

The Dilemmas of Solidarity of Civic Activists: Supporting Displaced Ukrainians in a Non-Solidarian Regime

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Abstract

Civic actors working with marginalized and disadvantaged groups in society face various dilemmas associated with defining and, if needed, ranking human needs and vulnerabilities. Our article examines the reasonings for intervention in civic solidarity operations that emerged in response to the arrivals of displaced Ukrainians in Hungary in 2022–2023. Solidarians have strived to find spaces of action in an authoritarian regime that normalizes policy rationales of deservingness and social hierarchy in contrast to equality and inclusion-based diversity. We engaged with those solidarity actors who showed some degree of reflexivity to the wider social, political, governance, and charity activism landscapes considering their position and operational ethos. The mixed research methods generated ethnographic and discursive data that allow us to offer a practice-centered interpretation of civic actors' reasoning. This article explores the dilemmas that civic actors face when judging and prioritizing needs, responsibilities, and resources in comparing and contrasting the conditions of their own society and the situation of people with migratory trajectories. We identified three perspectives through which civic solidarity actors articulated their normative and strategic dilemmas: the origin and nature of the needs of the displaced people, the refugee assistance responsibilities thereby assigned, and the broader social care system in the host society. We offer insights into how solidarity actors discernibly departed from pure humanitarianism and deployed concepts of horizontal interdependence, anti-discrimination, and layered human rights, applying their own vocabularies.

Keywords

civic solidarity; defiance to authoritarianism; deservingness; normative and strategic dilemmas; social inequalities; vulnerability

1. Introduction and Context

Reactions to migration and refugee policy challenges in European societies embrace various ideas in their design and justification of interventions, including deservingness, duty to care, and human rights. These frames link the notions of human needs, vulnerabilities, and solidarity responsibilities with philosophical, moral, and political arguments. Active citizens and organized civil society actors also engage in the production of these frames when they prepare and explain their solidarity actions at times of crisis or junctures in broader societal practices. These actors mobilize vernacular, professional, or mixed reasonings that react to and contest the regimes of truth that the political and policy realms promote. When civic actors prioritize solidarity interventions, they face the pressing dilemma of how to normatively assess needs on the one hand and the responsibilities and resources that they can mobilize and redistribute on the other (Bähre, 2022; Brković, 2023, 2024; Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021; Milan & Martini, 2024; Streinzer & Tošić, 2022).

It is critically discussed that European societies compassionately opened their doors to displaced people from Ukraine when the full-scale war against the country started in February 2022. This empathy extended to the citizens of a country whose cultural-historical proximity and geopolitical significance seemed starkly obvious in contrast to the plight of the Syrian asylum seekers in 2015–2016 (Cantat, 2022; Dražanová & Gonnot, 2023). Nonetheless, a few weeks after February 2022, the depth and scope of the solidarity and the distribution of assistance responsibilities provoked debate and struggle within the solidarity movements across Europe. The Hungarian government made welcoming political declarations concerning hosting refugees at the start of the hostilities. With some delay, it selectively mobilized state authorities and larger faith-based charity organizations to create logistical facilities for accommodating the refugees. Despite the government's openly pro-Russian foreign policy path and rhetoric, Hungarian society expressed significant support for the Ukrainian forced migrants (Zakariás et al., 2023), which remained relatively robust, even until early 2023 (GLOBSEC, 2023).

The post-February 2022 solidarity mobilizations aimed at supporting the displaced Ukrainians arose as a classical welcoming assistance but also a rapidly emerging migrant inclusion task. For a growing number of solidarians, stepping up at this migration juncture intensified various forms of activism they had experimented with and nurtured during the Covid-19 crisis and its aftermath or in other societal contexts. Our multi-year research endeavors have examined the intervention reasonings and practices in civic solidarity actions across three salient junctures of recent history: the 2015–2016 refugee arrivals to Europe, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the forced migration provoked by the fully-fledged war against Ukraine in 2022–2023. Our prime subject is the Hungarian solidarity scene required to navigate a dominantly authoritarian political and policy regime embedded in broader European political currents.

This article will center on the civic solidarity operations prompted by the arrival of the displaced Ukrainians in February 2022. It will explore the rationales that civic actors deployed to judge and prioritize needs, responsibilities, and resources vis-à-vis the conditions of their own society and of people of migratory trajectories. Most of the displaced Ukrainians did not view themselves as refugees despite the traumas of war, experiences of violence, or forced separation they endured. In this space, the nature, duration, and mutability of solidarity assistance have become the subjects of moral, political, and policy dilemmas. Some of these dilemmas are well known to any or most migrant solidarity spaces, whereas others are distinctive components of civic activism associated with a historically and politically specific configuration of actors,

paradigms, and power mechanisms. Our study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it helps reveal that the seemingly unconditional welcoming of the displaced Ukrainians in Central and Eastern Europe embodied pressing dilemmas and debates even among the most dedicated civic actors. Second, our study calls for identifying the principles of social equality reasoning in civic solidarity rationales that the literature still often overlooks or unmask as the humanitarian inclination to vulnerability. Third, our inquiry informs discussions concerning the conundrum of what counts as change, adjustment, or transformation in solidarity rationales.

This article kicks off with selective engagement with the literature and a portrayal of our research methodology. Then, we propose a conceptual framework to unpack the multitude of civic solidarity dilemmas and present our findings using three analytical dimensions. Finally, we summarize our conclusions and contributions to scholarship by highlighting the contingencies and tensions that civic solidarity work generates when it engages with authoritarian governance mechanisms while establishing and protecting inclusionary social spaces.

