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Solidarity at the Border:
The organization of spontaneous
support for transiting refugees
in two Hungarian towns
in the summer of 2015



ABOUT THE PROJECT

This study was prepared for the research project “**Solidarity in European societies: empowerment, social justice and citizenship - SOLIDUS**” (<http://solidush2020.eu>). SOLIDUS is funded by the European Union under the Horizon 2020 Programme (Grant Agreement n° 649489), running from June 2015 through May 2018. It explores from a conceptual, empirical and inter-disciplinary approach point of view, current and future expressions of European solidarity. This paper contains empirical data from two case studies on how solidarity with migrants was organized and expressed during the time of an unprecedented refugee movement throughout Hungary and Europe in 2015. The data collection process benefited from collaboration with CPS Research Fellow Celine Cantat, who carried out a post-doctoral research project on migration discourses and citizen response in Hungary during the same period. The empirical material was shared.

ABOUT THE PAPER SERIES

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SOLIDARITY AT THE BORDER:
THE ORGANIZATION OF SPONTANEOUS SUPPORT
FOR TRANSITING REFUGEES IN TWO HUNGARIAN TOWNS
IN THE SUMMER OF 2015

SARA SVENSSON, ANDREW CARTWRIGHT AND PÉTER BALOGH

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1. INTRODUCTION

The number of migrants in world has been on the increase since the 1970s¹. This includes an unprecedented number of refugees². The complexity, scale and differential impact of migration has made it one of the most divisive political issues of the day. Recent opinion polling carried out by Ipsos Mori highlighted widespread ambivalence amongst a majority of the population in 22 countries surveyed who believed that alongside legitimate refugees, there are many who should be seen as economic migrants³. Indeed, in 2015, when there were record numbers of people applying for asylum in Europe, in the vast majority of cases, asylum petitions were rejected as being without merit⁴.

Migration affects peoples and places in different ways. Undoubtedly, while the subject has been on the political agenda for years, from a European perspective, 2015 was a milestone. Whereas southern Europe, especially Greece and Italy have long been the site of significant immigration, in 2015, many countries hitherto unaffected by large scale population movement found themselves facing large numbers of arrivals. The rapidly moving situation was particularly challenging for the main transit countries of Southeast Europe, a region that had long characterized by emigration rather than immigration.

With most refugees and migrants from the Middle East and South Central Asia choosing the Balkan route rather than the riskier and more expensive Mediterranean route, the first EU Member State that they reached was Hungary. In 2015 alone, Hungary registered 177,135 asylum seekers in 2015,⁵ with another estimated and unregistered 60,000-70,000 people passing through its territory towards the west.

Whereas state authorities received much international attention and criticism for their approach, not least the portrayal of migrants as potential threats or as violent and undeserving of humanitarian assistance, this paper focuses on how communities and administrations at the sub-national level responded. We do this through case studies of two non-governmental, informal initiatives that organized humanitarian assistance in two southern Hungarian border towns, Szeged and Pécs. These actions were joined to the national-level organization MigSzol and became known as MigSzol Szeged and MigSzol Pécs.⁶

1 The total number of people living outside their native countries was 3.3 % in 2015. See the United Nations Population Fund: <http://www.unfpa.org/migration>

2 UNHRC The UN Refugee Agency: <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

3 Mori, Global View of Immigration and the Refugee Crisis, July, 2016 <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3771/Global-study-shows-many-around-the-world-uncomfortable-with-levels-of-immigration.aspx>

4 For example, whereas less than 20% of applications were rejected by Italian authorities, Greece rejected 75% of asylum seekers. In the EU as a whole less than 15% of those who applied for protected status were successful. See 'Asylum Statistics' http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics#Decisions_on_asylum_applications

5 Hungarian Office of Immigration and Nationality 2016

6 See <http://www.MigSzol.com/> Note that this link leads to the MigSzol umbrella organization. Its independent affiliate in Pécs does not have a homepage of its own, but a Facebook-group. Further note that the usage of the name – Migszol or MigSzol – is inconsistent across the organization's material. In this report we use MigSzol to follow the dominating practice.

The specific research questions asked are the following:

- In what ways did MigSzol Szeged and Migszol Pécs organize support and help for the passing migrants and refugees?
- What impacts did their actions have on local migration policy and local public opinion?
- What types of solidarity acts and bonds arose out of this organization?

By addressing these questions, we can investigate the conditions under which it spontaneous expressions of solidarity emerges. Our particular focus is on the importance of relations between the different groups involved in this response, in particular, the volunteers who set up the NGO, the migrants and refugees, and local authorities. We also analyze the intra-group relations, particularly between core, organizing and volunteer members. We look at relations with the local population, including those hostile to their action. Finally, we examine the importance of MigSzol Szeged and MigSzol Pécs as potential examples of peer support and solidarity. We argue that these local responses show counter-examples to the majority national discourse surrounding the crisis, and demonstrate an unwillingness to follow government or popular opinion⁷.

The case study is structured as follows. In the next section, the Hungarian state policy response is detailed. Section 3 presents and analyzes the case of MigSzol Szeged, which had the largest scope of activities of the two groups. Section 4 investigates the organization and activities of MigSzol Pécs. The conclusion contrasts and summarizes the findings.

The empirical materials consist of 19 interviews, carried out in June and July 2016. In Szeged, the research team⁸ carried out interviews with seven volunteers of MigSzol Szeged (CIV 1–5), including two out of the three key actors (CIV 4, CIV 7); two interviews with external experts (CIV 8, CIV 10); and one with a high-ranking official at Szeged City council (CIV 9). In Pécs, the same team carried out two interviews with volunteers of Migszol Pécs, one interview with a representative of Pécs City and one interview with an activist from an opposition party (CIV 11–14), and an additional five interviews with volunteers and UNHRC representatives were carried out in Pécs by Céline Cantat, research affiliate at the CEU Center for Policy Studies at a separate occasion (CIV 15–19). The interviews were followed up by online correspondence for clarification purposes with some interviewees in the fall of 2016. Thus, the bulk of the interviews represented civil sector perspectives, but representatives from both towns were also interviewed, as were experts and other politicians. This was partly because of the nature of the project for which the interviews were carried out⁹, and because it was easier to get access to volunteers keen to record their experience of a transformative and remarkable time. The target beneficiaries, i.e. the refugees and migrants that passed through Pécs and Szeged in 2015, were not interviewed. With very few exceptions the vast majority of people who were helped by these groups are no longer in Hungary.

The interviews were largely semi-structured and non-standardized, although themes set out by a guideline produced by the central research team were followed. The majority of interviews were conducted in Hungarian and were transcribed and translated simultaneously. In the translated transcriptions, we have tried to keep some original expressions, since they are often revealing of emotions,

7 Repeated opinion polls have shown that the majority of Hungarians do not consider the migrants to be genuine refugees, nor do they accept the view that Hungary has a responsibility to take in quotas of refugees. See the recent Ipsos Mori, *Global attitudes towards immigration and refugees*, 2016.

8 See information on the SOLIDUS project on the inprint page.

9 See information on the SOLIDUS project on the inprint page.

even though this sometimes led to idiomatic or grammatically incorrect English. The material was sorted and analyzed with relations to concepts defined by the main research project themes (democracy, pluralism, recognition, transparency, impact and scalability). For the purpose of the current working paper only some of these subjects have been included.

2. POLICY RESPONSE TO THE REFUGEE SITUATION IN HUNGARY IN 2015

As with many of the newer member states, up until recently, Hungary had very little experience with large numbers of people claiming asylum. In 2013, for example, there were less than 1,000 people who asked for refugee status in Hungary, and even then, the majority of people processed in the asylum system absconded before any decision was made. In terms of administrative arrangements, there were very few dedicated facilities to house asylum seekers. For example, there was only one facility in the country that could be an official reception center for minors, despite the steady rise in number of unaccompanied minors coming to Europe.

