

CHAPTER 5

The Online–Offline Hybrid Model of a Collaborative Solidarity Action: Migrant Solidarity Grassroots Groups in Hungary

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Abstract

The migrant and refugee crisis that culminated in 2015–2016 brought about a number of new phenomena and lessons for Europe. Hungary also experienced an intense, albeit relatively short period of the crisis in 2015 as a transit country, but the impact of this period goes beyond its duration. One remarkable new phenomenon of the migration crisis was the emergence of a volunteer grassroots solidarity movement that operated large-scale aid activities by using a hybrid online–offline model. The volunteers formed and maintained their grassroots groups online, via Facebook, to organize their daily activities, logistics and fundraising in order to provide an effective on-site, offline aid activity for migrants and refugees. The spontaneous solidarity movement emerged from nowhere provides an example of how activity through social media platforms interacts with offline humanitarian aid activity in the framework of a ‘go online to act offline’ model and how the relationship is transformed by the proliferation of the online activity.

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Introduction and Background

Migrant solidarity grassroots groups as collaborative action groups emerged from nowhere 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. Hungary has been affected by the crisis as a transit country, but the thousands of refugees and migrants who crossed and temporarily stayed in Hungary at that time were left without sufficient provisions and aid by the state and official aid providers. State and municipality organizations as well as major NGOs and charities that were originally working in this field were not responding sufficiently to the unmet needs of migrants and refugees, which became highly visible when hundreds of them started to 'live' in central public open-air spaces in downtown Budapest, mostly around major railway stations. Local civilians with no organizational ties and often without any professional background started to provide aid to migrants and refugees, mainly to express solidarity and provide immediate relief. Soon these independent actors contacted each other on Facebook, and various types of Facebook groups started to connect individuals who wanted to help in some way.

Social media platforms (predominantly Facebook) were used by both the volunteer activists and the asylum seekers at an intensity and with an effectiveness never witnessed before in humanitarian activities in Hungary, and this was one of the most relevant lessons that Hungarian civil society learnt from this crisis. For the volunteers, Facebook was the core platform for establishing their groups, and it had a central role in sharing information, developing contacts and membership, organizing activities and collecting and distributing donations during the entire crisis. Furthermore, these were highly effective communication channels outside the grassroots groups to inform and also shape public opinion about the migration crisis and the activity of the solidarity grassroots. For refugees and asylum seekers, Facebook, Twitter and a number of new and already established user-driven mobile phone applications were extremely helpful: call and chat software programs (ICRC 2017) and other information applications directly targeted migrants, while online maps, GPS 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 development, patterns and scale of the migration flow probably would have been significantly different. In contrast, established NGOs and large charities – which might have taken a more relevant role due to their profile and previous activity but were hardly involved in the mitigation of the crisis – used social media less intensively and in a more conservative manner, in line with their lower activity level in the refugee crisis compared to the volunteer groups.

Questions and Methods

This chapter explores the ‘go online to act offline’ model, by investigating how the efficiency of using social media platforms can fuel and interact with the offline activity of solidarity-driven humanitarian aid movements in a crisis. Moreover, this case can contribute to the discussion on how online and offline activities can reinforce each other in such a context, as, in addition to the online tool facilitating the offline activity, an interaction between the online and offline activities might occur.

The backbone of this study is empirical research¹ that was carried out between September 2015 and January 2018 in three Hungarian cities (Budapest, Szeged, Debrecen), by applying mainly qualitative social research methods, with an emphasis on ethnographic methods. Fifty-six semi-structured individual interviews were carried out with stakeholders and actors in the refugee solidarity movement: 19 with leaders or prominent members of grassroots groups and other NGOs and charities; and 37 with grassroots volunteers. Furthermore, three focus groups were organized with volunteer activists in the three major cities where these grassroots operated. The primary evidence collected through these methods was complemented by on-site and online participant observation during the aid activities, and also by the information gathered in public (offline) events where the volunteers and the grassroots groups presented their activities to a wider non-professional audience.

