

# Constrained Localism in an Authoritarian Environment: Developments in Solidarity With Displaced Ukrainians in Hungary

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## ABSTRACT

The paper examines how collaborations and alliance-building among civic and municipal actors supporting displaced Ukrainians in Hungary contributed to the emergence of localism as an alternative approach to the central state's hostile migration policy and curtailment of the rights of civic and municipal actors. The qualitative research, which forms the basis of this study, explored the solidarity acts of civic and municipal actors and considered how the Hungarian state and international humanitarian organizations contributed to localizing refugee-support responsibilities. Applying the notion of constrained localism, we seek to indicate how localism unfolds through alliances between civic and municipal solidarity actors, sometimes transforming longer-term refugee reception and diversity governance, while in other cases, remaining fragile, limited in scope, and contested.

## KEYWORDS

Localism; solidarity; refugee reception; civil society; local government; Ukraine; Hungary

## 1. Introduction

The strengthening of nationalist politics and increasingly selective, restrictive, and securitizing migration policies (Cantat & Rajaram, 2019; Feischmidt, 2020) have buttressed scholarly interest in solidarity with migrants and refugees and the possibilities for maintaining solidarity practices in the longer term. One of the dominant research strands has dwelled on the notion of locality as a potent candidate for countering decreasing state responsibility and hostile migration policy measures. Locality is perceived as an assemblage of local governmental bodies and institutions, civic organizations, and active local citizens (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Ataç et al, 2023)

The literature of recent years has shown the importance and variability of localism depending on social situations and political systems, mainly in Western European countries (Alexander, 2003; Careja, 2019; Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021; Łukasiewicz et al., 2023; Sabchev, 2021). In this paper, we will discuss how civil and municipal solidarity actions, and the interpretations they make of the local, are alternatively represented in Eastern Europe in a context of increasing autocracy, which is not only hostile to migrants but also severely restricts the rights of civic and municipal actors (Della Porta & Steinhilper, 2022; Geró et al., 2020).

From February to December 2022, 3.9 million Ukrainian refugees entered Hungary, and by March 2023, 43,229 individuals registered for Temporary Protection (United Nations High

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Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2023). By the end of the summer of 2022, most displaced Ukrainians with alternative plans left the country and searched for protection elsewhere (Pędziwiatr & Magdziarz, 2023; Trauner & Valodskaitė, 2022). Various sources estimate the number of Ukrainian citizens residing in Hungary in 2024 to be around 200,000, a significant proportion of whom have had work permits (Zatykó & Schumann, 2024). Some are from the Transcarpathia region, neighboring Hungary, where people speak Hungarian and typically have dual citizenship, including Hungarian-speaking Roma (Eredics, 2022; Hungler, 2023).

Even the few days of transit and the need to assist those who decided to stay for longer created an extraordinary situation due to a dilapidated immigration assistance infrastructure. In this study, we will focus on the early period after the outbreak of the war, when civic actors and municipalities responded immediately and did most of the work organizing the temporary reception and access to health, education, and other refugee services (Korkut & Fazekas, 2023; Kovács & Nagy, 2022; Letki et al., 2025; Zakariás et al., 2023). We will show how the resources made available partly by previously existing local solidarity structures and partly by international humanitarian organizations have increased participation and cooperation among civic organizations and municipalities, creating lessons about the longer-term matters of refugee reception and migrant governance on the one hand, and local alternatives to autocratic governance on the other. We examine how a growing role for the local occurs through two processes: the shifting of refugee-care responsibility from state and supranational agents to civic and municipal actors and the valorization of localism as a form of politicizing solidarity in the context of a fear-mongering and autocratic state (Gerő et al., 2022). Our major question regarding the social and political conditions that produce localism will be addressed in two domains. First, we explore the major institutional structures that have provided resources for solidarity practices with displaced people from Ukraine. On this basis, we talk about the structural conditions of localism. Second, by drawing on narratives about the aims and motivations of civic and municipal activists, we uncover the views and values underpinning localism. Thus, this is not a systematic analysis of factors shaping local practices and producing local variations but an exploratory study of the structural and political conditions of constrained localism in the field of refugee solidarity under autocratizing circumstances.

## 2. Understanding solidarity in the context of the local turn in migration and refugee studies

Localism, in its broadest sense, is about valuing the interconnectedness of social actors, communities, and activities involved in producing power and knowledge in local forms distinct from national and international levels. The shift in policy attention to “communities” and “locality” has been due to the perception of the latter’s possession of resources waiting to be activated through being given voice, empowerment, and participation, incentivized and promoted by experts from “above.” As imagined by development and welfare policies, the main targets of such “empowerment” have been municipal and local governments, related institutions, and formal civil society organizations (Rose, 1996). The concepts of “new municipalism” (Thompson, 2021) and “new localism” (Katz & Nowak, 2018) embrace local political and policy activities that reconsider public service provision in neoliberal economic and governance regimes, posit municipalities as spaces for democratic change, experiment with power (re)sharing between central and local decision-makers, and most importantly, reinvigorate relationships of solidarity (Agustín, 2020).

The Global Humanitarian Assistance Report in 2009 confirmed that local communities provide significant humanitarian assistance “in the shadow” of well-established organizations (Pries, 2019, p. 11). By unveiling inefficiencies and inequalities in the global humanitarian system in various socio-political circumstances, the “local” has become a keyword in critiques that call for a new approach from the international humanitarian sector. “Localization” means, in critical humanitarianism, the emancipation and inclusion of local agencies and engagement with refugee-led

community organizations (Bauder, 2022; Pincock et al., 2021; Roepstorff, 2020). Like the UNHCR, the leading international organization in the refugee field, IOM also increasingly recognizes the importance of the local scale and its actors. Nevertheless, as certain studies critically acknowledge (Ahouga, 2018), international “migration management” incorporates the local scale and actors through “a neoliberal articulation of the global and local space-times” (p. 1526).

