

TransSOL researches European paths to transnational solidarity in times of crisis. The sixth TransSOL newsletter discusses public opinion on the 'refugee crisis' to evaluate solidarity with refugees.

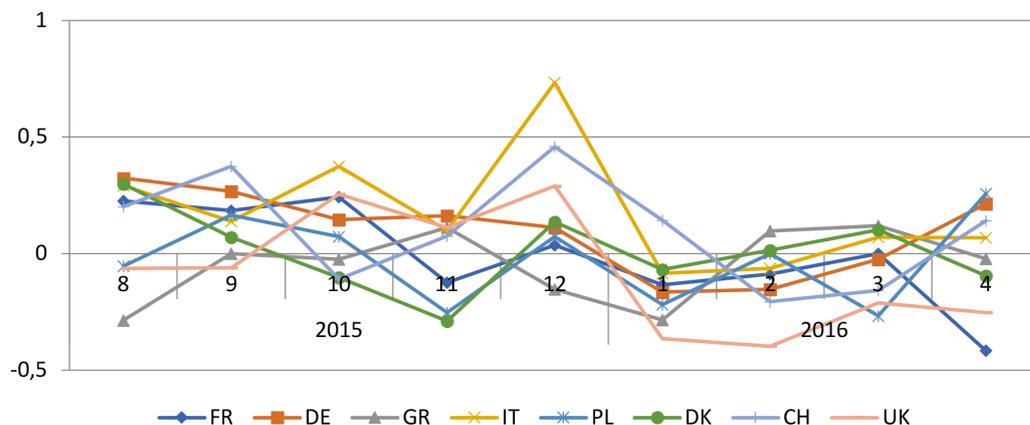
Newsletter

The 'Refugee Crisis' in the Media

Solidarity has been defined as the readiness to share resources with others. This is particularly important when considering refugees that arrive as people who have often lost or left behind all their belongings and even parts of their family in unsafe and war-ridden countries. The topic's saliency massively increased with the huge number of asylum-seekers arriving in the middle of 2015. The so-called 'refugee crisis', then, was fuelled by the decision of German chancellor Angela Merkel to suspend the Dublin Regulation requiring that asylum-seekers be registered in their country of first entry to the EU. This meant that refugees could be rejected at the borders of non-first-entry countries and, by suspending the regulation, refugees could now move freely towards Germany. The decision was first celebrated as a historical victory of human rights over national interests, but later on increasingly contested as naïve and irresponsible, opening doors for terrorists and so-called economic migrants from safe countries 'undeserving' of help. Overall, the large wave of refugees entering the EU during September 2015 and the following months created a litmus test for European solidarity, which had already become eroded by earlier crises. TransSOL's fifth work package examined the state of solidarity with refugees as represented in the media. The project examined all actors raising their voice in media discourses in order to get a sense of public debates in mainstream and social media. This newsletter will summarize our results from mainstream media.

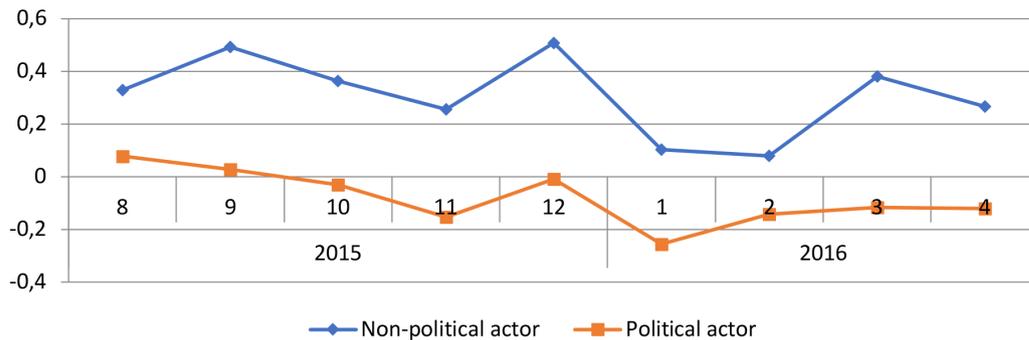
To what degree is there solidarity with refugees?

In short, there was more pro-solidarity discourse in 2015 than in 2016. This drop in solidarity can be related to the attacks in Paris of 13 November 2015 and the events on New Year's Eve 2015/16 in Cologne. Projecting an image of refugees as terrorists or molesters, these events meant that solidarity with refugees dropped considerably and opened up space for anti-solidarity promoters capitalizing on social fears with regard to terrorism and xenophobia.



