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AMBIGUITIES OF SOLIDARITY IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: PROXIMITY, POLITICS OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN FORCED MIGRATION CONTEXTS*

1. *Introduction*

While the concept of the global solidarity emerged as a «response to a deeply divided world which has failed to realise the promise of the United Nations *Declaration of Human Rights*», the political and material interests of great powers are recognised as impediments to its realisation (Wilde 2007: 176). Although global solidarity has its origins in the European political thought, the European Union (EU) and members states from Germany (Uhr et al 2025; Bojadžijev et al 2025) to Central Europe (Remenyik et al 2022; Goździak and Main 2020) have been widely accused of selectively demonstrating solidarity towards close and distant others. Critical migration scholars and criminologists have long investigated how migration governance in EU member states favours those who are privileged enough to travel freely, even amid military conflicts and mass displacements, while criminalising and "illegalising" those arriving from the Global South without adequate reason and proper documentation (Franko 2020; others). It has also been widely addressed how solidarity with illegalised migrants had been increasingly criminalised prior to the Ukrainian war (Carrera et al 2019; della Porta and Steinhilper 2021). As a result, the differences characterising societal, political and legal responses to the *refugee (response/protection) "crisis"*

(2015)[1] and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022) have been described by labels ranging from preferential, differential or discriminatory (Kienast et al 2023; Blomqvist Mickelsson 2025) through the lenses of selective solidarity (Paré, 2022) to selective dehumanisation (Bueno Lacy and van Houtum 2023).

The mass displacement of Ukrainians triggered the activation of the EU's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) mechanism, marking a historic shift in the EU legislation towards forced migration (Kienast et al 2023; Schrooten 2025). Despite the EU-wide welcoming legislative framework toward Ukrainians, the practical implementation of TPD differed between the EU member states. As it became evident that the war would last longer, governments implemented domestic solutions related to long-term integration, while constant discussions on both temporary protection and resettlement began (Schrooten 2025: 2).

While the EU used the rationale of "geographical proximity" to justify the implementation of the TPD, critical scholars contemplated whether this approach may be considered racist (Skordas 2023; Kostakopoulou 2023). On the one hand, the warm official reception of the Ukrainian refugees stood in sharp contrast with the securitising and "illegalising" logics that have been characterising EU migration policy and visa regimes for more than a decade (Stępka 2022). On the other hand, the societal responses also reflected two extreme mindsets, with "heroic solidarity" for desirable Ukrainians being contrasted with 'repugnant racism' (targeting undesired non-European individuals in equal need of protection) (Skordas 2023; Kostakopoulou 2023; Breda and Potot 2024). The implementation of the TPD provided Ukrainians with far greater

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[1] In 2015 the EU witnessed an unprecedented migration wave from South-East Europe, dubbed as refugee (response/protection) crisis. However, each component of this term became contested. While people mostly associated with the political right doubted whether the arrivals were indeed refugees meriting legal protection as victims of persecution (in line with the provisions of the UN Refugee Convention, 1951), social scientists either preferred the term refugee response/protection crisis over refugee crisis or criticised the term 'crisis', arguing that it is the normal state of world affairs which actually means a crisis from the perspective of Global South citizens whose cannot move as freely across borders as Global North citizens do.

legal protection than other migrants fleeing conflicts or perse-cution from outside Europe. While the reception of Ukrainians could be characterized as restrictive, liberal, selective or uni-versal in practice (Hernes and Łukasiewicz 2025), the rhetori-cal justification of "geographical proximity" was perceived as hypocritical fallacy not just in the Global South, but also by critical scholars (Bueno Lacy and van Houtum 2023: 452). The double standards have become even more visible since many countries, such as Hungary and Poland, have not only believed in erecting fences or enforcing pushbacks along the EU's external border as a solution since the 2015, but also opposed the idea of 'promising, but controversial solutions', such as (tradeable) refugee quotas (Sangiovanni 2023).

Racialised attitudes towards different groups of migrants were often used to explain such political (and public) stances in various EU member states (Bueno Lacy and van Houtum 2023 Skordas 2023; Kostakopoulou 2023; Breda and Potot 2024). Focussing his attention on EU members in CEE and contemplating the roots of such perceptions, Branko Mila-novic – a renowned World Bank economist of Serbian origin – attributed such dispositions to entrenched ignorance and post-imperial arrogance of the East European intellectual elites, arguing that they remained largely disengaged from the historical trajectories of the Global South, including decoloni-sation, anti-imperialist movements, and the rise of non-Western powers (Milanovic 2024). This epistemic detachment, exacerbated over the past three decades by EU accession, has prompted a sense of Western belonging among elites who have historically suffered from inferiority complexes, promoting ex-clusionary and hierarchical worldviews according to Mila-novic. As implied, not only elites, but also «nations in CEE were able to imagine themselves as white and tapped into the larger European colonial projects» (Balogun and Ohia-Nowak 2024: 3).

These interpretations resonate well with critiques attribut-ed to decolonial scholars who tend to divide the world accord-ing to the logic of dichotomic colonisation histories, i.e. politi-cal entities and individuals are heirs of either colonisers or the colonised (following or inspired by Sartre [1964] 2006 among others). Such criticism indirectly applies "racist lenses" by as-suming that CEE states belong to the former category based

on skin colour, EU membership, or simply geographical proximity. Such approaches, however, either overlook or neglect the complex historical experiences that CEE societies have accumulated in their relations between East and West. In absence of conventional "colonisation records" (territorial conquest, exploitation of manpower, extractivism of natural resources), contemporary selective solidarity requires an explanation other than well-known tenets like ignorance or hypocrisy. According to the anthropologist Nina Glick Schiller's (2017: 2) observations formulated after the *refugee crisis*, but before the war in Ukraine commenced:

historical reflexivity has become curiously lost in recent writings about migration, integration, and social cohesion despite the emergence of a generation of authors steeped in the deconstructionism of variants of post-modern theory that question any uncritical stance towards hegemonic "truths".

Glick Schiller's goal was to defend "cosmopolitan sociability" – which is focused on recognition of commonalities rather than on passive tolerance of differences – against arguments praising welfare solidarity produced and secured by the nation state (Schiller 2017: 6). CEE, however, is one of those regions of the world, where the borders of the territorial state and the frontiers of the nation (as an ethnic-linguistic community) do not necessarily overlap; nor could people take it for granted that state borders remain fixed or permanent (Lee and Bideleux 2012). As a result, defining the domains of commonality and differences is a somewhat more complicated task in the region than in other Western welfare states, the borders of which were more stable during the 20th Century. While the TPD as a legal instrument can be criticised on political grounds or from the perspective of human rights promising universal standards of protection, the mass societal mobilisation for providing humanitarian aid in the region (Moroń et al. 2025; Ślęzak-Belowska et al. 2026) was by no means obvious, and the widespread solidarity with Ukrainians was more than remarkable (Saracino 2024), considering the historical experiences accumulated by people living in the region.

To further complicate this jigsaw, it is worth to include in the analysis some perspectives from critical humanitarian

studies that have examined race and ethnicity in the context of neoliberal interactions. One of the strongest arguments against mainstream humanitarian practice, with the bulk of aid being delivered to victims of disasters, emergencies and conflicts in the Global South by humanitarian organisations registered in the Global North, frames contemporary humanitarianism as a legacy of colonial philanthropy reflecting "white supremacy". Recalling Polly Pallister-Wilkins (2021:102):

it is necessary, for scholars and practitioners alike, to acknowledge that humanitarianism, with its universalist claims, acts as a salve for sustained racial discrimination and violence, working if not to entirely invisibilise racial hierarchies within suffering, then to make the racial underpinnings of such suffering acceptable through supposedly universal practices of care.

Obviously critical scholars negatively assess not only "white supremacy" embedded in the foundations of contemporary humanitarianism, but also the commercialised nature of contemporary ironic spectatorship, which is more concerned with the privileged (mostly "white") giver's self-esteem and well-being than true solidarity with ("non-white") victims (Chouliaraki 2013). Such ambiguities characterise not only aid relations between Global North donors and beneficiaries in the Global South, but also interactions at EU borderlands and hotspots, demonstrating the negative effects of philanthropy, charity work and humanitarianism in general (Mitchell and Pallister-Wilkins 2023). Ethnographic studies show that (commercialised) universal humanitarianism is very far from the ideals of authentic solidarity, not only in critical scholarship, but also at the level of local perceptions (Theodossopoulos 2016). Thus, scholars have advocated for a more nuanced approach to diverse forms of citizen aid mediating contemporary solidarity and care (Fechter and Schwittay 2019). While Julia Eckert (2024) proposed the citizens' support provided to Syrian migrants in Germany to be interpreted as "radical politics of helping" reflecting cosmopolitan solidarity (as opposed to national solidarity), others argued that autonomous or radical solidarity should be distinguished from (mainstream, institutionalised) humanitarianism, which is far too often complicit in practices of military and political control (Dadusc and Mudu 2022).

