




Contesting Flexible Solidarity: Secular and Religious Support for Refugees in Hungary

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INTRODUCTION

By the end of 2015, more than 390,000 mainly Muslim asylum seekers crossed the Serbian–Hungarian border and descended on the Keleti train station in Budapest. Smaller groups of refugees arrived in Debrecen and Pécs (Rokicka, 2021). Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary, did not see refugees fleeing war-torn countries as a humanitarian challenge but rather as a Muslim invasion threatening national security, social cohesion, and the Christian identity of the Hungarian nation (Goździak & Márton, 2018; Goździak, 2019).

The European Union asked Hungary to find homes for 1,294 refugees. Rather than accept the EU's decision, the Hungarian government spent approximately 28 million euros on a xenophobic anti-immigrant

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campaign. The government called on voters to defend Christian values and Hungarian national identity in order to stop Hungary from becoming “a breeding ground for terrorism” (Vékony, 2019).

Furthermore, the Hungarian government’s response to the threat allegedly posed by the asylum seekers was to erect a 100-mile-long, four-meter-high, razor-wire-topped fence on Hungary’s southern borders with Serbia and Croatia to keep refugees out. Hungarian border police swaggered in pairs alongside the fence in a scene reminiscent of the Cold War, yet, somehow, this was not enough. Hungary recruited 3,000 “border-hunters” to join the 10,000 police and soldiers already patrolling the border (Goździak, 2016).

In September 2015, Hungary amended its Criminal Code to criminalize crossing the closed border, damaging the fence, and obstructing the construction work related to the border closure and to punish any such acts with a three- to ten-year prison sentence. The Act on Criminal Proceedings was also amended with a new fast-track provision to bring the defendants to trial within 15 days of interrogation—or within eight days if caught *in flagrante*. With these new provisions, the Hungarian government declared a “state of crisis due to mass migration” (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2019). Between September 2015 and March 2016, 2,353 people were convicted of unauthorized border crossing (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016). These people generally remained in immigration detention pending removal to Serbia, which Hungary deemed a safe country to which asylum seekers could return. The Hungarian Helsinki Commission argued that Serbia could not be regarded as a safe third country because it recognized virtually no asylum seekers. Applications for a stay of proceedings referring to the non-penalization principle of the 1951 Convention were systematically dismissed on the grounds that “eligibility for international protection was not a relevant issue to criminal liability” (Gyollai & Amatrudo, 2018). In 2018, the Hungarian parliament outlawed helping migrants to launch asylum claims or apply for residence inside the country. The “Stop Soros” legislation stipulated punishments of up to one year in prison for anyone assisting refugees (Human Right Watch, 2018).

In order to gain the public’s support for criminalizing migration and rejecting the European Union’s request to admit a few hundred refugees, the Hungarian government organized a national referendum and asked Hungarians a simple question: “Do you want the European

Union to prescribe the mandatory settlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary without the consent of the National Assembly?”.

Voter turnout was only 39 percent, far short of the 50 percent participation required to make the referendum valid under Hungarian law, but Orbán decided that the 3.3 million Hungarians who voted “no” in the referendum spoke for all 10 million Hungarians. The Orbán government feared that the referendum alone would not deter potential asylum seekers from trying to enter Hungary. In order to ensure that the situation from the summer of 2015 would not be repeated, the government began to further strengthen the borders and close existing refugee camps (Goździak, 2019) and called for “flexible solidarity” and emphasized a preference to support refugees in their countries of origin over assistance and settlement in Hungary.

In this chapter, I juxtapose the Hungarian government’s call for “flexible solidarity” with grassroots efforts undertaken by different actors to welcome asylum seekers and facilitate their onward journey to European countries, where opportunities for more permanent settlement existed. This chapter is a companion piece to an article I published with Izabella Main on flexible solidarity and grassroots solidararians in Poland (Goździak & Main, 2020). Both texts are part of a larger interdisciplinary research project on secular and religious norms and values in the context of the “refugee crisis.”

