

# Solidarity in European Societies: Solidarity Initiatives in the Hungarian Context

National Seminar, April 26,  
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## **Closing the SOLIDUS project in Hungary: a chance to reflect**

A month before the official end of the SOLIDUS project, the Hungarian research team at the Center for Policy Studies, Central European University organized its national seminar “Solidarity Initiatives in the Hungarian Context”. This took place on 26 April from 9:00-13:00 in a downtown Budapest location (Kazimir restaurant).

The aim of the national seminar was to discuss and reflect on some of the findings and potential lessons of the project. In this sense, we started from the idea that to offer solidarity entails real costs. It means practical support for those in danger. It can force those creating the dangers to back down, knowing the strength of oppositional support they face. At present, solidarity is often invoked at times of mourning and emergency, but it is also invoked when people find themselves helpless in the face of unexpected economic crises. In Europe, there have been frequent calls for solidarity towards those who have most lost out in these crises, as well as support for those affected outside Europe. The SOLIDUS research project has collected over 100 examples of solidarity in action in the EU. The cases focus on contemporary questions of housing, education, health, employment and civic engagement. They detail the origins of the actions, the impact of the work and the potential for changing public policies.

While offering several academic definitions of solidarity<sup>1</sup>, the SOLIDUS project has in practice focused on a certain kind of solidarity. This often involves treating the recipient of support or services (“end-user”) as suffering from, hopefully, a temporary but perhaps lasting disadvantage or risk. This form of solidarity does not offer any judgement on how someone

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<sup>1</sup>Solidarity involves identifying with and showing concern for the suffering of others through practical actions; it is a generous disposition, a propensity to sacrifice something one values on behalf of others whose welfare is deemed important (Arnsperger and Varoufakis, 2003). Solidarity is distinguishable from reciprocity as it involves other-centred actions that do not expect a ‘return’ on what is given. It is distinguishable from love and care in terms of scale: solidarity generally involves large groups. Solidarity is a core part of affective relational life governing those human actions that are primarily other-centred rather than self-centred. Luc Boltanski (2012) defines solidarity as a politicised or social form of love. (Presentation by Kathleen Lynch at Policy Seminar, Brussels, June 21-22, 2016)

got into their position in the first place (acknowledging that roles could be reversed at any time) and it also emphasizes the points in common. In this regard, it should not use characteristics such as ethnicity, nation or class as the basis for deciding whom to support. Based on the empirical research carried out within the project, this account of solidarity does not completely account for the different forms of solidarity in Hungary, and from that point of view, the purpose of the seminar was therefore to:

- (a) provoke a discussion and brainstorming on the different notions and interpretations of what people understand by solidarity in contemporary Hungary;
- (b) to review what overall project findings on what makes solidarity initiatives ‘successful’ in terms of sustainability, results and scalability
- (c) to review and brainstorm around policy recommendations.

The participants of the seminar were directly recruited and invited for the event. The decision was made to hold the event outside the premises of Central European University and have it led by an external non-CEU affiliated moderator. This was in order to ameliorate possible fears among potential participants within a current political climate where the university’s future in the country is uncertain<sup>2</sup> and where its opponents has accused it, amongst other things, of acting against the national interest of the country. The approximately 20 participants in the seminar represented organizations covering the following topics:

- corruption
- education
- environmental protection
- refugees
- people suffering from mental health problems
- academic professionals and experts on social economy, rural development and socially deprived regions in Hungary
- women section of the federation of trade unions in Hungary
- research (Central European University)

Some participants were interviewed by the project in 2016 and early 2017 and others were recruited to represent organizations whose activities are based on solidarity actions supporting different social groups. Importantly, several of the participants had travelled to

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<sup>2</sup>See the website of Central European University for details: <https://www.ceu.edu/category/istandwithceu>

the seminar from towns in other parts of the country, which contributed with a richer perspective than when the focus is only on capital-based organizations and initiatives.

## **The understanding of solidarity in contemporary Hungary**

The first part of the seminar addressed the concept of solidarity, and how it resonates historically and within contemporary Hungary.

### **The relation between solidarity and charity**

The following thoughts were set forth in this regard: while charity is a solution which is more often associated with the conservative side, solidarity is more of a left-wing concept. The term charity expresses an implicit acceptance of inequalities, whereas solidarity suggests the potential emancipation of vulnerable social groups. At the same time, for example, *pro bono* activities are present in both in solidarity and charity types of actions. Charity is when somebody gives away his/her surplus, while solidarity means that somebody is giving even when this requires serious effort.

