

**POWER RELATIONS, HUMANITARIANISM, AGENCY
THE CASE STUDY OF THE LET'S HELP THE REFUGEES TOGETHER GROUP**

By

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This thesis is dedicated to my fellow volunteers and all the newcomers I met during my work. May all your dreams come true.

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Abstract

The focus of my thesis is a Hungarian grassroots organization called Let's help the Refugees Together, that helped the newcomers arriving to Hungary from the summer of 2015. The volunteers had to step in, because the state not only refused to provide services, but even contributed to the escalation of the crisis, and focused only on its xenophobic propaganda, while the big charity organizations were unprepared. The untrained, and mostly unexperienced volunteers worked in an informal setting, with no effective supervision. Through a focus group discussion with volunteers of the Let's Help The Refugees group I mapped the most important problems they faced, and examined their legitimization for their decisions. While praising the hard work of the volunteers, I draw attention to the dangers of their unsupervised work. In an unequal power situation, the helpers might ignore the agency of the beneficiaries. The literature on humanitarianism, agency and power relations between helpers and beneficiaries claims that humanitarian workers are not always aware of inequality caused by dependence, and they often ignore the will or decisions made by aid recipients, justifying it with a crisis situation, emergency, or simply not seeing them as human beings with agency only as victims. Contrary to this, the volunteers working in the informal groups were much more aware of their power and the responsibility they took.

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1. Introduction

In my thesis, I am going to explore the unbalanced power relations between newcomers and volunteers during the refugee crisis in Hungary, at the summer and early autumn of 2015. I am using the term newcomer as an umbrella term for all migrants and asylum seekers who arrived to Hungary during the summer of 2015 in search of a better life. The volunteer organization I am going to examine for this case study is the Hungarian Let's Help the Refugees Together (Segítsünk Együtt a Menekülteknek, SEM) group.

I intend my research to contribute to the literature on humanitarianism, questioning the responsibility of aid workers, and the agency of refugees or in my research, newcomers. However, these literature focus almost exclusively on well-known international organizations like Red Cross, Oxfam, Save the Children, with millions of Euros of funding available, usually working in Africa and Asia. My case study gives a unique and different perspective, as I present an informal, European-based grassroot, and in this case the beneficiaries, the newcomers arrived mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Morocco to the volunteer's home and cultural environment, contrary to the situation assessed by scholars, where volunteers are "exported" to third countries.

Because of the informality of the group, decision-making was entirely up to the volunteers themselves. I will to explore whether they were aware of this responsibility, how they legitimized their decisions, and whether they found it important to consult the clients, the newcomers and respect their choices.

First, I am going to present the Hungarian case study, then in the third chapter I will clarify my own position, as one of the founders of the researched group. Then I am going to review the literature dealing with humanitarianism, power relations and agency. In the fifth chapter I will present the Hungarian political environment, that is vital in the understanding of the

environment the volunteer groups emerged and worked in. In the sixth chapter I will describe the events of the summer and autumn of 2015, when most of the volunteers were active. Then, in the seventh chapter I am going to present the recent studies conducted about the volunteer groups helping the newcomers in Hungary during the summer and autumn of 2015. Following that, in the eighth I am going to introduce the Let's Help the Refugees Together group, how it was established, how it worked, and what the main issues the volunteers faced were. Then in the ninth chapter I will analyse the results of the focus group interview I conducted with seven volunteers of the Let's Help the Refugees Together group. The final chapter of the thesis is the conclusion.

2. The Hungarian case

I am going to present the case of a Hungarian grassroots organization founded in 2015, called Let's Help The Refugees Together (Segítsünk Együtt a Menekülteknek, SEM).

According to the Central Statistical Office, in 2015 a little more than 62 thousand organizations worked in the non-profit sector in Hungary¹, and out of that, only a few dealt with migrants and refugees. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee² provides legal aid for asylum seekers and trainings for officials working with migrants and refugees, Menedék (Hungarian Association for Migrants)³ does social work with migrants and refugees, organizes trainings for the majority society and contributes to international policy making. Artemisszió Foundation⁴ helps with the integration process of the newcomers in Hungary, and they also provide trainings for the majority society. The Cordelia Foundation provides psychiatric, psychotherapeutic, psychological treatment and psycho-social counselling to torture survivors and severely traumatized asylum seekers, refugees and their family members arriving to Hungary.⁵ Besides these four NGOs that have been working with migrants for more than 20 years, the UN Refugee Agency has its regional centre for Central Europe⁶ in Budapest.

As migration to Hungary mainly affected the Hungarian diaspora from neighbouring countries, these organizations were little known by the general public. When in 2015 the Hungarian government refused to provide any service for the newcomers at the train stations in Budapest,

¹ Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, "A nonprofit szektor legfontosabb jellemzői, 2015," 2015, 5.

² "Információk Az Emberi Jogok Világából," *Magyar Helsinki Bizottság* (blog), October 1, 2015, <https://www.helsinki.hu/en/>.

³ "Homepage of Menedék," Menedék, accessed May 19, 2018, <https://menedek.hu/en>.

⁴ "Homepage of the Artemisszió Foundation," Artemisszió Alapítvány, accessed May 19, 2018, http://artemisszio.blog.hu/2014/04/17/about_us_237.

⁵ "Cordelia Foundation," accessed May 31, 2018, <http://www.cordelia.hu/index.php/en/>.

⁶ "Homepage of UNHCR Central Europe," *UNHCR* (blog), accessed May 22, 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/ceu/>.

where the newcomers were arriving after crossing the Hungarian border, all these organizations with previous experience on migration and migrants suddenly got into the spotlight, and many expected these four NGOs and UNHCR to do something. However, UNHCR was not allowed to operate by the Hungarian government⁷, and Menedék, Helsinki Committee, Cordelia and Artemisszió already faced an exponential increase in the number of clients turning to them for help. As their mandate and funds were limited, they provided trainings and informational leaflets for the volunteers, but they were unable to solve the maintenance of thousands of people on a daily basis. Additionally, the Migrant Solidarity group, and informal organization established in 2012, focusing mainly on political activism and education helped the newly formed groups as well.

The number of volunteers helping in the summer of 2015 was surprising, because while the number of people volunteering is growing according to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office,⁸ it is still less than half of the European Union's average (20%) concerning both formal and informal volunteering activities.⁹ "Similar to other post-communist states, Hungarian civil society is usually characterized as weak and resource dependent"¹⁰.

There are constantly many attempts to promote active citizenship, and educate mostly young people how to influence their environment, like the trainings of Amnesty International¹¹ or the

⁷ This information was shared by Ms. Montserrat Feixas Vihé, UNHCR Regional Representative for Central Europe at one of the information-sharing and coordination sessions on refugee and migration developments in Hungary and Central Europe held in the UNHCR office in 2016.

⁸ Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, "Az önkéntes munka jellemzői," n.d., 18.

⁹ "Participation_in_voluntary_activities_(Formal_and_informal).Png (805×1347)," accessed May 19, 2018, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/3/3d/Participation_in_voluntary_activities_%28formal_and_informal%29.png.

¹⁰ András László Pap, *Democratic Decline in Hungary : Law and Society in an Illiberal Democracy*, Comparative Constitutional Change (New York, NY; London :: Routledge, 2017., 2017), 36.

¹¹ "Emberi jogi oktatás," accessed May 24, 2018, <http://www.amnesty.hu/emberi-jogi-oktatas/kepzesekrol>.

mentor program of Romaversitas, and educational service for talented Roma youngsters in Hungary.¹² Since the 2012/2013 school year a law has come into effect, prescribing 50 hours of mandatory community service for high school students as a requirement for high school graduation. Yearly around 63 thousand students participate,¹³ and it would be an efficient way to promote voluntarism and social awareness. However, making it obligatory is quite controversial. There is no data available yet whether the mandatory community service influenced the inclination of young people, but many students, from elementary school to university helped in some way the newcomers during the summer of 2015. Some public schools and the Central European University also promoted institutionally the volunteering and donating for newcomers¹⁴.

¹² Alapítvány Romaversitas, *Romaversitas Mentorprogram - Intenzív Aktív Állampolgársági Képzés*, accessed May 24, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpXCv96NvbA>.

¹³ “Iskolai Közösségi Szolgálat: Kutatási Eredmények És Jó Gyakorlatok Című Konferencia | Oktatókutató És Fejlesztő Intézet,” accessed May 19, 2018, <http://ofi.hu/hir/iskolai-kozossegi-szolgalat-kutatasi-eredmenyek-es-jo-gyakorlatok-cimu-konferencia>.

¹⁴ “CEU Listed Among Organizations Helping Refugees | Central European University,” accessed May 24, 2018, <https://www.ceu.edu/article/2015-10-01/ceu-listed-among-organizations-helping-refugees>.

3. Disclaimer

Being one of the founders and active members of the Let's Help the Refugees Together group, I am personally involved. However, I will be careful to use this position only to provide inside information about how the group functioned. My position as both researcher and field worker will only add a unique point of view.

At the beginning of June I visited the Keleti Train Station for the first time to get information, and to see the situation with my own eyes. From that day on I spent usually four full days per week at the Keleti Train Station or at the base of SEM, and I was available on the phone and on social media almost any time for donors and volunteers to provide information.

Almost none of the active members spoke foreign languages, but since the international media was interested in our work, eventually I became the spokesperson of our group and the one who coordinated with the non-Hungarian speaking donors.

My level of involvement and constant presence made me one of the leaders of the group, however, it was not formally declared until we discussed the possibility of establishing an association where I was nominated as president. Eventually we only registered the Let's Help Together Association in 2017, and I became vice president.

4. Power relations, humanitarianism, agency

Humanitarians, aid workers and volunteers working with socially disadvantaged people are usually pictured as 'good Samaritans' sacrificing their time and money for others. But being the helper also places them in a hierarchically higher position compared to the beneficiaries of their work.