A description of the field research is followed by a brief discussion of the concepts and frameworks used in this study. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to the analysis of empirical findings. I begin with a discussion of the *flexible* and *effective* solidarity promoted by the Hungarian government and I show how it created deserving and undeserving refugees. I also present the position of religious leaders toward refugees to show how some attempted to welcome the Stranger (and, unfortunately, failed), while others sided with the Orbán administration to advocate for solidarity abroad. Next, I show how different solidararians representing civil society organizations and informal community networks contested the government’s anti-refugee policies. While the civil society actors provided invaluable assistance to asylum seekers, they were not able to affect major policy changes.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter is informed by field research in Budapest, Bicske, Vac, and Debrecen. The research was carried out from September to November 2016, in May 2019, and in March 2020. In total, we¹ interviewed 35 solidarians, in some instances more than once. We also interviewed a few asylum seekers, mainly in Bicske, while the camp was still open, and in Budapest. The interviews took a form of individual in-depth ethnographic interviews, but on occasion, we also held focus group discussions with representatives of Hungarian civil society. Additionally, we spoke with several Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant spiritual leaders as well as lay representatives of the Seventh Day Adventists and the Hungarian Reformed Church. The majority of the interviews were conducted in English, often with the aid of a Hungarian co-researcher. The solidarians representing civil society were mostly young, highly educated women and men between the ages of 25 and 50, with a predominance of women among the interviewees.

I use narrative analysis to identify themes related to the concept and practice of solidarity and the role of religious and secular motivations in providing assistance to asylum seekers and refugees. “Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research that takes story as either its raw data or its product” (Bleakley, 2005, p. 534). Narrative methods have a long tradition in many fields (Eastmond, 2007). In international migration studies, narratives often provide researchers with the only means of learning something about people’s lives in times and places to which they have little other access. In this study, personal accounts allowed me to glean the diversity of actions undertaken by different solidarians and spiritual leaders. Narrative analysis, as used in qualitative research, is grounded in the assumption that meaning is ascribed to phenomena by being experienced and that we can only understand people’s experiences through the way they express it (Schütz, 1972). In other words, experience gives rise and form to narratives, but is also organized and given meaning in the telling. Thus, analytically, I was able to distinguish between solidarity as lived (the events in solidarians’ lives, solidarity as perceived and made sense of (how solidarians see and ascribe meaning to their own actions), solidarity as told (how the experience of solidarity is framed and articulated in a particular context and to a particular audience) (Bruner, 2004), and solidarity as text (the researchers’ interpretation and representation of the story) (Eastmond, 2007).

CONCEPTS AND FRAMEWORKS

Two main concepts frame my discussion: solidarity and solidarians. Much has been written about the concepts of solidarity. I do not intend to review the vast theoretical literature on solidarity; others have done it masterfully (see Bauder & Juffs, 2020 for an analysis of the concept in migration literature). However, I do want to briefly mention a few of the analytical frameworks used to analyze different types of solidarity in Hungary during the refugee crisis.

István Grajczár and colleagues (2021) explored institutionalized solidarity (macro-solidarity, understood as a form of solidarity that is based on the interests of others). They focused on the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and on attitudes toward welfare redistribution, in the context of a hybrid regime built by the right-wing populist government led by Victor Orbán and the Fidesz party. They found that the proportion of the Hungarian population promoting inclusive solidarity was the lowest, while the exclusive orientations were highest.

Using the framework of ethnography of immobility, Annastiina Kallius and colleagues analyzed (unexpected) horizontal solidarities, “involving private citizens working with migrants, standing with them in their protests, sheltering people, and transporting them to the western border.” They consider these actions horizontal modes of solidarity and juxtapose them with “the reading of the migrant crisis as a problem of state responsibility, and migrants as humanitarian victims lacking agency” (Kallius et al., 2016, p. 27).

Looking at Hungary (and beyond), the contributors to the volume *Refugee Protection and Civil Society in Europe* (Feischmidt et al., 2019) discuss numerous forms of solidarity, shaped by local and national contexts, and new constellations of actors engaged in what they call “vernacular humanitarianism,” involving both “local helpers” and “international volunteers.” One of the contributors, Celine Cantat (2019), points to the concepts of reciprocity and commonality as the main characteristics of solidarity with refugees in two border towns in Hungary: Szeged and Pécs. Her discussion is situated in the context of the marginalization of migrants and refugees in Hungary.

In this chapter, I focus on solidarity as debated in the context of the “refugee crisis” (e.g., Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; King, 2016; Rygiel, 2011). I use two interrelated concepts of solidarity: (1) solidarity as a value that underpins the actions of different solidarians working with and

on behalf of refugees and (2) solidarity conceptualized as movements that shape a new kind of cosmopolitanism, namely, cosmopolitanism from below (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019). Finally, I have also been inspired by anthropological analyses of solidarity (e.g., Lem, 2008; Rakopoulos, 2016; Theodossopoulos, 2016).