In early 2015, Hungary saw the first large scale wave of migrants, mainly travelling from nearby Kosovo and partly explained by an ongoing visa liberalization process with the European Union¹⁰. Almost all applicants were rejected and returned home, but from this point Hungarian media began to monitor the issue on a more or less regular basis.

With the first arrivals of significant numbers of refugees and migrants from the Middle East (in particular Syria) and South Central Asia (mostly Afghanistan and Pakistan) in the spring, things started to change dramatically. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris, the FIDESZ government¹¹ launched a so-called ‘national consultation on immigration and terrorism’¹². As its name suggested, the “consultation” excluded the issue of refugees or indeed, emigration, a phenomenon that has characterized Hungary for a long time. The first measure was a survey to every households containing very loaded and biased questions, for example, ‘Do you agree with the Hungarian government that instead of supporting migrants, it is rather Hungarian families and Hungarian future children that need support?’ Available responses were ‘Fully agree’, ‘partly agree’, or ‘not agree’, meaning that two out of three possible answers were predetermined as support for government position. Over 1 million questionnaires were returned, with 90% expressing criticism of immigrants¹³. A nationwide poster campaign showed the government’s emerging policy on migration and refugees (see Figure 1).

While a small number of posters were defaced, according to many opinion polls, the majority of Hungarians – to whom immigration was most likely a non-issue until very recently – subscribed to the government’s line. The message towards potential immigrants and refugees was very simple: ‘Don’t come here!’ In reality, the vast majority of migrants did not want to stay in the country, but simply to travel through Hungary in order to get to Germany and Scandinavia.

10 European Commission 2016; Reuters/Bytyci Fatos and Krisztina Than 2015

11 The Hungarian government is since 2010 composed of representatives of Fidesz (English: Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance) and KDNP (Christian Democratic People’s Party).

12 See at <http://nemzetikonzultacio.kormany.hu/> (visited 2016-06-14)

13 Hungarian Government National Consultation (<http://nemzetikonzultacio.kormany.hu/>)

Figure 1: The left poster reads: “If you come to Hungary, you cannot take away the Hungarians’ jobs!” The right says: “If you come to Hungary, you have to abide by our laws!”



Source: http://nemhiszemhoggy.blog.hu/2015/06/11/ha_magyarorszagra_jossz_nem_veheded_el_a_magyarok_munkajat (visited 2016-06-16)

At first, the response of the Hungarian authorities was to catch all illegal border crossers, take them into custody, and to register them. In the face of criticism that they should be more tolerant towards the migrants, the government replied that they were simply abiding by the Dublin Regulation, whereby the responsible state for processing asylum applications will be the first member state through which an asylum seeker entered the EU. With the border guards and the police unable to make much of a difference to the numbers of people crossing into the country, the government decided to build a border fence on the country’s border to Serbia, rapidly implemented in August 2015. The upshot was to displace tens of thousands of migrants from the Hungarian-Serbian border to the Croatian border. The result of this was that large sections of the Hungarian-Croatian border were also eventually fenced off. A further, more controversial step was to penalize the illegal passing of Hungary’s borders (the law entered into force on September 15). Some refugees or migrants did manage to cut or damage the barbwire, and several were arrested and prosecuted. Large numbers of people did reorient towards Slovenia and Austria although both these countries set up sections of border fences and stricter border controls.

The refugee crisis boosted cooperation between the otherwise sleepy Visegrád group¹⁴, which implemented a shared border control. As a result, Slovak and Czech policemen helped Hungarian authorities guard Hungary’s southern borders (Reuters 2015). By October, the government claimed to have solved the ‘problem’ of immigration. Yet the issue has far from disappeared from the political agenda, largely due to the EU proposals for a national quota to redistribute refugees, something which the Hungarian government and several other central and eastern European countries are firmly against¹⁵.

Apart from the widely circulated media reports and images from Budapest last year, one place that also stood out was the city of Szeged, (162,000 inhabitants) at Hungary’s border to Serbia – i.e.

14 Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary.

15 See for instance coverage in *The Guardian* (Traynor 2016).

at the EU's external boundary¹⁶. Here, an action group called MigSzol Szeged was formed, eventually providing humanitarian assistance to an estimated 30,000 refugees in 2015, according to the group's own figures (CIV 4). Despite being only 35 kilometers from the border to Croatia (and approx. 70 km to the Serbian border) Pécs, the other site of research presented in this paper, did not make the news. Nevertheless, it was directly affected by the crisis in two ways. First, the police bussed migrants from Szeged to Pécs from where they were told to find their own way to their preferred destination (CIV 11, CIV 13-16). Second, a suggestion to set up a refugee camp in a small village outside Pécs, Martonfa, led to extensive local protests that were covered in the national media.

3. THE MIGSZOL SZEGED ACTION GROUP

MigSzol Szeged was initiated by a small circle of friends and acquaintances sharing a common background at the University of Szeged. The group was set up in June 2015 as the refugee situation rapidly escalated. The main founder and coordinator is a lecturer in social psychology. Two other key persons include an economist and an IT-specialist. Their names appear in all discussions with people who know the organization of humanitarian aid for migrants in southern Hungary, as well as in talks with volunteers conducted by the SOLIDUS research project team.

As individuals, they gave food and other items to migrants and refugees passing through in spring, 2015, including those coming from Kosovo. At the end of June, they decided to start a Facebook-group for all who wanted to help. They were unsure what to call themselves, but another volunteer had contacts with the Budapest-based action group MigSzol (Migrant Solidarity Group) and, after a brief discussion with them, they decided to adopt the same name, even though the former concentrates more on changing public opinion rather than providing humanitarian aid. MigSzol Szeged realized this only later.

By the time we realized that MigSzol was not the best name for us, it had already stuck to us. When we started this in June, we had to give it a name, and someone had a connection to the Budapest group, and we didn't have experience, so we decided this in five minutes and added that [name] to the Facebook group, which grew to 1,000 members in three days. (CIV 5)

In what follows, we will outline how this group functioned, and the impact they had during and after the zenith of activity between June and September 2015. By that time, they estimated that they had provided direct assistance to between 25,000 and 30,000 refugees. These were persons who crossed the border legally, but often lacked information on how to proceed to next destinations and in need of sheltering and food until transport could be arranged to take them further. The activities centered around the train station. After the border was more or less sealed, they continued to assist those few refugees who managed to get into temporary transit zones as well provide assistance to other groups in need. The scale of this work is much smaller and with fewer volunteers.

16 Most refugees would of course have passed another EU country first, usually Greece.

3.1. Decision-making: democracy, pluralism and accountability

MigSzol Szeged never registered as a formal non-governmental organization, but nonetheless, it quickly built up structures and procedures for quick and efficient decision-making. Despite the absence of formal rules, decision-making was rather hierarchical, with the key coordinators taking the majority of responsibility. This can be explained by the emergency context in which the organization evolved. The hierarchy had two main branches, with the key organizers leading the work of the Hungarian volunteers but during the summer and early fall of 2015 also increasingly directing the work of international mainly European, volunteers. With the exception of a minority of self-declared ‘anarchists’ from Germany, according to the organizers this all usually worked smoothly.

MigSzol Szeged does not have formal membership, but at the high-point of the refugee crisis it had approximately 150 volunteers¹⁷. The main coordinators (two men and one woman) are in their thirties, whereas the other volunteers we met (who apparently make up the core) tend to be middle-aged or younger elderly women. According to one of the coordinators, roughly two thirds of all members who helped throughout the crisis were women. At present, there are still very few men active (CIV 5).