Interestingly, if not ironically, while critical migration studies have widely accused the EU in general, and CEE in particular, of selective solidarity favouring Ukrainian forced migrants over migrants and refugees of Global South origin, critical humanitarian studies tend to advocate for local "practices of care", which should be prioritised in emergencies and disasters (Pallister-Wilkins 2021). Hence, the somewhat rhetorical question arises as to whether the advocacy for "local practices" – where the "local" is defined by the logic of proximity – should (or should not) apply to European contexts. Hence, the goal of this paper is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of CEE-based solidarity by answering the following questions:

•   How does the historical backdrop frame contemporary solidarity in the context of the migration in Central and Eastern Europe?

•   How do institutionalised-official and civilian forms of „local care" reflect regional solidarity?

Drawing on studies mapping the impact of earlier population transfers in the region (Becker et al 2020), at the Polish-Ukrainian (Reid 2020) and Hungarian-Ukrainian borderlands (Erőss 2024; Erőss et al 2025), this paper argues that temporal dimensions, such as historical legacies and personal and political memories of past atrocities, are at least as significant for explaining (absent) solidarity as spatial factors (contemporary arrangements in the field of migration governance, human rights and humanitarian practice), including political alliances (Karageorgiou and Noll 2023: 410-412). It demonstrates that notions of distance and proximity are more nuanced than those typically used by scholars focusing on decolonisation and racism. The paper unfolds in the following manner. The methodologies section is followed by an explanation of the term "solidarity" and a brief introduction to the history of CEE. The main section examines the responses of Poland and Hungary, two CEE countries neighbouring Ukraine, by scrutinising solidarity in three domains: institutionalised hospitality and integration practices; official aid transfers (ODA, military aid); and examples of cross-border civilian aid.

2. *Methods, sources and ethical concerns*

This paper mainly provides an interpretative analysis but is also empirically informed by earlier interdisciplinary research conducted by authors[2] in the context of the war in Ukraine, the displacement of the Ukrainian population and their reception in CEE and Israel (Ślęzak-Belowska et al. 2026). Thus, data was gathered by reviewing the literature on responses to the refugee crisis (in 2015) and the war in Ukraine (since 2022) in CEE, as well as doing fieldwork in Poland (2022-2025) and Hungary (2024-25) to bolster narratives about forced migrants and refugees.

The literature review included academic papers and grey literature, such as reports from international agencies (UNHCR, IOM), national authorities (immigration offices, aid agencies), NGOs, and policy documents on the subject. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN offices in Budapest and Rzeszów, and public authorities (officials) who helped forced migrants at the governmental or local (municipality) levels. The majority of interviewees were "practitioner experts", including state and local administration officials, decision makers, policymakers, NGO staff, and academics, representing a wide array of individuals who interacted with migrants professionally. The individual interviews were reinforced by panel discussions with various groups of stakeholders in Poland (two rounds in 2023 and 2025), as well as numerous informal conversations with activists and participants of solidarity-based, humanitarian initiatives for Ukrainians.

The themes associated with the solidarity in the context of migration and forced migration were identified via (critical) narrative inquiry (Pino Gavidia and Adu 2022). We looked for relevant topics during both the literature review, and the fieldwork. Echoing the teachings of migration studies, this approach has allowed us to learn about experiences that are

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[2] The study, as part of the authors' research projects was approved by the ethical boards of both institutions, for a detailed description of the data sources *see* Ślęzak-Belowska and Paragi 2026.

distinctive to time and space, even though we had limited access to all places and people. Those narratives were valuable in learning about the diversity of actions and actors who mediated as acts of solidarity with Ukrainian forced migrants. The narrative analysis in this case begins with the assumption that meaning is attributed to phenomena through the experience of displacement and related solidarity. Learning about experiences comes from the expressions assigned to these experiences. All these experiences can shape and formulate narratives, organise and provide significance to stories about individual acts of solidarity (see Goździak and Main 2020: 3).

3. *Solidarity in a nutshell*

Without a doubt, the concept of solidarity, which has long been rooted in Western intellectual and political traditions, has served as a potent rhetorical and normative tool (Bauder and Juffs 2020). Originating in legal discourse (Karageorgiou and Noll 2022), it underwent a paradigmatic shift in the 19th century, becoming central to philosophical debates in which humanitarianism, philanthropy, and the ethos of *social love* were foregrounded. However, as Kobyliński (2009) argues, the term has since been subject to semantic inflation and instrumentalization, leading to its conceptual dilution and, at times, ideological misuse. It also pertains to the current migration discourse on selective solidarity. Indeed, as noted by Karageorgiou and Noll (2023: 401), it is historically reductionist «to analyse the reception and protection of Ukrainians through the lens of solidarity alone». However, in order to grasp the interplay between time and space, it is inevitable to reflect on the meaning of solidarity first.

Emile Durkheim (Durkheim 1984 [1893]) is credited with one of the first in-depth scholarly reflections on solidarity. He used this concept to demonstrate the institutional and psychological conditions necessary to ensure societal stability amidst «intensifying individuation on the one hand, and the coordination needs of increasingly complex societies on the other» (Weber 2007: 699). Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, it found a resonance in the context of the independence and anti-imperialistic struggles, in which communities all over the

world joined and supported struggles for human rights and self-determination of others (Foucault 1994 cited by Tazzioli and Waters 2022: 187).

Despite being long marginalised within the disciplinary frameworks of political science (Wilde 2007) and international relations (Weber 2007), the concept of solidarity has resurfaced from theoretical obscurity to become a key point of research among social scientists. It is increasingly recognised as a foundational mechanism for facilitating social integration, and the provision of collective goods not just *within* the architectural nation-state, but also beyond it. Alternative conceptualisations of solidarity and understandings of its functionality appear to have muted old cleavages, such as beliefs in the exclusivity of «nation states being the quasi-natural side of sharing» (Bourdieu 1977: 166 referenced by Eckert 2024: 3). The rich scholarship exploring the nature and features of the emerging global civil society (GCS), which focusses on arrangements beyond the administrative power of states and (transnational) corporations, has long normalised the use of concepts such as global or transnational solidarity (Kaldor 2003; Keane 2003; Anheier 2005: 328-358) and even created new terms, such as cosmopolitan sociability (Glick-Schiller 2016). The increasing institutionalisation of the GSC-initiatives and the professionalisation of NGOs has resulted in widespread criticism of their credibility, calling into question their roles as genuine mediators of (global) solidarity, particularly in the humanitarian sector (Dadusc and Mudu 2022; Mitchell and Pallister-Wilkins 2023). As acknowledged by scholars and practitioners of new humanitarianism, aid aiming at alleviating suffering can easily sustain the oppressive action as long as it ignores the political context and causes of a conflict under the pretext of neutrality and impartiality (Terry 2002; others).

Regardless of its dimensions (local, national, global) and domains (political, social, humanitarian) the essential principle of solidarity is burden-sharing (Karageorgiou and Noll 2023: 403-406). Originally, it was defined as «the preparedness to share resources with others by personal contribution to those in struggle or in need through taxation and redistribution organised by the state» (Stjernø 2004: 2). The state, however, has never been the exclusive (re)distributor of soli-

darity. As a result, solidarity should rather be viewed as a distinct type of social phenomenon, «a form of joint action [the purpose of which is] to overcome significant adversity, where participants identify with one another and are disposed to come to each other's aid in pursuit of shared goals» (Sangiovanni 2025: 46). This definition captures three crucial elements – collective action, identification with others, and mutual aid in the face of existing adversity (Sangiovanni 2025: 46-56), which characterises the two most basic forms of solidarity actions: gift exchange and hospitality.

Despite its marginalisation in political and international relations theory in the second half of the 20th century, solidarity has been rediscovered as a fundamental component of social order in philosophy and sociology. Jürgen Habermas (1990; 2012), one of the most well-known theoreticians of European solidarity, defined solidarity as the "reverse side" of [legal] justice, emerging from interpersonal communication and enacted within spaces of dialogue free from coercive power relations, while also noting that civil solidarity expresses "joint political will-formation in the EU". Obviously, solidarity unites members of a political community through shared normative commitments, including the willingness to make sacrifices for the welfare of others (Kobyliński 2009). However, such normative manifestations of solidarity are not without contestation. Recent research has revealed the darker undercurrents of solidarity, notably in the context of migration governance. The notion of *crimes of solidarity,* in which states criminalise humanitarian or civilian aid to migrants and refugees demonstrates not only the tension between moral imperatives and securitised state, but also the limits of solidarity within the borders of (nation) state (Carrera et al 2019; della Porta & Steinhilper 2021; Tazzioli & Walters 2022).

Local gift exchanges traditions and hospitality practices are, in some ways, universal and timeless. Whether interested, altruistic or ambiguous, these behaviours presume solidarity between either communities or individuals, often regardless of state involvement, participation, or regulation (Derrida 2000 [1998]; Mauss 2002 [1925]; Adloff 2006; Pyyhtineen 2014, others). However, it must be acknowledged that neither the concept of European solidarity, nor solidarity in the context of colonial relations and postcolonial arrange-

ments such as foreign aid, can be understood without Mauss' conceptualisation of gift exchanges between archaic sovereigns as *total social fact* (Mallard 2019). Traditional, ambiguous gift exchange practices have modern equivalents in international contexts: foreign aid, primarily official development assistance (with humanitarian aid included in ODA statistics).

