

TransSOL Research Summary 6: Three Cases of Organised Transnational Activism

Learning from Good Practices of Transnational Solidarity (WP6)

Introduction

TransSOL is an EU-funded research project dedicated to describing and analysing solidarity initiatives and practices at a time in which Europe's existence is challenged by the consequences of the 2008 economic and financial crisis, by the problematic management of large fluxes of refugees and by the outcome of the 2017 Brexit referendum. The sixth and final work package provides three pilot studies on cases of activism that have been effective in meeting recent challenges. By closely examining how three grass roots organisations and networks operate, we might generalize in order to provide exemplary practices that seem to foster solidarity between individual people as well as collectives across European countries.

By analysing three case studies of organised activism, effective practices can be ascertained from what has proven to work for promoting solidarity. The three pilot studies closely examined include:

- 1.) The transnational organisation of workers in the gig economy and the transnational social strike, a case already studied in WP4, exemplifying cross-border solidarity actions in cases of job precarity and unemployment.
- 2.) 'Cities of Solidarity': an informal initiative of city governments and civil society actors who are welcoming refugees into their municipalities despite national-level regulations and who are building a network of transnational solidarity with refugees.
- 3.) *Krytyka Polityczna*: a civil society organisation based in Poland and active across Central

and Eastern Europe. The organisation is involved in several initiatives, including a journal, an independent news platform, a publishing house and 20 social clubs across the country.

These three networks, with different degrees of formal organisation, respond to different aspects of the crisis, touching on TransSOL's key issues, such as migration and employment. For this reason, these organisations have been selected as case studies in order to gather tangible ideas based on already-functioning practices.

Evidence and Analysis

The three case studies demonstrate ways activists have facilitated solidarity in the wake of the financial and political crisis throughout Europe.

1) Transnational networks in the gig economy and the transnational social strike

The transnational social strike began in 2014 with the aim of linking diverse movements of precarious workers, migrants and the unemployed. Rather than an institution like a trade union, it is a network of communication for the exchange of knowledge and tactics across borders. In particular, it addresses the question of how to withhold labour as a form of effective activism. The group holds regular international meetings and publishes material in several European languages.

In the past two decades, labour has become both more flexible and more precarious. The introduction of online platforms in the labour market in the last few years have reshaped and accelerated these processes, giving birth

to the so-called “gig economy”, a system in which working activities are completed through a series of tasks facilitated by online platforms. The struggles of gig-economy workers provide an interesting chance to investigate the relationship between technological innovation, social contention and transnational activism.

The food delivery industry is the sector that has the most significant cases of organisation. Young adults riding on bicycles while carrying boxes marked by the logos of companies like Foodora, Deliveroo, Justeat, Glovo, and so on, are a common sight in most European cities. Customers order food from a restaurant of their choice through a website or an app, and riders deliver it as quickly as possible. Forms of employment tend to vary significantly across countries and companies as well as the ways in which they are paid. What they have in common is the fact that they are not considered to be regular employees of the food delivery platforms but instead free-lance workers that perform a series of “gigs”, thanks to the service provided by platforms.

What is ironic is that it is partly thanks to new developments in online communication that these workers have been able to mobilise across European nations. The mobilisation of gig economy workers in general, and in particular of the employees of food delivery platform employees, has been spreading across Europe in the last two years. The “Transnational Food Platform Strike Map” built by French activists shows only three protest events for 2016: the protest in front of the Deliveroo headquarters in London in August, the strike of Foodora rider in Turin in October, and the protest of Deliveroo rider in Bordeaux in December. For the following year, 2017, the same map reports 40 protest events, in 8 different countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom).

The range of tactics that were used was rather broad: from small demonstrations to the choice to carefully respect traffic laws, from

circling company buildings to distributing leaflets in the restaurants that use the platform, from striking to occupying company offices, from refusing to take to the streets in case of bad weather conditions to marching with activists in solidarity, and so on.