The “local turn” in migration and border regime analysis, like the literature on urban citizenship and sanctuary cities (Bauder, 2022), signaled a shift to local politics in the field of migration (Ataç et al., 2023, p. 2). Applying a multilevel governance framework, scholars have aimed to understand why and how cities and municipalities respond differently to migration challenges and how the diversity of responses can affect other levels of migration governance. A special issue that offers a comparative view of the local turn has inspired many pieces of research, including our own study, by drawing attention to the horizontal links between local governance and civil society actors and the vertical links between local governance and other levels of governance (national and supranational) (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017, pp. 242–243).

Studies on bottom-up solidarity movements following the so-called refugee crisis in 2015 and most recently in 2022 have revealed that civic actors have engaged in increasing the value of local and horizontal links, filling the gaps in refugee protection left by national authorities (Della Porta & Steinhilper, 2022). Scholars have also found that civic solidarity strengthened by municipal structures may have transformative power (Feischmidt & Zakariás, 2019; Vandevordt & Verschraegen, 2019) and offer sustainable solutions for refugee protection on the local level (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Sabchev, 2021).

The valorization of locality is also an epistemological and methodological issue. It is imperative in the field of migration research, which is more distorted by methodological nationalism than any other subject or field of sociology or anthropology (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2009). Rescaling migration research beyond the state has been crucial to acknowledging the role of time, space, and place, as the authors of a current review of migration studies have shown (Triandafyllidou et al., 2024). Moreover, we must view the emergence of local reactions to immigration in terms of different social contexts and diverse governance structures (Alexander, 2003; Bruzelius, 2022; Jørgensen, 2012; Schammann et al., 2021). Moreover, localism is constructed by competing, sometimes even opposing, discourses that use “the local” to legitimize different political goals and ideas. Not only solidarity with migrants and refugees but also their opposite, namely exclusion, fear, and hate, generate forms of localization. This ambiguity has been recognized by scholars working in “critical locations” on migratory routes (Feischmidt, 2020; Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2020). A recent article that used empirical cases from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, and Germany (Ataç et al., 2023) examined the cooperation of social movements and civil society organizations with local municipalities in setting up local migration politics that re-negotiate the national and supranational policies, challenge anti-migrant stances and produce spaces for inclusive and progressive practices at the local level (Ataç et al., 2023, p. 4). Researching localization in an autocratic context makes it particularly important not only to explore alternatives to autocratic governance and anti-migrant stances, but also because it warns of the dangers of idealizing localism. There can be different degrees and forms of accommodation to anti-migrant and anti-democratic state policies, to which this study will be particularly sensitive, as well as to the trade-offs between the expectations of local society, for example, by separating “deserving” or “genuine” and “undeserving” refugees (Brković, 2023; Tosic and Streinzer, 2022) already indicated by scholars working on the different reception of different categories of refugees from Ukraine in other countries (Mickelsson, 2025).

Among the studies on localism in refugee assistance and migration research, we know of no examples from Hungary and very few from East Central Europe, apart from Poland. Regarding the latter, researchers at the Migration Research Institute in Warsaw have recently proposed examining the possibilities of multi-level governance in Eastern and Central European cities, considering supranational, nation-state, local, and individual specificities (Łukasiewicz et al., 2024). In Poland, which also has its own history of anti-migrant nationalism, NGOs, together

with opposition municipalities in large cities and Ukrainian diaspora organizations, have arranged the reception of Ukrainian refugees, who are more numerous and more settled than in Hungary (Łukasiewicz et al., 2023; Molęda-Zdziech et al., 2021).

In resonance with the streams of thought discussed above and in relation to recent studies that have dealt with the specificities of refugee policy in Hungary (Hungler, 2023; Korkut & Fazekas, 2023; Letki et al., 2025; Tóth & Bernát, 2023; Tóth, 2022)—in particular, the challenges of populism and authoritarian politics (Kovács & Nagy, 2022; Kováts, 2022; Gerő et al., 2022; Pepinsky et al., 2022; Gerő & Sik, 2020)—we seek to fill this gap by exploring how localism emerges from structures and discourses of solidarity with displaced Ukrainians in Hungary. Our analysis also builds on a research history that has identified modes of politicization in civil solidarity in Hungary during previous crises and recognized the importance of the relationship between civil society, social movements, and local governments in countering the constraining effects of authoritarian politics (Bródy, 2022; Feischmidt & Neumann, 2023).

### 3. Methodology, data, and research questions

To map solidarity in Hungary with displaced people fleeing the war in Ukraine, first, we conducted a population survey of 1,000 respondents in the summer of 2022. This highlighted a high level of civic mobilization and underlined the vulnerability and limits of civil solidarity due to the continuous exposure to political discourses and lack of state involvement (Zakariás et al., 2023). Our qualitative research, which forms the basis of this study, explored the helping activities of civic and municipal actors, their discourses on deservingness and responsibility, and the solidarians' motivational narratives, including the political, emotional, and moral aspects of solidarity work. We conducted 44 semi-structured interviews, ensuring a diverse sample regarding participants' organizational backgrounds and social and geographical location (see Appendix A). The sample included representatives of nine non-governmental organizations, twelve non-registered civic groups, eleven actors affiliated with local governments (such as mayors or other municipal officials), four faith-based groups or organizations, and four international organizations. In terms of the content of their activities, the provision of general immediate aid, housing, education, and a combination of these activities were characteristic. Respondents were selected using the snowball method applied to our previous contacts in the field and current media reports as the starting points. Most of the interviews were conducted in the summer and autumn of 2022, but in 2023, additional ones were added, and in early 2024, some key actors were interviewed again. Thirty-three interviews were conducted in Budapest and 11 in rural municipalities (5 with rural civic actors and 6 with rural municipal actors), with 14 cases of multiple interviews. All interviews were transcribed and thematically coded following the principles of grounded theory, first uncovering the common themes in the empirical data (open coding), then applying the themes from previous research to create a unified code guide and systematically applying it in coding.

Data collection was complemented by the participant observation of solidarity actions and the online ethnography of the social media activity of the initiatives under study.