The Evolution of the Solidarity Movement in the Context of the Migration Crisis and Hungarian Politics

The migration crisis that peaked in 2015 and the following years was unprecedented in Europe since World War II. The number of asylum seekers in the EU increased steadily from the early 2010s, and an initially moderate upward trend accelerated and more than quadrupled by 2015 and 2016 (from 282,000 asylum applications in 2011 to 1,283,000 in 2015 and 1,221,000 in 2016). The year 2015 was also a milestone in the refugee and migrant crisis in Hungary with an even steeper upward trend, as the number of registered asylum seekers increased a hundredfold within four years (from 1,690 in 2011 to 177,000 in 2015) (Eurostat 2021): the highest number of asylum seekers and migrants recorded in an EU member state, and in Hungary since World War II. The number of asylum seekers, however, then shrank radically (by 29,000 first time

¹ The chapter is based on the broader research project entitled ‘The social aspects of the 2015 migration crisis in Hungary’ (Simonoivits and Bernát, 2016). I would like to thank Fruzsina Márta Tóth and Anna Kertész for their contribution in the research and in previous studies.

applicants in the next year, and to 115 people by 2020); the drastic decrease was the result of rigorous legal and political measures as well as the physical border fence implemented by the Hungarian state from the autumn of 2015 in order to literally close off Hungary and prevent further waves of migrants.

As a transit country, Hungary was affected by the migration flow in a different way than target countries: migrants usually spent only the necessary minimum time in Hungary until they were able to continue their trip towards their target countries, which also required assistance and aid. Furthermore, migrants generally wanted to avoid having to apply for asylum in Hungary, as this was not their country of destination and, under the Dublin Convention, the asylum procedure would in principle have tied them to Hungary and not to their country of destination. Most migrants and asylum seekers were interested in getting through Hungary as quickly and with as little official administration as possible. The Hungarian state initially pursued the same goal, backed with a strong anti-migration campaign: the state also aimed to admit or administer the fewest possible asylum seekers, and thus it did not prevent migrants from crossing the country or essentially provide any assistance.

However, the need for aid and assistance became apparent by early summer 2015, as more and more migrants and asylum seekers stayed for several days instead of transiting the country immediately, and lacked accommodation and other basic amenities or needed health provision. Local individuals noticed and reacted to these situations in growing numbers and it soon turned to a collaborative effort organized via online channels (mainly Facebook groups) and realized on-site, offline. Finally, the humanitarian aid provided to migrants and asylum seekers who transited through Hungary largely relied on the activities of civil volunteers and grassroots organizations. This movement emerged rapidly and unexpectedly across the country at the beginning of the 2015 summer migration crisis, especially in cities where these people spent several days before they could continue their journey to their destinations.

Similar grassroots solidarity movements, also applying an online–offline combination of aid activity, emerged in many countries along the migration route from Greece to Serbia, as official aid providers were not prepared to adequately provide aid for the migrants and refugees arriving in such numbers. Therefore the migrants and the local volunteers soon established direct contact, and locals started to provide assistance in multiple countries and cities in a very similar way to what happened in Hungary.

The evolution of the solidarity and aid movement, including both the new grassroots and traditional aid organizations, is embedded in a particular socio-political context in Hungary. The stark contrast between the pro-migration EU approach and the anti-migration Hungarian state approach was apparent, which combined with inaction from both sides initially. The Hungarian state then took pivotal steps to realize its politics through strict legal and physical barriers to hamper migration, while the EU remained ineffective in managing the refugee crisis with legal and political instruments.

