From Crisis to Aspiration: Navigating Temporalities in Humanitarian and Educational Refugee Support Settings

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I, the undersigned, **Irina Șerban**, candidate for the MA degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology declare herewith that the present thesis titled "*From Crisis to Aspiration: Navigating Temporalities in Humanitarian and Educational Refugee Support Settings*" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. Certain fragments of this thesis are built on essays I previously submitted as coursework during my MA at Central European University. These sections have been substantially revised and integrated into the thesis to contribute to its original argument.

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Vienna, 10th June 2025

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how time is experienced, structured, and contested in refugee support work, focusing on the contrasting temporal logics that shape humanitarian aid and university-based educational initiatives. The central question guiding this research is: *How do different refugee support models shape and reflect competing temporal regimes, and what kinds of futures are made possible or foreclosed by different models of intervention? Moreover, how do actors within these systems negotiate the tension between crisis and aspiration?* Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation in a refugee day center in Brussels and interviews with frontline aid workers, volunteers, and participants in the Open Learning Initiative (OLIve) program, a university-based educational initiative for displaced people, the thesis examines how temporality is lived and negotiated across institutional contexts. The thesis argues that while humanitarian support often operates within a logic of perpetual emergency and crisis, university-based initiatives like OLIve interrupt this temporal regime by fostering aspirational temporalities. Even as they remain entangled in some structural precarities, such initiatives create spaces for critical reflection, future-making, and political becoming. By tracing how time is stitched together in these two settings, this thesis speaks to the anthropology of displacement, revealing how urgency and the hope for lasting change are held together, often uneasily, by both recipients and providers of support.

Key words: temporality, temporal regimes, anthropology of displacement, refugee support, humanitarianism, crisis, educational initiatives, emotional infrastructures of care

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INTRODUCTION

> *Time is not a resource we have for cashing in. True timefulness is to live in awareness of the dynamic and unpredictable array of times that co-exist within one life, as well as the intersubjective nature of time between all individuals. To live it well, we may need to break the temporal norms altogether and finally come to terms with time as entirely relational and contingent upon each other in specific and localized ways.*
>
> - Ruth Allen, *Weathering*

> *Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today?*
>
> - Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

Traditionally seen as a field defined by altruism and universalist ideals, humanitarian work has undergone significant transformation in the neoliberal era, as market forces and economic policies have been influencing its practice (Kamat 2004). Whereas humanitarian aid was once focused primarily on short-term relief, it has increasingly taken on roles associated with development work, as complex emergency situations demand longer-term solutions (Krause 2014). At the same time, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are being pushed to operate not just as solidarity-driven actors, but as contributors to global value creation in response to changing global governance structures and economic pressures (Teegen, Doh, and Vachani 2004).

Such development reflects a wider transformation, from a "nationally scaled modernist welfare to regionally and locally embedded forms of collective belonging" (Muehlebach 2012, 43), which in turn compels NGOs to prioritize efficiency and increasing returns over traditional humanitarian principles (Teegen, Doh, and Vachani 2004). This shift manifests concretely

through what Giudici and Ramsay would refer to as "discourses of duty and productivity which have replaced those of suffering and need, impelling migrants to perform their deservingness by illustrating their capacity to contribute to their host societies" (Riva, Altman, and Hoffstaedter 2024). Neoliberal humanitarianism reframes refugees as economically productive subjects seen as "potentially profitable workers responsible for their own economic survival and social integration" (Liu-Farrer, Pearlman, and Al-Masri 2024).

This logic extends to humanitarian workers, who are tasked with managing these contradictions through short-term, project-based interventions that rarely address root causes. The result is a form of governance that enables urgency as the dominant temporal mode in the cycles of reactive aid delivery (Liu-Farrer, Pearlman, and Al-Masri 2024). This process has led to the institutionalization of "crisis" as a permanent condition that dominates how displacement and migration are understood and managed by agencies, policy-makers, and civil society alike, increasingly framing forced migration as a disruption in an otherwise normal global order in a way that demands immediate intervention and quick solutions (Cantat 2016).

The problem is twofold: on the one hand, while humanitarian organizations often claim a mission of systemic change, in practice, aid workers find themselves engaged primarily in so-called "crisis" management, which limits their ability to address problems from the root cause (Lie 2020); on the other hand, the *neoliberalization* of humanitarian work has led to a work culture that emphasizes measurable outputs over meaningful reforms, leading to a discrepancy between the aspirations and the operational reality of the solutions employed (Teegen, Doh, and Vachani 2004). Consequently, the discourse of crisis serves to depoliticize structural causes of displacement and legitimize outcome-oriented interventions that align with the neoliberal demands on international organizations. It also creates a professional environment where humanitarian workers are constantly responding to emergencies, not because crises are

inherently unending, but because the aid system is structured to treat them as such (Riva, Altman, and Hoffstaedter 2024).

Yet what happens when the "crisis" never ends? When we acknowledge the fact that displacement is not a temporary phase but a prolonged phenomenon, one that is structurally reproduced, socially normalized, and politically managed?

This thesis explores the temporal dimensions of refugee support programs, particularly the ways in which time is organized, experienced, and contested within humanitarian and educational responses to displacement. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted intermittently between 2023 and 2025 and in-depth interviews, this research focuses on two contrasting yet entangled initiatives of refugee assistance. The first is a frontline humanitarian aid hub in Brussels, where I engaged in participant observation as a volunteer on two separate occasions: first informally, and later as part of a three-week research stay supported by a fieldwork grant. There, I documented service delivery and daily interactions between migrants and humanitarian workers. I also volunteered alongside the employees in food distribution and other tasks. The second is the Open Learning Initiative (OLIve) program, a university-based educational initiative for displaced people. In addition to fieldwork, I carried out 15 interviews with a range of actors involved in both initiatives, including frontline humanitarian workers, shelter managers, fundraisers, cultural mediators and volunteers in Brussels and Vienna, as well as educational program facilitators, tutors, and former students, some of whom became tutors or staff themselves, in Vienna and Budapest.

By comparing two initiatives with distinct institutional logics, I aim to explore how differences in aims, scope, and infrastructural support shape the temporal regimes in which actors operate. The Brussels hub, oriented toward immediate relief, is embedded in a logic of urgency and improvisation, while OLIve, with its pedagogical inclusion goals offers an alternative

temporality grounded in continuity and reflection. The two programs were selected precisely for their contrast - one exemplifies the dominant crisis-response paradigm, while the other represents a slower approach that challenges the temporal compression typical of humanitarian aid. Together they allow for an analysis of how time is experienced, managed, and contested across different modes of refugee assistance.

The selection of the two initiatives was guided by a desire to explore how refugee support is shaped by different configurations of structures, schemas, and resources (Sewell 1992). These sites are not only institutionally and geographically distinct, but they also represent contrasting approaches to displacement. S*tructure*s refer here to the organizational and institutional frameworks that shape each initiative's operations. The Brussels day center operates within a reactive environment, shaped by shifting migration flows, limited state support, and the logic of grassroots humanitarianism. In contrast, OLIve has been embedded within a formal academic institution, and subject to university governance. These differences influence not only how each initiative functions, but also the procedural guidelines marked by the political context that influences the work of the professionals involved. *Schemas* encompass the cognitive and normative frameworks that guide actors' perceptions and decisions. In the Brussels hub, urgency and triage dominate the mental models of volunteers and coordinators, who often describe their work in terms of crisis management and moral obligation. At OLIve, by contrast, tutors and participants articulate a different set of values, emphasizing long-term? empowerment, critical thinking, and future orientation. *Resources* include both tangible (funding, infrastructure, personnel) and intangible (emotional resilience, knowledge) assets available. By attempting a comparative analysis of the different refugee support models through this tripartite lens, it becomes possible to trace how associated temporal regimes reflect and resist the structural conditions of crisis under which they operate. This approach also allows me to *explore how practitioners and displaced people in different contexts reconcile the fracture*

between hope and the uncertainty of a foreseeable future. The two sites reflect different temporal logics – the "humanitarian time" and the "humanistic time" (Mazlish 2009a). The former is shaped by immediacy, repetition, as well as the urgency of survival, while the latter offers a glimpse into future-oriented perspectives defined by relational continuity. Neither of these initiatives escapes the broader socio-political conditions that make planning for the future precarious. For both recipients and providers, the two programs are caught in a web of temporal contradictions: they must act urgently to address immediate needs while claiming to lay the foundations for long-term transformation.

While there is a growing body of research on how displaced people experience uncertainty and disrupted temporalities (Birger 2024; Khosravi 2021; Ramsay 2020), the identities, motivations, and emotional labor of those working in humanitarian and educational settings remain comparatively understudied. This holds true in particular for the quiet, often invisible forms of endurance that humanitarian workers engage in as they navigate the temporal regimes of crisis response. Following Merton's (1987) call to "specify ignorance", my thesis addresses this gap by examining how humanitarian workers and educators involved in refugee support initiatives negotiate their roles and sustain their commitments within systems that demand constant responsiveness yet offer little temporal stability.

I analyze the two support programs through the lens of "timescapes" (Bear 2014), a concept able to capture the multiplicity of temporalities that shape social life. Timescapes are not simply timelines, but relational configurations of time embedded in institutional rhythms and affective experiences, which can allow us to understand how they inhabit and negotiate overlapping temporal regimes. A distinctive aspect of this approach stands in the fact that timescapes, according to my findings, are not merely neutral settings in institutional and organizational responses, but actively produced through practices of care, influencing the relations, affective atmospheres, and personal aspirations of the actors involved. To further articulate these

dynamics, I consider how different timescapes coexist in the field: the urgency of frontline humanitarianism, the delayed hope of long-term educational initiatives, the bureaucratic inertia of state institutions, all intersecting in the lived experiences of displaced people and support providers, who must navigate them all.

My methodological approach is informed by thematic analysis in an attempt to draw upon "repeated patterns of meaning" (Braun and Clarke 2006, 86), allowing access into various forms of situated knowledge. I also draw on methodological insights from trauma studies, to understand how repeated exposure to crisis affects both displaced people and support providers. Research has shown that relief workers are more exposed to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety compared to the general population (Connorton et al. 2012), as well as a higher risk of burnout and secondary traumatic stress in the case of people who support displaced individuals specifically (Adwi et al. 2025). Additionally, concepts such as "compassion fatigue" (Taithe 2019), as well as "trauma-informed pedagogy" (Bailey et al. 2023) helped me make sense of the emotional rifts that structure support work.

The ethical dimensions of my research are important in shaping the foundation of a respectful inquiry, as I am committed to ensuring the privacy and informed consent of the participants involved. Accordingly, each interviewee was provided with a detailed consent form outlining the purpose of the research, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. To safeguard anonymity, participants' real names have been anonymized, and the precise location of the day center in Brussels shall not be named. All audio files, transcripts, and notes are stored securely in encrypted folders that are only accessible to me.

To support my inquiry, the thesis is structured across four main chapters, each building on the last to develop a comparative analysis. Chapter 1 situates the discussion within broader theoretical and political frameworks, tracing how humanitarianism has evolved into a

depoliticized, service-oriented model shaped by neoliberal governance and crisis discourse. It introduces key concepts such as *liminality*, *temporal disjuncture*, and the *productive framing of crisis*, laying the groundwork for understanding time as a structuring force in displacement. Chapter 2 turns to ethnographic material from a refugee day center in Brussels, to examine how humanitarian support operates through logics of urgency, scarcity, and perpetual emergency. It explores how these temporal rhythms shape both institutional practices and the lived experiences of waiting, and emotional labor. Chapter 3 shifts focus to the OLIve program, to explore how it cultivates alternative temporalities centered on aspiration, and future-making, while also acknowledging its structural constraints. It highlights how moments of pause, reflection and relational engagement offer an alternative to the compressive tempo of crisis. The final chapter, brings these two sites into dialogue to analyze how different temporal frameworks shape the politics of care and support. Rather than treating temporality as a singular condition, it argues that multiple temporalities, each embedded in specific institutional and affective timescapes, are actively negotiated and reconfigured. These negotiations reveal time not as a neutral background, but as a site of struggle, where displaced people and humanitarian actors alike grapple with uncertainty and competing temporal demands. Finally, this thesis is not just an account of others' experiences but also a reflection on how fieldwork reshapes the researcher: in attending to the affective and temporal textures of aid, I found myself grappling with similar tensions between commitment and exhaustion, idealism and disillusionment, presence and projection, tensions which, I argue, are not external but constitutive of what it means to care and be cared for in spaces defined by uncertainty.