Solidarity refers to relations of equality, in which case, it is democratic, or hierarchical relations, in which case it is philanthropic; the latter belonging to the category of charity. For some of the participants, charity is a sub-concept of solidarity because there are solidarity forms that have nothing to do with charity - take, for instance, demonstrations supporting protest against the closing down of Central European University. Solidarity is a matter of engaging in a case or standing for a case, while charity is always hierarchical. At the same time, promoting the empowerment of vulnerable groups cannot be considered as charitable, neither it is hierarchical. Charity and solidarity are mutually reinforcing processes because ultimately there is always solidarity behind them. Charity is the idea of “giving someone a fish”, whereas solidarity is “teaching someone how to fish”. In another respect, charity is action-oriented, while solidarity is permanent engagement.

*Different key words associated with charity vs solidarity*

Solidarity	Charity
leftwing	conservative
commonality	old style
“teaching someone how to fish”	“giving someone fish”
permanent	action-oriented
pro bono	pro bono
engagement	victim
serious effort	surplus
equality - democratic	hierarchical - philanthropic
standing for a case	
empowerment	

**With whom do we have solidarity and with whom do we have act charitably?**

Participants expressed the thought that ‘we’ are more charitable and less often feel solidarity with Roma people, for example. Many charitable people give money to the organizations that will then provide help to the people in need. At the same time, supporting human rights organizations is an act of solidarity, and not of charity. Somebody said she supported human rights organizations for selfish reasons, because she needs news, justice, etc.

**Solidarity & protest vs. solidarity & advocacy for change of laws, practices an public policies**

Many participants expressed the view that social dialogue practically does not exist in contemporary Hungary. When the dominant forms of political power are not interested in listening to what the representatives of civil society organizations say, it will not do anything; when it does not matter to the government, then perhaps it will do something; and when there is very strong social pressure on the government, then again, it will make some changes.

The case of refugees had not been an important policy issue until 2015. Since then this issue has become a controversial political issue. There is no relationship between the government and the supporting NGOs as the political hatred against refugees cannot be interpreted professionally. Refugees became the worst enemy of the current government and the most important element of the campaign for 2018 parliamentary elections.

The relationship between civil society and the government is very bad, and there is no formal consultation between them. According to some participants, the roundtables where the government, civil society organizations, trade unions, etc. should sit together are packed with puppets.

## **Solidarity and civil society**

In the second part of the seminar, there was a discussion about various solidarity initiatives in Hungary drawing on the experience of the participants.

The basic assumption was that state institutions carrying out solidarity-related activities do not satisfy the needs of their target group. At the same time, it is very hard to work for civil organizations. The government wants to silence all the organizations that are critical about them, and if the activities of these organizations target people whom the government does not like (e.g. refugees), they are declared to be not civil but political organizations. Anything it does not like is regarded as political by the government. This kills the very possibility of the solidarity, which must not be allowed, since this is still not a totalitarian state, only there is a power aspiration to make it a totalitarian state, which can still be defeated.

### **The context of ‘success’ in Hungary: What makes solidarity initiatives ‘successful’?**

The participants represented organizations of a broad spectrum, and had often been involved in several more organizations over the course of their involvement in civil society initiatives. The following key features were highlighted:

- embedding, which can be achieved by building trust with the target group
- if the solidarity action or activity can achieve a goal that the state does not



- if it becomes news and reaches people who did not know about the organization before
- if it results in the empowerment of the respective community
- if members of the target group are not afraid and dare to count on themselves, thus becoming able to break out of a negative spiral and believe there is hope (representative of the organization dealing with people suffering from mental health problems)

### **Important prerequisites for stable operations**

It is well-known that many organizations and initiatives find it difficult to sustain themselves in the long run. The following terms were pronounced with regards to what are the most important prerequisites for a stable long-term operation:

- professionalism
- commitment
- toughness
- communication
- well-structured organizational model
- supportive legal environment
- supportive institutional environment
- sympathy
- network

### **Prerequisites for knowledge transfers to others and disseminating the activities of the organization**

The following thoughts were formed in this regard:

- The ideas should be disseminated, not the organization
- Only bottom-up ideas can be spread
- Volunteering is very important in extending and transferring knowledge

### **Constraints of solidarity actions towards the poor, the homeless, and Roma?**

Three main ideas came out of this discussion, which had to be interrupted due to time constraints.