Who shows solidarity with refugees?

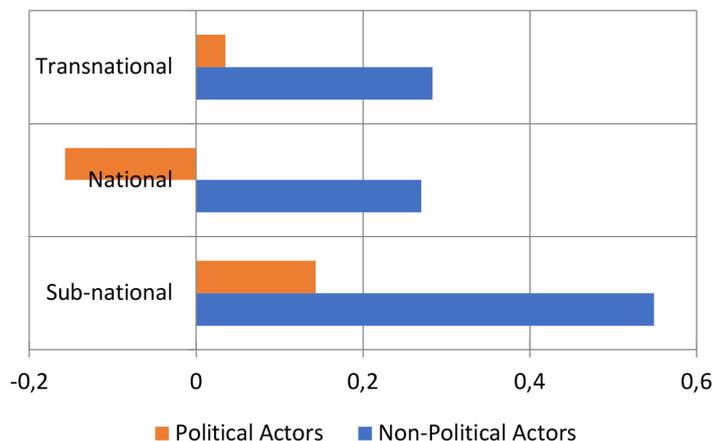
One of the key findings of the work package is that political representatives are overwhelmingly prominent in the debate about solidarity with refugees, while at the same time were less supportive. Civil society actors, in contrast, are less visible but are promoters of solidarity with refugees.



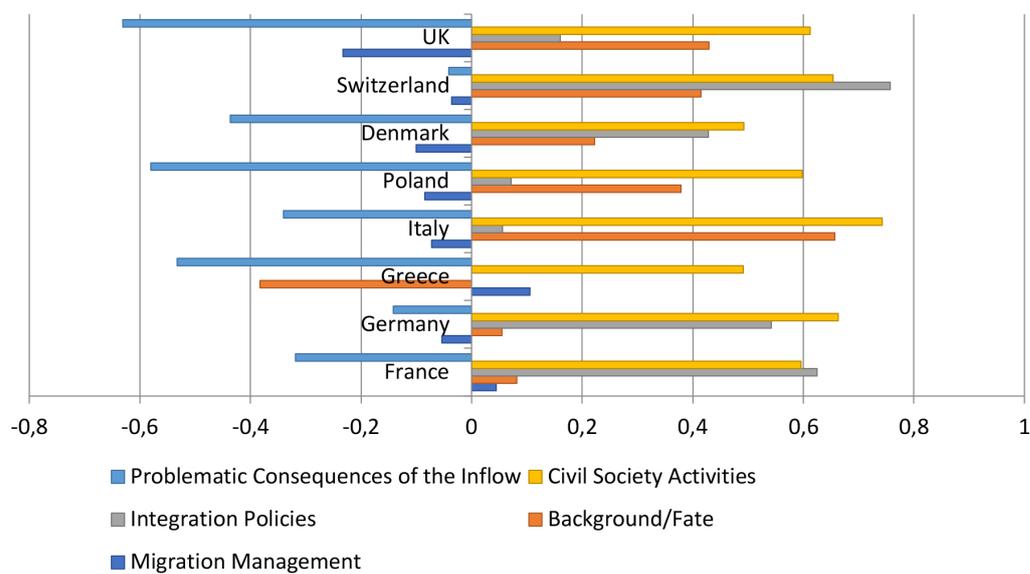
Furthermore, national claimants were most prominent, too, making up 61% of all claims. Regional and transnational claimants were less visible. Regional-level claims can be correlated with a higher degree of solidarity, which suggests that those actors immediately in touch with refugees – arriving at their train stations or landing on their island – are more inclined to support them, too.

Results for actors with national scopes seem quite sobering, displaying a strong negative tendency. Yet, when the claimant was domestic (from the country for which the claims was coded), solidarity was supported more than in such cases when national claimants came from other EU countries or from a non-EU context.

The strong prominence of political actors immediately connects to the fact that migration management (e.g., border management, registration of asylum seekers, relocation of refugees or the cooperation with non-EU countries such as Turkey over keeping refugees in their country) were the most discussed issues in all countries. Migration management claims were also prone to be more anti-refugee on average.



