

# Solidarity powered via social media: Migrant solidarity grassroots groups in Hungary

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**Abstract.** Hungary experienced an intensive, albeit relatively short period from the migration crisis in 2015, as a transit, and not a destination country, but the impact of that few intensive months is much beyond its length. One of the most relevant new phenomenon facilitated by the migration crisis was the emergence of volunteer grassroots movement. Grassroots emerged from scratch without any organisational history, comprised by volunteer individuals willing to fulfill the unmet needs of asylum-seekers and refugees crossing Hungary. These individuals formed and maintained their grassroots organizations and organized their daily activity, logistic and fund raising via Facebook groups. One of the key findings is that the use of social media platforms, predominantly Facebook made the formulation and operation of volunteer grassroots groups with no organizational history of independent individuals extraordinary fast, effective and influential, at a level that has never experienced in a humanitarian crisis in Hungary before. This study focuses on how volunteers themselves perceived the role of social media during their work.

## 1 Introduction

Migrant solidarity grassroots groups as collaborative action groups emerged from scratch in some major Hungarian cities during the summer of 2015 as a response to the migration and refugee crises in a hostile political and public context. Hundreds and thousands of refugees and migrants were crossing and temporarily staying in Hungary at that time (as one section of the Western Balkan migration route towards their target countries in Western Europe) without sufficient provisions and aid reflecting to their immediate needs. State and municipality organizations as well as major NGOs and charities were not responding sufficiently to the unmet needs of migrants and refugees which became highly visible when hundreds of them started to “live” on central public spaces in downtown Budapest, mostly around major railway stations. Local



civilian individuals with no organizational ties started to provide aid to migrants and refugees, mainly only due to express solidarity and provide immediate relief. Soon these independent actors contacted on Facebook and various types of Facebook groups started to connect individuals who wanted to help in some way.

Social media platforms, predominantly Facebook in Hungary used at an intensity and with an effectiveness never witnessed before in Hungary during humanitarian activities, both by asylum seekers and helpers, played an eminent role during the crisis, and this was one of the most relevant lessons that Hungarian civil society learnt. For the volunteers Facebook was the core platform for establishing their groups, and it had a central role in sharing information, developing contacts and groups, organizing activities, and collecting and distributing donations during the entire crisis. Moreover, Facebook, through the groups' official pages, represented a way of communicating with a larger audience. For refugees and asylum seekers Facebook, Twitter and a number of new and already established user-driven mobile phone applications were extremely helpful in their course of flight: call and chat software programs and other information applications directly targeted migrants, while electronic maps and other practical applications created radically different opportunities compared to those available during previous waves of migration. In sum, without Facebook, the other social media platforms, and mobile applications the whole story and its intensity would have been completely different. On the contrary, established NGOs and large charities used social media less intensively and in a more conservative manner, which was in line with their lower activity level in the refugee crisis compared to the volunteer groups.

This paper aims to explore how social media activity influenced the civic engagement, as well as the evolution, the activity and the reputation of newborn migrant solidarity grassroots groups. The research<sup>1</sup> was carried out between September 2015 and January 2018 in three Hungarian cities (Budapest, Szeged, Debrecen), by applying mainly ethnographic and qualitative methods.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The paper is based on the broader research entitled "The social aspects of the 2015 migration crisis in Hungary" (Simonoivits-Bernát 2016). This study is based on two previous papers (Bernát, 2016 and Bernát-Kertész-Tóth, 2016). I would like to thank for Fruzsina Márta Tóth and Anna Kertész their cointribution.

<sup>2</sup> 19 semi-structured individual interviews with leaders of grassroots groups and other NGOs and charities; 37 semi-structured individual interviews with grassroots volunteers; 3 focus groups with volunteers (with 21 participants), attending several public events that dealt with the grassroots and participant observation, supplemented with general population surveys on attitudes (in October 2015 and January 2016, N=1000 each)

## 2 The social and political context of the migration crisis in Hungary

The year 2015 was a turning point in the refugee and migrant crisis, both in Europe and in Hungary. Although in recent years there had been a marked increase in the number of registered asylum-seekers in Hungary, in 2015 the highest number of refugees and migrants reached Hungary's borders since World War II. Within a year, about 390,000 people passed through the country, of which only 177,000 were registered as asylum-seekers by the authorities. The great majority of this heterogeneous migrant population did not consider Hungary to be their destination country, but only a transit country on the way to their final destinations in Western Europe (primarily Germany and Sweden), thus they left Hungary as soon as they could. Countries along the Western Balkan migration route were faced with an ever-increasing number of migrants. As they established direct contact with the local population, volunteers began providing assistance in multiple countries and cities, including Hungary. The relief work largely relied on the activities of civil volunteers and grassroots organizations that emerged rapidly and unexpectedly across the country at the beginning of the migration crisis in the early summer of 2015, especially in cities where the masses of asylum-seekers and migrants spent several days while waiting before continuing their journey to their target countries.

