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Solidarity work, duty to care, and commoning during the pandemic crisis

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Abstract

The article explores civic solidarity acts during the first lockdown associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on qualitative research conducted in Hungary largely online, we explore how solidarity work initiated civic collaborations that reconfigured human effort, time, and labor to mitigate crisis conditions in multiple ways and shaped the political potentials of solidarity practices. The inquiry captures different reasonings and practices associated with managing the division, valuation, and responsibilities in solidarity work. It also examines how the sense of duty to care became an essential component in the pandemic operation of solidarity. We identify three different modes of articulating and organizing the duty to care in response to crisis conditions, which embraced various engagements with the principles of *commoning* in solidarity spaces and beyond: reparative, sheltered, and transformative modes of *commoning*. Our inquiry also contributes to the discussions on the transformative potentials of civic experiments in collective solidarity actions in societies governed by an authoritarian regime, such as Hungary.

Keywords: solidarity work; duty to care; commoning; authoritarian conditions

1 Introduction

It has been widely discussed that during the dramatic lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–21, various forms of solidarity action mushroomed in societies, including rich and poor and democratic and autocratic alike (Gomez, 2020; Myhre, 2020; Illés et al., 2021). In parallel with widespread fear, solitude, and uncertainty, the drive to assist, encourage, and care became paramount. Exceptionally intensive emotional states mobilized experienced and new solidarity actors with an 'almost Durkheimian collective effervescence' (Alteri et al., 2021, p. 10) due to the recognition of the interdependence of heterogeneous individual interests (Alteri et al., 2021, p. 10).

We teamed up to investigate the visions, forms, and effects of solidarity actions in Hungary as a real-time endeavor during the first lockdown period of the pandemic in 2020. Our inspiration stemmed from the understanding that crises and catastrophes are

events that profoundly inform social and scholarly thinking about suffering and well-being and the relations between the extraordinary and the everyday (Povinelli, 2011, p. 14). We were eager to observe actors who had reacted to two specific manifestations of pandemic-related hardships: the immediate disruptions of everyday conditions of life and social marginalization that had preceded the crisis but was exacerbated during it. Of our manifold observations, this paper explores how solidarity work initiated civic collaboration, reconfiguring the meanings and values of human labor to mitigate crisis conditions in multiple ways and reshape the understanding of the duty to care through solidarity practices.

The context of our inquiry is Central and Eastern Europe, where neoliberal authoritarian political and governance paradigms have gained traction since the early 2010s, although these trends have unfolded unevenly across the region. Hungary stands out as a textbook example of the most stubborn and enduring political and policy apparatus of this kind. Related scholarship has been rich and manifold, uncovering how the aspirational rulers of authoritarian regimes use the state apparatus against those who might challenge their monopoly on power. Another vital component of these regimes in managing crisis conditions has become equally salient, as we closely observe in Hungary. These are the mechanisms by which the central powerholders govern all public matters, most notably those concerning social reproduction. By tightly controlling central resources and diminishing autonomous spaces, they manage social services and social assistance by combining xenophobic, racializing, homophobic, and productivist narratives to mark deserving and undeserving groups in society and adjust redistributive decisions accordingly. On top of this, the Hungarian regime increasingly represses the space for rights-based and equality-promoting civil society entities. In contrast, it lavishly supports pro-government ones (Scheiring & Szombati, 2020; Gerő et al., 2022).

When the first wave of COVID-19 reached Europe, Hungary's general crisis management, health care, and education system had been in poor condition, and its economy showed strong dependence on car industry production chains and tourism. Hungary's health spending per capita had reached about 60 per cent of the OECD average, resulting in a life expectancy five years below the EU 27 average (OECD, 2020). The education system embraced extreme inequalities and subsequent pedagogical challenges, disinvestment, and a growing shortage of teachers. The social assistance system had been hit by diminishing public resources, faced a split between religious and secular institutional systems, and embarrassing regional inequalities. Expert opinions converge that the erosion of the country's social service infrastructure largely contributed to the ultimately devastating consequences of the pandemic (Ágh et al., 2021). By the summer of 2021, the healthcare system was trembling, and the total death toll per 100,000 inhabitants climbed to the highest in Europe. Mid-term reports on the pandemic acknowledged that half of the unemployed in the country did not receive any support from the government (Győri, 2021). The authorities failed to mitigate the digital inequalities that hindered labor and educational engagement during the lockdown. This increased the already widening divide between urban centers and rural settlements, especially in the marginalized regions, and perpetuated the exclusion of most Roma. A great part of the Hungarian public believed that the government's crisis management had neglected the problems of the losers of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ágh et al., 2021; Csurgó & Kovács, 2023).

First, the government tried to downplay the severity of the public health risks, but then it quickly introduced relatively strict lockdown measures. As early as March 2020, the government's two-thirds supermajority in parliament adopted the so-called Coronavirus Defense Act (also known as the Authorization or Enabling Act). This enabled the government to suspend or override any laws, as well as suspend by-elections and referendums, as well as proceedings at ordinary courts (Győri, 2021). Instead of relying on democratic institutions, the military patrolled public spaces to enforce curfew regulations. The military was charged with controlling strategic companies in the telecommunications, transport, and healthcare sectors. Hospital commanders, who reported to the Minister of Interior Affairs, were appointed to oversee medical management decisions. Regarding wider societal mobilization for solidarity activities, the larger church-based charities received the bulk of the centrally distributed financial support and unconditional moral endorsement. In parallel with this, the government used the pandemic to weaken the political opposition further using diverse instruments, reduce revenue sharing with municipalities led by oppositional forces, and vilify autonomous media and civic mobilizations by criminalizing critical voices for spreading 'fake news' and fearmongering (Ágh et al., 2021).