We conducted ethnographic observations across two districts in Budapest and four additional localities of varying sizes to examine local solidarity practices' diverse contexts and modalities. Governed by a proactive local government, having a track record of municipal migration policies, characterized by a diverse civil society and significant immigrant population, including relatively small Ukrainian and Russian-speaking diasporas prior to 2022 (Kováts, 2013; Kováts and Soltész, 2022; Kováts, 2022), Budapest was a natural choice as a field. However, we also wanted to explore the patterns of solidarity work outside the capital. Therefore, our site selection included three settlements near the Ukrainian-Hungarian border. One site was a small town and a neighboring village, where families from Transcarpathia and Eastern Ukraine were hosted in a guest-house, usually hosting pilgrims. The second was a peripheral village in northeastern Hungary, where the local municipality and civic society stepped forward to host refugees. Our third site was a smaller village where the Protestant pastor and presbytery hosted Transcarpathian Roma

families and third-country students from Ukraine. The fourth rural locality was in Western Hungary in the proximity of economically prosperous industrial towns, inhabited mainly by a lower-middle class population.

At the beginning of the research, the local aspects of the organization of aid were not the focus of the investigation. However, we were interested in how solidarity activities linked to a particular sector fit into longer-term cooperation, how they push it forward, and how the relationship between solidarity and politics emerges. This approach has directed our attention towards localism, the collaboration of civic actors and local government, the systematic elaboration and explanation of which has become the main aim of this article. Based on our qualitative data, in the following four sections we explore the role of the state, international humanitarian organizations, local municipalities and civic organizations, and communities in the local turn in terms of responsibility for refugees, the broader lessons for the governance of migration, and the political significance of localism in the context of expanding autocracy.

## 4. Results

### *4.1. The Hungarian state outsourcing the responsibility for displaced Ukrainians*

The postsocialist transition in Central and Eastern Europe brought about neoliberal restructuring and a severe decrease in state spending on welfare, education, and health. Fidesz's coming to power in 2010 buttressed the neoliberal reforms in parallel with ushering in authoritarian modes of governing. Neoliberal authoritarian actors and measures transformed state-civil relations, too: they pushed civil organizations and NGOs out of policy formation mechanisms and, depending on the specific field of activities, either exercised open hostility and practiced explicit destruction or relegated civic actors to a service-provision role (Gerő et al., 2020).

Refugee care is one of the weakest elements of a weak social care system, and this is not a new development. Legal scholars unanimously agree that Hungary quickly adapted its legal system to the evolving body of international law by joining international conventions on human rights (refugee protection, for example) in a Euro-Atlantic integration process from the early 1990s onward (Nagy, 2019; Tóth, 2013; Tóth & Sik, 2008). Nevertheless, this did not lead to the substantial internalization of the former either in politics or society. Melegh and co-authors refer to “constrained compliance” when revealing the institutional and practical formations opposing these international norms (Melegh, 2023; Melegh et al., 2021, p. 188). The management of regular migration and the control of irregular migration, especially asylum, became the major tool of the authoritarian turn in Hungarian politics, with rules applicable during a fictitious “state of crisis caused by mass immigration” (Kovács & Nagy, 2022) and political propaganda and securitization that manipulates the image of migrants and refugees (Gerő & Sik, 2020) and attacks NGOs and other actors that attempt to secure the exercise of human rights and refugee rights. In congruence with its militant anti-immigrant xenophobic discourse (pursued since 2015) and shrinking welfare provisions, the government has deconstructed its already weak asylum infrastructure: it has closed almost all refugee accommodation facilities, terminated its cooperation with the European Integration Fund, suspended almost all types of integration assistance and care services (Kovács, 2022), and made the legal-administrative procedure for claiming asylum almost inaccessible to applicants (Hungarian Helsinki Committee, 2021; Kovács & Nagy, 2022). In September 2015, a fence or border seal was built along the southern border of the country (Bernát et al., 2019); terrorism and the violation of national sovereignty were linked to the topic of migration, which continued to play a central role in the maintenance of the politics of securitization until the present (Bocskor, 2018; Gerő et al., 2022; Gerő & Sik, 2020). Meanwhile, guest workers and international students were dropped out of the official migration discourse. Although civil society and social movements showed resistance to the government's migration politics in 2015 (Feischmidt & Zakariás, 2019; Nagy, 2016) and some NGOs and communities have continued to work to protect refugees and migrants, surveys have shown that the politics

of fear practiced by informational autocracy (Gerő et al., 2023) has effectively boosted xenophobia in the Hungarian society, which was already high by international standards before 2015 (Sik et al. 2016; Sik & Simonovits, 2019; Messing & Ságvári, 2021).

In the spring of 2022, although the legal framework for granting temporary protection status for refugees arriving from Ukraine was quickly established and central financial resources were mobilized, rebuilding the refugee assistance apparatus was unsatisfactory. In line with the national policy of “churchification” unfolding in the fields of education and mainstream social welfare (Fodor, 2022; Keller & Virág, 2023; Neumann, 2025), the government has assigned the responsibility for humanitarian interventions for refugees and asylum-seekers to larger church-related charities coordinated by the Charity Council. The Council has thus managed the relevant central state resources, and its members have received most of the designated EU-backed funds. While these charities have a history of providing emergency service and humanitarian assistance, they have only recently developed their capacities concerning refugee-integration measures. However, apart from the first weeks of the crisis, the state and its favored charities only maintained low-key contact with international humanitarian organizations and rejected NGOs working with refugees and migrants (Gerő et al., 2020).

