

Solidarity towards migrants during the Covid-19 pandemic. Creative solutions half between civil society initiatives and the state.

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Covid-19 brought about a shift in political priorities, pushing migration issues to the margins. Governments concentrated on measures to contain the pandemic, some of which had strong impact on migration (e.g. closing of borders, halt to asylum applications). While the refugee issue disappeared almost entirely from the public debate, it was still referred to as a health hazard by anti-immigrant political leaders.

At the same time, support to asylum seekers from the civil society was almost completely stopped. CSOs had to close their doors, making even more visible how local authorities were ill-prepared—and sometimes not concerned at all—to protect vulnerable groups such as refugees, asylum-seekers and undocumented migrants from the pandemic. However, new initiatives emerged, some of which online, others involving small organizations, volunteers, activists and local government personnel in surprising constellations catering for those groups shut out by the response of the government and traditional civil society.

We draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the 2015-18 reception crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic in Belgium to argue that what happened on the ground did not fit in a taxonomy of state (top-down) vs. civil society (bottom-up) solidarity. Instead, many important initiatives took place in an improvised, creative and hybrid fashion, beyond the original mission of the actors involved, or involving new target groups including non-migrants. These forms of solidarity bring to the light strong weaknesses within the traditional spaces of state solidarity. We conclude by reflecting on how new strategies adopted under Covid-19 could continue to be employed by civil society actors in order to carry out their activity in a more effective and resilient way.