The paper sets out to introduce the research that informed this article and the respective solidarity field in broad brushstrokes. Then, we present highlights from the scholarly discussions on civic solidarity in times of crisis. The following section addresses the organization and valuation of different forms of work incorporated in solidarity initiatives. This leads to exploring the modalities of engaging with the duty to care through solidarity activities through the conceptual lens of *commoning*. In the conclusion, we discuss the emancipatory qualities and potentials for resilience of solidarity initiatives in an authoritarian regime during the crisis and beyond.

2 The research and its initial inspiration

Social scientists who address societal reactions to crises tend to assume that disasters embolden the powerful (typically state- and market-) actors who possess financial, human resource, and administrative power. These actors accept that charity organizations may contribute to their assistance infrastructure (The RHJ, 2020). Notwithstanding this, our inquiry strived to identify collective entities aside from the most resourceful state, market, and professionalized charity actors active in Hungary during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. We were intrigued by the old and new citizen groups and civic organizations that engaged in solidarity activism by redirecting and multiplying their capacities, reshuffling their social networks, and mobilizing new alliances in micro-settings and broader societal arenas. Our interest in civic solidarity is part of an enduring inquiry that explores solidarity activism in Hungary, starting with the 'refugee crisis' of 2015–16. Then, we continued observing smaller reactions in subsequent years that multiplied during the COVID-19 pandemic. We strive to understand the politics and practices of solidarity and their complex nexus with wider inequality patterns in a society shaped by junctures in contemporary and longer-term transformations.

Our attention to the civic solidarians is partly inspired by our understanding that actors' motivations, moral and political imaginations, and social liaisons have impacts

way beyond the solidarity spaces they populate. We are at odds with the dominant paradigm in current scholarship that finds weak trust in collective action and low-level civic involvement amidst authoritarian political conditions in Central and Eastern Europe (Gerő et al., 2022; Sik & Zakariás, 2021). This paradigm is particularly stressed in the case of Hungary by highlighting the fundamentally demobilizing effects of the ruling regime's contempt for autonomous, grassroots, or simply horizontal forms of collective mobilization.

To find our informants, we systematically searched social media and regular news media about solidarity action during the pandemic in 2020, which resulted in a preliminary dataset of 242 initiatives. Then, we applied qualitative representativity, narrowing our sample to fifty-two relevant cases. We conducted largely online semi-structured interviews with the selected solidarity actors between April and June 2020. Among our fifty-two informants of almost full gender parity, forty-two were leaders or coordinators of collectives, and the rest were regular volunteers. One-half of our sample operated in the larger cities of Hungary (Budapest, Pécs, Miskolc, and Debrecen), and the rest came from other settlements of varied sizes. More than half of the solidarity actors provided basic services and goods to the most vulnerable and the marginalized; several others delivered health and social assistance to 'ordinary people' and 'essential workers' and distributed hardware and know-how for online teaching and learning. Several actors combined their activities to preserve employment during dramatic disruptions of the economy through social services and the alternative provisioning of basic goods. In this article, we more closely examine twenty-six initiatives mastered by *citizens* mobilizing other fellow citizens, *civic groups* viewing themselves as solidarity actors, and *civil society organizations* (see a list of the cases with descriptive data in the Annex).

We relied on grounded theory building by identifying first-level analytical aspects of solidarity activities in our interviews and then processed and cross-read the data in conversation with the relevant theoretical alternatives. Accordingly, in the interviews, we explored the participants' motivations for becoming active solidarians in relation to individual and institutional biographies, the framings that solidarity actors chose to make sense of their practices, and understandings of solidarity work in broader social and political configurations. Information gathered in these descriptive dimensions allowed us to acknowledge more complex agendas that tailor solidarity spaces. In this article, we will dwell on two associated puzzles. First, we discuss the evolving norms and deeds in relation to valuing the variety of *human labor* deployed in solidarity work. Second, we unveil how experiments in collectively provisioning the basic goods of life inspired the respective actors to interpret the *duty to care* in and beyond the immediate spaces of solidarity. These two issues allow us to contemplate how certain types of civic solidarity prefigure, prepare, and generate resilient practices in authoritarian regimes.

3 Crisis and solidarity—concepts and crosscurrents

The COVID-19 pandemic was not the first major juncture to prompt conceptual discussions suggesting that solidarity mobilizations are intrinsically entangled with crises. Inspired by classical anthropological thought and the Polanyian double movement theorem, years before the pandemic, Rakopoulos argued that solidarity networks are the offspring

of crises and simultaneously the means of containing their most destructive outcomes (Rakopoulos, 2016, p. 147). In reflection on solidarity actions associated with the impact of post-2008 austerity policies and the 2015–16 arrival of refugees to Europe on a massive scale, he also stressed that in the unsettling conditions of crises, temporary bridges are built over the gaps that widen between state and society amidst crumbling basic services, and pre-existing social structures are both resuscitated and reconfigured (Rakopoulos, 2016, p. 143). Other renowned scholars of austerity and neoliberal crisis reactions propose that contemporary solidarity actions derive from and react to the precarity associated with neoliberal social and political structures (Muehlebach, 2012). Despite this tension, it is not farfetched to conclude that solidarians constitute their practices as an antidote to such crises (Rakopoulos, 2016; Rozakou, 2016; Lahusen et al., 2021).