The non-hostile central political discourses about displaced Ukrainians in the weeks following the outbreak of war became an important resource in organizing solidarity support compared to the domestic climate in 2015. This opened action spaces both for civic actors and for local governments. Municipal and civic helpers outside the capital have had to rely on the Authority of Disaster Management and its referral system. The central role of this Authority mirrors the dominant framing of social policy governance in Hungary, which makes care for the vulnerable (refugees, the marginalized and disabled, and the Roma) a public security matter. However, the most tangible experience of all the helpers we interviewed was a lack of consistent policy and the poor transparency of the welcoming infrastructure maintained by the central authorities.<sup>1</sup>

As a case in point, a local entrepreneur and his family accommodated refugees in their pension in a village close to the Hungarian-Ukrainian border. They provided complete (basic welfare, document-processing, personal, etc.) care for refugees and covered all their expenses for four months until the arrival of state aid.<sup>2</sup> The police and the local municipal representative of the immigration office made only short visits to check on the presence of the refugees. Later, the latter only phoned them and instructed them to pick up the new refugees they had been allocated, who until then had to wait on the street. Even less did the state care about how the hosts had coped with the administrative tasks and psychological burden. Our informants had been living in close proximity to twenty to thirty people of varying composition, including both large Roma families from Transcarpathia and older adults from Kharkiv, for a year and a half. They received professional help and supervision only from international and Budapest-based NGOs. However, even this was not enough to help them deal with the increasing anti-Gypsyism of local society and their doubts about the long-term intentions of the refugees they were receiving. They informed the disaster management authorities that they could not continue hosting refugees. However, on our last visit, new families were still arriving.<sup>3</sup>

In the first months after the outbreak of the war and the arrival of Ukrainian refugees in Hungary in February 2022, the management of the refugee crisis was substantially different from 2015.<sup>4</sup> While in 2015, the focus was on the delegitimization of refugees, in 2022, it was on their legitimization, referring to the “real” war in the neighboring country: the men left at home to fight and the fleeing women and children who must be protected. Although the refugee status of dual nationals was not fully clarified, the Transcarpathian Hungarians were a priority among the victims in need of protection in Hungary. This was not the case for the Roma, who were also of Hungarian nationality and whom the reception and temporary accommodation centers largely tried to keep away by various means<sup>5</sup> (Gerő et al., 2022, Eredics, 2022, Zatykó & Schumann, 2024).

By the time the focus in other countries had shifted to longer-term reception and integration, the focus in Hungarian governmental discourse and related media outlets had shifted to war,

and a foreign policy discourse had come to the fore. The Hungarian government has taken a unique position in the European Union by articulating anti-Ukraine political messages: it has opposed arms transfers and economic sanctions against Russia and emphasized the power ambitions of Western political actors and NATO. By the time of the 2022 parliamentary elections and even so by the 2024 municipal elections, the Hungarian government and FIDESZ party added president Zelensky to the list of the scapegoats (including George Soros, the EU, and the opposition), and portrayed Viktor Orbán as the political guarantor of peace, and Hungary as “the last bastion of peace” (Szabó-Panyi, 2022; Gerő et al., 2022, p. 36).

The organizer of a pop-up school pointed out that, in contrast to Germany and Poland, for example, in the Hungarian political context, people do not want to express their sympathy for Ukraine openly, and their volunteers try to remain anonymous: “...*what we observe is that in the surrounding countries, you have open solidarity. I’m not saying that people are necessarily actively helping, [they may not even be] actually helping, but it’s no problem showing solidarity publicly.*”<sup>6</sup> The government made its intentions even clearer by closing the main reception center in Budapest in August 2023, significantly reducing the state subsidy for private accommodation providers for people of temporary protection and excluding working-age displaced people from eligibility.

One may conclude that ambivalent, partly tolerant, partly alienating governmental discourses have shaped the relationship between the displaced people from Ukraine, those acting in their support, and the broader public. Legislation was quickly aligned with EU directives when the first wave of refugees arrived. The government did not have to explain why it had designated the already privileged major faith-based organizations the main pillars of refugee assistance work and directed most of the funding to them. Likewise, the government did not have to explain why it excluded all civic actors who did not completely belong to a privileged circle. While initially, many might have sought cooperation with the state in matters potentially transgressing the main ideological and client-network lines, the latter organized their operations largely independently of state-funded provisions. The legal and discursive conditions for solidarity were initially in place, yet they were dependent on shifting foreign policy objectives, while the institutional safeguards were never established. Reception and care were provided by volunteer or state-designated accommodation providers who did not receive adequate financial and professional support from the state. How they carried out their tasks under these circumstances depended on their access to other resources, which we will discuss in the following chapters.

#### **4.2. Supranational humanitarian organizations endowing the “local”**

Independently of the central governmental structures, the disposable resources of international aid and humanitarian organizations facilitated the setting up of assistance services for displaced people from Ukraine in 2022. In this context, support for host communities became a priority for all related UN organizations in the first month of the period under analysis. UNICEF outlined key recommendations for local authorities (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2023). IOM Hungary also encouraged contacting municipal bodies, including the Municipalities of Záhony and Budapest (International Organization for Migration (IOM) DTM Hungary, 2023). UNHCR built active partnerships with the six major church-related organizations of the Charity Council and a similar number of autonomous civic partners (UNHCR, 2022, 2023). Three of the latter actors were established NGOs in the field of refugee protection with a multi-year professional track record of offering classical migrant integration services, and three civic actors were new to the field.<sup>7</sup> It is far from obvious what role the European Union’s migration governance norms and funding have played. Due to the poor transparency of the distribution of state funds for any purpose, it is not easy to describe how these resources have affected the organizations providing refugee care at the local level. Most civic actors involved in providing aid have not received support from these funds to the best of our knowledge.<sup>8</sup> The reason is the high threshold associated with meeting the pre-financing-, own contribution-, accounting-, and financial administration application conditions.<sup>9</sup> Only large charities have the capacity to apply.<sup>10</sup>

Recognition and support for smaller urban and rural initiatives were proffered by smaller donor organizations. These donors possess modest financial resources yet can share knowledge and network-related contacts with local initiatives neglected by state organizations. For example, United Way Hungary, the local branch of a privately funded international NGO, has focused on community mentoring: they have worked with small organizations and micro-budget projects operating in a variety of cities and municipalities across the country. They have provided financial and technical support to nearly 30 civil organizations and initiatives for projects focusing on supporting the basic well-being of refugee families, children, and young people. Beyond empowerment, United Way programs have aimed to link rural solidarity initiatives with those in the capital of Budapest through regular professional meetings.<sup>11</sup>