CHAPTER 1: SITUATING CRISIS AND TEMPORALITY IN REFUGEE SUPPORT

1.1 Humanitarianism as an object of imagination

Humanitarianism is not only a set of practices or institutions, itis also a powerful imaginary (Malkki 2015, 13). It mobilizes emotions, moral imperatives, and narratives that shape how suffering is recognized and responded to (Käpylä and Kennedy 2014), while aiming to adhere to principles of neutrality (Dany 2024). As such, the actors perceive "the universality of trauma and the equal right all human beings possess to be free of its effects" (Robbins 2013, 456).

Scholars such as Didier Fassin (2007; 2011) and Miriam Ticktin (2016) have critically examined how humanitarianism operates through a politics of compassion rather than a politics of rights. As Ticktin argues in Dany (2024), humanitarianism often privileges feeling over entitlement, framing aid as an act of benevolence rather than a fulfilment of justice. This framing has significant material consequences: it can depoliticize suffering, reduce displaced people to passive recipients of care, and obscure the structural causes of displacement (Kemedjio and Lynch 2024).

These imaginaries are particularly visible in the framing of migration as a "humanitarian emergency", as seen during the so-called "long summer of migration" in 2015. While the framing helped mobilize public support, it also reinforced a crisis logic that prioritized short-term relief over long-term rights-based solutions, as organizations focused on material assistance in camps rather than sustainable integration, effectively keeping refugees in a state of managed dependency (Dany 2024).

This crisis-driven imaginary also shapes the working conditions and moral frameworks of humanitarian workers, creating a temporal regime that places emphasis on urgency. Not only is the demanding nature of their activities and responsibilities marked by high levels of stress and trauma (Foo et al. 2023), but the same regime can lead to moral fatigue among aid workers (Taithe 2019), who are caught between institutional expectations and the realities of protracted displacement (UNHCR 2020). In this way, the humanitarian imaginary not only structures how refugees are perceived but also how aid workers understand their responsibilities and limits.

By situating humanitarianism as an object of imagination, will examine how dominant narratives of crisis and care shape both the delivery of aid and the temporal structures through which it is experienced.

1.2 The NGOization of civil society and the rise of the apolitical service model

This section traces how the NGOization of civil society came to dominate the landscape of humanitarian aid and welfare provision from the 1970s onward. During this period, the expansion of foreign direct investment (FDI) and the growing influence of transnational corporations (TNCs) reshaped the global economic order. In response, international institutions such as the United Nations began to formally recognize TNCs as key actors in global governance(Davies 2014). This recognition coincided with the founding of the World Economic Forum as a platform for coordinating strategies among corporate and political elites in the international marketplace. In this context, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) gained prominence as transnational actors capable of engaging both states and corporations. Their rise was not incidental, but part of a broader transformation in global civil society, where activism increasingly took institutionalized and professionalized forms, as INGOs began to position themselves as intermediaries between grassroots movements and global governance structures (Davies 2014).

Simultaneously, the shift in governance foregrounded the INGOs' embedding in bureaucratic structures characterized by a clear chain of command and specialized roles held together by formal written communications, reflecting Weberian notions of hierarchical governance. However, the NGOization of civil society has been critiqued for its tendency to depoliticize social issues by framing their solutions as apolitical services (Choudry and Kapoor 2013). This process of depoliticization aligns with the neoliberal agenda that connects human well-being to entrepreneurial freedoms, minimal state intervention and a competition-driven environment where social assistance is contingent upon the trope of individual responsibility (Wacquant 2012). While Wacquant sees neoliberalism as undermining social solidarity in favor of individualism, Muehlebach offers a different perspective: she suggests that people's relationship to neoliberal values is not unilaterally imposed but negotiated in relation to pre-existing cultural norms, which are used to reframe unwaged labor as an expression of moral duty. This leads to the emergence of "zones of nonremuneration – seemingly untouched by the polluting logic of market exchange", where relational labor emerges as a new mode of production (Muehlebach 2012, 7).

1.3 Neoliberal humanitarianism

The historical evolution of transnational governance paved the way for the growing prevalence of INGOs as the primary deliverers of humanitarian support on a global scale. This shift occurred both to fill the gaps left by state withdrawal and to facilitate neoliberal governance. However, such governance often neglects the root causes of inequality. Instead of addressing structural injustices, it tends to prolong the existence of vulnerable populations within the same systemic conditions. This dynamic, can, in turn, reduce the pressure on political authorities to pursue more sustainable solutions, as there is a persistent "temptation for humanitarian actors to be institutionalized in a way that eases pressure on political authorities to address suffering

in a more sustainable way" (Krause 2014, 103). This framing is particularly evident in funding mechanisms like the European Union Trust Fund for Africa, which, under the guise of "emergency funding" bypasses standard public procurement procedures to prioritize immediate political objectives over long-term solutions.[2] It has been described as an example of how development aid is leveraged to pressure African countries into cooperating with European migration control demands, focusing on crisis management rather than addressing root causes of displacement. It is thus a tool for perpetuating a permanent crisis model that sacrifices structural solutions for temporary measures that serve donor countries' political agendas, often at the expense of those most in need (Hayden 2022). This perspective was echoed in the field, as one humanitarian worker I interviewed described their work as "putting a band-aid over bigger systemic problems".[3]

The bureaucratization of care under neoliberal governance is not only evident in institutional design but also in the everyday experiences of humanitarian workers. As one staff member at the Brussels day center explained, "[they] are often borrowing tools from impact measurement"[4], that places emphasis on quantifiable outcomes. Another worker in Brussels described how voluntary labor is increasingly framed as a moral obligation[5] while another noted that executive orders affect funding for refugee services.[6] These perspectives underscore how neoliberal logics not only shape institutional structures but also moral economies of labor, as part of a broader push for humanitarian action to "demonstrate its competence" (Karlsrud and Mühlen-Schulte 2017, 203) through global accountability mechanisms. In an attempt to maximize utility while minimizing state involvement, the literature suggests a growing trend of states treating refugees not solely as objects of humanitarian protection but increasingly as

[2] Interview with humanitarian volunteer, March 13th, 2025.
[3] Interview with humanitarian worker, April 18th, 2025.
[4] Interview with humanitarian worker, April 28th, 2025.
[5] Interview with humanitarian worker, July 3rd, 2024.
[6] Interview with humanitarian worker, April 18th, 2025.

economic actors (Yates 2011). This shift aligns with the adoption of "workfare" frameworks over traditional rights-based welfare systems, where refugees are increasingly expected to demonstrate productivity and self-reliance as a condition for receiving support (Liu-Farrer, Pearlman, and Al-Masri 2024).This transformation in the treatment of people in need of care is paralleled by a restructuring of humanitarian labor itself. Accompanying this is a phenomenon that Muehlebach (2012, 104) describes this as a "humanitarianized" public sphere. In this configuration, she suggests that the state "reduces its own responsibilities by relying on volunteers to fulfil some of the roles it once might have handled directly (ibid., 48). Volunteering thus becomes a labor regime at the center of which stands a subject delivering pleasure from the unwaged work, the *homo relationalis*, animated "not by a rational entrepreneurial subject but by a *compassionate* one" (Muehlebach 2012, 6). This not only shifts the burden of welfare provision but also reshapes the experience of humanitarian workers themselves, whose labor is moralized and often precariously positioned within bureaucratic systems of accountability.

This approach of equating voluntary labor with ethical citizenship (Giudici 2021), as much as it fosters a sense of solidarity and community engagement, is fundamentally built on the reframing of labor as a moral imperative for the question of *deservingness* (Muehlebach 2012, 48). On the one hand, it generates new modes of *belonging* and *exclusion* of those subject to precarious roles, without necessarily providing support or recognition for their actions. On the other hand, as interlocutors working at the day center described, it creates the expectation of "do[ing] the work of two or three people",[7] not simply because of staff shortages, but because their compassion itself is treated as a resource. It is an institutional expectation that they would

[7] Interview with humanitarian worker, July 3rd, 2024.

stretch themselves, emotionally and physically, under the assumption that care work, when rooted in empathy, could (or should) be endlessly elastic.

1.4 Crisis as a productive framing in governance

The politics of legitimacy offers a productive framing that legitimizes states to respond selectively to emergencies not merely to address suffering (Rajaram 2015), but to reaffirm their moral credibility (Cantat, Pécoud, and Thiollet 2023, 632). In what can be seen as a broader crisis of hegemony (Horton 1979), states turn to moral panic to reassert control over populations (Cantat 2015), while shifting responsibility onto civil society actors. Consequently, in refugee support work, *crisis* is not simply a reflection of objective conditions but a productive framing that shapes how institutions perceive and respond to displacement. This framing challenges the conceptual and organizational routines of governance mechanisms (Cantat, Pécoud, and Thiollet 2023, 640) and structure intervention through predefined thresholds. Reflecting on these dynamics, one humanitarain worker responsible for fundraising noted that such institutional logics generate cycles of urgent action constantly adapted to shifting priorities. At the same time, the push for efficiency that mirrors market logic [8] creates an *emergency temporality* that affects how programs are designed for immediate relief rather than sustainable support. Another worker added that this happens despite organizational attempts toward structural change.[9] As the person in charge of fundraising expressed: "leaving a region will result in the crisis recurring within a few months".[10] Media coverage plays a crucial role in perpetuating this logic reducing displacement to a series of urgent events, "as the crisis acquires a narrative character and unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming" (Cucu and

[8] Interview with humanitarian worker, December 13th, 2025.
[9] Interview with humanitarian worker, April 18th, 2025.
[10] Interview with humanitarian worker, December 13th, 2025.

Kenny 2023, 143). In the words of the fundraiser, "giving attention to a particular situation rather than the scale of the actual need"[11]

Funding follows the same logic, with money for urgent purposes being easier to access (Karlsrud and Mühlen-Schulte 2017, 211). Thus, the act of describing and explaining suffering is never neutral, but driven by the need to demonstrate a "motivated truth" (Sending 2017, 71). At the same time, "people have a very small window to engage with the cause, sometimes like five minutes"[12], time in which fundraisers are expected to make an impact, yet what emerges is a landscape in which different actors experience temporality in radically asymmetrical ways. Despite this, as an activist involved with the OLIve program observed, "displacement isn't temporary, people's needs extend far beyond an emergency frame".[13]

The dominance of crisis logic creates not only an assumption that we are experiencing a deviation from the routine (Roitman 2013), which blinds us to the possibility that "the systemic dimensions of a crisis are lived and embedded in our everydayness" (Cucu and Kenny 2023, 143), but also leads to a kind of temporal compression that fragments organizational memory and suspends life in an ongoing present of managed waiting for both the providers and the recipients of aid. The next section shall further develop the argument that the actors described, though differently positioned, are embedded in the same institutional and affective landscapes that structure refugee time.

1.5 Liminality and the temporalities of displacement

Literature has warned against the consequences of separating migration into "voluntary" and "forced", as this only grants recognition to certain forms of displacement (Fine and Ypi 2016)

[11] Ibid.
[12] Interview with humanitarian worker, December 13th, 2024.
[13] Interview with activist, April 22nd, 2025.

and obscures the political framework used to create opposition (Cantat, Pécoud, and Thiollet 2023, 640) between people who migrate propelled by a pursuit of enhanced opportunities and people who are compelled to undertake dangerous journeys fleeing immediate threats to their safety (Castles 2010). The latter, whose lives "become organized through humanitarian regimes that are often constrained to present concerns and void of future possibility" (Ramsay 2020, 392), experience a state of *liminality* (Turner, Abrahams, and Harris 1995) that extends beyond a mere spatial connotation. It translates into a profound sense of temporal dispossession, from a coherent sense of belonging and continuity into "existential precarity" (Ramsay 2020).

While much of the literature on temporality and displacement focuses on the experiences of refugees, in my thesis I argue that these temporal regimes are not confined to displaced populations alone. Rather, they also shape the lives and labor of those who work within refugee support systems. This shared temporal condition emerges from a constant recalibration of effort without resolution (Birger 2024), in which both groups are caught in a perpetual present, where the future is indefinitely postponed (Vandevoordt and Fleischmann 2021). My fieldwork confirms this correlation, as the people I discussed with have described the feeling of mirroring the stagnation experienced by the people they support. This shared temporality complicates the binary between "helper" and "helped" (Brun and Horst 2023). As such, understanding refugee support requires attention not only to the temporal experiences of displaced people but also to those who mediate, and often internalize the same pressures.