As Barnett and Weiss write;

„although humanitarianism is frequently presented as devoid of power, this claim represents both a comfortable myth that aid workers tell themselves and simultaneously helps manufacture their power, which rests on their authority. Authority can be understood as the ability of one actor to use institutional and discursive resources to induce deference from others. When individuals have authority, we frequently know it because we give them the right to speak and we defer to their judgment (not that we necessarily do what they say).”¹⁵

Major organizations working with migrants and refugees operate with a strict code of conduct, typically using the one developed by the International Red Cross and Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster¹⁶. The major principles are that:

1. “The humanitarian imperative comes first;
2. Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone;
3. Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint;
4. We shall endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy;
5. We shall respect culture and custom;
6. We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities;

¹⁵ Michael N. Barnett and Thomas George Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question : Politics, Power, Ethics* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2008., n.d.), 38.

¹⁶ “Code of Conduct,” *International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies* (blog), accessed May 22, 2018, <http://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/who-we-are/the-movement/code-of-conduct/>.

7. Ways shall be found to involve programme beneficiaries in the management of relief aid;
8. Relief aid must strive to reduce future vulnerabilities to disaster as well as meeting basic needs;
9. We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources;
10. In our information, publicity and advertising activities we shall recognise disaster victims as dignified humans, not hopeless objects.”

These rules and principles are strictly enforced by the charities, and those who do not comply, can be held accountable and are simply let go from the organization. But what happens if there is no official authority to enforce the rules? This is one of the main issues I am going to discuss while presenting the Let's Help The Refugees Together group.

The volunteers in Hungary had power over the newcomers, with no effective authority to supervise and control it. Weber defines power as “ the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests,”¹⁷ Barnett and Duval define it as „the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate”, Dahl's definition is “the direct control by one actor over another so that one actor compels another actor to do something that it does not want to do”¹⁸. In the case of aid workers, and volunteers, Dahl's definition seems too harsh, however, the definition of Weber, and Barnett and Duval may also contain that the helpers are not obviously aware of their power, but they are unconsciously using it. In fact, they perceive themselves as the savers of the

¹⁷ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (University of California Press, 1978), 53.

¹⁸ Robert A. Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (January 4, 1957): 201.

newcomers, and they often seem to know better what their beneficiaries need. This is especially important in the Hungarian case, where the volunteers were ‘at home’, surrounded by an environment they already knew, and often the newcomers had to rely on this knowledge. This encourages a possible attitude of volunteers even more, where they ‘know best’ what is good for their beneficiaries even without consulting them.

“Most relief agencies now sheepishly confess that they have largely proceeded without much input from those who are supposed to benefit from their concern. The reasons for this omission are many. Aid workers assume that the vulnerability of recipients owes to their general lack of power. There is a sense that aid workers know more and know better, caused by the presumption that beneficiaries’ poverty, situation, illiteracy, and provincialism make them incapable of making informed decisions.”¹⁹

The crisis itself is generating a situation where rules are bent, and the goal justifies the means, creating a situation where the beneficiaries of the help are not heard. As Bernard and Weiss state;

“Aid workers excuse their inability to get informed consent, especially in emergency conditions, because of the nature of the situation—when lives are on the line, like doctors in an emergency room, they must act now and ask questions later. The discourse of ‘needs’ suggests that context matters little—that food, shelter, medicine and water are biological requirements that do not vary. In the main, there are relatively few in-depth practitioner-generated or scholarly analyses about the supposed beneficiaries of humanitarian action.”²⁰

Similarly, seeing the newcomers as victims only, "understanding displacement as a human tragedy and looking no further can mean that one gains no insight at all into the lived meanings that displacement and exile can have or specific people [...]"²¹, as anthropologist Liisa Malkki writes researching Hutu refugees in Tanzania, and it results in the newcomers being stripped of their agency.

¹⁹ Barnett and Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question*, 47.

²⁰ Barnett and Weiss, 47.

²¹ Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile : Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1995, n.d.), 16.

5. Hungarian politics since 2010

In 2010 the Hungarian national elections resulted in the victory of the Fidesz-KDNP²² coalition, by taking 263 out of the 386 seats in Parliament.²³

“FIDESZ won in every category if we look at data based on sociological research from the election (gender, places of residence, age, educational level, etc.). The reason for the landslide victory was rooted partly in the nature and logic of the distribution of seats in the Hungarian electoral system, which very much (sic!) favors the winner, meaning other parties – especially smaller ones – are placed at a disadvantageous position, weakening them further.” The supermajority gave them the right to modify the constitution and other major laws, which they did. In 2011 a new constitution²⁴ was adopted that was widely criticized by NGOs²⁵ and the European Commission also expressed its concerns about some of the new articles that confronted EU law.²⁶ Such was the new Media Law that endangered the freedom of press²⁷.

“Rewriting the regulations of the press and electronic media was a highly significant stage of the transformation of the Hungarian constitutional order. Through two new laws, the

²² “FIDESZ (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége, Alliance of Young Democrats), used this acronym at the 1990 and 1994 elections. The acronym was changed in 1998 to FIDESZ – MPP (FIDESZ – Magyar Polgári Párt, FIDESZ – Hungarian Citizens’ Party), and at the May 2003 conference the acronym FIDESZ – MPSZ (FIDESZ – Magyar Polgári Szövetség, FIDESZ – Hungarian Citizens’ Alliance) appeared. Within the alliance there are different social and political organizations, among them, the Christian Democratic Party (KDNP), which was an autonomous party but now is a satellite organization of FIDESZ, despite having a leadership of its own, a faction in the parliament and members in the government. At present we may see the Alliance as one political unit with organizational differentiation.” / Máté Szabó

²³ “Hungarian National Election Results 2010,” accessed May 17, 2018, <http://www.valasztas.hu/dyn/pv10/outroot/vdin2/hu/l50.htm>.

²⁴ Kriszta Kovás and Gábor Attila Tóth, “Hungary’s Constitutional Transformation,” *European Constitutional Law Review* 7, no. 2 (June 2011): 183–203, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1574019611200038>.

²⁵ “Analyses on the Constitutional Changes in Hungary,” accessed May 17, 2018, <https://sites.google.com/site/ruleoflawinhungary/>.

²⁶ “European Commission - PRESS RELEASES - Press Release - The European Commission Reiterates Its Serious Concerns over the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution of Hungary,” accessed May 17, 2018, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-327_en.htm.

²⁷ Human Rights Watch | 350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor | New York, and NY 10118-3299 USA | t 1.212.290.4700, “Hungary: Media Law Endangers Press Freedom,” Human Rights Watch, January 7, 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/01/07/hungary-media-law-endangers-press-freedom>.

government not only established such a wide-ranging government control of the print and electronic media unprecedented in constitutional democracies, but it also abolished the safeguards against unilateral political influence. Without these safeguards, the governing majority had the opportunity to create an entirely politically homogenous body, with all members nominated by the governing party, to oversee compliance with the rules.”²⁸

Another significant change was the new election law²⁹ that cut the number of seats in the Parliament to 199 starting with the national elections in 2014, and changed the system to favour bigger parties, also “besides the government taking political control over the Election Commission, electoral reforms introduced a remarkable form of gerrymandering that disproportionately (sic!) favors the governing parties.”³⁰

Fidesz has gone through some significant changes since its foundation in 1988. During these years, from a young, liberal and Europe-supporter voice they have turned towards a conservative, populist strategy, with harsh criticism towards the European union³¹. Populism has many definitions, and I will use Cas Mudde’s, that populism is “an ideology that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’, and it states that politics should be an expression of the ‘general will of that people’.”³² According to Mudde, as a result of the migration or refugee crisis, the terrorist attacks in European cities and BREXIT, populism is currently quite common in Europe and Viktor Orbán is a crucial actor in the scene. He seems to be very successful, acting the role of national hero, defending the country from Muslim immigrants, terrorists and the unfair and illegitimate influence of the European Union.³³ In his latest speech on the national holiday of the Hungarian

²⁸ Pap, *Democratic Decline in Hungary*, 22.

²⁹ Attila Tibor Nagy, “Hungarian Electoral System and Procedure,” n.d., 4.

³⁰ Pap, *Democratic Decline in Hungary*, 24.

³¹ Edith Oltay, *Fidesz and the Reinvention of the Hungarian Center-Right* (Budapest : Századvég, 2012, n.d.).

³² Cas Mudde, “Europe’s Populist Surge,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 17, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2016-10-17/europe-s-populist-surge>.

³³ Kisistók Levente, “2015 februári kutatási eredmények – Ipsos | Közvéleménykutatók.hu,” accessed May 17, 2018, <http://devel.kozvelemenykutatok.hu/2015-februari-kutatasi-eredmenyek-ipsos/>.

revolution of 1848, the Prime Minister claimed that migrants want to take our country away, and ‘It is not the weak little opposition parties that we have to fight, but an international network organized into a real empire. Media supported by foreign consortia and local oligarchs, paid activists, agitators, NGOs funded by international speculators, things that the name of George Soros represents and embodies. It is this world that we must fight in order to preserve ours’,³⁴ and then he also threatened the opposition by saying that “After the elections, we will seek redress. Morally, politically, and legally”.³⁵

The Fidesz–KDNP government had a troublesome relationship with critical NGOs even before 2015, but since most of the support of asylum seekers, asylum rights, human rights, solidarity, active citizenship, democracy and transparency were promoted by existing and newly formed grassroots and NGOs, the government declared a war on these organizations. NGOs and their supporters were labelled as foreign agents, agents of Soros, supporters of terrorism and overall traitors of the country. The Eötvös Károly Institute, the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee and Transparency International Hungary prepared and have been regularly updating a timeline of the governmental attacks on Hungarian NGOs in English.³⁶

In 2015, one year after the elections the Fidesz government’s support dropped with a few points³⁷ according to public opinion polls³⁸. In 2014, while they were without doubt the

³⁴ “Orbán: ‘We Must Fight against an Organized International Network,’” *Visegrad Post*, March 16, 2018, <https://visegradpost.com/en/2018/03/16/orban-we-must-fight-against-an-organized-international-network/>.