The Hungarian domestic anti-immigration governmental campaign started via all political and public media channels before the first visible signs of the migration crisis in Hungary, and accelerated in the following years, although the number of asylum seekers shrank radically and thus immigration was not a reality for Hungary due to the strict legal and physical barriers (including a defence fence built at the southern borders) implemented by the Hungarian government from the fall of 2015. The introduction of these legal and physical barriers instantly cut the migration flow at the borders of Hungary, which ended the mission and thus the work of the refugee solidarity movement but did not put an end to governmental anti-immigration propaganda, which continued even years later, although without any measurable immigration flow (see Juhász, Hunyadi & Zgut 2015; Kallius, Monterescu & Rajaram 2016 for more details on the political context and impact).

Although the general political landscape in Hungary was dominated by the anti-migrant campaign of the government before the migration crisis could have been noticed on the streets of Hungary, in the wake of the crisis of the summer of 2015 the migrant crisis and refugee aid movement have been embedded in a highly polarized political context, which also provided some opportunity for the expression and activity of pro-migration solidarity advocates. This exceptional solidarity movement of new civilian volunteers and their organizations emerged from an inherently anti-refugee country with low level of interpersonal and institutional trust. The Hungarian population has a tendency to demonstrate xenophobic attitudes (Sik 2016), and exclusionary behaviour towards marginalized groups (e.g., various nationalities, ethnicities, religions or lifestyles) in general. It is combined with a low level of trust in general (Tóth 2009; Boda & Medve-Bálint 2012; TÁRKI 2013) as well as a low level of civilian activity (KSH 2012). However, 3 per cent of the Hungarian adult population reported that they participated in refugee relief work or made donations in some form during the summer and early autumn of 2015, and 7 per cent claimed to have a friend or an acquaintance that participated, according to self-reported responses of a representative survey. At the time around 5 per cent of the population could be considered ‘xenophiles’ in a survey denoting those who would accept any asylum seekers to enter the country, and this group could overlap significantly with those that volunteered (Bernát et al. 2015).

A further aspect to understand about the Hungarian reception of the migration flow is the limited experience of both immigration and emigration: the last large-scale immigration flows happened several decades earlier and mainly involved Hungarians fleeing from neighbouring countries where they lived as a minority (in the late 1980s and early 1990s from Transylvania, Western Romania; in the early 1990s asylum seekers, many of whom were ethnic Hungarians, from the war zones of Yugoslavia). Accordingly, Hungary is a homogeneous society with a very low number of non-nationals (200,000 people in 2020), which is one of the lowest levels in the EU (2 per cent of the population) (Eurostat 2020). Hungary is also a latecomer to emigration, boosted

mainly due to the protracted financial crisis around 2010, and despite the recent increase Hungary has always been a less significant source of Eastern European immigrants into Western European countries. The rise in the number of migrants in the 2015 crisis thus was unprecedented in Hungary as well as in Europe in terms of the order of magnitude, composition and processes. Although governments had information about migrants heading towards Europe, they may have underestimated the possible effects of such a large-scale and heterogeneous migration flow with some links to human trafficking.

Underestimating the migration flow, combined with the purposeful reluctance and lack of official aid, finally led to a spontaneous and highly effective refugee solidarity aid movement in Hungary. The aid activity followed a hybrid online–offline model that had never been used at this scale in any Hungarian humanitarian crisis.

The Social Media Imprint of the Grassroots Organizations

The unexpected grassroots solidarity movement emerged in the early summer of 2015: several migrant solidarity grassroots, operated exclusively by volunteers, appeared out of nowhere, without any history, with the direct goal of providing relief to migrants who transited through Hungary. In a surprisingly short span of time these new grassroots groups managed to formulate a wide agenda, significantly raise public awareness and obtain influence by voluntarily filling a service gap that became increasingly apparent, and fulfilling a mission that should have been served by paid, professional state agencies and charities. Neither state institutions nor professional, established civilian and charity organizations provided sufficient humanitarian aid to the migrants transiting the country, partly due to adapting to the anti-immigration state approach and partly for infrastructural reasons. Moreover, some general public services, such as some of the public transportation companies and the public sanitation services, were unprepared and seemingly less motivated to cope with this challenge, which made relief work even more difficult.