2. Conversations With the Literature

Renowned scholars of austerity and neoliberal crisis reactions in societies in Europe and beyond propose that contemporary non-governmental solidarity actions react to the precarities associated with neoliberal social and political structures (Muehlebach, 2012). Scholars of critical humanitarianism have shown that compassion is not unconditional, and discourses and policies of humanitarianism legitimate certain categories of sufferers who deserve aid and assistance (Malkki, 2015; Streinzer & Tošić, 2022; Ticktin, 2011). In cognizance of these caveats, other voices argue that many civic solidarians constitute their practices by contesting the non-symmetrical power relations of liberal humanitarianism, articulating political agendas, and striving for structural changes in society rather than fixing problems (Lahusen et al., 2021; Milan & Martini, 2024; Rakopoulos, 2016). Civic solidarity acts often substitute the infrastructures and services that society expects from the state. While their strategic entrenchment creates zones of temporal autonomy from state governance, they also negotiate the terms by which essential state services are to be provided (Trémon, 2022). Consequently, solidarians intervene in conditions of exclusion, domination, and discrimination in societies that they often challenge and interrupt (Fleischmann, 2020). Some civic solidarity actors (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2018; Feischmidt et al., 2019; Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020) advocate for the transformative ideals of social justice and engage with the epistemological and ethical dilemmas of the classical liberal and post-liberal political concepts of human rights, inclusion, and fairness in migration settings (Bauböck et al., 2022).

Three further streams in the literature appeared to be theoretically relevant to our current inquiry: one unveils the controversies of deservingness judgments in migration settings and a radically different rationale of relational care, the second examines the tensions of solidarity rationales that dwell on the present and future, and the third addresses the distribution of caring responsibilities, particularly in authoritarian political and policy contexts.

Regarding the first stream, welfare studies and migration research offer vital insights into how the notions of vulnerability and deservingness are discussed in clustering and managing people. The influential thesis of van Oorschot (2000) suggests that members of society (in developed welfare regimes) apply five specific criteria to assess who deserves welfare. Accordingly, groups are seen as more deserving if they are

considered not to be in control of their neediness, have a grateful attitude, are able to reciprocate, have an identity closer to “us,” and are in genuine need of support. Both supporters and critics of van Oorschot reveal that assemblages of the proposed deservingness components show major variation within and across polities, contexts, and situations (Carmel & Sojka, 2021; Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021), and judgments are relational, conditional, and mutable (Willen & Cook, 2022). The scholarship also has shown that degrees of deservingness contribute to creating hierarchies between and within groups of mobile people and stratifying their access to resources (Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021; Welfens, 2023). Dominant frames balance the requirements of the victim’s passivity and expected agency, a typical outcome of which is the lens of “promising victimhood” (Chauvin & Garcés-Masareñas, 2014). Contrasting and shifting deservingness conceptions construct complex boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that migrants must navigate.

A recently emerged direction in the literature, although one with important antecedents, uncovers that civic solidarians also contemplate their duties, motivations, and capacities from the perspective of caring relations. Thanks to critical humanitarianism, social movement studies, and feminist scholarship, duties of care that extend way beyond sympathy and moral righteousness are understood. Care is conceived as a social system in which state, communities, families, and profit actors all take part with differential motivations and responsibilities (Woodly et al., 2021). Further, in reflection of recent crisis reactions (post-2008 economic, refugee, Covid-19), the notion of care has become the subject of politically salient vernacular sense-making among citizens and civic actors. Ticktin (2024) describes how “new enactments of care have pushed a reevaluation of the concept” that goes beyond the temporality of crisis and reworks the traditionally hierarchical power dynamics of solidarity. Assisting others involves popularizing and strengthening horizontal and reciprocal relations among carers and the cared-for and facilitating the expansion of new ethical grammars of engagement. This horizontal and relational understanding of caring for others radically challenges forms of deservingness-based reasoning.

The second stream of scholarly thought we engage with examines the modalities of migration and refugee solidarity rationales regarding the depth and temporality of social and political changes they advocate for. Korteweg et al. (2023) investigate citizens’ refugee sponsorship in the framework of a state-sponsored resettlement program in Canada and reveal the formation of humanitarian reasoning and its adjustments. The observed settings allow citizens to enact actions that are neither humanitarian governance by the state nor “vernacular” against, or in the absence of, the state (Korteweg et al., 2023, p. 3962). As humanitarian aspirations evolve in time and respond to various moral and practical challenges, the main protagonists enter into a tacit “humanitarian bargain.” They initially act upon their convictions of solidarity with little or no expectations about the behavior of other actors, including fellow citizens, assisted refugees, and public bodies. But over time, they contemplate the attitude, contribution, and cooperation drives of other actors who are involved. The authors conclude that this citizen activism does produce reflexive civic conduct but remains within the remits of humanitarian reasoning even if the solidarians move from the reactive task of saving strangers to the proactive future-oriented task of making citizens (Korteweg et al., 2023, p. 3960). The scholars argue that the notion of a “humanitarian bargain” unveils both the impact of temporal and relational dynamics in enacting humanitarianism in a programmatic context.

Vandevoordt and Fleischmann (2021) examined solidarity mobilization in Belgium and Germany in the aftermath of the Syrian war and the 2015 refugee arrivals to Europe. Compared to the above-described programmatic settings, the subject of the inquiry here was a diverse civic space of multiply positioned actors.

