

European NGO's and the Refugee Crisis. Case studies of Serbia and Hungary

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Abstract

A deeper understanding of what civil societies and NGO's are, and what they offer for the communities in which they are active, will help establish a starting point. Moving further we can attempt to identify the main ways in which they act to achieve their objectives and then apply our analysis to a few examples of NGO's involved in the refugee crisis at the moment.

In the context of a refugee crisis that puts pressure on local governments to act in managing a large influx of migrants pass through its borders, as is the case of countries such as Turkey, Serbia, Greece, Hungary or Austria, local NGO's can face an especially strong pressure to put together a proper response in due time.

Keywords: NGO's, Refugee Crisis, Serbia, Hungary

THE EVENTS IN Syria have provoked a grave humanitarian problem that affects not only the neighbouring countries of the war-torn state, but also the ones located on other continents where many victims seek escape from the conflict. Governments and international organizations have taken different stances on the matter, each underlining particular interests that they hold above everything else in their approach. Some have welcomed the displaced people and have sought to offer them safe haven, others have chosen to keep them in specially set up camps until they are able to return to their homeland, while others have closed their borders completely. Public opinion has also been sharply divided between those who wish to help these people by welcoming them as their neighbours and those who look at the masses with suspicion, dreading the potential dangers they see in letting so many people into their countries.

In this difficult context, several non-governmental organizations have risen to the challenge of responding to the crisis. Through the means available to them, many have attempted to help the people afflicted by the events. Working with other institutions

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and authorities, they represent actors that warrant more consideration and a more careful review of the role they play in supporting humanitarian causes worldwide. While it would be unrealistic to say that any and all such organizations are bound to act when faced with such situations, it is important to note that those that have become involved do provide some improvement to the situation, at the lowest levels. This chapter will attempt to offer a perspective on how civil society takes a stance on such an issue. As such, the focus will be on understanding these actors' standing on the international stage, on their objectives and interests, on their actions and their results.

A deeper understanding of what civil societies and NGO's are, and what they offer for the communities in which they are active, will help establish a starting point. Moving further we can attempt to identify the main ways in which they act to achieve their objectives and then apply our analysis to a few examples of NGO's involved in the refugee crisis at the moment. We will be looking for connections between such organizations and humanitarianism in modern society. The main questions that we seek to answer are:

1. What type of NGO's are involved in this crisis?
2. What are their objectives and their means of actions?
3. What is their impact in the broader perspective of a crisis that sparks intense debates on all levels of the international and national stage?

The last question in particular will be difficult to answer, seeing how the work of such organizations is often not as well documented and reported, both internally and externally, as that of an official governmental institution, for example. As such it can be difficult to determine the true implications that the actions of NGO's have in influencing the general problem. Not only that, but it can be difficult to analyse them as a united front, acting towards the same ends, seeing how even when their objectives are similar, they often act completely independent from one another. This could be considered a major detriment in achieving their full potential.

The cases studied in this chapter will view the general situation of some European countries affected by the crisis, where NGO's have made a mark. Thus we have the case of Serbia, where civil society is providing a rapid and effective response along with other important actors in the region. We also have the case of Hungary, where institutions have reacted defensively to the tide of refugees, yet organizations and citizens have tried to actively help them nonetheless. The humanitarian response has been visible in these countries and non-state actors have been at the forefront.

Defining NGO's and their place in international humanitarian aid

Non-governmental organizations have existed in various forms throughout modern history. Examples ranging from the associations advocating equal voting rights for all people, environmental protection organizations and charities have shown the ability to grow from local groups to transnational actors (Davies 2014). Their efforts are often recognized by both states and international institutions and they change the way in which certain issues are viewed and solved. Ever since the formation of the United Nations, NGO's have been valued as providers of expertise in their field of interest and partners in realizing projects aimed at helping communities at regional or international levels (Martens 2005).

In 1989 the World Bank released Operational Directive 14.70, which sets a framework for involving NGO's in its activities. This document offers us a useful summary of the main elements that define this type of organization. In essence, they represent private, non-profit, value-based associations that are unaffiliated to any government (World Bank 2008). Acting in specific areas of interest (ex. Environmental protection, humanitarianism or education) they carry out activities that promote certain values and bring about a change in a community that they see as being beneficial to the people that form the said community. They are largely funded by contributions from their members, donations or certain funds established by states or international bodies, with the entire budget invested in their activities. Through their constitution, the members of an NGO exercise the right to vote on the principal policies of the organization, including electing representatives and management. When acting on a national or international level, many NGO's develop an expertise in their field and are able to provide valuable information that can be used in drafting policies or policy recommendations by the proper authorities.