In the broader scholarly debate on the 'refugee crisis' in 2015–16, inspired by the critique of humanitarianism (Fassin, 2011; Ticktin, 2011; Brkovic, 2017), leading voices argued that solidarity-based assistance inadvertently contributed to social inequalities and confirmed pre-existing power structures. Others demonstrated that the very act of helping inspired the voicing of critical positions in the public and assigning political responsibility (Feischmidt & Zakariás, 2019; Mourão et al., 2023). The notion of 'subversive humanitarianism' captured the transformative power of solidarity assistance (Vandervoordt & Verschaegen, 2019). In view of various hybrid forms of solidarity acts during the coronavirus pandemic, Schwiertz and Schwenken (2020) advocated for capturing boundary-crossing political and apolitical activities. Most recent social movement studies (Della Porta & Steinhilper, 2022) have called for recognizing indirect, implicit forms of politicization that motivate ordinary and everyday acts of collective problem-solving (Jakobsson & Korolczuk, 2020, p. 131).

Another important stream of the literature contemplates how solidarity actions that emerge as resilience to a neoliberal governing logic further strengthen neoliberal social policies and forms of provisioning (Shachar, 2020). It is emphasized that in an era of increasing vulnerability, people must rely on personal and institutional dependence grounded in the ideology of self-help. Moral economies of reciprocity, embraced by solidarity acts, may rescue members of society from harsh exploitation, yet this acts to undermine the potential revolutionary spirit of the oppressed and depoliticizes it (Narotzky, 2020, pp. 15–16). Muehlebach (2012) conceptualizes moral neoliberal citizenship, which encourages and exploits voluntary work by those who are excluded from paid labor. This human condition is generated and cherished by neoliberal states, which endorse creating zones of 'non-numeration seemingly untouched by the polluting logic of market exchange' (Muehlebach, 2012, p. 7). This mode of solidarity enacts minor palliative corrections in stubborn neoliberal orders.

Even those scholars who offer the most powerful warnings about the limits of bottom-up solidarity mechanisms also acknowledge the transformative potential of these acts as they challenge relations of dispossession and exploitation (Narotzky 2016; 2020). Moral arguments of worth which describe and endorse various economic activities may become political expressions of conflict and struggle that address social inequality. Therefore, one needs to analyze 'entanglements and articulations of differential social values for their ability to maintain or transform the conditions of possibility for making a living and leading a life worth living' (Narotzky, 2020, pp. 15–17). Other renowned scholars of capitalist exploitation and inequalities, such as Graeber (2006) and Skeggs (2014), argue that

people are not automized laborers reproducing material relations, and the realm of care embraces spaces that deny the logic of exploitation and material accumulation. According to Graeber, human life is 'being attended to and cared for' through loving, educating, honoring, and hoping for one another in our closest relations (2006, p. 74). Skeggs proposes that care through affectivity and love for one another enables people to flourish in their everyday lives within the fragile conditions of capitalism (2014, pp. 11–17).

The newest solidarity literature reflects upon the cross-cutting, complex, and global pandemic-related experiences in dialogue with ongoing discussions on humanitarian solidarity and civic interventions during the economic (2008), the 'refugee' (2015), and climate-change related crises (2020s). In this intellectual arena, critical thinking on the *commons* has entered the stage to scrutinize social practices that emphasize protection against enclosure and everyday stewardship over shared resources, as well as the cultivation of spaces of non-hierarchal respect and mutuality. Commons are understood as places where notions of deservingness are erased because people's entitlement to the basic means of living is not rendered by their comportment, social status, legal citizenship, or other factors that often disqualify people from care (Woodly et al., 2021). Commons are discussed as opportunities for radical resource redistribution and deconstructing domination to produce horizontal relationships of equality, mutuality, and responsibility.

Care is a prime method of imagining, prefiguring, and enacting alternative ways of being together in a non-exclusionary and non-sentimental manner (Ticktin, 2021, p. 916). Ticktin's engagement in this ontological move towards explaining various forms of local, everyday, and crisis-mitigating citizens' cooperation is profoundly telling. 'While I have long critiqued forms of care such as humanitarianism, I join this interest in renewed and emerging forms of materially grounded care insofar as they are co-constitutive of a new set of political formations – what I'm calling a decolonial, feminist commons' (Ticktin, 2021, p. 919). Actors of commoning are often inspired to open up, establish connections, and reshape institutions from the ground up through expanding commoning (De Angelis, 2017, p. 24). This expansion may rely on 'subversive commoning,' which motivates communities to preserve their autonomy in parallel with engaging in 'boundary commoning' – linking with other domains and communities through common interests (Birkinbine, 2018, p. 301). Commoning not only involves fostering new means of production but also creating new subjectivities and ways of being in common (Nightingale, 2019).

In parallel with conceptualizing the political hope of commoning, experiences show that commons are contingent achievements and may be imbued with ambivalence and power-related contradictions (Nightingale, 2019, p. 18). Thus, '[…] commoning efforts involve a renegotiation of the (contested) political relationships through which everyday community affairs are organized and governed' (Nightingale, 2019, p. 25). In other words, efforts at promoting inclusive well-being may still generate the effects of exclusion. These insights pertain not only to overwhelming neoliberal and authoritarian (or combined) policy regimes but to any kind of bottom-up and horizontal civic activities that rely on mutuality, disinterested care, and unconditional support in circumstances alien to these principles.