The evolution of the organisations that helped the migrants during this period (including grassroots and traditional aid organizations) and the role of volunteers are embedded in the national and local socio-political context. Accordingly, it is essential to provide a brief overview of the events related to the 2015 migrant crisis.

EU leaders engaged in a so-called “refugee welcoming” rhetoric, but their actual responses to events was indecisive since the beginning of the crisis. It is not only outsiders' critique but was also the opinion of some EU bodies. While most of the Western European EU states expressed their support towards migrants in general, Germany, the migrants' primary destination country, emphasized this message the strongest. The Hungarian government's strong anti-immigration rhetoric<sup>3</sup> was almost unique at that time; a message which the majority of the

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<sup>3</sup> The first milestone may have been Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's statement at the commemoration of the victims of the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris in January 2015; namely, that economic immigration should be curbed because immigrants “can only bring trouble to Europe”. The statement raised a great deal of attention both in Hungary and in Europe and was

European leaders condemned, but the majority of Hungarian society supported. The domestic anti-immigration governmental campaign has been so successful from the aspect of the government that it continued intensively via all political and public channels and medium in the following years, although the the number of asylum-seekers shrunk radically and immigration “threat was not realistic in Hungary. The general political landscape in Hungary was dominated by the anti-migrant campaign of the government but it has been embedded into a highly polarized political context. (More on the political context and impact see Hunyadi-Juhász-Zgut, 2016 and Kallius – Monterescu, – Rajaram, 2016)

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, the new civilian volunteers and their organizations emerged from an inherently anti-refugee and confidence-deficient country. More precisely, the Hungarian population in general can be described as highly xenophobic (Sik, 2016) with a low level of trust in general (Tóth, 2009; Boda & Medve-Bálint, 2012; TÁRKI, 2013) as well as low level of civilian activity (KSH 2012) and a tendency to demonstrate exclusionary behavior towards marginalised groups (e.g. various nationalities, ethnicities, religions or lifestyles). Moreover, Hungary last faced large-scale migration two decades earlier in the form of ethnic Hungarians from Transylvania (Western-Romania with a large Hungarian minority), and asylum-seekers (many of them also ethnic Hungarians) and from the war zones of Yugoslavia, and most of these refugees were ethnic Hungarians fled from a minority status. The rise in the number of migrants in the 2015 crisis, thus was unprecedented in Hungary (and also Europe) in terms of the order of magnitude, composition and processes. Although governments had information about migrants heading towards Europe, they may have underestimated their number, their effect on new migrants and on human trafficking.

Despite the low level of civilian activity, 3 percent of the Hungarian adult population participated in refugee relief work or made donations during the summer of 2015, and 7 percent claimed to have a friend or an acquaintance that participated, according to self-reported responses collected through quantitative research. At the time around 5 percent of the population could be considered xenophiles, which group could overlap significantly with those that volunteered. (Bernát-Sik-Simonovits-Szeitl, 2015)

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followed by an anti-immigration government campaign in the spring of 2015 along with a “National Consultation on Immigration” and a subsequent, country-wide billboard campaign, while political opposition was unable to answer meaningfully and effectively..

### 3 The evolution of grassroots organisations and its social media imprint

In the early summer of 2015, a number of new, volunteer-based migrant solidarity grassroots organisations emerged with the goal of providing humanitarian aid to migrants. In a surprisingly short span of time they managed to formulate a wide agenda and significantly raise public awareness and obtain influence. The role and weight of these grassroots organisations in public life was widely magnified in an already highly politicised atmosphere as their activities (which until then had been more traditionally conducted by the state or larger established civilian or ecclesiastical charity organizations) sharply contrasted with the anti-immigration message of the government. The activities of volunteering civilians were covered quite significantly in social media and in the press.

Neither state institutions nor official civilian and charity organisations provided sufficient humanitarian aid to the migrants crossing the country, so in response to the general passivity individual volunteers and new volunteer-based grassroots organisations started to emerge. Moreover, some general public services, such as some of the public transportation companies or the public sanitation services were also unprepared and less motivated to cope this challenge that made relief work even more difficult.