Often characterized as supporting charity and development at a societal level, NGO's take initiative on many humanitarian causes. The basic principles of humanitarianism, as established by the United Nations General Assembly, strongly resonate with the basic principles under which most organizations operate. The desire to protect life and respect for human beings (Humanity), to act in accordance only with the need of a person (Impartiality), without being influenced by outside factors of power (Independence) or being drawn to choose sides in conflict (Neutrality) (United Nations 1991), are paramount to an organizations' system of values. Thus we can understand that they will seek to direct their own resources towards specific groups of people in need.

It should be noted that organizations have as a defining feature their reliance on volunteering members and on the funding that they can receive through grants given by private or public institutions. It is therefore essential for an NGO to be able to offer com-

prehensive and feasible programs and projects to access the necessary funding and support from national or international authorities, as well as to have the capabilities to attract potential volunteers to help in their cause ([Gibbs et al. 1999](#)). One could argue that giving people the opportunity to volunteer is also an important step in fulfilling a group's goal. By bringing previously uninvolved members of the community in the campaigns, they learn the values of the organizations, become influenced by them and integrate them in their own way of thinking. This can create an ever larger base of supporters that will drive society towards a change of values, attitudes and practices.

In the context of a refugee crisis that puts pressure on local governments to act in managing a large influx of migrants pass through its borders, as is the case of countries such as Turkey, Serbia, Greece, Hungary or Austria, local NGO's can face an especially strong pressure to put together a proper response in due time. However, one could argue that it is in these situations that more people feel encouraged to volunteer and help in the unfolding situation. Associations that are able to put together an adequate structure to facilitate volunteering can attract many members of society who want to contribute, as they would feel safer in the group and gain confidence that collective effort will bring changes that individual sacrifice would not. Donations coming from concerned citizens could also be more easily attainable, as many are drawn to the humane and charitable nature of organizations that seek to help large groups in need of help.

The Operational Directive of the World Bank states some of the key factors in an NGO's success. These include partnerships with donors and institutions, a political environment where comprehensive laws regulate and encourage NGO activity, the ability to operate with limited resources in an efficient manner, to promote community involvement and to respond rapidly and effectively as soon as problems arise ([World Bank 2008](#)). These are elements that we will see to a certain degree in our case studies.

Case study: Serbia

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, over 485,000 had registered their intention to seek asylum in the year 2015, at the end of November ([UNHRC Serbia](#)). Even before the influx reached its peak in October, there were already large groups arriving in July-August. Many of those who wished to go further into the European continent would become stranded for long periods of time, especially after the neighbouring countries Hungary and Croatia closed their borders. Several camps were set up near Serbian border towns, while a large percentage remained near Belgrade waiting to be registered. Both national and international organizations have intervened to

help in managing the situation. The UN Serbian Country Team has allocated a total budget of 7.45 million dollars to offer basic necessities for the victims ([UNHRC Serbia 2015](#)).

NGO's cooperated with authorities and specialized agencies right from the beginning in order to cover the most important needs of the people arriving in the country: access to food, water, sanitation, housing and information. We can find examples of projects undertaken by organizations to start fundraising and donation campaigns, put in place regular supply deliveries, establish contact with major refugee groups, bring experts to offer them legal assistance, counselling and other forms of assistance.

Refugee Aid Serbia gives us an example of how local NGO's were able to create a common platform on which to act. It was formed as an umbrella group of 9 organizations, in order to pool their efforts to provide aid for the refugees stranded in Belgrade ([Haines-Young 2015](#)). These included local branches of international organizations such as Save the Children and ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency), as well as local organizations such as Giving Back Serbia, the Anna and Vlade Divac Foundation and the Belgrade Foreign Visitors Club. Most of them were concerned with different social problems than those posed by the influx of migrants in the capital, yet they were able to find common ground in the desire to offer better conditions for the refugees. With the help of their extensive network of contacts and related organizations, they were able to bring over 500 volunteers from over 50 countries to Belgrade to assist in their daily activities and have been continuously gathering donations since September 2015 ([Refugee Aid Serbia 2015](#)). They based their approach on the idea that intervention has to be swift and effective, in order to maintain a steady flow of aid for the refugees. As such, they partnered with local businesses, such as clothes manufacturers, food and water suppliers, transportation firms to deliver the supplies anywhere needed free of charge, telecom companies for Wifi and charging stations and individual donors who would offer to pay for accommodation in hotels for children or families ([Haines-Young 2015](#)). From the end of September until the present, Refugee Aid Serbia has been conducting its operations with increasing support from local and international communities.