I am cognizant of the fact that although solidarity as a value continues to be present in public debates, “its meaning is not very clear and depends on the discussant’s intentions” (Petelczyc, 2018, p. 129). The principle of solidarity is also often contested (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Koca, 2016). In contrast with Poland, where civil society members rarely used the word “solidarity” while narrating their involvement with refugees and migrants (Goździak & Main, 2020), Hungarians invoked the concept and its related actions more frequently. There are migrant solidarity groups that use the word in their name, for example, MigSzol Szeged and MigSzol Pécs (Svensson et al., 2017). However, an equal number of people spoke about their desire to support refugees and the need to be hospitable without ever referring to the concept of solidarity.

I use the term “solidarians” to discuss the different actors involved in providing support to migrants and refugees in Hungary. As Rozakou (2018) observed, the word “solidarian” is a neologism resulting from an interesting grammatical–ontological shift that has occurred in Greece, where the adjective *solidarian* (*alliléggios*) has become a noun signifying a person (not just the action) who is in solidarity with somebody else. Rozakou argues that this grammatical modification denotes a radicalization of solidarity in the social spaces where it is being practiced.

In Greece, the word *solidarians* is used to differentiate between activists helping refugees who were arriving in the country during the summers of 2015 and 2016 and employees of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), who also became key actors in the humanitarian relief efforts. Arundhati Roy makes a similar argument when she talks about the NGOization of resistance (Roy, 2014). Many *solidarians* do not define their activities in terms of “service” to “beneficiaries” the way NGO workers do. Rather, they promote and adhere to the principles of egalitarian and empowering relatedness. They talk about “sociality as a rehumanizing process” (Rozakou, 2016, p. 194).

While the concept of solidarity was invoked in Hungary, the term “*solidarians*” was rarely used. Actors standing in solidarity with refugees and migrants referred to themselves as “helpers” and “volunteers.” These

terms were used by both ordinary citizens who felt compelled to assist the asylum seekers and representatives of NGOs.

In summary, I understand solidarity as practices that expand the sense of community, move beyond borders, and are produced mainly at the local level (see Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019), and solidararians as actors coming from all walks of life motivated to support refugees and migrants.

PROMOTING FLEXIBLE SOLIDARITY

At an informal meeting in Bratislava on September 16, 2017, the leaders of the Visegrád Four (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Czech Republic) issued a joint statement emphasizing that migration policy should be based on the principle of “flexible solidarity,” framed as an ability to decide on specific forms of contributing to a solution for the “refugee crisis.” The Visegrád statement suggested that member states ought to be able to contribute to the refugee relocation program in various forms and to express their “flexible” and “voluntary” solidarity with the ongoing refugee crisis (Ardittis, 2016; see also Plomecka & Stankiewicz, 2016). The notion of “flexible solidarity” was later augmented by “effective solidarity,” with its emphasis on solutions leading to effective protection of the EU’s external borders (Frelak Seges, 2017).

Furthermore, the Hungarian government argued that to settle the refugee crisis, the international community should provide humanitarian aid in the countries of crisis. Most importantly, the Hungarian government argued that the country cannot accept any non-Christian (i.e., Muslim) asylum seekers, because Europe should remain Christian. In order to accomplish this goal, the Orbán government established a ministerial office focused on defending Christianity and Christians, including Christians in the Middle East. In an interview, a young representative of that office, whom I call Imad,² spoke at length about the incompatibility of Muslim lifestyle and worldview with European values. He said, “I awaken Hungarians to the difficulties in living alongside Muslims.”³ He also talked about the danger of Muslims bringing their families to Europe. In his opinion, “changing the demographics is part of a major Islamic plan.” Although this young man, born to an ethnic Hungarian mother and a Lebanese father, was not keen on welcoming Syrian refugees in Hungary, in 2015, he offered his services as an Arabic interpreter to the local Caritas, a Catholic charity.

Speaking about his professional work, Imad said that “Europeans are looking at Syrians as a cheap labor force, but my office is trying to help them at home to keep them in Syria.” Apparently, the Hungarian government provided two million forints (approximately \$5,600) to the Catholic Archdiocese in Syria for the reconstruction of homes destroyed by ISIS. Imad said that this relatively small amount of money helped some 4,000 people, while assistance to the 1,200 refugees (the EU quota) would cost much more.

