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# Symbolic struggles over solidarity in times of crisis: trade unions, civil society actors and the political far right in Austria

Julia Hofmann<sup>a</sup>, Carina Altreiter<sup>a</sup>, Jörg Flecker<sup>a</sup>, Saskja Schindler<sup>a</sup> and Ruth Simsa<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Sociology, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria; <sup>b</sup>Department of Socioeconomics, University of Economics and Business, Vienna, Austria

## ABSTRACT



As a consequence of the recent financial and economic crisis, social cohesion and integration are in jeopardy all over Europe. In this context, scholars also speak of decreasing solidarity, which is defined as a normative obligation to help each other and to make sacrifices to reach common goals. By taking the empirical example of Austria, we argue that the meaning of solidarity is increasingly being contested. Various collective actors such as trade unions, civil society actors, but also right-wing populist parties are engaged in symbolic struggles over solidarity. To show this, we examine the different concepts and foundations of solidarity and analyse where and why they conflict with each other, referring to recent debates on political issues, such as the needs-based minimum benefit system and the access to the labour market for refugees.

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**KEYWORDS** Solidarity; symbolic struggles; FPÖ; trade unions; civil society actors; Austria

## 1. Introduction

The recent financial and economic crisis had major effects on the European Union (EU). Although the crisis did not affect all member states equally, some general trends can be observed. Statistics show that unemployment – especially youth unemployment – has been on the rise in all European member states (European Commission 2013). Nearly a quarter of the EU population (23.4%) is at risk of poverty or social exclusion (European Commission 2012). There is a sharp increase in job

**CONTACT** Julia Hofmann  [julia.hofmann@univie.ac.at](mailto:julia.hofmann@univie.ac.at)  Department of Sociology, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

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insecurity and different forms of precarious working conditions all across EU countries (Eurofound 2013a,b).

The political consequences are enormous: life satisfaction and the overall trust in governments and institutions are deteriorating (OECD 2014). In many European countries, far right parties gained electoral support. British citizens voted to leave the European Union. Although these developments are heterogeneous and the different parties on the rise range from populist parties to right-wing extremist ones (Hentges 2011), they all represent a certain trend. This trend is sometimes interpreted as a substantial threat to the European integration process, to European solidarity and to living together in prosperity within the nation states. However, the crisis spawned initiatives for inclusive local solidarity, especially in the countries hit the hardest: for example, people in Spain established platforms to help those affected by evictions (Asensi 2014) and to run soup kitchens (Simsa 2016), and in Greece, food cooperatives and initiatives to provide free medical care were established (Papadaki *et al.* 2015). Moreover, new left-wing parties were formed and some of them even gained government responsibility (such as Syriza in Greece).

In this paper, we argue that these developments do not necessarily mean that the idea of solidarity is becoming less important. Rather, the forms of solidarity may change and a symbolic struggle over the concept may be waged. By symbolic struggle we mean controversies in which (collective) actors try to impose their 'legitimate vision of the social world' (Bourdieu 1989: 20) on others. This relates both to what we consider to be right or wrong, good or bad, valuable or worthless and to 'symbolic boundaries' that separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership (Lamont and Molnár 2002: 168).

Stjernø (2005) described differences in the concepts of solidarity in history and shows in what way the social democratic idea of solidarity was challenged by Christian democracy, communism and fascism. Currently, solidarity is again subject to intensified symbolic struggles. The political (far) right has started to use the term giving it a different meaning. A good example is Victor Orbán's phrase in which he described the closing of Hungary's borders to refugees as an act of European solidarity (Spiegel 2016). But the idea of solidarity is also contested when the term is not explicitly used. The concrete fields of contention may relate to institutionalised solidarity in the form of the welfare state, to the boundaries of the community of solidarity, and to the goals and the means to achieve them.

We address this symbolic struggle over solidarity by exploring the different concepts of solidarity of selected collective actors in Austria.

The country serves as an example for the developments we are seeing all over Europe: with the popularity of the Freedom Party (FPÖ) since the 1990s, Austria has taken a right-wing populist path, which many other European countries are also on nowadays. Therefore, it is worth taking a closer look at the developments in this country. Moreover, despite its small size, the country faced a high influx of refugees in 2015, which led to a huge support movement orchestrated by civil society actors. In Austria, we find a strong civil society, influential trade unions and a strong political far right with strongly contrasting positions on notions of solidarity. What is more, these collective actors are engaged in conflicts over policies of inclusion and exclusion, in particular, regarding immigration and social security. Thus, by using Austria as an empirical example, we are able to observe the widening divide in European societies as if under a magnifying glass.