Despite a genuine concern with the disconcerting potentials of civic solidarity, in this inquiry, we were compelled to seek forms of solidarity which transgressed and reassembled groups of people and registers of valuations to enact reciprocity and mutualism and to build transversal social relations. We purposefully selected our solidarity actors

among those who discovered, nurtured, or explicitly targeted perspectives that we consider emancipatory in some fashion, being ready to expand human conditions and relations to encompass more equality, rights, and dignity.

4 The nature and value of solidarity work

In the context of emerging shortages of goods and services during the pandemic-related lockdowns, meeting life's basic needs required quick social reactions. Our empirical investigations revealed that two saliently different types of actors (market-friendly and market-critical) largely continued their work according to a pre-existing operational logic. In the former case, we observed a university-based business incubator unit and small and mid-size entrepreneurs who strived to protect their employees' jobs and upgrade their constituencies' crisis-coping skills. Regarding the latter end of the scale, we explored civic groups engaged in social economy and cooperative production experiments prior to the pandemic that strived to safeguard these spaces. These two types of actors composed a smaller part of our informants. Most of our solidarity actors positioned themselves in-between with their aspirations to re-tailor mainstream market structures and/or create separate spaces of exchange outside of the market through solidarity acts. Among them, we identified owners of restaurants, master chefs, independent artists, self-employed professionals, neighborhood and NGO activists of different socioeconomic statuses, and occasional volunteers from different walks of life. For example, horizontal collaborations of catering industry entrepreneurs, artists, and managers of temporarily closed cultural institutions and linked civic actors delivered food and other supplies to 'essential workers' and provided material and non-material support to the temporarily or permanently vulnerable of different walks of life. Business managers, IT professionals, and inclusive education-supporting civic actors found each other to establish and operate knowledge platforms to boost online pedagogy innovations.

Gradually, cooperation emerged between people of different social statuses, and the possibility of horizontally organized participation became tangible. These horizontal liaisons embodied transversal inspirations and practices that cut across three well-established distinctions in organizing human labor in late modern (Global North) societies: between lay and professional knowledge, between blue- and white-collar work, and between paid and unpaid contributions. Most of our informant action groups and collectives did not see major challenges in defining the in-house rules, coordination protocols, and division of labor in their activities. As a rule of thumb, the participants of the civic engagement track records took the lead in shaping the operations of the new action groups. Credibility and capacity to coordinate were judged by former solidarity and community organizing experience. An activist from an established civil society group supporting inclusive education acknowledged that '…civic actors are accustomed not to waste any opportunity and [can] navigate from crisis to crisis. They know what to do, or to be more precise, they know where to place what they know. Then the professionals hook up who have some technical expertise and material infrastructure.' Further, the grounds for taking a central coordination role were tied to the intensity of commitment reckoned in daily or weekly hours of availability. However, many of the solidarians acknowledged that

responding to inquiries from the assisted users of a new service in the most helpful manner was becoming increasingly demanding for volunteers of diverse backgrounds. For example, a knowledge platform that boosted online pedagogy innovations created a workflow, '…which enabled our activists to turn to a rapidly growing in-house inventory of case knowledge to make the best decision, to avoid mistakes, and seek advice only for the most sensitive matters'.

Several solidarity actors repurposed their primarily market-based knowledge in human resource management. They became the most active innovators in connecting paid and unpaid work, pairing skilled and unskilled tasks, and lacing together social reproduction and economic regeneration in micro-practices. They stretched the boundaries of their entities, converging the positions of owner, laborer, and solidarity broker, being open to transactions with both classical market actors and charity organizations but not merging with those. One of the many urban catering entrepreneurs who stepped into such solidarity coordination work appeared to be a particularly vocal interpreter of the experimental ethos and praxis of organizing work. He explained that solidarity experiments led to positive surprises, satisfaction, and pride in that the 'horizontal logic of mobilizing labor is doable, effective, and liked by those involved.' These solidarity entrepreneurs mindfully acknowledged that these innovations fared well when the focus on market efficiency and profitability was temporarily deemphasized or ranked secondary to maintaining meaningful work and employment. These groups acted as vernacular Polanyians, establishing embedded reciprocities through structures parallel to the market or safeguarding these spaces by controlling their channels to market.

These examples revealed distinctive modes of valuing labor in solidarity work. Participating in fixing supply chains, substituting broken infrastructures, and connecting social spaces became valued contributions regardless of the providers' original social and cultural capital. The possibility and willingness not to register and measure solidarity labor contributions according to rigid metrics, let alone in monetary terms, promoted forms of valuation inherent to various *commoning* practices (Woodly et al., 2021). Simply being on board as co-workers in solidarity actions by accepting specific internal rules of cooperation generated valuable work and recognition for participants. Value was most importantly defined through the *sense of meaningfulness* of solidarity work. Provisioning basic goods to the needy and essential workers (in some cases for a whole neighborhood) became a compelling experience of productive work. This experience of profound worth resonates with Graeber's explanation of how the social value of labor often becomes detached from its market value (Graeber, 2019). Our solidarians turned upside down what Graeber called 'bullshit' jobs by generating gratifying assignments that contributed to tangible and socially relevant goals. Further, the multi-layered and vibrant space of solidarity acts enacted relational (*phatic)* work, as conceptualized by Malinowski and advanced by Elyachar (2010). This quality of work connects citizens and enhances social bonds beyond the immediacy of the encounters. For our solidarians, the effects of rolling out the meaningful work of caring for others, paid or unpaid, helped reorganize or enhance neighborhood or temporary collectives' connections. All this also resonates with how the elevating aspects of otherwise disconcerting neoliberal citizenship have been discussed in relation to conditions of Southern European austerity after the 2008 economic crisis (Muehlebach, 2012, p. 205). Volunteers hone and cultivate human relations by mobilizing the sensibilities and sociabilities built into their solidarity work.