As part of the “solidarity abroad” efforts, the Hungarian government also established a scholarship scheme for Christians from majority-Muslim countries. The scholarship recipients can pursue their studies in Hungary in English. Imad thought that studying in English instead of Hungarian would ensure that they leave Hungary after graduation. He mentioned that before the transformation, many foreign students from Bangladesh, Iraq, and Yemen studied Hungarian prior to embarking on engineering or medical studies. “Unfortunately, most stayed. They married here and stayed. Studying in English now gives them a *better chance to go back*” (emphasis added). In other words, the Hungarian government is doing everything possible to prevent local settlement. Ironically, Imad’s own father came to Hungary from Lebanon to study. He married a Hungarian woman and stayed.

Imad wholeheartedly agreed with Orbán’s approach to Muslim refugees. He said, “I’m still a Fidesz voter because there is no better. We do whatever Orban says because he is a charismatic leader,” Imad added. Imad also emphasized that “Orbán uses religion to define the nation.”

Orbán’s religious conversion is quite remarkable. An atheist when he entered politics in the 1980s, he now calls himself a defender of Christianity. At the opening of the 2nd Conference on Christian persecution in 2019, Orbán said that “the Hungarian people and their government believe that Christian virtues provide peace and happiness to those who practice them.” He also noted that protecting Hungary’s constitutional identity and Christian culture was an obligation for each state agency under Hungary’s fundamental law. “This legacy obliges us to protect Christian communities persecuted across the world as far as we are able,” he said (Hungary Today, 2019).

The focus on “solidarity abroad” meant that the border was closed to new asylum seekers and little was done for the few asylum seekers who had come to Hungary before 2015. Beginning in December 2016, Viktor Orbán closed most refugee camps, including the camp in Bicske.

When I visited the camp a few days before it closed, 75 individuals hailing from Cuba, Nigeria, Cameroon, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan lived there. When the camp in Bicske closed, the refugees were relocated to Kiskunhalas, in southern Hungary. The Bicske camp's location offered its residents access to a variety of educational and recreational activities, which helped them adjust to life in Hungary. Some refugees commuted to Budapest in order to attend classes at Central European University (CEU) or language courses provided by NGOs. Bicske residents attended events and met with Hungarian mentors from groups such as Artemisszió, a multicultural foundation, and MigSzol, a migrant advocacy group. Christian refugees were bused to an American church each Sunday morning. Moving the residents to Kiskunhalas has deprived them of these opportunities.

DESERVING AND UNDESERVING REFUGEES

The Hungarian government continued to endorse “flexible solidarity” until white Christian refugees needed assistance. In 2019, Hungary accepted 300 refugees of Hungarian origin from Venezuela. The Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta led the resettlement effort. The refugees had to prove some level of Hungarian ancestry in order to qualify for the resettlement scheme.⁴

According to Hungarian law, everyone who can prove Hungarian ancestry is entitled to citizenship. As Hungarian legal scholar Edit Frenyó said, “of course process is key, meaning political and administrative will is needed for successful naturalization.” According to media reports, the Venezuelan refugees received free airfare, residency and work permits, temporary housing, job placement, and English and Hungarian language courses (Stone, 2019). In the eyes of the authorities and the general public, they deserved these services. In the official narrative—an ethnonational story of homecoming—they were presented as Hungarians, not refugees. As Gergely Gulyás, Chancellor of the Republic of Hungary, declared: “We are talking about Hungarians; Hungarians are not considered migrants” (Reuters, 2019). Frenyó posits that the Hungarian government must present the refugees as Hungarians seeking to come home in order to avert political backlash and to ensure that the controversial tax law imposed on groups that “support immigration” is not levied on the Malta Order. At least one commentator referred to this situation as “Magyar abszurd” [Hungarian absurd].

Let's fast-forward to February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine. The Visegrád Four offered immediate assistance to Ukrainians fleeing the war. Lydia Gall of the Human Right Watch reported that

at the Hungary–Ukraine border last week and at one of Budapest's main railway stations, I was struck by the enormous outpouring of solidarity from local communities and volunteers helping tens of thousands of people fleeing the war in Ukraine. Hungarians have to date [March 2022] welcomed more than 180,000 refugees from Ukraine with open arms (Gall, 2022).

Gall was impressed by the volunteer and charity organizations trying to provide humanitarian relief to those fleeing Ukraine, but indicated that it was less clear what the Hungarian government was doing.