The number of migrants kept growing during the summer and early autumn of 2015, which also increased the scale of activities and public awareness of the grassroots organisations. Until the middle of September – when the closing of the borders was carried out through physical and legal means – aid was predominantly provided to migrants by volunteer civilians who believed that the absence of large established charity organisations during the summer was mainly politically motivated. However, established charity organisations held that the social work done on the streets by non-professionals (mostly) was unprofessional and excessive in relation to the number of migrants. Established charity organisations argued that in order to avoid giving superfluous aid to migrants during the summer, they would not lend their complete help and only marginally took part in the relief work. These organisations started providing aid – with a targeted referral group and the help of substantial financial contributions from the government – after the migration route suddenly changed from the closed Serbian-Hungarian border towards Croatia. Meanwhile, the role of the grassroots organizations was greatly reduced. At this time, large numbers of migrants disappeared from the public areas of major cities partly due to the state-supported

transportation of migrants from the check-in point (the Croatian-Hungarian border) to the exit point (the Hungarian-Austrian border). This period lasted one month, from mid-September to mid-October, until the border fences were made ready at the Croatian border.

After the route of the migrants was modified to avoid Hungary, a small but dedicated cadre of the grassroots organisations and established charity organisations continued their charity work at the end of 2015 and in 2016 in neighbouring countries, following the hubs of migrant movement in Greece and the Balkans. In 2016 some grassroots from Budapest, Debrecen and Szeged, individual volunteers again started providing partial aid to migrants who were starting to return to Hungary in smaller numbers. Other former volunteers shifted their activity towards local vulnerable people, but both the number of such volunteers and the scope and intensity of their relief activity remained low, and most of them ceased such activity in the following years.

The relief work of newly emerged grassroots were solely organized via Facebook groups. The number of members of the Facebook groups of grassroots organizations markedly increased at the manifestation of the migration crisis in Hungary, i.e. in June and July 2015. Until the reduction in the significant presence of migrants in Hungary, the larger groups, *Segítsünk Együtt a Menekülteknek – Let's Help the Refugees Together (SEM)*, and *Migration Aid (MA)*, based their operations in Budapest and had an online membership of 10,000 in closed Facebook groups that were established to help active members organize operational work. The open page of MA, which initiative was the easiest to join, and was designed to provide a floor for discussing pro-migrant opinions had amassed 35,000 'likes' within a few months. The closed operative groups tied to specific aid locations usually had a few thousand members: the closed groups of Migration Aid dedicated to the three largest Budapest railway stations were MA Keleti (2,500 members), MA Nyugati (2,900 members) and MA Déli (1,200 members). One of the main MA bases outside Budapest was MA Debrecen (600 members), where a reception camp was also operated at that time. The largest grassroots group outside the capital, *MigSzol Szeged* (as Szeged is the first city where migrants enter to Hungary arriving on the Balkan route), was founded at the end of June 2015 as the first such grassroots groups on Facebook during the Hungarian phase of refugee crisis in the summer of 2015 and had around 2,500 members. Membership of the individual groups rose remarkably fast until October 2015 (when the borders of Hungary have been ceased and the migration flow decreased significantly), despite the fact that there were overlaps between

the groups. The Hungarian migrant solidarity grassroots groups have been fast shrunken after the migration crisis bypassed Hungary and started to decrease or complete the migrant focused activity or shifted their attention towards local vulnerable groups, but except for Migration Aid, most groups finished or minimalized any other kinds of activity due to several reasons.

## 4 The use of online and social media

One of the most important feature of the refugee crisis was the use of new internet-based technologies. Facebook and other social media platforms played an essential role in facilitating the exchange of information between individuals and the organization of group activities. In addition, call and chat software programs and other information applications directly targeted migrants, while electronic maps and other practical applications created radically different opportunities compared to those available during previous waves of migration. All this was complemented by the intense presence of commercial and public media (television, radio, online and print media) which simultaneously shaped public opinion and events, and whose influence was also determining.

As more and more groups and movements are organised online, the role of social media inevitably an important factor while studying various social activities and movements. Numerous social movements are conceptualized as having been given life through social media (see e.g. the case of Arab Spring), referring to the crucial importance of social media (Castells, 2012; Fuchs, 2014). According to Castells, in terms of political communication social networking sites function as “counter-power” to the official channels of communication in which opposition points of view have less chance of being expressed because of political power relations, and therefore social media can serve as a base for further real-life political action (Castells, 2012). Critics of this positive approach label the political action undertaken on social media “slacktivism”, “clicktivism” or “feel-good online activism” which they claim has little-to-no effect on real-life events (Morozov, 2010; Fuchs, 2014).

Newly formed Hungarian grassroots organisations clearly acted as a counter-power to government policies, but in the case of media use, with a principal role of Facebook, they were unable to dominate the field of communication. Media content analysis shows that, even though the new grassroots initiatives used social media frequently and quite successfully to spread their messages and mobilise resources, most of their content was framed by official governmental

communication (conveyed both via offline and online media) which lead to a reactive strategy of communications that failed to create an independent narrative (Barta & Tóth, 2016; Bernáth & Messing 2015). It is also suggested that the main characteristics of one of the newly formed Facebook groups (Migration Aid - MA) is its “rhizomatic structure” and function as an “information thermostat,” and it can therefore be described as an example of “connective action” (Dessewffy & Nagy, 2015) which refers to a new type of collective action based on social networking sites.