1.6 Scales and temporal disjunctures

In this section, I discuss the significance of various *scales* in understanding temporality. At an individual level, the research delves into the subjective experiences of the actors involved, as well as the space pertaining to the refugee center and the university classroom as two distinct yet overlapping sites of intervention and exchange, involved in constructing a sense of a

"relational and contextual locality" rather than a "scalar and spatial one" (Appadurai 2013). This suggests that they are not merely geographical spaces, but "structures of feeling" (Williams and Orrom 1954), implying that transient populations – both recipients and providers – have their lives characterized by mobility, and become engaged in creating a meaningful and emotional connection to a place, even as traditional social formations disintegrate due to today's globalization processes (Appadurai 2013).

In both the Brussels day center and the OLIve classroom, the idea of *locality* emerges not as a fixed geographical anchor but as a relational and affective space. , My findings suggest that attachment to place in these settings is not about rootedness in a fixed location, but about the creation of temporary yet significant forms of belonging within transitory and often precarious environments. As one humanitarian worker in charge of meal distribution noted: "When I come back after missing for a few days, the beneficiaries salute me with a smile".[14] An OLIve alumn similarly reflected on this fluid belonging: "We built strong relationships. The experience made me feel like I had a place in the world again".[15]

These spaces are able simultaneously to generate their own micro-temporalities in the daily rhythms of distributing aid, the weekly pacing of classes, and the cyclical nature of enrolment and departure. Thus, the temporal layering shapes how people inhabit these spaces, not just physically, but also socially and emotionally.

Humanitarian governance is increasingly shaped by an *event-driven temporality* requiring constant recalibration, as humanitarian workers often experience time as a sustained loop. Drawing on insights from peacebuilding literature (Christie and Algar-Faria 2020), we see that "policy time" (the temporal logic that governs measurable interventions) clashes with the lived

[14] Interview with humanitarian worker, July 2nd, 2024.
[15] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 29th, 2025.

temporalities of both displaced people and those who support them. This tension is amplified by the increase in "protracted" refugee situations, with average durations extending over many years (UNHCR 2020). Although it may seem contradictory, what is imagined as an exceptional disruption becomes stretched out and institutionalized, the crisis being thus experienced as a chronic emergency. This raises questions about how time is experienced and managed in aid settings, especially in spaces framed as emergency interventions but functioning in practice as long-term infrastructures, which will be explored through empirical material in the following chapters. Conversely, the classroom in programs like OLIve foregrounds slower temporalities that make learning, self-expression and planning possible. As one experienced tutor in social sciences expressed, the classroom offers "particular time frame where one could offer something meaningful".[16] This slower pace is still, as another tutor would explain, marked by the urgency of language acquisition and survival in an unfamiliar society, explaining that people can't always afford to focus on learning when they're in survival mode and everything outside the classroom pushes for urgency.[17] The testimonies I gathered shall further reveal in the next chapters how the classroom functions as a site of partial temporal reprieve, an experimental space of hope, while still remaining haunted by broader structures of uncertainty.

At a medium level, refugee support is entangled with national histories and institutional configurations shaped by the structures and systems that create opportunities and constraints for human mobility (Czaika and De Haas 2014) in the context of today's globalized world as well as by temporal regimes that "unevenly structure the circulation of discourses, experiences, and resources" (Bjork and Buhre 2021). These aforementioned structures create uneven temporal landscapes – fast asylum procedures for some, interminable waiting for others, temporary permits that renew hope or reintroduce even more instability,[18] while shifting legal

[16] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 25th, 2025.
[17] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 29th, 2025.
[18] Interview with activist, April 22nd, 2025.

policies and educational access shape what is possible, for whom, and on what timeline, forcing people into the waiting rooms of history (Chakrabarty 2009).

In this context, transnational professionals, described by Harrington and Seabrooke (2020) as agents that embody the specialized roles and distributed agency required to operate within and shape the dual systems of national and transnational economies, which they both inhabit and construct, become *temporal mediators* at the medium scale. These professionals demonstrate high mobility by means of operating across borders in a way that often challenges the authority of nation-states, possessing abstract knowledge (Sending 2017, 68) that allows them to conceptualize and act within transnational spaces with a view to negotiating the tensions between neoliberal constraints and the epistemological frameworks of their work, thus leveraging their transforming potential by using their positions to increase their autonomy and establish the metrics by which future activities will be evaluated (Harrington and Seabrooke 2020). As such, they know how to negotiate between the fast time of funders, the slow time of bureaucratic processes, the suspended time of asylum seekers, and the aspirational time of transformative education.

To understand how the temporal regimes discussed in this chapter are lived and at times contested by those working within refugee support, I now turn to ethnographic observations and interviews with aid workers across a range of institutional contexts that illustrate the lived tensions between humanitarian urgency and humanistic aspirations. Rather than presenting a unified ethnography, the next chapter draws on multiple accounts that offer a window into how temporal contradictions are absorbed at the level of practice.

CHAPTER 2: HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT AND THE RHYTHMS OF PERPETUAL EMERGENCY LOGICS

2.1 The day center as a temporal and social space

It was supposed to be summer, but Brussels didn't seem to care. A storm had settled over the city, the rain felt violent, dropping with relentless force, flooding the streets and washing away everyone's last attempts to anchor themselves in any kind of comfort or safety. It was one of those days when everything felt heavier than usual. A family of five came into the refugee center – two parents and their three daughters. The youngest was a baby, while the two older girls were both under the age of ten. They didn't have a place to stay for the night and finding spots in a proper shelter required being already on a waiting list. One of the aid workers went over to speak to them, trying to offer moral support, since there wasn't much else he could promise them at that moment. Even after making it to the waiting list, the probability of finding shelter was mild at best. The day center was only meant to be the first point of contact - a place to wait, not a place to stay.

I approached the family with hesitation as I didn't want to force my presence upon them. I had been helping around with food distribution and trash collection, moving around the canteen that was offering dedicated spots for families and women. That's when one of the girls, the eldest one, came close to me. She stood at a short distance at first while looking at me with wide curious eyes. She was dancing the entire time, as if she was following some music only she could hear, wearing colorful clothes that seemed to radiate their own small defiance, and a necklace made of colorful knotted strings and bits of wool. I told her that she looked beautiful and that I loved her necklace, I couldn't help but offer my kindness in that moment.

The effect was immediate. She stopped dancing, looked straight at me, and without hesitation began taking the necklace off. Before I could react, she held it out to me with both hands, telling me she made it herself. I froze. Everything inside me screamed to refuse, to make her keep it. I stumbled through broken fragments of every language I could speak, trying to explain that I hadn't meant to ask for it. But it didn't seem to matter to her.

The family had no luggage with them, all of their possessions were either strapped onto the baby's stroller or worn on their bodies – the bare minimum for survival, no extra toys, not many belongings. I felt like I was stripping her of something important, something she had chosen to bring with her wherever they might travel, maybe it reminded her of home, maybe it reminded her of herself before everything changed, I couldn't know. have never been good at accepting gifts, even in ordinary situations, but I also knew I couldn't say no in that moment. I told myself, I convinced myself that by accepting it I was allowing her to be the one that gives instead of the one who receives even as everything else was being taken away, that somehow it served a larger purpose in preserving a thread of dignity.

The blue token woven from scraps of string and wool now hangs above my desk, pinned to the cork board. I carried it with me for almost a year and now it's there as I'm writing these words. Looking back, whenever I glanced at it, my first thought was never linked to some academic purpose. There was always something underneath, something deeper and heavier that I couldn't quite name, a feeling more than a thought – it was hope.

Each weekday morning thousands of smartly dressed, highly qualified commuters disembark from Brussel's North Train Station, coming from the city's outskirts, and heading towards jobs in tall glass-plated buildings that make up the city's financial district. But if one was to walk just a couple of blocks further away, one would find a number of people who had not slept comfortably at all and another group of people working hard to make sure their day starts off on a more uplifting note with some hot drinks and a meal. The people receiving breakfast had spent the night in the Park Maximillien, but they are not simply without a home, they are mostly young men who had traveled thousands of miles, mostly from Africa and the Middle East. In 2015, a group of asylum seekers set up tents across the street from Belgium's Foreigner's Office, strategically placing themselves to increase their chances of applying for asylum.

This event drew the attention of local citizens who started to hand out soup and clothes. Over time, doctors and social workers joined in, leading to the formation of an organized aid platform

while partnerships were established with different stores around the city to support the cause. Some undocumented migrants, determined to reach the United Kingdom, would only be there in transition, resorting to dangerous plans, and risking their lives in the process. During my research, I was told about a young boy who had been planning to hide inside a box in order to be shipped there. I couldn't tell if it was true or simply a rumor but the image stayed with me, his small body trapped in that dark space, invisible, hoping that a path forward could be carved out through containment. Others, having already traveled extensively, faced a sense of timelessness, of being left behind and forgotten – while people rarely disclosed to me the reasons for their departure, I quickly learned that many of the displaced people were highly educated – engineers, professors, doctors, people with academic background.[19]

Despite the relocation of the Foreigner's Office, the volunteers who initiated the project remained committed to the cause. By 2017, they observed an increased tendency among the local police to display aggression towards migrants in the park. This prompted a project encouraging Belgian families to host migrants, especially during winter. However, due to overwhelming demand, a shelter was opened in December same year, entirely operated by volunteers, with the assistance of international organizations. Initially approved only for the cold months, the shelter was reopened in the summer of 2018 at a new location, accommodating around 300 people.

Initially organized solely by international organizations, the center became shaped by both national and EU-level funding mechanisms. Now fully set up, it offers various services, such as providing meals and hot beverages as well as a space for social interaction, shower facilities, clothing donations, language learning, legal advice, medical care, and psychosocial support (Serve the City Brussels, n.d.). relying on permanent aid workers, along with volunteers, many

[19] Interview with humanitarian worker, July 3rd, 2024.

of whom have a background of displacement themselves. Thus, what was initially conceived of as a temporary solution, quickly turned into an urbanized space, separating its beneficiaries from the gentrified neighborhoods surrounding it (Vandevoordt and Fleischmann 2021).

The refugee center brings together people from vastly different walks of life, a true "global neighborhood" (Appadurai 2013) of nationalities, legal statuses, and personal histories. Some were citizens of the host country, others were migrants or former asylum seekers themselves. A few had once been beneficiaries of the center and later returned as staff after receiving work permits. For some beneficiaries, the presence of staff who had once been in their position offered a sense of hope. Some volunteered informally while waiting for their own asylum decisions. Educational backgrounds varied just as widely. Others had university degrees in social, psychology, or international relations. Others had no formal training but brought lived experience and linguistic skills that proved invaluable. Although there was formal management in place, the internal structure often operated with minimal hierarchy. Team leaders rotated, while responsibilities would occasionally emerge through observation and mutual adjustment. The daily rhythms felt both structured and improvised. The center itself offered no shelter, there were no beds, no overnight stays. Instead, people had to sign up on a separate list, often with no guarantee of placement. Yet during the day, it was a vital component in the lives of many. People came to rest, charge their phones, sit somewhere warm. The space was modest but full of light, an old car showroom I had been told. The walls were decorated with art and posters curling at the edges in several languages, bringing color to the concrete pillars. The air inside often carried the smell of food and disinfectant, mingling with the faint scent of damp clothes.

Each day during the time I spent volunteering, around 400 people passed through the doors to receive two meals, usually a warm dish prepared in one of the community kitchens, supplemented by less perishable items distributed under EU food aid programs. The community kitchens, run by volunteers and by grassroots collectives, prepared the food early in the morning

at a different location, so it would be delivered on time to the center, where it met the long lines already forming outside. During the meal distribution, which was generally perceived as the "rush hour, where efficiency was the name of the game"[20], each moment would be packed with movement. Everyone was focused and yet one could sense a kind of practiced routine installing over, sometimes a necessary numbing.