Since the 1950s, foreign aid has been portrayed as the classic, though not necessarily altruistic realm of *international solidarity* (solidarity between states). "Official" in its name, ODA-financed projects are widely implemented with the participation of non-state actors. Although its normative purpose is either developmental (reforming the recipient) or humanitarian (saving lives, alleviating suffering), there is a wealth of scholarship exploring foreign aid as gift (inspired by Mauss), the primary function of which is more to maintain friendly relations and preventing violence or disorder than delivering development in economic or political terms (Hattori 2001; Hattori 2003; Furia 2015). While Hattori (2001) used the term "symbolic domination by giving" to describe contemporary official aid relations between states, others questioned whether alliance or coalition-building (for example, by providing ODA out of self-interest) can be considered solidarity action at all (Sangiovanni 2025: 48). Recalling that the „devil lies in the details", hospitality, including in-donor refugee costs, may also be included in the ODA statistics.[3] As a result, the matter of refugee admission, within or beyond the framework provided by the UN Refugee Convention (1951), cannot be interpreted

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[3] Recalling the rules: «(1) the rationale for counting in-donor costs as ODA underlines that refugee protection is a legal obligation and that assistance to refugees may be considered a form of humanitarian aid; (2) the eligible categories of refugees imply that categories must be based on international legal definitions. Asylum seekers and recognised refugees are covered; (3) the "12-month rule" reaffirms that expenditures beyond 12 months are outside the scope of statistics on international aid flows; (4) the rule on the "eligibility of specific cost items" explains what cost items may or may not be included in reporting, e.g. temporary sustenance (food, shelter, training) is eligible, but not costs of integrating refugees into the economy of the donor country. Since Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine, the costs of refugees' support have risen, including those provided by one provider country to another one hosting people fleeing the war, such as Poland. This category of costs is identified individually in DAC statistics» (OECD DAC 2025e, see also OECD DAC 2025g).

without taking the goal of alliance-building, as an alternative to war and violence, into account. Indeed, the EU's response and the activation of TDP can be viewed both as a manifestation of international solidarity and a means of alliance-building (Karageorgiou and Noll 2023).

Other labels also reflect existing ambiguities. Acknowledging that international solidarity (between states) is not to the same as *transnational or global solidarity* (solidarity between non-state actors), certain GCS entities, particularly humanitarian and development iNGOs, as well as faith-based organisations (FBOs) affiliated with churches, cultivate ambiguous relations with states and international organisations (such as the UN or the EU). Many of them combine official financing with private donations to implement their projects in the Global South. As a result, "borderless" solidarity can be viewed not only as transnational or global (Featherstone 2012), but also as cosmopolitan (Glick-Schiller 2016; others) highlighting the limitations of state and organisational power in providing welfare, protection and security to people in need.

The aforementioned nuances also apply to domains of (international vs transnational, cosmopolitan, global, citizen) hospitality, specifically support for "aliens" entering European soil. Indeed, the concept of solidarity was further revitalised when migrants and refugees arrived, making it an even more powerful and contested domain than it was before (Ataç et al 2017; Bauder and Juffs 2020: 46; Carrera and Ineli-Ciger 2023). Such solidarity implies a "morphology" of assistance towards people "en route" or in transit, because aid to them is dependent on both geography and temporality. Hence, natural landscapes (e.g. sea, rivers, mountains) shape the practice of solidarity, whereas temporary locations (e.g. camps, shelters) refer to its adaptive nature (Tazzioli and Walters 2022).

To summarise, the widespread and multidimensional meaning of solidarity has been changing both within and outside the borders of the nation-state: from the Durkheimian mutual interdependence and a sense of national or ethnic "we-ness", through support for the welfare state and care for those in need, to joint political activism – beyond nations and nationalism – along with its empirical manifestations. The debated manifestations include bonds between people based on similarities, common identities shared by values and norms,

as well as relationship and interdependence among group members, to name a few. While there is no doubt that solidarity is a prerequisite for serving collective (rather than just ethnic or national) interests, achieving a clear synthesis is difficult due to variety of meanings across the research fields (Koos 2019: 629-633) and the abundance of scholarship contemplating solidarity in migration and aid contexts.

True solidarity seems to be based on mutual identification «with one another based on role, cause, condition, set of experiences, or way of life», and those involved «intend to do [their] part in overcoming *some significant adversity* ... by pursuing a shared goal together» (Sangiovanni 2005: 47). Obviously, the term "others" appears both in definitions and in the public discourse on solidarity, implying symbolic boundaries that separate "insiders" from "outsiders", resulting in both inclusion and exclusion. According to Wilde (2007: 173), «the paradox at the heart of solidarity has long been evident»: on the one hand, it has connotations of unity and universality, emphasising responsibility for others and the sense of togetherness, on the other hand, it manifests itself most forcefully in antagonism towards other groups, often in ways that reject the possibility of compromise. This paradox has painful consequences when individuals identify with or considered belonging to multiple groups at the same time based on their diverse group identities (location/origin, language, religion, ethnicity, gender, class, etc.), while the given groups, demanding loyalty from their members, fight each other.

4. *The past shaping contemporary solidarity in CEE*

While countries in Central and Eastern Europe are rarely discussed within the framework of postcolonial or decolonial scholarship, there are studies documenting historical matrices of domination/subordination, exploitation, and forced assimilation – typical for colonial settings – vis-à-vis Russia, Germany, Poland or Austro-Hungary, both in the context of nations and some ethnic groups (Gerwarth and Malinowski 2009; Bakuła 2014; Budryte 2023; Thompson 2000; Polakowska and Skórczewski 2020; Kalmar 2022: 199-226). Hence,

our "decolonial" perspective focuses not only on unequal power dynamics, at the micro and macro levels, but also seeks to deconstruct narratives in order to understand and critically assess the existing differences and shifting roles of victims and perpetrators.

To understand selective solidarity in CEE, both the phenomenon "racism without race" and the depiction of CEE states and societies "as backward" must be problematized for their inherent relatedness. The former emerged as a response to the trauma of the Holocaust in Europe after 1945, with sociological markers replacing biological traits in public discourse. During communism, most Central and Eastern European states, did not register citizens' ethnic or religious origins, such as Jewishness, or other minority status. And because "race" did not appear in official statistics or discourse (Balogun and Ohia-Nowak 2024), anti-racist education could not become part of any curriculum in East Central Europe, namely the V4 countries (Kalmar 2022: 243). Regarding "backwardness", when the "new member states" were not catching up with the "much richer and more powerful West" after the fall of the communism (1990), the EU-accession (in 2004) or during the refugee (protection) crisis (after 2015), they become stigmatized by the EU and its privileged public (Lovec et al 2021). Their "failure" and reactions were not attributed to the "invisible hand of intervention by Western-dominated, global market neoliberalism" – labelled as racial capitalism – rather its societies were labelled as «congenitally, inherently, culturally backward» by many in the West (Kalmar 2022: 5). Acknowledging that Ivan Kalmar himself acknowledged that some of his arguments could be easily appropriated for cynical, populist purposes (Kalmar 2022b), it is worthwhile to recall his overall assessment on the relation between racism *by* CEE and racism *towards* its citizens (2022: 5):

To be blind to this, and instead to blame "Eastern European" backwardness for what is very much the West's doing, is racist.

Furthermore, just as «about every [white] Eastern European knows how it feels to be, if not attacked, then dismissed or demeaned by Western white people» (Kalmar 2023: 1467), the "other" for Central and Eastern Europeans, perhaps with the

exception of the Roma people and some of those with Jewish origin, was also historically "white" – different in terms of language and ethnicity rather than skin colour.[4] Nationalities – often speaking the same language but having different religions, or vice versa, sharing religion, but speaking different languages – lived in multiple states, and states have hosted minorities in addition to the majority population since the end of the first World War (Arendt 2017: 352-379). As a result, neither welfare and solidarity, nor their absence could be interpreted solely within the frameworks provided by contemporary nation states, as they have also been part of diaspora politics.

