

## Introduction: Comparative European Perspectives on Transnational Solidarity Organisations

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### Abstract

Solidarity with the deprived is a mission that many civic organisations share throughout Europe. The various crises, to which the European Union has been exposed to, have fueled and constrained this collective action at the same time. This article offers an introduction into this special issue. It highlights that the objective is to provide sound empirical findings about the magnitude and structure of the organisational field and to offer theoretical insights into the forces and constraints impacting on it. In addition, it presents the unique and new datasets on which the analyses are based on and stresses their comparative approach, given research carried out across fields (migration/refugees, unemployment, and disabilities) and countries (Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, and the UK). Finally, the introduction to the special issue argues that the organisational fields are exposed to transformations that point to a more transnational scope of activities and a more encompassing and inclusive understanding of solidarity.

### Keywords

civic organizations, comparative analysis, crises, European countries, transnational solidarity

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## **Introduction**

In the last decade, citizen collective action initiatives and civil society organizations have devoted increasing attention to issues of European solidarity in various fields of activity, among them migration and asylum, unemployment and disabilities. Findings of a European project<sup>1</sup> show that these fields of civic solidarity organizations have roots as far back as the early 1900s, but exhibit regular waves of newly established initiatives reacting to upcoming grievances during the 1950/60s, 1980/90s and the recent crises since 2008. One of the most intriguing aspects of these fields is the transnational scope and outreach of many of these groups, which is related to their specific features, including their activities, partners or beneficiaries. So far, however, we have little knowledge about these dynamic fields of civic action. We know very little about their missions, their organizational patterns, their activities. We have a low understanding of transnational solidarity work in its main forms, opportunities and challenges. Finally, while previous research has contributed a lot by means of individual case studies, we are lacking a comprehensive and systematic analysis that concerns various countries and fields of action.

The proposed special issue addresses this topic in its various facets. Papers focus on three fields which have become especially visible in the past few years owing to the strong impact of the economic and refugee crises: a) disabilities and health, b) unemployment and precarity, as well as, c) migration and refugees. Additionally, they follow a comparative approach and thus include the experience of citizens' solidarity work in Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Switzerland and the UK. This introduction aims to present the topic under study, making reference to the various research debates and strands that have been developed and offering reflections on the various aspects to be analysed in the papers.

### **Why study Transnational Solidarity Organizations in times of crises?**

Transnational solidarity is a highly dynamic field responding to ongoing societal challenges. It has been addressed by social movement analysts interested in the diffusion of local protest events across countries (e.g. Imig and Tarrow 1999; della Porta and Caiani 2009), or those who have investigated the pluralism of European civil society in regard to issue fields, representational strategies, modes of action, and national provenience (e.g., Eder and Kousis 2001; Balme and Chabanet 2008; della Porta and Caiani 2009; Koopmans and Statham 2010). Although transnational solidarity organisations have a long history and cover a wide repertoire of activities (Davies 2016), there is a lack of up-to-date empirical, systematic and cross-national studies within Europe. This is particularly true when examining specific fields of innovative and recent transnational solidarity, such as migration, disability and unemployment, since the recent intersecting crises. In all three issue fields, we count with stimulating cases that await a systematic analysis. First, the recent refugee crisis of 2015 has accentuated the importance and growth of transnational solidarity organisations. This case is interesting, because these solidarity initiatives have emerged to address unmet needs, and comprise very often newly established, informal and little professionalized citizens groups (e.g. Atac et al., 2016).

But also older movements, such as the disability movement or the unemployment/labour movements, also illustrate the importance of transnational solidarity, evidencing that also more established

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<sup>1</sup> See TransSOL project findings on WP2 at: <http://transsol.eu/files/2016/12/Integrated-Report-on-Reflective-Forms-of-Transnational-Solidarity.pdf>.<sup>1</sup>

organizations are able to adapt to new circumstance generated by the economic and financial crisis. Moreover, these fields are of scientific interest also because these organizations explicitly address solidarity in its European dimension. So far, disability activism studies usually focus on the national level (Hande et al., 2016, Soldatic and Grech, 2016). Additionally, recent work on transnational unemployment/labour solidarity addresses its global dimension outside of the European context (Scipes, 2016, McCallum, 2013). Research has only sporadically focused on the European dimension (e.g. Baglioni and Giugni, 2014, Lahusen, 2013). Systematic empirical, cross-national studies on transnational solidarity organisations in Europe is still lacking in these three fields, and for the recent crises period (Lahusen, 2018; Lahusen, Zschache and Kousis 2021).

### **Methods Used: Action Organization Analysis through Hubs-retrieved websites and Qualitative Interviews**

The Special Issue is based on empirical evidence produced in the context of the project<sup>2</sup>, funded by the European Commission. Covering the recent global economic crisis as well as the refugee crisis in Europe (2007- 2016), the papers make use of two unique datasets. Four of the six papers analyse fresh data created using Action Organization Analysis, a new content analysis approach to the study of organizational websites in each country (Author A2 2018), while two papers rely on in depth qualitative interviews conducted with representatives of citizens groups and civil society organizations.