While international humanitarian organizations avoid directly criticizing government policy on refugees and migration (Kovács & Nagy, 2023, p. 234) and support the large charities favored by the state, they also empower Hungarian civil society actors. *“We try to build the capacity of the Hungarian civil society, in general, to make sure that there are civic organizations that know how to do some project management, financial management, know about the funding opportunities, can also apply to other donors in the longer run, so it’s definitely part of the work that we do.”*<sup>12</sup> Two components of this quote from an interview with a leading humanitarian representative are relevant to the broader context. First, one shows how the funding of local NGOs is also targeted to ensure the predictable and stable functioning of organizations that provide services to refugees. Therefore, priority is given to larger and more formalized organizations with a longer history. Another refers to the hope that funding for refugee-related tasks has broader spill-over impacts, namely, strengthening the professionalism of the Hungarian civic sector. In this vein, international humanitarian organizations, in cooperation with foreign faith-based donors, helped set up a new community center facility in the capital to provide direct services for the displaced, enable civil assistance providers to meet their beneficiaries and provide a community space for groups of displaced people using their own programs.<sup>13</sup> By the same token, fast-track empowerment and capacity-building donor efforts have remained selective. The citizens, action groups, and communities who have done most of the immediate relief work have never had access to funding from any international organizations.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to institutional capacity development, international humanitarian and charity organizations have promoted substantive principles and expectations concerning refugee solidarity work. They have placed significant emphasis on identifying the most vulnerable groups of refugees in the given situation, most notably, the Hungarian-speaking Roma fleeing extremely deprived conditions in Transcarpathia. Many of these people, who have Hungarian citizenship, have not enjoyed the hospitality of either the state or Hungarian society. The schooling of displaced children with poor and partially illiterate parents and the housing of large families was ensured by local NGOs working with Roma in Hungary. International donors have closely collaborated with Hungarian Roma organizations when their programs targeted Roma refugees.<sup>15</sup> These organizations were consulted concerning the needs arising from the Roma’s structural position and cultural characteristics and the features of racism in the host society and the institutional environment (Eredics, 2022; Hungler, 2023).

By cooperating with the largest charities privileged by the state, international donors and humanitarian organizations have performed due diligence in cooperating with main governmental actors and their trustees. Simultaneously, international actors have played an important role by supporting refugee protection on scales and in domains that the Hungarian state partially or fully abandoned. They have directly funded civic actors independent of the state and supported larger NGOs in their horizontal empowering activities.

#### **4.3. Municipalities as emerging agents of refugee protection**

In Hungary, the authoritarian changes starting in 2010 and the subsequent centralization of power severely affected local governments’ positions, mandates, and resources. The 2011

amendment of the Local Government Act meant a major loss of competencies and autonomy of local governments and the delegation of numerous responsibilities for public services to the national level, most notably related to health care and education. Local government budgets further shrank during the “emergency governance” introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, which involved removing additional financial resources (e.g., numerous local taxes) from local governments (Baranyai & Ferencz, 2023). All this has resulted in grave shortages in local budgets and, in many cases, genuine hardship in terms of managing the remaining locally assigned responsibilities.

Such centralization had diverse effects on the operation of local governments. In mid-sized cities and smaller towns (Jelinek, 2020), the often non-accountable transfers from the national government level and the centrally controlled distribution of EU funds have increasingly forced local officials to engage in political clientelism, with dependency on the central powers (see also Gherghina & Volintiru, 2023). Local authorities often perceive civil society organizations, especially activists and grassroots initiatives, as threatening opponents. Elsewhere, and these are mainly the local governments led by oppositional or independent mayors, they have become increasingly valuable partners over the last decade (Bródy, 2022; Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2020). The pandemic-related crisis in 2020–2021 revealed that social solidarity and mutual assistance between people concerning everyday matters could significantly increase, and local governments and solidarity activists might become valuable allies. (Feischmidt & Neumann, 2023, Zentai & Feischmidt, 2024)

Despite the lack of long-term interest in migrant integration (Soltész & Vadasi, 2022; Soltész, 2021) and the shortage of current financial resources and navigation of conditions of dependency, some local governments, mainly in the capital and the northern and eastern parts of the country close to the Ukrainian and Romanian borders, participated in the reception of displaced Ukrainian people. Besides Budapest, 297 settlements out of the total of 3170 are known to have hosted refugees for longer or shorter periods—as reported by the mayor of one of the municipalities we visited. For this purpose, the latter could rely upon educational, health, and social institutions located in their settlements despite their administrative subordination to the national structures (e.g., in the case of schools).<sup>16</sup> Our survey and qualitative research results showed that intensive horizontal collaboration among civic and municipal actors was key to effectively mobilizing support for the displaced Ukrainians.

In the municipal election cycle of 2019–2024, most of Budapest’s districts were governed by oppositional political forces. Although their financial possibilities were massively reduced, the districts studied could establish policy and fiscal autonomy and develop social policies following inclusion and human rights principles.<sup>17</sup> The municipal government coordinated Ukrainian war-related refugee solidarity work across the districts. The Metropolitan Coordination Forum in Budapest was on the second day of the war, involving regular technical consultations between local professional NGOs, international refugee organizations (UNHCR, IOM), and civic initiatives mobilizing for the refugees. “*We think that the task of a municipality is to create the possibility for professional organizations to do this,*”—argued the representative of the capital city government.<sup>18</sup> The infrastructural background became more robust due to the setting up of the community center “Budapest Helps” jointly with the capital city government, IOM, and UNHCR. The capital’s leadership was keen to show solidarity not only with the refugees arriving in Hungary, but also with Ukraine. With a commemoration of the 1-year anniversary of the war (co-organized with the Ukrainian Embassy and representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora), Budapest City Hall reiterated its political solidarity with Ukraine.<sup>19</sup>