Despite the gratifying aspects of solidarity work, the pandemic-related solidarity operations revealed that horizontally organized work rarely exists without tensions and contradictions when inequalities are manifold in society. Some cracks in the sense of meaningfulness and unnoticed or intentionally trivialized 'expenses' of solidarity work were revealed by a few solidarians. For example, social workers who teamed up in a civic group with unpaid volunteers in a deprived neighborhood in Budapest regularly took on second and unpaid shifts in addition to their formal municipal employment to help people in need during the pandemic. They reported that '…we never feel that we have done something successfully; we are always anxious because we cannot win, even in obvious cases'. Another action group which was supporting the most vulnerable families in the countryside through various forms of provisioning argued: 'We help mitigate the gravest consequences of the crisis, but we cannot fundamentally change the marginalized conditions of those people we help. It is the state and its authorities that should step in.' In other words, the limited outcomes of volunteering social assistance during the pandemic occasionally questioned or reduced the sense of worthiness of the solidarity work. These insights surfaced in conversations with our informants on work, the organization of everyday activities, and achievements. Several solidarians noticed that lockdown-related vulnerabilities were inextricably intertwined with the impacts of enduring marginalization that *commoning* during the crisis was only partially able to mitigate, let alone transform.

Another widely discussed controversy concerning unpaid volunteering remained largely hidden in our interview conversations: the naturalized impacts of *self-exploitation.* Most solidarity actions were composite outcomes of paid and unpaid work in different configurations. This duality surfaced in the operational logic of the collectives as well as in the lives of the solidarians. However, for some action groups, the proportion of unpaid work was much larger than the paid one, and in the lives of the solidarians, the lines of production and reproduction were often completely erased. This did not generate much tension in the lives of those who volunteered together with their family members or who were able to negotiate a decent sharing of caring work at home. But for those whose caring duties had been disproportionate vis-a-vis other family members or could not rely on anyone except for themselves, the unpaid work had multiplied and expanded their working time, often exorbitantly. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, this experience was scarcely mentioned explicitly by our informants. In those rare cases when it was voiced, for example, by a new action group taking care of fragile elderly people with no daily supporting services during the lockdown, the utterances were dramatic: 'No one can doubt it: we take over state responsibilities and sweat 24 hours a day.' Another group in a mid-sized city engaged in providing various services to vulnerable families accounted for their work as follows: 'We are used to doing this: we fill in the cracks, mobilize people, we do not care about working hours, just the dedication to complete the task. This is the essence of the civil attitude.' According to this reasoning, limitless availability is readily naturalized.

Our interviews did not explicitly address the gendered nature of volunteering work in anticipation that its relevance would pop up. Several informants, indeed, observed that women were more active and systematically engaged than men in solidarity work. This experience resonates with the general distribution of paid and unpaid work in society and the naturalized expectation that women should live up to these social norms at times of crisis as well. Some of our civic actors reported on their aspirations to increase the presence of male volunteers to parity with women without mentioning specific actions.

Disproportionate gender participation was primarily detected by the active-aged activists and less by the young and elderly ones, presumably associated with generational differences in equality norms and political awareness. The discomfort with the imbalanced gender composition, however, did not become a primary concern for our informants. We assume that their enthusiasm for the solidarity upsurge that cut across different social ranks and positions overshadowed this feeling. The relatively fair gender balance in the leadership of the formalized civic groups active in the solidarity operations may have also helped mitigate the reported discomfort with the uneven gender participation in solidarity work.

Despite these briefly portrayed adversarial conditions, our informants' overwhelming experience was that non-hierarchical valuing and organizing human labor and reciprocal praxes of solidarity work effectively substituted the public sector and the market in provisioning basic goods amidst broken chains of production and service delivery and contributed to repairing social bonds. In parallel with reshaping and making sense of work, they strove for fairness in the distribution of material goods, attention, and care in society in crisis conditions and broader vistas. This leads our discussion to the second key component of solidarity operations.

5 Making sense of the duty to care

As the previous section has revealed, in organizing and making sense of solidarity work, citizens and civic groups all showed an essential openness and creativity across the board in organizing labor in collaborative and non-proprietary ways. These actors, however, were saliently diverse in how they explained the causes of the ruptures, marginalization, and abandonment in pandemic crisis management and reflected upon the nature of their solidarity activities in wider public affairs. Further, their understandings of responsibilities in organizing systemic care in society, i.e., the reproduction of material and non-material conditions of life on individual, community, and societal scales, also significantly diverged. These understandings reckoned formal assignments and administrative, political, and material power in relation to human well-being, needs, and vulnerabilities.

