

Perplexities of solidarity: host society relations to displaced people from Ukraine in Hungary

First results and conceptual considerations for the qualitative inquiry

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Our research team has been scrutinizing the emergence and patterns of Hungarian solidarity mobilisation in crisis situations since the 2015 refugee crisis. Most recently, we have conducted **28 interviews and ethnographic observation in Budapest and four rural regions** to explore bottom-up solidarity mobilisations.

	Budapest	Cities and villages	Total
Representatives of local governments	2	3	5
NGOs and civic initiatives	10	3	13
Schools and education initiatives	10		10

The Hungarian state reacted with some delay but positively in its political declarations by creating a legal framework and some logistical facilities for the accommodation of Ukrainian refugees and later allocating financial resources to this end. But it was reluctant to restore a complex refugee support system, which has been strategically dismantled since 2015. The capital and some towns and villages in the North-Eastern border of Hungary as well as **NGOs and grassroots civil networks** – which had been the driving forces of social solidarity during previous crises, such as the 2015 refugee crisis or the 2020 Covid crisis, – have quickly responded. In **Budapest**, much of the coordination has been carried out by the municipality in cooperation with **NGOs** specialized on legal, social and educational support. In **rural areas**, municipalities and local organizations registered with the National Directorate General for Disaster Management (Katasztrófavédelem) or designated by the state have hosted refugees by involving many volunteers.

In **the capital city**, the response was particularly fast, with donations collected and distributed, temporary accommodation set up in community facilities, former homeless shelters and by private hosts. In the first weeks of the crisis, in one of the central districts of

the city, the Participation Office (Részvételi Iroda), liaising with local civic organizations, was the driving force behind the municipal involvement, with many volunteers working day and night. In an interview, the head of the office praised the **commitment of civilians**. The role of local government and NGOs has diminished since most refugees have left Hungary, and those who have stayed have been taken care by the state and its partner church charities, and by organizations specialising in refugee support. In one of the capital's districts, a few hundred refugees are known to be the users of housing by courtesy of small communities or private individuals.

Considerable **financial resources**, both **foreign and private**, have been channelled in the refugee support system in 2022. Some of these directly assist the refugees, and other ones sponsor the development of civic capacities to gradually replace the voluntary efforts. Apart from the first weeks of the crisis, the state and its co-opted charities do not cooperate with the UN, and the top management of large state and church charities have ceased to build dialogue with NGOs. Cooperation is limited to lower levels of state administration and mainly on operational issues.

The **civic cooperation** in the form of regular consultations and exchange of information was emphasised by many of our informants. This cooperation partly builds on previous liaisons (there are significant civil hubs in the capital) and partly on the centripetal efforts of **NGOs specialised in refugee care**. Capacity building of organisations specialised in refugee assistance and integration has largely focused on providing technical support to the work of smaller organisations, voluntary groups, and municipalities. Municipal government and civic interfaces have been fostered by senior experts of civil society background in both districts and the capital city administration.

In **the countryside**, we have been in contact with groups who support refugees with longer-term accommodation and care in three settlements, all near the Ukrainian-Hungarian border, and of significant poor and or Roma populations. One is a small town and a village in its immediate vicinity, where the owners of a boarding house, which normally hosts pilgrims, have taken in families from Transcarpathia and Eastern Ukraine. The other is a small hamlet where the municipality and its social service institutions and NGOs are integrating various disadvantaged groups and have also volunteered to receive refugees. The third is the Protestant pastor of a small village who, with the support of the presbytery, has been hosting

very poor Transcarpathian families who speak Hungarian, together with the deacon in charge of Roma pastoral care.

In regard to our master issues, **firstly** our inquiry focuses on how local governments and civic actors are engaged in crisis management. Our analysis seeks to dwell on the concept of **progressive localism** by unveiling how **solidarity is organized** and the helping rationales are framed by local and municipal actors. We are also curious of how local and municipal actors relate to central political narratives on migration and the humanitarian and charity reasoning by civic and faith-based actors. While solidarity with refugees has largely remained an urban phenomenon in Hungary, we acknowledge that **small town and village initiatives** have played a greater role in addressing the current crisis than in the past. Therefore, beyond urban responses, the discussion of rural forms of refugee solidarity will make an important part of our contribution.

Secondly, we intend to analyse the opportunities that the Ukrainians crisis has opened for **civil society**. We have learned from our interviews that solidarity with displaced people from Ukraine brought new actors in the fragmented refugee care system and the already existing one have **significantly expanded**. This enrichment has an additional indirect impact on the civil space: **new resources** are emerging, and previously rarely seen **collaborations** are being established.

There are vivid discussions in the literature about whether moments of crisis which typically push mobilizations to promote practical solutions **depoliticize solidarity and marginalize critical reflections** on the structural causes and effects of solidarity or if they rather widen the space for new alliances, various sorts of public engagement, and space for **being political otherwise**. Recent literature on crisis and solidarity mobilizations that addressed the 2008 financial crisis and the 2015 migration crisis found the growing politicization of solidarity activism as well as the transformative force of solidarity. Our current examples can also contribute to the literature on solidarity mobilizations in the context of shrinking welfare provisions, de-democratization, and repressive state policies towards civil society. Following the logic of our previous studies, which argue for widening the horizon of social-movement studies and recognizing indirect, implicit forms of politicization that motivate ordinary and everyday acts of collective problem-solving, we turn our attention to the interpretations of solidarity action framed in broader terms of collective goods, values, and responsibilities.

Refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine have arrived in a country that in previous years had almost completely stopped accepting asylum seekers and ushered in delegitimising refugees and portraying “migration” as the main threat to the country. After 24 February 2022, the official government rhetoric concerning the displaced Ukrainians (but only them) have changed. After a few months, however, social media and everyday talks started to contemplate who the **real refugees** were and who were **unworthy of help**. There are three groups of Ukrainians living in Hungary: those under **temporary protection** (around 30,000 according to records), the **agency and migrant workers** in Budapest and other industrial centres (around 100,000), and the ones of dual citizenship. Paradoxically, the most unwelcome are the **Hungarian speaking Roma** from deprived localities in Transcarpathia. However, our interviews showed that some civil solidarians have advocated for working against this dire marginalisation and hierarchization of refugees.

Thirdly, our analysis addresses the production of **differential deservingness** in solidarity spaces supporting people displaced by the war against Ukraine and reveals conflicting visions and practices of deservingness in regard to various groups of vulnerable groups. More closely, **ethnic, racial, and religious hierarchies**, assigned perpetrator and victim roles, and degrees of suffering as grounds for distributing compassion, care, and material resources will be examined.