³⁵ “Orbán.”

³⁶ “Timelines of Governmental Attacks against NGOs,” *Magyar Helsinki Bizottság* (blog), November 17, 2017, <https://www.helsinki.hu/en/timeline-of-governmental-attacks-against-ngos/>.

³⁷ Eva S. Balogh, “Another Poll, Another Loss for Fidesz Ahead of a by-Election,” *Hungarian Spectrum* (blog), April 8, 2015, <http://hungarianspectrum.org/2015/04/08/another-poll-another-loss-for-fidesz-ahead-of-a-by-election/>.

³⁸ Kisistók, “2015 februári kutatási eredmények – Ipsos | Közvéleménykutatók.hu.”

strongest party, the customized electoral system³⁹ and the gerrymandering of the electoral districts⁴⁰ were vital in order to achieve supermajority in the parliament⁴¹. In 2010 Fidesz got 3 326 524 votes at the national elections, resulting in taking 67,8% of the mandates, while in 2014 they got more than a million less, 2 142 142 votes which gave them almost the same share, 66,8% of the mandates in the parliament, resulting in high over-representation of Fidesz in the Parliament compared to the number of votes they got.⁴² While Fidesz lost some of its support, Jobbik, the far-right opposition party gradually won some support of former Fidesz-voters with their similar racist and anti-Semitic views, combined with the refusal of the government's corruption.⁴³ The issue of migration and the possibility of uniting the people by making them fear their one common enemy, came very handy for the Fidesz government. While in February 2015 21% of the eligible population supported Fidesz, in September 2015 it grew to 24-34% percent according to opinion polls.⁴⁴ Their 'National consultation on immigration and

³⁹ "Dezső and Pozsár-Szentmiklósy - Zoltán Pozsár-Szentmiklósy.Pdf," accessed April 22, 2018, <http://www.aceeeo.org/sites/default/files/PDF/elections/JB16-en-low.pdf>.

⁴⁰ "Four More Years - Hungary's Election," accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21600169-viktor-orban-heads-third-term-and-wants-centralise-power-four-more-years>.

⁴¹ "OSCE/ODIHR Final Report on Hungary's Parliamentary Elections Recommends Ensuring Clear Separation between State and Party | OSCE," accessed May 12, 2018, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/hungary/121375>.

⁴² Cas Mudde, "The 2014 Hungarian Parliamentary Elections, or How to Craft a Constitutional Majority," *Washington Post*, April 14, 2014, sec. Monkey Cage, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/04/14/the-2014-hungarian-parliamentary-elections-or-how-to-craft-a-constitutional-majority/>.

⁴³ "Why Hungarian Voters Are Turning Away from Fidesz and towards Jobbik," Heinrich Böll Foundation, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.boell.de/en/2015/06/02/why-hungarian-voters-are-turning-away-fidesz-and-towards-jobbik>.

⁴⁴ Kisistók Levente, "Pártpreferenciák 2015 szeptember – Egyre növekvő Fidesz vezetést mutatnak a közvélemény-kutatók | Közvéleménykutatók.hu," accessed May 23, 2018, <https://kozvelemenyskutatok.hu/partpreferenciak-2015-szeptember-egyre-novekvo-fidesz-vezetest-mutatnak-a-kozvelemenyskutatok/>.

terrorism'⁴⁵ combined with a billboard campaign⁴⁶ already started in April, 2015 when the asylum seekers were not yet visible in public spaces. The national consultation was sent out to every Hungarian constituent, as tool faking the interest of the government in the opinion of the citizens. The official reasoning behind the consultation was that “a change in the Government’s immigration policy requires wider social support, and therefore the Government has put together a questionnaire of twelve questions as part of a national consultation concerning immigration, economic immigration and terrorism.”⁴⁷ The posters were in Hungarian, warning people, that “If you come to Hungary, you have to respect our culture”, or that “If you come to Hungary, you cannot take the jobs of the Hungarians”. The national consultation and the billboards were widely criticized by the academics and several NGO’s, along the European Union⁴⁸ claiming that it is manipulative and it lacks ethical and professional standards, therefore the taxpayer’s money should not be wasted on them.⁴⁹ The cost of the consultation amounted to one billion Hungarian Forints. Out of around 8 million people who got it, 1 000 245 returned it, and 57 973 people filled it out online, according to the report by government, as there was no transparency or supervision by an independent authority, nor any possibility to fact check the presented results. According to the government, most of the respondents agreed with their position, therefore it was communicated as a huge success.⁵⁰ In 2016, the government also held

⁴⁵ “National Consultation on Immigration to Begin,” Government, accessed December 31, 2017, <http://www.kormany.hu/en/prime-minister-s-office/news/national-consultation-on-immigration-to-begin>.

⁴⁶ Nick Thorpe, “Hungary’s Poster War on Immigration - BBC News,” accessed December 31, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33091597>.

⁴⁷ “National Consultation on Immigration to Begin.”

⁴⁸ “European Web Site on Integration by the European Commission,” European Web Site on Integration, accessed May 12, 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/hungary-governments-national-consultation-on-immigration-and-terrorism-creates-widespread-debate>.

⁴⁹ Migszol group, “Fidesz’s ‘National Consultation’ Is No Consultation at All. It Is a Shameless Piece of Propaganda,” Migszol, accessed May 12, 2018, <http://www.migszol.com/4/post/2015/05/fideszs-national-consultation-is-no-consultation-at-all-it-is-a-shameless-piece-of-propaganda-a-migszol-commentary.html>.

⁵⁰ Szabolcs Dull, “Jé, a konzultáló magyarok tényleg jobban szeretik a családokat, mint a bevándorlókat,” July 27, 2015,

a referendum in order to fight the European Union, by asking the voters the following question; “Do you want the European Union to be able to mandate the obligatory resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens into Hungary even without the approval of the National Assembly?”⁵¹ The majority of the opposition parties and the civil sector called for boycott or voting invalid, claiming that the question of the referendum “does not bring our common issues further, it doesn’t make sense, and the campaign of the government is inhuman”.⁵² Eventually the referendum was invalid as only 41,32% of the eligible voters voted validly. However, as 98,6% of the valid votes were in favour of the government’s position⁵³, this again was interpreted as a success and a strong legitimacy for the Hungarian government’s migration politics.⁵⁴ The government kept the campaign ongoing and eventually fighting migration was their main promise during the election campaign, and the Fidesz-KDNP coalition managed to win supermajority at the national elections in 2018, as well.⁵⁵ The Hungarian government’s strong position against the European Union is now backed up by Poland⁵⁶, and the two countries claim to fight for the sovereign rights of the states, especially concerning migration. The latest threat

http://index.hu/belfold/2015/07/27/kovacs_zoltan_ismertette_a_bevandorlasi_nemzeti_konzultacio_eredmenyet/.

⁵¹ Chris Harris, “All You Need to Know about Hungary’s Refugee Referendum,” euronews, October 1, 2016, <http://www.euronews.com/2016/10/01/all-you-need-to-know-about-hungary-s-refugee-referendum>.

⁵² “22 civil szervezet kéri a polgároktól, szavazzanak érvénytelenül, vagy bojkottálják a népszavazást! « Mércé,” Mércé, September 14, 2016, https://merce.hu/2016/09/14/22_civil_szervezet_keri_a_polgaroktol_szavazzanak_ervenytelenul_vagy_bojkottaljak_a_nepszavazast/.

⁵³ “Results of the Referendum Held on 02.10.2016 in Hungary,” accessed May 12, 2018, http://www.valasztas.hu/dyn/onepsz201610/szavossz/en/eredind_e.html.

⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch | 350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor | New York, and NY 10118-3299 USA | t 1.212.290.4700, “What Does Hungary’s Migrant Quotas Referendum Mean for Europe?,” Human Rights Watch, October 6, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/06/what-does-hungarys-migrant-quotas-referendum-mean-europe>.

⁵⁵ “Hungarian National Election Results in 2018,” accessed April 22, 2018, <http://valasztas.hu/dyn/pv18/szavossz/hu/l50.html>.

⁵⁶ Aleksandra Wróbel, “Hungarian Parliament Votes to Support Poland in Fight against EU,” accessed May 17, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungarian-parliament-votes-to-support-poland-in-fight-against-eu/>.

to organizations or individuals trying to help the newcomers in any way, is in the “Stop Soros Act”⁵⁷ proposed by the government, that would criminalize the assistance of irregular migrants.⁵⁸ Assistance could be anything from giving informational leaflets to offering food and shelter. The Hungarian Government would punish everyone who smuggles migrants into the country, helps newcomers to get asylum, or funds ‘illegal’ migration with a prison sentence.⁵⁹ UNHCR urged Hungary to withdraw the draft because, as Pascale Moreau, Director of UNHCR’s European Bureau said, “Seeking asylum is a fundamental human right, it is not a crime”. He claimed that “UNHCR appeals to Hungary to remain committed to protecting refugees and asylum-seekers, including by facilitating the essential role and efforts of qualified civil society organizations.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ “STOP Soros Legislative Package Proposal,” accessed May 17, 2018, <http://www.helsinki.hu/wp-content/uploads/STOP-SOROS-LEGISLATIVE-PACKAGE-PROPOSAL.pdf>.

⁵⁸ “Hungary to Criminalise Migrant Helpers,” *BBC News*, May 29, 2018, sec. Europe, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44288242>.

⁵⁹ “Dömötör Csaba: A kormány kedden benyújtja a ‘Stop Soros’ törvénycsomagot,” accessed May 29, 2018, http://magyarhirlap.hu/cikk/119378/Domotor_Csaba_A_kormany_kedden_benyujtja_a_Stop_Soros_torvenycsomagot.