- Many participants would have wanted to develop these thoughts further. Prejudice against Roma and the lack of knowledge about their culture are the most important factors.
- Roma people do not have their own organizations and they are not able to represent their own interests.
- When a company organizes a program targeting Roma people, the non-Roma become frustrated, so that it only reinforces prejudices against them.

## European attitudes to solidarity, impact on policy and policy recommendations

The final part of the discussion aggregated several themes derived from various parts of the research project. The participants looked some of the outcomes from the TESS survey. The moderator showed 6 slides with graphs and short sentences about the following questions: should the state redistribute from the rich to the poor (or should it be the EU); should the EU create a welfare system; what's more important: reducing income differences within countries or between countries; which areas should be bailed out first; would people pay into a solidarity fund? And if so, how much of their income would they give; and finally, every country should accommodate refugees. Those that don't should compensate those that do.

The research findings were summarized for the participants: the financial crisis of 2008 with subsequent recessions and austerity packages seem not to have affected the general level of solidarity and there is significant support for solidarity at EU-level, even though many Europeans worry about national sovereignty and immigration. Graphs with national and transnational solidarity for sick, the elderly and the unemployed are with over 80% approval. Support is very high in Hungary for helping poorer regions in one's own country with almost 80% supporting the proposition.

### **What should the EU do for redistribution?**

The following ideas were expressed in this regard:

- The solidarity budget of the EU is very limited. The largest budget goes directly to support business, which is unnecessary since the market creates good businesses

anyway. This money, in fact, supports corruption, because the state is an inefficient redistributor in Hungary.

- The EU should organize a fairer system of redistribution, because so far it has only intensified inequalities.
- It would be good, if redistribution was not carried out at a national level, because ideology and the support policy of the Hungarian state currently go completely against each other. Transparency is not part of state redistribution, which is partly due to the lack of competence.
- Another serious problem is that everything that civil society organizations could do much better is in the hands of the state.

### **What can be expected from EU?**

It would be good if only those states got money that can be prosecuted and effectively controlled. The EU should decentralize the system and not provide support to the government. Instead, it should support independent consortia that would then redistribute the funds in democratic and transparent ways. EU funds should be redistributed by professionals, as opposed to the government.

### **What are the preconditions of grass-roots democratic decision-making processes within an organization?**

The following thoughts were formed in this regard:

- Democratic decision making does not work in Hungary as people are not socialized to this kind of processes, and such mechanisms would entail huge troubles.
- It would be important to introduce this kind of democratic decision-making processes, as democracy can only be strengthened by exercising it.
- It is not possible to exercise this kind of decision making in a country where compliance with the Fundamental Law cannot be achieved. It takes long educational processes, where well-functioning institutions educate wrongly performing people within them, to institute this kind of decision making.
- Strong management or a good leader does not exclude, in itself, the possibility of democratic decision-making processes.

- Professionalism kills grass-roots democratic decision-making processes, hence maintaining at least the participatory feature represents the middle way.

## Final remarks

The exercise was different than many conventional seminars in that it did not rely much on presentations of research results or invited speakers. Instead the findings and knowledge emanating from SOLIDUS was conveyed to participants in two ways. First, all participants received a short fact sheet at their seats which enabled them continued access to key thoughts throughout the seminar. Second, throughout the seminar small pieces coming out from the Hungarian and European research was given to participants as prompters for their discussions. This format had several advantages:

- It enabled the present researchers to validate findings from the research against both ‘old’ (participants in the research) and ‘new’ (specifically targeted other initiatives) audiences.
- It enabled a space for researchers to continue thinking about cross-cutting conceptual themes that there were often not time to do during the project itself.
- Seminar participants had a chance to learn from the research project, but in a scope that is digestible and possible to take away.
- Seminar participants were able to share their own experiences and learn from each other.

While the seminar was not formally evaluated, in a debrief at the end of the seminar all participants expressed satisfaction with the format, and several stayed on for more than an hour after the formal ending of the end. The sense of satisfaction was shared by the organizing team, which assessed the seminar as having achieved its goals.