In most cases, there is a clear role in supporting the development of the mobilisation of established network of activists, such as *Plan C* in the United Kingdom or *Critical Workers* in Germany, either belonging to long-standing political areas of the radical or formed as crystallisations of the recent wave of anti-austerity mobilisations that has characterised several European countries in the last few years. That is to say, the events of 2011 their aftermath has had an impact on the capacity of these activists to cooperate transnationally.

2) Cities of Solidarity

Since summer of 2015, almost all countries involved in the TransSOL project were affected by the so-called “refugee crisis”. European Union institutions have faced increasing difficulties in external and internal border management, while countries of first arrival have experienced strong pressure on their systems and facilities of reception, as well as on their urban and social structures. Cities are the preferred destination for migrants, and often the place of highest concentration.

Confronting the limitations of migration policies put in place by single national governments, civil society has been organising in innovative ways, with numerous associations and networking experiences springing up all across the continent. In a significant number of cases, these initiatives met with a willingness to cooperate on the part of local and municipal authorities.

This has led to a novel model of cooperation between self-organised migrant groups, informal associations and structured NGOs, on the one hand, and City governments on the other. At the same time, such cooperation has fostered new transnational networks, with relationships and connections built between

single cities, with the aim to present shared proposals for asylum and migration policy and to coordinate their practical efforts in solving daily and long-term problems in the reception and social inclusion of migrants. We define these exemplary cases as “Cities of Solidarity.”

The situation in different European countries after the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 has produced and is still producing a wide range of solidarity activities, from informal initiatives to more structured institutional projects. Most of these practices can be identified, developed and tested as models of transnational solidarity practices. They proved to be effective in their premises and results; sustainable from an environmental, social and financial point of view; appealing in terms of creation of positive social values, culture and imagination; and even adapted in different contexts and reproducible on larger scale.

These four cases in Palermo, Barcelona, Grande-Synthe, and Berlin as well as the transnational EuroCities Project show how the networking between citizens and civil society practices in “Cities of Solidarity” can contribute to defining single solutions and more strategic proposals for alternative policies on asylum, migration and mobility across national borders and developing innovative social solidarity practices at European Union level.

Cities are proving to be more dynamic and effective than single national governments in the management of migratory phenomena and particularly in the reception and social inclusion of new arrivals.

In the last three years, social movements, civic groups and associations have played a leading role in welcoming migrants, which is a phenomenon of great cultural, political, social and practical importance. In fact, it proves the growing awareness of the structural character of migratory phenomena, the claim for a universal, cosmopolitan right to mobility and the need to experience European citizenship on urban level as an inclusive and extensive dimension, beyond national origins. This

attitude has important political consequences (160,000 protesters in Barcelona on 18 February 2017 to ask the Spanish government to open the borders to asylum seekers; 100,000 in Milan on 20 May 2017 to ask for “bridges, not walls, solidarity and hospitality”). This also entails a widespread practical articulation in thousands of voluntary initiatives and/or cooperative mutualism, aimed at ensuring accommodation, food, legal support, health assistance, education, cultural activities and orientation towards placement in the labour market.

Local institutions are also committed, starting from the city governments that put themselves in a constructive and horizontal relationship with the social composition of refugees and migrants, and with the initiatives of civil society and active citizenship. Precisely this sort of cooperation defines the possibility that an urban and metropolitan space presents itself as a “City of Solidarity”.

3) *Krytyka Polityczna*

Krytyka Polityczna is a Warsaw-based civil society organisation engaged in transdisciplinary activity spanning Central and Eastern Europe and Ukraine. The question of the intellectual and cultural marginalisation of Central and Eastern European countries, and particularly the Visegrád group since the fall of communism, has demonstrated the need for a re-invention of democratic culture in the region but also within the context of the EU. *Krytyka Polityczna*, a network of intellectuals and activists based in Poland, is a key actor in this reinvention, with the stated aim of forwarding the idea of ‘deep European integration’.

The organisation is involved in several initiatives, the centre of which is a journal and independent news platform. In addition, the network runs a publishing house while managing over 20 social clubs across the country. The organisation is a good example of ‘horizontal’ or geographical solidarity among and between the V4 countries and beyond, but

also shows vertical political solidarity with local grassroots initiatives, bridging the divide between intellectuals and the public.