People would come to the center more often on sunny days because it would have been more complicated to move from their improvised shelters around the city when it was raining outside. In the canteen, the space was divided subtly by using scotch tape as handwritten signs on the tables, and corners designated for women and families, to offer a sense of privacy. Many ate quickly, their backpacks still strapped to their shoulders, as if ready to move at any moment, holding to their belongings in movements marked by "existential precarity" (Ramsay 2020). Some would often try to return to the food queue for a second helping. At the end of the meal, everyone was expected to separate their waste into recycling bins. While this might seem like a routine task, it occasionally became a moment of friction. Volunteers or staff members would step in to correct sorting mistakes, sometimes repeating instructions kindly. Some beneficiaries would step in to assist, but for some who were unfamiliar with local recycling norms, the process was overwhelming. What could have seemed like a natural task to many, sometimes became almost bureaucratic in its imposition. Meanwhile, many kept a close eye on their belongings, hypervigilant to theft.

After the food was distributed, the day center became a holding space, some people would gather in small circles to talk, socialize, or play ping-pong and other sports. Others would sit silently in thought, tracing futures on napkins and in the subtext of their silences. There was a separate corner for women, and a modest play area for children with books in different

[20] Interview with humanitarian volunteer, March 13th, 2025.

languages that allowed them a bit more freedom. In these in-between hours, as hot drinks were constantly being offered and people queued again, some chatting, some being quiet, the atmosphere was calm. It is not necessarily that time was socially devalued in every instance, but rather that these moments emerged because people had nowhere else to be. Among the many tasks and pressures, some aid workers would find the time to play along, read stories, make coffee, constantly trying to find new ways to stay engaged. One worker would dedicatedly take care of plants like clockwork, believing that making a routine out of cultivating them long-term would improve the mental health of everyone. Such "ordinary affects" (Malkki 2015, 55) would accumulate meaning in repetition, as the center was always in motion, like a machine running on conveyor belts, with no space for stillness, offering a rhythm that would only be disrupted by "extraordinary" (Malkki 2015, 55) moments erupting unpredictably – a fight breaking out or a spike of intensity breaking the slow-burn exhaustion of daily work.

I've encountered moments when the unpredictability of supply of services[21] would drive refugees to become impatient, physically agitated, or even somewhat rude, not out of hostility but as a response to an overwhelming environment. The long queues stretching outside the center, the food that would sometimes arrive late, the cramped thick air of frustration marking so many interactions, they would all be a symptom of prolonged exhaustion. It was in these imperfections that humanity became the most visible, as well as the fragility of the infrastructures holding daily life together. Such encounters expose the limits of adapting procedures to suit the emotional rhythms and urgent needs of a space that could never be fully standardized, as "professional practices never perfectly fit the institutional mandates and structures that produce them. They are negotiated in real-time in the messy, often chaotic realities of specific circumstances usually only partially understood" (Malkki 2015, 37).

[21] Interview with humanitarian volunteer, March 13th, 2025.

Thus, the question became: *how do you help people who have nothing but time? And more than that, how do you bear witness to the stillness without becoming complicit in the stagnation?*

While this chapter is grounded in observations from this site, the themes of liminality and emotional labor resonate across the wider set of interviews I conducted with humanitarian workers in other settings.

2.2 Temporal disjuncture: between urgency and lived suspension

> *On the information desk stood a digital clock always displaying the exact date and time, in full view for those spending their days in the center, who might glance at it as they passed between different activities. But then, an apparently insignificant moment interrupted this seamless choreography. As I approached the desk, I noticed that the clock had been covered because someone had unintentionally placed a file in front of it, obscuring the display. I thought little of it, but then one of the men seated nearby noticed it as well. He got up from his seat with an uptight demeanor, determined, crossing the room to alert the staff. He was short in stature, but there was urgency and indignation in his gesture. I didn't understand at first why it mattered so much to him that he looked at the clock since he didn't seem to have any appointments. The aid worker quickly apologized and cleared the file as the man just as quickly returned to his peers. She turned to me and explained that it wasn't a singular incident, that most people become uneasy if they didn't have access to the clock and asked for it to always be visible. It seemed like a form of resistance against being reduced to passivity. The clock was perceived as a sort of compass, a way to orient oneself in an otherwise unstructured present, it offered a sense of direction in a space that left little room for temporal autonomy.*

Time in the center was not neutral; it moved differently depending on one's position. Humanitarian workers leaned on structure not only to maintain the flow of operations but also to make their work emotionally and practically sustainable. I could sense the existence of a set rhythm to their helping activities, regardless of whether it involved arranging appointments or supporting someone with their administrative documentation..

On the one hand, a kind of temporal disorientation seemed to rule the experience of the beneficiaries. For the refugees seeking services, time was often stalled: waiting, hoping, being told to come back the next day to have their demands met. When I asked what could be done to interrupt the collective suspension in time, where the capacity to plan or anticipate, to establish routines was profoundly disrupted, one volunteer quickly replied "nothing". I sensed a paradoxical condition in his words: the simultaneous expectation that nothing would change and the persistent uncertainty about what the next day might bring. For many, "waiting had become the temporality of displacement", amounting "to an act of resilience rather than patience" (Al-Khalili 2024), an embodied form of endurance. As Ramsay (2020, 401) also noticed, it is "not to say that people in situations of displacement occupy one distinct temporality", but that "these temporalities stem from the effects of dispossessive forces" which pushed them into "zones of political containment in which time is slowed, unmeasured, unproductive". A staff member from the day center reflected on this: "Maybe for me four months is not the long-term solution, but for them it can be. For people who used to live on the streets.[22] Some people "you would see every day for months, even for years. It feels like that person's life has stopped, time is frozen for,[23] another aid worker told me. Additionally, it was explained to me that in certain regions of Belgium, completing a set of community service hours was a mandatory step for obtaining a particular residency status, a way of "repaying the hospitality offered by the state" (Giudici 2021), which made the work of some volunteers not just an act of solidarity, but a necessary part of their struggle for stability. Despite the visible exhaustion, many told me they were happy to do it because it provided a kind of structure as a replacement for the waiting in the day center, a vision of more structured times.

[22] Interview with humanitarian worker, November 26th, 2024.
[23] Interview with humanitarian worker, November 26th, 2024.

For staff and volunteers, time was scheduled, oriented around tasks and triage, and governed by urgency. The system kept changing constantly: "you would leave for a few days, and you come back a completely different person"[24], workers used to say. This would often translate into ever-evolving rules on the job rotations and responsibilities. Furthermore, functioning within the day center required a different kind of temporal labor prompted by the institutional logic that demands a narrative framework to justify their action. Aid workers would operate under a narrative of emergency even in moments of routine, something that would allow them to maintain a sense of purpose in a setting where change was slow, often imperceptible. This narrative acted as a foundation for a collective imaginary of competence and resilience: "we love working under pressure because we know we can sustain it".[25] They often described their motivation in terms of "being on the front line". Through this vocabulary drawn from the language of conflict, they would constantly position themselves in a perpetual state of alert. In contrast, displaced people would articulate images of stability. One aid worker recalled a young man who, despite years of displacement, spoke with excitement about becoming an architect: "he stood there smiling, talking about his future… it's amazing and heartbreaking at the same time". Such expressions of hope were not naïve, but strategies for living in prolonged uncertainty. As Malkki (2015, 13) notes, "the practice of emergency relief often involves risks and those risks inevitably engender imaginative scenarios". These imaginaries would not be confined to the future, as Vandevoordt and Fleischmann (2021) suggest, "imaginations of the present and the future conflate in the temporal horizons of collective forms of action". People would embrace roles that both enabled action (in what could be seen as repetitive and draining tasks) and concealed its limits (in the narratives of impact that made the present more bearable).

[24] Fieldnotes, July 2024.
[25] Interview with humanitarian worker, July 3rd 2024.

The day center thus became a site of temporal negotiation, one in which aid workers had to imagine emergencies to remain mobilized, while displaced people had to imagine stability to endure the wait. It revealed the contrast between the urgency of what was "socially immediate" (Ramsay 2020) and the hopes of what was "socially imagined" (Ramsay 2020). Though not always grand or transformative, hope persisted in small quiet forms: a stable place to sleep, a moment of peace.

Another layer that transpired from the interviews is related to the bureaucratic timelines and budget decisions, often made at a distance from the rhythms of everyday work. Aid workers expressed a wish to be more involved in the process, as they were aware of the specific needs in the place. They would often criticize the project-based logic that led to "temporal hierarchies" in which the time of the funding bodies dominated over the time of local actors (Verlin 2021).

The practical wisdom to go beyond the procedural logic and imagine *phronetic* (Bear 2016) situational responses", was exercised at the end of each day, as the team would gather for a debrief. Not only would the workers review logistics, but they would also reflect on the tensions experienced throughout the day, as well as on their emotional experiences. These debriefs functioned as a kind of collective processing space, where the affective weight of the work could be shared. It also created space for *phronetic* judgment in the sense that their reflections went beyond protocol and contributed to building a collective contextual responsive knowledge, one driven by attentiveness to the moment and to each other. Practical wisdom, then, became a way of holding space for care within a system that often prioritized efficiency over empathy.

Yet, despite this ability to "navigate the intersection of global policies and local cultural practices", exercising what Seabrooke (2014) has defined as "epistemic arbitrage", in reframing knowledge to better suit the realities they face on the ground, frontline workers often felt

excluded from the decision-making process.[26] This would limit their ability to advocate for solutions that addressed the root causes of the situation. As such, many felt stuck in a reactive time, one that could offer temporary relief, but also reproduced a kind of suspension, where resolution remained always just out of reach, limiting strategic reflection.

It was in these everyday negotiations that conflicting *timescapes* overlapped: the constructed emergency of the humanitarians, the extended present of the displaced, the bureaucratic timelines of the organization, all intersecting depending on each person's personal specific situation and status. In the following section, I expand on these dynamics by drawing not only on this field site, but also on conversations with aid workers in other settings, to show how these affective infrastructures are sustained across humanitarian contexts.

2.3 Emotional infrastructures of care and the social permeability of time

> *I turned to say goodbye to one of the refugees and instinctively said "au revoir", the casual French phrase that implies a return, a promise of another meeting. Immediately, the words felt strangely out of place, and I felt guilt. What was I implying? I didn't want that person to feel like I was assuming that they would come back, that things would stay the same, that they would need help again. It wasn't an open-ended goodbye, like I would offer to a friend I might see again soon, in this context it implied something permanent to it.*
>
> *Just as I was feeling the weight of it, he responded to me "à la prochaine" ("see you next time"). The words felt even heavier, it was a subconscious acknowledgment of routine, of inevitability. They were almost indifferent to the reality of daily life, one in which the situation didn't change, and one couldn't escape it.*

At its core, humanitarian labor is deeply emotional, as aid workers are expected to embody a particular kind of resilience. As Pozniak (2020, 56) puts it, this involves "adjusting the habitus

[26] Interview with humanitarian worker, November 26th, 2024.

of the self-manageable, compassionate professional fabricated within the discourse of contemporary aid industry". Yet beneath this professionalized exterior lie multiple challenges. Aid workers must navigate not only the suffering of other people, but also their own emotional responses, which are often shaped by factors beyond their control: "in forming or maintaining social connections, cultural differences, security restrictions or even stigma" (Stevens, Sharma, and Skeoch 2022). In highlighting these concerns, I argue for a nuanced understanding of humanitarian labor as a type of affective endurance shaped by everyday acts of hope.

To survive emotionally within systems that would ask them to set boundaries in the face of repetitive inconsistencies, aid workers would constantly need to negotiate their emotional involvement, trying to "balance distance and proximity" (Malkki 2015, 56). In such conditions, continuing to care required, in their view, more than emotional resilience, but a deep, ongoing commitment to seeing people as more than the circumstances that brought them through the door.

To many of the people that I discussed with, their involvement would not be a mere gesture of goodwill. As a highly educated energetic woman in her 20s mentioned: "We all have a sense of not just urgency but responsibility". Among the aid workers, many had a profound, personal connection to the cause, others were displaced themselves or would volunteer in the center while awaiting recognition of their legal status. The feeling of being needed[27] and the personal lived experiences of the workers played a significant role in shaping their motivations, with displaced people being more likely to see their work as a form of self-empowerment that challenged the traditional subject-object dichotomy in which they are typically seen as passive recipients of aid. "I used to be more motivated as a volunteer than I am now when I am being paid",[28] one frontline worker who had previously been deployed in the Balkan region noted.

[27] Interview with humanitarian worker, November 20th, 2024.
[28] Interview with humanitarian worker, November 26th, 2024.