This contribution aims at answering the research question as to what characterises the concepts of solidarity of different collective actors, how these manifest themselves in debates on topical political issues, and how the very meaning of solidarity is being contested in symbolic struggles. To answer this question, we map and analyse the concepts of solidarity of highly influential collective actors and explore how they influence current political debates on the needs-based minimum benefit system and the issue of labour market access for refugees. These political debates are of special interest because all over Europe – and especially since the ‘refugee crisis’ – access to social security and the labour market are strongly contested as we have seen with, for instance, the Brexit. These debates are particularly insightful examples of struggles over solidarity, as its scope and the question of inclusion and exclusion are negotiated. To look at the symbolic struggles within a country is of special interest as they shape a country’s position on the political questions at the European level where nation states still play an important role. In the EU context, especially migration and social policies remain at the national level and strongly affect the EU’s position. Struggles within the national context further show that a country’s position is far from homogenous, but highly dependent on the power and hegemony of different actors.

We map and analyse the concepts of solidarity of three highly influential collective actors: the FPÖ, the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) and the civil society actors active in refugee support. We selected these actors because of their high levels of influence and their particular positions. While the FPÖ and the civil society actors strongly shaped the public discourse on these issues in Austria and expressed the most

controversial positions, the ÖGB was able to shape these debates at the institutional level due to the still functioning and politically highly influential system of social partnership in Austria (Pernicka and Hefler 2015). Overall, the FPÖ stands for a very exclusivist understanding of solidarity, the ÖGB shows a contradictory position in this respect, whilst civil society actors depict an inclusive concept of solidarity.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we systematically review the academic debate on solidarity in order to describe our analytical framework. Second, we examine the different foundations of solidarity of the FPÖ, the ÖGB and the civil society actors as well as their positions on selected political issues in Austria. Third, we draw conclusions on different meanings and symbolic struggles regarding solidarity.

## 2. Concepts of solidarity

The historical roots of the term solidarity lie within the ancient Roman law of obligation prescribing the ‘unlimited liability of each individual member within a [...] community to pay common debts’ (Bayertz 1998: 11). It goes back to the concepts of fraternity and brotherhood (Stjernø 2005: 27) which were later replaced by the concept of solidarity (Metz 1998). Apart from collective liabilities, solidarity refers to a feeling of community and to sharing resources (Stjernø 2005: 28). With the German philosopher Bayertz we define solidarity as a ‘mutual attachment between individuals’ (Bayertz 1998: 11), which involves a ‘factual level of common ground between the individuals’ and a ‘normative level of mutual obligations to aid each other, as and when should be necessary’ (ibid.: 12).

Within the European history of ideas, Stjernø (2005) identifies two basic types of solidarity concepts: The first understands solidarity as the result of norms and values that bind different parts of society together, and it is found in the writings of Comte (1973 [1852]) and Durkheim (1933 [1893]). The second, found in Marx and Engels (1976 [1888]) but also in Weber (1978 [1922]), describes solidarity as a relationship between members of a certain group. Based on the definition of this group, solidarity thus includes and excludes, integrates and divides (Stjernø 2005: 85). The different empirical concepts of solidarity we analyse in this article belong to the second type of the two analytical solidarity concepts.

Some scholars stress the necessarily inclusive or universalistic meaning of solidarity. Scherr (2013: 264f.) suggests to use solidarity only as an

emancipatory term and thus to restrict it to collective action, which aims at upholding common interests, and to a universal perspective. Focussing on political solidarity, Scholz (2008) conceptualizes solidarity as a revolutionary praxis, fighting unjust practices and institutions.

Nevertheless, there is also a tradition of juxtaposing different, and often opposing, meanings of solidarity. Sorokin (1947, quoted in: Smith and Sorrell 2014) distinguished between 'exclusive tribal solidarity' and 'universal solidarity'; Alexander (2006, 2014) opposed 'civil solidarity' to 'uncivil solidarity'; and Stjernø (2005) differentiates 'inclusive' and 'exclusive' solidarity. According to these positions, it would be misleading to merely define solidarity as 'inclusive' because different forms of solidarity show various degrees and scopes of inclusiveness. It is argued that 'exclusion cannot be avoided, and it is inherent to systems that produce solidarity of some nature' (Smith and Sorrell 2014: 235). However, this is probably no general ahistorical law. As Elias (2006) argued, with the development of stable patterns of self-control, the capacity to identify and feel sympathy with humans relatively removed from their group increases.

Conflicts have emerged over the different meanings and forms of solidarity in which the far right promotes exclusivist solidarity along ethnic and national lines (Carvalho 2014). In Hungary, for example, the extreme-right party Jobbik actively engages in solidarity actions for the poor, but limits its help to the ethnic in-group. In contrast, others demand universal forms of solidarity, as in recent social movements in Greece or Spain, actively embracing diversity, and basing solidarity on the understanding that 'everyone can find themselves at some time or other in a situation of oppression or suffering' (Gould 2007: 160).

To investigate current symbolic struggles over the concept of solidarity, we focus on its dimensions developed by Stjernø (2005). His multi-layered framework for the analysis of different concepts of solidarity examines four aspects. First, the *basis/foundation* of solidarity which refers to the self and its identifications. Self-interest shared with a restricted group is a narrow category on this continuum, the recognition of belonging to a larger group is a broader one, finally reaching to a universal category encompassing all human beings. Second, the *goals/objectives* of solidarity include realising common interests, strengthening a certain group, creating communities and shared feelings of belonging. Third, *inclusiveness* refers to the question as to who is included in, and who is excluded from, the group to be solidary with. The final aspect of *collective orientation* asks to what degree the concept of solidarity allows for freedom when it comes to possible tensions between individual and collective

interests (*ibid.*: 16ff.). The following empirical analysis draws on these dimensions. In the presentation of our findings below, we mainly refer to the first three dimensions that turned out to be the most important.