In February 2024, in preparation for the upcoming municipal elections, the incumbent leaders of three capital districts seeking re-election announced explicit refugee solidarity and migrant inclusion agendas, with some variation, and all were successfully re-elected. On the one hand, in their campaign fliers and messages, they did not hide their intention to pay policy attention to refugees and migrants in the future, which demonstrated courage and self-confidence in a social-political environment that typically cherishes hierarchy- and deservingness-based social

policy. On the other hand, they concentrated efforts to communicate to the foreign-born citizens dwelling in their districts that they would be seen as citizens with political rights. The latter efforts include facilitating the implementation of voting rights in municipal elections in an informed manner. Regarding the policy visions and program frames for migration governance in the new municipal cycle, our first post-election interviews identified intriguing variation. In one of our target districts, migration governance is defined as “solidarity policy” rather than a specific policy field. *“I would say that the reason why there is no district migration policy is because there is a district solidarity policy.”*<sup>20</sup> In another one, the formation of a policy field will start with knowledge production and dedicated institutional advancement. An intercultural officer will coordinate the development of a new public policy vision. *“Now, in the new term, we will have a referent, a foreign-born person who speaks Hungarian, who will work on integrating foreigners in the district. I think that the zero point will be to manage big research to understand the groups, the needs of the groups.”*<sup>21</sup> A new deputy mayor who coordinated the cooperation with NGOs in the concluding cycle believes that this policy development will make the district more welcoming to foreigners and shape the self-image of the whole district.

The situation significantly differed in the studied rural areas, where municipalities are more vulnerable to central power and the clientelistic relations this creates. We identified two kinds of rural municipalities persistently active in refugee support, with mayors acting as the driving force. The municipality of a small village close to the Hungarian-Ukrainian border volunteered immediately after the outbreak of the war to host refugees. For twenty years, a mayor who is active in the national network of opposition mayors and that of women mayors has run the village and testified about her own responsibility: *“As mayor, I felt it was my duty to help.”*<sup>22</sup> She works closely with a socially committed elected body and an engaged community of volunteers. They framed their social policies and contested the central state’s migration policy. Yet, they relied on the minimum per capita state support for refugee accommodation. Concurrently, they reorganized their municipal social service infrastructure and redistributed resources toward delivering asylum assistance. The mayor’s office was especially cautious about maintaining local services for Roma and other marginalized citizens while they redistributed resources to Ukrainian displaced people. Nevertheless, the village’s modest resources could not be attractive to refugees seeking temporary or longer-term inclusion, and the sustainability of local solutions in the authoritarian political environment also seemed fragile.<sup>23</sup>

Another proactive municipality was similarly quick to respond by inviting “deserving” and “real refugees” to the village while promising to keep undeserving or “bogus refugees” out. The ability to accommodate several families and provide them with food, safety, and comfort was interpreted as a sign that they were a “good village.” Carrying out anthropological fieldwork in the village, Safonova (2023) revealed that the provision of local community-based assistance to refugees was considered an achievement that met the central state’s expectations and legitimized local leadership. This sort of differential treatment (Mickelsson, 2025) and selective solidarity emerges in the context of everyday populism (Safonova, 2022) and selective social policy in rural Hungary (Csurgó et al., 2022; Czibere & Kovách, 2022).

Our population survey conducted in June of 2022 found that political meta-ideologies or voting preferences did not influence respondents’ stance on welcoming or rejecting Ukrainian refugees (Zakariás et al., 2023). Correspondingly, we found that several municipalities without any history of welcoming refugees opened their doors to displaced Ukrainians. They obtained modest and earmarked state support, redeployed their own resources, and mobilized volunteers. Some municipal governments were motivated by humanitarian convictions; others pursued pragmatic objectives. Some were repeatedly portrayed in the state media in coverages that aimed to demonstrate that the Hungarian government and society welcome Ukrainian refugees. In another study, we identified four modalities of municipal solidarity (transformative, fragile, contentious, and conformist) and discussed in detail their background factors (Zentai & Feischmidt, 2024); however, the proportions of these modalities in 297 municipalities engaged in refugee reception could only be clarified by a future survey.

#### 4.4. Civic Solidarity Making Localism Politically Meaningful

For many years, in Hungary, most of the services targeting refugees, asylum seekers, and generally international migrants have been provided by NGOs. The number and size of these organizations have been significantly reduced by their diminishing financial support and political de-legitimization by the central government's anti-migrant propaganda.<sup>24</sup> Numerous NGOs taking part in organizing solidarity for displaced Ukrainian people are embedded into the discourse and networks of "community governance," built upon a project/tendering culture promoted and financed by supranational and international organizations. Pursuing the ideals of expertise, professionalism, and empowerment, and by facilitating "partnerships" of diverse types/forms/scales, they became central in assembling solidarity mechanisms.

The Ukrainian war-related crisis has valorized civic actors with the organizational background, knowledge, and capacity to operate long-term. Some focal points in civil society collaboration concerning refugee assistance in the capital have relied on a legacy of such operations. Further, informants reported that contacts established in 2015 were those most widely used, but a broader network of ad hoc collaborations has also developed for collecting and delivering donations, accumulating, verifying, and redistributing information on legal, housing, education, health, and welfare opportunities for refugees. The few active organizations of the Ukrainian diaspora have also found these civic hotspots.<sup>25</sup>

A leading civic actor in the field is a civic organization established 30 years ago when large numbers of refugees arrived from Yugoslavia. Since then, it has developed a complex set of services, including individual and group counseling, facilitating access to health care, education, housing, language instruction, and community programs for beneficiaries of international protection. It also supports public institutions and civic organizations that serve their own beneficiaries. The former has become a target of hostile governmental and media propaganda in recent years despite their cooperation with the migration policy mechanisms of the state. They are internationally recognized actors and members of several international coalitions and forums on asylum and migration policy (e.g., the European Council on Refugees and Exiles). Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, they have been able to expand their services and staff capacities. The capacity building of smaller organizations, voluntary groups, and municipalities, as well as the dissemination of professional standards, have been crucial parts of their activity. All this has been pursued through project funding. *"From day one, we were under a lot of pressure to find the right way to help. To do this, it was important to define what we were good at and what we were not. Crisis management and integration came up at the same time. It is difficult to reconcile compassion, sympathy, and professional help, but it is important that NGOs and professional organizations see each other as partners. The Municipal Consultative Forum was very important; it was there that the standards were developed, which everyone then became aware of and tried to apply."*<sup>26</sup>