While we spoke only to Hungarian activists, they told us about the many volunteers that joined them, the majority from Hungary but also many from abroad. They came mostly from Germany and Scandinavia, one or two from the Czech Republic or even as far as the United States (a young lady with Hungarian roots). At least two Hungarian volunteers were of Roma origin (a boy and a girl). Last but not least, several refugees themselves helped the volunteers, although for obvious reasons, this was for shorter periods.

Since MigSzol Szeged is and was not registered, it could not receive any formal financial support. Its work is completely based on volunteers and in-kind donations. When official contracts were needed (such as when the local government rented out a storage space), these were signed in the name of one of the founders.

They were and are keen to remain apolitical. This created a dilemma when the European Parliament’s Socialist Group wanted to donate 7 million HUF for their work.

That is a really big sum, so it was a huge dilemma. If it just had been a truck of mineral waters, we could have said no easily, but this amount ... So we talked to MigSzol Budapest, and said in the discussions ‘that if they get out in the media that socialists support MigSzol Szeged’, so we said ‘thanks, but no thanks’ and asked them to give the money to the Greeks instead, which was very good for the Greeks because by that time we had fewer refugees here. (CIV 4, CIV 5)

The organization received donations in the form of clothes, blankets, (conserved) food etc. to distribute among refugees. When numbers of refugees went down, the volunteers spent hundreds of hours sorting and cataloguing donations. Some items continue to arrive for the small number of refugees that arrives at the border. A few items have also been donated to local needy families, including of Roma origin.

One of the three main actors stressed the importance of to avoid chaos, but this can also be seen as a way to address possible challenges to the legitimacy and accountability of the group. The fact that MigSzol Szeged does not have a webpage is a drawback in terms of visibility, but it should be seen

17 This figure does not include people who just spontaneously helped for a short time (e.g. for an hour), which also occurred.

in the context of extremely limited resources. The initiative has existed for less than one year, still, it features on the webpage of the national umbrella organization¹⁸, and it also appears in a number of media reports.

3.2. Relations and recognition: MigSzol Szeged and other actors

The three MigSzol Szeged coordinators were responsible for contacts with the local public administration, which in the current election cycle is one of local governments in Hungary run by the socialist opposition party. When the situation escalated in July 2015, and the group's activities were being reported in the local and national media, the Mayor's office got in contact. When they found out that the national railway company had asked the group to leave the train station, they offered to help and within 24 hours following a meeting they had erected a wooden hut supplied with electricity and nearby sanitary facilities.

Subsequent requests for assistance were heeded and information exchange was generally described as good. For instance, the deputy mayor praised their work:

I have to say they organized themselves extremely well; if I'm not mistaken several thousand people worked there for several months. They had to organise the changing of their staff, distributing donations from Germany etc; thus serious logistical abilities appeared. After seeing the railway station, the activists approached us at the city council if we could help with e.g. some wooden stands at the station from where they could distribute food, some storage, and toilets. (Szeged Deputy Mayor, CIV 9)

And it was amazing that one o'clock in the morning we got out from the Mayor's office, and they wrote down what we wanted and said that if they really hurry they could have it all within a week, but the next day at noon the wooden house was there, the electricity worked, etc. 23 hours after the talk they put it all together, including necessary permissions. (MigSzol Szeged Coordinator, CIV 5)

The good relations were ascribed both to the political color of the leadership and 'town spirit'.

I have a simple answer to this <why Szeged cooperated more with civilians>: we are better people. Hundreds of citizens helped people who they knew were walking 2,-3,000 kms and are exhausted. I think it's normal that the city helped, too. These people [civilians] took over duties of the state. The Hungarian state could build hundreds of kms of fences, and within a few hours organise some buses to – btw illegally – transport people from one of its borders to another, but is unable to print some info flyers and maps. We don't believe it's about the state's weakness; it is about the lack of will. Thus citizens of Szeged served not just refugees but other co-citizens as well, by creating relatively civilised [kulturált] conditions in public spaces. (Szeged Deputy Mayor, CIV 9)

When the wooden stands were taken down at the central railway station in late September, and by which time the majority of refugees and migrants were avoiding Hungary, the long-time incumbent mayor of Szeged, László Botka, explicitly thanked all those who worked for MigSzol Szeged for their efforts.

18 See at: <http://www.migszol.com/blog> (visited 2016-06-14)

It should be noted that due to the negative stance of the national government and large sections of the Hungarian society, it was relatively unlikely that the organization would receive further substantial recognition. Volunteers were shown great gratitude from refugees, even though it is likely that many refugees would not know whether they were being helped by the local authorities or by citizen volunteers. Some locals did show their sympathy and support, by bringing food or refreshment drinks to the volunteers and refugees.

However, MigSzol Szeged did experience disparagement and outright harassment. While no volunteers was physically attacked, they often were the subject of repeated yelling and negative comments when they were seen in action (e.g. informing refugees at the stands, distributing sandwiches to them, or when cleaning the railway station after them). These verbal accusations included allegations of being naïve and failing to understand that they were working for a bad cause (i.e. helping refugees and migrants to get accommodated in Hungary).

One specific group the volunteers frequently found themselves in conflict was the local taxi-drivers. For the latter, refugees were a lucrative source of income and they did not appreciate MigSzol Szeged's information to refugees on what would be reasonable taxi rates (CIV 1, CIV 3).

3.3. Social and political impact

When it comes to national policy, MigSzol Szeged's impact is virtually non-existent. Under current conditions, it might even be seen as positive that the government at least did not attempt to hamper the group's work directly, although indirectly, allegations have been spread by officials that civilians helping migrants are supported by foreign backed organizations, in particular those backed by George Soros. Such allegations harm the image of initiatives like MigSzol Szeged, as many Hungarians uncritically buy into the story.

PB: Were there attempts to call to the attention of the state that such actions are its duties?

SN: We have been in contact with the local university, where they have surveys on public opinion (e.g. from Tárki) towards aliens and refugees. In these, Szeged citizens are much more tolerant than the national avg. Thus there is a local culture that we don't get scared by a foreigner appearing on the street.

However at local level, things have been different. As seen above, the Szeged municipality was largely helpful (CIV 1–5). According to the Deputy Mayor Sándor Nagy (CIV 9), there were some voices against the refugees and migrants among Fidesz-representatives in the local council, but their impact was limited. Still, the local population was not immune to governmental rhetoric, and the Deputy Mayor agreed that local public opinion has become more negative towards refugees and migrants (CIV 9). At the same time, a local academic (CIV 10) argued that even Szeged municipality was more refugee-friendly in rhetoric than in actual policy measures.

Dialogue between the local and national state level appears limited. According to the Deputy Mayor, they did not communicate a lot “*but received information from them making clear that they were not interested in progress in this field*” (CIV 9) However, the state is inter-linked at many levels, and one of the city-owned entities for environmental management forwarded bills related to the increased costs to the central state, but it was not known at the time of the interview with the Deputy Mayor whereas these bills were accepted.

Whether they got the money, I do not know. The city of Szeged can of course stand for these few million forints of extra costs, but the company nevertheless submitted the bill to the state given its extra spending [related to the crisis]. (Szeged Deputy Mayor, CIV 9)

Zooming into the micro-environment of MigSzol's premises, the old school-building in a suburb of Szeged, this was characterized by single family houses, and activists (CIV 1–5) local residents who live just next door tended to be sympathetic. None was bothered by the organization's activities, and several even came by to say hi or even helped.

Last, but not least, MigSzol Szeged became a community of friends, with most volunteers not previously knowing each other. Volunteers were recruited, but this did not require active work.