This dynamic was also observed by Sending (2017, 71), who described similar dynamics in his study of refugee engagement in humanitarian contexts.

Despite this, such passion would often be challenged, as the emotional toll of sustaining hope while being constantly close to people's suffering would eventually catch up with everyone. “We are very close to the problems of the world. We have got information people don’t get from the media. Yet people expect us to be almost superhuman, always perfect, never taking a break, and constantly sacrificing ourselves for the cause”[29], a young aid worker confessed.

From the beginning, as I was volunteering, a woman warned me: “You should take care of yourself. Don’t come here every day. This place is going to exhaust you”. I instinctively thought of the metaphor of airplane oxygen masks - you must help yourself first, before you can help others. And I could tell they were speaking from experience. Learning how to stay without becoming undone was the first unspoken lesson they were trying to teach me. During one of my interviews, a humanitarian responsible for fundraising explained to me that they generally have little expectations for volunteers, as they lacked the institutional incentives that might push employees to “break personal records” or overextend themselves for recognition.[30] However, when I was placed under the supervision of a fellow volunteer in the day center, an imposingly tall man from South Sudan, he told me from the beginning with a seriousness I couldn’t ignore: “We need strong people here”. Simply by walking through the door, he suggested I signed an unwritten contract, a commitment not just to show up, but to endure and to hold a certain kind of emotional line.

For this reason, burnout was a constant and palpable presence in the day center weighing down on the workers in ways that were both visible and silently accumulated in small gestures:

[29] Interview with humanitarian worker, December 13th, 2024.
[30] Interview with humanitarian worker, December 13th, 2024.

delayed smiles, heavy sighs, tired laughs. At first glance, one might link their exhaustion to the way the center was managed, the impossibility of meeting endless needs with limited resources, of being caught in a structure that demanded more than it could reciprocate. As one frontline worker noted: “the crisis feels continuous, it feels like nothing will ever change. People were experiencing the same difficulties and then I realized there's nothing wrong with me, it's the place”.[31] One cultural mediator confessed to me, after one beneficiary threatened him with a knife for not being able to offer some services, that “we had some colleagues who arrived in the environment and realized they were not ready for it“.[32] Often in moments of heightened tension between beneficiaries, aid workers would invoke religion as a calming force, using common cultural references to restore a sense of order.[33] Such practices were not just about faith, but an attempt at emotional regulation (Holman, Martinez-Iñigo, and Totterdell). Despite the difficulty in offering the right kind of support that could manage the volatility of the space, one worker confessed: “I can talk to them but in the end I am not a psychologist, I cannot give them the right tools”.[34] And yet, despite these strategies, people worked together to sustain emotional investment, reflecting the essential yet and unsustainable task that Slim (2002) described as the moral imperative to remain hopeful. Some cited the *community*[35] they found in the center as a source of motivation, while others described the work as an *adventure,*[36] a way to test their limits.

Functioning, then, often required a delicate balance of boundaries, a dance between the discipline of curating what emotions could stay visible, which had to be buried, and the quiet

[31] Interview with humanitarian worker, November 26th, 2025.
[32] Interview with humanitarian worker, November 20th, 2024.
[33] Interview with humanitarian worker, November 26th, 2024.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Interview with humanitarian worker, July 3rd, 2024.
[36] Interview with humanitarian worker, December 13th, 2024.

refusal to collapse, drawing strength not from the system, but from each other. As one frontline worker in the shelter would explain:

> "When I tell my family about my day, they're so impressed about it, they don't know how I can sustain it. But you can say whatever you want, most people here choose to be, because they love working under pressure".[37]

In time, I began to sense that the roots of that fatigue were deeper, it was not just about structural failures or mismanagement, it was about time itself – the slow cumulative erosion of hope. To some, the chance to have their struggles witnessed seemed important: "I'll tell you everything. I don't care anymore". Coincidentally, or perhaps not, that person was transferred to a different facility sometime later. I followed up on their situation after a few months and they seemed lighter, more relieved about the fact that they no longer had to watch people suffer under such extreme uncertainty every day. The people they were working with at the time had stable shelter, a place to sleep at night, which made everything shift: less violence and irritability, and fewer conflicts. If things hadn't become easier, at least they were more bearable; they no longer had to witness, as they put it, "people picking rats up off the streets". Such moments accumulated would translate into a kind of "compassion fatigue" (Taithe 2019) that stemmed out of the repeated witnessing of suffering, which was not simply about being overwhelmed, but about the repetitive exposure to injustice without resolution as the situation remained unchanged. Such fatigue fueled the only thing that could be changed – "to keep myself motivated I have to change the place, to keep moving. This is my strategy, changing places, changing jobs"[38] – a restless desire to shift focus toward the next possible intervention.

Hoping structurally would therefore not be about blind optimism, but about holding space for possibility, both for oneself and for others, while navigating a form of ethical endurance as a

[37] Interview with humanitarian worker, November 26th, 2024.
[38] Ibid.

way of staying present without being consumed. As one person working in a resettlement organization would reflect:

> "It's not a cliché, I absolutely believe that either you think liberation is intertwined, or you believe in silos. If you believe in silos, you start thinking this is only happening to "those people over there". But in reality, there are no "those people." I see more and more rights being taken away and the political is coming closer and closer to your own life. Eventually, you realize this isn't separate from you, even if you're not directly affected. Even after reaching that breaking point, *hope* helps you maintain a working relationship with reality".[39]

Yet this investment came with a cost, the moral ambivalence of emotional distancing, of separating their professional roles from their personal identities:

> "I think that this sense of compartmentalization is, in my mind, a manifestation of cowardice to some level. Which I can still respect in some people, as I also recognize how rewarding it is because it's exactly what allows you to function in this system".[40]

These contradictions were very present in the day center. One quiet afternoon I was sitting with two aid workers as they shared stories from their past, comparing their personal experiences. Both were smiling, but their joviality carried something deeper underneath. They both agreed, almost laughing, that this kind of work wasn't something one could do indefinitely, and half-jokingly they set a mutual deadline for when they would resign together, as if sharing an expiration date would somehow make it easier to endure the present. The conversation reflected a feeling I encountered often – humanitarian work, many have said, once entered, had a way of trapping? people. Most mentioned how difficult it was to find a job outside the field once you entered it, either because the skills were valued in very specific ways and not easily transferable

[39] Interview with humanitarian worker, April 18th, 2025.
[40] Ibid.

(with the exception of fundraising), or because the work created an irreversible transformation in the way they saw the world and themselves, that some described as *intoxicating*.

The imagination of leaving, to them, was rather about the prospect of reclaiming emotional balance, yet *actually leaving* wouldn't just be about finding another job, it would be about redefining one's sense of self. One of the workers who had set a deadline had completed a master's degree in international relations and theoretically could have pursued other professional paths, ones perhaps less precarious or emotionally draining, and yet she kept choosing to stay. I often noticed her, always kind and attentive, almost inexhaustible in the gentleness she offered. Such commitment reflected yet another contradiction, as Ramsay (2020) argues, the inability to "make a life" reflects a deeper tension between the cultural imperative to become self-sufficient neoliberal subjects and the structural barriers that make such autonomy increasingly unattainable. This contradiction is not limited to migrants or displaced people, it extends to those who work within the humanitarian system itself, as the aid workers I met were caught between the desire to live ethically and the reality of precarious contracts, emotional exhaustion, and limited mobility outside the sector. In this way, the day center and its overlapping temporalities, became to many both a refuge and a trap, a place in which many people sought meaning, but also where they risked losing the ability to imagine other futures entirely.

CHAPTER 3: UNIVERSITY-BASED SUPPORT INITIATIVES AND THE TEMPORAL POLITICS OF EDUCATION. THE CASE OF OLIVE

Moving from the suspended time of the day center, it becomes imperative to consider not only refugee's immediate needs but also the long-term implications of their inclusion into host societies.

While humanitarian responses often focus on urgent needs, such interventions tend to overlook the enduring nature of displacement. As of early 2009, a significant number of refugees (63% of Convention refugees) were in long-term situations, indicating that displacement is not merely a temporary state. This trend can be observed in various contexts, including high-income countries, where refugees may also experience prolonged displacement due to various factors such as legal barriers, social integration challenges, or lack of access to education and employment opportunities. As such, many refugees find themselves in protracted situations, with an average length of stay in displacement exceeding ten years (Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2012).

As displacement increasingly becomes a protracted condition, education has been recognized in the literature as a critical tool for attaining this goal (UNHCR 2023), by offering an alternative to humanitarian emergency response that cultivates spaces for future-making.

In this chapter I argue that university-based initiatives like the Open Learning Initiative (OLIve) foster an *aspirational temporality*[41] by promoting investment in learning and critical thinking,[42] that resists the commodification of time and insists on care as a long-term relational initiative.[43]

[41] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 16th, 2025.
[42] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 25th, 2025.
[43] Interview with OLIve staff, April 28th, 2025.

3.1 The initiative

The *Open Learning Initiative (OLIve)* is a university-based educational program, designed to support people of refugee background in accessing higher education and rebuilding their academic and professional trajectories (UNHCR 2021). Having previously operated in Berlin and Budapest, the initiative was hosted by Central European University (CEU) in Vienna, a private, American-accredited university with a strong tradition of critical scholarship and political engagement. This institutional context shaped both the ambitions and the contradictions of the program.

According to the Director of Studies of the initiative, CEU's financial stability and academic autonomy, especially during its time in Budapest, enabled OLIve to experiment with a more expansive vision of refugee education. The program was structured around three main tracks: an academic track, a skills or customized training track, and an advocacy/activism track. Students could choose among these and personalize their learning experience to their goals and interests. This flexibility reflected a broader pedagogical commitment: to treat refugee learners not as passive recipients of aid, but as individuals with diverse aspirations.

As part of the initiative, the *OLIve University Preparatory Program (OLIve-UP)* was intensive, full-time, and designed to mirror the structure and rigor of a Master's program. It included small class sizes, stipends to allow students to study without working, and individualized academic mentoring. Two core pillars defined this track: academic English instruction (up to 15 hours per week) and subject-specific academic tutoring, often aligned with CEU's departments. The program was said to be selective: out of over 130 applicants in some years, only about 50 could

be accepted. Initially male-dominated, the program later prioritized gender balance, actively recruiting women to correct early disparities[44].

These pillars were later complemented by a third, more experimental one focused on advocacy and activism. While this third component resonated more with the *OLIve Weekend Program* (OLIve, 2020), which serves a broader demographic, including high school students and adult learners not necessarily aiming for university, the full-time preparatory program remained focused on academic progression[45] This approach challenged the rigidity of credentials and acknowledged the fragmented educational trajectories common in displacement.

Importantly, the trajectory of the OLIve initiative cannot be separated from the broader political and institutional constraints, as the Hungarian government's legislative attacks on Central European University forced it to relocate to Vienna (Redden 2018), eventually disrupting the continuity of the full-time program. Although OLIve-UP was revived from 2020 to 2023 under a different name, sustaining it proved difficult due to its high cost and reliance on external funding.[46] The discontinuation of OLIve-UP was experienced by many within the academic community as a betrayal,[47] as the program's closure was not merely a logistical decision. It was a symbolic loss, signaling the university's shifting priorities despite the very values CEU had long championed: academic freedom and social justice. It reveals how even the most ambitious initiatives can be undone by the very systems they aim to transform, and how the promise of inclusion can be quietly withdrawn, leaving behind a sense of rupture that is both institutional and deeply personal.

[44] Interview with OLIve staff, April 28th, 2025.
[45] Interview with OLIve staff, April 29th, 2025.
[46] Interview with OLIve staff, April 28th, 2025.
[47] Interview with activist, April 22nd, 2025.

To understand its full significance, I will now shift the lens from institutional breakdown to the lived experience of education as a temporal and political intervention. The next section explores how OLIve disrupted the dominant humanitarian logic by insisting on education as a long-term, transformative process. As one alumnus/a described: "The program gave me the ability to grow: as a person, as a student, and as a human being. I could see further and start to plan. Before, I really was stuck in time. and I couldn't find any way to manage my life or start something new. And now, even if I don't follow my first plan, or if I end up something else after finishing my master's, I'm okay with it. Because inside, I know I'm stronger, more stable, more secure, and more confident. And this all happened because of the program".[48]

3.2 OLIve as a social and affective space

Refugee students experience different educational needs and challenges at each stage of their migration journey. This calls for innovative pedagogical strategies that embrace trauma-informed practices, ensuring that educational environments are not only accessible but also responsive to the unique challenges faced by refugee students (Arbour, Walker, and Houston 2024). In a landscape where large organizations like UNHCR tend to focus on early education, this leaves a gap for adults who are eager to pursue higher education, yet whose aspirations are often seen as a luxury.[49] OLIve was, in contrast, sending the message that universities can and should support displaced people in meaningful ways,[50] especially those who lack immediate access to resources for pursuing higher education (Marcu 2018). This is where the principles of *andragogy* (the theory and practice of adult learning) become essential.