Historical events (see later) have demonstrated that a person resembling the majority society in terms of physical appearance does not automatically enjoy solidarity among "white" ethnic and class groups in CEE either. It can be illustrated by recent practices on how group identities in the era of citizenships and passports are questioned or denied, even within Europe and *within* state borders until today. An embarrassing example of missing solidarity is provided by a recent legislation in Hungary (Act on the Protection of Local Identity 2025) that in name of protecting „local identity", „cultural heritage" and „community values" enacted municipalities' right to decide whether properties can be freely purchased by individuals (non-residents of the given village or city), or whether preferential purchase rights should be granted to local residents and existing property owners. The proposed law «allows municipalities to exercise pre-emption rights and to restrict or make the registration of residence conditional» (Kamocsay-Berta 2025). As Angela Kóczé (2025) put it, the law normalizing racial exclusion – targeting mostly the Roma and foreigners from the Global South – is «not merely a legal failure but a moral abandonment – a betrayal of the European Union's foundational promise that citizenship and rights cannot depend on local or racialised boundaries». This failure is even problematic because laws may as well be used to mitigate the harmful impacts of human perceptions. Quot-

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[4] This paragraph revisits certain claims published in Ślęzak-Belowska and Paragi 2026, which will be discussed further in this paper.

ing Sandor Fegyir, Ukraine's ambassador to Hungary (Vörös 2025):

Journalist: *Who are you [i.e. how would you define yourself]?*

Fegyir: *Transcarpathian. According to Hungarians, someone who is not Hungarian; according to Ukrainians, someone who is not Ukrainian. To make matters even more complicated: the Hungarians of Beregszász [Beregovo] do not regard the inhabitants of Ungvár [Uzhhorod – 70 km away] Hungarians. For example, Róbert Brovgyi [one of the most decorated officers in the Ukrainian army], even though his ancestors are Hungarian, is not regarded as Hungarian in Beregszász/Beregovo. What about mixed marriages, in which even though they know Hungarian fluently, they are still not [considered] Hungarian?*

The above self-assessment highlights the complexities of identities in Western Ukraine (Kovály and Opioła 2024) and aligns with Ivan Kalmar's (2022: 4) observation that «Central Europeans *should* see the need for solidarity with the Global South» based on a rational analysis. However, addressing the cognitive residue of the past is easier said than done.[5] Locals never needed "distant others" to show suspicion, indifference, hostility, cruelty, or to engage in 'racism without race', as opposed to solidarity based on shared humanity. Indeed, the 20th century was marked not only by military conflicts, but also by mass executions and extrajudicial killings, dispossessions (of rights and property), and exterminations of entire communities based on (manipulations of) ethnicity, religion or class. The most well-known examples include the Ukrainian Holodomor (1932-33), the Jewish Holocaust and Roma Porajmos (1939-1945) (Applebaum 2017; Popieliński and Krzyżanowski 2020; Holocaust-studies), which were preceded, accompanied, or followed by population transfers (of Germans, Schwabs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Jews, Poles etc.) across state borders redrawn upon great powers' discretion and in-

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[5] Proving causality here would require a separate paper, but evidence from disciplines such as neuroscience, psychology and even economic science (Mullainathan and Shafir 2014) confirms a common logic: having less than needed, that is, the struggle for (financial, emotional, time-related, etc) resources – triggered by poverty, deprivation, transgenerational trauma, etc – has an adverse impact on thinking and behaviour, empathy and solidarity included.

terest (Lee and Bideleux 2012; Becker et al. 2018). Ukraine is by no means an exception. That the past is never over is well illustrated by Donald Trump's 'peace plan' that would expect Ukraine give up territories it currently controls to Russia, among others (The Guardian 2025; Harding 2025).

While hundreds of thousands of war prisoners and political prisoners from CEE states were sent to labour camps in the territory of Ukraine (or elsewhere in the former Soviet Union) and many lost their lives there not only during, but even after the Holocaust and WW2, Ukraine's population also suffered exceptional losses during the 20th century (Reid 2000). What is obvious to those dealing with the legacy of the region or the scholarship attributing common roots to the Holocaust and genocides committed in the colonies (Arendt 1951/2017; Gerwarth and Malinowski 2009: 279-280; Zimmerer 2024; others) appears to be overlooked by scholars naively criticising selective solidarity: societies in CEE were at least as much subject to imperialism and great power rivalry over the centuries, with all of its consequences, becoming not only both victims *and* perpetrators (sometimes taking both roles within a lifetime), but also carrying similar burdens of transgenerational traumas, as inhabitants of colonised territories.

As many segments of the civilian population suffered tremendous losses east of the "Szczecin/ Stettin – Triest/Trst" line until about the 1950s (1980s),[6] and as a result of the "end of history" and the arrival of the neoliberal market in the region in the 1990s, survival – not only of the individuals, their families and descendants, but also that of the wider community – required norms and skills different from those in the West. For example, the shared experience of decades of communist rule, including enforced membership in state-controlled organisations has undermined spontaneous or autonomous solidarity by instilling antipathy towards voluntary organisations in the region (Howard 2003). Similarly, racism, illiberalism and populism are neither "out of the blue", nor inexplainable (Kalmar 2022; Kalmar 2023).

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[6] For a collection of atrocities and casualties suffered and committed only in Hungary (in the territory of former Austria-Hungary) in the 20th century, see http://konfliktuskutato.hu/ (in Hungarian only).

Considering the above, it becomes necessary to examine the contemporary configurations of solidarity as well as the emerging fault lines of inclusion and exclusion that are forming in the aftermath of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. This necessitates a critical engagement with both normative and empirical dimensions of solidarity as they are rearticulated within the CEE's socio-political landscapes. The ongoing debate surrounding the war in Ukraine foregrounds the contingent nature of solidarity, demonstrating its alignment with – or detachment from – the political affinities of individuals, groups, and power elites alike. State actors, mediated through governmental institutions and political leadership, may adopt bifurcated approaches: either actively endorsing solidarity-driven responses or exhibiting marked indifference at the rhetorical level (Szabó and Lipiński 2024). Simultaneously, societal actors, ranging from individual citizens to organised segments of civil society, may demonstrate profound empathy and engagement or, alternatively, display apathy and detachment from those in need.

Crucially, the interplay between state and society is determined not only by historical legacies, but also by current socio-political climates. Authorities may either align with public sentiment to enact inclusive solidarity measures or be compelled by civic pressure to carry out solidarity-oriented initiatives, even if their ideologies differ even in Russia. A third option is demonstrated by the case of Hungary, where the government not only manipulated public opinion against refugees and migrants (Tóth and Bernát 2023: 273), but also criminalised segments of the civil society that assisted refugees in name of counterterrorism, national security and public order during the refugee crisis in 2015 (Romaniuk 2022) in the shadow of de-institutionalising official refugee protection (Nagy 2016; Segarra 2023). A similar criminalisation pattern arose in Poland in response to activists assisting migrants from the Global South attempting to cross the Belarussian and Polish border with the support of the Belarussian KGB. Some of the activists were charged with so called 'illegalising migrants' stay' or facilitating their stay, but the District Court in Hajnówka acquitted them (Polska Agencja Prasowa 2025).

5. *Solidarity in CEE in the shadow of the war in Ukraine*

Seven years after the refugee crisis, the initial phase of the Russian invasion of Ukraine left a striking and rather paradoxical landscape in both countries. With the outbreak of war, Polish citizens mobilised *en masse* to assist displaced Ukrainians, temporarily overshadowing historical grievances and geopolitical tensions. This spontaneous civic engagement echoed throughout political institutions, compelling state authorities to align with humanitarian imperatives and collaborate with various actors to orchestrate solidarity-based responses, both formal and informal, including legal solutions. In line with the EU legislation, both Poland and Hungary activated the EU's Temporary Protection Mechanism (TPM), sort of revising their previously restrictive asylum policies amid the 2015 refugee crisis. This legal framework granted fleeing Ukrainians immediate access to housing, employment, healthcare, and education, circumventing the protracted asylum procedures typically required (Łukasiewicz and Matuszczyk 2023; Moron et al 2025). This model by linking asylum and integration, can be seen as simultaneously restrictive and liberal, depending upon who seeks the protection (Łukasiewicz, Yeliseyeu, Pachocka 2025).

Unlike Hungary, the Polish government implemented several strategic support measures aimed at Ukrainian state and its governing authorities, establishing itself as a key regional actor in the coordination of solidarity-driven responses to the crisis (Kopper et al 2023). These measures had both symbolic and material dimensions, reflecting a conscious alignment with Ukraine's sovereignty and resilience in the face of Russian aggression (Hargrave, Bryant 2024). Over time, the initial surge of solidarity – characterised by widespread civic mobilisation and institutional support for Ukrainians, both forced migrants and those living in Ukraine – faded, giving way to a significant shift in public sentiment and state position.

Based on the collected sources, we attempt a scholarly synthesis addressing practices of "local care" – both official and civilian responses – in Poland and Hungary towards Ukraine, as well as Ukrainian forced migrants. Acknowledging that we attribute a broader meaning to the concept local care than the literature usually does (Pallister-Wilkins 2021; Zakariás et al

2024: 3-4), the emphasis is placed on three areas of contested solidarity: institutionalised hospitality and integration practices; official forms of aid (ODA, military assistance), and examples of authentic civilian cross-border initiatives.

A) Institutionalised hospitality: reception and integration

Ukrainians' reception and integration in the region are inextricably linked to differential treatment of borders and bodies. While Hungarian-Serbian and Polish-Belarusian borders became heavily securitised both in regulatory terms and in practice (Caballero-Vélez 2024; Korte 2023; Graban 2023; Polko 2025), the Ukrainian-Hungarian and Ukrainian-Polish borders have witnessed unprecedented solidarity and hospitality[7] since February 2022. Not only has the differential treatment of migrants on different borders been criticised in public discourse and by scholars, but the degree of hospitality enjoyed by Ukrainians and others has differed across the region and even within countries (Tóth and Bernát 2023; Fóti 2024; Moroń et al 2025).