### 3. Methods

The paper is based on document analyses carried out in 2016 in the framework of the research project ‘Solidarity in Times of Crisis (2016–2019)’<sup>1</sup> and on data collected during the two preceding research projects carried out between 2013 and 2016 (used for the analysis of the general concepts of solidarity).<sup>2</sup> This data was (re-)analysed according to the understandings, foundations and boundaries of solidarity.<sup>3</sup> The main source of information on the three collective actors were documents such as the party programme, information material, public reports, resolutions, press releases and material on the organisations’ websites (see [Table 1](#)). Where needed (because of heterogeneous or ambivalent positions as well to cover the specificities of the different actors), other empirical data (e.g. interviews) was included. For the NGOs, we conducted a secondary analysis of a qualitative investigation (Simsa *et al.* 2016). For trade unions, the secondary analysis is based on qualitative interviews with trade union and workers representatives (from the ÖGB and the two biggest sectoral trade unions PRO-GE and GPA djp) (Hofmann 2017). For the FPÖ, we carried out qualitative document analysis of the latest party’s programme, important party documents and guidelines such as the ‘Handbook of Liberal Politics’, policy proposals, press releases and media interviews by the party’s core figures. In this case, no additional interviews were needed to answer the research questions, as the party’s position was more homogenous than the position of the trade unions and the civil society actors.

### 4. Solidarity in practice

The economic crisis together with the wars and ecological crises that triggered migration movements have put the notion of solidarity back on the

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<sup>1</sup>The research project ‘Solidarity in Times of Crisis – Solidarität in Zeiten der Krise. Sozio-ökonomischer Wandel und politische Orientierungen in Österreich und Ungarn (SOCRIS)’ is funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), Project Number I 2698-G27.

<sup>2</sup>For further information on the preceding projects see: Hofmann (2017), Simsa *et al.* (2016), Simsa (2017).

<sup>3</sup>Although parts of the data were collected in different research contexts, our analysis of the different concepts of solidarity of the collective actors is somewhat independent of them, because we rely mainly on non-reactive, ‘natural’ data such as resolutions, press releases, etc. As the different time horizons of the projects matter for the position on political issues at stake, in this context we only used material of the same survey period (after 2016). But the general solidarity concepts of the different collective actors remain fairly stable over time, so in this context, the different time horizons do not play an important role. Thus, for this analysis we also used the ‘older data’ (from 2013 on).

**Table 1.** Data.

Collective Actors	Methods and data
Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)	- Document analysis (e.g. party programme, Handbook of Liberal Politics, policy proposals, press releases, media interviews)
Trade unions	- Document analysis (e.g. press releases, websites, resolutions, information material, media interviews)
	- Interviews with trade union and workers' representatives ( $n = 24$ )
Civil society actors	- Document analysis (e.g. press releases, websites, information material)
	- Interviews with NGOs (e.g. Red Cross, Caritas; $n = 14$ ), grassroots organisations (e.g. Train of Hope; $n = 11$ ), volunteers ( $n = 14$ )

political agenda in Europe. Reactions to societal challenges are strongly influenced by the way solidarity is framed and how solidary communities are defined. The different concepts of solidarity, as well as the question of who should experience solidarity and who not, clash especially when it comes to the issue of migration and asylum seeking. Thus, in the following sections, we describe the different understandings of solidarity of selected collective actors in Austria and give an insight into the symbolic struggles over solidarity with respect to the migrants and refugees they are currently involved with.

#### 4.1. FPÖ

The FPÖ is one of the most successful far right parties in Europe in terms of election results. Its support stems from 'new political divisions concerning immigration, European integration and the functioning of the political system' (Aichholzer *et al.* 2014). Since the mid-1980s, the party has strongly influenced the political agenda in Austria thereby contributing to a general shift of the political coordinates to the right (Wodak 2015). In the party's programme and in its main political documents, the FPÖ uses the term solidarity in an affirmative way to call, for example, for 'generation solidarity' or solidarity with the 'fellow countrymen' (FPÖ 2011: 7f.). Solidarity is supported with reservations when it comes to 'European solidarity' or social policy. And, finally, the term is used in a denunciatory way when reference is made to 'misconceived solidarity with irresponsible governments of bankrupt states' (FPÖ-Bildungsinstitut 2013: 25). In the following, however, we do not focus on the use of the *term*. Rather, we mainly discuss what *concept* of solidarity the FPÖ is implicitly and explicitly putting forward.