The reports made by the UNHRC show how each of these organizations were also able to implement specific programs, as part of the broader efforts to assist refugees. Save the Children and SOS Children, for example, focused on offering housing, sanitation, psycho-social support and protection for children and their families in designated safe spaces ([UNHCR Serbia 2015](#)). Other specialized organization offered legal advice or translation in languages spoken by the displaced people. In the latter category we find the example of The Belgrade Centre of Human Rights, an organization concerned with the theory and practice of human rights.

Since 1995, The Belgrade Centre of Human Rights have formed a team of profession-

als in fields concerning social/political sciences, economics and law, in order to both study and promote human rights nationally ([Belgrade Center for Human Rights 2015](#)). Their usual activities include publishing, researching and reporting the state of human rights in the country, informing the public and putting forwards suggestions for laws and reforms of state institutions. More recently they have focused intensely on providing legal assistance to asylum seekers and humanitarian assistance. Together with the UNHCR they conducted a 12-month project, starting in January 2015, to bring legal advisors to the asylum seekers entering the country. Their stated objectives are to help people understand the rights granted to them by national and international law, so that they may be able to apply for asylum respecting the necessary procedures ([Belgrade Center for Human Rights 2015](#)). The contact they establish with the refugees also helps in signaling potential human rights abuses they may have been subjected to. As recently as November 2015 a report was issued by the organization regarding the inadequate treatment they received from the Bulgarian police, as they were passing through the country to reach Serbia. The Centre has gone so far as to submit recommendations for the Bulgarian authorities on how to better handle the flow of refugees and migrants and how to prevent abuses. These focused not only on the way in which the Bulgarian authorities instruct and monitor their agents, but also on allowing civil society and outside institutions (the Ombudsman, the National Preventive Mechanism against Torture) to assist in managing the situation, to ease tensions that may occur between the arriving people and the police ([Belgrade Centre for Human Rights 2015](#)).

We can observe from their example that an NGO can use their influence to interact with state institutions, to implement new policies and procedures to resolve matters. By encouraging debate over the policies regarding the granting of asylum or migration policies, for example, long term legislative solutions may be obtained. To date it is difficult to accurately ascertain the true extent to which their contribution has influenced local institutions to change regulations and practices, however the fact that they bring these topics into discussion is important for the democratic process and decision making cycle, nonetheless.

Case study: Hungary

The Hungarian government has come under criticism from media, international institutions and advocacy groups for the decisions they made regarding the problem of the asylum seekers. The national Parliament brought a series of amendments to the country's legislation that allows authorities to declare a state of crisis in certain areas on the ba-

sis of trouble caused by “mass immigration” authorizes the use of military personnel to help in managing the situation, criminalizes illegal border crossing, as well as damaging barriers ([Human Rights Watch 2015](#)). The borders were closed, fences and rows of razor wire were put in place and both police forces and soldiers on guard had authorization to use their weapons in defense against unarmed refugees. Several people were convicted of illegal border crossing and placed in detention camps, where sometimes asylum seekers were also housed until they received response on their applications. Many others were sent back to Serbia, Greece or Macedonia, which were declared “safe areas” for them ([Népszabadság Zrt. 2015](#)). Riots were documented between the groups of people seeking to enter or pass through the country and the authorities keeping them in place. Civil society groups have generally declared their dissatisfaction with the fact that they were not allowed in the transit zones along the Hungarian Serbian border, where many of these altercations took place. As a result of these new legislative measures, over 1,100 people were being detained for illegal border crossing in October (though the number has steadily decreased), the number of people arriving the country, asylum applications and asylum statuses granted all fell drastically ([UNHCR 2015](#)).

Hungary has taken a firm stance against the plan to redistribute asylum seekers in various EU countries by varying quotas and it has been reported that they launched media campaigns meant to deter others from coming to Europe. Excessive use of force in dealing with protesting migrants, unsuitable conditions in the detention and reception camps, slow response to asylum requests and hostile language used by local politicians to describe them has been reported ([Amnesty International 2015](#)). In this situation local NGO's faced difficulties due to a general reluctance of the governing bodies and a majority of the population to assist the asylum seekers and welcome them into the country. They attempted not only to directly help these people, but also to urge local authorities to reconsider their stance.