A week after Russia's invasion, Viktor Orbán traveled to the border town of Beregsurány to meet Ukrainian refugees. Speaking to reporters, he said that “Hungary is a good friend of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. If they need any help, ... they can count on us” (Egan, 2022). There is no clear evidence of what concrete steps the Hungarian government has taken or plans to take in order to aid Ukrainians seeking refuge. One thing, however, is clear: As with the Hungarian Venezuelans, the white and Christian Ukrainians are deemed deserving of help. The brown and non-Christian refugees from the Middle East continue to be unworthy of assistance.

The categorization of refugees as deserving and undeserving is not new. Migration scholars have written extensively about this issue (Marchetti, 2020; Sales, 2002). The deservingness of immigrants is often framed in different and sometimes contradictory ways (Chauvin & Garcés-Masareñas, 2014). For forced migrants (refugees or victims of human trafficking), vulnerability and victimhood have been major criteria of deservingness, but as Sophie Hinger (2020) argues, other framings—such as economic performance or cultural deservingness—also play a role. Cultural and/or religious closeness was definitely a factor in Hungary's decision to assist both Hungarians from Venezuela and Ukrainians.

Across Europe, there are vast differences regarding the perceived deservingness of different groups. While elderly people are seen as the most deserving, immigrant groups are found to be the least deserving (Van Oorschoot, 2006). Among asylum seekers and refugees, women and children have always been considered deserving of assistance. We all

remember the heart-wrenching moment when the body of three-year-old Alan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach. The image of the little boy went viral and created an understanding of the humanitarian crisis. The image “led media to upgrade the ongoing ‘migrant situation’ to a ‘refugee crisis’” (Mattus, 2020, p. 51). Petra Molar (2016) described the image of Kurdi as a “macabre catalyst for progressive change.” On the other hand, photographs of young Kurdish men at the Keleti station posted on social media and published in newspapers were met with outrage; many Hungarians thought that young, able-bodied men should be fighting back in Syria, not seeking asylum in Europe.

Nevertheless, in some circles in Hungary, there were people ready to step up and assist asylum seekers. Some failed to attract followers, despite their best intentions, but others successfully managed to recruit volunteers and develop grass-root assistance networks. I discuss them next.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS’ ATTEMPTS TO WELCOME THE STRANGER

While Hungarian politicians vehemently rejected the idea of accepting non-Christian refugees, some religious leaders endeavored to set an example of welcoming the Stranger. Miklós Beer, the now retired Catholic Bishop of Vác, housed refugees in his rectory. “Pope Francis said that refugees are our brothers. In the Bible, Jesus said: ‘When I was a refugee myself, you took me in.’ You cannot understand this message in any other way.” Beer was disappointed over the apathy of other clergy and members of his congregation and their reluctance to follow in his footsteps. They chose to believe the hateful and intimidating messages broadcasted by state media. He commented on people’s irresponsiveness and hostility, saying, “What makes me sad is that they want to protect Christianity and yet they reject refugees. So, what is it that makes us Christians?” While most of the Hungarian Catholic clergy ignored Bishop Beer, his friend, Lutheran Bishop Tamas Fabiny, joined him in recording a video message about the importance of welcoming the Stranger. They recorded the message at the invitation of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017).

There were also several other members of the Hungarian clergy who responded positively to Pope Francis’s call. Péter Mustó, a Jesuit priest, and Csaba Bőjte, a Franciscan monk, stressed the importance of the message of humanitarian responsibility toward refugees. István Bogárdi

Szabó, the Bishop of the Hungarian Reformed Church's Synod, called for the expansion of the Refugee Mission. Péter Ganec, a Lutheran Bishop, visited one of the refugee camps and called for compassion and assistance to refugees (Barcsa & Máté-Tóth, 2016).

Others, however, thought it was not their responsibility. The Hungarian Baptists believed that it was more important to invest in helping refugees in their countries of origin than providing assistance in Hungary. Leaders of several Hungarian Jewish communities publicly empathized with the persecution faced by Muslim refugees, but called on governments of rich Arab countries to step up and help. They also emphasized the need for strict control of immigration, but maintained that the decision should be in the hands of the Hungarian government (Barcsa et al., 2019).

The Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference admitted the seriousness of the situation and assured the public that Caritas Hungarica was looking for effective ways to help refugees, but also stressed that countries have both a right and a duty to protect their citizens. The bishops also indicated their serious concern for the situation of Christians in the Middle East (Barcsa & Máté-Tóth, 2016).