In terms of *foundation*, the concept of 'Volk' (people, ethnic community) plays a major role. In contrast to the historical national socialist conception of solidarity (Stjernø 2005: 280ff.), it is no longer construed as a 'race' or 'blood community' but as a 'solidary community' (Peham 2010:



477), which is defined as 'völkisch', stressing the 'German ethnic community'. This term was re-included into the party programme in 2011. In addition to the 'German ethnic community' to which the majority of Austrians should belong, historically resident 'autochthon ethnic groups' are also seen as part of the national community ('*Staatsvolk*'). This definition of the community of solidarity is combined with ethno-pluralism demanding the separation of 'the free peoples and fatherlands' in Europe (FPÖ 2011: 1). Although the party has increasingly been displaying Austrian patriotism from the 1990s onwards (Sickinger 2008), the 'German language and cultural community' still has priority today.

As far as the *objectives* of solidarity are concerned, the 'well-being' and the 'survival' of the ethnic community is a major concern of the party. The former MEP Mölzer used the term '*Umvolkung*' (forced conversion of ethnic population) through immigration that needs to be prevented. A further objective is securing the 'national preference' through welfare chauvinism (De Koster *et al.* 2013). The FPÖ presents itself as the 'social homeland party' and expresses its preference for nationals in their slogan 'Austria first'. Thereby, the far right successfully addresses rational voters' motives of social closure relating to the labour market, social security, housing and the education system (Flecker *et al.* 2007).

The party's position on *inclusiveness* results from their preference for the 'German ethnic community'. In a party document, the FPÖ demands a child-raising 'salary' for nationals and presents this as a question of 'survival of our people' (FPÖ-Bildungsinstitut 2013: 147). The so-called 'minus immigration' aims at the same goal: migration is construed as a danger for the people that should be reversed. Migrants should not be allowed to use the public employment service and should not be covered by unemployment insurance as they 'have the opportunity to find work in their home countries' (FPÖ-Bildungsinstitut 2013: 113). According to the FPÖ, the solidary community of the welfare state therefore includes mainly the 'German ethnic community' and to some extent the whole national community.

Consequently, the FPÖ demands a separate social security system for non-citizens and some party organisations ask for a withdrawal of the right to needs-based minimum social benefit for refugees. Regarding immigration, the main demand refers to migrants' adaptation or 'integration'. The exclusivist position of the FPÖ is underlined by their demand for a revision of the European Convention of Human Rights as 'Europe is exposed to a continuous mass immigration that to a large

part takes place under a permanent abuse of the right to asylum' (FPÖ-Bildungsinstitut 2013: 27f.).

During a parliamentary election campaign, the FPÖ used the slogan 'Liebe deine Nächsten' ('love thy neighbours') (Marquart 2013) adding the sentence 'For me these are our Austrians'. This prompted objections by a Christian church accusing the FPÖ of misusing the term: 'Charity is not about measuring distance', as argued in the media by the director of Diakonie stressing the idea of universal Christian solidarity. 'The question is not who is close to us but whether we are prepared to become the 'Nächste' (next or neighbour) ourselves'.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to their campaign slogan 'social homeland party' and to the importance of welfarechauvinist positions, the FPÖ's position on institutionalised solidarity of the welfare state is not clear. In their actual political activities, the party follows a neoliberal agenda of limiting workers' social rights and reducing welfare benefits which became most obvious when the FPÖ was part of a coalition government between 2000 and 2006 (Obinger and Tálos 2006).

#### 4.2. Trade unions

Since the first workers' movements in the nineteenth century, solidarity between workers has become *the* fundamental norm of trade unions. It is based on the idea of an inherent class conflict between labour and capital in capitalist societies (Offe and Wiesenthal 1980). Through the formation of a union, the fragmented working class tackles the dominance of capital interests. In spite of permanent competition, this *foundation* of trade union solidarity aims at breaking the competitive thinking between workers within a nation state, but also on a global level (Bohrmann *et al.* 2015). Union solidarity addresses different individual motives as it can be based on instrumental rationality (with the argument that it makes sense for workers to become members in order to enforce their interests more powerfully) and on value-rational motives (such as feelings of belonging to the working class, agreement with the values of the unions).

Accordingly, the main *objective* of workers' solidarity addressed by ÖGB is the increased strength of united workers. Nevertheless, they also propose cross-class solidarity by balancing interests between employers

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<sup>4</sup>[http://diepresse.com/home/politik/nrwahl2013/1440857/Evangelische-Kirche\\_FPO-missbraucht-Begriff?direct=1441009&\\_vl\\_backlink=/home/politik/innenpolitik/1441009/index.do&selChannel=&from=articlemore](http://diepresse.com/home/politik/nrwahl2013/1440857/Evangelische-Kirche_FPO-missbraucht-Begriff?direct=1441009&_vl_backlink=/home/politik/innenpolitik/1441009/index.do&selChannel=&from=articlemore) (20.11.2016).

and employees which is argued to be beneficial for both sides: it creates a certain degree of wealth redistribution and a restriction of social inequality, prohibits wage-based competition between employers and guarantees social peace.