One example is a joint statement released in September 2015, with over 40 signatories, in which the government is called upon to improve its efforts in managing the situation at Roszke, cooperate with the proper international bodies and ensure that they act with “due respect for human rights” ([Greenpeace Hungary 2015](#)). In the small town neighbouring the Serbian border, hundreds of people were forced to a halt on their way into the EU, and kept outside by officers assigned to control the flow of people arriving into the country ([Field 2015](#)). On 16th of September there was an altercation that received international attention, as police armed in full riot gear pushed back the refugees trying to get past a crossing gate. A UNHCR representative commented that they had the necessary logistics to help the authorities manage the situation, yet their offers were rejected. ([Field 2015](#))

What some national news outlets saw as a violent act committed by asylum seekers

angered at the border patrols, others saw as a failure of the government to adequately handle the refugee situation, leaving organizations, independent groups and international organs to attempt to improve the situation. Similar to our previous case study, we see a variety of different organizations stand behind this initiative, in spite of their different missions: Amnesty International Hungary, Chance for Children Foundation (concerned with helping and educating disadvantaged children), Clean Air Action Group, Green Academy, Greenpeace Hungary (ecologically oriented), European Network Against Racism Hungary, Hungarian LGBT Association, Rainbow Mission Foundation (concerned with gay, bisexual and transgender rights) ([Greenpeace Hungary 2015](#)). The fact that they all gathered around this initiative shows that civil society is capable of operating in an informal network, in order to show support for a common cause.

While these groups are attempting to bring different problems to the forefront of public discussion, they are often seen in the same light: as countercultural, opposed to the current status quo, attempting to right a certain wrong in society, in line with norms that transcend national consciousness and become transnationally relevant. It's important to note that this solidarity could be enhanced by the recent actions the government has taken in regards to NGO's that deal in divisive social, political or cultural issues. After several politicians accused members of being political activists attempting to 'enforce foreign interests' in the country ([Hungarian Spectrum 2015](#)), several audits were ordered on some of these organizations (especially those who accessed foreign funding, such as the EEA grants), going so far as to lead to legal prosecution for suspicion of engaging in illegal activities ([Amnesty International 2015](#)). This attitude has been called hostile by delegates of the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2014, who see it as an attempt to silence or discourage NGO's who are critical of the government and support causes that it does not agree with ([Hungarian Helsinki Committee 2015](#)).

One of the most remarkable movements created during this period is Migration Aid. Originally established by the Entrepreneurs Club Association in Budapest in June 2015 ([The Budapest Sentinel 2015](#)) to distribute supplies for the asylum seekers and help them reach the camps they were assigned to ([Migration Aid 2015](#)), they soon attracted numerous followers and branched out to become a semi-structured organism capable of acting somewhat independently. Communicating mainly through social media, they acted as a platform where willing citizens could become ad hoc volunteers and later as a group that has an effective internal functioning mechanism. They recruited full time coordinators to manage teams and meetings in the main areas and established communication mechanism to help groups cooperate, thus giving somewhat of a formal hierarchy and functionality within their organization ([The Budapest Sentinel 2015](#)). Although many financial donations have been sent to them, they have avoided them so as not to attract criticism

or scrutiny from financial monitoring institutions. Similarly to the NGO mentioned in the previous case study, they send messages through all communication means regarding the kind of materials most needed by refugees, so that the public may choose to donate the respective items. In an interview given by the spokesperson of the group for the Budapest Sentinel, she has stated that this form of support comes as a form of 'quiet protest' of many people who disagree with the negative view the media and the government hold against the asylum seekers, that many do not share these views and would rather see humanitarian action taken to help them ([The Budapest Sentinel 2015](#)).

At the same time it could be said that such a structure is unstable to a certain degree and the movement could disband as quickly as it was formed, if it does not serve a purpose. Even in the interview the representative of the group said that their plans were not for the long term and they were uncertain of how long their organization could last. With the closure of the borders and the halt of transit in October 2015, it seemed as if Migration Aid would have little to contribute to. It is remarkable in this sense that they were able to refocus their efforts on areas still confronted with large groups of immigrants and go beyond the borders of their country to achieve their goals.

With the help of volunteers inspired by their story, an organization was registered in the UK by the name of Migration Aid International, to carry out their activities in any country affected by the crisis ([Migration Aid International 2015](#)). Their teams are present throughout the Balkans, helping asylum seekers along the main migration routes. What's more, they continuously advertise efforts made by other organizations and use their large following on their website and social media pages to inform people on the most recent developments in the refugee crisis. It is impressive to see a shift from urgent improvised humanitarian intervention at a national level, to a more long-term transnational organization, acting out public awareness campaigns and sending autonomous volunteer teams in critical areas. This shows that in spite of restrictions placed by local policy, civil society is capable of finding the means to carry out their stated mission, even if this means internationalizing their concept and organization.