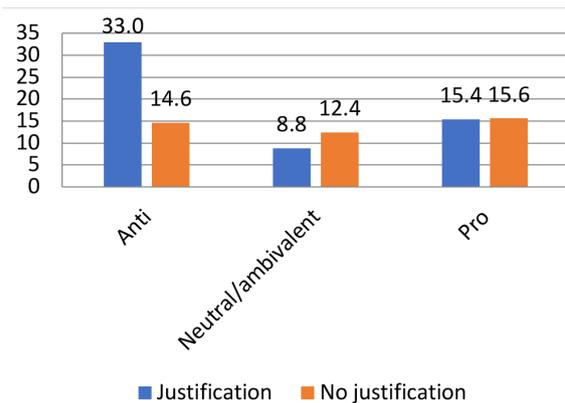
Making claims about the issue of the integration of refugees, claimants promoted a rather positive attitude towards refugees. However, problematic consequences of the massive inflow of refugees, which also concerned the long-term integration of refugees, were debated in a rather negative tone. Thus, while solidarity can more easily be promoted when talking about the causes of crisis, the actual implementation of solidarity when it comes to integrating them is a more contested topic. Claims discussing civil society and citizens' activities and volunteering were overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the pro-solidarity role of such actors, which often compensated for shortcomings of authorities struggling with a massively increased workload.



Claims were made as political decisions (17.7%), direct solidarity actions and humanitarian aid (7.5%), protest actions (10.4%) and verbal statements (64.4%). Looking at political actors, meaning any representative of a state-like institution (e.g., chancellor, mayor, UN secretary general, EU commissioner or MP), verbal statements were by far the most prominent form of claiming.

This highlights the strong emphasis of political debate amongst politicians dealing with the 'crisis'. In contrast, other actors (i.e., non-political ones) show a more balanced picture, using different kinds of claim forms to enter the discussion. Patterns in this respect are very homogeneous across countries and do not differ much. They also suggest, however, that civil society actors become visible in the public sphere rather by mobilizing than by 'only' making verbal statements.

Pro-solidarity claims mostly built on justifications referring to human rights or equality. Justifications that revealed a more rationally driven perspective or one that made reference to identity-related aspects such as nationalism were very often more negative. For a majority of claims, no justification was coded.



What can be done?

Our findings show a negative bias regarding the solidarity discussion on refugees, especially by political actors. Research on media effects has shown how media contents on migration and refugees can help foster undemocratic values and the rise of extreme parties. In this respect, politicians – and also the media – contribute to eroding the social cohesion of societies by promoting inequality.

Politicians should maintain a voice of solidarity and not give in to opportunism regarding short-term media and public attention. They should publicly support the causes of civil society, or include them in their claims and activities. This may help not only to motivate citizens to join others and get engaged, and it would also help to promote solidarity by giving a voice to refugee supporters. In the long run, this could also help to reduce general anxieties and foster the social cohesion of society as such.

This project also examined social media, and results are published in both the report and the policy brief, which can be found at: www.transsol.eu.

Recent Events

Workshop in Como



From 27-29 November 2017, members of the TransSOL consortium met in Como, Italy, in order to take part in a workshop titled "Solidarity as a contested terrain: Italo-German experiences in the European frame". The event was held at Villa Vigoni, which houses the Italian-German Centre for European Excellence. The TransSOL team presented papers and engaged in discussion featuring Prof. Silvana Sciarra (member of the Italian constitutional court), members of the Solidus project and further experts in welfare state and public policy research. The workshop dealt with the uncertain future of European solidarity. While findings from individual surveys in several countries showed that a large proportion of Europeans support the idea of solidarity and burden-sharing within the EU, and while a substantial share of citizens are engaged in individual practices of solidarity within and beyond their countries, the speakers also raised points of concern with regard to public policies within member states and the US. In particular, concerns raised were cleavages within public opinion on European solidarity, and moments of retrenchment of welfare policies and EU burden-sharing.

Coding Meeting in Florence

In January of 2018, team coordinators of each coding team for the fifth work package (which undertakes media analysis) gathered in Florence, Italy, to discuss the results of a reliability test. On the basis of these results, the group made some decisions as to the aggregation of some categories in variables and decided to drop some that did not seem to work. This also entailed refining some rules and implementing cross-checks. The meeting was hosted by the TransSOL team based at UNIFI, University of Florence.



About TransSOL

TransSOL is an EU-funded research project dedicated to describing and analysing solidarity initiatives and practices at a time in which Europe's existence is challenged by the consequences of the 2008 economic and financial crisis, by the problematic management of large fluxes of refugees and by the outcome of the 2017 Brexit referendum. In particular, TransSOL focuses on three areas of vulnerability: migration, unemployment and disability.

Consortium

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Project Information

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