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Crisis, Continuity, and Missed Opportunity: Tracing a Transnational Solidarity Economy across Europe in Turbulent Times

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ABSTRACT

Due to an increasingly turbulent and unpredictable socio-economic environment, the sustainability of many CSOs is frequently questioned. To better understand the financial infrastructure of the social economy in times of crisis, we analyse a unique set of responses from 245 CSOs across eight European countries. Given the transnational nature of crisis and austerity, we explore the potential existence of a 'transnational solidarity economy'. We find limited evidence of a cross-border solidarity economy space. Adopting the analytical framework of isomorphism, we uncover variegated solidarity economies that speak to national configurations and reveal that forces which seek to shape transnational responses to ostensibly transnational crises are weak. Our paper indicates a missed opportunity for the development of a transnational solidarity economy in a previous period of crisis and highlights key hubs that may be crucial in the development of such a cross-border infrastructure.

KEYWORDS

Transnational solidarity;
solidarity economy; civil
society organisations;
isomorphism

Introduction

The importance of transnational solidarity—defined as collaborations of citizens, realised in civil society through the work of Civil Society Organisations (CSO) (Lahusen 2020), and operationalised through socially innovative organisations including a range of solidarity groups or social enterprises (Defourny and Nyssens 2010; Defourny and Nyssens 2013; Laville 2018)—is exemplified by the need to collectively address the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as other economic, social and environmental challenges of a global nature (Montgomery and Mazzei 2021). Indeed, the role of CSOs in tackling many wicked global problems including poverty, hunger, water shortages, social and economic inequality, and climate change has been acknowledged in previous studies (Steiner et al. 2021). At the same time, CSOs have

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also been recognised for meeting the basic needs of a wide range of vulnerable groups in society at local and national levels (Henderson et al. 2020; Kelly et al. 2021). The fact that, in some cases, CSOs have been performing a welfare function is not new (Peck and Tickell 2002; Markantoni et al. 2018) and issues surrounding the role of CSOs in welfare provision are well-established in the literature (Swyngedouw 2005; Brandsen and Pestoff 2006; Steiner et al. 2021; Baglioni and Giugni 2014; Jones and Royles 2020).

Although increasingly delivering public functions, the financial sustainability of many CSOs is frequently questioned (Weerawardena, McDonald, and Mort 2010; Vanderhoven et al. 2020), and the tensions between social goals and adequate resourcing are subject to critical analysis (Eikenberry 2009; Mazzei 2017; Lewis, Henry, and Roy 2021). Despite the growing popularity of this theme (Utting, Van Dijk, and Matheï 2014), evidence regarding financial support structures that underpin the operations of CSOs is still scattered (Kalogeraki, Papadaki, and Pera Ros 2018; Pennerstorfer, Reitzinger, and Schneider 2020) and there is a gap in empirical studies that focus on how *transnational solidarity* is funded in Europe (von Schnurbein, Perez, and Gehringer 2018). Research exploring how *transnational solidarity* is funded in *times of crisis* is even rarer. The latter is surprising considering that crises threaten the sustainability of a wide range of organisations,¹ including CSOs.

Addressing the presented knowledge gaps is important for several reasons. Firstly, it can shed light on how CSOs navigate crises when resources are scarce. Secondly, it can offer a novel insight into the financial infrastructure underpinning the heterogeneity or homogeneity of European CSOs' responses to the crisis. Thirdly, an international empirical study conducted during a turbulent period of global uncertainty can develop a new understanding among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers about the barriers and opportunities for transnational solidarity in times of crisis. Indeed, these three contributions can have implications for policy and practice aiming at strengthening the sustainability of CSOs, designing strategies that mitigate the impacts of the crisis, and ultimately, supporting the most vulnerable citizens in our society.

Considering the background presented, our study took place in the European context and explored the emergence and existence of a European identity, a transnational public sphere (Risse 2011; Ross 2021) as well as attitudes and practices of solidarity by citizens in Europe (Gerhards et al. 2019; Baglioni et al. 2019). More precisely, CSOs from Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, and the UK became the unit of analysis in our transnational solidarity investigation. Analysing CSOs from these countries provided us with an insight into a variety of contexts with different constitutional arrangements, legal systems, and welfare states (Esping-Andersen 1990). Moreover, these countries have been differentially impacted by various crises, and responses to crises have also not been uniform by civil society and governments. For example, the experience of disabled people in Greece, where public services were heavily impacted by austerity measures (Rotarou and Sakellariou 2019) contrasts with the resilience of the German economy during and after the 2008 financial crisis and opportunities for workers in that labour market (Reisenbichler and Morgan 2012). Furthermore, while the so-called 'refugee crisis' which took place in Europe in 2015 has been experienced differently in terms of the numbers of the arrival

of newcomers, for example in Italy and the UK, it manifested responses from right-leaning politicians which politicised the crisis in each country (Gianfreda 2018) rendering the terrain of solidarity in this field more hostile. Despite these differences in national experiences of crises, organisations engaged in solidarity activities with vulnerable groups continued operating at national levels.

Given our concern with cross-border solidarity, we set out to map organisations across the eight countries with a transnational dimension, a process that we elaborate in further detail below. The organisations we surveyed were involved in a variety of different activities. These encompassed the political education of citizens, services including material support, lobbying institutions and interest representation, engagement in policymaking processes, as well as mobilising through direct action, protests, and demonstrations. When discussing the issue of solidarity, we must also consider questions of solidarity *with whom*. The project from which this paper emanates focussed specifically on investigating solidarity across three fields of inquiry where specific groups were exposed to the impact of the crisis, including the unemployed/precariously employed, disabled people, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

Considering aspects of finance, we approached our analysis with a holistic rather than particularistic frame of the financial support structures which underpin the operations of CSOs. In other words, we avoided narrow conceptualisations of CSO finance through the privileging of specific investment models (e.g. microfinance, crowdfunding; see Mersland, Nyarko, and Szafarz 2019; Vulkan, Åstebro, and Sierra 2016; Vanderhoven et al. 2020). The latter enabled us to capture a wide spectrum of solidarity in terms of financial infrastructure.