⁶⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “UNHCR Urges Hungary to Withdraw Draft Law Impacting Refugees,” UNHCR, accessed May 29, 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2018/5/5b0d71684/unhcr-urges-hungary-withdraw-draft-law-impacting-refugees.html>.

6. The summer and autumn of 2015

In 2015 more than 391 000 migrants arriving mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other African and Middle Eastern countries, crossed the Hungarian border⁶¹, fleeing from war, terrorist organizations, poverty and starvation. During the summer of 2015 thousands of Hungarian and international volunteers helped the newcomers at various locations in Hungary, despite the governmental propaganda and the lack of response by charity organizations with equipment, trained professionals and available funding for help.

The members of the Hungarian Charity Council⁶², the Catholic Caritas, the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta, the Hungarian Interchurch Aid, the Hungarian Red Cross and the Hungarian Reformed Church Aid are the five biggest and richest charity organizations in Hungary, but they failed to respond to the escalated situation in the summer of 2015 at the train stations of Budapest and civilian volunteers had to do their job. In 2016, I made an interview with Zsófia Lénárd, director of the Emergency Appeal program of Red Cross in Hungary⁶³, in which I asked her why Red Cross was unable to respond in time. She refused the allegations that it was for political reasons, as many assumed, but claimed that since the Hungarian Red Cross was not involved in migration since 2000, when they helped during the Balkan wars, they were unprepared. She praised the informal volunteer groups for stepping in, and buying time for the bigger organizations who had to go through the internal processes to gain the financial

⁶¹ Magyar Rendőrség, “Elfogott Migránsok Száma - Dátum Szerinti Lekérdezés,” accessed May 12, 2018, <http://www.police.hu/hu/hirek-es-informaciok/hatarinfo/elfogott-migransok-szama-lekerdez-es>.

⁶² “Karitatív Tanács,” accessed May 24, 2018, <http://karitativtanacs.kormany.hu/tagszervezetek>.

⁶³ “IFRC: Emergency Appeal Final Report Europe Migration: Coordination, Response and Preparedness,” accessed June 2, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MDR65001efr.pdf>.

and human resources required for helping. According to Lénárd, the grassroots reduced the tensions.⁶⁴

While the biggest charity organizations that could not to respond in time, smaller organizations like the Oltalom Charity Society, operated by the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship⁶⁵, some smaller Jewish communities⁶⁶, the Mosques⁶⁷ did all work together with the volunteers.

The Hungarian government and the authorities claimed that all necessary services are available for the newcomers in the refugee camps, therefore they refused to provide any additional maintenance outside of these, especially in Budapest. However, the camps were unable to host the number of newcomers arriving, the conditions were terrible. There were not enough beds, so people had to sleep in the garden of the asylum centres.⁶⁸

The crowd of newcomers at the Keleti train station became unbearable. Many newcomers tried to leave the country via train, but eventually the Hungarian state completely shut down the international train service at the Keleti Train station, that resulted in a demonstration organized by the newcomers, demanding to let them go. As Hungarian state kept all trains out of the station, the newcomers started to march on foot towards Austria, which eventually resulted in shutting down the Serbian border and transporting the people to the Austrian border via buses. Earlier there were some plans by the Office of the Mayor of Budapest to create a temporary social facility to host some newcomers in the capital⁶⁹, however, by the time it would have been

⁶⁴ Luca Janka László, "Informális csoportok szerepe a 2015-ös menekültválság során Magyarországon" (Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem, 2016).

⁶⁵ "Oltalom.Hu," accessed May 24, 2018, <http://oltalom.hu/cikk.php?id=903&lang=hu&mid=>.

⁶⁶ "Zsidóként Segítetek a Bevándorlókon! | Szombat Online," accessed May 24, 2018, <https://www.szombat.org/politika/zsidokent-segitetek-a-bevandorlokon>.

⁶⁷ "Sztárklick - Interjú a Magyar Iszlám Közösség Imámjával, Kovács Miklóssal," accessed May 24, 2018, <http://www.sztarklick.hu/kozelet/interju-a-magyar-iszlam-kozosseg-imamjaval-kovacs-miklossal/315472>.

⁶⁸ BBC News, "Chaotic Scenes at Hungary Migrant Camp," *BBC News*, September 11, 2015, sec. Europe, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34216883>.

⁶⁹ MTI, "Ideiglenes szociális blokkot hoznak létre a Verseny utcában," MNO.hu, September 4, 2015, <https://mno.hu/belfold/nyolcszaz-migranst-aludhat-az-uj-ideiglenes-szocialis-blokk-1303028>.

ready, the Hungarian state decided to close the border between Hungary and Serbia with a barbed-wire fence.⁷⁰

The fence cost more than eight hundred million Euros, and in 2017 Hungary demanded the European Union to share its costs, claiming that this fence actually defends Europe. However, paying the bill for the fence was firmly refused by the European Commission.⁷¹ “Since the completion of the fence along the Serbian border on 15th of September 2015, entering Hungary through the border fence has become a criminal act in violation of Article 31 of the 1951 Refugee Convention”.⁷² From September 15, the Hungarian government was transporting people from Budapest⁷³, and the Hungarian-Serbian border to the Austrian-Hungarian border via buses and trains, where the Austrian authorities opened the border and let newcomers walk through. Then Croatia sent a train full of newcomers on September 19 to Hungary, and Hungary accused them of helping illegal migration.⁷⁴ The Croatian-Hungarian border was open until the 16 of October, then the Hungarian state closed it, as well. With the borders closed, newcomers almost entirely disappeared from the country, only a few hundred were in refugee camps and detention centres. Eventually the government shut down every single state facility hosting asylum seekers, and put everybody at a newly installed complex, installed at the Hungarian-

⁷⁰ “Hungary Completes New Anti-Migrant Border Fence with Serbia | Euronews,” accessed May 17, 2018, <http://www.euronews.com/2017/04/28/hungary-completes-new-anti-migrant-border-fence-with-serbia>.

⁷¹ “EU Rejects Hungary’s Demand to Finance Border Fence,” accessed May 19, 2018, <https://euobserver.com/migration/138857>.

⁷² Georgi Voynov et al., “Pushed Back at the Door,” n.d., 24.

⁷³ Luke Harding, “Hungary Transports Refugees to Austria before Border Clampdown,” *The Guardian*, September 14, 2015, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/14/hungary-refugees-austria-border-clampdown>.

⁷⁴ Hamdi Alkhshali CNN Ivan Watson and Greg Botelho, “Hungary: Croatia Helping Migrants Illegally Cross Borders,” CNN, accessed May 17, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/09/18/world/europe-migrant-crisis/index.html>.

Serbian border, the so-called Tranzit Zone, that operates without much concern to international refugee and asylum regulations.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ “Minimum Standards Required in the Transit Zones on the Hungarian Land Borders,” *Magyar Helsinki Bizottság* (blog), August 30, 2017, <https://www.helsinki.hu/en/minimum-standards-required-in-the-transit-zones-on-the-hungarian-land-borders/>.

7. Presentation of researches conducted about the volunteers working in the summer and autumn of 2015

As volunteers helping in such big numbers were unique in Hungary, this “humanitarian miracle”⁷⁶ inspired many researchers to look into the motivation and attitude of the volunteers and the Hungarian population. Some⁷⁷ called it a miracle, because volunteering has no embedded culture in Hungary, and the fact that hundreds or maybe thousands of people were involved in helping the newcomers in newly emerging civic organizations, despite the governmental propaganda, was very much unexpected. Psychologists from Eötvös Loránd University conducted a survey among 1459 people who supported the asylum seekers and migrants arriving to Hungary in 2015 or participated in political protests. They investigated the motivations of the volunteers in the xenophobic Hungarian political environment. Based on their findings, Kende, Lantos, Belinszky et al. suggest that ‘activities of pro-refugee volunteers became the means to express moral convictions and a desire for social change.’⁷⁸ They were interested in the connection between political activism and volunteering. Helping the asylum seekers was considered by both volunteers and researchers to be an alternative form of political activism. As Eszter Zalan writes “Helping migrants in Hungary has inadvertently become a political protest against prime minister Viktor Orban’s government for those outraged by the country's apparent inertia on (sic!) dealing with the growing crisis.”

⁷⁶ Anikó Bernát, A. Kertész, F.M. Tóth, “Solidarity Reloaded: Volunteer and Civilian Organizations during the Migration Crisis in Hungary,” accessed February 1, 2018, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317760011_Solidarity_reloaded_Volunteer_and_civilian_organizations_during_the_migration_crisis_in_Hungary.

⁷⁷ “The Humanitarian Miracle in Hungary’s Train Stations,” *Pressenza*, July 10, 2015, <https://www.pressenza.com/2015/07/the-humanitarian-miracle-in-hungarys-train-stations/>.

⁷⁸ Anna Kende et al., “The Politicized Motivations of Volunteers in the Refugee Crisis: Intergroup Helping as the Means to Achieve Social Change,” *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 5, no. 1 (May 15, 2017): 261, <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v5i1.642>.

The TÁRKI research institute made their extensive research ⁷⁹looking at what kind of attitude the Hungarian society has towards migrants, especially asylum seekers, based on representative surveys. As a qualitative research, they made stakeholder interviews and focus groups with the volunteers and grassroots organizations helping the newcomers, and as a plus, they also analysed the media, in order to understand the organizations better. They found that xenophobia was extremely high, and xenophilia almost completely disappeared. Regarding the volunteers, they conducted 37 interviews, and they found three main motivational structures: ‘those with primarily altruistic motivations, those who were mainly driven by outrage of the political situation, and lastly the first or second-generation immigrants and their relatives who felt that they had to get involved’. Based on the interviews, they claim, that the interviewees identified themselves as volunteers, and denied the importance of the political motivation. This contradicts Zalan and Kende et al., who found the political aspect more important.

