the official channels of RTL and through media coverage, mostly in Finnish, English or sometimes Swedish. This is a practice that was undoubtedly effective for the political goals, but also limited the scope of people able to participate in the voicing of the protests, and to some extent separated the official voice from the democratic idea of the grassroot-level voices of the organization (see Gerbaudo, 2017).

## Discussion and conclusion

Our data illuminate how the multicultural starting point of the RTL demonstration generated explicit discussions about authority and the voice of the organization: Who should talk on behalf of the demonstration? What is our main message? Who can decide it? While the activists cherished the idea of multicultural polyphony, it seems they regarded it essential to filter the multiplicity of voices into univocality in order to create a recognized entity and to communicate strategically and effectively. The Finnish supporters in particular advocated such practices. Our data highlights how authority became visible through practical tasks and skills as well as through the existing cultural hierarchies in the asylum seekers' communities, and further, how these forms of authority were reflected in the processes of voicing the organization. Most importantly, both processes of voicing we examined were markedly communicational processes, where skills from meeting practices, negotiation skills, copywriting and social media skills were essential. We suggest, that the mediated society and current communication-heavy forms of doing a protest (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2017) are lifting the importance of communication skills, which then become interwoven with questions of authority.

In line with the arguments presented in previous research on no-leader social movement organizations (Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Fyke & Sayegh, 2001; Sutherland et al., 2014), when leadership positions were refused, hierarchies and positions of authority formed roots in the existing power relations—in the case of RTL, in connection with both traditional/cultural power and practices/merits. The interview data and field notes both show how the practical roles taken up by the protesters inadvertently created status positions and even leader roles in the demonstration organization. Such roles were related, first, to the everyday tasks in the demonstration, but also to more professional tasks that required existing skills and knowledge. Practical authority also affected the processes of voicing the organization to bystanders and officials, in which language skills played a considerable role. Thus, authority in the protest organization was, to some extent, based on meritocracy. Second, the existing cultural hierarchies, particularly in the Iraqi and Afghan groups, led to some persons being regarded as “naturally” more powerful than others. In both cases, the emerging status positions or leadership roles were not decided upon or appointed by the protest organization; they became visible through practices and practicalities. Further, the Finns' ideas of conducting a protest “correctly” following the practices that were generally accepted in progressive social movement organizations (Polletta, 2002) were adopted by the RTL organization and helped increase the authority of the Finnish supporters—further accentuated because of their knowledge of the local administrative system and language. At the same time, they relentlessly maintained the idea of a demonstration that was owned and represented by the asylum seekers themselves (Haavisto, 2020).

As a part of the 'correct' ways of doing a protest, Finns also initiated the process to form the official demands for RTL, a process that highlighted the tensions between the actors and their voices inside the organization. In the light of our data, the negotiations emerged as a process in which authority was negotiated in communication and action (Taylor & Van Every, 2014; Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009). Essentially, it was a process of forming a text, but it also appeared as a negotiation about the organization and its purpose—of authoring the organization (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). In an organization in which no authority seemingly or allegedly existed, the centripetal process of voicing carved out existing authority positions and hierarchies. They connected first, to the question of who were invited to the meetings where the demands are made—not all our interviewees were—and second, to the skills and the professionalism of the Finnish supporters in particular. Various forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1991) became embedded in the demands through the process: the social and cultural capital the Finns possessed through their knowhow and language skills and the symbolic capital the asylum seekers possessed, particularly certain traditionally prestigious figures in the community. Hence, the existing forms of authority—meritocracy, traditional—intertwined with communicative authority in the process of authoring the organization.

Another form of voicing RTL was using social media for communication and lobbying. Online, the cultural diversity and polyvocality of the organization was given more space, as the social media dissemination was allowed to be fragmented, multilingual and multivocal. Unofficial social media groups were founded to fit all purposes with names not directly connected to the RTL protest. From the perspective of voicing and authoring the organization, however, they were separate from the official channels supporting the voice of RTL, which were mostly administered by communication officers. Other groups remained as micro-stories that participated in the constitution of the organization (Taylor & Van Every, 2014), but they were not fully incorporated to the authored organizational voice, nor worked to stand for the organization like the demands did. This practice allows the organization to maintain its multivocality on one hand, but also to meet the requirements of effectively communicating a protest on the other.

Simultaneously the demands, produced in a democratic process of meetings and online conversations, became a stabilized textual representation of the organization, an authoritative text (cf. Kuhn, 2008), in which organizational goals were formulated and through which the organization was made present—regardless of the stories the interviewees told about a problematic process. This is indicative of the power and authority possessed by texts as discussed by Kuhn (2008): They are permanent and solid and carry the ability to direct attention and discipline actors. We argue, that the negotiations that led to the demands played an essential role in building authority for the demands—something that even the official social media messages were lacking. As an end result of the process, the

demands made the organization present by acting on its behalf in various, subsequent interactions; they made it possible for actors to speak on behalf of the organization (Taylor & Cooren, 1997). Hence, through the demands, the *organization* emerged from the collective; the state of entitative being was found (Nicotera, 2013; Robichaud et al., 2004). The demands perhaps did not perform the political claims they stated, but they did perform the organization into existence (Taylor & Cooren, 1997; Cooren et al., 2008); in this sense, they were not statements of fact, but acts of speech with consequences (Austin, 1962). It seems that in a multivocal organization, the ability of texts to incorporate polyphony and retain some of the contingency of meanings present in the process of their creation allow them to serve as coorientating devices in the organization. Despite the difficult process of their realization, they are considered to include all the voices of the organization, perhaps empowered by the aura of a democratic process.

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