The study was conducted in the context of crisis, prolonged social and political uncertainty evident at both national and transnational levels, and the contemporary economic challenges that are revealed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Our research aimed to verify if there is a transnational solidarity economy operating across Europe in times of crisis. To do so, we sought to answer three research questions: (i) What were the sources of CSO finance during the crisis in Europe?; (ii) What were the differences and similarities of the solidarity economy support for CSOs across European contexts? (iii) Can we identify a transnational solidarity economy operating across European borders?

By addressing the above aim and answering the research questions we generate new knowledge in the field. We shed light on the symmetries and variegations across different European contexts of the solidarity economy that underpins the activities of CSOs and, as such, fill a gap in the extant literature on solidarity. Moreover, our findings offer insight for practitioners in terms of learning from other contexts and the potential opportunities for transnational solidarity in the future. Our findings also provide novel empirical value to policymakers who view CSOs as crucial in the delivery of services (Brandsen and Pestoff 2006; Bovaird et al. 2019; Strokosch and Osborne 2020) and support vulnerable groups in society.

In the remainder of this article; (i) we set out the context of the solidarity economy in relation to crisis and austerity; (ii) we then elaborate our analytical framework of isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) and the conceptual value it brings to

understanding our empirical data; (iii) next, we outline our research methods in relation to the survey we deployed and our sample of participants; (iv) then, drawing upon data from 245 interviews conducted across eight countries and three fields of migration, disability and (un)employment, we reveal our empirical findings; (v) we then present a discussion of our findings and explain how our analysis answers our research questions; (vi) and finally, we set out our conclusion.

The Solidarity Economy, Crisis, and Austerity

The crisis which engulfed the global economy in 2008 has been a critical juncture for the social fabric of societies. The failure of financial institutions, the implementation of austerity measures, and the aftershocks that emerged in the shape of political reconfiguration provoked questions about the continued viability of the neoliberal order (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2010). Across Europe, the austerity resulted in a hollowing out of public services at a time when the needs of vulnerable groups have increased (Taylor-Gooby, Leruth, and Chung 2017). Now, more than a decade since the financial crisis has (re)shaped political geographies, social and economic challenges are being forged in a new context of flux and uncertainty catalysed by the consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic. Interestingly, although crises, such as these have often led some to speculate on the potentially precarious future for capitalism, others point to the capacity for neoliberalism to not only survive but actually thrive from crises (Peck 2010; Mirowski 2013). Indeed, one unintended consequence of the 2008 global financial crisis and the implementation of austerity measures has been the growing importance of the role of civil society organisations and the financial infrastructure which underpins it (Baglioni and Montgomery 2020; Vanderhoven et al. 2020).

Although complex in its nature and diversified across organisational types and geographies (Defourny and Nyssens 2013; Spear et al. 2018), the 'solidarity economy' relates to practices that seek to meet unmet human needs through entities that often emerged between the blurred boundaries of the market and the state (Nicholls and Murdock 2012). Our conceptualisation of 'solidarity economy' encompasses a broader range of sources of funding for solidaristic practices including actors from the market, the state, umbrella organisations, and donations from individual citizens. The solidarity practices described in this article are often performed through an organisational expression, one key example of which is CSOs. Indeed, CSOs have been consistent sources of support to those who have been experiencing vulnerability as a consequence of the austerity that has rolled back public service provision.

Commenting on the role of social economy efforts in response to periods of crisis in capitalist development, Moulaert and Aileni (2005, 2048) state:

'When, in the 1970s, Fordism entered a major crisis, this also provoked reactions among the 'new' social economy initiatives against large institutions, paternalist welfare agents, suffocating public bureaucracy, etc. This, together with the strong focus on local development, explains why today's social economy initiatives, despite their concern about 'up-scaling their governance', are not well organised at higher spatial scales, cannot benefit from proper legal instruments guaranteeing their sustainability and show a grand amateurism regarding their financial structure'.

Considering aspects of the *crisis*, we develop an understanding of financial mechanisms in Europe to support CSOs and assess the extent to which a solidarity economy operates at a transnational scale. The idea of a solidarity economy as a transnational arena situates it as an alternative to hegemonic capitalist spaces (Bergeron et al. 2015). In the contemporary period of transnational capitalism (Sklair 1997; Scholte 2005; Baylis 2020), this alternative space (where the solidarity economy may perform a counterhegemonic function) has been embodied in pre-crisis efforts, such as the World Social Forum (Mundial 2003) and the post-crisis attempts to map a post-capitalist future (Mason 2016). Therefore, the foreground analysis considers not only the spectre of crisis *per se* but also the differentiated responses to its consequences.

Understanding the Solidarity Economy through the Prism of Isomorphism

When conducting analysis in the context of crisis, a key concern is comprehending the processes of change and continuity (Utting, Van Dijk, and Matheï 2014; von Schnurbein, Perez, and Gehringer 2018). Revealing these dynamics in the context of our study required adopting an analytical framework that connects with the extant literature in a way that stimulates discussion and drives forward existing and forthcoming debates. To do so, we turned to the key concept of isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) and, given its well-established capacity for explanatory power, we applied it in our work.

In their seminal work on isomorphism, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) outline three key forms of isomorphic pressures (that is, those homogenising forces which shape and reshape organisations): (i) coercive isomorphism relating to ‘formal and informal pressures exerted on organisations’ (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 150) often by political actors, particularly the state as organisations conform to the structures and rituals of the institutional ecology of their milieu (Meyer and Rowan 1977); (ii) mimetic isomorphism, a phenomenon that is most likely to occur because ‘when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty, organisations may model themselves on other organisations’ (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 151); (iii) normative isomorphism which ‘stems primarily from professionalisation’ (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 152) and the growth of organisational professionals. The analytical framework used in this study considers mainly coercive and mimetic isomorphism, with the rationale for this approach being elaborated in greater detail in the discussion section below.