The researchers found that civic actors faced the temporal dilemma of reacting to hostile political environments in the present and their grave humanitarian consequences while directing their endeavors towards creating an alternative future involving more structural social and political change. This entailed that the civic actors had been aware of this dilemma from the outset, constantly struggled with it, and made a major compromise: They prioritized migrants' immediate needs in the present but did not give up their vision of the migrants' structural inclusion. However, this temporarily put their efforts for a better future on hold. In sum, with some notable variations, grassroots initiatives in both Belgium and Germany developed strategies of (re-)appropriating and enhancing their scope of acting towards their desired future.

The third larger body of knowledge we rely on unveils that refugee solidarity actors, in their norm-setting discussions, reflect upon domestic social policy regimes and, by doing so, conceptualize responsibilities, institutional protocols, and fairness outcomes of care as a social system. Civic actors acknowledge, debate, and intervene in inequality relations as intermediaries between the domains of practice by informing and nudging public officials and institutions (Piccoli & Perna, 2024). Forms of "subversive humanitarianism" redefine specific categories of recipients based on vulnerability, contesting the understandings of deservingness and actively reacting to flaws in government policies (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019). This solidarity "from below" strives to overcome forms of exclusion across native and migrant members of society (Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020), enacts alternative spaces against humanitarian machines, expresses outrage at structural injustices, and advocates against xenophobic rationales and narratives (Ambrosini, 2022). Grassroots organizations often go beyond the humanitarian concerns motivated by discontent or outrage with unwelcoming policy regimes. Their active refugee-assisting work often "prefigures" a world in which freedom of movement, health rights, and equal opportunities are respected. Their normative ethos stands at odds with the border protection mechanisms that discriminate against people because of their passport or skin color (Milan & Martini, 2024).

A number of scholars are exploring civic-solidarity-related normative discussions in authoritarian governance regimes that promulgate narratives of social hierarchies and enact specific "moral common senses" (Streinzer & Tošić, 2022, p. 4). In Central and Eastern Europe, authoritarian versions of neoliberal governance paradigms have gained traction since the early 2010s, although unevenly across the region. Hungary stands out as a textbook example due to its tight control of public resources, diminishing of autonomous spaces, and management of social services by combining xenophobic, racializing, homophobic, and productivist narratives to separate groups in society, rendering redistributive decisions accordingly. In addition, deservingness-based social policy mechanisms intensify the outcomes of a globally entrenched political economy (Fodor, 2022; Scheiring & Szombati, 2020). The societal landscape is polarized by political loyalties, social networks, and dependency relations. The most pronounced divide, even if not always manifested in visible spatial segregation, is between the Roma and non-Roma groups of local societies (Feischmidt & Szombati, 2017).

Finally, our current research agenda interacts with an important conversation in the wider scholarship that cuts across the problems addressed above. Several scholars agree that "there is nothing inherently progressive to grassroots assistance as compared to state support or the formal aid sector" (Cantat, 2022). The former initiatives enact their own politics and ethics and often follow unexamined desires to do good and informally support unequal power relations. Others acknowledge civic experiences that enact longer histories of struggle that can "interrupt and reconfigure the dominant political order" (Nyers, 2024). These struggles are "refusals"

or resistance to power practices that exclude categories of people from claiming rights and access to the basic conditions of life (Nyers, 2024). We will reflect upon this debate in the literature in our conclusions.

3. The Analytical Lens and Research Methodology

For mapping the migrant and refugee civic solidarity scene, Ambrosini (2022) identifies four groups of actors: NGOs and other specialized third-sector organizations working with professional staff, civil society organizations embracing a mix of professional and volunteering personnel, social movements originally coming from a background of radical political engagement but also involved in hands-on assistance, and citizens, mostly locals, without an organized background or explicit political or religious engagements. The solidarians we examined belong to one of the last three groups according to this classification. In the context of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022–2023, these actors, while organizing and intensifying their relief efforts for the displaced people, positioned themselves within the web of solidarity assistance responsibilities in the respective domestic context and assessed the broader socio-political environment and the ways it shapes the conditions for pursuing a decent life for all. These solidarians used conceptualizations informed by their previous civic activist experiences, debates, and struggles among themselves and with various powerholders, and often contentious engagements with the wider public, which was far more interested and involved in refugee support than in 2015–2016.

We propose a triadic analytical scheme to explore the bundles of civic actors' solidarity dilemmas. The idea of these three pillars has evolved through our empirically and conceptually connected investigations into "crisis events" and the solidarity reactions to those since 2015, as well as other multifaceted inquiries that our larger research team has conducted on civic actions (CSO, movement, citizen) reacting to the social consequences of strengthening authoritarian governance in Hungary. We identified three perspectives concerning normative and strategic considerations through which civic actors articulated various priority dilemmas, decisions for action and inaction, and justified these decisions for themselves, for their constituencies and alliances, and for the wider social environment, thereby forming concepts about human needs, assessing caring responsibilities, and reckoning the inequality conditions of their own society. These perspectives were ingrained in practices, temporalities, and rationales of refugee solidarity work by no means unique compared to other refugee solidarity arenas yet specifically shaped in the given historical-political context:

1. Solidarians acknowledged the *variety of refugees' needs* that originated in forced migration, as well as pre-established and portable disadvantages that displaced people had, complicated by their paths in the host society's welcoming structures. We examine the relational, contentious, and mutable formations of vulnerability concepts that tailor various solidarity rationales, especially those that go beyond the traditional humanitarian drive of reducing suffering (Chauvin & Garcés-Masareñas, 2014; Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021).
2. Solidarians constantly assessed the fair and effective division of refugee *assistance responsibilities* and the adequacy of the broader care provisions in the host society. In so doing, they positioned themselves among different actors and adjusted their action frameworks. We highlight those dilemmas that civic actors articulated when sharpening their role in forced migration contexts intertwined with the broader system of social policy and governance (Ambrosini, 2022; Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020; Ticktin, 2024).

