

Refugees and individual solidarity: Social beliefs, political-ideological orientations and social traits

In the last years, the issue of solidarity towards vulnerable groups such as refugees has come under the spotlight. On the one hand, the inability of EU institutions and their member states to establish a coordinated asylum policy, mechanisms of admission and integration as well as the success of anti-immigration populist parties across Europe, have raised concerns about the augmented influx of refugees from Syria and other regions affected by wars. On the other hand, however, the refugee crisis has highlighted the relevance and growth of transnational solidarity organisations, which have been working on a daily basis to meet basic needs of refugees, taking the form of both advocacy and service provision. How widespread are solidarity initiatives in favour of refugees? What are the characteristics of the people involved in such initiatives?

This focus examines cross-country evidence on individual perceptions and behaviours towards refugees, in order to outline the profiles of European citizens engaged in solidarity practices in favour of this vulnerable group. It relies on results from original survey data (N=16,000) collected from eight European countries (Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, UK) for the [TransSOL project](#). In our questionnaire, we refer generically to refugees/asylum seekers without focusing on the proper legal distinction between these two groups. Indeed, we are interested in a broader category that includes both, given that most people interpret the terms “refugees” and “asylum seekers” as synonymous.

As a starting point, we need to outline the picture of diverse solidarity practices (donating time or money, passive and active membership, buying products, protest participation) **in favour of refugees across the eight countries in question, to mirror both the civic and political dimension of solidarity in different European contexts** (see Table 1). The results show that on average, 27.1% of respondents have been engaged in at least one solidarity activity in favour of refugees, with some noteworthy differences across countries: Greece and Germany are the countries with the highest level of engagement (36.4% and 34.1%, respectively), whereas France and the UK show the lowest level of engagement (20.2% and 21.7%, respectively).

If we look at the different types of solidarity practices, the charity behaviour of donating money is the most frequent action in all countries (12.2% on average) **except in Greece, where donating time is the most frequent action** (15.2%). Conversely, political protest-oriented activities are not widespread (4.7% on average), with a slight peak in Greece (8.9%). Similar patterns can be found regarding the active and passive involvement in organisations supporting refugees. Finally, buying or refusing to buy products in favour of refugees is a political action more widespread than protest-oriented actions in all countries (7.4% on average), with a peak in Greece (12.7%) where such action ranks second after donating time.

Table 1. Type of reported solidarity activities in favour of refugees over countries (in %)

	DK	FR	DE	GR	IT	PL	CH	UK	Total
Attended a march, protest or demonstration	4.5	3.9	5.3	8.9	5.8	4.9	3.6	3	4.7
Donating money	20.1	8.3	15.2	11.7	11	11.2	18.6	12.4	12.2
Donating time	8.6	6.1	14.1	15.2	7.5	8.6	10.6	4.7	8.9
Bought or refused to buy products in support	7.7	5.7	9.2	12.7	8.1	6.3	11.2	5.1	7.4
Engaged as passive member of an organisation	3.5	2.6	2.8	5.4	3.5	2.9	3.6	3	3.1
Engaged as active member of an organisation	4.2	2.9	6.3	8.1	5.6	2.7	4.7	2.5	4.4
Total (at least one action)	30.4	20.2	34.1	36.4	27.6	26.7	32.8	21.7	27.1
N	697	415	701	806	579	566	736	446	4946

Source: TransSOL project

Who deserves solidarity?

Previous studies have shown that solidarity behaviour depends on a target group's image reflected by vulnerable groups and their perceived deservingness ([van Oorschot, 2000](#)). In our survey, we asked respondents to name the specific group they would choose for charity donation among the following ones: unemployed people, people with disabilities, migrants, refugees/asylum seekers, and children. We can consider this variable as a proxy for deservingness, arguing that people are more likely to choose a group they deem more deserving of help for charity donation. Results show (see Table 2) that children are by far the most preferred group for charity donation (53.2% in the whole sample), followed by the disabled (28.8%) and the unemployed (9.8%). For European citizens, refugees/asylum seekers and migrants are definitely the groups they deem less deserving (6.7% and 1.6%, respectively). These patterns are confirmed if we look at country-specific results, but with some interesting differences with regards to the relative ranking of unemployed people and refugees/asylum seekers. The latter are considered a more deserving group (in terms of charity donations) compared to the unemployed in Denmark (13.1% vs 9.7%), in Germany (8.4% vs 5.5%) and in the UK (8.3% vs. 3.7%). In Switzerland, there is a substantial equilibrium between those who cite refugees/asylum seekers as preferred charity group (7.9%) and those who cite the unemployed (7.8%). In any case, in all countries, findings show that refugees are an out-group perceived by the in-group of European citizens as less deserving of help compared to other vulnerable groups such as the disabled.