At this point, we wish to highlight the value of an isomorphic framework in studies, such as ours which cut across national boundaries. The explanatory power of isomorphism has been recognised by fellow scholars conducting research on the solidarity economy more broadly and civil society organisations of various shapes and forms which operate to meet a broad spectrum of needs (Evers and Laville 2004; Maloney and Van Deth 2008; Baglioni and Giugni 2014). While investigating the sources of CSO finance during the crisis in Europe, we were conscious of extant research that has explored isomorphic pressures across different political and cultural contexts as well as the agency that organisations can exercise in accepting or rejecting these isomorphic pressures (Nelson and Gopalan 2003). Indeed, some scholars have reflected upon the importance of the transnational scale as a prism for understanding both homogeneity

and heterogeneity in organisations (Beckert 2010; Bies 2010). Similarly, we believe that an analysis that seeks to uncover the value of the transnational scale through a framework of isomorphism can offer explanations for homogeneity and heterogeneity in times of crisis. Our understanding of isomorphic pressures is further informed by the work of Beckert (2010) who highlights how changed institutional arrangements can only really emerge with support from powerful external actors and that mimetic isomorphism is mobilised more by disorientation than by rational assessments. What these reflections point towards is the question of *agency*. Thus, our analysis, informed by the framework of isomorphism (coercive or mimetic), tells us how that agency is constrained (e.g. by political actors, especially the state in response to crisis). However, isomorphism (through mimesis) also tells us something about the behaviour of CSOs in response to the crisis. The work of Fligstein (2001) on 'social skills' of societal actors provides some additional insight at this point. Here we recognise that collective action of the type engaged in by CSOs involves 'a social skill that proves pivotal to the construction and reproduction of local social orders' (Fligstein 2001, 106). Our tracing of the solidarity economy will therefore reveal the extent to which the 'social skills' of CSOs are being developed and deployed within a transnational solidarity economy operating across European borders.

As presented below, our analysis mobilises the concept of isomorphism to reveal the differences and similarities of the solidarity economy support for CSOs across European contexts. In addition, our discussion section elaborates on the weakness of transnationalism through the identification of three dimensions of our analysis: *crisis*, *continuity*, and *missed opportunity*. We then reflect upon how we can utilise isomorphism to learn from the experience of previous crises and, crucially, how CSOs can respond to future crises.

Research Methods

The data presented here derives from a large, collaborative, cross-national, and interdisciplinary project² designed to better understand the activities of CSOs from northern/southern Europe, post-communist Europe, and a non-EU member state, in responding to the needs of vulnerable people in a context of global economic turbulence and austerity policies. CSOs included in the study consisted of organisations involved in the delivery of direct support, advocacy, and services for the unemployed/precariously employed, disabled people, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Our investigation of solidarity across three fields of inquiry where specific groups were particularly exposed to the impact of crises offers fresh insight into the way in which crises (and concurrent policies) are important for understanding responses from civil society. These crises include the impact of the global financial crisis and the austerity measures which followed that had ramifications for the unemployed/precariously employed in the labour market and for disabled people in terms of cuts to public budgets and support measures. Moreover, the 'refugee crisis' also had implications for those seeking asylum and those moving across borders.

To capture the experiences of CSOs, a survey was designed with specific questions developed and informed by the existing literature in the field (for examples, see

[Appendix 1](#)). The survey captured information on sources of finance supporting European CSOs in times of crisis at the national and transnational levels. We also explored the resources available to CSOs including their operating budgets and main sources of funding whilst gauging the extent to which the organisations have experienced an impact on their finances in times of crisis. One further dimension of our data collection process was to ascertain the degree to which funding for CSOs was being primarily drawn from national level or transnational level sources. To ensure accuracy and readability, the survey was pre-tested (via initial interviews) in different contexts across the eight countries of our study, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, and the UK.

To uncover the most relevant examples of CSOs, we drew upon the existing knowledge of transnational organisations from our project and combined this with web searches to map salient umbrella organisations and networks operating at the transnational level in the three fields of our study; migration, disability, and (un)employment. It was national organisations and networks (drawn from transnational umbrella organisations and networks) that formed the basis of the purposive samples for national-level interviews. Following this sampling approach, organisations were contacted for interviews. To complement this process, the snowball sampling technique was deployed to expand the number of interviews until a minimum of thirty interviews were carried out in each country, ensuring that at least ten interviews were conducted across fields of migration, disability, or unemployment.

Once contact was established, we consulted participating organisations and identified relevant experts best placed (in terms of their position and experience within the organisation) to provide comprehensive responses to our survey (Burnham et al. 2008). These individuals occupied organisational and managerial roles including directors, policy officers, and those with expert knowledge of the CSOs. We then interviewed these key individuals either in person or by telephone/skype. In total, 245 interviews were conducted (Grix 2018) and evenly distributed across the eight countries and three social support fields including migration, disability, and (un)employment. All participants received an information pack that explained the aims and objectives of the study, and outlined the scope of the ethical approval granted for the research to take place (Grix 2018). The interviews lasted ~1 h, and on a few occasions, participants were contacted twice to expand on their responses. In this article, we have focussed our analysis on the battery of questions that relate to the financial situation of CSOs against the background of crisis and austerity which they have been navigating. The responses which form the basis of our comparative analysis (Burnham et al. 2008) and which are elaborated in the tables below were analysed using SPSS statistical software.

In the section below we describe findings from our comparative analysis. Although novel, we acknowledge some limitations in our approach. For example, there is a wider ecology of organisations that may exist in a specific context, and organisations in other fields (e.g. environmentalism) may yield different results. Nevertheless, there is a lacuna in the existing literature on transnational solidarity economies and our findings elicited from experts in the field aim to begin the process of filling this gap and provoking fresh debate.