People would come up spontaneously. There was only one occasion, in early August 2015, when we feared we might lack volunteers because students from the university went home over the summer and people left for holiday so the number of volunteers dropped. (CIV 4)

The coordinators posted a public note in their Facebook-group (which they encouraged other volunteers to share with their contacts) which listed “7 reasons why you should volunteer with MigSzol Szeged”. The coordinator could not remember them all but it included “Helping others is a good thing”, “You will meet great people who volunteer with MigSzol”, etc. This brought a few dozen people very rapidly. Other than that, there was enough volunteers. Those interviewed listed that they were persuaded by seeing people in need, but one also mentioned that she wanted to make up her own opinion about the refugee situation.

I saw the news, and people were saying things, and I want to see the reality, because there were different versions. I went to the wooden house, and tried to ask how I could participate, that what was motivation ... I was never political¹⁹. (CIV 2)

Interviewees generally denied that their engagement had an overt political nature, and emphasized the humanitarian side. Many volunteers still keep in touch with the core group and some help with sorting remaining clothes and donating them at the border with Serbia. According to one of the main coordinators, one important benefit of having organized this community is to create a group of local citizens/activists who can be mobilized for various civic initiatives.

MigSzol Szeged focuses on the city where it started, but they were also in frequent contact with the Budapest MigSzol Group, even though the focus differed between the two groups. They also had contact with other spontaneous and sometimes very temporary MigSzol groups, such as in Békéscsaba, Cegléd, and Kiskunhalas.

After the number of refugees dropped, they have had time to develop other links, but this has mainly been carried out on an individual basis. One of the founders, for instance, has started to work for SOS Children.

In terms of political and administrative competences, the regional level in Hungary is very weak, and in a recent reforms, further administrative competences have been taken away (Buzogány and Korkut 2013). The county Csongrád does not have any real say in migration policy. According to Sándor Nagy, the Deputy Mayor of Szeged (CIV 9), “it is even pointless to contact them, counties don't

19 Note that this term is often more narrowly defined in Hungarian.

even exist in Hungary anymore”. The county did not answer a request (including a reminder) by the project team for an interview.

When it comes to the national level, as already mentioned, the name MigSzol has been used for awareness raising rather than concrete voluntary aid. Still, the successful case of the Szeged branch could inspire the main umbrella organization, or other initiatives. Through their international contacts, MigSzol Szeged is internationally well-networked with volunteers from other countries, as well as journalists who interviewed the coordinators. This can support the development of a pan-European movement of pro-refugee activists or help strengthen existing ones.

3.4. Reflections on solidarity

Within a very short period, what started as a private initiatives transformed into a large-scale humanitarian aid effort. Those who were involved managed this through a mixture of flexibility (everyone who wanted to help could do something) and the creation of rules that were largely followed (the authority of the three informal leaders was only challenged occasionally, and never successfully). In the lives of those they helped, this was just one or a few days of a long and arduous journey, but undoubtedly the personal impact of that moment was significant.

The volunteers themselves were often profoundly affected by the events that unfolded. A sense of community was swiftly created, a ‘we-feeling’ often against what was perceived as a hostile society. Nonetheless it is noteworthy that this hostility did not extend to the local authorities, with which relations were perceived to be good and productive.

The group operated under the name ‘Solidarity with Migrants in Hungary Szeged’. Although at the time, they might not have reflected on just what solidarity meant, it is clear from the interviews that it was a solidarity based on human encounters. They strived to keep away from public and political debate, and hence did not argue in terms of how Europe or Hungary should act in the face of the crisis. It also went to considerable length to remain within the boundaries set by Hungarian law, something that was easier in 2015 when laws were less restrictive regarding assisting refugees than they are in 2016.

4. THE MIGSZOL PÉCS ACTION GROUP

MigSzol Pécs was created in June 2015 in response to the plight of the growing number of migrants passing through the city. Most had been registered as asylum-seekers and had received notice that they should report to a refugee camp within a short period of time. In reality, both sides knew that the journey would not end in Hungary. Refugees were adamant that they wanted to go to Western/Northern Europe (usually Germany or Scandinavia) and the Hungarian authorities had no intention to stop them except for a brief period of a few days in late August and early September 2015 when trains to Western Europe from Budapest were cancelled²⁰. How and why migrants ended up coming through

20 The scenes when thousands of refugees were held up at the Keleti railway station (and other Budapest railway stations) led to massive media international coverage. The following story is representative: PBS Newshour, “Thousands of refugees stranded at Budapest train station”, September 2, 2015: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/thousands-refugees-stranded-budapest-train-station/>

Pécs was never clear and explanations ranged from state incapacity (CIV 4, CIV 11) to deliberate policy (CIV 16), in other words, the refugees were deliberately dispersed in order to create hostility among the local population, although without access to internal political and authority records of the time, none of these versions can be verified.

Civic activists understood that although migrants should have been sent to reception centers for processing, there were neither the facilities nor the human resources to deal with all those entering the country. For all extents and purposes, the Hungarian Immigration Office, aided by the police, made the unofficial policy decision to facilitate the onward travel of migrants thereby reducing pressure on the border crossings and nearby urban centers. It was in this context that local activists had to decide what role to play in what increasingly looked like a European and national drama.

The name MigSzol Pécs was adopted in June 2015. As with Mig Szol Szeged, one volunteer had contacts with the main MigSzol organization in Budapest and proposed that it would be good to attach to them. Again, unlike the Budapest group, the focus of MigSzol Pécs was solely on humanitarian help, their Facebook page states:

‘The members of the group are in solidarity with the refugees arriving in Hungary, and in accordance with the possibilities they have, support MigSzol activists, so that they can help those who are in need’ (translation from Hungarian).

Even if the Budapest-based organization differentiated between the activities of the organization and the members, the organizations in Pécs and Szeged rejected the hands-off advocacy position and focused on practical action. Their work consisted in providing humanitarian assistance and information to the refugees that passed through their city. Geographically, the planning and execution of this task took place in three locations.

1. **The train station:** an area not much bigger than a basketball court was the main site of action. Here MigSzol Pécs put up tents and stands where food and drinks were provided, some opportunities for hygienic needs and games for children
2. **The storage place:** When the amount of donations became unmanageable, the group needed a storage place. A large hall belonging to the socialist party MSZP was offered and accepted after negotiations with the railway station had broken down.
3. **The headquarters:** A café downtown Pécs serves as sort of a ‘hanging-out place’ for various civil society activists. Much discussion and planning around the work took place here.

Recruitment took place almost entirely online, with the Facebook group quickly growing to a peak of 500 members. One short-term volunteer describes a lot of serendipity in the way he was recruited:

“I just bumped into their Facebook profile one day, and well, I was interested in the issue. I’m a political geographer, so migration and migration affecting my country is something that political geographers are curious about. Why are they coming? What are they doing here? And so on and so on. So I was, let’s say, I would not say I was focused on this topic, but I was following the news and everything, so I bumped into this Facebook profile, where they were asking for help and donations from the public. <...> my garage is full

of old clothes, so I thought that well, why not? I can get rid of a bag of kids' clothes, I can meet a migrant, in flesh and bone and everything, in reality. Because you know at that time the news were full with news about migrants: "migrants are coming, migrants are overrunning Hungary, and so on" and if you walk in the city of Pécs you cannot see anyone, so I was curious about it, 'let's meet a real migrant', what do they look like, what do they think about us, about each other, and so on. So it was a little bit of being a researcher, out of curiosity. I decided to take part. (CIV 14)

The quote illustrates how curiosity can motivate action, 'let's meet a real migrant'. This is in direct contrast to the core volunteers who stressed the humanitarian roots of their action, or as one of the coordinators in Pécs called it 'the duty to help'.