Ildikó Zakariás, researcher of the Hungarian Academy of Science did her research using a survey in order to find out what percentage of the population was involved in helping, and why they did or did not help the refugees in Hungary during the summer of 2015⁸⁰. Her survey was completed by 1000 people, and it was representative for gender, age, education and settlement size among the Hungarian adult population. Her findings are that 3,5% of the population was involved in helping the newcomers during the summer of 2015, but 27,7% of the respondents would have helped if they had had the possibility. She found that around 190 000 people were involved in helping the migrants during that summer. She criticizes other authors dealing with voluntarism, for ignoring the fact that helping others is a social construct. Helping people has

⁷⁹ “The Social Aspects of the 2015 Migration Crisis in Hungary,” accessed February 1, 2018, http://www.tarki.hu/hu/news/2016/kitekint/20160330_refugees.pdf.

⁸⁰ Ildikó Zakariás, “A menekültek civil segítése: attitűdök és morális érvek,” *REGIO. Kisebbség Kultúra Politika Társadalom* 24, no. 4 (December 22, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.17355/rkkpt.v24i4.137>.

boundaries, there are helpers and people who receive help, and they all exist in a hierarchical structure. It is decided by the helpers, or society itself, who deserves help, who is suffering enough to deserve it. Women and children are usually considered vulnerable enough to be helped, however, as we could see in the case of the migration debate, teenage and adult males are more often not considered to be worthy for help, and they are labelled as the ones who abuse the system. The media and the governmental communication stressed and promoted fear and the feeling of danger, and it made people forget about the suffering of the migrants. Workers of the Hungarian National Television were specially instructed not to show any footage of women and children living in the train stations.⁸¹ However, as Liisa Malkki describes, the victim role dehumanizes people, especially the refugees, and they become pure victims in general, ‘the necessary delivery of relief and also long-term assistance is accompanied by a host of other, unannounced social processes and practices that are dehistoricizing’⁸² (p. 378). In this context, the voices of the victims were muted, and there were no relevant platforms to give their evidence or testimony about their condition.

The other issue often ignored, according to Zakariás, is the question of responsibility. According to her findings, 22% of the respondents agreed with the idea of helping the newcomers, however, they thought that it should not be done by the grassroots organizations and everyday people, but it was the responsibility of the state and the charities.

As Nina Bø writes in her master thesis⁸³, volunteers usually ‘put an emphasis on the importance of avoiding addressing differences between the volunteers and refugees’. The arguments that newcomers are just like ‘us’, and that ‘they deserve help, because we can be in their place any

⁸¹ Daniel Nolan, “Hungarian TV ‘Told Not to Broadcast Images of Refugee Children,’” the Guardian, September 1, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/01/hungarian-media-told-not-to-broadcast-images-refugee-children-memo>.

⁸² author Liisa H. Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization,” *Cultural Anthropology*, no. 3 (1996): 378.

⁸³ Nina Bø, “A Human Touch Across The Hall,” n.d., 106.

time, and we would expect help, too' was often used by volunteers and sympathisers. Bø presents the experiences of other volunteers she worked with in a Norwegian refugee camp. A young woman working with minors claimed that 'she avoided talking about herself to prevent creating an unnecessary barrier based on how her life differed from those of the refugees. When confronted with questions about her life, she preferred to avoid the issue or even lie to make her life situation seem more moderate, and thus avoid what she thought might emerge as an uncomfortable situation'⁸⁴.

⁸⁴ Bø, 67.

8. The Let's Help the Refugees Together group (SEM)

In this section I am going to present the Let's Help the Refugees Together group, where I have been volunteering since the summer of 2015, and eventually became one of the leaders, because of the many hours spent coordinating and collecting donations.

The Let's Help the Refugees Together (Segítsünk Együtt a Menekülteknek, SEM) group⁸⁵ was established on Facebook on 27th of June in 2015 by human rights expert Nora Köves. Just a day later, Sándor Újhelyi, a Hungarian businessman created another group for the same cause, called Migration Aid. Migration Aid grew extremely fast, hundreds of people joined every day. However, there was no coordination, no leadership, just people willing to help in numerous ways. Coordination of the helpers first started in small steps. Some people would cook or donate food, others were ready to transport the food to the train stations where the newcomers appeared. The helpers soon realized that it was not enough, so then some would write daily reports in the Facebook groups to let others know what went well and what did not, what seems to be needed more, and what donations are completely unnecessary. Újhelyi then started to collect money on his own bank account in order to help the newcomers. However, there was very little documentation available on how he spent the donations. It created great tension among the members of the Migration Aid Facebook, and it was probably the moment, when we decided to keep SEM separate, and started to use that group more actively.

At that time, the SEM Facebook group was open, anybody could join and post. However, when trolls appeared and 20-30 posts were added daily, the group submerged in chaos. Something had to be done to keep it effective, so we changed the group policy, only members could add new members, and a few admins were appointed who would do the housekeeping in the Facebook group, deleting irrelevant posts, answering questions. Eventually we decided to create

⁸⁵ "Facebook Page of 'Segítsünk Együtt a Menekülteknek!,'" accessed March 16, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1603043899969611/about/>.

another, secret group on Facebook, with the most active members, in order to coordinate the most pressing, operative work.

Due to severe personal conflicts, this smaller group needed to be renewed from time to time, because instead of facing the conflicts and deleting troublesome people from the group, there was always a new group created. This helped to separate coordination and the call for donations, but then a third group seemed to be necessary, as well. We created a group called 'Parlour' (*Társalgó*) to provide a space for the members where they could share interesting articles, events, that were not crucial to the day to day operation, in order to keep the important information visible.

Media attention grew parallel with the size of the group: more and more non-Hungarian journalists and volunteers became interested. As all our groups were in Hungarian, we decided to create a fourth group, that was intended to communicate our needs and operations in English. Our physical basis was a basement, previously used as a community library and space for the homeless close to Keleti Train Station. It even had a name, from the address 41 Bérkocsis street it was called BK41. We decided to keep the address and the location secret in order to avoid unwanted attention from the media, and the anger of people who disagreed with our cause, but as the membership and donations grew, it was impossible to hide it anymore. Still, we would not let everybody down to the basement from the media, partially because the cooking there was done without an official permit, and even though we tried to keep the basement as clean as possible, it was still far from the sanitary standards of a restaurant's kitchen.

The food we used was all donated by private individuals, usually via online delivery, as in the beginning we did not accept any financial donations, only goods. The basement was around 50 square meters, that felt quite small when we tried to fit in all the food that was handed out in a day for 2-3000 people, the cooking equipment (100 and 80 litre cooking pots), the volunteers,

tables and chairs to work on, plus we also received 10–15 bags of used clothes and shoes every day.

We got dozens of kilos of vegetables and fruits every day, and in the summer heat, they would often start to rot in the badly ventilated basement. The volunteers had to select the healthy products several times a day, and we had to fight the flies, midges and mice. Despite the unideal circumstances, BK41 quickly became an iconic place of the events in 2015. It was a great challenge to separate the clothes, that were often old, unwashed and in need of serious selection from the fresh food, and eventually we managed to get another basement room for the clothes close by.

Few of our volunteers were involved in the community library and cooking also before the summer of 2015. Three of them were at that time semi-homeless, so they had the time to sleep at the basement, in this way we literally provided 0-24 care. However, despite their dedication, it sometimes caused tension, as well. All three smoke cheap cigarettes, with a heavy smoke, that annoyed many of the volunteers coming down, and it also raised sanitary problems. Eventually we agreed that smoking was only allowed outside the basement.

As the number of people interested in volunteering grew, we realized that while our informality has some advantages, the lack of clear rules, structure and administration can cause a great deal of problems. After a volunteer reported that her purse went missing, it was clear that a system where people could simply come and go whenever they pleased was not sustainable. We introduced a system where first-time volunteers had to show their ID to the person responsible, then sign the daily list and then they got a badge with their name and our logo, that they had to bring for future occasions. However, volunteers often left their badges at home, then they needed new ones, and having a badge would, of course, not stop anybody from stealing, nor could we recognize a fake ID. Still, this system did help in the situations where some people would pose as our volunteer and collect money from donors (even though we never accepted

money during the summer), or even asylum seekers and then disappear, as now we and everybody else could identify the volunteers representing our group from the badge. We only learned later that these things happened, because nobody knew all the others personally, due to the great fluctuation in the group.

One other issue was, that many volunteers would come at weekends and in the afternoons, sometimes so many, that there was not enough space for them in the basement, but at other times, especially in the mornings, when most of the work, for example cooking lunch needed to be done, people were less likely to come, because they had to work. In order to find a solution for this problem, we tried to introduce a Google sheet, where people could sign up for different tasks each day. This was not perfect either, as not everybody would sign up, or they would sign up but not come, plus there were some technical difficulties, for example people would sometimes accidentally delete each other's name from the Google sheet.

Even the badges and the Google sheet could not solve the great difference of popularity between the tasks. The worst part of the job, with the least amount of positive feedback was cleaning the gigantic pots, the basement, packing and sorting the deliveries, stirring the food in the pot for hours. Eventually it was done mostly by volunteers who had the most experience, and were most committed, while the more popular tasks, such as handing out clothes and food to the newcomers, playing with the children, or talking to the media was often done by first timers, lacking any experience. Although we often asked everybody not to make any statements in the name of the group, if a volunteer wearing our badge said anything in the media, it was associated with us. As the most popular task was helping the children, families were often overloaded with food and other donations, while the young boys arriving alone had nothing. When the more experienced volunteers handed out the food and other donations, we tried to pay attention to those who did not have anything. Often, we would walk around, and if we could see piles of food, we would not give any more.