Unlike pedagogy, which often assumes a blank slate, andragogy starts from the premise that adult learners are self-directed and shaped by accumulated experience. They are not just

[48] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 29th, 2025.
[49] Interview with OLIve staff, April 28th, 2025.
[50] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 17th, 2025.

learning new content, they are integrating it into already complex lives (Knowles 1978). For many OLIve students, returning to education after years spent outside formal schooling meant navigating a temporal dissonance not only from youth, but from the normative student trajectory that higher education quietly assumes. Yet the challenge of moving from survival time to aspirational time was not only a student experience, it was a shared struggle, a collectively negotiated temporality. For many instructors, the experience of teaching in OLIve required a constant balancing act: between empathy and accountability, flexibility and structure, care and the risk of *infantilization*. They would often have to recalibrate expectations and stay in constant attunement to the lived realities of students. As one educator reflected, "Often, you're speaking with someone who is older than you, who has lived a full life. Now they're coming to you as a student in a weekend program, but you still need to understand their wholeness. Sometimes that's hard because we tend to confuse care with treating someone like a child. That's very condescending, I think".[51] With OLIve, there was a sense of mutual transformation, where the teacher is also learning, and the classroom becomes a shared space of reflection, echoing in most experiences: "Both of the students I taught had immense knowledge and life experience, often more than me in many respects. We were taught that the role of the teacher is more like a facilitator, someone who creates space for learning to happen in multiple directions".[52] Another facilitator reflected specifically on the multi-directional approach of the initiative:

> "For me, that's the beauty of teaching in this setting. Because it's not just that I teach, it's that I also learn a lot. Every year, every class is different. It reshapes my understanding of the same materials over and over again. I think that's what really sets it apart from more conventional approaches that are more hierarchical, more one-directional. And that's also what I hope any future initiative would carry forward: the idea that education is not just about delivering content, but creating a space for shared experience and change".[53]

[51] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 28th, 2025.
[52] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 17th, 2025.
[53] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 25th, 2025.

This approach is particularly important in the context of displaced learners, who often carry not only professional and personal experience, but also the emotional and psychological weight of forced migration. Moreover, the process often involves rebuilding identity, navigating trauma, and adapting to unfamiliar systems simultaneously (Wolsey and Karkouti 2023). With this in mind, "what made OLIve unique was that it gave people a real opportunity. It showed that their skills and knowledge weren't lost, they just needed the right space to be recognized and built upon".[54] One alumn reflected on the relational and emotional support they received during the application process: "We were so nervous... It was our first time applying to a European university, so it was a lot of pressure. [The coordinator] stayed in touch the whole time, sending messages, helping us try again, step by step".[55]

The challenge, then, was to create a space that was both serious and supportive, that respected students' realities without lowering expectations in ways that might feel patronizing. One of the most difficult and delicate tasks instructors faced was helping students move from a state of temporal suspension into one of engagement. As one instructor recalled, "One of the hardest things we as instructors had to do was precisely establishing and maintaining a framework that helped the students get out of a space of timelessness and waiting, and enter a space of planning and action. At times, it felt impossible. Highly rewarding, yes, but very hard".

One proposed solution was to build collaborative agreements at the start of each course, setting expectations together, with room for adjustment. This approach emphasized dialogue, and helped avoid the dynamic of instructors "speaking at" students. "So I think creating a way where we're not another force speaking to them and at them, but with them... that was really helpful. That's how even the quietest students started to engage", one tutor and socially engaged PhD

[54] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 17th, 2025.
[55] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 29th, 2025.

researcher noted.[56] This dynamic also shaped classroom practices, as instructors were often hesitant to assign demanding coursework, aware that many students were working, caring for family, or managing trauma. While this was done with compassion, it also raised concerns: "If we're going to treat this as a university program, or if we're preparing them for job settings, there has to be some level of accountability".[57]

Thus, the affective labor of teaching also involved navigating complex interpersonal dynamics. In some cases, students came from opposite sides of a conflict, and political discussions could become emotionally charged. Instructors had to be attuned not only to what was said, but to what remained unsaid as well, to silences shaped by trauma, cultural norms, power imbalances. One teacher described their own internal questioning when a student from Afghanistan remained quiet in class: "Is this because of what we know, or what I assume I know? Maybe it's my gaze that is very Westernized... Am I assuming she's not talking because of gendered power dynamics? Or is she just introverted?" [58] These moments required humility, and reflection. And sometimes, what helped most was simply being human. "Humor is very underrated in these moments"[59], the instructor said. In small acts of vulnerability, the classroom became a space not just of instruction, but also a space of temporal rehabilitation, where students were invited to imagine themselves not only as learners, but as future actors in a world that too often positioned them as passive recipients of decisions made elsewhere.

In this way, OLIve was not just an academic program. It was a relational space, where students and teachers negotiated care and meaning together. It required cultural humility, and pedagogical creativity. And it offered, at its best, a glimpse of what education can be when it is grounded not only in knowledge, but in mutual recognition and respect. As one educator put it,

[56] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 28th, 2025.
[57] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 28th, 2025.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.

"Meaningful change was usually connected to what happened in the classroom. That was the space where I could actually do something, achieve something".[60] Within the classroom, different temporalities overlapped: the semester pace of the university, the slow unfolding of personal confidence, the interrupted focus caused by ongoing legal insecurity. Students expressed this in subtle ways, in the hesitation to speak, the anxiety before submission deadlines, the fatigue of relearning to be students.

Outside of class, however, students often lacked the time, energy, or resources to engage with additional readings or assignments, so the classroom became the primary site of learning, where reflection happened together, in real time. The program's intensity also posed challenges. OLIve was a full-time commitment, and for participants who had already been displaced for several years (many of whom had jobs, families, or other responsibilities), joining the program was not always feasible.[61] Engaging in academic study at an older age, often in a second or third language, required OLIve students to stretch their personal time and, even when they were highly motivated and qualified, the demands of daily life made full participation difficult. In this way, the program's structure, while supportive for some, could be exclusionary for others. "That's why programs that take a holistic view, looking at the family environment, not just the individual, are important", one tutor focusing on migration studies explained.[62] When you've experienced trauma, you just want to survive. It can feel wrong to take a Saturday for yourself instead of working or helping your family",[63] one alumn explained. Parenting added another layer of complexity: "As a parent, of course, I have to cook every day, I have to clean, so I'm not free... I couldn't join the cohort of students because I'm a parent. I couldn't join evenings, drinks, bars... And I missed the time when I was able to join the cohort in that informal life".[64]

[60] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 25th, 2025.
[61] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 17th, 2025.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 16th, 2025.
[64] Ibid.

But when the program supported not just the individual but their broader context, it became easier to participate without guilt: "If the whole family is involved and supported, it's less taxing on the individual. They come into the program with a support system".[65] Thus building community was not always easy, as participants spoke about the difficulty of forming new relationships as adults, especially while navigating grief: "Meeting new people, for me it felt like betrayal of my old friends and my old life. I was isolated by my own situation, not by choice exactly, but because I built a different rhythm". This rhythm speaks to the temporal disjunctures produced by displacement, where one's previous life continues to exert emotional gravity, even as one is pushed into a new social and institutional order.

And yet, many have described OLIve as a space to connect, a community,[66] a rare instance of re-synchronization in lives often disrupted by fragmentation. One student described the program as "liberating", expressing a strong sense of solidarity and mutual care:

> "There was no power over us. We could build strong connections with other students. There was a lot in common between us. We always felt like [the staff] cared about us. We always felt love from their side, that there was a real emotional connection".[67]

In this way, OLIve became more than a classroom, but a social and affective space, where people could rebuild trust, share and feel seen. At the same time, the emotional atmosphere of the program formed its own affective timescape, in which moments of possibility were entangled with the fragility of its structure.

3.3 Beyond emergency: education as an interruption of crisis time

Within the humanitarian framework, education is frequently treated as a secondary concern, something to be addressed only after survival is secured. Yet if we acknowledge displacement

[65] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 28th, 2025.
[66] Interview with OLIve staff, April 23rd, 2025.
[67] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 29th, 2025.

as a prolonged condition, education becomes not just a service, but a temporal and political intervention. One OLIve staff member articulated this clearly:

> "We don't want to be based on *crisis*. This program should be continuous and permanent, because there are always displaced people, and they need to have this kind of service. You can't just give one course or two, or even one semester and expect someone to be ready to do whatever they want. If you want to prepare a student for higher education, you need one to one and a half years to get them ready. We have to do it this way because this is how the students can grow and see their potential."

By challenging the dominant humanitarian logic of temporariness, OLIve insists that education for displaced people must be long-term and sustained, not just focused on access to opportunity, but a gradual unfolding of capabilities. Additionally, the aim has been to challenge the boundaries of the university. In that sense, "OLIve was an extremely interesting laboratory, something based on mutuality and hope. It offered as much to the so-called 'target group' - the students, as it did to the professors".[68]

The initiative's pedagogical model reflected this mission: "A key difference in OLIve compared to other programs was that we never approached students as lacking knowledge. Instead, we emphasized building opinions. As a group, we produced various documents on inclusive pedagogy"[69]. Moreover, the program was shaped through a participatory approach,[70] thereby transforming the narrative from one of dependency to one of empowerment. As one alumn expressed: "It was different because it was my choice this time, not like before, when my education was decided by my parents".[71]

Conversely, despite this flexibility, at the heart of the OLIve-UP program there was a pragmatic goal: to equip displaced students with the academic skills to apply successfully to Master's

[68] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 25th, 2025.
[69] Interview with OLIve staff, April 29th, 2025.
[70] Interview with OLIve staff, April 28th, 2025.
[71] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 29th, 2025.

programs, as some students were "lacking that general regional knowledge makes it possible to succeed in university life".[72] This meant that despite its inclusive mission, there was still a tension between recognizing the lived experience of the participants and meeting institutional standards demanding conformity to dominant academic norms.[73]

And yet, what emerged most consistently from interviews with both students and tutors was not only a critique of these constraints, but a recurring theme of gaining *confidence*. For many participants, OLIve was the first space where they began to believe (again) in their own intellectual capacity. As one young tutor reflected: "Both of my students seemed more confident by the end. They were more willing to try new things, even in unfamiliar environments".[74] It marked a shift from being evaluated by systems that often rendered them invisible or inadequate, to participating in a space that, however imperfectly, invited them to be taken seriously. Recalling one couple in their 40s enrolled in the program, another more experienced tutor noted, reflecting on the relationship between the partners:

> "She was much more vocal throughout the semester, yet in the final feedback session, she turned to her husband and said, 'Now you should speak.' Then he stood up and gave his own reflection. That was the change".[75]

Nonetheless, for many OLIve participants, academic confidence was not enough to overcome the bureaucratic and institutional hurdles that came with incomplete or undocumented educational histories.[76]For instance, the lack of recognition of prior learning and qualifications can hinder the integration of refugees into academic environments, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and marginalization. This challenge is compounded by the fact that only 1% of refugees gain access to higher education, highlighting an urgent need for models that prioritize

[72] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 25th, 2025.
[73] Interview with OLIve staff, April 28th, 2025.
[74] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 17th, 2025.
[75] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 25th, 2025.
[76] Interview with OLIve staff, April 23rd, 2025.

adaptability in educational frameworks (Moser-Mercer, Hayba, and Goldsmith 2018). In this context, another particularly innovative feature of OLIve was its approach to recognizing prior learning, as some applicants had completed most of a Bachelor's degree but lacked formal documentation due to displacement. OLIve thus developed a policy that allowed for individualized academic assessments in collaboration with faculty, enabling students to fill in gaps and apply for graduate programs. [77]

While navigating structural barriers, many participants came to see education as more than a means to an end, but as a space of intellectual awakening. One participant, who had previously studied sociology in Damascus, explained how the program helped them develop a deeper understanding of politics:

> "When I came to Germany, I was really fascinated with the 'Welcome Refugees' movement. Now I feel like it was a kind of charity. It wasn't real or authentic. When you learn more, especially theory, you see more, you see deeper. *Reflection* was a tool I developed in OLIve. It made me feel like I had a place in this world again".[78]

Importantly, education in OLIve was not framed solely as a pathway to employment, though many participants did go on to pursue degrees and careers. For some, it was the first time they had been in a classroom since fleeing their home country. For others, it was a chance to reconnect with intellectual passions that had been interrupted by conflict:

> "What's beautiful about OLIve is that you can learn animation, theater - things that are about learning for the sake of learning. That's humanizing. After being made to feel like every resource is only for survival, it's freeing to say, 'I want to learn art for the sake of art'. Not because an NGO thinks it will make you less of a burden to the state. That shift away from survival mode is important".[79]

[77] Interview with OLIve staff, April 29th, 2025.
[78] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 29th, 2025.
[79] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 28th, 2025.