The discrepancy between the often reluctant official and professional aid organizations and the non-professional but committed volunteers gained much public and political attention in the context of an already highly politicized atmosphere as the grassroots' pro-migration approach sharply contrasted with the anti-immigration message of the government. The activities of volunteering civilians were covered significantly in social media and in both pro- and anti-migration political sides' media outlets, but with a strong headwind against the aid-provider civilians due to the general dominance of the governmental media in Hungary (Bernáth & Messing 2015; Barta & Tóth 2016).

The relief work by newly emerged grassroots groups was solely organized via Facebook: besides some independent (and often closed) Facebook groups there was a hierarchical alliance of location-based groups (also often closed groups). Until the reduction in the presence of migrants in Hungary, the larger

groups, the individual *Segítsünk Együtt a Menekülteknek* – Let’s Help the Refugees Together (SEM) and the core group of the alliance Migration Aid (MA), based their operations in Budapest and had an online membership of 10,000 each in closed Facebook groups that were established to help active members to organize effective operational work. The open Facebook page of MA supported the closed group. This initiative was the easiest to join and was designed to provide an open space for discussing pro-migrant opinions; it reached 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/Eastern (2,500 members), MA Nyugati/Western (2,900 members) and MA Déli/Southern (1,200 members). One of the main MA bases outside Budapest was in Debrecen (600 members), the second largest Hungarian city, where a reception camp also operated at that time. The largest grassroots group outside the capital, MigSzol Szeged (as Szeged is the first city where migrants enter Hungary on the Balkan route), was founded at the end of June 2015 as the first such grassroots group on Facebook during the Hungarian phase of the refugee crisis, and had around 2,500 members. Membership of the individual groups rose remarkably fast until October 2015 (when the borders of Hungary closed and the migration flow decreased significantly), although there were overlaps between the groups. The Hungarian migrant solidarity grassroots groups shrank fast after the migration crisis bypassed Hungary as they decreased or completed the migrant-focused activity or shifted their attention towards local vulnerable groups. Most groups, except for Migration Aid, finished or minimized any other kinds of activity, for several reasons. Initially, most of the refugee solidarity groups tried to shift their activity towards local vulnerable target groups, but these attempts faded and disappeared in the long run. The only Hungarian migrant solidarity Facebook group, MA still exist, six-seven years after the migration flow gripped Hungary, but its activity was limited to requests for some support for the remaining few refugees or awareness-raising related to the milestones of the migration crisis in other countries until the Ukrainian migrant crisis of 2022, when MA continued its refugee relief activities, but in an even larger volume. It set up a temporary refugee shelter for 260 people, an afternoon school, a long-term accommodation search and mentoring team for the fullest possible aid provision, exclusively with volunteers and civilian donations, and without any state support.²

² This chapter is focusing on the refugee solidarity aid activities during the 2015 crisis and not dealing with the Ukrainian refugee crisis started in February 2022, in which Migration Aid and other civil and grassroots organizations and volunteers provided a wide range of aid provisions to refugees. As the crisis is still ongoing at the time of finalizing the manuscript, this case will be analysed in other research papers.

The Hybrid Online-Offline Model of Aid Activity and Its Drivers

One of the most important features of the refugee crisis was the use of new internet-based technologies. In addition to Facebook, call and chat software programs and other information exchange applications (such as an information app directly targeting migrants on their way into Europe) directly targeted migrants, while electronic maps 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. But above all, the exploitation of Facebook as a multi-faceted tool used by the new grassroots to 'go online to act offline' was among the most important outcomes, as it made the offline activity so effective that it was able to compensate for the lack of experience, resources and infrastructure of the reluctant professional aid providers.