Despite the general decline of trade unions all over Europe, the ÖGB is still one of the most influential political actors in Austria. Even though the union density rate is only mediocre in European comparison (around 28%), collective bargaining coverage is one of the highest in Europe at 98% (European Commission 2015). Moreover, the ÖGB still has a strong influence on legislation based on personal relations within the social democratic party, on the still firmly established social partnership, and on the compulsory membership of employers in the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (Pernicka and Hefler 2015).

Regarding the question of *inclusiveness*, the ÖGB's concept of solidarity is ambivalent: the notion of workers' solidarity is, in fact, universal, meaning that it should be established across borders and include all members of the working classes irrespective of their social or ethnic origin, gender or work status. But there are clear boundaries which are rooted in the historical origins of trade unions as interest groups for craftsmen (Webb and Webb 1895) and these become highly visible in the prevalence of nation-based solidarity within the European Union (Erne 2008). The tension between these two demands – universal solidarity and the protection of the national labour market – became obvious on various occasions in the past, e.g. Austria's access to the European Union when the government was finally able to mitigate unions' concerns (Beer and Flecker 1997), or the Eastern enlargement of the EU between 2004 and 2007 when, based on union's interventions, access to the Austrian labour market was initially restricted for workers from the new member states.

The idea that workers solidarity is based on a shared experience (e.g. through the participation in a joint strike) or on active membership was relegated to the side-lines within the ÖGB over a long time. In comparison to trade unions in other European countries, Austrian unions felt the need to engage in organising new members (Pernicka and Hefler 2015) to a lesser extent. In the past few years, given the shrinking power of unions in Europe but also in Austria, these ideas were slowly re-introduced, for example, with the (self-)formation of interest groups for self-employed workers or migrant workers within the union structures (Pernicka and Stern 2011; Griesser and Sauer 2017). It remains to be seen to what extent Austrian trade unions will continue to rely on their institutional

power within social partnership or pursue a stronger membership-oriented renewal strategy (Astleithner and Flecker 2017).

The unions' borders of solidarity are thus not permanently fixed and ambivalent. The answer to the question of who is represented by the unions and who is not depends not only on political and economic conjunctures, but also on the unions' strategic positions. In this context, the migrant workers present a good example. As long as they were only a small minority within the Austrian workforce and the Austrian labour market was a rather national one, unions were not actively engaged in organising them. With changing labour market composition and shrinking union power, they slowly shifted to a more open position concerning the question of migrant members and union representatives.

#### **4.3. Civil society actors active in refugee work**

Since the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, when more than a million refugees streamed through the country and 88,912 asylum applications were registered (BMI 2015), many civil society actors have been engaged in helping refugees in Austria. The contributions of NGOs and thousands of volunteers in first aid, refugee shelters and integration activities, and the public pressure exerted by them, were important for maintaining humanitarian standards and promoting integration. As in other countries, the government did not take full responsibility (Carrera *et al.* 2015), and civil society stepped in to compensate the deficits in public welfare (Becker *et al.* 2016). Although civil society actors are diverse, their motives and concepts of solidarity in the context of refugee work are very homogeneous.

The *foundation* of solidarity expressed by all social movement actors is universalistic. Human rights and the opinion that all people are equal are mentioned frequently. Explicit or implicit condition for many activists is brotherly love and charity. Thus, the foundation of solidarity to help people because they are human beings and deserve dignity was clearly put into practice and also repeated often in the external communication and advocacy activities. Although foundations of this encompassing solidarity vary from a mainly religious basis to general humanity, the differences between these motives remain limited when it comes to support refugees. On the contrary, even usually religious-based and homogeneous organisations became more diverse by employing new personnel with different characteristics (religion, language, origin). Newly-formed initiatives have usually been very inclusive regarding members as well as clients:

a well-known example of cooperation across religions is the association *Train of Hope* in which Muslim communities, Sikhs and Christians worked closely together.

The motives expressed for solidary behaviour are widely affectual and value driven. Many felt the wish to give back what they got from society; they wanted to contribute to the common good and felt a personal need to help. A recurrent topic was distrust in the government's ability or willingness to supply sufficient services and anger because they did not see their standards of social welfare met (Simsa 2017). Strong emotions were also reported such as feelings of helplessness, responsibility or satisfaction to be able to help. In this context, altruistic and more self-centred motives, such as being part of a community, were sometimes mixed.

The *objectives* of some of the organisations are very generally defined as maintaining social security or caring for vulnerable people. Others are more specifically directed towards helping refugees, keeping humanitarian standards or fostering integration. There is a strong sense of *inclusiveness*. One example is Volkshilfe who explicitly demands 'equal chances to participate for every one'.<sup>5</sup> Diakonie, based on Christian solidarity, stresses the brotherhood and sisterhood of all people, and participation for everybody.<sup>6</sup>

Solidarity is generally seen as unconditional. In particular at the beginning, nothing was expected from refugees – they were seen as incapable of fulfilling any obligations as many were traumatised. However, a certain change has taken place. Some activists were frustrated by incidents of violence and by cases of religious fundamentalism. Today, expectations of behaviour based on human rights and solidarity attitudes are expressed more clearly, and integration is seen as a mutual process with responsibilities on both sides.