Findings

Our findings are divided into two strands. First, to understand a broad *financial climate in which CSOs function*, we reveal the operating budgets of the European CSOs included in our sample, the trend of retrenchment regarding available funding affecting their activities since 2010 as well as information on activities involving raising funds. The second strand of our findings focuses on the importance of *different forms of CSO finance*. As such, we refer to a variety of funding sources influencing the activities of CSOs including private donations, national government grants, funding from the European Union, private sector organisations, and finally, solidarity economy foundations/umbrella organisations. We use these two strands of findings to answer our research questions and identify sources of CSO finance during the crisis in Europe, the differences and similarities of the solidarity economy support for CSOs across European contexts, and to comment on the existence of a transnational solidarity economy operating across Europe.

Sourcing CSO Finance in a Climate of Crisis and Austerity

When we first turn to the financial situation of CSOs (Table 1), we observe that a quarter of CSOs included in our sample had an annual operating budget under €100,000. For 20% of CSOs, their annual budgets fell between €100,000 and €500,000, and 46.1% had a budget exceeding €500,000. In terms of country variation, the majority of CSOs in Denmark and Switzerland had annual budgets over €500,000. The high proportion of organisations with such a relatively high level of the budget was also evidenced in Germany, Greece, Italy, France, and the UK, with the exception of Poland, where noticeably fewer (26.7%) organisations were managing high-level budgets.

Exploring the financial environment in which CSOs operate, we asked our respondents if they experienced a retrenchment in funding or available resources since 2010 (i.e. when the impact of the financial crisis and the austerity measures which followed began to be felt). As presented in Table 2, the majority of CSOs reported funding retrenchment. Given that the cuts in operating budgets would be occurring at a time when needs may have been increasing is particularly challenging for CSOs. Our findings reveal that the most severe retrenchment was in the UK (46.9%), closely followed by Greece (40%) and Italy (36.7%). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the German, Swiss, and Polish contexts had the smallest percentage of organisations experiencing severe

Table 1. Annual operating budget of the organisation.

| Country | Less than €50,000 (%) | Between €50,000 and €100,000 (%) | Between €100,000 and €200,000 (%) | Between €200,000 and €500,000 (%) | More than €500,000 (%) | Don't know (%) | Refusal (%) | Total (%) |
|-------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Denmark | 13.3 | 6.7 | 3.3 | 10.0 | 56.7 | 10.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| France | 21.2 | 9.1 | 18.2 | 6.1 | 42.4 | 0.0 | 3.0 | 100.0 |
| Germany | 10.0 | 13.3 | 0.0 | 6.7 | 50.0 | 10.0 | 10.0 | 100.0 |
| Greece | 20.0 | 13.3 | 10.0 | 6.7 | 50.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Italy | 16.7 | 10.0 | 13.3 | 3.3 | 50.0 | 3.3 | 3.3 | 100.0 |
| Poland | 20.0 | 10.0 | 3.3 | 13.3 | 26.7 | 16.7 | 10.0 | 100.0 |
| Switzerland | 13.3 | 6.7 | 6.7 | 16.7 | 53.3 | 0.0 | 3.3 | 100.0 |
| UK | 6.3 | 9.4 | 12.5 | 28.1 | 40.6 | 3.1 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Total (%) | 15.1 | 9.8 | 8.6 | 11.4 | 46.1 | 5.3 | 3.7 | 100.0 |

Total = average across all eight countries, $N = 245$.

Table 2. Retrenchment in funding or available resources since 2010.

| Country | No retrenchment (%) | Limited retrenchment (%) | Severe retrenchment (%) | DK/NA (%) | Total (%) |
|-------------|---------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Denmark | 53.3 | 13.3 | 33.3 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| France | 45.5 | 33.3 | 21.2 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Germany | 53.3 | 30.0 | 6.7 | 10.0 | 100.0 |
| Greece | 23.3 | 33.3 | 40.0 | 3.3 | 100.0 |
| Italy | 40.0 | 23.3 | 36.7 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Poland | 40.0 | 43.3 | 16.7 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Switzerland | 53.3 | 36.7 | 10.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| UK | 15.6 | 28.1 | 46.9 | 9.4 | 100.0 |
| Total (%) | 40.4 | 30.2 | 26.5 | 2.9 | 100.0 |

Total = average across all eight countries, $N = 245$.

Table 3. Actively involved in raising funds.

| Country | At the national level | | | At the transnational level | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|---------|-----------|----------------------------|---------|-----------|
| | No (%) | Yes (%) | Total (%) | No (%) | Yes (%) | Total (%) |
| Denmark | 10.0 | 90.0 | 100.0 | 60.0 | 40.0 | 100.0 |
| France | 24.2 | 75.8 | 100.0 | 78.8 | 21.2 | 100.0 |
| Germany | 53.3 | 46.7 | 100.0 | 93.3 | 6.7 | 100.0 |
| Greece | 56.7 | 43.3 | 100.0 | 96.7 | 3.3 | 100.0 |
| Italy | 36.7 | 63.3 | 100.0 | 76.7 | 23.3 | 100.0 |
| Poland | 36.7 | 63.3 | 100.0 | 70.0 | 30.0 | 100.0 |
| Switzerland | 36.7 | 63.3 | 100.0 | 83.3 | 16.7 | 100.0 |
| UK | 37.5 | 62.5 | 100.0 | 81.3 | 18.8 | 100.0 |
| Total (%) | 36.3 | 63.7 | 100.0 | 80.0 | 20.0 | 100.0 |

Total = average across all eight countries, $N = 245$.

budget cuts since 2010, reflecting the continued strength of the German and Swiss economies during the decade, and the economic stability of Poland which was the only country in the EU to avoid economic recession.³