The migration crisis articulated in 2015 in Europe was not the first crisis that used social media effectively, as several social movements are conceptualized as having been given life through social media (e.g., the Arab Spring), or have referred to the crucial importance of social media (Castells 2012; Fuchs 2014), but this was the first time that social media played a central role in a social movement in Hungary. The former cases prove that social networking sites can function as counter-power to the official channels of (political) communication, and can turn up the volume of oppositional views so that it better reflects the real political flow (Castells 2012). This can apply even to an EU member state where the power and media dominance of the democratically elected government could create highly biased coverage. However, as the grassroots' media use was dominated by Facebook, this limited their possibility to dominate the field of communication in general. Media content analysis shows that, even though the new grassroots initiatives used social media frequently and quite successfully to spread their messages and mobilize resources, most of their content was framed by official governmental communication (conveyed via both offline and online media), which led to a reactive strategy of communications that failed to create an independent narrative and framing (Barta & Tóth 2016; Bernáth & Messing 2015). The limited reach to a wider audience beyond its membership or Facebook users, even given the dominant role of Facebook in everyday communication, suggests that it was not a game changer in political communication in general: rather a 'connective action' (Dessewffy & Nagy 2016), which refers to a new type of collective action based on social networking sites.

Moreover, some critics of the positive approach attributed to the role of social media in political action suggest that such activity is often superficial or less effective and thus may be labelled as 'slacktivism', 'clicktivism' or 'feel-good online activism', which they claim has little or no effect on real-life events (Morozov 2010; Fuchs 2014).

Social media, which is represented almost exclusively by Facebook in Hungary, primarily served as a multifunctional tool with applications to recruitment, management, fundraising and awareness raising. There have been no similar groups in Hungary since, or before, the Facebook refugee solidarity groups. These online activities initially responded directly to the needs of offline, on-site aid provision in terms of involving more activists, organizing the aid activity and donation supply more effectively and inducing a more positive public reception of the migration crisis in a hostile political climate. Later, the online activity became so intensive and effective that it had to be more responsive to needs generated by the online activity itself. In terms of recruitment and involvement, the management of the online membership by moderation increased significantly and thus was not limited to the original goal, the recruitment of more volunteer workers as on-site aid activists who worked face-to-face with the migrants. In terms of management, the accelerated online activity of the Facebook groups triggered further online organizational activity. Furthermore, in terms of awareness raising, the influence and volume of the online groups' activity induced more and more Facebook posts and comments as a self-generating loop that also required more moderation and staff hours by the volunteers operating the groups. These processes thus gradually transformed the relation between the online and offline activity of the solidarity groups: the original clear role of the online activity to support the offline action in a 'go online to act offline' manner shifted to a more blurred and mixed pattern, with increasing and self-supporting online activity beyond the support of the offline aid provision. This highlights that not only can online activity drive the offline action, but it can be realized in the opposite way, as initially the causal interaction was driven by the offline activity and the online tool supported it according to the need of the offline activity.

The various facets of the Facebook groups as a multifunctional tool provide further examples of how the hybrid online–offline activity was realized. In terms of recruitment and involvement, most activists joined the aid providers via the Facebook groups and not offline. However, the mobilizing effects of social media should not be exaggerated, as evidence from qualitative research suggests that only one Hungarian group, albeit the largest and most influential one, established itself exclusively through social media, while in other groups some of the core members and founders had been in contact before. However, Facebook provided a low entry threshold to join the mission: by just one click anyone could feel that they supported or were part of an errand, although most people who joined these groups remained less active online and not active at all offline, confirming the validity of the 'clicktivism' argument. A low entry threshold is also applicable to offline activity: those who wanted to go beyond armchair activism could easily join on-site relief activity by donating a bag of food or a pair of good shoes or working a few hours as donation distributor or administrative staff, or practising their profession or skills if relevant (as medical staff, translator or social worker).

The organizational function of the Facebook groups covered a wide range of activities and the portfolio as well as the workload also proliferated in line with the increase in online activity, both in terms of the types and the volume of the tasks. The organizational portfolio covered a wide range of administration, such as keeping track of the online and offline volunteer activists and their work schedules as well as donation lists, donation demand and supply by locations, or providing up-to-date and practical legal or travelling information.