#### 4.4. Symbolic struggles and political implications

The abovementioned different concepts of solidarity are rarely addressed *per se* in the public discourse. Rather, they are implicitly drawn on within debates on concrete political measures. Symbolic struggles over solidarity manifest themselves in this context and are also reflected in opinions of the general public. There we can also see that they are ambivalent and volatile, with conflicts currently being manifested especially when it comes to the topic of migration. On the one hand, we see high degrees

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<sup>5</sup><http://www.volkshilfe.at/integration> (23.11.2016).

<sup>6</sup><https://diakonie.at/ueber-uns/leitbild-und-diakonischer-gedanke> (23.11.2016).

of inclusive solidarity expressed not only in opinions (OGM 2015), but also in large amounts of volunteer work with and for refugees (Simsa 2017). On the other hand, strong exclusive tendencies are manifested as hostility towards migrants, e.g. nearly half of the Austrian population wants the country to accept fewer refugees than in the years before (OGM 2014). This is why, in the following section, we analyse debates regarding the labour market and the social security system in which the issue of migration plays an important role.

#### 4.4.1. Debate regarding labour market access for refugees

In 2016, Austria was confronted with one of its highest unemployment rates in history (6% in EU calculation). Especially the poorly trained, elderly people and migrants were at high risk of becoming unemployed (AMS 2016). In this context, refugees also tried to ‘get their foot’ in the labour market. They were thus seen as a threat to ‘Austrian workers’ especially by the FPÖ which declared its strict opposition to labour market access for asylum-seekers. This was in line with their exclusivist stance (‘priority for Austrians’) and supported by the argument that work permits would attract further refugees or, in their terminology, would trigger ‘misuse of asylum’. In this context, the FPÖ is not questioning universal solidarity in the form of the right to asylum as such. Rather, they doubt eligibility and try to delegitimize refugees’ claims arguing that they are not really in need. To the rational motive of monopolising labour market opportunities for Austrian nationals, they added the value-rational stance of avoiding ‘*Überfremdung*’ (excess of immigration’) and safeguarding the purity of the ethnic community. In this context, the FPÖ does not only address refugees, but migrants as such. In their programmatic demand of ‘minus-immigration’, they call for all migrants to be sent back to where they originated from. The precarious labour market plays an important role in this argument.

Since migrants who are allowed to work still face great difficulties, many civil society actors in Austria (such as the Volkshilfe or the Diakonie) are active in offering advice, training, competence checks etc. to enable labour market access, often in collaboration with official bodies. They propagate an open and supported labour market access for asylum-seekers and – in opposition to most other actors – they do not make the right to work contingent on a certain length of stay in the country. However, some civil society actors accept certain restrictions. For instance, Volkshilfe favours open labour market access only after six months of asylum proceedings.

In contrast, the ÖGB has changed its position on labour market access for migrants in the past few years and now promotes the integration of refugees in legal employment, though with some restrictions: an easier but regulated labour market access should be granted to refugees even during an ongoing asylum procedure. This is meant to avoid undocumented employment, exploitation as well as wage and social dumping. The ÖGB also supports the idea that refugees should only be allowed to apply for jobs in cases in which no EU-citizen can be found. Here, the ÖGB refers both to value-rational arguments (universality of human rights) and instrumental goals (such as a regulated labour market with limited competition). Hence, concerning the question of labour market access, the ÖGB does not follow an exclusivist nor a universal approach; its position could rather be characterised as ‘in-between’. The reasons for the change in the position of the ÖGB are manifold. One reason was the growing pressure of refugees on the Austrian labour market. Another important factor were the new political alliances between Austrian trade unions and civil society actors which emerged in 2015/2016: The platform UNDOK (*Contact point for trade union support for undocumented workers*), which consists of many NGOs and activists, but also experts and members of trade unions or political parties, launched a campaign under the slogan ‘Access Now’ for asylum-seekers. Here, the right to work is argued to be humane, and a necessary basis for self-esteem and integration. To gain acceptance, this position is not only pushed forward based on a universalistic approach, but advantages for the local population are stressed. A recurrent argument is that the prevention of exploitation of refugees in illegal forms of employment and of wage dumping also serves to maintain standards for autochthonous workers.

#### **4.4.2. Debate regarding the needs-based minimum benefit system**

The needs-based minimum benefit system (*‘Bedarfsorientierte Mindestsicherung’*, BMS), which was introduced in 2010 in order to standardise basic social benefits, is highly questioned in Austria, especially by the Conservative (ÖVP) and the Freedom (FPÖ) party. Even though the eligibility criteria for this welfare benefit are quite strict (e.g. people are not allowed to have savings over €4.139,13 and need to take work offered by the public employment agency; BMASK 2015), they argue that lowering the total amount of the benefit would support the incentive to work and thus reduce unemployment. Since the large mobility of refugees in 2015, the debate accelerated further. The FPÖ argues that the amount is generally too high especially for larger families, which are assumed to be mostly

migrant families. The far right frequently publishes comparisons between support for refugees and ‘Austrian’ families, in which the transfer payments to migrants are highly exaggerated. In 2017, the national system of the BMS ended and its administration is now the responsibility of the federal states. Since then, there has been a marked trend towards lowering the amount especially in the federal states where the FPÖ is in government (e.g. Upper Austria).