3. Solidarians reflected on the production and experiences of *social inequalities in the host society* that precede and undergird the formation of solidary agendas and practices concerning the displaced. Our interpretation captures experimental, resilient, and reconciliatory visions of civic operations in exclusionary and authoritarian regime contexts (Feischmidt & Szombati, 2017; Tošić & Streinzer, 2022; Zentai, 2019).

At the conjunctions of these three perspectives, solidarity actors connected their dilemmas and formed ethical, professional, and often politically salient positions from which they reflected upon their and other actors' practices. In exchange, immersing themselves in thick practices inspired the solidarians to tinker with and shift their initial dilemmas. As our discussion will reveal, the concepts of vulnerability, inequalities, and the conditions for human flourishing often resonated with dilemmas that the solidarians encountered in other fields or former crises. At the same time, the forced migration mobility path embodying distance from the homeland, involuntary separation from family members, and uncertainties of return or moving further away, twisted and sharpened the solidarians' conceptions of human needs.

We conducted 40 semi-structured interviews in total, including 28 with civic groups, civil society organizations, and (non-privileged) faith-based activists active in the capital city and rural municipalities. We also carried out ethnographic observations in two Budapest municipal districts and four rural regions. We explored bottom-up solidarity mobilizations and examined the rationale of these civic groups and how and whom to support. The inquiry that we pursued resembles what others consider a phenomenological approach (Piccoli & Perna, 2024): It involves seeking, collecting, and interpreting the experiences of conceptual and ethical dilemmas that civic actors face by "illuminating the meanings that they attach to specific values and principles, and relating these understandings to the lived experiences of the actors in the field" (Bauböck et al., 2022, p. 435). We captured sense-making formations by relating solidarians' words, reasonings, action priorities, and choices. Our empirical observations stretched over the year 2022 and partly 2023. This entails that we were able to capture solidarity practices in a period that embodied tumultuous humanitarian moments for a short period and then quickly embraced multiple temporalities of forced mobility and welcoming assistance. New groups of displaced Ukrainians arrived, and others started to move back and forth or settle in the host society of unknown duration. The tasks of "saving lives" and "shaping lives" overlapped and fused for solidarity missions (Korteweg et al., 2023).

4. Solidarity Dilemmas in Three Perspectives

4.1. Concepts of Refugee Vulnerabilities and Needs

Most solidarity actors shared two fundamental experiences, especially in the early weeks of the war against Ukraine in 2022. One, they identified everyone arriving from any locality of war-torn Ukraine, especially by train or walking through the border crossing, as a victim of war, creating an unambiguous call for action. Two, many solidarians also noted special properties and situations among the displaced people, such as ability, age, gender, health, and parenting responsibilities, which required differential attention to human needs. This attention occasionally remained close to common sense or humanitarian ideals: "We recalibrated our beneficiary register by zooming on those who are the most vulnerable and need long-term assistance, such as those caring for small children and disabled. We constantly adjusted our register and our priorities" (An experienced solidarity actor, Budapest). However, the categories of gender and age, regularly identified

in the literature as the grounds of undue differentiation by humanitarian hierarchizing (Welfens, 2023), called for another type of consideration by the activists. Most of the solidarians whom we talked to approached the situation of displaced women through their care duties for the elderly and children—that is, as active social agents whose duties were not suspended in the asylum situation. Further, first, it was not obvious yet did not take too long to acknowledge why Ukrainian women resisted being sheltered by single-man households. Horizontal discussions helped the solidarians obtain knowledge about gender-based violence in war and the heightened risks of human trafficking in times of displacement. Most solidarians in our sample came with some preliminary knowledge or acted with a propensity to quickly learn about the complex gender relations in asylum situations, whereas a few remained with their humanitarian compassion towards women and children.

Concepts of refugee needs were also shaped by solidarians' concerns with other types of social inequalities in contemporary liberal or post-liberal capitalist societies. For example, for a housing support organization, clustering refugee needs resonated with inequalities anchored in household income and social network capital that fundamentally tailors one's chances of obtaining decent housing. This housing support organization was one of many advocacy groups that deepened their accumulated knowledge of marginalizations and multiple discriminations in contemporary societies through the new asylum situation. Their lead activist explained:

We provide housing support for low-income people, and we expanded our understanding of intersecting forms of discrimination triggered before and during the Ukrainian refugee crisis. We acknowledged that people arrived who were specifically vulnerable in their home conditions.

Others, even without background knowledge, quickly grasped the nature of some portable vulnerabilities among the displaced, such as the small pensions of the elderly in Ukraine and unmet medical needs, all aggravated by the war and refugee journey. Thus, displacement needs were complicated by already existing *income and class inequalities* about which solidarians either acquired knowledge through their preceding activities or rapidly increased their insights during solidarity mobilizations through horizontal conversations with peer actors.

Assessing the asylum-specific needs in relation to the displaced people's past and present access to resources was complicated by citizenship differences among the displaced from Ukraine. Several people of Hungarian ethnic background possessed dual Ukrainian-Hungarian citizenship before the war of 2022 with various privileges associated with healthcare, property, labor, and political rights (as an electorate expanding provision of the ruling regime of Hungary). Due to this status, these people did not become eligible for temporary protection status and its benefits when crossing the border as displaced. This puzzled the solidarians as they faced people with immediate asylum needs but who were known to have obtained citizenship privileges and resources. The social networks and household reserves mobilized by those of dual citizenship solved most of this puzzle outside of temporary protection resources, except for the Transcarpathian Roma.