Krytyka Polityczna's efficacy as a model is best demonstrated by its capacity to maintain cross-border initiatives over a long period, to develop intellectual ideas not only in short individual projects, but over several years in a space that is both global and well-defined politically within Europe. One condition for this is the continual cooperation between different organs of the organisation itself: the interplay between the publishing house, Agora meetings and Democracy 4.0 being a particularly good example. The need for real-life activist meetings came *as a result* of the limitations of intellectual publishing. But it was the experiment and lessons learnt *in dialogue* with the Italian and Spanish groups in Democracy 4.0 that helped *refine and expand* a process that was already underway. And this in turn had an effect on the kinds of debates picked up by the publishing house.

For *Krytyka Polityczna*, in other words, transnational solidarity is the result of effective internal management processes, in which connections made by one initiative are able to inform the future activities of another. In practical terms, this kind of online/offline hybrid organisation is made possible by the effective use of European infrastructure like cheap flights, the pre-existing connections of local activist networks and effective use of digital technology. Yet these are all synchronized by the core institution of *Krytyka Polityczna* to facilitate a continual flow of knowledge between the Polish speaking 'national' communities and various international collaborators.

Lessons Learned and Policy Recommendations

Lessons learned from the three case studies are addressed first and foremost to civil society organisations. However, some of insights

from analysing the three organisations should be considered by policy-makers, as well.

1) How should transnational activism be organised?

For the experience of *Krytyka Polityczna*, there are general lessons to be drawn regarding the internal organisation of civil society organisation.

First of all, translation should be seen as a vital political tool. As *Krytyka Polityczna* demonstrates, polyglot communication can facilitate much more than just the sharing of neutral information in new contexts. If framed effectively, translated materials actively build cultural spaces, and forms of cultural cooperation.

Secondly, the use of digital and social media as well as other pan-European infrastructures can enable communities to develop both in concentrated moments (such as real-life events) and prolonged communication (online groups). The two, however, need to be held together. Democracy 4.0 is a good example, in which several real-life meetings were organised to reflect upon the digital tools themselves. The lessons learnt resulted in precisely those tools being used to create further actions in streets, squares and other public spaces as well as for reinventing AGORA. Digital technologies, we might conclude, only bring solidarity when they facilitate new political meeting points.

Further, regional specificity can act as a springboard for larger scale solidarities. One of the reasons that *Krytyka Polityczna's* pan-European initiatives have been so successful is that they were conceived in gradual terms. They began with an emphasis on the Visegrád region and developed into something larger in scale. Even in processes of transnational communication, then, national and local experiences continue to be grounding forces.

In addition, our cases show that specific long-term partnerships yield the most fruitful results. The case of the Ukrainian partnership demonstrates how years of prolonged communication and community-building are essential to building effective transnational structures. When the dual national institution was founded in 2010, the participants were not aware of the various turning points that would come in the following years and how mutually beneficial the structure would prove to be. With this community already in place when shots started, however, they were ready to respond to unexpected challenges of the conflict with a sustainable institution that was resilient to the unfolding events.

Finally, it is important to point out that the EU itself is already facilitating solidarity. Leaving aside criticisms of specific institutions, *Krytyka Polityczna's* activities are a good example of how the EU remains a space with certain novel privileges for organisations working to build forms of solidarity beyond national and class-based communities. That such an innovative form of cultural activism has taken root in Poland, against precisely such nationalist and oligarchic forms of opposition, is testament to the democratic value of this already existing transnational political space. Freedom of movement and speech are today under assault from all sides, but the forms of solidarity pioneered by civil society actors across the EU demonstrate how much groundwork has already been laid in defending and redefining these terms for the future.

2) How can cooperation and momentum be generated between organisations and their activists?