CONTESTING FLEXIBLE SOLIDARITY

In contrast to the government's anti-refugee policies of recent years and the religious leadership's less than stellar attitude toward refugees, different solidarians hailing both from civil society organizations and informal community networks offered assistance to refugees seeking safe haven in Hungary or safe passage to other countries in the European Union. It is difficult to categorize these solidarians and their actions, as their missions and activities often overlap, but I will attempt to provide a preliminary taxonomy. I have used a range of characteristics and research questions to devise the taxonomy. I looked at the relationship between particular groups of solidarians and the Hungarian government, the types of organization (formal NGOs or informal networks; faith-based or secular initiatives), and the types of action.

Spontaneous Expressions of Solidarity

We witnessed, heard about, and talked to representatives of numerous spontaneously created networks of volunteers whose efforts started in the

early summer of 2015. A Facebook photographic diary, *Budapest Seen*, documented many ordinary citizens stopping by the Keleti train station to drop off food, toys, and diapers. Doctors and nurses were seen providing medical assistance. Young volunteers were spotted playing with children. These acts of solidarity were often expressed at the individual level; people acted of their own volition, motivated by a variety of factors: empathy, secular ethical values, as well as religious values.

In addition to individual solidarians, there were also spontaneously created networks of volunteers and advocates. In this study, I have looked closely at two such networks: one in Debrecen and one in Budapest. Both were established through social media connections, primarily Facebook. The leader in Debrecen, whom I call Éva, sent a mass message to her Facebook friends indicating that the asylum seekers arriving in Debrecen needed to be fed and hydrated. Within an hour, her friends were setting up tables at the station while others were preparing trays of sandwiches. Later on, volunteers assisted refugees in buying train tickets to continue their journey to Austria, since the Hungarian government was adamant that nobody would be able to settle in the country.

The students at the University of Debrecen also got involved. A large group of foreign-born students attend the university, including Arabic-speaking students. Marta, a Yemeni Hungarian medical doctor, alerted her two sons, who speak fluent Arabic and study at the university, to the needs of the incoming asylum seekers. Students volunteered to serve as interpreters, and some even donated money to purchase train tickets for the refugees traveling to Austria. Krisztina, a trained psychotherapist, communicated with other volunteers through a private Facebook page called MigAid 2015.

The network in Budapest operated on similar principles. Volunteers provided assistance—food, money, or train tickets—and coordinated itineraries. They worked both at the Keleti and Nyugati train stations. Some of the volunteers in Budapest were previously involved with Amnesty International. Zsuzsa, who has many connections to Scotland, managed to mobilize donations—financial and material—from her Scottish friends and patrons of a Scottish pub in Budapest.

These volunteer networks were led primarily by women. Éva said that

women know what to do when the world around them is falling apart. They can face any challenge that comes their way. I didn't need to instruct them what kind of food to prepare to meet the dietary requirement of

Muslim refugees. They knew Muslims don't eat pork. They coordinated everything seamlessly.

Éva appreciated the help men provided, but joked that they had neither leadership skills nor common sense:

My husband and many other men whom we recruited to help were willing to step up to the plate, but they had to be told exactly what to do. They had no clue how to arrange tables holding food and water to facilitate a smooth queue.

The groups in Debrecen and Budapest did not seek to formalize their activities. However, other networks, such as MigSzol Szeged and MigSzol Pécs, did establish a more formal NGO connected to the national-level action group. Unlike the Budapest-based MigSzol, which worked with migrants and other vulnerable groups (the disabled and the Roma), MigSzol Szeged and MigSzol Pécs focused solely on asylum seekers (see Svensson et al., 2017).

The groups in Debrecen, Budapest, Szeged, and Pécs

in a surprisingly short span of time ... managed to formulate a wide agenda and significantly raise public awareness and obtain influence. The role and weight of these grassroots organizations in public life was widely magnified in an already highly politicized atmosphere, as their activities ... sharply contrasted with the anti-immigration message of the government (Bernát, 2019, p. 5).

Established Secular Charity and Aid Organizations

While the civil society in Hungary is not as robust as in other countries, there are several established charities and aid organizations, both secular and faith-based. Menedék (Hungarian Association for Migrants) and Migration Aid are examples of secular organizations. Menedék was established in the 1990s, at the height of the Balkan wars. In 2015, with the support of the UNHCR, Menedék established an emergency response team that provided counseling, information, and material support to some 14,000 refugees. After the closure of the border with Serbia, and later the Hungary–Croatia border, members of the emergency response team continued monitoring transit zones and making daily visits to Tompa, Röske, Beremend, Barcs, Zákány, Letenye, and Lenti. They also worked

in three detention facilities in Nagyfa, Martonvásár, and Vác as well as a child protection center in Hódmezővásárhely that provided psycho-social services (personal communication).

