

EWSI Analysis on Voluntary and Citizens' Initiative: Hungary

1 INTRODUCTION

Are considered as citizens' initiatives all activities mobilising large numbers of volunteers (e.g. in workplaces, schools, local communities, etc.) to support immigrants' long-term integration and/or open up the public to integration matters and diversity. **These initiatives most notably involve people-to-people or mutual learning activities** matching migrants with mentors, peers or people volunteering their time or space. These initiatives may concern housing, mentoring, child or university-level education, extracurricular activities for children, lifelong learning, language learning, information provision, assistance with public services, translation, job preparation, awareness-raising/advocacy, etc.

Given EWSI's thematic focus, the emphasis is placed on citizens' initiatives focusing on long-term reception (e.g. during the asylum procedure) and integration (of beneficiaries of international protection and/or other categories of migrants), and not on the **initial front-line humanitarian reception for asylum-seekers** (e.g. food, clothing, shelter before entering the reception phase).

2 LONG-ESTABLISHED VOLUNTEERS/CITIZENS' INITIATIVES

Description of initiatives that have been running for several years.

In Hungary, most civil society initiatives become formalised/institutionalised at an early stage in their development – meaning that the founders/members register them as an NGO (usually association or foundation). Based on a research conducted in 2012, the majority of migrant community organisations are formal, registered NGOs. Only a handful of informal/volunteer groups around certain immigrant communities were identified.

The only known exception is [MigSzol](#), the Migrant Solidarity Group. Formed by refugees and other foreign residents in Budapest (many of them students), as well as Hungarian citizens, the group has been active for three years without becoming formally registered. Its main focus is advocacy, mobilisation and awareness raising, and it has been rather successfully positioning itself as a grassroots community organisation. It has established partnerships and issue-based coalitions with other refugee-assisting NGOs, but never applied for state funding or formal calls for application. It operates solely on the basis of private donations and voluntary work. Initially, MigSzol was more involved in mobilising, organising protests and campaigns about refugees' housing and general integration situation. Most recently, they started to get involved in organising community events for refugees, as well as providing Hungarian language courses.

3 NEW VOLUNTEERS/CITIZENS' INITIATIVES

Description of major initiatives started only recently, particularly since the large numbers of refugee arrivals in 2015.

In Hungary, all new voluntary movements emerged along the front-line reception activities. As the state reception facilities proved to be insufficient, and the major formal aid organisations responded quite late – if at all – to the needs of asylum seekers, it was the civil society that filled the gaps in service provision such as food, clothing, medical care and logistical support. Many existing immigrant communities joined their efforts, though they consciously wanted to keep low profile.

The 2 major voluntary groups were:

- [MigSzol Szeged](#) and other MigSzol groups in country towns where asylum seekers transited. They had no links to the 'old' MigSzol group
- [Migration Aid](#)

Each of them had more than thousand members (followers) and provided continuous services in the weeks of the crisis. Once the borders were closed and the migration route diverted toward other countries, these groups either dissolved (Migszol Szeged) or continued their activities in other countries along the Balkans Route (Migration Aid), or tried to look for other areas of activity both in refugee integration or aid work for other disadvantaged social groups.

Since the number of asylum seekers dropped, voluntary groups have tried to establish their services within refugee reception centres, or in local communities. There is a visible presence of voluntary assistance in language training, community activities, accommodation services and general peer mentoring, however their impact is less significant than that of state authorities' and formal NGOs'.

There was a good cooperation between formal NGOs and voluntary groups during the crisis, NGOs often providing technical and information support for volunteers. Since the closure of the borders, new movements' volunteers started working for formal NGOs, either as employees or as volunteers.

4 PROFILE OF VOLUNTEERS

Description and comparison of the profile of volunteers active in old versus new initiatives.

The new initiatives have been more attractive than the formal ones, as they had:

- much bigger absorption capacity (could employ a lot more people).
- more flexible structures (no admission procedure, no fixed positions or working times).
- benefited from large coverage in mainstream and social media

Apart from primary humanitarian motives, volunteering in the front-line services was a form of social or political protest against the Government's policy. Immigrants were largely over-represented among the 'new' volunteers, many migrant groups and communities joined the efforts in an organised manner. In case of volunteering for traditional integration NGOs, the presence of immigrants was less significant.

5 INNOVATION ASPECT

Description and comparison of innovative or entrepreneurial aspects of the old versus new initiatives.

The new volunteers' movements could mobilise much more social capital and resources than the old structures. What can be considered a longer lasting innovation is the use of community-based initiatives in integration work: job-placement, accommodation peer-mentoring. One such example is the Békefészek (PeaceNest) movement, where ordinary citizens provided temporary accommodation for refugees. Initially, it was a service for people transiting the country, but now it helps people in the transit between a reception centre and a private accommodation.

6 ADDED VALUE

Description of the added value of such initiatives (both long-established and new), including the uniqueness of their activities compared to the existing practices of the (1) state and (2) NGOs.

Apart from the initial emergency front-line support, there haven't been new activities emerging. The 'old' NGOs keep providing their services with new donors attracted by the crisis, and new staff recruited from last summer's volunteers.

7 IMPACT

Description and comparison of the impact of old versus new initiatives.

As the volunteer movement was focused on front-line reception, there hasn't been a significant impact on integration services. There are some side-effects however: due to the polarised political discourse, the overwhelmingly negative public attention turned toward long established NGOs running integration programmes, receiving many criticism and harassment from the public. The opposite happens as well, though to a lesser extent: support and donations are given to NGOs working on integration as a result of the public attention triggered by the volunteer movement and mobilisation last summer.