Such forms of welfare chauvinism (Kitschelt 1995: 259) address threatened economic interests. Moreover, these parties call for granting the full amount of the minimum benefit only to people who have already contributed to the Austrian social security system; consequently, refugees should receive less from the state than ‘Austrians’. Here they confuse obligations existing within the logic of the (Bismarckian) social insurance system with the rules of the separate basic welfare system which is based on the idea of subsidiarity and guarantees a minimum income to everyone regardless of contributions.

The ÖGB strictly opposes the idea of restrictions to and cuts of the BMS. In numerous press releases, the ÖGB argues that such measures would put the country on the path to a ‘poverty republic’. Moreover, the ÖGB opposes the idea that the Austrian state consolidates its budget at the expense of the poorest in society. With this position, the trade unions not only express their solidarity with refugees and the unemployed, but also have an angle on the topic as they fear a downward spiral concerning minimum wages (ÖGB 2016). Thus, the ÖGB reverses the argument of the FPÖ by stating that the minimum benefit is not too high, but that the minimum wages are too low and need to be raised. In this case, universalistic solidarity is actually beneficial to the interests of the in-group.

As in the debate on labour market access, civil society actors stand in clear solidarity with refugees: They refuse to make eligibility to receive the minimum benefit contingent on a certain length of stay in the country. Many of them actively advocate high levels of social security for refugees. Accordingly, in the highly escalated debate, they are defamed as naïve ‘do-gooders’ who actively harm the country, while especially FPÖ-representatives are accused by civil society actors as being racist-exclusivist and destabilising the social climate in the country.

Finally, the empirical examples (see Table 2) show that although there are huge differences in the foundations and objectives of solidarity between the different collective actors, the symbolic struggles mainly overtly address the aspect of inclusiveness. At the same time, the analysis



**Table 2.** Solidarity in practice.

	FPÖ	Trade Unions	Civil society actors
Solidarity concept	Ethnic community as foundation: demands for 'minus immigration' and separate social security system for non-citizens	Working class as foundation: in principle universal but gender differences, core – periphery and nation-based	Equality of all human beings as foundation: demands for humanist obligation to help all people in need
Labour market access for refugees	Exclusivist: no labour market access for refugees	Ambivalent: promotion of labour market integration but unequal treatment	Inclusive: free, supported access for all refugees
Needs-based minimum benefit system	Exclusivist and in favour of lowering benefit levels	Inclusivist and in favour of maintaining benefit levels	Inclusivist and in favour of maintaining benefit levels

reveals that the foundation of solidarity and its inclusiveness are deeply linked. Especially the high escalation level of the debate on the BMS (the costs of which are only 0.5% of the state's total budget; BMASK 2015) finally shows how deep the divisions in the different understandings of solidarity are in Austria.

#### 4. Conclusion

While the rise of right-wing populism is often construed as an outright weakening of solidarity, we have raised the question of whether we might be seeing a change in the meaning of solidarity and symbolic struggles over the concept. Taking Austria as an example of developments in Europe at large, the analysis has made clear that collective social actors' concepts of solidarity differ fundamentally regarding foundations, objectives and inclusiveness. Furthermore, these actors are engaged in promoting their perspectives partly explicitly, partly implicitly when debating topical political issues. In particular, in the light of political and economic crises, solidarity has become a 'battle term' used by different actors to promote very different policies. At the same time, collective actors promote different concepts of solidarity without necessarily using the term.

Understanding different solidarity concepts is especially important in regard to current tendencies of hostility towards migrants. While the far right aims at closing the borders, insinuating that refugees are not really in need and should be kept away from the labour market and social security systems, for civil society actors all people in need should be granted equal support. Obviously, the different degrees of inclusiveness are based on opposing understandings of the foundations of solidarity. While for the

civil society actors these relate to the identification with all human beings, in the case of the FPÖ, identification boils down to the ethnic community.

The empirical analysis has further shown that juxtaposing inclusive and exclusive forms of solidarity should not lead to prematurely accept the solidarity claims of xenophobic actors. The FPÖ is a case in point: While the party presents itself as a 'social homeland party', their actual policies do not strengthen the welfare state. On the contrary, the weakening of the BMS, for example, is being legitimised by excluding migrants although that also affects Austrian nationals. Thus, the Austrian far right implicitly tackles the foundation and objective of institutionalised solidarity. Thus, we have to allow for the existence of out-group rejection without in-group solidarity or, in other words, exclusivist positions are not necessarily coterminous with exclusivist *solidarity*.