During the summer and autumn of 2015 the refugee crisis was one of the main topics covered by the European media. Based on the commonly acknowledged power of social media and the online press, almost all the actors in the crisis (politicians, NGOs, charities, grassroots) used these channels in a very conscious way, and they also showed an example to other stakeholders of how to use such media in the future. All of the parties used the media according to their goals: the government, via its own media outlets, only gave voice to its own point of view, while the major media outlets, the online and offline press of the left-wing opposition, as well as the major commercial TV channels, presented the work of both the new and the established NGOs and organisations. The major aid organisations were initially absent from the media, but having received a barrage of criticism increased their media presence, while last but not least, the media was also effectively used by bellwethers among the refugees, who even demanded representation on occasion.

Social media, used at an intensity and with an effectiveness never witnessed before in Hungary during humanitarian activities, both by asylum seekers and helpers, played an eminent role during the crisis, and this was one of the most relevant lessons that Hungarian civil society learnt (For more on the role of online and social media in the refugee crisis in 2015, see Barta & Tóth, 2016; Bernáth & Messing, 2015). However, the very strong impact of online media and especially social media was no surprise at all: Hungarians themselves have never before had such a powerful influence on close-to-home contemporary events as they experienced during the emergence of such active and influential Facebook groups.

Social media was first and foremost a tool in the volunteers' hand. It had three main roles for volunteers and grassroots during the events of the refugee crisis. First of all, it was a tool for involvement: most of our interviewees joined the aid work through social media - either directly or indirectly (after being recommended by an acquaintance or visiting the fieldwork). Secondly, social

media was an organisational tool as donation lists, work schedules, practical legal information etc. were available online. Finally, Facebook, through the groups' official pages, represented a way of communicating with a larger audience.

Considering the anti-refugee rhetoric of the Hungarian government, grassroots volunteer groups like Let's help refugees together!, MigSzol Szeged, and Migration Aid can definitely be framed as communication platforms for those who disagreed with the official message of the governing party. However, as regards the mobilising effects of social media, we must note that only in Debrecen did the volunteers organise themselves exclusively through social media, as the group's core members had never met before engaging in this voluntary work. In the cases of Budapest and Szeged, some of the core members and founders had been in contact before as they had been friends or co-workers for years. Therefore the early mobilising effects of social media should not be over-exaggerated, as the aid work was started by a small group of people. In Szeged the founders of the group had known each other well for years and most of them had previous volunteer or activist experiences. As their example, as well as the Budapest-based Migration Aid group appeared on the news, it motivated many others for whose mobilization social media served as a great tool, as the vast majority of the grassroots members informed about the migrant solidarity groups and joined them via Facebook.

As for the involvement of the volunteers, our interviewees from the grassroots organizations often referred to their previous engagement with social media, such as sharing others posts or making statements about the refugee crisis. These earlier forms of engagement through social media can be described (using Morozov's term) as "slacktivism" that refers to online activism with little to no effect on actual events (Morozov, 2010), although it did later lead to commitment to humanitarian work and was thus the first step in becoming fully engaged. Why did people join the refugee relief work after sharing articles, photos or statements about the refugee crisis? One of the potential answers is that people strive for consistency in terms of their commitment, while society rewards consistency and condemns inconsistent behaviour (Cialdini, 2009). Accordingly, after being active on social media (i.e. visible to friends and acquaintances), people felt that in order to be consistent in their attitudes towards the refugee crisis, they had to volunteer. According to this finding we state that engagement to a cause through social media might be the first step of civic involvement, if the actors of that cause provide the possibility of joining their work.

## 5 Conclusion

The flow of migrants who crossed Hungary prior to the summer of 2015 escalated to a level the country had never witnessed before. The rapidly rising number of asylum-seekers arrived in a country generally characterized by a low level of trust, solidarity and civil activity, as well as widespread xenophobia. These features were exploited by the government's anti-immigration policies promoted by an intensive communication campaign that included the use of billboards with anti-immigration messages. As neither state institutions nor official charities or NGOs took a leading role in handling the refugee crisis, as they remained inactive or hardly visible during the summer, independent citizens formed their grassroots groups via Facebook in order to provide help for those in need.

The inevitable role of social media, especially Facebook, was among the most important tools in the evolution of the movement as the grassroots groups popped up on Facebook, as well as organized and promoted their daily activities using this site. The online press monitored the migration crisis, as well as the helping activity of the new grassroots initiatives, with growing intensity, and in doing so, contributed to the resupply of donations and new volunteers. Nevertheless, the media representation of the refugee crisis and of the grassroots movements was politically highly polarized. In any case, online media, alongside social media, played an extremely influential role, both from a pro and anti-migration perspective.

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