An active approach to fundraising may prove financially crucial for CSOs and diverse income streams including those beyond the national boundaries which CSOs may use as a buffer against localised funding retrenchment. Moreover, substantial cross-national income streams would be a sign of the existence of a transnational solidarity economy in Europe. Instead, [Table 3](#) suggests that a transnational solidarity economy remains embryonic at best. Although 63.7% of the CSOs in our sample were active in national fundraising efforts, only 20% were involved in similar activities at the transnational level. In fact, when comparing findings across the eight countries, CSOs in Denmark was heavily involved in fundraising activities at the national level (90%) whereas, in contrast, CSOs based in Greece were among the least likely to do so (43.3%). The relatively lower degree of activism in Greece may reflect the economic situation in the country and thus fundraising initiatives may have less utility for organisations in this context. Interestingly, also the degree of activism at the transnational level was highest in Denmark (40%) in stark contrast to CSOs in Greece (3.3%). High activism in Danish fundraising may link to the existence of Nordic circuits of solidarity that are frequently formalised by pan-Nordic bodies and geographic cross-border solidarity (Klausen and Selle 1996). The very low instances of fundraising initiatives in Greece at the transnational level are, however, surprising given the large degree of awareness regarding the impact of austerity in the country across Europe and limited national financial resources. Possibly, undertaking such transnational initiatives by sympathetic CSOs in other countries may involve resources that are already scarce.

Sources of CSO Finance

One primary method of generating CSO finance for the solidarity economy is the general public and donations from individuals. Our findings show that individual donations were most frequently reported as ‘very relevant’ or ‘fairly relevant’ in Switzerland (83.4%), followed by Poland (80%), Germany (70%), France (66.7%), and Greece (63.3%). On the other hand, around half of the respondents in Italy (53.3%), the UK (46.9%), and Denmark (46.7%) assessed public donations as ‘irrelevant’ to their budgets (Table 4).

The exposure to the shocks of the national economies led us to question the extent to which the CSOs may be reliant upon funding from governments as an income stream. Of course, national government funding can take several forms and be distributed unevenly depending upon the political will, policy agendas, priorities of need in terms of specific local/regional inequalities as well as the capacity of governments in terms of fiscal headroom to invest in the solidarity economy. Table 5 shows that grants from national governments are ‘very relevant’ to 80% CSOs from Denmark (for more on how this funding reflects the dynamics of state-community relations, see Birk 2017), which contrast with Greece where only 6.7% of the organisations gave the same response. In a similar vein, the UK is another context where few organisations (12.5%) perceived grants from the national government as being very relevant to their budget with 71.9% of CSOs indicating that this source of finance is ‘irrelevant’ to their activities.

Given our transnational focus, when considering possible social funding for CSOs, it is important to explore potential support from the European Union. Broadly speaking, such funding may come in different shapes and forms, including

Table 4. Donations from individuals.

| Country | Irrelevant (%) | Fairly relevant (%) | Very relevant (%) | DK/NA (%) | Total (%) |
|-------------|----------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Denmark | 46.7 | 26.7 | 26.7 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| France | 33.3 | 21.2 | 45.5 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Germany | 23.3 | 36.7 | 33.3 | 6.7 | 100.0 |
| Greece | 33.3 | 53.3 | 10.0 | 3.3 | 100.0 |
| Italy | 53.3 | 36.7 | 10.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Poland | 20.0 | 50.0 | 30.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Switzerland | 16.7 | 46.7 | 36.7 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| UK | 46.9 | 31.3 | 21.9 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Total (%) | 34.3 | 37.6 | 26.9 | 1.2 | 100.0 |

Total = average across all eight countries, $N = 245$.

Table 5. Grants from national government.

| Country | Irrelevant (%) | Fairly relevant (%) | Very relevant (%) | DK/NA (%) | Total (%) |
|-------------|----------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Denmark | 13.3 | 6.7 | 80.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| France | 39.4 | 12.1 | 45.5 | 3.0 | 100.0 |
| Germany | 33.3 | 6.7 | 50.0 | 10.0 | 100.0 |
| Greece | 63.3 | 26.7 | 6.7 | 3.3 | 100.0 |
| Italy | 43.3 | 30.0 | 26.7 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Poland | 40.0 | 23.3 | 36.7 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Switzerland | 46.7 | 16.7 | 36.7 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| UK | 71.9 | 15.6 | 12.5 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Total (%) | 44.1 | 17.1 | 36.7 | 2.0 | 100.0 |

Total = average across all eight countries, $N = 245$.

Table 6. Grants from the European Union.

| Country | Irrelevant (%) | Fairly relevant (%) | Very relevant (%) | DK/NA (%) | Total (%) |
|-------------|----------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Denmark | 60.0 | 26.7 | 13.3 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| France | 51.5 | 9.1 | 36.4 | 3.0 | 100.0 |
| Germany | 50.0 | 33.3 | 6.7 | 10.0 | 100.0 |
| Greece | 36.7 | 36.7 | 20.0 | 6.7 | 100.0 |
| Italy | 60.0 | 30.0 | 10.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Poland | 33.3 | 33.3 | 33.3 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Switzerland | 80.0 | 10.0 | 3.3 | 6.7 | 100.0 |
| UK | 84.4 | 6.3 | 9.4 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Total (%) | 57.1 | 22.9 | 16.7 | 3.3 | 100.0 |

Total = average across all eight countries, $N = 245$.

Table 7. Sponsoring from companies/firms.

| Country | Irrelevant (%) | Fairly relevant (%) | Very relevant (%) | DK/NA (%) | Total (%) |
|-------------|----------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Denmark | 53.3 | 26.7 | 20.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| France | 42.4 | 24.2 | 33.3 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Germany | 56.7 | 10.0 | 23.3 | 10.0 | 100.0 |
| Greece | 40.0 | 46.7 | 6.7 | 6.7 | 100.0 |
| Italy | 80.0 | 13.3 | 6.7 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Poland | 43.3 | 36.7 | 20.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Switzerland | 66.7 | 26.7 | 6.7 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| UK | 84.4 | 15.6 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Total (%) | 58.4 | 24.9 | 14.7 | 2.0 | 100.0 |

Total = average across all eight countries, $N = 245$.

investments aimed at tackling inequalities across Europe through, for example, the European Social Fund or the European Regional Development Fund. As presented in Table 6, CSOs in France found grants from the European Union to be very relevant (36.4%) followed closely by Poland (33.3%). The grants were perceived as ‘irrelevant’ to 80% of CSOs from Switzerland—an unsurprising finding considering that the country is a non-EU member state. Interestingly, however, 84.4% of the UK CSOs indicated that grants from the EU were ‘irrelevant’ to them—a finding that even outstrips that of Switzerland. A similar view was shared with other EU members including Denmark and Italy with 60% of the respondent indicating the irrelevance of the EU funding.