Poland emerged as one of the top host countries for Ukrainian forced migrants, with about a million individuals currently residing there under the TPD-mechanism (Eurostat 2025). Acknowledging that Ukrainians had previously migrated to Poland also in peaceful circumstances, given their origin, favourable regulations (Krystyna and Weinar 2008), the country and its citizens demonstrated a strong institutional response towards Ukrainians. The Polish government, along with EU institutions and NGOs, civil society and local authorities implemented large-scale integration programmes that provided housing subsidies, language training, and employment assistance to vulnerable groups, particularly women with children (DG for Migration and Home Affairs 2022). The overall assessment of the situation shows that the TPD framework – translated into the national regulation, was rather welcoming, but with certain deficiencies. Due to insuffi-

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[7] The official costs of hosting Ukrainians (as refugees) may be included in ODA-statistics to the extent that governments disclose them to the OECD DAC.

cient assistance from the state, international organisations, including NGOs, swiftly filled the financing gap by establishing a network and *ad hoc* programmes to address the needs of forced migrants (Łukasiewicz and Matuszczyk 2023; Bielewska et al. 2025)

The available data show the vast magnitude of this solidarity and hospitality, particularly in terms of access to local healthcare and transportation. As for the former, 1.3 million forced migrants benefited from publicly funded healthcare services from February 2022 to the end of September 2024. The entire cost of treatment amounted to PLN 4.3 billion, with the following services included (National Security Bureau 2025): primary care facilities (more than 1.1 million patients); outpatient specialised care (514,000); inpatient treatments (457,000); psychiatric care (21,000); vaccinations administered to children (77,000); oncology care services (7,000 Ukrainian patients);paediatric oncology and haematology services (more than 1,000 children). In addition, the national railway operator (PKP) allowed free passage for Ukrainian citizens and established reception points at selected stations, including Przemyśl Główny, Chełm, and Warszawa Wschodnia. Finally, a daily humanitarian train (Lviv–Przemyśl) and a medical train (Mościska–Warszawa) were launched to transport aid and injured individuals (Polsko-Ukraińska Izba Gospodarcza n.d).

This hospitality stands in stark contrast to the initially stringent asylum policy adopted during the 2015 refugee crisis. The geographic, cultural, and emotional proximity of the war in Ukraine catalysed a significant normative and policy shift, resulting in a preferential treatment of Ukrainians over others (Letki et al. 2024; Bansak et al. 2023; Moise et al. 2024; Trychomiak and Wróblewska 2022).

Emerging evidence, however, also suggests a growing societal unease (Danielewski 2025) and erosion of initial solidarity amid the intensification of presidential election campaigning and a resurgence of border-related alarmism propagated by some media, political elites, and nationalist activists (Bąkiewicz 2025). Within the securitisation of migration discourses, even Ukrainians – once emblematic of deservingness – are increasingly portrayed as burdensome or "undeserving migrants". This shift is exemplified by the presidential veto of the

legislation aimed at extending social support for Ukrainians, despite the continued applicability of the EU's Temporary Protection Directive. As a result, the government has been forced to seek alternative policy solutions to address the crisis. Recently, a new law has been formulated and signed, but it covers the Ukrainians with protection only until March 2026. The transition from enthusiastic reception to ambivalence reflects the conditional and politically contingent nature of solidarity within the socio-political landscape of Poland.

Hungary[8] has also had a long history of hosting Ukrainians, both with and without Hungarian citizenship or mother tongue, for historical and economic reasons (Çağlar and Gereöffy 2008). While its official solidarity with foreigners was labelled as 'utilitarian' serving the political economy of its foreign and migration policies (Tóth and Bernát 2023: 272, 275-276), the country lacked a functioning asylum system and a cohesive integration policy before the war (European Commission 2024). As a result of the politics of reporting, conflicting data is available to the public in almost every regard (Fülöp 2025): according to governmental communications, 1,38 million border crossings have been registered at the six border crossing points along the Ukrainian-Hungarian border since February 2022, and the government spent about HUF 100 billion (ca USD 300 million or EUR 250 million) on hosting Ukrainians in the first three years. However, as of August 2025 approximately only 39 000 Ukrainians enjoy the *menedékes* status after having registered in line with the TPD-mechanism. Neither researchers, nor media workers are convinced about the reliability of the data (Fülöp 2025).

Just as elsewhere, the state is legally responsible for the protection and temporary integration of people seeking refuge or asylum (in line with the Refugee Convention, 1951) in Hungary too. The domestic legal protection mechanisms have also been aligned with the TPD, which prescribed to grant specific rights and assistance to those receiving temporary protection (Nagy 2023: 152-156; Tóth and Bernát 2023: 273-276). Even though the TPD protection status has been extended until March 2026, the government modified the geographical eligibility criteria, as a result of which parts of Western Ukraine –

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[8] This paragraph builds on Ślęzak-Belowska and Paragi 2026.

which has historically been a home to Ukraine's mostly illiterate Roma population too – have been considered safe from August 2024.

Despite establishing the necessary regulatory framework and providing subsidies, the level of enthusiasm demonstrated by the government and the National Directorate-General for Aliens Policing (NDGAP/OIF) was much lower than elsewhere in the region, for example, Poland (Nagy 2023; Eurofund 2024; Kiss 2022). Though the National Humanitarian Coordination Council (NHCC), led by the Prime Minister's Office, has been involved in coordination, communication and support (HU GOV 2013; Eurofund 2024), the task of implementing official hospitality has been «essentially outsourced …. to five Church-based organisations and the Red Cross that coordinated their activities with the National Directorate-General for Disaster Management» as well as to civil society organisations and initiatives (Nagy 2023: 149). The government not only allowed CSOs, FBOs, the UNHCR and the IOM, and citizens to respond to the needs of Ukrainian refugees proactively in Spring 2022 (Tóth and Bernát 2023: 282-289), but the practical implementation of the legal obligations became somewhat "messy", undercoordinated at the macro level but over-coordinated at the mezo level (Kiss 2022; Ślęzak-Belowska and Paragi 2026: 100-104).

While various aid organisations simultaneously mapped needs, provided up-to-date and reliable multilingual information on rights, obligations and services by translating information from English and Hungarian to Ukrainian, and served as contact points for those Ukrainians who required legal or other assistance to navigate the Hungarian bureaucracy (healthcare system included), the Municipality of Budapest took the lead in supporting Ukrainian forced migrants in the capital, as due to its strategic location most Ukrainians had to stop in Budapest, even if they did not intend to stay in Hungary. It took on this responsibility as a "voluntary commitment" rather than a legal obligation, opening a reception centre and coordinating aid with UNICEF and the private sector (Csoba et al., 2025a).[9] Despite politically strained relations

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[9] Interview with an advisor from the Municipality of Budapest, Sept 28, 2024. In Hungarian «*2. Budapest Főváros Önkormányzata önként vállalt feladatai,*

with the government, the capital city provided assistance to Ukrainian individuals and families registered in the city through UNICEF funding and cooperation with the largest commercial bank (Ślęzak-Belowska and Paragi 2026: 101)

B) Giving: official aid transfers to Ukraine and Ukrainians

Since the refugee crisis and war in Ukraine, not only have migration control and border protection policies become further securitised[10], but so have official forms of international solidarity, such as foreign aid. In addition to the military aid it has received in the context of the war, Ukraine, classified as an ODA-eligible, lower-middle income country (LMC)[11] has also become one of the largest ODA-recipients since the war began.[12] The war also forced it to reconsider its previous legislation, which had prohibited most Ukrainian civil society organisations from accepting foreign funding or benefit from any form of cross-border solidarity prior to the war (Oleinikova 2017).

16. az Ukrajnában zajló háború miatt otthonuk elhagyására kényszerülő személyek megsegítésében való közreműködés, ennek keretében – a rászorulók igénye szerint – átmeneti elhelyezésük és ellátásuk biztosítása, életkörülményeik egyéb lehetséges módon történő javítása» (Budapest 2022).

[10] Securitisation in the humanitarian sector first appeared in the context of the GWOT (global war on terror), 25 years ago. The US' stance had less of an impact on the CEE states, given that the V4 countries only joined the EU in 2004 (but with the EU accession they adopted the EU and OECD DAC's "development policies" with their obsession with security, counterterrorism, and PVE).

[11] LMC, per capita GNI: 1 136 – 4 465 USD

[12] According to the OECD DAC (2025a; 2025b), Ukraine has received the following amounts of ODA in the past years: USD 16.1 billion (2022) and USD 18.215 billion (2023; 8% of the total ODA). In 2024 ODA to Ukraine decreased by 16.7% from the previous year (USD 15.5 billion), accounting for 7.4% of the total net ODA granted by DAC member countries. Counted as part of the ODA, humanitarian aid provided by donor governments amounted to USD 1.8 billion, marking a sharp 43% decrease from 2023. Similarly, spending on hosting Ukrainians in donor countries has also decreased. The EU institutions allocated 53% of their total net ODA (19 billion USD) to Ukraine. General trends:
https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/official-development-assistance-oda.html and sources of data: https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD(2025)6/en/pdf (OECD DAC 2025a) and full report (OECD DAC 2025b):
https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/cuts-in-official-development-assistance_8c530629-en/full-report.html.