We have identified three modalities of producing visions and duties of care in pandemic solidarity operations. We found the first among several solidarity actors who fostered moral transformations by changing individual attitudes and spreading the spirit of collective action in more expansive societal spaces. The norms of selflessness and reciprocity framed as either humanist or religious convictions appeared as the primary motivations behind these solidarity operations. Moral reasoning was often entangled with a middle-class-based sense of responsibility attuned to social disparities and the unmet needs of the marginalized. In some accounts, the reciprocity in solidarity acts was understood as a thick concept that entailed that the roles of givers and receivers were interchangeable, and the distinction between the carer and the cared destabilized. Reflections on the internal power relations of the solidarity space thus generated a first-level public concern.

This sort of activism strived to achieve social change by reshaping people's beliefs by engaging them in volunteering activities in addition to their paid jobs or the lack or temporary collapse of these. Interestingly, most informants of this conviction were experi-

enced volunteers who had already been active in previous crises. They conceptualized their work by envisioning individual or small group-based solidaric acts resulting in a proliferation of citizen involvement and mutuality. One of the established smaller civic organizations in the capital city helping to provide food to health workers popularized solidarity work among young people by noting that: 'We reach out, help, and do good things that everyone can do. We show to people that you and you can also do this. We are not super-heroes; we demonstrate that participation builds the community, and we invite others to become active.' In this form of mobilization, social and political structures were seen as subject to improvement and repair, and grassroots activism was hoped to reconfigure social ties and, thus, address unequal citizenship and differential access to social services. Notably, the respective groups in our sample resisted working closely with the more prominent faith-based charity organizations, regarding those as exclusionary and authoritative in their solidarity practices. We argue that solidarity actors who proposed to mobilize citizens through moral reasoning and grassroots community work enacted *prefigurative commoning*: they advocated for and conducted the non-hierarchical valuing of solidarity work, envisioned the transposability of small-scale actions to wider social structures, and genuinely believed that solidarity work contributed to repairing the societal system of care.

The second type of solidarity actors boosted everyday solidarity acts, delivering assistance in mitigating a lack of attention, care, and resources to maintain the elementary conditions of human life. At the center of their helping activities were quotidian details of social reproduction, yet essential ones in times of crisis. They showed similarities with the former type of actors in their practices, yet major differences in their reasonings. They ushered in meaningful work, provisioning, and reconnecting supply chains as everyday solidarity acts. In doing so, they also nurtured reciprocity-generated resources and sociabilities protected from market principles and state policies based on differential deservingness, at least in micro-settings. 'If you start acting only with small contributions, you can be reassured that later, if you are in need, you will get it back in a community which is connected by this mutuality,' – stated a food provisioning action group's unofficial spokesperson concerning their spirit of action. The informant cited above also proposed that '… citizens' contribution to the common good is essential at times of the paramount and enduring inaction of the state.' This solidarity actor, like several other ones we consulted, proposed causal relations between the ruling regime's poor social service provisioning work and the unmet needs of several social groups during the crisis. Another sort of state failure was experienced by those civic groups that strived to offer para-medical services to hospitals and other medical institutions, their personnel, and clients. These groups learned that civic solidarity acts had to be limited to food delivery for medical health teams in public hospitals, regardless of the potential expertise offered. This happened despite paramount shortages of high-quality safety equipment in clinical settings at the beginning of the pandemic. The state proclaimed itself the only capable actor in certain service provisions, encouraging several civilians to establish autonomous spaces of action.

Quite a few helping actors deliberately distanced their activities from controversial public affairs. They explicitly valorized citizens, volunteering, and local actions in contrast to state or municipal services. The solidarity space became a sanctuary which protected practices, relations, and collectivities against the mainstream relations of exploitation and

unfairness. As sharply articulated by a self-help food producing and distribution group activist in the capital: 'We build an alternative world, which is protected against exclusionary values. It stands as an island based on egalitarian relations among people – the caring and the cared-for as well.' This position was frequently expressed by labeling public affairs 'politics.' The respective solidarity actors often advocated for a polis in which civic actions are 'protected from politics.' Their principled practices of caring for the vulnerable, the ones who care for others and are exposed to health risk, and in general for rebuilding public goods in crisis, resonated with the ideals of the *commons*. Solidarity actors worked to build transactions and relations resilient to dispossession and marginalization. By non-exploitative provisioning, they embraced an explicit civic duty to care by positioning the latter as a reversal of mainstream configurations. Creating alternative domains, promulgating reciprocity instead of self-interest or one-sided gift-giving, and building connectivity to replace abandonment represented serious statements about public affairs. Some of these civic actors advocated for multiplying these spaces imbued with a duty to care but were not (yet) confident about the latter's transformative power.

Further inquiry is required to explore if the everyday acts of sharing labor, time, affect, and primary goods and connecting those who are separated do have the potential to generate social change beyond the immediacy of solidaristic relations. With respect to the perseverance of the solidarity groups concerned, another recent publication that emerged from our research explains that the new solidarians, especially in the areas of health care and education, often become subject to co-optation or appropriation by powerful business and governmental operations in the long term (Feischmidt & Neumann, 2023). This is reminiscent of the *enclosure of the commons* through state or corporate exploitation and control in various non-crisis settings as well. The time horizon of our research was not long enough to examine another potential threat to the new solidarity commons. It is Hungary's paramount material, social, and political dependency relations instigated by an authoritarian neoliberal regime, which saturates almost all domains of life (Szombati, 2021). These dependency relations generate narratives and practices that differentiate the deserving and the undeserving parts of society and assign distinctive routes to means of employment, citizenship claims, well-being, and belonging. The solidarity actors observed in our research acknowledged these dependency mechanisms and lucidly captured them as more layered and complex in urban contexts than in rural ones and, thus, less menacing to those actors pursuing communing-spirited solidarity. As a consequence, urban solidarians were relatively confident in their resilience capacities against the dependency mechanisms that saturate production and reproduction in this society.

