

Country National Seminar – Germany

Report

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Background

The SOLIDUS WP10 Country National Seminar (CNS) in Germany took place on 26 April 2018 at 5.00 pm at Leipzig University. In attendance were Holger Lengfeld, Florian Kley, and Inan Bostanci, on behalf of the SOLIDUS team Leipzig, as well as Lennart Selling as a former researcher of the team. The CNS was attended by 11 local solidarity promoters, politicians, and researchers that followed our invitation. While about 200 people had been invited by mail, most unfortunately were unable to participate for various reasons or did not respond to our invitation. The meeting started with a welcome speech by Holger Lengfeld. Afterwards, four presentations were held on different topics by SOLIDUS researchers (see presentations). Each presentation was followed by a discussion. In the middle of the meeting a break was held, with snacks and non-alcoholic drinks provided. This allowed the attendees space for discussion, exchange, and networking. The focus group meeting ran for about two and a half hours total (until 7:30 pm); however, some informal exchanges between the key participants were held even after the end of the meeting.

Presentations

The CNS consisted of four presentations, each of which presented background, information, and/or findings of the SOLIDUS project.

1. *Introduction (held by Florian Kley)*

In the first presentation, the background of SOLIDUS was presented: The financial as well as the refugee crisis and their relationship with solidarity in Europe were discussed. Additionally, the meaning of solidarity and information about the project – SOLIDUS team, funding, objectives, and methods – were presented.

2. *TESS-Survey (held by Holger Lengfeld)*

The second presentation contained information and results on the Transnational European Solidarity Survey (TESS). After explaining the background of the survey, selected results on fiscal solidarity, welfare state solidarity, and solidarity during the refugee crisis were presented.

3. *Solidarity Acts in Germany (held by Inan Bostanci)*

In this presentation, solidarity acts were presented. In the centre of this presentation, three selected German projects/organisations were presented in detail: Their origin, their work, their relation to the different crises. The objective was to show the variety and creativity of reactions to crisis driven problems.

4. *Drivers and Barriers of Solidarity Acts (held by Lennart Selling)*

The last presentation addressed the results of the analysis of solidarity acts. After a brief introduction of the methods used, Drivers and Barriers that had proven to be prominent in our research were discussed. Additionally, some ideas for policy recommendations were discussed with the participants.

Discussion

Audience questions and remarks were raised after each presentation. The definition of solidarity caused some discussion. At the country national seminar the speakers described solidarity in a broader sense, including a variety of forms of solidarity all related to people supporting other people. A member of the audience highlighted different meanings and understandings of the word solidarity, e.g. a different meaning in the former German Democratic Republic and its use as a political basic principle among the citizens in the former socialist state.

The results of the Transnational European Solidarity Survey were a surprise for some of the audience members. One participant pointed out that the media coverage of EU-related topics gives the impression that a huge part of EU-citizens shares an attitude against the European Union. The speaker agreed, explaining that the media often covers conflicts and problems as opposed to 'things going well'. Apparently, while the media is interested in the 'loud' but small anti-EU-groups, a huge but quiet EU-supporting majority is not covered. Another point of discussion were the lower approval ratings for redistribution of refugees within the EU in East-Central Europe as compared to the rest of the countries. One person pointed out that this attitude is contrary to Christian beliefs and values in countries where the Christian church is very popular. The participant commented that this might be related to a lack of proper (religious) education. In response, the speaker offered differing conceptions of European integration to explain the difference between East-Central Europe and West Europe as opposed to a lack of education. While the objective of membership within the EU of East-Central European states might be to strengthen the nation state, Western (and Southern) European states might more strongly regard the EU as a measure to overcome the nation state. Contrarily, another participant argued that citizens in wealthier EU-states have more benefits from the European Union, experiencing the 'good' Europe unlike their fellow citizens in less wealthy states.

Questions were raised regarding the policy recommendations presented. Participants of one organisation wanted to know how these recommendations will eventually reach decision makers. The speakers highlighted that the recommendations will result in a policy brief, which will be prepared by the SOLIDUS-partners.

After the presentation of Drivers and Barriers encountered by solidarity acts, one participant contributed an additional policy recommendation. From his experience, there are conflicting goals between administration and civil society. Attempts to improve such collaborations – for example by comparing the outcomes to the outcomes of initiatives with similar resources – are rarely made. He offered academia as a solution. Universities should function as unbiased referees, evaluating the efficiency of collaborations between civil society and administration while at the same developing strategies for further improvement. In his view, it is important for civil society and administrations to cooperate more closely, including the very early stages of applying for funding. In addition, the evaluation of achievements through clearly defined aims at the beginning of the project should be decisive for further funding. Through such measures, complex processes of applying for funding could be drastically reduced.