Table 1. Net bilateral ODA from OECD DAC donors to Ukraine
(million USD, 2023 constant prices)

	2021	**2022**	**2023**	**2024 (prelim)**
All DAC donors, of which		16 121	18 215	15 458
… DAC-EU countries (bilateral)		2 635	2 339	2 077
… Poland	105.6	226 (370*)	230	175
… Hungary	23.4	15 (88.7*)	14.5	5.8
EU Institutions		10 616	20 527	18 973

*including in-donor refugee costs; s*ources*: OECD DAC 2024: 13, OECD DAC 2025a: 11; *Hungary*: OECD DAC 2025c: 15; *Poland*: OECD DAC 2025d: 15)

Limiting the discussion to Poland and Hungary, while the proximity of the Ukrainian war explains securitisation sentiments, there are significant differences across the V4 countries, Poland and Hungary included, that are not unrelated to their differing foreign policy considerations (Szynol 2025).

Poland. Its response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has positioned it as a leading actor in both humanitarian and military support within the European Union, as well as an emerging external contributor (Zalas-Kamińska 2024). Aside from its substantial contributions to ODA, Poland ranks first globally in terms of aid to Ukraine as a percentage of its GDP, allocating approximately 4,91% of GDP to support Ukraine and its citizens (with 0,71% for direct support to Ukraine and 4,2% for forced migrants-related expenditures) (Ukrinform 2024).

2022 marked a significant increase in Polish international humanitarian activity, but it was 2024 that it made the largest-ever contribution to UNHCR, supporting not just Ukrainian refugees, but also humanitarian efforts in Sudan, Syria, and Armenia. This multilayered aid reflects Poland's evolving role as a donor state, with ODA including both bilateral assistance to Ukraine and contributions to global humanitarian operations (Ministry of International Affairs 2025). The total ODA of Poland dropped from USD 3.38 billion (PLN 15.06 billion), representing 0.51% of its GNI (in 2022) to USD 2.1 bil-

lion, or 0.24% of its GNI (in 2024). This era saw a shift in priorities, with Poland spending most on Ukrainians: its net ODA (USD 226 million; 7% of its total ODA) and other forms of official assistance to Ukraine amounted to USD 2.18 billion in 2022. To compare, in 2023 and 2024, the primary focus was on Ukraine and Moldova, with some funds allocated to Africa and the Middle East (e.g., Lebanon, Senegal, Tanzania). In 2025, policy priorities are likely to change towards long-term partnerships with civil society organisations (CSOs), moving away from annual project calls (OECD 2024; OECD DAC 2025f).

Poland distinguished itself as the first to deliver large-scale heavy weaponry to Ukraine, launching the so-called *"tank coalition"* and becoming the first NATO member to supply combat aircraft. Poland provided military aid to the regional defence architecture, including over 350 tanks, 250 infantry fighting vehicles, 100 self-propelled artillery units, 30 rocket launchers, 14 fighter jets, and 12 helicopters, among other assets. The entire value of military aid stands at approximately PLN 15 billion (around EUR 3.23 billion) (National Security Bureau 2025; Ministry of National Defence 2025). Furthermore 20,000 Starlink units were funded and supplied (National Security Bureau 2025).

The Polish state is confirming its strategic commitment to Ukraine's defence with its 46th military aid package**,** valued at approximately EUR 200 million, as well as ongoing military training programs, having trained 28,000 Ukrainian troops, accounting for nearly one-third of all personnel trained under EU auspices (Ukrainska Pravda 2024).

Within months of the outbreak of war, the country began to receive regular transports of wounded Ukrainian soldiers[13]. The change of regulations enabled the cross-border medical evacuation and treatment, including both Ukrainian citizens and foreign nationals fighting in Ukraine, mostly surgical and orthopaedic procedures. By mid-2024, around 300 wounded Ukrainian soldiers had received treatment in Poland. Furthermore, the establishment of the MEDEVAC Hub in Jasion-

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[13] A development made possible by amendments to domestic legislation, including the Nursing and Midwifery Act and related statutes, signed by the President of Poland.

ka, near Rzeszow, permitted the transfer of approximately 3,000 patients to medical facilities in 18 European countries (National Security Bureau 2025).

Poland's location has rendered it a pivotal logistics hub in the trans-European supply chain supporting Ukraine. Over 80% of EU assistance, totalling over EUR 800 million, was routed through Poland's UCPM logistics hub in the first half of 2022 alone, demonstrating the country's infrastructural significance in the EU's coordinated response. To compare, Poland's own in-kind contributions totalled approximately EUR 415 million during the same period (National Security Bureau 2025).

Finally, the Governmental Agency for Strategic Reserves RARS oversaw humanitarian efforts, transporting various goods, e.g. 11,000 tonnes of food products, medicines, 70,000 cubic meters of fuel and 4,000 emergency housing containers (during first two years of war) (JSTOR daily 2025). This operation also includes commodities from all around the world, with 58 countries being handled. 75,000 pallets and over 55,000 tonnes (worth more than PLN 1.5 billion) of products passed through the reloading hub, hauled by 9,000 trucks and several hundred trains. RARS personnel have built 14 container towns for Internally Displaced Persons, IDPs, including four in Lviv. The dozens of towns built so far can accommodate more than 10,000 homeless people. They will be used by refugees until they find new permanent homes (Chancellery of the Prime Minister n.d.).

Hungary. The extent to which international solidarity can be measured by foreign aid transfers, the Hungarian government demonstrated stronger solidarity with Ukrainian citizens than with Ukraine as an ODA-eligible state (see Table 1 above). To provide context, Hungary became a donor country after joining the EU in 2004 and the OECD DAC in 2016 (Paragi 2010). Its international development policy received limited political attention and was underfunded, having a modest role in Hungary's foreign policy until the mid-2010s; since then it has undergone significant changes under Prime Minister Orbán's administrations (Paragi and Szent-Iványi 2024). Its overall net ODA increased from 153 million USD (2011) to 506 million USD (2019) and 489 million USD (2020), positioning Hungary as one of the top bilateral contributors among

CEE EU member states. Although this change reflected Hungary's pragmatism in light of its larger global diplomatic and economic objectives (Tarrósy and Solymári 2022; Szent-Iványi et al, *forthcoming*), its net ODA fell again to 256 million USD (2023) and 197 million USD (2024) (OECD DAC 2025c: 2).

In terms of its composition, almost half of the ODA-budget is consumed by the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship programme, which targets students from the Global South and East, including Christian students – primarily from the Global South – and young individuals from Hungarian diaspora communities, either Ukraine or overseas (OECD DAC 2025c: 8). Within the circumstances of the war, the Students at Risk Subprogramme for students fleeing the war in Ukraine was established „to facilitate access to scholarships both for Ukrainian students and for other students studying in Ukraine" as early as 2022 (OECD DAC 2023a: 37).

However, when measured by total ODA-transfers (see Table 1) Ukraine was ranked only as the fourth largest recipient in 2023 (after Turkey, Nicaragua, and Lao PRD) – receiving approximately 27% of the Hungarian programmable aid spent in European ODA-eligible countries (OECD DAC 2025c: 8). Not only has not it provided military aid, but Hungary has demonstrated far less solidarity with Ukraine than Poland in terms of its ODA disbursements, which is remarkable for two main reasons.

First, Ukraine has a significant Hungarian-speaking minority in Transcarpathia, and Hungary has supported diaspora communities in the ODA-eligible Ukraine and Serbia since the early 1990s. Indeed, from 2018 to 2020, the 20 largest projects accounted for half of total project financing and were concentrated in three countries (Lao PDR, Serbia, and Ukraine), with Serbia receiving about 48 million USD and Ukraine 18 million in 2020 (OECD DAC 2023a: 21). However, because this nexus of "diaspora politics" and "development policy" approach discriminates against recipients based on their ethnicity, the associated practices (disbursements) have long been criticised by the OECD DAC community (2023a: 32). Contrary to this criticism, only larger Ukrainian beneficiary organisations could meet the conditions imposed by Kiev, which regarded foreign donors as "foreign agents" (Oleinikova 2017). Indeed, only as a result of recent legislative

changes in Ukraine, the Ukrainian population (and smaller local organisations) have been permitted to accept foreign donations from official or civilian donors, explaining why Hungarian ODA was so concentrated benefiting only few local partners and excluding the majority of local NGOs.

Second, the long-time unassuming Hungarian aid policy has finally acquired its "identity" in the years preceding the Russian invasion in Ukraine in supporting persecuted Christian communities in ODA-eligible countries (Paragi 2023; Paragi and Szent-Iványi 2024). As a result, Hungary has been spending increasingly large amounts of money since 2017 to support persecuted Christians communities in the Middle East, Africa and Asia through a programme called Hungary Helps, which provides direct funding to local Christian churches and Hungarian FBOs. The principle behind assisting Hungarian communities in the diaspora and (persecuted) Christian communities in their home countries is the same: to ensure that they remain in their homelands by preserving their group identities (Paragi 2023; Paragi and Szent-Iványi 2024; Tóth and Bernát 2023: 276-277). However, in case of Ukraine, "stay" also signifies a battle over minority rights, since Hungarians in Western Ukraine, just as Russians in Eastern Ukraine, and other minorities, have also had to bear the consequences of legal measures that have limited the use of mother tongue in public life and education for years (Balogh and Kovály 2025; Fedinec 2025).