I am like that, that for me it is a strict obligation to help such people who are poor, if I can, if my capacities allow and I have opportunity. If everybody is <content with their own> well-being and does not see that another person does not have clothes, does not have food, then there is a serious problem in society. Then there is a huge problem with this society, morally and materially. (CIV 11)

In what follows we will outline how this group functioned, and their impact they had during and after the height of activities between June – September 2015.

4.1. Decision-making: democracy, pluralism and accountability

The three initiators and key coordinators of MigSzol Pécs shared a background in civil activism, opposition to the local and national government, and, to some extent, trade union activism. Two of them were married. In terms of professions, one was a teacher, one worked in the health sector, and one had worked as a youth sports trainer for more than 30 years. These backgrounds brought a focus on people skills, such as arranging games for the refugee children while waiting at the railway station, thinking about hygiene arrangements, and how to inform whilst not having access to all information. The professional backgrounds had good operational value. However, perhaps if the group had included other professions, such as lawyers, prominent entrepreneurs or professors, they might have found it easier to communicate and establish a trusting relationship with the local authorities.

One coordinator said that he identified with the refugees because he sees them as vulnerable and in need, just like the disadvantaged background he came from.

This is nonsense what is happening in Hungary. We hear that they <the leaders> put away billions, they steal and they lie, and at the same time there are children who hunger and eat from the waste bins. <At the same time> families cannot support themselves, and children grow up with mothers and fathers without work, saying "we cannot pay for this, we don't have opportunity, we don't have money, you cannot go to that school". <Such a> child comes into such a disadvantage that he/she can never pick up. And for me, this is what solidarity means. (MigSzol Pécs Coordinator, CIV 11)

Those who started the MigSzol Pécs initiative had previous experience helping homeless people. This served as a bridging resource for work with refugees. On the other hand, the support that was

offered to the migrants was also sometimes seen by the majority population (and sometimes the refugees themselves), as support that would be better given to the local homeless.

“We always got critique (‘összehányás’, literally ‘vomiting’) from the city people, how can we help the refugees, when there are here poor people and homeless, and why don’t we help them? And no one knew, no one(!), that we had already done this for two years! We fought for people in Pécs should get a flat. It took three years until the homeless got their first flat. And we had to fight for this! (MigSzol Pécs coordinator, CIV 11)

The three leading coordinators of the group were friends and one is well-known locally as an advocate for workers’ rights and trade unions (she has a teacher’s background). She is also well connected with the leftwing media. Their friendship “tapped into longer term relationships among trade unionists, who had been organizing several events a year to support the poor, such as Christmas celebrations and rounds of aid collection, and were used to collaborate with local social workers” (CIV 15, from interview summary by CPS research fellow Céline Cantat).

In terms of political dispositions, the initiator’s standpoint was clear. One volunteer who helped for a week, described their outlook in a guarded tone:

“Well, <coordinator 1> and <coordinator 2> looked like they don’t like the government, our current leaders, and <another prominent volunteer> also. They were talking about that. I would not call myself apolitical, but I don’t really take part in this kind of debates in the street on politics, it is not my style, but working for them for a week, from time to time I just heard . . . , that they are talking about this and this, and I would say they don’t like the current government.” (CIV 14)

The volunteer was careful to avoid ascribing opinions to others. Another leader was less restrained, and repeatedly spoke of the governing Fidesz party in negative terms, for instance, as shown in the following quote:

“How can it be that out of hatred for foreigners we don’t help people who have lost their house in bombings, their families, whose fathers and mothers were captured, everyone? How can a Prime Minister have the nerve to say that they should get out of here? On which ground does he do that? If we think about himself, if he had come to Hungary like that, how would he have liked that? (CIV 14)

This view of the governing party, also spilled over to negative attitudes towards the local government, which belongs to the same party, although in the main, opposition was towards events and discourses at the national level. It should be noted that there was some political diversity, with followers of different opposition parties visiting the scene, but always doing so discreetly. Thus parties were present, but not visible:

“I can’t recall that anyone had a stand there. Rather, no party really capitalized of this issue; we did not appear with symbols or so, but sympathizers and activists of our and of other oppositional parties went there to help. I myself also brought donations, and we tried to help. Btw I found it good that no party tried to benefit from the issue in this sense.

MSZP [the Hungarian Socialist Party] for instance helped by lending their storage at the local party HQs to those who helped. But I did not see anyone's logo at the station.”
(Opposition politician, CIV 13)

In sum, there were certain common ideological backgrounds (civil society background, opinions towards the government, positive attitude to the organization of workers), but also a pluralism in terms of professional backgrounds.

When analyzing decision-making within the initiative it should be emphasized that MigSzol Pécs was not a formal registered non-governmental organization. MigSzol Pécs never considered setting up an NGO, since it takes time, is not very easy and is associated with monetary costs (CIV14). However, the reason was not a lack of capacity. Several members of the group set up a local organization that helps women and children in need, especially those affected by eviction and homelessness.

As it was unregistered, MigSzol Pécs could not process financial donations and if the refugee stream through Hungary had continued, they would have been unable to file any project applications. It also meant that there was no written, formal structure of the membership, the Board or the nature of decision-making procedures. However, within a very short period, the spontaneous initiative became a relatively large-scale humanitarian aid effort, in which up to 50 refugees a day were given food, drinks, and access to hygienic facilities, and information. When needed, they could have used their already established association to channel funds, but this option was only discussed, not used.

A working order was established in which the leading trio took decisions, after consulting with other volunteers. One coordinator claimed that final decisions often rested with him, since he was the one willing to take responsibilities in respect of the external world.

There was a small core, 15 persons, who took part all the time. If there was a problem, we sat down together and talked about it. If it was about the medical service, about food, or clothes, or connections with the authorities, we talked about it with the community, and I said what was the problem of the day, but then I had to make the decision. Because when you needed someone with ‘a big face’, someone who dares to stand up for what we do, that was me, always... I took that upon myself, and I would <be that face> towards anyone. It didn't matter with whom I had to speak, I went there. (MigSzol Pécs Coordinator, CIV 11)

Decision-making is intertwined with accountability, and the possible negative repercussions of their work. At the same time, interviewees were keen to emphasize that they could influence the details and the general direction of the initiative.

We never made a decision that was just by <the three of> us, or just by me and my wife, never... Everyone had opportunity to give recommendations, and if anyone had better ideas, we did that. It was not a dictatorship. (MigSzol Pécs Coordinator, CIV 11)

This description was reinforced by a short-term volunteer who described it as ‘practice’ that two or three persons making the decisions. This was rarely contested, and when it was, it only was about minor issues. One interviewee recall only two instances when tensions arose. The first happened in the storage location which belonged to the local Socialist Party. While party affiliates were mostly absent, the volunteer saw one socialist representative arguing how the work should be organized in terms of which

donations should be taken where and when. The second conflict, took place between one coordinator and some young female volunteers new at the railway station. The young volunteers wanted to give more material goods and provide more help to some refugees than the coordinator thought possible, both in terms of fairness and future needs:

“... sometimes there were other volunteers during that single week I worked, who came for the first time, and they started to work with very great , with very great passion, and wanted to give everything to everyone at the same time. They felt they have to act like this, I don’t know why. <Coordinator 2> told the two girls, “slow down”, “don’t do that”, “don’t give everything to one family or one guy”, “try to keep some system in this”, “This is not the time for eating. Now they have to choose clothes for themselves first, and when they are ready, pack left-over clothes in the van, pack their used clothes in the trash, they have to wait half an hour. Don’t fulfill all their wishes at the moment.” Something like that, but I don’t think that is bad about the organizations. (CIV 14)

Hence, day-to-day work proceeded with only minor difficulties and conflicts. Due to the short operation time of the organization, there never was substantial pressure from volunteers for increased participation in decision-making or greater accountability of their coordinators. As far as it was possible to gather from the interviews, there were no issues surrounding transparency, for instance around the use and distribution of donated goods.