In 2015, Migration Aid based its operations in Budapest and had an online membership of 10,000 in closed Facebook groups. The closed groups tied to particular locations usually had a few thousand members, such as those of Migration Aid dedicated to the three largest Budapest train stations (Bernát, 2019). The Migration Aid volunteers focused on children. They brought toys and sweets for the refugee children camping at Keleti and turned the station into a playground during the afternoons. However, when Migration Aid volunteers started to use chalk to draw colorful pictures on the asphalt as a creative means of helping children deal with their trauma, the Hungarian police reminded the volunteers that the children could be made liable for “violating public order.” In contrast to civil society’s engagement with children, the Hungarian government tried to undermine and limit public sympathy toward refugees. Hungarian state television employees were told not to broadcast images of refugee children. Ultimately, the task of visually capturing the everyday life of refugee families and their children, as the only means to bridge the distance between the refugees and the societies receiving them, was left to volunteers and Facebook activists.

The narratives surrounding the activities of established charities, especially those that received government funding, are difficult to disentangle. Some established charity organizations apparently “held that the social work done on the streets by non-professionals (mostly) was not professional and excessive in relation to the number of migrants” (Bernát, 2019, p. 5). Representatives of some established charitable organizations argued that in order to avoid superfluous aid to asylum seekers, they would be marginally involved in the relief work. Many of our interlocutors mentioned seeing representatives of established charities “in their fancy vests with prominently displayed logos, just standing around and doing nothing.” Iványi Gábor, the leader of the Hungarian Evangelical Brotherhood, talked at length about the apathy of the “official helpers” who did not want to provide latrines for the refugees gathered at Keleti saying that “if the refugees need toilets, they should go to Austria; there are plenty of toilets there.”

Faith-Based Networks

Magyar Ökumenikus Segélyszervezet (Hungarian Interchurch Aid), the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), and Hungarian Baptist Aid (HBAid) are examples of well-established faith-based organizations. All have had the blessing of the government, although they have been rather silent on the issue of government funding. When I spoke with a representative of Ökumenikus in the fall of 2016, she talked at length about the assistance the organization had provided to refugees in 2015, both at the border and in the interior of Hungary. Ökumenikus had the support of the government; Anikó Lévai, Viktor Orbán's wife, volunteered with the organization. It is hard to say whether this was a one-off photo opportunity or genuine solidarity with refugees. When the government criminalized assistance to asylum seekers and migrants, all references to the organization's activities with and on behalf of refugees disappeared from their website. Today, they are back in business, assisting Ukrainians displaced by the Russian invasion.

ADRA is part of a large international network operating in 118 countries. It was founded in 1956 in Maryland, USA, and has access to international donors. When we interviewed a staff person of ADRA Hungary, he indicated that they wanted to scale up their activities. The conversation took place as refugee camps were being closed, borders strengthened, and assistance to undocumented migrants criminalized. These events seriously limited their ability to provide assistance to migrants. However, I also had the impression that the expansion of services was very much related to (1) the agency's endorsement of the government's focus on humanitarianism abroad and (2) the opportunity to develop an overseas program. The latter seemed to have been tied with the mission to recruit converts.

Hungarian Baptist Aid (HBAid), another faith-based institution, was heavily involved in the migrant crisis of 2015. HBAid had their own staff and volunteers at Nyugati train station. HBAid offered medical assistance, a mobile baby-bathing unit, and food packages. Once the government restricted the entry process for migrants, HBAid moved their operation to Serbia and Croatia.

The involvement of the Hungarian Evangelical Brotherhood in the migration crisis was quite different. The Brotherhood, established in the 1970s when a group of young theologians split from the Methodist church, is an example of religion meeting political opposition. As Iványi Gábor said, "for over 40 years we have been in opposition—first against

the communist regime, then we were expelled from the Methodist church and recognized as a new denomination, but now with Fidesz introducing authoritarian practices, we are again forced to be the opposition.”