Most solidarity actors also acknowledged that the displaced people from Ukraine also differed according to their *racialized ethnic backgrounds* imbued with multiple forms of vulnerability. Two groups of this sort arrived at the refugee support spaces of Hungary: Roma, most of whom were Transcarpathian Roma, and third-country

national foreign students displaced by the war. The latter group, arriving in relatively small numbers, got basic humanitarian support from the most human rights-conscious civic groups in the capital city, and most of them left the country. The Transcarpathian Roma were met with suspicion or even abject rejection by the host public, cynical abandonment by the Hungarian state authorities, and mixed responses by faith-based humanitarian giants. These Roma became the prime targets of the deservingness test for the majority public. They appeared as inapt economic migrants with undeserving claims or a racially inferior group whose claims should not even be judged through a deservingness test, or both.

Several civic groups specifically dedicated themselves to saving those who became targets of direct racial discrimination in the refugee assistance domains: “You want a reasonably decent shelter as a Transcarpathian Roma family? What can we tell them in the first place? That you have chances similar to a Hungarian Roma family minus 10%”—the challenge was thus characterized by a Budapest-based activist. Responses called for not simply acting upon inclusive civic and political imaginaries but understanding needs derived from upfront discriminations or outright rejection. This resilience characterized several solidarity actors in other parts of Europe in the 2015–2016 refugee-supporting mobilizations but only later became widespread and visible in the solidarity circles in this part of the world. For example, a local hotel owner in a rural settlement in Eastern Hungary agreed to host several displaced families and learned of their Roma background only upon their arrival. He and his family provided shelter and additional assistance with deep compassion. This solidarian, far away from the sophisticated civil society groups in the capital, had never ventured to help the marginalized Roma prior to the Ukrainian war. He admitted:

The reality knocked at the door when two large Roma families arrived together, carrying their full lives in few bundles, including a mom with a small baby and a woman eight months pregnant and many children. What could I do when I saw the despair and the fear of rejection in the eyes of those at the doorstep?

Acknowledging the manifold vulnerabilities of the Roma and specifically prioritizing their support became a proactive *reversal mechanism* against deservingness selections and undue differentiation in refugee assistance. The widespread atmosphere of antigypsyism and xenophobia in the Hungarian public made this act particularly daring and connected the ethical position of the capital city civil society organizations and the ad-hoc local solidarity actors in rural settings.

In sum, the selected solidarians’ rationales involved noticing vulnerabilities generated by forced migration as part of the condition universal to all people exiling Ukraine due to the war. Differences among these immediate needs were captured through elements of genuine inequality thinking, although some humanitarian norms of seeing women, children, and the disabled as having greater human needs by default remained a source of inspiration for some civic actors. The majority of the civic solidarity actors did not use a human rights language but were motivated by an understanding that resonated with the principle of human rights. Accordingly, rights are not to be deserved and conditioned by any property of the person and are not tied to the future contributions or proper behavior of the supported people. When presenting this interpretation, we acknowledge that our sample was biased as we sought civic actors who showed some autonomy and devotion to inclusive practices despite their diversity in history, location, resources, and mission. We also concede that the initial conviction of detaching refugee needs from “proper behavior” and future productivity became weakened when the support of the local social public declined over time.

Further, we also noticed some signs of cracking in the solidarity rationales when civic groups' resources gradually dried out towards the end of the first year of mobilization. The more resourceful of the displaced took advantage of the inclusion potentials or returned to their home country, and the most vulnerable remained in the solidarity practices.

4.2. Responsibilities in Refugee Assistance and Social Care Systems

The very same actors who assessed the refugee needs by examining the arriving people's portable conditions and situational vulnerabilities actively reflected concerning what responsibilities should be assigned and performed within the broader set of social care systems in the host society. Two larger distinctive and intersecting fields composed the wider domestic environment of solidarity actions in the context of the Ukrainian war: the refugee reception system and general social welfare provisions, including education, health care, housing, and social assistance. The solidarity actors in our inquiry reckoned the responsibilities of the state, municipal governments, larger faith-based charity organizations, the diverse civic arena, and international organizations as part of their everyday practices and wider strategic decisions. In this section, we limit our attention to the expected duties of the state and the civic actors, as well as their contentious relations.

The first overwhelming experience for all civic helpers was poor state performance in establishing a transparent and adequate refugee arrival infrastructure, which was largely dismantled after 2016. The central state authorities became visible only after a whole month of absence when they took over the arrival assistance coordination from the civil solidarians. They also started to act behind the scenes to engage the larger faith-based humanitarian organizations and local governments in a highly selective way. Most solidarians acknowledged that the state had failed to perform due diligence and abandoned the displaced people despite or exactly because of the actions taken by civic groups: "It was stunning that civic and local government actors put their heads together and tried to figure out what the central state authorities would do. We were scratching our heads and guessing"—this depicts the shared experience of civic solidarity actors in the capital city. Solidarians felt outraged that the state authorities were neglecting their duty to protect the elementary well-being and safety of the displaced. Solidarians were also spurred into action by the negative experience emerging from the systemic selection mechanism that differentiated the deserving and non-deserving refugees we fleshed out in the preceding section. The state authorities turned a blind eye to the fact that individual volunteers and larger humanitarian organizations often avoided hosting any displaced Roma.