In the case of the trade unions the political positions are clearly located within the tension between inclusivist and exclusivist forms of solidarity. While the protection of union members' welfare through restricting labour market access is a form of social closure, hedging overall employment standards by ways of securing decent work for migrants and other outsiders is, in contrast, in line with universal class-based solidarity. The ÖGB's actual position is ambivalent. It pursues inclusivist strategies fighting wage dumping, but lacks the power to turn this into an outright solution of the dilemma. Given limited power resources, exclusivist policies to protect their main membership therefore remains an option. As a consequence, the trade unions oscillate between a nation-based hierarchical position favouring Austrian workers on the labour market, and a universalistic position when it comes to social benefits. Nevertheless, considered over a longer time period, the ÖGB shows a tendency towards an opening up to social movements as well as developing a more inclusive solidarity concept explicitly integrating traditional 'out-groups' such as refugees or undocumented workers.

In contrast to the trade unions, the civil society actors showed an unambiguous position. They promote and act according to universalistic solidarity. Access to the country, to the labour market and to social security should, in their view, be granted to all people in need. Still, the symbolic struggle over the solidarity concepts also had some impacts on ÖGB. First, compared to the times of the large refugee movement in 2015, the inclusive and universalistic concept of solidarity has recently been increasingly criticised in the public debate. Second, the unconditional welcome and support for refugees slowly turned into universal solidarity for refugees meeting certain behavioural norms.

Using the example of Austria, the contribution of this paper has been to analyse collective actors' opposing concepts of solidarity. This not only aimed at mapping the differences and showing how these concepts manifest themselves in debates on topical political issues. It also serves to improve our understanding of the ongoing symbolic struggle over the idea of solidarity in Europe. We have shown that, in particular, the foundations and the inclusiveness of solidarity concepts are highly contentious. In addition to the academic contribution, the research also yielded insights helpful for socio-political debates insofar as it has shown that more far-reaching concepts of solidarity are being negotiated in debates over political issues such as refugees' access to the labour market and to social assistance. The political far right, for example, prioritises the 'health' and 'survival' of the 'Volk', i.e. the ethnic community, over the claims of individuals for mutual support. Thus, by basing the solidarity concept on the identification with the ethnic community, the FPÖ implicitly conveys ideologies of the extreme right which tend to be taken over increasingly and often unwittingly in mainstream discourses about 'endangered national identities'. What is more obvious, and attractive to many, are the welfare-chauvinist claims of national preference given the widely questioned viability of the welfare state in times of crisis. However, in the case of the needs-based minimum benefit system, migrants are used as a pretext to lower benefit levels for all, thereby weakening institutionalised solidarity.

Due to their access to workers and their ambivalent position regarding solidarity concepts, the trade unions are crucial for the outcome of the ongoing symbolic struggles. Further strengthening universalism and class-based trade union solidarity seems a viable strategy if the trade unions turn out to be strong enough to secure decent work for migrants which, in turn, mitigates competition on the labour market and prevents the lowering of standards for the unions' core domestic membership. However, this strength is anything but certain.

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## Notes on contributors

*Dr. Julia Hofmann* works as a lecturer at the Department of Sociology at the University of Vienna and as a post-doctoral researcher at the Chamber of Labour Vienna (Austria). She is editor of the journal *Kurswechsel – Journal for social, economic and ecological alternatives* and co-founder of the ‘Section on Social Inequality’ at the Austrian Sociological Association. Her research interests include the sociology of work and industrial relations, social inequality, political sociology and attitude research.

*Dr. Carina Altreiter* is a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Sociology at the University of Vienna (Austria). Her research covers work and employment, social inequalities and social change. Recent publications are on working time, transnational labour mobility and social policy research. In her PhD project, Carina dealt with the influence of social class on the working life of young industrial blue-collar workers.

*Univ. Prof. Dr. Jörg Flecker* is a full professor of sociology and head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Vienna (Austria). Before, he was scientific director of the working life research institute FORBA in Vienna. His main research interests include changes in work, transnationalisation, employment relations, and the political extreme right. He coordinated the European project ‘Socio-economic change, individual reactions and the appeal of the extreme right’ (SIREN) in the 2000s and edited ‘Changing Working Life and the Appeal of the Extreme Right’, Ashgate 2007.

*Dr. Saskja Schindler* is a researcher at the Department of Sociology at the University of Vienna (Austria). She is currently part of a bilateral research project on ‘Solidarity in times of the crisis: Socioeconomic change and political orientation in Austria and Hungary’ funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). Her research interests include sociology of work and industrial relations, social inequality and political sociology. In her PhD project, she dealt with temporary agency work and its meaning for staff relations in Austria.

*Univ. Prof. Dr. Ruth Simsa* is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Sociology and head of the Competence Centre for Nonprofit Organizations and Social Entrepreneurship at the Vienna University of Economics and Business. Currently she leads the Austrian part of the European project ‘Third Sector Impact’ (Europe FP7) and the project ‘Civil Society in Spain’. She is editor of the journal *Voluntas – International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*. Her major research interests are nonprofit organizations, management and leadership, civil society and social movements.

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