Table 2. Preferred group for charity donations over countries (in %)

	DK	FR	DE	GR	IT	PL	CH	UK	Total
Preferred group for donation									
Unemployed people	9.7	7.3	5.5	17.0	20.9	5.4	7.8	3.7	9.8
People with disability	26.2	35.2	22.9	21.7	23.8	33.2	32.0	35.4	28.8
Migrants	0.7	2.4	1.6	0.5	2.4	1.4	1.6	2.3	1.6
Refugees /asylum seekers	13.1	4.1	8.4	5.0	3.8	3.1	7.9	8.3	6.7
Children	50.2	51.1	61.6	55.8	49.1	56.9	50.6	50.3	53.2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	1,860	1,798	1,854	1,973	1,898	1,948	2,030	1,777	15,138

Source: TransSOL project

Profiling Europeans engaged in solidarity

Regarding the profile of people engaged in pro-refugee actions, we need to take into account the individual characteristics of respondents. Previous research has shown that solidarity is highly determined by political preferences and ideological orientations ([Skitka and Tetlock, 1993](#); [Blekesaune and Quadagno, 2003](#); [Amat and Wibbels, 2009](#); [Likki and Staerklé, 2014](#)) and by citizen's differentiation in terms of personal resources and skills, such as education and affiliation to social class ([Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978](#); [Cainzos and Voces, 2010](#)). Building on these studies, we have focused on the political orientations of respondents (in terms of economic left-right positions and libertarian-authoritarian values) and social traits (social class and education level). To grasp the specificity of solidarity towards refugees, it is useful to compare the profile of respondents involved in solidarity practices towards refugees with those engaged with solidarity practices towards the disabled, i.e. the most deserving vulnerable group (except children) according to our data. We operationalized the dependent variable, i.e. solidarity practices toward specific target groups, by combining a series of questions about the aforementioned different kinds of solidarity actions that help to mirror charity, civic and political dimensions of solidarity. The reliability scale between these items is high (alpha test 0.66): thus, the items shared an important covariance, measuring the same underlying concept. Consequently, we created two dichotomous variables (0 'no action', 1 'at least one action') per target group.

Table 3 shows the relationship between solidarity actions towards our target groups and political orientations in the pooled dataset, particularly looking at respondents' left-right positions on economic issues and their values along the libertarian-authoritarian

dimension. In our survey, there are several questions on economic issues connected to a broader left-right divide, as confirmed by a [factor analysis](#). Hence, the economic left-right orientation of respondents has been measured as an additive index of positions linked to a unique factor component. Results of the factor analysis show that a specific economic left-right item (“equal incomes vs. larger income differences”) is not related to the other economic items. Consequently, we separated the relationship between this variable and solidarity actions towards our target groups. Finally, respondents were asked about several cultural items connected to a broader libertarian-authoritarian divide, as confirmed again by a [factor analysis](#). Therefore, we created an additive index of values linked to a unique factor component.

Considering the economic left-right index, results show that, in our sample, centre-right positions on economic issues prevail over centre-left stances, even among people involved in solidarity actions. Nevertheless, data also shows that centre-left people are over-represented among people supporting refugees (34.8% vs 24.3%), whereas centre-right people are under-represented (41.3% vs 53.9%). Conversely, the shares of centre-left and centre-right people supporting the disabled do not differ so much from the sample’s average. This over-representation of centre-left people among people supporting refugees disappears if we look at the share of respondents with an egalitarian stance regarding income differences; indeed, egalitarian positions prevail among people supporting refugees (62.6%), but this share is around five percentage points lower than the sample’s average. With regards to the libertarian-authoritarian index, the field of solidarity towards refugees is even more singled out for its specificity. Here, libertarian people are by far the largest category (53.2%) and are clearly over-represented. Conversely, the share of libertarian people supporting the disabled (45.4%) is practically the same as the whole sample (45.5%). In conclusion, the findings show that solidarity engagement for refugees is related to political-ideological elements, whereas solidarity towards the disabled is not a divisive issue in political terms.