Against this backdrop, several ad-hoc citizen groups, established civil society organizations, faith-based grassroots, and some professional not-for-profit human-service (e.g., trauma counseling) entities formed a nearly autonomous and loosely coordinated arena. Beyond the common ground of resentment toward the non-transparent state-backed initiatives, these actors embraced differing initial inspirations (moral, professional, faith-based, political, etc.) and had variegated knowledge about refugee contexts and solidarity organizing. Civic actors acknowledged that they were tailoring their missions in a crisis that had originated partly in forced migration and partly inept state reactions to that. Many developed a concern that their resources and knowledge would allow them to pursue limited interventions, yet the moral call to substitute underperforming state institutions by stretching their means was pressing. This puzzle motivated several solidarians to deepen their diagnostic accounts regarding vulnerabilities, marginalizations, and intersecting

inequalities. Further, they squeezed their human and material resources to offer immediate support, which often enacted separate, resource-poor, and fragile welcoming solutions.

Among the solidarity actors, one group emerged with widely acknowledged agenda-setting and professional authority stemming from decades of experience in migration support. When the massive civic mobilization kicked off, this group embarked on capacity building for civic groups and municipalities. The group's lead activist unveiled the following about the challenges:

From day one, we were under a lot of pressure to find the right way to help. Crisis management and integration tasks came up simultaneously. It is difficult to reconcile compassion, sympathy and professional help.

This disclosure mirrors the tension between the need for knowledge and competence building and the call for immediate solidarity action, respectively, among those civic actors that started to stretch, enhance, and multiply their capacities and outputs driven by outrage at the state authorities' poor services and selective approach.

Despite their dedication to solidarity, civil society activists often lacked specific expertise to handle the intersectional and multiple inequalities that their target groups manifested. Some leading Roma organizations, backed by international donors, stepped in to sensitize the old and new civilian helpers to work with Roma refugees. An experienced Roma organization working on higher education and empowerment mobilized its Roma experts and student mentees to work with civic groups and help them understand the specific needs of Roma from Ukraine. As the lead of the organization put it:

What we are doing now is mostly trying to offer expertise to civic initiatives that deal with Roma children from Ukraine. Because what we see from the beginning is that there are well-meaning, enthusiastic NGOs, but they haven't necessarily worked with Roma target groups.

The Roma civic groups believed that solidarians needed basic marginalization sensitivity to understand the needs of the Roma. But they also viewed solidarity operations as being imbued with structural racism inadvertently practiced by civic actors. These civic actors felt unease being seen as contributors to a racializing social assistance system while making extraordinary efforts to revolt against racism. The dilemma of working with a refined sensitivity to a specific inequality problem while not yet knowledgeable enough in another one is a classical intersectional challenge for any social assistance or solidarity work. In this context, where the most dedicated actors felt challenged or abandoned by many other powerful actors, the intersectional dilemma poignantly hit and hurt some civic actors.

As time passed and everyday inclusion needs moved to the forefront, the solidarity actors faced widespread frailty and shortages associated with the general welfare infrastructure of the host society, most importantly in healthcare and education. In these domains, as opposed to housing, citizens' voluntary resource sharing could not substitute for scarce or inaccessible provisions. A case in point is that, in the fall of 2022, all public schools were obliged by a bureaucratic measure to enroll Ukrainian children, with no material and pedagogical support. Some school principals simply refused to take refugee children due to the language barrier; others let the displaced children enroll and survive without any assistance. Several civic solidarians

repurposed their experience of working with marginalized children and vocally claimed all children's rights to schooling and offered pedagogical and mentoring assistance. These examples revealed that the civic solidarity actors confidently took the task of *nudging* and directly assisting reluctant or unprepared public service institutions.

In addition, solidarity actors not only substituted poor services but assisted in unpacking *non-obvious configurations* of needs and service provisions. Several collective educational initiatives popped up among the solidarity actors, the Ukrainian refugee community's self-organizing volunteers, and alternative and church-based schools. These actions embodied professional and lay discussions and conceptual compromises among the involved actors regarding the universal and differential aspects of Ukrainian children's educational needs. The language of learning, the current and future location of the displaced families, multiple senses of belonging, and children's learning development prospects often suggested ambivalent or contradictory considerations concerning which education programs and institutions could provide the best environment for Ukrainian children.

In sum, the host society's authoritarian policy regimes (with neoliberal cues) regarding the refugees and their civic helpers magnified some of the dilemmas that the solidarians faced, which we address in the previous section of the article. Disconnecting and, in many respects, abandoning state services intensified the urgency of dwelling on universal human needs as opposed to paying more refined attention to needs driven by various inequality divides among the refugees. Further, temporary problem-solving and service provision by civic actors outside the regular public mechanisms did not always enhance the displaced people's possibilities for claiming equal conditions to pursue a dignified life, as found in other solidarity contexts (Piccoli & Perna, 2024). Finally, some of the civic actors became involved in conceptualizing needs in a transient trajectory of life when return to one's homeland is still hoped for and actively sought. The latter concerned the less vulnerable, somewhat or fairly resourceful groups of displaced Ukrainians. With this, solidarity actors' dilemmas started to be separated, at least to some extent, according to the target groups and their ethnicized/racialized class divide.

4.3. Understandings of One's Own (Host) Society

Solidarians' internal discussions embraced the dilemma of how to reckon and prioritize their solidarity capacities to serve the displaced Ukrainians in view of the pre-existing conditions and struggles for well-being and inclusion in the host society. Those who had a track record of solidarity work felt the moral drive to balance their attention and commitment to social groups both with and without mobility paths. Seasoned activists worked with already acquired knowledge of the domestic social structures that put some groups in their own society in dire need of solidarity assistance, whereas ad-hoc groups largely formed their accounts of host society configurations through situational sense-making.