When distributing food at lunch time, the person responsible would ask for the help of some asylum seekers who spoke English. They would help us organize people into two queues, one for men, and one for women and children. As our resources were limited, each could get one portion of food, unless they explained that they had a friend or family member who was unable to stand or walk. In such cases a volunteer would accompany them and take a portion to the disabled/sick/underaged person, too. The helpers were often given extra food, or they could choose from the clothes, as a reward for their help. The fluctuation of the newcomers was high, so the helpers would also change very often, except for a few cases, when they stayed for a month or so.

The queues were necessary, because due to the lack of governmental and official charitable help, the only food they got was often what they got from us, or other volunteer groups. Although we tried our best, we often did not have enough for thousands of people. This often-created fights and tension between the newcomers, especially when some people tried to ask for more portions or stood in the line repeatedly. It was essential to cool these tensions so that the helpers could do their work.

The temporary ‘assistants’ among the newcomers were also crucial in dealing with medical issues. Both Migration Aid and SEM had a medical team, but they eventually joined and operated mostly in a room given by the municipality at the Keleti Train Station. Doctors, nurses, medical students, retired medical professionals came to offer their services. In Hungary, those who did not apply for asylum are only eligible for care in case of 1. Emergency, 2. Life threat 3. Giving birth. After these services are given, the price of the services may be billed. After submitting asylum application, or already holding a refugee, subsidiary protection, or humanitarian protection one is eligible for everything that Hungarians are eligible for, without

charge.⁸⁶ However, as the newcomers did not plan to stay for a longer time, they often went just to the volunteer medical team, rather than going to a hospital, that would have required transportation to the given institution, and a local guide. As a pharmacy offered a big supply of necessary medicines and medical tools, the medical team had a lot of resources available, especially after a Hungarian company donated a fully equipped ambulance car. However, it was problematic and professionally questionable to give medicine without being aware of possible allergies, a confirmed diagnosis, outside of a medical institute. The involvement of the medical team was necessary, they mostly treated bruises and wounds, but there were women giving birth on the stairs of the train station, assisted by the volunteers of the medical team. There was, however, a professional debate among the division members whether, as responsible professionals, they should do anything else besides treating minor, external injuries.

In this environment, where the volunteers performed basically unsupervised work in their home country/town, the power relations between the newcomers and the volunteers were clearly imbalanced. While the founders shared the principles written in the Code of Conduct of Red Cross, we were unable to constantly supervise and enforce the rules, therefore we had to trust our volunteers. The volunteers were usually Hungarians, from Budapest with local knowledge about the country, the language and Europe, while the newcomers arriving from the Middle East completely lacked this knowledge and had to rely on the information they got from the authorities, the volunteers, each other or the internet. The Hungarian authorities often failed to provide understandable information, for example a map they provided was an outline map used for testing students to find cities, stolen from a geography teacher's website⁸⁷.

⁸⁶ “Általános Egészségügyi Tájékoztató a Magyarországon Tartózkodó Menekültek És Segítőik Részére,” A TASZ jelenti, accessed May 21, 2018, http://ataszjelenti.blog.hu/2015/09/10/altalanos_egeszsegugyi_tajekoztato_a_magyarorszagon_tartozkodo_menekultek_es_segitoik_reszere.

⁸⁷ “Vaktérképpel Segít a Magyar Állam | Vastagbőr,” accessed May 22, 2018, <https://vastagbor.atlatszo.hu/2015/07/14/vakterkep/>.

One of the first and biggest dilemmas of the volunteers was whether it was acceptable to help the newcomers to go abroad instead of going to the designated refugee camps. As we received news that the camps became full in a few weeks, the volunteers started to help buying train tickets to Austria and Germany for those who wanted to go but could not buy these themselves, as the ticket office started to check passports at the time of the purchase. In July, there was no passport control at the train to Austria, and then Germany, as according to the Schengen Agreement⁸⁸ it was unnecessary. However, when the Austrian authorities realized that undocumented people are arriving in large numbers via train, they started checking the passports of people with non-European looks. A strategy to avoid passport control was to dress up asylum seekers in nice clothes, give them lighter make up, tourist books and newspapers in English. Sometimes it worked, sometimes people were sent back. Some used their own car, and smuggled newcomers through the Austrian-Hungarian border, taking advantage of the lack of border control. Of course, not everybody agreed with the process that volunteers helped newcomers trick the police and avoid the asylum process. It could not last long anyway, as after a week the passport control got stricter, and the authorities checked everybody.

It seemed that the newcomers will stay for a longer time living on the floors of train stations, without state care, as the Hungarian state's position was that every service is available in the refugee camps, newcomers should go there, disregarding the reality that thousands of people were fed and taken care of by volunteers. Many of the volunteers were hesitant at the beginning, because they thought that helping newcomers should not be done solely by grassroots organizations and civilians, but it was the responsibility of the state and the charities. However, the grassroot groups became organized and continued working, because they felt that there was nobody else doing this job, and while we agreed, that providing medical help, food, clothes and

⁸⁸ "The Schengen Agreement: Countries, Map and the Definition," Schengen VISA Information, accessed May 20, 2018, <https://www.schengenvisa.info.com/schengen-agreement/>.

other help to asylum seekers should be handled by the state and the charities who are trained for it, we also agreed, that the refugees needed help at that moment, and there was no time to debate the responsibility.

But most of us had no prior knowledge on volunteering, asylum law, the Islam or Middle Eastern culture, the volunteers had to quickly process all information available from NGOs, the internet, experts, the media, and the newcomers themselves, and decide on the ‘appropriate behaviour’. It was, however, quite unclear what is really ‘appropriate’.

Most of the newcomer women wore headscarves and clothes that covered most of their body. As it was summer time, normally the temperature was around 30 degrees, so most of the female volunteers were wearing shorts and revealing summer dresses. Some volunteers opposed it and suggested that these females are offending the newcomers with their ‘inappropriate clothes’, others insisted that first of all the volunteers are at home, so they should not change their life just because the newcomers are used to seeing something else, moreover that the European liberalism should be promoted by the volunteers, and rather the newcomers should adapt.

The question of gender relations came up regarding other topics, as well. Some of the volunteers suggested that we should respect the ‘customs’ of the newcomers, that the food is given to the head of the family, the father, who then distributes it among the family members. However, it was not always proven to be a real custom, and it was contrary to the European customs, where women and children are served first.

A different issue was, that it was considered normal and understandable, that there was a great demand for razors among the newcomer men, and the volunteers did distribute hundreds of razors. However, when somebody wanted to give cosmetics to the ladies, it generated controversy, and some considered it unnecessary, or even ridiculous to think about cosmetics when food or shelter are more important. Those who wanted to distribute it anyway, argued that

these little things help to preserve their sense of dignity and self-esteem, as most of it was ripped apart when they had to give up their home and life.

There were sexual and romantic relationships between volunteer women and newcomer men. In any formal organization, it would have been strictly prohibited, but we had no means to stop these affairs. When between the September 16 and the October 16 the Hungarian government let the newcomers go, and Austria welcomed them, some young newcomers choose to stay because of the Hungarian girls they dated. However, all the relationships I knew of ended in the following few weeks, but it was too late for the newcomer boys, they missed the opportunity to go safely and legally to Austria.

In the illegal refugee settlement at Calais, known as ‘Jungle’, there was a serious scandal in 2016, when volunteers were accused of ‘sexually exploiting’ the camp’s asylum seekers and migrants. “After being told of the allegations, UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency, called for charities in Calais to impose ‘zero tolerance’ policies on any exploitation to help maintain the ‘integrity’ of volunteer work.”⁸⁹ Just like in Calais, the train stations of Budapest were not officially recognised as refugee camps, and the organizations were only informal groups. Some volunteers did not belong to any organizations, so volunteers engaging in sexual relationships could not be called to account or banned that easily. In Budapest, according to the stories, mostly female volunteers engaged in such relationship with young, male asylum seekers. Probably it was not only the volunteers who recognized the possibility, but local prostitutes, as well. Once a young Afghani guy asked me whether ‘Hungarian women only have sex for money’, because that was his experience.

⁸⁹ May Bulman, “Volunteers in Calais Jungle Accused of ‘sexually Exploiting’ Refugees,” The Independent, September 16, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/calais-jungle-volunteers-sex-refugees-allegations-facebook-care4calais-a7312066.html>.

While there were all these debates on various questions, given that there was no formal environment, everybody could and did do whatever they wanted. Even when we suspected that somebody used the relationship our group built with the newcomers and exploited some families by promising them a way out of the country, we were defenceless. The police got involved too, but the suspected woman was never arrested, and while she was banned from BK41 and the Facebook group and we also warned Migration Aid in case she would try to join them, we were told that she was still coming to the train station regularly.

Once we became more organized, it came up whether besides providing help to the newcomers, we should also become engaged politically, and try to push the government for taking responsibility. The volunteers had a long debate about the demonstration on September 2, 2015⁹⁰ that was organized against the changes in immigration laws and the inhuman treatment of refugees, because most of the people were satisfied with volunteering being their only political statement against the government, while others would have stuck to the traditional form of protesting. Protesting in Hungary has not been particularly successful, except for an anti-government protest in 2006⁹¹ that turned violent. At that time, the government eventually resigned. The only other directly successful demonstration was against a proposed internet tax in 2014⁹², because after the wide-scale demonstration the proposal of the internet tax was completely dismissed.

⁹⁰ narancs.hu, “Tüntetés volt ma délután a szerkesztőségünk előtt,” September 13, 2015, <http://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/cof-magyar-narancs-tuntetes-96463>.

⁹¹ Index, “Tüntetések, tévéfoglalások percről percre,” September 17, 2006, <https://index.hu/belfold/tuntet0917/>.

⁹² Index, “Székháztámadás lett az internetadó elleni tüntetésből,” October 27, 2014, http://index.hu/belfold/2014/10/27/szekhaztamadas_lett_az_internetado_elleni_tuntetes_vege/.