The awareness-raising facet of the Facebook groups covered an increasing range of communication tasks in line with the proliferation of the groups' activity. It served as an internal information source related to the relevant events and news of the migration crisis in Hungary and beyond, targeting the membership, and also functioned increasingly as a representation platform informing outsiders about the groups as well as promoting the pro-migration and solidarity perspective in contrast to the anti-migration state politics.

Finally, the link between online and offline activity at an individual level can be induced by an unconscious process aiming to make our online activity consistent by reinforcing it with offline activity. As evidenced by the interviews with volunteers, the activists often referred to their previous social media activity related to the migration crisis prior to joining any solidarity group on Facebook as a driver to the offline involvement, although most online group members never became active in the actual relief work. The term 'slacktivism' (Morozov 2010) encompasses these earlier forms of engagement exclusively through social media and refers to an online activism with little to no effect on actual events, but which later can lead to commitment to humanitarian work in the offline sphere. This also suggests a hierarchy of online activities in social media activism, ranging from low-cost, lighter activities such as post likes via activities that require more engagement, like commenting or sharing posts, up to the highest cost activities, e.g., joining a group or attending a Facebook event, with a constantly decreasing number of activists towards the higher levels of the activity pyramid. An analysis based on the actual Facebook activity data of the pro-refugee activists disproved the theoretical model of the hierarchy of online activities that is based on the theory of slacktivism in the case of Hungarian pro-refugee Facebook groups. The dominant activity was attending a Facebook event, followed by liking posts (these should be in reverse order according to the theory), while Facebook group membership indeed covers fewer activists but it is not a marginal group; rather, it is significant in terms of number of activists (half of the only-liking group). This also suggests that online and offline activism (e.g., liking, commenting, sharing a post or joining a group and participation in an event) are not separate, but rather complementary elements in a humanitarian action that reinforces the framing of hybrid activism in the Hungarian migrant solidarity movement (Dessewffy, Nagy & Váry 2017).

Another critique of slacktivism theory and a possible reason why the mere online activity of sharing or commenting on others' posts, media contents or own thoughts can later lead people to join actual aid work is the inner striving

for consistency in terms of commitment: society rewards consistency and condemns inconsistent behaviour (Cialdini 2007). This suggests that the engagement in an idea or mission through social media might be the first step of civic involvement, if the actors of that cause provide the possibility of joining their work, and thus social media activity to support a mission cannot be simplified as mere armchair activism.

Conclusion

The inevitable role of social media, especially Facebook, in the Hungarian refugee solidarity movement was to link to support of on-site relief activity by exploiting social media skills in a crisis, involving independent individuals often from widely spread locations but with similar principles. Facebook offered a high level of efficacy in terms of recruiting offline (and online) activists and volunteers, to make on-site aid provision more effective in terms of staff, task and donation management and also to provide an efficient tool for internal and external communication.

The relief activity thus relied on a hybrid model that aimed to utilize the advantages of both the online and offline facets in this crisis, but the sudden and unexpected growth of the movement led to unforeseen difficulties. The proliferation of the groups in terms of membership, online activity (posts, comments, etc.), reach, and public and political attention shifted the online–offline division of work towards a less clear model, where the relation between the two spheres became blurred: the online activity no longer only supported offline work but also maintained a self-boosted overflow that consumed resources from the group and distracted attention from the original aim of on-site humanitarian aid provision to a more political focus. The online boom that shifted resources and capacities from the offline work outside the scope the movement but it was also impossible to neglect it, in case the Facebook pages and groups would slip out of control. This sheds light on additional vulnerability of a system that was inherently vulnerable, being a spontaneous grassroots movement, which multiplied the organizational challenges of the stakeholders. These processes could be sufficiently followed by the combination of online and offline ethnography, dominated by participant observation, that would ensure the most beneficial tools to understand the complexity of the hybrid operation of pro-refugee activism.

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