In the capital, many religious communities that have been active in helping people in need have accumulated significant experience through their solidarity work during the 2015 "refugee crisis" and the COVID-19 epidemic. They could quickly mobilize their members and enhance their support programs, primarily based on enduring personal networks. For example, the housing program of the Budapest branch of a Catholic peace movement<sup>27</sup> and the charity work set up by a Lutheran pastor and her team of volunteers<sup>28</sup> are cases in point. The latter operates now the capital's largest community and service institutions for refugees, partly supported by Lutheran Church and partly by UN and other international humanitarian organizations. Thus, these enduring community-building models and actions connect "local" imaginaries and structures with national, transnational, and supra-national religious networks and resources.

A specific form of municipal-civic entanglement emerged in the capital city and its districts led by opposition local governments. At the municipal elections in 2019, in several municipalities, grassroots social movement activists with a long track record became local government administrative staff members, and this trend continued after the 2024 municipal elections. This enabled them to bring together their experience, the professional expertise of the grassroots

community, and the infrastructures and remaining powers of local governments. *“The nature of these municipalities is determined by the fact that the boundaries between the civil and municipal actors are very blurred, and social issues are managed by activists in municipalities. Here, the two worlds naturally overlap, and it makes no difference whether you help as a municipality or as a civil society organization—you help, and that’s it,”*—reported our interviewee,<sup>29</sup> who is a Hungarian pioneer of the municipalist movement that started in Barcelona. The Deputy mayor of another district formulated her governance vision similarly: *“I really believe in the civil sector. I really believe that in the twenty first century, local government has to find its place in the twenty first century, and it’s [this involves] a completely different relationship with civilians and citizens (...).”*<sup>30</sup> Both informants are linked to internationally educated new-left activist groups that are formulating system-critical political claims about neoliberalism and global capitalism. These groups emerged in the 2000s, mainly in the capital and a few major Hungarian cities.

Many of the civilians came not only with their political convictions but also well-developed visions and methods for intervention involving linking direct aid experiences with public policy positions. Civilians previously working with Roma and disadvantaged children and offering special programs for refugee children articulated the vision of an inclusive and intercultural education system.<sup>31</sup> Housing activists providing accommodation for refugees referred to the universal right to housing.<sup>32</sup> Religious leaders, volunteers, and charity staff envisioned communities united under a universalist integrative church.<sup>33</sup> These and similar services invited displaced people and other vulnerable groups into the same community of solidarity. All this signals a shift in imagination concerning the boundaries of the community and ties of belonging that challenge the mainstream representations of civic and political communities premised on a sharp distinction between “us” and “them” within the nation-state. The “local” is not conceived by these actors as a nested subsection of the heterogeneous national community but enshrined as a space associated with specific values, identities, and visions of the future, formulated openly or implicitly as an alternative(s) to the imaginaries promoted by the state and national government.

However, the production of the mechanisms of solidarity and related discourses of the “local” is subject to many constraints. As we mentioned earlier, civic initiatives in smaller settlements that are the most obvious potential partners in this endeavor may face reluctance and/or the open hostility of local governments. For numerous initiatives, finding the larger systems of support (promoted by INGOs, professional NGOs, or the solidarity hubs described earlier) that would be essential for stabilizing and anchoring support activities and services in more isolated places is often hampered. This applies not only to smaller initiatives in rural northern and eastern regions of Hungary but also to refugee self-help organizations, which, as we found, may lack “entry points” into the civic solidarity landscape; at least, this is what our sample indicates.<sup>34</sup> Struggles for recognition and material resources induce the most ubiquitous threat to stabilizing inclusive local solidarities. On the one hand, Ukrainian refugees wish to avoid misrecognition and loss of status by being linked to the “local poor” and being treated in the same spaces. On the other hand, vulnerable local citizens who receive support may fear the consequences of redistributing resources. Moreover, discourses that racialize displaced Ukrainian people of Roma ethnicity constitute a significant threat to the stabilization and maintenance of solidarity practices and inclusive local identities. The competitive struggles for recognition and resources and the ubiquitous anti-Roma discourse need constant management, coordination, and interventions on the part of the actors working on processes of “localization.”

## 5. Discussion

In this paper, we have argued that several structural factors have led to a significant shift in the tasks and responsibilities associated with supporting refugees from the national to the local level in Hungary. The process of localization has involved numerous actors of various types and

scales. First, we described how the state transferred a significant proportion of vulnerable displaced people to marginalized social spaces (often to economically disadvantaged rural settlements) while providing only scarce material, financial, and administrative resources. This insufficiently met these people's needs and put the burden of care on the local governments, civic organizations, and citizens of these settlements. Second, we described how transnational actors, including supranational bodies, international organizations, and Western donor NGOs, provided important symbolic and material-financial resources to support displaced Ukrainian people. By mobilizing community governance and localizing humanitarian aid, they made important contributions not only to setting up infrastructures, networks, and alliances to provide services for the displaced but also advocated for the symbolic values associated with the notion of the "local." All this is germane to conceptually linking solidarity practices with locally anchored civic groups, their struggles, hopes, and experiences. Third, we have described how municipalities and local governments that still possess the remnants of institutional power and (scarce) material and infrastructural resources—as *sui generis* "local" actors—have become the producers of localized solidarity structures.