9. Focus group analysis

I conducted a focus group interview with seven members⁹³ of the Segítsünk Együtt a Menekülteknek group. Although the literature suggests to have more than one group⁹⁴, I could only manage to organize one, due to time limitations. I invited twenty volunteers, but only seven could come. As I explained before, there were some personal conflicts during the work of the group, which resulted in some people leaving it. While I tried to invite everybody, who participated for a longer time very actively in the work of the group, some people might have refused the invitation due to our personal conflicts in the past.

I chose the focus group method, because it is less artificial, and given that I knew and had a good relationship with all of the participants, it was an effective way to gather their points of view in an informal way. Besides being less artificial, focus groups allow the participants to interact with and reflect on each other, and it is a good way to capture group dynamics.⁹⁵

“Focus groups enhance the validity of survey research by providing more detailed understanding of the topic under consideration (Wilkinson 1998) by: contributing to the identification of relevant theoretical concepts; assisting in the formulation of appropriate hypotheses; and aiding in effective communication with the target population (Fuller et al.

⁹³“Morgan (1998a) suggests that the typical group size is six to ten members” Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods, 4th Edition*, 4th edition (Oxford u.a: Oxford University Press, 2012), 479.

⁹⁴ “Clearly, it is unlikely that just one group will suffice the needs of the researcher, since there is always the possibility that the responses are particular to that one group.” Bryman, 477.

⁹⁵“The focus group practitioner is invariably interested in the ways in which individuals discuss a certain issue as members of a group, rather than simply as individuals. In other words, with a focus group the researcher will be interested in such things as how people respond to each other's views and build up a view out of the interaction that takes place within the group.”⁹⁵ “Focus group research is less artificial than many other methods, because, in emphasizing group interaction, which is a normal part of social life, it does not suffer from the problem of gleaning information in an unnatural situation. Moreover, the tendency of many focus group researchers to recruit participants from naturally occurring groups underpins the lower level of artificiality of the method, since people are able to discuss in situations that are quite normal for them.” Bryman, 487.

1993).”⁹⁶As we discussed events that occurred three years ago, the conversation helped to refresh the participants’ memories as well.

I was interested in how they perceived the problematic issues I described before, such as illegal activities, clothing, gender relations, sexual relationships between the helpers and the beneficiaries, group hierarchy. I hoped to find out whether the volunteers were aware that they needed to make decisions, how they came to a decision, and then how they legitimized them.

My hypothesis was, that they were not aware of how imbalanced the power relations were between them and the newcomers, and made their decisions affecting the lives of newcomers unconsciously of this, but with good will and honestly believing that they were doing the best they could to help the newcomers.

I informed the participants that I would make notes, and record the conversation, but would only use it for the purpose of this thesis. The volunteers were chosen based on their activity in SEM, but they are not representative for age, gender or other demographic variable.

I gave a number to each participants and will refer to them as Volunteer1/2/3/4/5/6/7. They do not know who has which number. I found keeping their anonymity especially important in the current political environment, where the government threatens with persecution for such activities these volunteers carried out, as some of them are still active.

⁹⁶ “The Schengen Agreement: Countries, Map and the Definition,” Schengen VISA Information, accessed May 20, 2018, <https://www.schengenvisa.info.com/schengen-agreement/>.

Involvement

At the discussion I explained them that I need their input for my thesis, which focuses the relationship between newcomers and volunteers, and the awareness of responsibility and legitimization of decision making of the helpers in an informal setting.

During the discussion, we first talked about why the volunteers chose the Let's Help the Refugees group to work with, and how they got involved with the organization.

Volunteer1 and Volunteer7 were operating the basement, BK41 for years with a little group in order to help local homeless and socially disadvantaged people. The majority of the first, and most active members of SEM came to help to BK41 regularly even before the summer of 2015. They noticed the growing number of newcomers at the public places when they were distributing the food for homeless people.

Volunteer2 and Volunteer6 were cooking illegally with another group at another basement for homeless people regularly, then they saw a Facebook post that there were newcomers arriving to train stations in Budapest, and they seemed lost and hungry. Volunteer2 then drove to Keleti Train Station, where individuals brought food and some other donations. As Migration Aid was the first and quickest growing group she noticed, that was the one she joined. However, she decided to quit when the establisher of that group started to send newsletters about his restaurant to the e-mail address she gave to receive volunteer information. When the leader of the activities in BK41 offered the basement for cooking, Volunteer2 joined gladly, and brought Volunteer7 with her.

Volunter4 and Volunteer5 also worked with Migration Aid first, as it was the biggest group with the biggest media attention, but it seemed that there were already too many people there, and they were not needed. However, in SEM they could participate in the activities.

Illegal Activities

In the second part of the conversation we discussed the legal and possibly illegal activities, and how the volunteers felt about these, how they legitimized their actions.

At the first weeks of the summer, volunteers helped newcomers to get to the dedicated refugee camps, and gave some food or other donations to help to maintain personal hygiene.

Then some newcomers asked for help in buying train tickets to get to Germany, Austria, Sweden, where their relatives and friends were supposedly waiting for them. That was the first time the issue of helping illegally first emerged, as anybody could be a human trafficker, who helped somebody cross the border in an unstatutable way.⁹⁷ Help could be ‘physical’, such as guiding the person to the border, accompanying the person through the border, misleading the border police, or providing tools that made the border crossing easier or giving fake documents or help could be ‘psychical’ as well, such as giving advice, guiding one, or telling the crossing place.⁹⁸

Newcomers also often asked to borrow smart phones, but then the Hungarian Helsinki Committee later warned people that it might be dangerous, as the owner of the phone could not control what phone call or text message the newcomer made, and he or she might be accused of aiding human trafficking.⁹⁹

All the Volunteers present at the focus group conversation claimed, that they were aware of the risks of performing illegal activities in order to help, however, as Volunteer2 explained, the governmental propaganda started already before the newcomers arrived to Hungary, and therefore it was clear that the state would not help, so the volunteers had to. According to her,

⁹⁷ Máté Halmos, “Menekülteknek segít? Így nem lesz önből embercsempész,” August 7, 2015, http://index.hu/belfold/2015/08/07/menekult_embercsempeszet_btk_buncselekmeny/.

⁹⁸ Wolters Kluwer Kft, “2012. Évi C. Törvény - 1.Oldal - Hatályos Jogszabályok Gyűjteménye,” 353. §, accessed May 30, 2018, <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A1200100.TV>.

⁹⁹ “Informational Document for Volunteers Prepared by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee,” accessed May 30, 2018, http://helsinki.hu/wp-content/uploads/info-segitoknek_FINAL_2.pdf.

in this situation it was okay to help illegally as well. Volunteer2 also mentioned her Jewish heritage, and how her family members had to hide during World War II. She felt compelled to help, now that she could, as her family members were also helped and hidden by brave volunteers.

Volunteer5 also mentioned that while the Hungarian Government spent a lot on political communication, they were unprepared to host the people arriving, and somebody had to step in. Volunteer4 said that the volunteers wanted to help, and as the goal of the newcomers was to go abroad, further West, the helpers had to aid them in achieving this. Volunteer1 reminded us that the volunteers might have committed illegal activities, but so did the Hungarian Government, when they ignored international asylum law.¹⁰⁰ According to Volunteer5, as the authorities let the volunteers do everything, they basically legitimized the illegal activities, too.

Volunteer6 also claimed, that while she respected the law very much, mostly out of fear, this was a chaotic crisis situation, where the rules were unclear. Volunteer2 said that as the government did not protect the newcomers, besides feeding them and providing information, it was also the volunteers who tried to warn them not to take the cabs for ten times the original price, the volunteers contacted the police when far right activists planned to protest against the refugees, and they organized the newcomers shelter in an ice storm. Many people got rich finding a business opportunity in the often chaotic environment. Volunteer1 told about his experiences, when hostels asked for hundreds of Euros for a night in a dirty shared room, taxi drivers were smuggling newcomers, and some people even sold the train tickets Swedish donors bought to be distributed for free among newcomers.

¹⁰⁰ “European Commission - PRESS RELEASES - Press Release - Commission Opens Infringement Procedure against Hungary Concerning Its Asylum Law,” accessed May 30, 2018, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-6228_en.htm.

Cultural differences, gender

In the next part of the focus group discussion, the perceived cultural differences, gender issues were raised. Volunteer7 told us how she felt uncomfortable in shorts when walking around among the newcomers, as they ‘stared’ at her, but she did not want to change her appearance, especially since most of the volunteers also wore revealing summer dresses. Volunteer4 also felt the same way, however, she decided to wear long skirts and trousers, because she felt it earned her more respect, and she did not want to be stared at.

Volunteer2’s reasoning for not changing her clothes was, that it would mean sacrificing her own cultural identity, which she did not want to do, however, she thought that there were some gestures that the volunteers could do without giving up their own identity, such as cooking with Middle-Eastern spices, or respecting Ramadan, and having food ready for those who only wanted to eat after sunset. Volunteer1 also confirmed, that because the cooking was for the newcomers, obviously we prepared meals we thought they would like. Volunteer7 also mentioned that while she would not change her clothes, even when she felt stared at, she got over the fact that the newcomers are impolite according to European standards, so they would not stand up when she gave them food, however she could forgive it, as they said thank you. Volunteer1 told us that although the volunteers tried to give food and clothes that they presumed the newcomers would like and use, but it did happen that teenage newcomer girls took the miniskirts, or that young newcomer boys would only ask for the some left over beer when they could choose anything from the basement.

For providing effective help to the newcomers, lots of trust was needed from both sides. Volunteer2 said that she felt the worst when she wanted to bring a family with lots of children to a shelter from the ice storm, and the father would not let his wife and smallest children to spend 5 minutes without him in the car, so he rather made his 6-year-old child walk to the shelter in the storm, and he sat in the car. Volunteer2 explained that while she understood the source

of mistrust, it felt really bad. Volunteer3, who is a refugee himself, but arrived to the country many years ago, confirmed that the newcomers were careful, as during their travels they had to suffer exploitation and lies, and the father was right to do everything to protect his family. This situation also shows, that if the decisions of the newcomers were different from what the volunteers expected, the helpers immediately felt bad or mistrusted.