In the first year (2022), Hungary has mobilised resources to help Ukraine and is hosting a significant number of refugees (see above), marking a positive shift from its previously very strict asylum policy, and, as foreseen by the OECD DAC (2023a: 16; 49-50), «continued support to Ukraine, where a large Hungarian minority lives, will remain high on Hungary's co-operation agenda.» Foreign policy issues, however, have surpassed these expectations (Kopper et al, 2023; Müller and Slominski 2024; Schmidt and Glied 2024). Table 1 shows that Hungary donated just USD 14 million (2023) and USD 6 million of net bilateral ODA (2024) to Ukraine, with "USD 0 million of the amount" declared as humanitarian aid in 2024 (OECD DAC 2025c: 25).

What is also remarkable here is the politics of reporting. OECD DAC members, such as Hungary, can include the costs

of hosting Ukrainian refugees in their ODA. Hungary, on the other hand, decided *ex post* «to remove in-donor refugee costs all together from their final reporting on 2022 ODA … [as it] wanted to avoid a peak in their 2022 ODA [cf. Table 1], which they saw as potentially misleading for their partners» (OECD DAC 2025g: 3 and 15). A year later, in-donor refugee costs totalled USD 2 million in 2023, accounting for 0.9% of Hungary's gross bilateral ODA (OECD DAC 2025c: 8). Official solidarity, like alliance-seeking, has its limits at the level of statistics too.

C) Giving: cross-border solidarity and civilian aid to Ukrainians and Ukraine

Evidence from Central Europe also demonstrates that during crises and displacement situations civil society acts as a catalyst by responding to needs through ad-hoc partnerships and community engagement. Indeed, civil society actors in the V4 countries, including aid organisations, grassroots initiatives, online communities, and unorganised citizens, played a pivotal role in handling the initial phases of the crisis. However, as previous studies in Germany and Hungary, among others, have demonstrated, the very act of "citizen help" provided to "undesired" or undocumented migrants of Global South origin can also be interpreted beyond pure community engagement or compassion, evoking a hidden critique of domestic politics and populist indifference (Cantat 2020; Eckert 2024). In other words, acts of civilian solidarity are more than just collecting donations or offering in-kind aid to strangers, but may also carry certain political dimension, frequently motivated by personal or family memories of being helped in the past (Grossmann 2015).

Poland. The Russian invasion sparked unprecedented wave of grassroots mobilisation, with more than 77% of the population engaging in refugee assistance and the provision of unpaid services (Bielewska et al. 2025). This civic engagement included a wide range of activities, from hosting forcibly displaced people to organising food, clothing, transport etc. Civil society actors, including NGOs and informal networks, played a pivotal role in compensating for the deficiencies of the state, frequently forging ad hoc alliances that transcended tradition-

al humanitarian relief (Szeptycki 2024). These initiatives were frequently seen as either complementary to state-led interventions or embedded into digital infrastructures to improve coordination and outreach (Ślęzak-Belowska and Paragi 2026).

Over 2.2 million Ukrainian forced migrants are hosted in private homes, demonstrating strong civil activity (Kaufman et al. 2022). This solidarity was considered exceptional, especially when compared to other displaced populations (Ramji-Nogales 2022; Ajana et al. 2024). The scale and speed of this response have sparked scholarly interest, with some calling it a "humanitarian uprising" (Chimiak and McMahon 2025), emphasising its needs-driven, decentralised nature and the emergence of hybrid partnerships between citizens and NGOs. These alliances frequently blurred the boundaries between humanitarianism and political solidarity, as illustrated by crowdfunding campaigns for military equipment intended for Ukrainian soldiers.

The spontaneity and scale of these grassroots efforts, particularly in the initial phase of the crisis, were unprecedented. Train stations, which were filled with individuals, activists, NGOs etc., formed spaces of humanitarian actions – became logistical hubs for informal aid networks and centres of humanitarian actions. Private networks proved indispensable not just for mobilising voluntary engagement, but also for maintaining long-term support mechanisms for Ukrainian refugees

While these partnerships occasionally intersected with state structures, they were predominantly local, typically taking place at the municipal level. Since 2022, scholarly analyses have increasingly focused on these dynamics in the Ukrainian context, frequently involving Polish researchers who are themselves engaged in humanitarian fieldwork. A landmark contribution in this regard is the 2025 report *The First Line of Solidarity: How Polish Cities Supported Ukraine* (Kamiński and Matiaszczyk 2025), which offers a comprehensive account of the modalities and scale of assistance provided by Poland's eleven largest urban centres. This report complements an existing body of empirical research (Ślęzak and Bielewska 2022; Madej et al 2023; Bielewska et al 2025; Kamiński and Matiaszczyk 2025; Sobierajski et al. 2022; Matiaszczyk 2025).

The initial mobilisation was largely grass-root, spontaneous, with examples of empathy-driven hosting experiences and generous, multidimensional support. However, over time stakeholders articulated the need for more systemic and coordinated responses (Dziekońska 2025; Bielewska et al. 2025; Szeptycki 2024). In response, the Polish government eventually introduced much needed policy instruments, such as *Strategia migracyjna* (Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów 2024), which aims to institutionalise refugee support mechanisms. International organisations such as UNHCR and UNICEF also intervened, primarily providing financial support to municipalities and local NGOs in cities like Kraków and Warsaw. These funds enabled a range of services for Ukrainian forced migrants, including direct financial help, needs assessments, and partnerships with local authorities and specialised institutions like hospitals. Notably, the operational focus of these international actors has been oriented more toward coordination than direct service provision (Ślęzak-Belowska and Paragi 2026).

Finally, any comprehensive account of Poland's response to the Ukrainian crisis must include human narratives and lived experiences from those involved in cross-border solidarity efforts. These stories—often conveyed through informal channels, local media, and ethnographic documentation—form a tapestry of civic engagement and humanitarian commitment. They reveal the emotive dimensions of aid, the moral imperatives driving action (both symbolic and physical), and the relational infrastructures that underpin transnational support. The prevalence of such accounts underscores the significance of narrative as both a mobilising force and a repository of collective memory, locating grassroots humanitarianism within broader socio-political and cultural frameworks (see, e.g. Podgórska et al. 2024).

Hungary. While solidarity has faded over time in Hungary too, the individual members of the society mobilised in an unprecedented manner to provide support to Ukrainians after February 2022 (Zakariás et al 2023; Tóth and Bernát 2023: 290-292). Hungarian civilian solidarity with Ukrainians has manifested as a series of faith-based, secular, and even quasi-military initiatives that underscore both the depth and complexity of regional support. While Hungary's public discourse

on migration remained divided along ideological lines (Reményi et al 2022; Gerő et al 2023), the practical involvement of thousands of individuals – driving buses, translating documents, and sewing children's clothes – testified to spontaneous, bottom-up solidarity regardless of political considerations (Zakarias et al 2023).

Within a day or two after Russia's invasion on Ukraine, grassroots initiatives sprang up on social media, coordinating volunteer rides from Budapest's Keleti station, collecting housing offers from private citizens, and organising pop-up language cafés. Just as elsewhere in the region, some of these initiatives were entirely spontaneous, while others relied on the dual local knowledge of Ukrainian and Hungarian as languages and the Ukrainian-Hungarian diaspora(s) living. One of the most efficient initiatives was the *Segítségnyújtás MOST* (Hungary Refugee Help Digital Network), founded within hours after the war broke out to address two major issues: the apparent lack of capacity among local NGOs to create digital an efficient digital tool, and Ukrainian refugees' reliance of on social media rather than websites (Lengyel-Wang 2023). The fact that it was mostly coordinated by women (young mothers) confirms earlier observations that „helping refugees is unequally associated with those who are already heavily engaged in care duties— that is, women and those working in gendered and underpaid care sectors" (Zakariás et al 2023: 6).

The most autonomous manifestation of solidarity, however, probably came from a more 'masculine' initiative *Karpataljai Sárkányellátó* (*Transcarpathian Dragon Suppliers),* an online fundraising community. Its civilian volunteers raised HUF 500 million in the past three years – an impressive amount when compared to the budgets of more established aid NGOs – from private donors. Initially it purchased dual-used items (thermocameras, tactical communications equipment, etc) and transported them to soldiers fighting in Eastern Ukraine; more recently they also implement conventional civilian projects in Ukraine. Their activities expressed not only solidarity with Ukrainians, but also political opposition to the Hungarian government's military aid policy (Zubor 2023; Paragi 2025).

Cross-border religious, mostly Christian communities in eastern Hungary and Transcarpathia also revived centuries-old networks of parish ties, opening church halls as shelters,

coordinating refugee registrations, and channelling relief supplies directly to sister congregations across the border. Building on this ecclesial infrastructure, as well as networks and experiences gained in Global South countries, Hungarian FBOs in the capital also mobilised substantial donations beyond official government allocations, ranging from clothing and hygiene kits to medical equipment, and established receptions both in Budapest and at border crossings to provide legal advice, psychosocial care, and language courses to arriving families (Marsai et al 2025).