Producing and maintaining provisions and services for the displaced people from Ukraine required the activism of civil society organizations, communities, and individuals, whose involvement was far greater than ever before (Zakariás et al., 2023). Solidarity actions responding to the needs of the displaced people have relied on alliances between municipal actors set up in recent years with the active participation of civic and religious non-governmental organizations with a social mission. This has been most salient in the capital and its districts and some rural municipalities. An important development in this area has been the municipal and civic pioneers' strategically built interfaces of refugee care and other social policy sectors. This has helped incorporate refugee services into the broader institutional landscape of the "social," which in some cases has also enriched the imaginary of refugees and the displaced people as members of the local political community. In this way, inclusive social policy visions have also enhanced the potential of a political agenda of progressive localism.

The local implementation of tasks and responsibilities related to refugees has involved civil and municipal actors with unequally distributed resources. Unsurprisingly, civic and municipal actors in the capital and other cities have obtained a larger share of the latter. Despite the limited resources, local governments and civic actors involved in refugee support are motivated by a sense of local responsibility and a duty to care for needy and vulnerable groups, including refugees and people on the move. NGOs and civic and religious actors often articulated universal moral arguments associated with the phenomena of an inclusive community, local democratization, or religious community-building. These ideals have been voiced and promoted to resist the morally and politically destructive effects of the dominant central governmental paradigms and practices that embody a hierarchy of human beings and social groups and clientelism-based policymaking and governance.

Scholarly opinions converge that before the forced migration juncture caused by the war on Ukraine, municipalities did not have visions, programs, or public policy strategies for dealing with migration in Hungary. Our research shows that changes are emerging due to the challenges and responses to the arrival of displaced people from Ukraine. The municipal elections in 2024 can be seen as an interim stage and tipping point that may facilitate the formation of political and policy programs for the new municipal cycle. In the capital city and certain districts of Budapest, migration governance is envisioned as part of inclusive and gradually more refined social policy governance and policy-making that had already demonstrated responsiveness to specific equality causes (gender, Roma, disability, etc.). It is yet to be seen how the social policy framework will be laced together, if at all, with multicultural city visions and urban identity, making the most of diversity as a resource.

Our results have also highlighted some vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and limitations of localism and localization. The neoliberal modes of "governing through the community" in the short term provide resources and operational capacity to NGOs that host refugees, but international

project-based funding makes service provision and civic activity extremely difficult in the long run. The restrictive and punitive effect of the authoritarian regime on civilians and especially on human rights organizations active in the field of asylum further and more profoundly limits the development of localism. With the notion of constrained localism that we propose, we seek to indicate that, in the wake of several local developments and transnational links, localism is also unfolding within the context of autocracy and has gained considerable momentum in relation to the recent refugee crisis. Nevertheless, this localism is constrained because of public fears about the consequences of being resilient to the central regime, the general anti-migrant and anti-Roma sentiment, and local struggles for recognition and resources.

## Notes

1. Interview M5, M6, M7.
2. Interview M4-1.
3. Interview M4-2.
4. Interview N1, N2.
5. Interview N6, N8, N9.
6. Interview E3.
7. Interview IN1, IN3.
8. Interview N7, N3.
9. Interview IN4 and N2.
10. Interview F1.
11. Interview IN2, N8, N9.
12. Interview IN1.
13. Interview F2, C1, C2.
14. Interview C5.
15. Interview N6, N8, N9.
16. Interview C7, C8, C9.
17. Interview M1, M2, M3.
18. Interview M1.
19. Fieldnotes 25. February 2023.
20. Interview M9.
21. Interview M11.
22. Interview M6, M7.
23. Interview C9, C10, M6.
24. Interview N1, N3, N7.
25. Interview C1, C6.
26. Interview C1.
27. See Fieldnotes 2022 March-May.
28. Interview F2.
29. Interview M2.
30. Interview M3.
31. Interview C5.
32. Interview N4.
33. Interview C8, F2, F3.
34. Interview F4, C7.

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## Appendix A

| Interview list and identification |                |              |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Number                            | Type of actors | Interview ID |
| 1.                                | NGO            | N1           |
| 2.                                | NGO            | N2           |
| 3.                                | NGO            | N3           |
| 4.                                | NGO            | N4           |
| 5.                                | NGO            | N5           |
| 6.                                | NGO            | N6           |
| 7.                                | NGO            | N7           |
| 8.                                | NGO            | N8           |
| 9.                                | NGO            | N9           |
| 10.                               | civic group    | C1           |
| 11.                               | civic group    | C2           |
| 12.                               | civic group    | C3           |
| 13.                               | civic group    | C4           |
| 14.                               | civic group    | C5           |
| 15.                               | civic group    | C6           |
| 16.                               | civic group    | C7           |
| 17.                               | civic group    | C8           |
| 18.                               | civic group    | C9           |
| 19.                               | civic group    | C10          |
| 20.                               | civic group    | C11          |

| Interview list and identification |                                            |              |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|--------------|
| Number                            | Type of actors                             | Interview ID |
| 21.                               | civic group                                | C12          |
| 22.                               | municipal government—capital city          | M1           |
| 23.                               | municipal government—capital city district | M2           |
| 24.                               | municipal government—capital city district | M3           |
| 25.                               | municipal government—rural                 | M4           |
| 26.                               | municipal government—town                  | M5           |
| 27.                               | municipal government—rural                 | M6           |
| 28.                               | municipal government—rural                 | M7           |
| 29.                               | municipal government—capital city          | M8           |
| 30.                               | municipal government—capital city district | M9           |
| 31.                               | municipal government—capital city district | M10          |
| 32.                               | municipal government—capital city district | M11          |
| 33.                               | faith based charity                        | F1           |
| 34.                               | faith based org                            | F2           |
| 35.                               | faith based charity                        | F3           |
| 36.                               | faith based group                          | F4           |
| 37.                               | faith based educational entity             | E1           |
| 38.                               | private educational entity                 | E2           |
| 39.                               | public educational entity                  | E3           |
| 40.                               | public educational entity                  | E4           |
| 41.                               | international organization                 | IN1          |
| 42.                               | international organization                 | IN2          |
| 43.                               | international organization                 | IN3          |
| 44.                               | international organization                 | IN4          |