Organizing the work

The helpers all agreed that the informality of the group had the great advantage of being flexible, and capable of adapting to the new challenges the volunteers and newcomers faced on a daily basis. Volunteer5 thought it was because unlike the formal charity organizations, SEM could focus on finding a solution, instead of going through a long bureaucratic process. When in September the big charities, such as Red Cross finally joined in the work, it seemed that their processes and rules do not work in this setting. They had a fixed amount of donations they were allowed to distribute one day, and they would not give more even if they could have, and this led to conflicts. Once when Volunteer2 was at Hegyeshalom, the SEM had to use the distribution station of Red Cross, as we did not have our own. But then Red Cross wanted SEM volunteers to wear the vests of Red Cross, which they refused, and eventually the Red Cross volunteers took off their vests too, and continued to help as civilians. Volunteer5 also mentioned, that the big charities were always noticeably more active when the media was around.

Volunteer1 highlighted the importance of the helpers joining the volunteers among the newcomers, and how they helped to keep the distribution in order. He even introduced some techniques, where the first row of queuing people would kneel down, and protect the volunteers from being pushed to the wall. Volunteer2 and 4 expressed their disagreement with making people to kneel down, as it would be humiliating, but they agreed that some order was necessary, as the crowd of hungry people could be dangerous sometimes.

Volunteer2 mentioned the system SEM worked with eventually, where there was a daily person in charge, whom everybody could turn to with questions and problems. The daily person in charge was not elected, there were no rules who was eligible for this position, but those who were already experienced would apply, and those who seemed capable, would do it more often. Volunteer2 had this position sometimes, but it did happen that she had to leave for a while, and

left the job to her 13-year-old daughter at the time, who did a perfect job in managing the group for that short time. Volunteer6 only took the responsibility once, and she felt insecure. She said that it was a particularly hot day, the ventilation system was down, and she was afraid that the cooks would get sick in the hot, steamy basement, and she tried to make them stop and go outside, but they would not listen, keeping Volunteer6 in great stress.

Volunteer2 brought up the problem that people who came to help often wanted to lead immediately, reorganizing the whole system, or giving new rules. As Volunteer6 described it, the group eventually excommunicated those who only wanted to lead, but did not want to work. There will still conflicts, like whether the group should give donations to the local, Hungarian homeless people as well. While there was no possibility to enforce it, the majority of the active members in the group vouched for helping whoever asked for our help, no matter the nationality, ethnicity, age, gender or religion. The group tried to help those first who seemed to need it the most, but even journalists coming to report from abroad were given a sandwich when they asked for it.

Relationship with the refugees

I brought up the issue of intimate relationships between volunteers and newcomers. Everybody in the focus group agreed, that it was not ethical, given the unequal status of the helpers and the beneficiaries. As Volunteer4 described it, the newcomers were dependent on the donations distributed by the volunteers, causing a hierarchy, where any romantic relationship between them was based on inequality, and while she dated other volunteers, she would never have dated a newcomer. While formal organizations strictly prohibit these relations, in an informal setting there were no means to control the volunteers.

There were lots of young, male newcomers arriving without families, however, there were basically no young, newcomer women without children, or husband. While some newcomer men were interested in local, Hungarian women, most of the volunteers shared the views of the participants of the focus group, and tried to maintain only a helper-beneficiary relationship.

We heard that many prostitutes offered their services to male newcomers, sometimes leading to a confusion, when newcomers thought that it was normal for Hungarian women to ask money in exchange for sex.

Psychological Challenges, Self-Doubt

I asked the focus group participants, whether they ever had any doubt that they were doing the right thing, when they had no training, no supervision, no safety net around them. Volunteer2 mentioned that she had lots of doubts, especially as she brought two of her teenage daughters there to help, but she did not have any regrets. She felt that her work saved many, or at least helped them a little. Volunteer5 also agreed, that while he had many doubts, there was nobody else there to do the job, and he could not just sit back and do nothing. Volunteer6 called up her memories about how terrible she felt when she first visited Keleti Train Station where newcomers were sleeping on the floor. First, she thought that she would not return anymore, as emotionally it was too demanding for her, but then kept working for the whole summer. In formal organizations psychological help and tests are mandatory to take for the workers, however, in this informal environment we did not even know at the beginning, how challenging it could be. One of the hardest tasks was to accept that we could not help everybody, and we could not solve all the problems. Volunteer1 remembered that for a long time he simply would not accept that, and it was a terrible feeling when despite all his efforts there were always hungry people left. Burn out, nightmares, emotional breakdowns were common among the people coming to help. Luckily, the volunteers were not left without help, first they organized themselves gatherings, where they would share their experiences, the good and bad things that happened to them during the day. Venting to each other was helpful, according to Volunteer6, and eventually psychologists would offer their services pro bono for volunteers, who needed professional help in order to prevent traumas and burn out, in the form of weekly group therapy sessions or individual counselling.

Agency of the newcomers

The newcomers were in a vulnerable situation, far away from their home, often without a common language with the volunteers. While the state and its media empire presented the newcomers as dangerous masses, the volunteers participating in the focus group, claimed that they tried to focus on the individuality of the newcomers. As they had to realize, that they cannot help everybody, volunteers often chose a family, or a smaller group and focused on their problems. The help could have been from finding a passing pair of shoe, to accompany them to a hospital, or the authorities, or simply listen to their stories. The low number of available Farsi, Arabic, Pashto and Urdu translators, or English-speaking newcomers and volunteers limited the chance for deeper discussions and personalized help, but both parties were creative and willing to try to find a communications channel through drawing, acting out, or using Google Translate. The volunteers said, that they were more interested in what the newcomers want, than what the international regulations prescribe. As Volunteer4 described, when the newcomers wanted to leave Hungary instead of waiting for the asylum procedure to conclude, the helpers provided in achieving this goal. When the newcomers started to protest in September against Hungarian governments decision, of completely shutting down international train service from Keleti Train station, many volunteers protested with the newcomers. When the newcomers eventually started to march towards Austria on foot, the volunteers instantly provided them water, food and practical backpacks on the way.

While in official charity organizations, the aid workers have to obey the rules, and are only allowed to do the prescribed activities, the volunteers of the informal groups had the possibility to adapt their activities to the need and will of the newcomers, by willing to listen and actually trying to understand what the newcomers want. Without the safety net of regulations and supervision of responsible experts, the best point of reference to “to do the right thing” as

Volunteer3 said, was to ask the newcomers themselves, what would help them most, therefore the agency of the beneficiaries had more recognition than it would have by official charities.

Conclusion of the focus group discussion

The focus group discussion with the seven volunteers of the Let's Help the Refugees Together group is not representative of the opinion of all people who helped the newcomers in the summer and autumn of 2015 in Hungary, however it does present the different opinions on the problems that the volunteers had to deal with on a daily basis, such as the legitimacy of their work, the constant obscurity in a legally unstable environment, the debate on how far they should go in helping the newcomers, whether the xenophobia of the government justifies even the illegal activities, how should they behave with people coming from a different cultural environment, and who is going to help the volunteers in processing the trauma of the crisis.

While the volunteers had a hard time making decisions, their main motivation was to offer as much help as they could, to as many newcomers as possible, while respecting what the newcomers themselves are trying to achieve.

10. Conclusion

I presented how a Hungarian grassroots organization worked in a politically hostile and legally unstable environment. The Let's Help The Refugees group helped thousands of newcomers on a daily basis for the whole summer and autumn of 2015, and even after that. Despite being informal, and lacking clearly defined rules and leadership, the volunteers managed to organize themselves, and do as much as they could. While SEM and other groups took the job on themselves, when the state and the biggest charities failed to step in, their informality had its advantages and disadvantages, too. The lack of hierarchy speeded up the reaction time, which was important in a constantly changing, unsure environment, and all the donations could be given directly to the newcomers. The newly emerging groups quickly won the sympathy and support of individual and corporate donors, creating a well working system. This job however, placed a huge responsibility on the untrained, inexperienced volunteers who were often working without emotional and professional support. Because of the lack of supervision, the volunteers sometimes caused damages despite their best efforts. Some gave legal advices, without a clear understanding of asylum law, some got into intimate relationships with newcomers, preventing them to leave the country when they had the chance. It was demanding for the volunteers themselves, burn out was common. The NGOs who were already working with migrants, asylum seekers and refugees were overwhelmed, and while they all supported the grassroots, the volunteers often needed more support. The helpers often had doubts in themselves, they were aware of their lack of experience, qualification and training, and that taking care of thousands of newcomers on a daily basis should not be their job, however, since there was not anybody else doing it, they felt, that they had to. It sometimes meant carrying out illegal activities as well, but the volunteers took this risk. The literature on humanitarianism, agency and power relations between helpers and beneficiaries claims that the humanitarian workers are not always aware of inequality caused by the dependence, and they often ignore the

will or decisions made by the aid recipients, justifying it with a crisis situation, emergency, or simply not seeing them as anything else, but victims. These problems come up in strictly controlled environments too, such as refugee camps, detention centres working with professional staff, like the recent scandals on the sexual misconduct of Oxfam employees in Haiti¹⁰¹, however the volunteers taking part in the focus group, working in the informal groups were much more aware of their power, and the responsibility they took. It does not mean that they did not make any mistakes or wrong decisions, but the lack of rules and clear leadership made them rely on their instincts, good will and desire to help.

¹⁰¹ Oxfam International, “Oxfam Release of 2011 Haiti Internal Report,” accessed May 18, 2018, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/oxfam-release-2011-haiti-internal-report>.

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