At the time when social work was forbidden in Hungary, the Brotherhood established *Funds for the Poor* to assist the Roma. In an interview, Iványi Gábor, talked about the role of a samizdat periodical called *Beszélő*, meaning “speaker” and “visiting hours in jail” that was first published in 1981. In 1988, the Brotherhood assisted ethnic Hungarians and Romanians fleeing the Ceaușescu regime. They were also involved when Yugoslavia fell apart and people were fleeing en masse.

They are registered as a charity organization, but they operate very much as a spontaneous network of volunteers. When asked whether they collaborate with other faith-based groups, Gábor said that

many churches are not willing to cooperate because then they too would be perceived as the opposition. We can collaborate with certain people, but not with churches as institutions. I have some very good friends among Catholic bishops and Catholic abbots, and we work together—but as individuals.

Human Rights Organizations

While there are several organizations working on human rights issues, many advocate for the Roma or LGBTQ populations and are not focused on refugees and migrants. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC) is an exception. Founded in 1989, the HHC has been providing access to effective, free-of-charge legal counselling and representation to persons in need of international protection. They also regularly comment on draft asylum and immigration legislation and analyze legal practices. They continued their legal counseling services during the refugee crisis. When we last spoke with HHC in March 2020, they were still going strong despite the passage of the “Stop Soros” legislation in June 2018, criminalizing assistance to asylum seekers. Representatives of the HHC and Amnesty International indicated that criminalizing essential and legitimate human rights work was a brazen attack on people seeking safe haven from persecution and those who assist them. The HHC representative we interviewed emphasized that the new law was a new low point in the crackdown on civil society. The organization vowed to resist the law every step of the way.

International Organizations

Several international organizations were present in Hungary during the summer of 2015. Among them were the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The UNHCR, along with the Council of Europe and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR), called on Hungary to refrain from policies and practices that promote intolerance, fear, and xenophobia against refugees and migrants. To mark World Refugee Day on June 20, 2015, the UNHCR's regional office in Budapest prepared a set of billboards showcasing refugees who have successfully integrated into Hungarian society. The UNHCR's poster campaign followed closely on the heels of the Hungarian government's own controversial nationwide billboard campaign, which warned migrants to obey the law and not to take jobs away from Hungarians. Many Hungarians enjoyed the dialogue between the two sets of posters; several of my Hungarian friends pointed me toward lively discussions on social media sparked by the campaigns.

IOM was present at all the different assistance centers, but was often criticized by civil society volunteers for "peddling its brand and doing very little." A representative of IOM told us that he very much regretted that the organization had withdrawn as soon as the government criminalized giving assistance to migrants. "We should have stayed longer," he said. Stopping assistance to asylum seekers contradicted what Magdalena Majkowska-Tomkin, head of the Hungary office of the IOM, told Reuters on September 15, 2015: "From my perspective Hungary needs to respect its international obligations and allow people to claim asylum and provide facilities for them that are adequate for their condition." Majkowska-Tomkin said the IOM saw room for a legal challenge to the new rules, but in the end, the organization did not challenge the decision of the Hungarian government.

IN CONCLUSION

Asylum seekers arriving in Hungary in 2015 entered a country characterized by widespread xenophobia, a high level of mistrust, and a relatively limited history of solidarity with forced migrants (Bernát et al., 2019). The government exploited this state of affairs and pressed what Gerő and Sik (2020) called the moral panic button, an institutionalized

form of fearmongering regarding the threat of migration and a world-wide conspiracy against Hungary that successfully streamlined intolerant thinking among the majority of Hungarian society and dissolved values such as solidarity.

Despite the hostile environment, a number of solidarians emerged and through their actions contested the government's attitudes toward asylum seekers. The number and diversity of civil society networks and organizations formed during the "refugee crisis" were impressive and very much appreciated by the asylum seekers transitioning through Hungary. Many of the networks continue to support migrants. Currently, most are assisting Ukrainians, but some also work with the Roma. However, their influence on immigration and integration policymaking vis-à-vis asylum seekers and migrants from non-European countries has been non-existent. This is not surprising. The Hungarian civil society actors have not yet formed powerful political advocacy akin to the politically minded NGOs operating in major refugee resettlement countries. The continued xenophobia of the current government does not bode well for policy changes in the near future.

NOTES

1. I use the pronoun "we" because I conducted this research with the assistance of Izabela Kujawa, Vera Juhasz, and Péter Márton. I would like to express my appreciation for their involvement in this study.
2. All the names are pseudonyms.
3. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes come from our interviews.
4. About 5,000 Hungarians emigrated to Venezuela in the twentieth century, mostly after World War II and in 1956.

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