The unit of analysis in the project is the reflective transnational solidarity organization (TSO), a specific formal or informal group of initiators/organizers who act in the public sphere through solidarity events with visible beneficiaries and claims on their economic and social well being - in the fields of unemployment, disability and migration. We also aimed at grasping the wider field of innovative cases of solidarity-based exchanges and cooperative structures such as barter clubs and networks, credit unions, ethical banks, time banks, alternative social currency, cooperatives, citizen's self-help groups, solidarity networks covering urgent/basic needs, and social enterprises (Lahusen, 2018, TransSOL WP2 Integrated Report, 2016). The fieldwork was based on a definition of transnational 'solidarity' as activities of (charitable, philanthropic, advocacy or political) support for target groups, both implying vertical relations of support (e.g., distribution of goods and services, support activities) and/or horizontal relations (mutual help, mobilization for common interests). 'Transnational' solidarity relates to the scope of these groups. We opted for an inclusive sampling strategy interested in civic groups directly engaged in transnational solidarity activities, but also open to all organizations indirectly tied into the field via their partners, supporters or beneficiaries. Groups and organizations included in the sample, which complied to at least one of the following categories: Organizations with at least one organizer from another country, with activities, beneficiaries, participants/supporters, volunteers, partners or sponsors from at least one further country, or with communicative frames with cross-national references. On civic organizations were considered, thus excluding for profit and/or state lead or owned groups.

The first and novel dataset takes into consideration the importance of the internet for activism (e.g. Earl and Kimport 2013) and provide content analysis of organizational websites of Transnational Solidarity Organizations (TSOs) in our eight European countries. Compared to previous approaches, AOA has the following advantages (Kousis, Giugni and Lahusen, 2018). First, in contrast to newspapers or archives, it offers, the best possible coverage of action repertoires (nonprotest & protest) as well as sufficient

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<sup>2</sup> Results presented in all the papers of this special issue have been obtained within the project <http://transsol.eu/files/2016/12/Integrated-Report-on-Reflective-Forms-of-Transnational-Solidarity.pdf>

information on main features and frames of collective action organizations at the transnational, national, regional and local levels. Secondly, it provides live directories, which offer the latest information and are more inclusive of informal as well as formal organizations compared to conventional sources, such as newspapers, official registers, or archives (TransSOL WP2 Integrated Report, 2016). Thirdly, the hubs-website approach offers large numbers of links on AOs and an approximate 'population' from which samples can be drawn, randomized and cleaned for website/AO coding, but also for subsequent online-surveys and qualitative interviews. In sum, the use of hub-retrieved websites moves beyond the obstacles of conventional media and the more selective use of online sources. The hubs-based approach is designed to limit selection biases while resting on as wide a coverage as possible of mostly activist-constructed hubs of action organizations offering a larger pool on specific collective action sector(s). It therefore offers unmediated information on organizational and action details that allow for a comprehensive and systematic study of collective action organizations.

Sample selection and the development of the coding tool rested on protest event analysis (Tilly 1978) and political claims analysis (Hutter, 2014). AOA was applied in four-phases: In Phase 1, Hubs Identification, selection and ranking were based on literature reviews, collaborative preparation among the teams and pilot testing, following a common set of guidelines. In Phase 2 of Website extraction from hubs/subhubs and preview of the 'population', the national teams sent their final selections to specialists in scraping websites in order to retrieve of the 'population' of AOs listed in the hubs. Sample construction followed during Phase 3, by randomizing and selecting AOs; 300 TSOs were selected in TransSOL from the 'population' of national, hubs-retrieved websites. Following the randomization of the lists, common criteria of selection were applied across all teams in each project. The random sample included only organizational websites that were active at any time within the period of the recent global economic crisis (i.e. at least between 2007-16); excluded were state (central)-related organizations, EU-related organizations and corporate related organizations as sole organizers of their actions. Coding of the TSOs took place in Phase 4, following a series of systematic pretests, coders' training workshops and e-sessions, as well as reliability testing were organized and coordinated by the leading team at UoC. Different selected sub-samples of English language websites were used for the pre-tests and coders' training, with the participation of all coders from all national teams, in both projects. These led to the development and refinement of the codebook's categories (see TransSOL WP2 Integrated Report, 2016), so that it would code the widely diverse TSO types, their activities, and features, based on the information available on their organizational websites. As a result of the four phase process (Kousis, Giugni and Lahusen, 2018), we explored, tested, and finally chose digital activists' own media sources, i.e. 29,277 hubs-retrieved websites of TSOs, with the assistance of search engine specialists (Marketakis et al., 2016). From these, we randomized and selected, according to our common set of criteria, a total of 2,408 TSO websites, approximately 300 for each of the eight countries.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the quantitative papers based on data from organizational websites, two of our six comparative papers uses qualitative interview data with representatives or participants of TSOs, mainly at the local, grassroots or regional level. These interviews were conducted in the summer of 2016 in all countries under analysis. These interviews were carried out using the same criteria of inclusion and sampling approach presented above, but with the aim to gather the experiences of groups and organizations active in the area of care, service-provision, charity, advocacy and/or protest. Interviews were based on commonly agreed upon guidelines and raised a series of topics: the characteristics of the organizations and their activities, beneficiaries and target groups, the institutional and legal context, and the impact of the crises. This dataset thus provides important and direct insights into the experiences of