Table 3. Solidarity actions towards target groups by respondents' political orientations (in %)

Political orientations		Refugees supporters	Disabled supporters	Total
Economic left-right index	Centre-Right	41.3	51.25	53.9
	Centre	24.0	22.17	21.8
	Centre-Left	34.8	26.58	24.3
	Total	100	100	100
	N	4,008	7,345	14,334
Left-right on income differences	Centre-Right	35.3	31.4	29.0
	Centre	2.2	2.8	3.6
	Centre-Left	62.6	65.7	67.5
	Total	100	100	100
	N	4,230	7,809	15,332
Libertarian-authoritarian index	Authoritarian	22.6	30.4	31.1
	Ambivalent	24.2	24.2	23.4
	Libertarian	53.2	45.4	45.5
	Total	100	100	100
	N	3808	6,985	13651

Source: TransSOL project

Table 4 reports solidarity actions towards target groups by subjective social class and level of education. Quite interesting patterns emerge if we take “social centrality” into examination, as measured by perceived class belonging. Results confirm the specificity of solidarity activities in favour of refugees. Among people supporting refugees, the lower class and, above all, the working class are under-represented compared to the total population, whereas the middle, upper middle and upper classes are over-represented. Conversely, the distribution of people supporting the disabled across class categories is in line with that of the total population. Considering educational attainment, highly-educated people are over-represented among those supporting refugees. Indeed, the percentage of respondents with a higher education is 28.5% among people supporting refugees (vs 22.5% of the total population) and 24.5% among people supporting the disabled.

Table 4. Solidarity actions towards target groups by subjective social class and educational attainment (in %)

Social traits		Refugees supporters	Disabled supporters	Total
Subjective social class	Upper class	1.7	1.1	0.8
	Upper middle class	10.1	7.8	7.1
	Middle class	43.0	41.7	40.2
	Lower middle class	23.2	24.6	23.6
	Working class	15.0	17.8	20.4
	Lower class	5.9	6.0	6.8
	Other class	1.1	1.0	1.0
	Total	100	100.0	100
	N	4,361	8041	15,792
Education	Higher education	28.5	24.5	22.5
	Intermediate education	43.5	44.1	42.8
	Lower education	28.0	31.4	34.6
	Total	100	100	100
	N	4,584	8,437	16,916

Source: TransSQL project

Solidarity towards refugees as a contested ground

To conclude, solidarity towards refugees is a contested issue that differentiates people of different political orientations related to both the (traditional) economic left-right divide and the cultural divide on libertarian vs authoritarian values. This politicisation of solidarity does not occur when the target of solidarity is a vulnerable group such as the disabled, which is considered worthy of being helped. In particular, solidarity towards refugees entails a political commitment to libertarian values as opposed to authoritarian stances, confirming the specificity of this cultural dimension compared to the traditional left-right dimension and the importance of new cultural issues for contentious politics (Flanagan and Lee, 2003). This is particularly significant for a continent that has faced both economic turmoil and a refugee crisis in the last years, and where right-wing populist parties (Mudde, 2011) have mobilised more on cultural “demarcationist” issues such as immigration (Kriesi et al., 2006) than on the economic left-right divide in order to gain votes among the lower classes, using migrants as scapegoats for their fears and economic distress. In this regard, our data shows that refugees are supported more by middle and upper-class people with a high level of education, compared to working class people with a lower level of education. Thus, the challenge for policy-makers is to adopt

effective and inclusive welfare policies that enable pro-refugees attitudes and behaviours to spread, also among the lower social strata, who are concerned about competition over scarce resources and attached to a social model more strictly defined in terms of traditional nation-state.

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