Another potentially important source of CSO finance can come from private sector organisations (Table 7). This source of income was classified as ‘very relevant’ by 14.7%, and ‘fairly relevant’ by 24.9%, of our European CSOs. More than half of CSOs (58.4%), however, suggested that income from the private sector was ‘irrelevant’ to their funding. In terms of the distribution across the eight European countries, the highest proportion of those identifying sponsorship from private companies as being ‘very relevant’ stemmed from France (33.3%). In contrast, none of the UK respondents indicated that private firms were very relevant for their funding and only 15.6% suggested that this income stream was ‘fairly relevant’.

Given the transnational dimension of our study, we explored whether solidarity economy federations and umbrella organisations play a role in sharing or distributing CSO finance. Overall, almost three-quarters (74.3%) of our respondents indicated that such bodies were ‘irrelevant’ to their finances (Table 8). Two contexts stand out in our findings: the UK CSOs were the most likely to indicate that finance from federations/

Table 8. Finance from federation or umbrella organisation.

| Country | Irrelevant (%) | Fairly relevant (%) | Very relevant (%) | DK/NA (%) | Total (%) |
|-------------|----------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Denmark | 86.7 | 10.0 | 3.3 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| France | 66.7 | 12.1 | 12.1 | 9.1 | 100.0 |
| Germany | 63.3 | 16.7 | 13.3 | 6.7 | 100.0 |
| Greece | 70.0 | 6.7 | 13.3 | 10.0 | 100.0 |
| Italy | 76.7 | 16.7 | 6.7 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Poland | 76.7 | 13.3 | 10.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Switzerland | 63.3 | 20.0 | 16.7 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| UK | 90.6 | 6.3 | 3.1 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| Total (%) | 74.3 | 12.7 | 9.8 | 3.3 | 100.0 |

Total = average across all eight countries, $N = 245$.

umbrella organisations was irrelevant (90.6%), closely followed by CSOs based in Denmark (86.7%). In terms of the UK, this speaks to a potentially inexistent culture of sharing resources among organisations and the fact that, when solidarity economy resources are restricted, CSOs are likely to compete rather than collaborate for the same diminishing funds (Sinclair et al 2018). In the Danish context, the very strong reliance on funding from the national government may suggest that these types of federations/umbrella organisations become relegated in importance for CSO finance. Among the eight countries, the highest proportion of respondents (16.7%) who identified funding from federations/umbrella bodies as ‘very relevant’ came from the non-EU member, Switzerland.

Discussion

As we compared the differences and similarities between the countries of our study, we were conscious that discussions of resources acknowledge the asymmetries of national economies. In other words, context matters. This is reflected by the operational budgets of the CSOs in our study exceeding €500,000, with Denmark and Switzerland having, respectively, 56.7 and 53.3% of their organisations managing budgets of this size are not surprising considering that these countries are among the ten most expensive places to live (World Population Review 2021⁴). On the other hand, only 26.7% of Polish CSOs managed budgets over €500,000 which may relate to a relatively low cost of living. Hypothetically, higher budgets can deliver less in high-cost countries while lower budgets could offer more services in low-cost nations relative to these costs. As budgetary requirements of CSOs depend on contextual variances in costs of service delivery, they should be considered when analysing the distribution of revenues in European solidarity economies. Having recognised the importance of context, we can then begin to observe formal and informal isomorphic pressures of the environment in which CSOs operate that shape the parameters of their budgets. Our analysis reveals three key dimensions in our findings: *crisis*, *continuity*, and *missed opportunity*.

In terms of *crisis*, as we elaborated earlier, the organisations with whom we conducted our research found themselves at the forefront of the global financial crisis. Of course, the crisis itself had an asymmetric impact with those already exposed to high levels of vulnerability being even further disadvantaged due to its consequences (Taylor-Gooby, Leruth, and Chung 2017). At the same time, the crisis provokes

contractions in the wider economy which, as evidenced through our data, leads to a much more difficult environment for CSOs to navigate as income streams from various sources begin to evaporate. This aspect relates back to our research question of the sources of finance for CSOs. Our study found evidence of Greece, Italy, and the UK experiencing the highest level of retrenchment in funding. The first two countries were disproportionately hit by the effect of the crisis that engulfed the Eurozone (Lapavitsas 2012; Matsaganis and Leventi 2014), with Greece, in particular, an emblematic battleground concerning the policies of austerity imposed by the European Central Bank (Varoufakis 2017). In terms of the UK, extant research has demonstrated that the policies of austerity acutely affected those geographies that had still not recovered from the processes of deindustrialisation (Beatty and Fothergill 2018) and disproportionately impacted groups experiencing vulnerability with a welfare reform agenda (Bambra and Garthwaite 2015). We can therefore observe coercive isomorphic processes at play (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) as the pool of financial resources simultaneously will have receded in its depth (due to the pressures on various sources of funding) while the needs of those most vulnerable, and thus demand on CSOs' resources to meet those needs, grew.

Although contextual features may provide some explanation of variation in operational budgets and the impact of the economic crisis on funding retrenchment, it is challenging to explain some trends in active engagement in fundraising. While the average level of CSOs actively involved in raising funds is 63.7% at the national level and 20% at the transnational level, Greek CSOs—possibly those most in need to generate income—are characterised by the lowest level of active engagement in the national (43.3%) and transnational (3.3%) fundraising.