Last, but not least, solidarity has also been demonstrated in alternative ways, particularly through words, as Hungary's official attitude became increasingly pro-Russian (Müller and Shlominski 2024). In line with the mutuality logic that underpins solidarity actions, Hungarian academics, journalists, and cultural figures signed open letters and petitions urging the government to increase asylum quotas, provide long-term integration funding, and unequivocally condemn Russia's aggression. Honoured by the Ukrainian recipients (ICES 2025), the reaction not only expressed gratitude for the 50 000 signatures, but also demonstrated a shared understanding of the complicated historical past:

Both Hungarian and Ukrainian history is marked by a constant struggle for identity – for our language, culture and rights... Today, our resistance to Putin's imperialism is a continuation of that same struggle... We, the Ukrainian nation, which has been divided for centuries, realise how important it is for you, the Hungarian nation, which has been divided throughout history, to be reunited again in Europe (*ibid.*).

Together, these interwoven forms of solidarity illustrate how Hungarian citizens activated their historical legacy, religious heritage, civic inventiveness, and even 'fighting spirit' to sustain a comprehensive civilian response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

6. *Do we need solidarity in, with, from or by Central Europe? Discussion and concluding remarks on solidarity-driven responses and practices*

By examining official and civilian responses in Poland and Hungary to the ongoing Ukrainian refugee crisis, this study sought to demonstrate the interplay of time and space, contributing to the vast scholarship on selective solidarity. Inevitably, the responses presented invite comparison – not only across states, but also with the 2015 refugee crisis – emphasising the importance of localisation, ethnicity and racialised perceptions, shared historical narratives, and the role of informal partnerships in shaping both the scope and nature of assistance, as well as the rights provided to displaced populations. These characteristics highlight the embeddedness of institutionalised humanitarian responses and spontaneous solidarity actions within larger socio-political and cultural contexts.

Various facets of the "selective solidarity" concept have been frequently employed in both public discourse and the scholarship (Paré, 2022; Kienast et al 2023; Bueno Lacy and van Houtum 2023; Blomqvist Mickelsson 2025). The terms also refer to the differences that characterised both societal and political responses to the 2015 crisis, the Ukrainian war since 2022 and the reception regimes in EU member states. Selective solidarity – a term capturing the uneven extent of support to different categories of displaced populations – has gained traction in migration studies. Paré (2022) contended that European policies are filled with racialised othering, with non-European migrants being systematically marginalised, revealing solidarity as precarious and exclusionary. This dynamic demonstrates how solidarity is dispensed not as a universal value, but as a privilege bestowed selectively on those deemed culturally close or politically convenient (Paré 2022) or useful in economic terms (Tóth and Bernát 2023). As proximity is also a matter of space, EU member states have invoked geographical proximity to justify the preferential treatment of Ukrainian forced migrants, thereby normalising an exceptionalism that sidesteps core refugee-protection criteria. This rationale presented Ukrainians as more deserving of solidarity based on physical proximity, that is, convenience. While crit-

ics argue that this logic reinforced a tiered architecture of belonging (Bueno Lacy and van Houtum 2023), this line of reasoning ignores the temporal-historical determinants of contemporary responses.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the subsequent displacement of millions of Ukrainian citizens, rather highlighted the paradoxes of solidarity within Central and Eastern Europe. Countries on the EU's eastern flank from the Baltic states (Budrytė 2023) to Poland and Hungary, responded swiftly and generously to the influx of Ukrainians both *for and against* historical memories. When compared to the scenes and public discourse of summer/autumn 2015, the forced migrants from Ukraine were welcomed as "our" people or "true refugees" deserving hospitality both in Hungary (Remenyik et al 2022; Zakarias 2023) and Poland (Zogata-Kusz et al. 2025). This reception revealed not only a selective, but also historically contextual sort of solidarity, one that is at least as much rooted in shared threat perceptions as in historical hostility and racism towards others. Just as the wisdom of "choosing one's battles" is not entirely inclusive, solidarity is at least as much a matter of scarce resources (money, time, cognitive-emotional capacities) as it is of political will.

Empirical studies (Garau 2010, Uhr et al. 2025; Karaçay 2023) and theoretical analysis (Karageorgiou and Noll 2022; Karageorgiou and Nol 2023) equally show that solidarity serves as a strategic notion from Europe to the Middle East, which is distributed along complex lines of race, geography, history, and political interest. Hence, reality appears to call into question normative universalist aspirations, complicating both the legal and moral underpinnings of universal refugee protection as reflected in the Geneva Convention. Furthermore, and remarkably, despite the rise of digital technologies and data-driven governance (Ślęzak-Belowska et al. 2026), physical proximity continues to play a decisive role in shaping both human and social interactions. The borderlands of Poland and Ukraine and Ukraine and Hungary exemplify how geographic proximity facilitated not just logistical support or utilitarian solidarity (Tóth and Bernát 2023) but also emotional and political identification (essential for "joint action") despite historical traumas both crossing and ignoring borders and diametrically opposite foreign policy orientations in Bu-

dapest and Warszawa. Historically linked both to Ukraine and Poland and Ukraine and Hungary respectively by cultural and political experiences, these regions served as conduits for solidarity that is not only spatially, but also temporally anchored. Spatial proximity is amplified by historical ties, cultural affinities, and collective memories of past conflicts *and* alliances, which contributes to a perception of Ukrainian migrants as both "familiar" and "deserving." The continuing importance of *shared* historical memories of traumas and territorial adjacency calls into question notions that digital connectedness, social media ICT technologies can replace physical proximity in generating solidarity and action however ironically (Chouliaraki 2013).

The shared borders allowed for not just logistical support but contributed to strengthening social bonds and political identification between the societies. Recalling the temporal features of contemporary solidarity, which are absent in relation to individuals migrating from the Global South, shared historical experiences, such as territorial adjustments by great powers, played a critical role in shaping responses to Ukrainian displacement. Consciously or subconsciously, they affected risk perceptions and created a sense of 'historical kinship' that influenced contemporary reactions, particularly in the sphere of spontaneous citizen aid. The welcoming of Ukrainian migrants cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the long-standing historical ties between EU member states in CEE and Ukraine. Regardless of how ambivalent they may appear to an outside observer these bonds produced a sense of moral obligation that transcended post-WW2 legal frameworks and international policy instruments in the realm of universal human rights. When migrants from the Global South are portrayed or perceived through securitised lenses in CEE (Nagy 2016; Stepka 2022; Polko 2025) or when they are stripped of their own histories and reduced to abstract data points in migration management systems across Europe (Pelizza 2020), cynical and indifferent political responses or racism may offer necessary, but not sufficient explanation.

To summarise, the paper attempted to answer the question of how historical context shapes contemporary solidarity in Central and Eastern Europe by introducing different forms of

institutionalised or spontaneous 'local care'. The CEE response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis demonstrates how solidarity is shaped by a complex interplay of spatial proximity, historical memory, and internal political dynamics. It is not a neutral or consistent idea, but rather one that reflects the region's distinct geopolitical position and historical entanglements. Recalling Sangiovanni's definition cited at the beginning of this paper, it is obviously easier for the region's population to identify with the Ukrainians' plight because there is a shared, unspeakable understanding of "existing adversity" (perceptions of both Russian and Western imperialism, the cruelty of the Red Army, the adjustments of political borders by great powers, the resulting territorial annexations by neighbouring states, deportations and population transfers). However, nothing is black and white. The cooperation of local elites either with the Nazi Germany (1930-40s) or with the Soviet Union (1940s-1980s) – at the expense of the local population and their own citizens – was also a historical fact, which explains the ambiguities and inconsistencies across official and citizen responses.

Solidarity, as implied, is not just a "spatial construct", but also a temporal one, rooted in the past and mobilized in the present, hence contradicting universalist concepts of global solidarity that ignore historical "path dependence" and demands equal compassion for all migrant groups. Clearly, the interplay of the temporal (how different past and historical memories *do* produce different responses even in the domain of "local care") and the spatial (how common norms and values *should* guide joint action) complicates the notion of global solidarity, which frequently assumes a universalist ethos detached from historical roots. The EU's and CEE's ambiguous response to migration demonstrates that solidarity is not a neutral or uniformly distributed principle, but rather one that is contingent, relational, and deeply political. It is influenced by who is perceived as "close" – not only geographically but also in terms of shared pasts and envisioned futures – when otherwise scarce resources are to be shared and great power interests are to be navigated. So, when politicians or the public in the "established" EU member states blame CEE governments and societies for their selective solidarity and racism, it is not impossible that they do it because they need a "racist

CEE" to divert attention from the means by which they defend their own (white) privileges even from Central European "migrants" (Kalmar 2022; Kalmar 2023). What remains invisible is the likely logic of "learning by doing" whereby practices of racism are passed over to those that are considered victims today.

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Abstract

AMBIGUITIES OF SOLIDARITY IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: PROXIMITY, POLITICS OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN FORCED MIGRATION CONTEXTS

Keywords: Central-Europe, solidarity, proximity, local aid actors, migration

The mass displacement of Ukrainian citizens triggered the activation of the EU's Temporary Protection Directive. The warm welcome of Ukrainian forced migrants has also drawn criticism because it contrasted sharply with the treatment of non-European refugees. Earlier studies not only examined the fallacies of 'geographical proximity' cited as a justification but also labelled the EU's selective inclusion as hypocritical. The aim of this paper is to provide a more nuanced understanding of this selective solidarity, by laying the groundwork on the history of the borderlands of Poland and Hungary with Ukraine, arguing that reflections on the temporal dimensions of (missing) solidarity are at least as important as spatial factors determining it.

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