This approach recognizes education not just as a means of economic productivity, but as a shared commitment to human flourishing. What Minouche Shafik (2021) would describe as one of the most powerful tools for building more just and inclusive societies, which must be understood as a mutual obligation rather than an individual privilege. As one participant put it in an interview after sharing their frustration with the state-run integration courses where the implict message is clear: "It's not about intellectual work; it's about starting any job right away".[80] In contrast, OLIve aimed to convey that displacement does not erase *ambition*: "Even if you are a refugee, you can still wish. You may want to bring your profession from before into this new place, to adapt, to prepare, to continue".[81] The focus on education was not just about employability, but about possibility. It allowed participants to imagine futures beyond immediate survival, even if those futures remained uncertain.

On the other hand, the divide between education as a means to employment and education as an end in itself was particularly visible in course selection patterns. As one tutor observed, "Most students from Arab countries seemed to feel like they had already lived that politics, so they didn't need to take a class on it. They'd much rather take the English course or the accounting course".[82] The pragmatic orientation seems entirely understandable, thus, the challenge was to create educational environments that don't force a choice between the two, but "in a generative way that allows for real conversation" and engagement with legacies of colonialism and power.[83] Most importantly, how can education support not just economic integration, but personal affirmation and the right to desire?

In all cases, the initiative became a way of *reclaiming time*, not just in the sense of preparing for the future, but in re-establishing a sense of *continuity* between past and future. Even for

[80] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 29th, 2025.
[81] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 16th, 2025.
[82] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 28th, 2025.
[83] Ibid.

those who did not go on to pursue a Master's degree, the experience of being in a structured, intellectually rich environment was described as deeply meaningful.[84] One alumn described it as "very much like a job", providing routine even for people balancing multiple roles, such as parenting.[85] It was a way to reclaim agency and stabilize emotionally: "The program really kept my mind in a good frame. It helped me stay strong emotionally. I was responsible for something important - my studies - and that gave me something to focus on".[86]

For some, OLIve was not simply a program, but the first step in a long-term plan that had previously felt out of reach, helping students move from uncertainty to clarity: "I don't think I could have accessed higher education otherwise. I spent two years just trying to figure out how to do that, and most likely I would have given up. But once we had OLIve, we could make a plan".[87] It was about restoring a sense of self, about "the ability to relate to their experiences and look back at them, to connect your past to your future".[88] For others, it felt like a temporary experience, a "nice break", or a moment of possibility before returning to the demands of the "real world".[89]

These reflections complicate any linear narrative, because temporality is not only shaped by personal goals, but also by the intersection of personal biographies, migratory histories, and the broader socio-political dynamics, including the asylum system and funding mechanisms (Sontag 2019). As one staff member explained, students from Ukraine under the temporary protection status, for instance, faced the possibility that their right to remain in Europe could be revoked if the war was declared over, which created a sense of conditionality around their efforts. In contrast, students from other countries often had no expectation of returning. Their

[84] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 17th, 2025.
[85] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 16th, 2025.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Interview with OLIve staff, April 23rd, 2025.
[88] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 28th, 2025.
[89] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 29th, 2025.

legal status, while still precarious, could sometimes offer a more stable horizon.[90] These legal and political distinctions created different relationships to time, which reveal that the model creates a space for imagining new possibilities, but it does not resolve the underlying inequalities that make those possibilities so precarious. The next section will thus pay attention to education as a site of temporal contradiction, where the promise of empowerment is entangled with the reality of exclusion.

3.4 Temporal contradictions and precarious futures

While the OLIve initiative exemplifies a progressive approach to refugee education, it is essential to recognize that the systemic precarity surrounding such programs often undermines their potential impact. From the beginning, the program was funded through project-based grants, primarily Erasmus+ funding from the European Commission.[91] In its early years, when OLIve was fully embedded within CEU, the program had access to campus infrastructure, could pay all its teachers, and even provided small stipends to students. One student even recalled how the program's modest but thoughtful financial support allowed them to focus on parenting.[92] But as the university's priorities shifted, so did its support. Eventually, OLIve had to raise its own funds, and while it succeeded in securing them from various foundations, the university's claim that the program was closed merely due to lack of funding rings hollow among all of my interlocutors. The politics of funding became especially visible in moments of global *crisis*, when many donors were eager to support specific causes only,[93] reflecting media-driven hierarchies of refugee legitimacy. Since OLIve's departure from CEU and its transition into an independent initiative, the program has entered a new phase, marked by both impressive commitment and precarious sustainability, as some of the current work is partially volunteer-

[90] Interview with OLIve staff, April 28th, 2025.
[91] Interview with OLIve staff, April 28th, 2025.
[92] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 16th, 2025.
[93] Interview with OLIve staff, April 28th, 2025.

based and a side-job for many.[94] One of my interlocutors recognizes that the fact "that people are willing to volunteer their time just for the program to go on. It kind of speaks for its importance and uniqueness".[95] From the beginning tutors chose to become involved because they believed in the mission:

> "I felt that I shouldn't just write about these topics. I wanted to do something, support people not only through academic work or extracting knowledge from them, but by standing in solidarity and offering real support to the community".[96]

Yet this model, while inspiring, is also fragile, as it can sustain the maintenance of the initiative, but it struggles to support a long-term vision. This speaks to the urgent need for institutional memory and backing, without which the program risks becoming locked in a kind of prolonged present.

Despite these constraints, OLIve has had a meaningful impact on participants' lives. Based on an internal, unpublished evaluation report produced in 2022 I had access to, the medium-term effects of participation in OLIve are complex. The study was designed to assess the scope, goals, and local specificities of the OLIve programs, while the research team (composed primarily of OLIve tutors and coordinators) interviewed 32 students (17 male, 15 female) to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and the structural conditions shaping the program's operation. The evaluation aimed to inform internal reflections on program development and to advocate for institutional support during a critical phase in OLIve's sustainability efforts. Across interviews and follow-up conversations, alumni consistently emphasized that the program had a transformative impact on their academic trajectories, self-confidence, and sense of belonging in higher education. Many participants went on to pursue bachelor's or master's degrees, and they credited OLIve with helping them. However, the report

[94] Interview with OLIve staff, April 23rd, 2025.
[95] Interview with activist, April 22nd, 2025.
[96] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 17th, 2025.

also highlights several critical areas for improvement. The short duration of the weekend program was seen as a limitation, especially for those balancing work, family, and study. There was a strong call for psychological support, as some participants experienced panic, and feelings of competition early in the program. One of my interlocutors emphasized that by admitting that "it's important to note that the biggest precarity for students isn't always educational. It's often legal. And students are in very different situations".[97] One week, a student might plan a future research project, the next, they might not be able to show up because they had been summoned to a legal interview.

In the report, participants also expressed a desire for a broader disciplinary offering, including access to natural sciences and technical fields, not just the social sciences. I also showed that there was a clear desire for more extracurricular activities, networking opportunities with research institutions and employers, and a stronger role for alumni in shaping the program's future. Lastly, while OLIve was not explicitly designed to improve labor market access, it did so indirectly.

Still, the conditions for accessing the program are not entirely equal, but sometimes determined by a range of "soft" exclusions, as a young tutor in political sciences explains[98] While the program has always aimed to be inclusive, the reality is that participation depends on a set of unevenly distributed structural supports. For many prospective students, weekends are not free time, they are essential for earning income, caring for family, or managing other responsibilities. Without stipends, childcare, or flexible scheduling, participation becomes a privilege rather than a right.[99] Barriers are also informational, as refugees are "inundated with bureaucratic demands, more so than anyone living as a citizen in their own country".[100] Simply

[97] Interview with OLIve staff, April 28th, 2025.
[98] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 17th, 2025.
[99] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 28th, 2025.
[100] Ibid.

knowing that a program like OLIve existed was already a privilege. As not everyone was embedded in the kinds of social or informational networks where such opportunities were shared.[101]

Then there was the question of language, a recurrent theme in the interviews. While the program did not require perfect English, it did require a level of fluency sufficient to follow and participate in classes, which already filtered out many potential applicants, particularly those who had not had access to formal English education.[102] This requirement could not easily be adjusted, as it was a necessary condition, yet sometimes also a source of anxiety, as the transition from conversational fluency to formal expression was not just a technical challenge but also a source of self-doubt. The absence (and at times, the presence) of local language instruction (Hungarian or German) was debated, as the structure of the program simply couldn't accommodate the kind of immersive, sustained language learning that would have made a difference: "The academic load was heavy, and even highly motivated students struggled".[103] For some students, the absence of local language instruction was a relief: "It reminded me of the state-led integration process, which was a bad experience. It was good that they didn't bring that into the program".[104] For others, OLIve's decision to focus solely on English felt limiting in some ways.[105]

This brings us to the complicated question of what OLIve actually offered and to whom. For most people, the program created a sense of safety: "The program felt safe for a while, it was nice to have that certainty at the time",[106] as one participant who had completed a Master's

[101] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 17th, 2025.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Interview with OLIve staff, April 23rd, 2025.
[104] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 29th, 2025.
[105] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 16th, 2025.
[106] Ibid.

program and was in the process of applying to PhD positions recalled. But that same sense of safety sometimes also felt misleading:

> "For me it created an *illusion*. Now I feel angry at my naivety. Every 'failure' I experience feels bigger because I have no safe place to return to. If you fail somewhere but have a home to go back to, it's different. I don't. I didn't connect everything logically, I wasn't able to be as rational as I maybe needed to be. Even after everything, after all the effort and soon getting my diploma, I still feel a bit like I'm not enough for this adult world. One part of me feels healed because of the program. But now I see that things don't work exactly how I thought they would. And maybe that's OK".[107]

Others experienced the program as a challenge: "My instructor always pushed me to work more. She never tried to protect me in an illusionary way. We all made it so that's not an excuse".[108] And yet, another voice complicates this narrative: "To be honest, there were people who mainly used the program for financial support".[109] Whether this is a fair assessment or a reflection of frustration, it points to the sometimes conflicting ways in which OLIve was used and understood. For some, it was a stepping stone, for others a temporary safety net and perhaps, for a few, a means of survival more than a path to transformation. And still, there are signs of something more enduring:

> "When I see only former OLIve students working as teachers at OLIve, it means that they already made a living and they stand on their feet and now they are empowered to even contribute to the well-being of other displaced people".[110]

This is not just a story of individual success, it's a sign of a program that has begun to reproduce itself not through institutional permanence, but through what my interlocutors described as "horizontal solidarity".[111] Holding all of these truths, we begin to see how hope is cultivated

[107] Ibid.
[108] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 29th, 2025.
[109] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 16th, 2025.
[110] Interview with activist, April 22nd, 2025.
[111] Interview with activist, April 22nd, 2025, Interview with OLIve tutor, April 25th, 2025.

not in spite of uncertainty, but alongside it. t is to this delicate reconciliation between aspiration and instability, that the next section turns.

3.5 Reconciling hope with uncertainty

"You cannot be in this work without changing"[112] was a feeling repeated often by those I spoke to. Working closely with people's stories, "it teaches you *patience*, empathy, and also sometimes frustration",[113] one educator said. And yet, among the many uncertainties, OLIve has cultivated something increasingly rare – a space for *reflection*. "Many people feel that having time for reflection - stepping back, looking at things in a broader context - is becoming increasingly difficult".[114] Yet the OLIve initiative, through its very structure, disrupts some of these difficulties. Someone described it as a response to the failures of more conventional humanitarian models, a tutor who had been previously active in an aid initiative in Jordan: "Through my experience, I saw how the traditional model of humanitarian aid often fails those who are the most vulnerable. It doesn't take a long-term, holistic approach to refugees. That made me really interested in seeing what more grassroots models of support could look like".[115] This desire to move away from emergency toward something more relational is precisely what OLIve aspires to enact.