It is not uncommon in Europe that populist governmental ideology apparatuses promulgate polarized visions of societies composed of productive and non-productive and worthy and unworthy citizens, families, and groups. In Hungary, this has developed in relation to an overarching authoritarian governance that operates social policy systems through deservingness principles (Bartha et al., 2020). Those who deserve recognition and resources have certain demographic, economic, and moral capacities, as well as ethnic and cultural identifiers. Further, workfare and pronatalist distribution mechanisms intensify the outcomes of a political

economy weakly protected from global economic currents. The intermingling effects translate to a society polarized by ethnic, class, educational, and spatial divides. Some municipal actors in smaller cities and villages strive to create spaces of reasonably shared local welfare. Elsewhere, the local dependency relations seriously limit municipal actors' scope of action. Civic actors go against the mainstream deservingness governance climate despite receiving modest moral, professional, and material support and are often forced to suspend or give up their resilient activism.

Socioeconomic precarization and Roma marginalization, often intersecting with or posited against each other, stood out as the most pronounced source of inequality in the host society. Most solidarity actors we examined had refined understandings of marginalization and multiple discriminations against the Roma and also acknowledged that many non-Roma face socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Given the widespread racial deservingness trope in Hungarian society, those solidarity groups who framed their refugee support acts in line with the mission to protect the marginalized Roma often faced adversarial reactions from the general public. Most civic actors reacted to this challenge by using broad anti-discriminatory reasoning in their public communication by remaining low-key about their sharpened attention to the refugee Roma. This was done assertively and in "good conscience": The subversive solidarity rationales became intertwined with strategically packaged public messaging.

Several grassroots groups in smaller cities and villages, sometimes in alliance with local governments, had worked as active agents in tackling socioeconomic marginalization in their local communities long before the full-fledged war against Ukraine. When the displaced arrived, some local leaders reconciled needs and limited resources among different constituencies by unapologetically channeling the refugee donations to the local needy and later by adjusting locally managed social service institutions to the ever-increasing needs. Cooperation between a mayor of a smaller village and local civic volunteers led to this reasoning:

We need to be accountable to local citizens, who also face poverty and precarity widespread in this micro-region. We need to demonstrate that helping one group does not take away from the other one. We believe that we have managed to strike a good balance but this balance we have to maintain day by day.

This strategy reveals that local communities did not offer unconditional compassion for refugee solidarity work but also that solidarians anticipated this attitude and did not expect perfect fairness. Instead, a vision of *shared local solidarity* was promoted involving practical distributive compromises and non-ranking inclusive public talks.

Another pressing experience challenged almost all solidarians. Societal groups with backgrounds of some existential security or stable socioeconomic status largely shared the official regime imaginary, which holds the precarious responsible for their own conditions and considers exclusions as the normal functioning of society. These groups became enthusiastic about supporting the displaced from Ukraine as opposed to supporting the local marginalized. For example, an experienced and knowledgeable civil society organization struggled to work with compassionate citizens who shared or temporarily opened their housing facilities to the refugees: "These citizens who participated in hospitality for the refugees would never consider doing the same for the local needy." Other solidarians developed a lucid view that the needs of the host society and the displaced cannot be easily compared, let alone publicly discussed, due to complicated, intersecting, and

polarized experiences of marginalization. Therefore, they opted to craft their own fairness rationales according to their best judgment and adjust them from situation to situation.

Over time, another contentious inequality problem provoked perhaps the hardest challenges for the solidarity workers in urban settlements in which host society cleavages and the refugee hospitality spaces intermingled. In addition to the Roma, homeless people are the other main stigmatized and vilified marginalized group in Hungarian society. Most Ukrainians (who, anyway, did not consider themselves refugees) were not willing to share facilities with the local homeless or even relate to solidarians working with the former. In turn, the beneficiaries of civic groups working with housing, poverty, and homelessness in the host society felt unfairness and expressed anger about the solidarians: “The local vulnerable who lined up for our assistance got seriously annoyed when learning that we also help the displaced Ukrainians”—a housing activist revealed. Our fieldwork only allows us to signal that some civic groups noticed and engaged with further linkages of inequalities in the host society and among the assisted migrants. Among the homeless, there are several refugees from earlier migratory waves from outside of Europe, even if their absolute number is relatively small due to Hungary’s highly selective international refugee assistance.

In sum, solidarity actors also conceptualized the unmet refugee needs through reckoning marginalized positions in their own society. Solidarity actors were most articulate about the marginalized who endure precarity exacerbated by spatial segregation and housing deprivation, both the Roma and the non-Roma, and increasingly the fragile elderly. From February 2022 on, solidarians mobilized for refugee assistance by adapting their already established categories of vulnerable groups and needs and proactively inviting and placing the displaced from Ukraine in those solidarity spaces they had already established. This emerged as both an ethical and strategic dilemma concerning how to strike a compromise between effective mission delivery and taking a principled stand in public when the solidarians rely on resources partly offered by those in the mainstream public whose values they contest.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The forced mobility juncture we examined encouraged solidarians to either rapidly surpass humanitarian approaches or combine them with others from the outset. This does not necessarily protect solidarity relations from some deservingness expectations, but the refugee-welcoming actors showed deep interest in delving into the conditions of social inequalities. Therefore, we argue that the solidarian accounts embodied both the objectives of “saving lives” (humanitarian assistance) and “shaping ways of lives” (promoting inclusion) (Korteweg et al., 2023), clearly tilted to the latter. For the solidarians, shaping lives in the post-2022 asylum context in Hungary entailed shaping conditions of lives in wider societal configurations and beyond the immediacy of the present. The cognitive, ethical, and political thinking process that the solidarity unleashed embodied conceptual dilemmas and horizontal learning often in defiance of the wider public concerns and official policy rationales.