4.2. Relations and recognition: MigSzol Pécs and other actors

In the course of providing assistance to refugees at the railway station, MigSzol Pécs established contacts with several actors, although most remained undeveloped. Among those that could be expected to have relevance for their work one can list the following: local (city) authorities, the national Railway company (MÁV), the police authority, the Immigration Office, other charity, civil society or religious groups, local citizens, parties, and right-extreme movements. Table 1 provides an overview of the relationship as perceived by Migszol Pécs. It should be emphasized that the table draws on an analysis of qualitative material reflecting a limited number of actions. There might be diverging perspectives on some points and further research would be recommended to explore the nature of these relationships in depth.

Table 1. Overview of relationship between MigSzol Pécs and other actors as perceived by MigSzol Pécs during summer 2015.

Actor	Possible interactions	Actual interactions (summer 2015)	Type and level of cooperation
Local (city) authorities	Practical support (electricity, water, etc.) or practical obstacle (not allowing activities in certain areas)	Limited.	Negative (the local authorities describes its own role as limited but does not want to portray the cooperation as such as negative).
Police Authority	Provider of information on procedures. Provider of information on refugees prior to arrival in Pécs.	Connections to police trade union partially helped overcome some of the initial difficulties, but distrust on both sides still hampered smooth operations.	Negative à neutral.
Immigration Office	Partner in providing support. Provider of information on procedures. Provider of information on refugees prior to arrival in Pécs.	Provided daily on how many refugees were on their way to Pécs. At one point tried to help to find a support location, but did not succeed. Otherwise limited interaction.	Neutral to positive.
National State Railways (MÁV)	Practical support (storage, bad weather location), provider of hygienic facilities.	Difficult interactions with management in Pécs and Budapest. Perception that little or no support was given. Sometimes fruitful temporary cooperation 'on the ground' with staff at MAV.	Negative.
Business	Donations, practical support.	Limited and low-profile (donations often given on the condition of anonymity).	Neutral.
Other charity, religious, civil society groups	Coordination around provision of assistance.	Largely absent, although Baptist engagement were mentioned by two interviewees, and the Maltese Order by one interviewee.	Neutral.
Local citizens	Positive or negative recognition to volunteers. Providing volunteers.	Many citizens volunteered, but the majority were passive.	Passive.
Political parties	Solidarity expressions as ideology and/or political propaganda.	Not visible at the station, but practical support (tents, storage) provided by the Socialist party. Members of Democratic Coalition were frequently present at the site (without political symbols).	Limited.
Right-extreme individuals and/or groups	Possible interruptions of work.	A few occasions when right-wing representatives came to the site, but no confrontations.	Negative.
Other Migszol Groups	Possible coordination of assistance and information.	Some contacts with MigSzol in Budapest, very limited with other MigSzol groups in the country.	Limited.

The evidence gathered by the SOLIDUS research project team in Pécs suggests that the relationship between the local authorities and Migszol Pécs was difficult. However, it should be emphasized that this was not a picture the local officials wanted to convey. The following quotes illustrate these divergences.

City of Pécs	MigSzol Pécs
<p>Here, the municipality had a certain helping or coordinating role in maintaining civilized conditions, cooperating with MÁV [the Hungarian State Railways], for instance while its trains were not yet arriving or ready to depart. Again, I cannot over-stress the important role of the police here, with whose help the transition of migrants did not take more than a day. The municipality had some costs related to the tents etcetera installed at the station. Secondly, local and regional authorities – such as the police, disaster recovery, public utility companies, etc. – were also involved, mostly coordinating their work with national authorities such as the police and the army. Two fora were held in Pécs for consultation between various levels of the administration, in which I also participated. As an additional information – but don't take my word for it – due to the specific physical geography of the borderlands here, featuring the Drava river, crossing the border is more difficult in this region. (City official, CIV 12)</p>	<p>I do not know of any concrete support by the municipality. Primarily around the train station, civilians gathered to provide some basic – including medical – help for the refugees. The latter first crossed the city in an unorganized way, later a little more organized. The whole issue was burdened by the news that a refugee camp might be set up not far from Pécs, at Martonfa, a settlement of a few hundred inhabitants directly bordering Pécs. The idea that the state-owned shooting-range there would be transformed into such a camp caused some fear, and Pécs did not take a stand on whether they support or reject the plan. (Opposition politician, CIV 13)</p>

It should be noted that while the municipality claimed a coordinating function, it could provide few specific details of what they actually did:

Well, you see, I do not want to turn away from the question, but I do not know on which exact days the city did or did not provide something. What I do know is that we were approached by certain groups with some queries, but I don't know to what extent we fulfilled these. When the municipality was approached for e.g. three tents or something similar it certainly did not provide them, but gave a phone number to somebody who might be able to help. The municipality had more of a background role; we did not directly engage ourselves, e.g. we did not set up a stand (at the station) to provide e.g. mobile toilets but relied on the mentioned actors as this had a regulated order that worked through the cooperation of the given responsible persons. When we were approached with queries, we primarily channeled these into the right, regulated order.” (City Official, CIV 12)

There are good grounds for believing that their claim for an overall coordination function is overstated. Volunteers working on the ground do not remember any significant occasions. The municipality might have forwarded calls from citizens to organizations such as Red Cross, but we have no evidence to substantiate any significant coordinating activity.

There was no direct contact between MigSzol Pécs and the central authorities. The negative attitude held by many volunteers towards the government meant that the national political development was the background against which local events were interpreted, acted upon and assessed.

Actually, the expectation is ... or it is even not the expectation, and I am angry with the government, if we get back to the government, when the first migrant came to Pécs, and we said that we could help as civil society, and when we were already into this and the process which we had set up worked, the food, the clothes, we solved everything. Then, all these responsibilities which we carried out, then the government acted as if there had been an offer/a donation by the government, I was very upset about that when in September there was a government meeting, and Orbán said that 'we gave a pretty sum to the civil society in connection with the refugee crisis', and I ask 'where is this money? where is this sum?', it is sure that I in Pécs did not get a cent from this, so I don't know from where he says that he gave money. (Coordinator, CIV 11)

Thus, negative assessments of the situation by the government party caused frustration and anger. While relations with other political parties were more benign, most volunteers were eager to portray themselves as neutral. They received practical help from the socialist party, for example, a tent, but volunteers stressed how organizers insisted that they hide the logo of the socialist party. No politicians made any public visits to the refugee assistance station.

After a while, we had so much food and clothes that we didn't know where to store it, so there was an idea, that because we are at the train station, I went to the leader at MAV (Hungarian railways) and asked them to help us with a place to store the donations, so that we don't have carry it every day. But <after much talk> the end was that we did not get anything. <...> I got so upset that I told my wife that we should give a 'damn' about it, how can it be that when we are here, the railway cannot give us one space to keep the food and the clothes? So this is how it works, they are totally dumb. <...>

And then a politician from the Socialist Party walked by and said that he could see that I am very upset, and asked why. I told him that in this fucking country you cannot arrange that someone gives us storage place. We don't ask for anything, just for us to be able to put in the food there. Then he said, that he can offer for us a storage in the party house, and we brought it there, and from that moment people said of us that we are communist rats, because communist finances us. But we didn't do anything here at the place with the refugees for neither the Socialist Party (MSZP) nor the Democratic Coalition (DK). We were just civil society people who felt that we can help. There were no logo, no party name, people came with perhaps two bottle of mineral water and left it. (Coordinator, CIV 11)

Most frustration on a daily level was created by the group's interaction with various levels of Hungarian State Railways.