The case of the transnational strike reveals the important role of the media for building momentum. Social media provides a powerful tool, facilitating connections at the communicative level between actors that find much stronger difficulties in coordinating their concrete struggles. One may say that the

same digital technologies that are used to exploit workers are then used to organise the struggle against exploitation. Nevertheless, it is true that the strategic construction of a feeling of shared belonging, of identifying as part of a growing movement, is a crucial aid for civil society organisations.

Furthermore, effective local collectives engaged in labour struggles seem to be substantially based on pre-existing activist networks, such as the transnational social strike, with politicised activists inside workers' collectives acting as brokers in the transnational sphere.

In general, the construction of concrete mechanisms of coordination of struggles between different countries is yet to come. Most activists are primarily focused on building their local struggle, accumulating strength, recruiting riders, and so on. Thus, on the one hand, the resources to be dedicated to transnational connections are rather limited and, on the other hand, it is rather difficult to build a common transnational agenda when legislative contexts are different from each other.

Workers and activists deeply feel the need to broaden the scope of their struggle as to reach the same transnational level on which companies are placed. In the same vein, researchers point out how bringing the struggle to the transnational level may be much more fruitful than waiting for an intervention by policy-makers.

3) How can cooperation and momentum be generated between civil society and state actors?

What becomes clear through analysing the 'Cities of Solidarity' is that there must be a structural reform of the European and national regulatory framework, which foresees a modification of the current international Conventions on the right of asylum and a more supportive migration policy, sharing

responsibilities and burdens on a transnational level.

The European Commission and European Council should give political and financial recognition of the role of cities, and local authorities should have of the broadest political and financial autonomy in migration matters granted single national governments.

The construction of stable and developed transnational networks between cities is necessary, which provides for the strengthening of exchanges of good practices and models of reception and social inclusion, the possibility of negotiating with one voice in front of the European institutions and national governments and the possibility of developing autonomous city-to-city policies, bypassing the direct control of the nation-state.

4) Summary of Lessons Learned and Policy Recommendations

- Translation is a vital political tool.
- Digital and real-life meetings must be held together and sustained.
- Regional specificity can act as a springboard for larger scale solidarities.
- Specific long-term partnerships yield the most fruitful results.
- The EU is already facilitating solidarity, and should take opportunities for developing it further.

Research Parameters

Each of the three studies follows a slightly different methodological approach, as each organisation / network works differently based on its own needs and structural requirements. However, particular criteria were emphasized in the qualitative analysis of the three exemplary cases.

1) Transnational networks in the gig economy and the transnational social strike

Our goals and evaluation criteria were the following:

- Assessing the state of development of transnational solidarity networks among precarious / intermittent workers, notably to discover whether they provide an embryo for a transnational re-organisation of labour struggles.
- Establishing the impact the transnational social strike has had on national groups working to further the rights of precarious workers, looking at specific case studies (e.g., Deliveroo workers in UK; Amazon workers in Italy).
- Ascertaining to what extent the transnational social strike has united social or 'class' groups that might have otherwise remained separate into a shared political framework:
- Ascertaining to what extent the transnational strike has built solidarity between migrant groups and precarious workers and identified points of common political interest.

2) Cities of Solidarity

Our goals and evaluation criteria were the following:

- Assessing the capacity of moving from informal initiatives to more structured and longer-term projects.
- Investigating examples of these practices capable of being identified, developed and tested as models of transnational solidarity practices.
- Identifying which of these experiences are effective in their premises and results; sustainable from environmental, social and financial point of view; appealing in terms of creation of positive values, culture and imagination; and reproducible on larger scale.

- Defining application-oriented guidelines destined to be re-produced and re-propagated in the coming years across Europe.

3) *Krytyka Polityczna*

Our goals and evaluation criteria were the following:

- Establishing how *Krytyka Polityczna* is creating an on-going public debate about Europe while explicitly tackling different forms of marginalisation and isolation

- Exploring how the organisation is developing solidarity across division lines that have separated Europe in its history, most notably between the V4 countries, through its work with civil society actors in the region.
- Assessing to what extent *Krytyka Polityczna* has successfully bridged a discursive gap between the intellectual and mass media environment, thereby contributing to the construction of a wider public debate on transnational solidarity.