Finally, a smaller portion of the civic groups represents the third modality of the duty to care. They had a more extended history of an astute and active public presence involving addressing *social injustices* and *inequalities* from broader historical and global perspectives. For them, the pandemic was not an extraordinary event but one in which pre-existing structural inequalities became more visible and further accentuated. This propelled the building of their networks with green, feminist, and left-wing civic and political mobilizations. They hoped to promote changes from bottom-up alternative economic organizations, cooperatives, and solidarity-based consumption and production collectives. To this end, their grassroots presence was also intensified during the pandemic.

An action group with a track record in cooperative experiments took pride in kicking off a small-scale courier service that employed a reversed model of the exploitative platform enterprises in delivery services. For them, the duty to care was embraced for those who participated in the production and those served by it. Another civic group which had organized online pro-democracy civic and human rights activities prior to the pandemic also intensively engaged in solidarity work during the crisis. They upscaled their networks and online platforms to engage in explicit 'social justice' advocacy and macro-social and political change. They took pride in the fact that two-thirds of their regular donors and petition signatories were located outside the capital city, thus bridging the differently conditioned urban and rural public spaces. They also encouraged the most politically vocal civic actors to become active in mitigating the materiality of the crisis. This articulated the conviction that engaging in everyday acts of care did not compromise political standing.

Both the alternative economy-centered and the advocacy groups expect(ed) broader structural changes from their solidarity work with the high hope of building alliances of like-minded organizations (Gagyi, 2020). 'We build autonomous groups that furnish their independent operation by their own rules. They enact models of solidarity in production and reproduction, which informs political activism as well,' – this summed up the underlying logic of the operation of an activist facilitating the networking activities across these groups. Further, many of the established civil society groups supporting marginalized communities with hands-on welfare services positioned themselves as outspoken advocates against social injustices before and during the pandemic solidarity operations. Their political vision occasionally reiterated the rationale of protecting solidarity spaces from politics, but more often, they vocally promoted the transformative potential of *commoning*. Overall, the duty to care became an explicit political agenda for the initiatives in the third modality of solidarity actions. They endorsed the relations and norms of *commoning* as defined by Ticktin, Woodly, and others and advocated for transformative changes through bottom-up civic practice and institution building.

In sum, our civic actors enacted three modalities of the duty to care through solidarity practices and reflections: the first one embraced *prefigurative commoning* through expanding the moral grounds of inclusive horizontal interactions and sociabilities, thus improving and repairing societal care. The second established various sheltered *commoning praxes* by altering the modes of collective action, protecting its own spaces and valuations, and positing itself as 'anti-political' – yet, in fact, taking anti-hegemonic positions. The third one relied on visions of social change by embracing inspirations and visions for *subversive commoning*, geared to transforming systems of production and reproduction beyond their own solidarity spaces. For us, the most diverse and less known experiments took shape in relation to the second modality to which most of the initiatives we studied belonged. The respective actors crafted critical reflections on the adversaries of pandemic crisis management and broader socio-political conditions. They demonstrated dedication and creativity in reframing and reassembling the relations of the market, state, social institutions, and micro-collectives in order to mitigate vulnerability and promote care and well-being.

6 Conclusions

Amidst massive disruptions in all domains of life due to the COVID-19 pandemic, solidarity acts reacted to people's immediate and pressing need to reorganize the basic conditions of life and livelihood. In the cornucopia of cooperation associated with everyday matters of delivering care, provisions, and social contacts, these acts reflected on and intervened not only in pandemic-related but enduring social inequality problems as well. These collective actions played a role in some fashion in actively undoing spaces organized by forces of exclusion, dispossession, and neglect by market, state, and larger religious charity organizations and their often intersecting powers.

In this article, we have ventured to explore the horizontal, bottom-up, and reciprocity-spirited collective acts and their transformative potential to link individual, micro-collective, and societal scales of action and relations. We have argued that the duty to care, as evidenced in the reorganizing of pre-existing divisions of resources, human capacities, and worths, became an essential component of solidarity operations in our examined context. Solidarity actors sharpened their practical knowledge and critical reflections on creating social spaces of reparative, alternative, or transformative agendas. We have revealed that these reflexive capacities are not the exclusive assets of politically experienced and outspoken actors. Several civic actors had an astute understanding of the frailty of *commoning* practices and that 'becoming common' depends on perseverance over time and space (Nightingale, 2019). Nonetheless, the conviction was widely shared that *commoning* acts, precisely because of their transitory and partial nature, must move beyond the politics of subsistence to actively promote the general commonwealth (Birkinbine, 2018).