We have revealed that a dedicated, although differently resourceful and vocal, circle of solidarians viewed forced migrant situations as temporary or an add-on to the conditions that shaped the displaced people’s placement in contemporary societies. This complex account had been formed by centering on the present but in view of future possibilities for a dignified life for the displaced and for transforming structural conditions to tackle social problems. The literature that explores the dynamics and trajectories in civic

solidarity rationales often captures that solidarians move away or reflexively relate to their humanitarian common sense and practices (Korteweg et al., 2023). The strategic compromises that our examined solidarians forged resonated with what Vandevooordt and Fleischmann (2021) found in other parts of Europe in an earlier round of refugee solidarity mobilization. In both settings, civic actors faced the temporal dilemma of reacting in hostile political environments to refugee needs in the present while also directing their endeavors toward an alternative future involving structural change. Their strategic compromise gave priority to present needs while not giving up their drive and vision for acting for the future. Our research results also highlight that the postponement of these transformative ideas is not fully complete: Some solidarians have broken the strategic compromise and launched principled actions to make genuine changes in the present. And they have often failed. The intentional use of the present perfect here acknowledges that these endeavors had not stopped by the end of our inquiry.

Civic groups assisting the displaced people from Ukraine were inspired to some extent by preconceived imaginaries of suffering stressed by standard humanitarian reasoning. However, most of them conceptualized social categories to address inequality conditions and identify the subsequent human needs in asylum circumstances. Solidarians acknowledged that universal human rights and capacities to flourish should be linked to the structural conditions in society and even the access to universal human rights will perpetuate inequalities for certain groups and categories of people. Therefore, differences in people's initial social positions should be addressed to deconstruct structural inequalities in society. Steps towards embracing this principled thinking about social justice departed from a rudimentary moralizing about "women and children" (Welfens, 2023). With a sharpened analytical eye on the solidarity dilemmas, our inquiry hoped to enrich the literature on civic solidarity: It is essential to acknowledge the solidarians' capacities to assess the relevance of *social categories and groups* without any major background in philosophy of justice or policy theories to conceive of solidarity interventions as based on the differential treatment of people concerning the *equality of results*.

It is tempting to consider if the formations of solidarity dilemmas by the civic actors in the Hungarian post-2022 refugee assistance scene can be seen as idiosyncratic in any sense. Solidarians acknowledged that the refugee-welcoming space was truncated and half-empty. The specialized refugee support and general social policy provisions of the host state were distributed through domestic clientelism by rendering the large faith-based humanitarian actors as deserving of most of the centrally distributed resources. The autonomous civic actors, especially those pursuing equality-conscious advocacy, were doomed to rely on themselves, modest international support, and volunteering resources. Their mission and solidarity operations functioned not only as resilience to the ruling regime's norms but as substitutions for caring duties. These solidarians stretched their emotional, moral, and human capacities to respond to needs they considered unmet. As their dilemmas were manifold, some of them felt that they only had partial knowledge and professional skills to address and prioritize refugee needs. Others sensed the opposite by taking pride in enduring the increasing hardship and challenges. Some of our actors felt abandoned in their struggles, especially if they acted far from the urban centers of institutional, knowledge, and civic resources. As indicated above, it is not incidental that some solidarians chose to break the strategic compromise of meaningfully impacting the present to advance more daring and radical operations meant for the future.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the ways in which the lives of the displaced became spatially dis/connected generated a *situational dimension of solidarity dilemmas* in the context we centered on.

The perpetuated hopes for return and the intensive nexus of several Ukrainians with their family members and relatives at home added a new layer to the solidarity rationales. Despite the physical distance, many of the displaced cultivate(d) active family relations, or often employment and livelihood links to their country of origine. They nurture(d) the hope that their home country would be their homeland again and their return would be possible in the foreseeable future. Solidarians thus had to acknowledge and act upon the displaced people's widespread desire to return to an existing homeland of close spatial proximity yet unknown temporality. Therefore, in the respective solidarity situation, the longer-term frames concerning a dignified human life became understood *outside of the solidarity spaces* through the autonomous relocation decisions of the displaced people. This did not erase temporary inclusion needs and principles yet multiplied the solidarity dilemmas vis-à-vis principles of rights, equality, and dignity. These dilemmas were articulated most intensively by those who helped organize educational services for the displaced children and their parents (which our research team will address in another publication, in progress).

The presented inquiry into civic solidarity experiences and dilemmas examined in a given context contributes to the production of knowledge on norm-setting mobilization and social-practice-based genealogies of civic solidarity. Our findings will help geographically and historically expand the research on civic solidarities in migration settings and beyond, in particular when solidarians show *defiance* to migration assistance and care provisions that normalize deserving-based social visions and governance practices. A limitation of our current study, as well as a direction for our future endeavors, is to genuinely relate our conceptual and empirical agendas to important research undertakings in Central and East European scholarship (Brković, 2024; Kovács & Nagy, 2022; Łukasiewicz et al., 2023; Macková et al., 2024; Mołęda-Zdziech et al., 2021). We have offered insights into how solidarity actors articulated and worked with dilemmas associated with human needs, vulnerabilities, and host society inequality conditions. We did not consider our informants inherently progressive (Cantat, 2022). But we took it seriously that they did consider themselves reflexive actors who critically assess humanitarian, migration governance, and social policy mechanisms. We remain deeply interested in how the positions that we have portrayed above can mobilize the future leg of solidarity compromises and support social and political movements aimed at genuinely transformative modes of governing social affairs.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data can be found in the data depository of the HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest.

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