The most important was this colossal passivity, at the railway network. Do they have right to be here? Do they not have the right? Suddenly they would say that this is a working area, we have to take them away, etc. The use of the toilet, etc. No-one wanted to give any information. Who has the responsibility for the toilets? For the cleanliness of the moving WCs, I asked the leader of the Hungarian Railways, so I called around, and turned out that they belong to the Budapest part of the Hungarian Railways! And I had to tell them to come and change the toilets! But the biggest thing was this constant fear that there

would be rain. Because I saw that the situation was such that we would not be able to solve it if it would rain. Because we did not have anywhere to bring them. Three times there were rain, and we could solve it by someone brought military tarp. Someone counted that in five square meters, 30 people were sheltered. (CIV 11)

The quote indicates a range explanations for the behavior of the railway company, from unwillingness to take responsibility, ‘buck passing’, and a fairly absent central state creating both inconsistencies and indecision.

Religious group-identification was rare, but one volunteer cited religious reasons for involvement. She was “from the Baptist church which was actively supporting refugees and supports the homeless, which she contrasted with the official Catholic Church in Pécs which <she claimed> refused to take part in refugee support .” (CIV 17, summary from interview summary by CPS research fellow Celine Cantat). An archival search of media reports from Pécs at the time do not yield any references to Catholic church statements or involvement with the refugee situation, neither in positive nor negative terms.

There was little external recognition of this work. There were no awards for the volunteers, and with a relatively modest scale compared to Szeged or Budapest, there was less media interest. When they did come, it was mostly because of the village protests against the planned refugee camp in a Martonfa.

Some local political actors declared their respect. One local politician said about MigSzol Pécs:

“I respect it fully. Every day, 10–15 persons gathered who worked in their free-time, despite any chance of recognition. I think this was brave and correct. I tried to help them with media contacts, and brought some donations myself.” (CIV 13)

By contrast, one of the coordinators describes how the reactions he got from the majority of the local population:

Well, what happened is that I am a ‘dirty communist, a left-liberal communist, dirty DK (democratic coalition party), what you can just say, ‘homeland traitor’, they put a ‘blood fee’ on my head because I helped the refugees. Anything bad that you can spit on a person, or say about a person, in a town, I got that, and we got it, and we get it to this day. They know that I am against the government, but we did this anyhow, and to this day, I would not do it differently, today I would do the same thing, because I am not interested of these criticisms, because the people who criticize <literal translation: ‘who vomit in your face’> ... I always ask ‘do you help you help your own society?’”, “if you see someone who is lying down in the street, you step over that person and continue walking”, I don’t do this, and I have a good heart. (CIV 11)

Again, this quote bears witness to the fundamental humanitarian impulse which drove these action. These negative reactions can be viewed in the light of Pécs having served as a European Capital of Culture in 2008. Then, the main message was that Pécs was an outward facing, multi-ethnic city with a turbulent past of invasion, siege and conquest. In this sense, the city might be expected to have a civic basis for solidarity and empathy. According to one local opposition politician, such a predisposition can easily wither under the twin pressures of a vociferous government campaign against refugees and difficult local socio-economic conditions.

“Thus the basis is there; but when you walk or drive around the city and bump into a poster every few minutes, and hear it on TV in every bloc of advertisements, people do begin to change. A brainwash is continuously ongoing. And when some people who cannot buy sandwiches for their own children see that they [refugees] are just throwing them around, these create feelings that leave impressions on people, and are effective. Some people may never have seen a foreigner in their lives, and nevertheless may become skeptical. I don’t know what will happen here. I get snide comments from people they hope my wife and daughter will also be raped by a migrant. (Opposition Politician, CIV 13)

Due to its close proximity to the Croatian border, parallels with the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s are also easy to make. The same interviewee claimed that then, things had been different.

In Szigetvár and other places, one could hear battles on the other side of the border. At that time, there were refugee camps in Szigetvár as well, including Muslims, but no one bothered about that and we could deal with them decently. So I don’t understand what has changed in these 15–20 years. When you mention this, people say that was different as those were Europeans, and these are Asians. (Opposition Politician, CIV 13)

Calls to prioritize ethnic based solidarity could also be mobilized. In other words, Hungarians should care about ‘domestic Roma’, i.e. another vulnerable group. In general, there were few comments along these lines, but one volunteer did witness an incident which partly illustrates the tendency:

There was only one incident. There was a ... I was watching from a distance, maybe half-drunk guy started speaking up loud, saying something about refugees, how much it costs of taxpayers, and why do not we spend it on Roma people instead. But he was alone, standing in a corner. We sent him away, we told him that this is not state money, this is volunteers’ donations. (Short-term volunteer, CIV 14)

We also encountered a discussion which showed how the presence of a European identity can work against expressing solidarity with refugees. The media in Hungary have frequently reported an uptake in property purchase by Western Europeans seeking to find a place in Hungary where they are ‘protected’ from multiculturalism and migrants. One interviewee, a local politician claimed to have been at first skeptical, but having encountered this himself.

I don’t know whether this is interesting, but our region also hosts a number of German and Dutch residents, and they say more of them might be coming now as no migrants are coming here. I also work with insurance and have a Dutch couple now as clients. They said they had difficulties selling their house a year ago, but now demand [from Dutch buyers (ed.)] has increased as many people come here due to the refugee crisis. They were normal, open Dutch people, so I was really surprised that now even they have such attitudes. Before I thought that this idea [of more Western Europeans buying property in Hungary due to the refugee crisis] was just a Hungarian self-justification, but hearing it from Dutch people started me to think about the issue as well. (Opposition politician CIV13)

Any such ascription of actions to be based on different national or European identity is of course open to alternative interpretations. Further explorations of such notions of ‘Europeanness’ (understood here as a ‘closing’ or ‘excluding’ rather than integrating) is likely to be conducted by researchers from the Hungarian academic community in the coming years.

4.3. Social and political impact

The volunteers at the Pécs train station did not save lives. Unlike in Greece or Italy, refugees were not drowning or starving, but often hungry, tired and badly clothed. Moreover, the scale of their work was nowhere near the magnitude found in Budapest and Szeged, where most refugees passed.

At the same time, for the estimated 3,500 migrants and refugees who travelled through this town as another station in their long journey towards Western or Northern Europe, the importance of being offered food, rudimentary shelter and help, had a more inscrutable and unquantifiable significance. It meant the possibility to continue and for yet another day, their journey was not over.

Beyond the importance of the humanitarian assistance, all interviewees assessed the impact of the refugee initiative on local policy and popular opinion as marginal. It is possible that the local majority were unaware of the humanitarian work going in their local train station. Neither the group, nor the local media saw the need to make the story into the news.

I think the majority of the inhabitants weren't aware of this thing, not at all. It wasn't in the main square, it was not in some very crowded place. Everyone use the other part of the station. You will see, it is in the back of this building, so everyone use that (other) way. Maybe those who came by car, there is a car park, and walked next to us. (Short-term volunteer, CIV 14)

All in all, the impact of this phenomenon on local administration as well as on citizenry was limited. At the same time, when speaking to national law enforcement I hear that a substantial share of their personnel is still placed in the borderlands, but we feel practically nothing of this here in the city.” (City official, CIV 12)

Thus, those who were against the refugees did not change their minds. On the other hand, for many volunteers the personal impact was evident. Many described it as an important time in their life, as a period when deep personal satisfaction could be derived.

I can honestly say that I felt that these were my life's three most beautiful months and if I could do it, I would go to southern Africa, to help with humanitarian (Hung.: karitatív) work, because these are better people than here, because there are people among which I can feel at home with myself. (CIV 11)

At the same time, it did not lead to changes in their fundamental beliefs.