Turning to *continuity*, our evidence indicates that in terms of our research question on the differences and similarities across contexts, the fundraising of the European CSOs remains nationally embedded, with a limited extent to which the solidarity economy is transnational. This is an interesting finding as many of the issues tackled by CSOs, as well as the economic environments they are navigating, are shaped by transnational events and policymaking.

In the context of the financial environment in which European CSOs operate, our study highlights diverse revenue streams for the solidarity economies we observed across Europe. Although donations from individuals appear to be important in Poland, Switzerland, Germany, France, and Greece, in other countries including Italy, the UK, and Denmark around half of CSOs assessed this source of finance as irrelevant. This may suggest the absence of a philanthropic culture in some countries during the time of economic austerity or the higher importance of other sources of finance. For example, we discovered significant variations in the importance of national government grants to local CSOs with 80% of Danish, and only 6.7% of Greek organisations reporting this source of funding as very relevant. This indicates the relative financial dependence on the state among Danish CSOs and, on the other hand, a solidarity economy in Greece that, due to significant public budget cuts, has limited support from the state. Once again, the prism of isomorphism, particularly in terms of formal pressures emanating from the (in)capacity or even (un)willingness of the state to support CSOs financially is a useful analytical tool. The frame of 'coercive isomorphism'

provides us with a reminder of the specific national legal frameworks which organisations navigate, policy change by government, and of course, decisions about the allocation of resources to meet the needs of different groups in society, including those at the forefront of our study, such as the unemployed/precariously employed, disabled people, and migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Interpreting our findings through this framework indicates that despite the 'transnational' features of crisis, there is a sustained degree of heterogeneity across our national samples of CSOs. This indicates the extent to which the frame of isomorphism animates our data given the insistence that: 'organisations are increasingly homogenous within given domains and increasingly organised around rituals of conformity to wider institutions' (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 150). This suggests that the actions of CSOs are exercised in a way that reflects the asymmetric geographical impact of the crisis (Aalbers 2009) across European countries. Similarly, these actions reflect those uneven processes of 'actually existing neoliberalism' that speaks to 'the production of such projects within distinctive national, regional and local contexts, defined by the legacies of inherited institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices and political struggles' (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009, 50). Recognising these well-established institutional frameworks and the processes which shape them sheds light on the challenge facing CSOs seeking to build at the transnational scale.

Considering CSO finance at the transnational level in Europe, our study found a consistent picture with non-EU and relatively wealthy EU members acknowledging the limited relevance of EU investments. On the other hand, more than half of the CSOs from countries that joined the EU after the 2000s (such as Poland) or weaker EU economies (such as Greece), indicated that the grants from the EU are 'very relevant' or 'fairly relevant' for CSOs. The results from Poland suggest that, in this post-communist state, the EU continues to perceive investment in the development of a solidarity economy as beneficial in the long term. Furthermore, the high importance of EU funding in Greece may speak to the scarcity of CSO finance in the country.

CSO finance emerging from private sector organisations was decidedly limited with the significant majority of CSOs from the UK and Italy indicating that this source of funding was irrelevant to their activities. This finding indicates that the financial climate also affects the sustainability of private businesses and their (in)ability to support CSOs. Moreover, we should recognise that some CSOs can experience tension between private sources of revenue and their social missions (Teasdale 2012; Steiner et al. 2021).

Reflecting on a *missed opportunity*, our findings also show a limited financial impact of solidarity economy federations/umbrella organisations. Thus, considering our research question, we find weak evidence of the existence of a transnational solidarity economy. While acknowledging that our sample does not reflect the full spectrum of the solidarity economy, it suggests that key forums and networks that are well placed to act as interlocutors between CSOs to share resources are not being utilised as such. As these forums/networking sites that bridge a transnational solidarity economy are underutilised, our empirical findings across the eight countries point out rather weak transnationalism. Returning to the reflections of Beckert (2010) elaborated earlier, no external actor is driving CSOs towards a new institutional design at the transnational level. Instead, homogenising forces are to be found primarily at the national level. Of

course, significant transnational actors do exist in Europe through the institutions of the European Union (as exemplified by some of our findings in terms of grants for CSOs) and other actors which have sought to develop civil society across European borders. However, the financial infrastructure of any emergent transnational civil society (Florini 2012), despite such efforts, seems underdeveloped and would require renewed and consistent investment. Moreover, those umbrella organisations which could act as critical intermediaries not only in terms of finance but also as schools for developing the transnational 'social skills' of CSOs (Fligstein 2001) are ideally located but crucially lacking the necessary power or resources to drive institutional (re)design. This 'grand amateurism' (Moulaert and Aileni 2005) of CSOs must also be contrasted with other actors in the economy (e.g. multinational corporations) who can demonstrate greater fluency when operating at a transnational scale (Sklair 1997).

It is here that we realise the value of isomorphism as an analytical framework. When we consider how CSOs navigate periods of crisis (such as the global financial crisis of 2008 and its consequences) then their national and sub-national networks become sources of learning. CSOs that appear to successfully navigate the difficult financial terrain thus become a model for others to imitate and, as such, may engender a form of 'mimetic' isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Moreover, decisions to imitate others reveal the type of agency that CSOs mobilise. It is a form of agency shaped around social skills (Fligstein 2001) that is embedded in national, rather than transnational, frameworks. What these mimetic forces offer us is an insight into what has already occurred but also what may yet take place in terms of the responses by CSOs to the impact of the pandemic on their organisations. In other words, having learned how to navigate the terrain of crisis and austerity in the last decade, some CSOs will imitate similar decisions and actions to continue their social mission and ensure the ongoing financial sustainability of their operations as they navigate the Coronavirus pandemic and its consequences.