A similar concept, but with differing means of action, can be seen in the case of the Migrant Solidarity Group of Hungary, an activist group formed by both natives and refugees in 2012, in order to lobby for refugee rights ([Migsol - Migrant Solidariy Group 2015](#)). Their history shows that they have used methods often associated with NGO's engaged in controversial topics. They have spoken out against laws and regulation that seem biased and unfair towards the target group (ex. A law criminalizing homelessness passed in 2013) and unfair condition in which they are treated ([Migsol - Migrant Solidariy Group 2015](#)). They go further by organizing demonstrations against such laws: protests, meetings, circles of silence against them. They also engage the asylum seekers in their camps,

so as to assess the state in which they are being kept and discover their needs, motivations and opinions. While this organization has attempted to assist refugees through direct charitable acts, their main focus seemed to be activism aimed at encouraging people to demand a solution at a national level. As such they concentrated on informing the public regarding the plight of asylum seekers, protested against the legislative measures taken by the state to meet the problem and encouraged all EU citizens to contact their MEP's, with a standard email asking them to pressure the Hungarian government to renounce some of the measures it has adopted ([No-racism.net 2015](#)). While these actions have attracted the support of many citizens and have drawn participation in their gatherings, these groups were largely ignored by authorities. To date they have not communicated any intent to discuss the situation with the protesters, nor acknowledge their requests.

As a conclusion we can say that in Hungary both grassroots movements and established organizations have found common ground in trying to offer short and long-term solutions for the crisis at hand. They have been able to gather groups of volunteers and donations on a continual basis, without monitoring membership strictly or keeping strict logs of resources made available to them. It would seem that this was enough to deal with the initial large waves of asylum seekers, however they did become more structured and formal when the flow was reduced and more focused action was needed. Well established organizations continued to protest against the treatment they received from the authorities and called for more adequate action in the refugee crisis. It would seem that the recent problems have become a milestone in their struggle to encourage certain values in the public space and increase their legitimacy in the face of the government and of the Hungarian people.

Conclusions

The recent troubles caused by the large number of asylum seekers arriving in Europe in 2015 has brought about an impressive response from civil society. In a relatively short period of time they have managed to establish a somewhat continuous flow of supplies and services for the people in need, thus improving their condition and alleviating a part of the pressure put on local authorities.

As we have seen in the case studies, many different types of organizations have decided to respond to the cause of helping asylum seekers, linking it to their respective mission statements and objectives. Often what they share in common is an orientation towards charitable activities that help people in need, acting in favour of people that are in a way or another marginalized and vulnerable and the desire to improve society by fostering

compassion and civic participation. This has led to various associations joining in a unified effort either to offer direct intervention in areas of interest, or to bring awareness of the problem to society and encourage debate and constructive solutions for authorities. We cannot be certain to what extent their activism becomes noticed by governments, especially since it can be argued that certain states have little regard for voices coming from this sector of the population.

It is important to take note of the grassroots initiatives that have come up as well. With participants representing various subgroups of the local population, these groups have been successful in organizing large scale volunteer activities and donation campaigns to bring those willing to the heart of the situation. They have even proved themselves successful enough to formalize their structure and continue supporting their cause. This may show that even civic movements that arise from an urgent unforeseen need in society can have the ability to bring about a certain benefit to it, but also to demonstrate the capacity to establish themselves as fully-fledged legal entities and functioning organizations. It remains to be seen if these newly formed movements will continue to function even when the current problems will subside, or when the public support that propels them to act will start to wane. Considering that public opinion on refugees and those that help them may be swayed either towards support or aversion very quickly, depending on new controversies that arise, it could become very difficult for these organizations to be able to sustain themselves only through public support. Seeing as authorities in our case studies have either worked in parallel with these organizations, without seeking a partnership that would unite efforts as a whole, or that they may have even placed barriers and hindrances in their way, they may find it more and more difficult. Moreover, as governments in certain countries show hostility towards asylum seekers or are simply unwilling to use the full extent of their abilities to help them.

We can be certain that the work of these organizations and groups shows that at a national and international level there is a willingness to become involved coming from the general public. Their actions are noticed by international organizations such as the UNHCR, as they represent an integral part of a larger response to a crisis of a European scale. While they may face certain difficulties in their wake, and the true results and effect of their involvement is difficult to measure, they are certainly having an impact on the situation, one that deserves more attention and a detailed analysis in the future.

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