Well, actually it did not change my mind about migration and migrants, because I used to think the same before. So it just proved myself that I'm right. Well, <about> the migrants and migration, so don't believe all this media hype surrounding migration in Hungary,

don't believe the billboards, don't believe the politicians. (CIV 14)

At the same time, all involved were sensitive to public debates, and the spokesperson took part in them even at personal risk.

As mentioned earlier, neither the national nor the local media reported on the situation in Pécs and there was little awareness raising activities beyond the recruitment that took place via social media. From this it could be derived that volunteers came from segments of the population opposed to the government or the popular line concerning the threat presented by migrants and asylum seekers. Their position was in opposition to the dominant portrayal and motivated by humanitarian concerns rather than overt policy or political positions. As we have seen, the mission was to help in generic terms rather than promoting a particular policy solution to the wider question of mass migration.

Opinion polls consistently show that the government campaign against refugees in Hungary has reinforced latent xenophobic attitudes. Nonetheless, according to both the city leadership and Mígszol Pécs leadership, the city atmosphere could not be described in terms of fear. A city official attributed this to efficient law enforcement:

“There was little fear at least among the wide segments of society, as law enforcement was efficient. Neither public security nor public atmosphere was affected in negative ways. (City official, CIV 12)

The local public debate centered on the plans to set up a refugee camp in a small village next to Pécs, Martonfa.

For a short time, the planned camp at Martonfa – located 15km from the city – caused some concern. But even here, demand appeared for information rather than substantial fear being present. Now there is an official decision that the camp will not be installed at Pécs. (City official, CIV 12)

What the city official calls ‘concern’, others would describe as fundamental opposition from the affected villagers of Martonfa, who staged marches and sit-downs on the land intended for this use, which formerly had been for military use. It should be noted that a politician who had made otherwise had a pro-refugee profile nonetheless was similarly against the set-up of the camp.

<We> feared possible tension if the refugees had had to walk from the railway station to the camp. We could see that they did not receive proper provision, their wounds were also just taken care of by volunteer doctors and civilians. We thus feared that if coupled with bad communication, all this might lead to disaster. Thus we also participated in demonstrations organized by far-right Jobbik [against setting up the camp at Martonfa]. I was almost beaten at one of these, when I expressed that we do not oppose the camp at Martonfa because we don't want to see refugees in the area, but because we don't find the proposed site appropriate for receiving them. We think such a site should not be located in a small settlement but ideally in a city. (CIV 13)

4.4. Reflections on solidarity

The study of MigSzol Pécs demonstrates how a solidarity-based practice can emerge and gain momentum based on past identifications, actions, experiences and competences. The initiative mobilized and organized volunteers, fundraised, organized basic logistics, reduced conflict and helped people on their journey. They did this while encountering many barriers, primarily due to unwillingness of relevant local authorities to take the lead.

As the number of incoming refugees drastically decreased - in Pécs it decreased to zero after September 2015 when laws restricting the legal maneuver for both migrants and volunteers were put in place - the group has been able to do little to help those fleeing to Europe. On the other hand, there could well be a legacy of solidified dedication and willingness to give practical solidarity to people in need, and for others to maintain an open and pluralistic perspective on the contentious issue of migration in Europe.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper described the conditions under which spontaneous solidarity was organized with a focus on relations within and between different groups. The case studies showed that individually expressed practical solidarity by volunteers could have a marked impact on the lives of those transiting, even in an adverse political climate. At the same time, the quality and variety of relations with state entities, such as local government, play an important role in determining how such solidarity is operationalized. We argue that this aspect of state/society relations was generally overlooked in media and policy discussions surrounding the events of last summer, and that further academic research could make an important contribution. We acknowledge that this research, also relies more on accounts by the civil sector than the local state level, but by conducting in-depth interviews with both sides we hope to encourage future research into combined actions. We would not go as far to say that the civic responses in Szeged and Pécs constitute a form of co-production of public services (Pestoff, V. and Brandsen, T. (eds.) 2009). There was not enough evidence of joint deliberation over the design and delivery of services, and it was also highly uncertain what would be the longer term relationship between the various parties once the immediate crisis had passed.

We argue that it is important to emphasize the temporal dimension of the events and relations portrayed in these case studies. Due to their relatively short duration, the discussion often focused on exceptional, emergency and unprecedented nature of the situation. This encouraged many, including those involved, to avoid questions on migration and asylum, and instead to focus on immediate and pressing humanitarian needs. Nevertheless, the longer-term effects of the 2015 civic mobilizations on what might be called the technology of participation may remain a fruitful line for social inquiry. They will continue to inform a plethora of Hungarian and European debates on citizenship, entitlement and the scope and indeed the limits of solidarity. As these discussions will continue for some time, we would encourage further empirical and analytical accounts of the events of summer 2015.

6. SOURCE MATERIAL

Documents

MigSzol Hungary: <http://www.migszol.com>

MigSzol Pécs Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/908956915817027/>

MigSzol Szeged Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=MigSzol%20Szeged>

Media articles in English and Hungarian related to MigSzol Szeged activities

Media articles in Hungarian related to MigSzol Pécs activities

Interviews

- CIV 1 – volunteer MigSzol Szeged, anonymity requested; June 6, 2016
- CIV 2 – volunteer MigSzol Szeged, anonymity requested; June 6, 2016
- CIV 3 – volunteer MigSzol Szeged, anonymity requested; June 2016
- CIV 4 – Ágnes Szőke-Tóth, MigSzol Szeged coordinator (logistics); June 6, 2016
- CIV 5 – Márk Z. Kékesi, MigSzol Szeged coordinator (communications); June 6, 2016
- CIV 6 – volunteer MigSzol Szeged, anonymity requested; June 6, 2016
- CIV 7 – volunteer MigSzol Szeged, anonymity requested; June 6, 2016
- CIV 8 – Academic, law, Szeged University, anonymity requested, June 6, 2016
- CIV 9 – Sándor Nagy, Deputy mayor of Szeged (Együtt); June 7, 2016
- CIV 10 – Viktor Pál, Deputy Head of the Department of Economic and Human Geography, Szeged University
- CIV 11: Gábor Garzó, MigSzol Pécs coordinator, July 18, 2016, core interview
- CIV 12: Pécs City official, July 18, 2016, anonymity requested
- CIV 13: Balázs Berkecz, member of presidency of the political party *Együtt* (Together) and outspoken for refugee-rights in southern Hungary, July 18, 2016
- CIV 14: Short-term (one-week) volunteer with MigSzol Pécs in 2015, interviewed July 18, 2016
- CIV 15: Erzsebet Nagy, teacher, trade unionist, MigSzol Pécs, online interview, September 28, 2016. Additionally *interviewed by CPS Research Fellow Celine Cantae outside the framework of the SOLIDUS project but with the interview relating to several SOLIDUS themes, June 16, 2016*
- CIV 16: Anita Garzo, MigSzol Pécs coordinator, *interview carried out by CPS Research Fellow Celine Cantae outside the framework of the SOLIDUS project but with the interview relating to several SOLIDUS themes, June 16, 2016*
- CIV 17: Volunteer with MigSzol Pécs, *interview carried out by CPS Research Fellow Celine Cantae outside the framework of the SOLIDUS project but with the interview relating to several SOLIDUS themes, June 16, 2016*
- CIV 18: UNHCR representative 1, *interview carried out by CPS Research Fellow Celine Cantae outside the framework of the SOLIDUS project but with the interview relating to several SOLIDUS themes, June 16, 2016*
- CIV 19: UNHRC representative 2, *interview carried out by CPS Research Fellow Celine Cantae outside the framework of the SOLIDUS project but with the interview relating to several SOLIDUS themes, June 16, 2016*

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