In this context, "initiatives like OLIve are important, even if they're small in scale compared to state structures, as they are trying to imagine something different, to break that cycle, or at least create a space within it, where displaced people aren't just treated as temporary subjects. Where their futures are considered, their ambitions are nurtured, where there's a longer horizon beyond survival".[116] While the initiative does not offer an escape from uncertainty, it definitely makes

[112] Interview with OLIve staff, April 23rd, 2025.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 25th, 2025.
[115] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 28th, 2025.
[116] Interview with activist, April 22nd, 2025.

space within it. Unlike the time of emergency aid, it opens up what might be called a "pause" – not in the sense of liminality, but in the sense of creating a space where displaced people may begin to imagine futures, while educators experiment with pedagogies that center reflection rather than remediation.

This experimentation and constant reinvention, also places a burden on those tasked with carrying the program forward, while the provisionality sometimes inflicts the teaching: "I wish we had a manual", one experienced tutor explained, "something to remember the experience after time passes".[117] However, according to my findings, creating a coherent rhythm in the classroom would require more than a well-planned syllabus. It would involve attending to emotional readiness, linguistic confidence, and the uneven ways students engaged with time itself. This sense of impermanence reflects a tension between ethical responsiveness and the need for structure, as OLIve itself inhabits a precarious institutional timescape: "Institutions are made for repetition, for predictability. But something like OLIve thrives on the unpredictable. And that's beautiful, but also fragile".[118] And yet, within this very precarity, a kind of narrative repair still emerges. As one alumn confessed:

> "Everything that happened before Budapest felt like it wasn't my *decision*, like things just happened to me, like incidents or accidents. But then I started to believe that sociology, and everything that came with it, was about me and my own choice. Even if, to some extent, it had been imposed on me. I just wanted to bring my agency back".[119]

What is being described here is not only a shift in circumstance but a reordering of temporality, from reactive to intentional. This possibility exists indeed alongside politics of concealment. As the participant confessed, "I know that my refugee background isn't my whole identity, it's just a small part of who I am. But I sometimes feel like I have to hide it, protect myself, and

[117] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 25th, 2025.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 16th, 2025.

protect others from their assumptions".[120] However, this concealment is not merely avoidance, but a way to resist the demand for legibility within social regimes that often reduce people to their trauma narratives. Through the experience they described, the participant asserts their control over the terms and the *pace* of their self-closure.

Thus, if crisis time is characterized by the compression of possibility into immediate need, then the time of OLIve is marked by openness. This openness is uneven and precarious, but it is real. It manifests in moments where people are allowed, and even encouraged to experiment, to step outside scripts.

This time is hard to hold on to. One participant described OLIve as "an imaginary place. It's not real".[121] Perhaps its affective and deeply human nature also makes it feel ephemeral, even fragile. But OLIve's fragility is not the opposite of strength, it's the condition for its ethical force. It produced real change not despite, but because of its refusal to surrender to standardization, to placing categories over people, or what immediately serves reputational economy over what is relational among them. And yet, this imaginary space was also entangled with "contradictions, despair, frustration, guilt, questioning about what it means to be a teacher", as one experienced instructor recalled. "It mattered that we were not humanitarian workers but teachers and, in most cases, students", as many tutors were PhD students, teaching to build experience, supplement income, or fill a temporal gap between funding cycles. Their involvement was temporary, situated between precarity and aspiration. This created a layered temporality within the program itself. While OLIve offered participants a rare temporal reprieve from suspension, for many instructors, it was also embedded in the unstable timelines of academic life: "OLIve was not real for us either". This shared unreality had been the very medium through which reflection on what solidarity can mean across profound asymmetries of

[120] Ibid.
[121] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 29th, 2025.

experience would emerge. At long last, while the initiative may not last in the form people would have imagined it to be,[122] it will continue to last in the transformations and quiet solidarities it produced, that made time for a future worth imagining. As one tutor involved in the initiative long-term eloquently expressed: “OLIve is hope”.[123]

[122] Interview with OLIve staff, April 23rd, 2025.
[123] Interview with OLIve tutor, April 25th, 2025.

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to explore how time becomes a terrain of struggle in refugee support work, focusing on how people supporting displaced populations navigate the fracture between hope and uncertainty. Through a comparative ethnographic lens, I have examined how emergency relief efforts and university-based educational programs like OLIve produce distinct timescapes shaped by competing temporal logics that structure both institutional interventions and individual lives.

Drawing on participant observation, interviews, and personal reflections from my time volunteering in a refugee center in Brussels, I have traced how displaced people and those who support them negotiate competing timescapes: the urgency of survival and the slow labor of aspiration. In humanitarian settings, time is often compressed into a perpetual present, marked by waiting, uncertainty, and the logic of crisis. Here, temporality becomes a condition of suspension, where futures are deferred and agency is constrained. In contrast, the OLIve program offers a different temporal horizon, one that allows for investment, growth, and the articulation of hope. It is a space where displaced people are not only supported but empowered to become students, thinkers, and public actors.

My own position shaped the ways in which I could access, interpret, and feel these temporal experiences. As someone who volunteered in these spaces, not just observing but responding, I was implicated in the very structures I was analyzing. I was not outside of crisis time, nor immune to the exhaustion or ambivalence it generates. At the same time, I was not experiencing displacement, nor the structural vulnerability that defines it. This dual positioning sharpened my awareness of the unevenness of temporalities and the relational dynamics they produce.

As the final step in my analysis, I find that terminology becomes important in creating different temporal regimes, in the sense that different organizations and initiatives employ distinct vocabularies, referring to displaced people as: *beneficiaries* in the day center, *clients* in resettlement agencies[124], and *students* in educational programs. This vocabulary does more than naming, it inscribes assumptions about people's autonomy. In some cases, people are framed as subjects of aid whose lives need to be sustained rather than transformed; or, when language is corporatized[125], people who are held responsible for their own immersion in the destination country.

These discursive frameworks influence the ethical orientation of interventions, and indicates distinctive logics of care: terms reinforcing a service delivery model in which displaced people are framed as recipients imply passivity or reinforce a transactional relationship. The transactional model resonates with *defamiliarization* in humanitarian discourse, which involves treating displaced people as abstract figures, in need of management, rather than social or political agents (Knudsen and Rahbek 2022). It also reinforces standard procedures aimed at sustaining life rather than transforming it (Sharty 2023). In contrast, smaller-scale or alternative interventions, such as OLIve (Open Learning Initiative) employ a vocabulary centered around empowerment and avoids universalizing legal terms and statuses: "OLIve does not use the term *integration*, it speaks about *inclusion*. Behind the idea of integration, there is an assumption that a homogeneous society exists, but that is a myth. *Inclusion* goes against this idea that you *become* a true member of society only after learning the language or developing social networks there. OLIve's mission is to propose a different idea of society".[126] One former participant also noted the distinction between their forced integration process upon arriving in Germany and the experience of inclusion they encountered through OLIve as being more than just semantic, the

[124] Interview with humanitarian worker, April 18th, 2025.
[125] Interview with activist, April 22nd, 2025.
[126] Ibid.

state-led process implied the need to assimilate into something preexisting, whereas OLIve provided an alternative model for co-creating belonging:

> "In Germany they had this attitude that they had to teach you about civilization, how to eat, how to use a knife, how to find a job in a supermarket or in a secretary's office. It was always like that, not about how you could study, or if you had studied in your country, how you could find a proper or better job. OLIve succeeded where integration failed, it made us feel safe and secure again, because of the emotions, the care, the warmth. I began to feel human again".[127]

This conceptual reorientation also involves the temporal frameworks in which refugee support is embedded. The logic of humanitarianism tends to operate under triage – in the day center I studied staff members struggled with this temporal logic, they often had to say "no" when distributing resources, balancing organizational constraints with personal ethics, yet ethical excess occurred (sharing cigarettes from their own pockets,[128] offering emotional support[129]) that resisted the impersonal logics of the system with emotional consequences that sometimes pierced through the self-protection provided by professional distance. In this context marked by what has been called a state of "permanent temporariness" (Birger 2024), in which rights are contingent and precariousness is not merely bureaucratic, but creates tensions based on differential access to resources, compartmentalization based on belonging to different legal statuses has political consequences.[130]

In contrast, while refugee support from the perspective of humanitarianism tends to promote a linear and repetitive model of time, one that produces a perpetual present in which action must be visible and scalable, initiatives like OLIve wish to interrupt this logic by attempting to resist the commodification of time and to imagine a different kind of temporality defined by what

[127] Interview with OLIve alumn, April 29th, 2025.
[128] Interview with humanitarian worker, November 26th, 2024.
[129] Interview with humanitarian worker, 2nd July 2024.
[130] Interview with activist, April 22nd, 2025.

could be called a "humanistic time" (Mazlish 2009). Despite not being immune to structural constraints shaped by the precarity of funding, and the legal limbos imposed by state and supranational timelines (Birger 2024), OLIve's purpose has been to resist the compression of crisis, by honoring agency and "emphasizing the common dynamics of the experience of displacement; it's not that the experience is the same, but these common dynamics have potential for solidarity and political action".[131]

Bearing this in mind, a key question emerging from OLIve is not only what education offers displaced people, but what kind of education institutions like universities are uniquely positioned to provide? One member of the staff emphasized that unlike organizations that focus on immediate employability or vocational training, their contribution is not to replicate job training programs but to cultivate capacities that are harder to define or measure. While they recounted familiar donor-friendly narratives of personal success (former participants who went on to work for international organizations, law firms, or launch their own NGOs), they were careful to distance themselves from a purely neoliberal success story, emphasizing that the role of such initiatives stands in the power of collective transformations, which are much more difficult to quantify: a shy underage woman who grows into being outspoken, an alumnus/a returning to volunteer with the program after pursuing other goals. As the interviewee put it, the real value might lie in the slow emergence of a [132]cohort of articulate, educated, combative alumni" who are reshaping public life from the margins.[133] This demonstrates the idea expressed in literature that "grassroots initiatives supporting migrants [can be] laboratories for experimenting with alternative socialities actively shaping and enacting visions of a more egalitarian and inclusive social order" (Vandevoordt and Fleischmann 2021). These could later

[131] Interview with activist, April 22nd, 2025.

[133] Interview with OLIve staff, April 28th, 2025.

join “efforts with initiatives in other regions or countries, in order to build [transnational] alliances (…) and bring about changes towards their desired future” (Vandevoordt and Fleischmann 2021). After all, the “key aspects of international humanitarian aid always begin somewhere local and specific, even intimate” (Malkki 2015, 3), while understanding refugee support work in this way means resisting easy abstraction when it comes to the embeddedness of global connections in local timescapes.

In this context, it becomes clear that temporality is not merely a lens through which to analyze displacement, but a site of struggle in itself, a contested field in which people claim futures, and reimagine what it means to belong. Thus, what emerges is not merely a difference in institutional function, but a deeper divergence in temporal logic. Whether in the suspended time of emergency or the unfolding time of education, the struggle over time is also a struggle over dignity, over possibility. *To reconcile hope with uncertainty* is to accept that time is not simply something we inhabit, but something we co-create. It is to claim agency not only over events, but over the structures that govern our lives, while attending to these timescapes is to see not only how people endure, but also how they remake the world, one temporal possibility at a time.

The most important lesson I have drawn, is that *hope*, in these accounts, is not naive optimism, but a form of effort. And that the most meaningful interventions may not be those that offer definitive futures, but those that create conditions where people can invest slowly, tentatively, courageously in themselves and in each other.

The findings of this thesis invite further exploration into how temporal imaginaries may shape broader forms of social and political engagement: the affective labor faced by aid workers navigating competing timescapes, how alternative educational spaces continue to shape civic life after formal support ends, and the long-term effects of participating in reflective programs like OLIve on both displaced people and educators alike.

In closing, this thesis has sought above all, not only to analyze structures of time, but to listen to those who navigate them with courage. Their stories ask us to consider not only how we manage uncertainty, but how to sit with it. And to hold space for those who continue to build futures from the margins of fractured time.

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