Conclusions

Considering that recurring crises affect the livelihoods of many, particularly vulnerable, citizens as well as the importance of the solidarity economy and CSOs in addressing social and economic inequalities, this paper has sought to fill the gap in existing knowledge on what powers the social economy in times of crisis. We have done so by examining cross-national solidarity economy support for CSOs during such periods and investigating the existence of a transnational solidarity economy. In the context of crisis, we conclude that international actors, such as the EU or solidarity economy federations/umbrella organisations, have a limited impact on the financial sustainability of European CSOs. Instead, it is predominantly the national macro-economic landscape that influences CSOs funding streams and, potentially, their ability to facilitate support to the vulnerable groups that are the focus of their activities. Evidence deriving from our study revealed that formal and informal pressures on organisations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) during the crisis took on a national rather than transnational flavour. Although possibly more tailored towards addressing national and local needs (Millar et al. 2020), high dependence on social funding from national governments, as

evidenced in Denmark, may put CSOs in a position with limited opportunities for pursuing their activities independently without following recommendations, or delivering/replacing services on behalf, of national governments. On the other hand, the inability to offer an adequate level of financial support to CSOs due to the consequences of austerity measures, exemplified by Greece, can create a bumpy terrain for CSOs seeking resources to support vulnerable groups of people.

In addition to the primacy of national contexts in shaping the ecosystem of finance for CSOs, our study shows a limited existence of a transnational solidarity economy. For example, the importance of EU funding in influencing CSOs activities was perceived as low, especially across well-established and relatively wealthy European countries. Moreover, federations and umbrella organisations that represent one of the key pillars of the infrastructure that can act as a facilitator for developing a transnational solidarity economy seem to be greatly underutilised. We recognise that umbrella organisations may not have enough resources to distribute; nevertheless, they are well-positioned to do so if the sharing of resources between CSOs is to be normalised. Thus far, however, there is no tangible transnational solidarity economy financial system to speak of and we conclude that European CSOs' transnationalism is very weak.

Our study is important in generating new knowledge and informing both—national solidarity economy policies and the activities of CSOs. Firstly, the evidence presented in this study was captured during a unique period of unrelenting social, economic and political flux in an environment greatly influenced by the impact of the global financial crisis. This is a context now being (re)shaped by the advent of a pandemic crisis and its economic and social consequences. Lessons from our study could help to inform decision-making within CSOs as they navigate new challenges. Secondly, our study offers new insight into the shape of the solidarity economy across eight European contexts. The absence of a truly transnational scale of collaboration raises important questions about the unrealised potential and the efficiency of the solidarity economy ecosystem. Indeed, this transnational dimension of our study is particularly relevant in times when the politics of border security is reappearing, and when the pandemic crisis has revealed the costs of poor coordination across borders to support vulnerable groups. Finally, we harness a novel approach to investigating CSOs through the explanatory power of isomorphism. We illuminate how isomorphic forces shape the resources of CSOs and offer an evidence-based insight for scholars seeking to understand how the solidarity economies of Europe will fare as CSOs navigate the new pandemic crisis. Although we appreciate the specific and unusual aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, our plea to fellow scholars is to recognise the lessons that can be drawn from the crises of the recent past to understand those of our present and avoid future missed opportunities for developing solidarity at the transnational level. As such, we call for further studies in the field, testing and developing our findings beyond Europe, particularly in the Global South among scholars pursuing similar research on solidarity economies.

Notes

1. Crisis is defined as 'a low probability high impact situation that is perceived by critical stakeholders to threaten the viability of the organization' (Pearson and Clair 1998, 66). In particular, global economic crises affect the entire global economy (e.g. with global

production and national GDPs decreasing, and unemployment levels increasing internationally), and exert impacts on both the external environment by altering opportunity set and the internal environment of the firms by testing firms' strategic flexibility in managing change (Ma, Yiu, and Zhou 2014).

2. TransSOL
3. <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/06/29/poland.economy.recession/index.html>.
4. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/most-expensive-countries-to-live-in/>.

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Appendix 1. Examples of questions

| Topic | Example of questions | Tables |
|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| Operating budget | • Q1 | • Table 1 |
| Funding retrenchment | • Q2 | • Table 2 |
| Actively fundraising | • Q3 | • Table 3 |
| Sources of funding | • Q4 | • Table 4 |
| | | • Table 5 |
| | | • Table 6 |
| | | • Table 7 |
| | | • Table 8 |

1. Could you please tell me what the more recent annual operating budget of your organisation is using the scale below?

1. *Less than €50,000*
2. *Less than €100,000*
3. *Less than €200,000*
4. *Less than €500,000*
5. *More than €500,000*
6. *DK*
7. *REFUSAL*

2. Since 2010 did your organisation experience a retrenchment in funding or available resources?

1. *No retrenchment*
2. *Limited retrenchment*
3. *Severe retrenchment*

3. Could you please tell me which are the main actions among those listed below used by your organisation in order to reach its aims?

| | No | Yes | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----|------------|-----------------|
| | | Nationally | Transnationally |
| 1. Mobilising members through protest, demonstrations | | | |
| 2. Mobilising members through direct actions | | | |
| 3. Political education of citizens/raising awareness | | | |
| 4. Interest representation/lobbying institutions | | | |
| 5. Services to members (advisory-counselling; material support; etc.) | | | |
| 6. Services to others (e.g. clients) | | | |
| 7. Fundraising | | | |
| 8. Participation in legal consultations/policy making processes | | | |
| 9. Other (please specify) | | | |

4. Could you tell us about your financial sources by indicating from the list below how is each source contributing to your budget?

| Sources | Irrelevant | Fairly relevant | Very relevant |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-----------------|---------------|
| 1. Returns from funds raising (events, sales of goods/services, etc.) | | | |
| 2. Membership fees | | | |
| 3. Donations from individuals | | | |
| 4. Sponsoring from companies/firms | | | |
| 5. Finance from federation or umbrella organisation | | | |
| 6. Grants from national government | | | |
| 7. EU grants | | | |
| 8. Other sources (please specify) | | | |