The solidarity actors we observed often saw their resource allocation activities as embedded in political, social, and moral values, in line with broader Polanyian thinking (Somers & Block, 2020). Some explicitly sought a countermovement to separate market and social values; others embraced radical ideas of alternative political economies and governance through *commoning*. Their political thinking also ventured to protect civic solidarity spaces from authoritarian state operations or to strategically use them for transformative changes. We were particularly keen on capturing these diverse reasonings and practices of counterhegemonic potential, acknowledging that the newly shaped valuations and forms of cooperation might have turned to complacency and compromise in subsequent phases of the pandemic. In another publication based on the larger research initiative we implemented during COVID-19, the authors stress the limitations of civic solidarity acts in pursuing longer-term structural changes (Feischmidt & Neumann, 2023).

During the 2015–16 'refugee crisis' in Europe, power, status, and resource relations among the privileged and the precariat, the deserving and the undeserving, remained relatively undisturbed, if not reinforced in most solidarity contexts. During the COVID-19 lockdown events, however, vulnerability and abandonment cut across societies' socioeconomic, cultural, ideological, and spatial cleavages. Solidary acts fostered the connection between the concerned privileged and the neglected marginalized, as well as groups with various imaginaries regarding undoing or redoing the social order. The pandemic evoked a 'hopeful time of action' in which solidarity actors, on the one hand, felt that they did have control over what was happening, at least in their solidarity practices, but often beyond those (Zamponi, 2024). On the other hand, they also developed varied practices in

care, labor, and public discussions that reacted to the extraordinary times and conditions yet always incited the 'normal' and the regular experiences in the recent past and envisioned those for the future. In reflection of these efforts, scholars, including the authors of this article, also made formative journeys during the pandemic crisis by contemplating civic experiments in collective actions and understanding rudimentary or more articulate imaginations about the feasibilities of fairness, well-being, and dignity in provisioning and care.

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Annex List of examined solidarity initiatives

Case number	Actor	Form of collective action	Solidarity activity during pandemic
1	Engineer entrepreneur	Citizen initiative	Producing basic protective devices for health workers and mobilizing peer entrepreneurs
2	University-based business incubator head	Citizen initiative	Supporting young entrepreneurs in kicking off their own enterprises in crisis conditions
3	Activist from enduring nexus associated with volunteering groups and city government	Citizen Initiative	Mobilizing local community for volunteering, donating, social assistance to the most vulnerable
4	General medical doctor	Citizen initiative	Coordinating volunteering among health workers and advocacy on crisis management in health
5	Experienced volunteer mobilizing citizens for local community work	Citizen initiative	Home-based services to all citizens with high health risk, including health, everyday wellbeing needs
6	Neighborhood group galvanized by the pandemic	Civic group	Domestic service and daily shopping for the elderly and disabled
7	Cooperative formation for eco-conscious consumption	Civic group	Expanding green consumption community in alliance with production cooperatives
8	Small action group around a star chef	Civic group	Operating an online platform to bridge labor supply and needs starting as catering enterprise and expanding to solidarity initiatives
9	Cooperative experiment pursuing social economy	Civic group	Enhancing social economy experiments by strengthening civic alliance and creating a new cooperative-based courier service entity

Case number	Actor	Form of collective action	Solidarity activity during pandemic
10	Ad-hoc group of allied professionals and volunteers	Civic group	Providing regular, quality hot meals to essential health workers
11	Education and parenting support-centered civil initiative	Civic group	Online call-in help for parents concerning online learning, IT, and hardware support for schools and parents
12	Ad-hoc action group of likeminded professionals	Civic group	Collecting cash donations and regranting to the most vulnerable children's families
13	Local parish community of the Lutheran Church	Civic group	Producing basic health devices (masks) through mobilizing the temporarily unemployed in volunteering, reaching out to the most marginalized urban poor
14	Civic cooperation office of capital city district with large volunteer network acting like a civic group	Special office of local government	Interlacing the human resources of closed social service institutions and the volunteers, coordinating the activity of hundreds of active solidarians
15	Established urban group supporting homeless people	Civil society organization (CSO)	Adding special health/sanitation packages to regular and systematic food deliveries to the homeless
16	Community and civil society development group	CSO	Fundraising for marginalized communities and distributing digital devices to public education actors
17	Pro-active foundation supporting community building and entrepreneurship	CSO	Crisis-related support for small enterprises, assisting digital teaching and learning, and delivering basic food and sanitation packages to marginalized communities
18	Established group for community and civil society development	CSO	Providing low threshold emergency micro-funds for local grassroots and upgrading online networking and knowledge sharing among them
19	Social workers and volunteers supporting urban marginalized	CSO	Providing regular hot meals to the most vulnerable and marginalized urban families
20	Pro-active foundation mobilizing young volunteers	CSO	Collecting and distributing sanitation goods and food donations for the most vulnerable villages
21	Established organization offering after-school education for the most marginalized (rural)	CSO	Specialized help for most deprived families to assist children to engage in online education and material support with everyday coping

Case number	Actor	Form of collective action	Solidarity activity during pandemic
22	Established organization for after-school education for the most marginalized (urban)	CSO	Specialized help for most deprived families to assist children to engage in online education and material support with everyday coping
23	Established group providing regular support to deprived communities	CSO	Connecting the most vulnerable and the urban upper middle class through regular food and clothing drives
24	High outreach online platform and policy advocacy umbrella facilitating civic participation	CSO	Material and psychological assistance to essential workers at the frontline of health services
25	Alliance of professionals and trade union activists	CSO	Phone-based assistance to families caring for fragile elderly and crisis-sensitive knowledge sharing
26	Established CSO supporting home-based elderly care	CSO	Mutual support group for families caring for the disabled and advocacy action