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<sup>3</sup> See Part III of the Work Package 2 Integrated Report at the above link

solidarity initiatives and practices in troubled times, and thus also on the ways how activists react and adapt to changing grievances and contexts (Lahusen et al 2021).<sup>4</sup>

### **The contributions**

All articles make important contributions to the literature by providing new empirical findings about the organizational fields and more conclusive theoretical insights into the forces and constraints impacting on them.

The first two articles are geared to describe and decipher what ‘transnational solidarity’ means in terms of citizens’ activism and organizational activities and missions. The article ‘What is solidarity about?’ builds on an inductive analysis of 97 individual interviews with representatives of TSOs engaged in the three fields of action in Germany, Poland, and Greece. Zschache et al show that activism moves toward a more open, inclusive, and empowering understanding of solidarity. Overall, the analysis stresses the variety of approaches, ranging from particularist and philanthropic orientations to a progressive and transnational approach.

The variety of solidarity approaches is also the topic of the article ‘Does organization matter?’, which adds quantitative knowledge about the numeric prevalence of different solidarity approaches within the organizational fields and about the organizational factors that impact on the choice of solidarity approaches. Fernández G-G et al show that a philanthropic and vertical solidarity approach is the most widely diffused, while multilevel analyses testify that choices are patterned by organizational features. As expected, vertical and philanthropic notions of solidarity are more common among professionalized groups engaged in meeting urgent needs, while horizontal and reciprocal solidarity is tied to more informal and contentious advocacy groups.

The next two articles add depth to these findings by focusing on the transformations within the organizational fields and the divisions in regard to scopes of activities. The article on ‘Transnational Solidarity Organisations and their main features, before and since 2008: Adaptive or Autonomous?’ Kousis et al offer a comparative analysis of TSOs before and after 2008, following the economic and the refugee crises, in response to recent debates on resilience during crises. Using the quantitative dataset on AOA, the analysis distinguishes reformist/adaptive TSOs from autonomous ones and documents a shift from adaptive to autonomous paths of TSO activity, pointing to the overall rise of autonomous, more innovative TSOs in European countries during times of crises – albeit less so for the disability field.

A differentiation of the organizational field along scopes of activities is proposed by Loukakis and Maggini in ‘Transnational activism for global crises: resources matter’. This article wishes to identify the factors promoting or inhibiting transnational European activities in the three fields and eight European countries. Its findings document that TSOs tend to be active at the local and/or national level/s, and less at the transnational one, thus corroborating that solidarity is mainly a grassroots phenomenon involving specific people at specific places. Truly transnational solidarity is tied to a specific organizational type: TSOs are more formal and professionalized, more cosmopolitan and with transnational partners.

The final two articles focus more clearly on separate organizational fields. Their aim is to better understand the specific contexts impacting on solidarity activism. In the article ‘Transnational solidarity to refugees in Greece, Germany, and Denmark’, Kanellopoulos et al focus on the three countries more directly affected

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<sup>4</sup> See Part III of the WP2 Integrated Report at the above link.

by the 2015 refugee crisis to study the influence of political opportunities and threats across national settings with contrasting experiences. They validate the relevance of different opportunities and threats, especially at the regional and local levels. Of special interest is the finding that in Greece and Germany, TSOs are a clear reaction to far-right voting, whereas the opposite trend holds for the Danish case.

Finally, the article 'Patterns of labour solidarity towards precarious workers and the unemployed in Critical Times in Greece, Poland and the UK' Karakioulafi et al examine the experiences of union activities in Greece, Poland, and the UK in mobilizing and organizing solidarity. While countries diverge considerably in regard to the socio-economic context and the exposure to the economic and financial crisis since 2008, they show that activists in the three countries have been addressing similar problems (precarity and social exclusion), broader constituencies (precarious workers and jobless), and a more encompassing and inclusive solidarity approach.

Overall, articles show that citizens and civic groups are highly committed in addressing societal grievances, even though solidarity is a primarily local phenomenon with very diverse solidarity orientations. Findings underline that organizational choices have a differentiating impact. Transnational activism seems to depend on formalization and institutionalization, while a more advocatory and progressive form of solidarity engagement is tied more often to informal and advocatory groups.

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## **Notes**

1. See TransSOL project findings on Work Package 2, at: <http://transsol.eu/files/2016/12/Integrated-Report-on-Reflective-Forms-of-Transnational-Solidarity.pdf>.
2. See: <http://transsol.eu/files/2016/12/Integrated-Report-on-Reflective-Forms-of-Transnational-Solidarity.pdf>.
3. See Part III of the Work Package 2 Integrated Report at the above link.

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