According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in 2015 more than 1’000’000 migrants are estimated to have been travelling to Europe through various transit routes across Africa, Asia or the Middle East. Facing an unprecedented volume of arrivals, European asylum authorities are under pressure and deep internal divisions between Member States have been reignited, bringing in transit countries such as Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia to progressively close their borders to migrants. In parallel, a new type of migration is emerging: modern migration that relies on new technology, notably on social media. Hence, the question we address in this paper is the following: in the context of the migration crisis through the Western Balkans Route, what is the role of social media? A sub-question concerns the contribution of social media to the migration flows towards Europe.
Migration crisis, social media and democracy in the Western Balkans

by Alexandrina Iremciuc

Introduction

Migration is a global and permanent phenomenon. Nowadays, all regions in the world are confronted with migration flows as departure, host or transit zones. Modern states delimit their territories by geographical borders and consequently create a distinction between people movements inside a country (internal migration) and outside a country (international migration).

International migration links South\(^2\) countries to North\(^3\) countries and is mainly motivated by political, religious, economic and demographic factors. Wars and civil conflicts as well as liberticidal regimes\(^4\) are often causes of exodus. Combined with other push factors including the on-going violence and instability in origin countries of migrants such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, the deterioration of conditions in countries of first asylum such as Turkey as well as the geopolitical changes “that have closed off alternative destinations such as Libya”\(^5\), explain the migration crisis Europe is currently facing.

The endless flow of migrants trigger virulent debates in the media, dividing public opinion and politicians, along two main opposing lines: migrant support and aid from a part of the civil society, on the one hand, and political attitudes demanding borders control reinforcement on the other. Meanwhile, migrant networks develop mainly on the Internet, notably through social media.
I – Social networks and social media

Analysis of social networks in the context of the crisis that the Western Balkans are currently facing is important to understand the role of new communication channels, notably of social media in the migration flows towards Europe.

The social network is a theoretical construct used in social sciences to study interdependency between individuals and groups, organizations or societies. In its simplest form, a social network is a map of specified ties such as family or friendship that focuses on the relationships between people, for example, through exchanges of information, instead of on characteristics of people.

The importance of social networks in the migration process has been established in various scientific studies. Nevertheless, new information and communication technology (ICT) has changed the way people interact and the nature of the networks they create. Nowadays, the Internet is no longer a tool for scientists or the military for which it was initially developed twenty years ago. It has transformed into a social medium and became a way for people to keep in contact and to create new networks beyond geographical borders.

The new transnational social spaces created by the interaction between people not necessarily acquainted and not living in the same country but tied by the same goal or interest, have created a new category of social network primarily through social media: “communities of interest”. Migrant networks as well as initiatives that defend their rights and support them in the different countries they transit, are examples of these kinds of communities.

“New information and communication technology (ICT) has changed the way people interact and the nature of the networks they create”.
The term “social media” refers to the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. Websites and applications such as forums, blogs and wiki, for example Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Wikipedia as well as smartphones applications (including WhatsApp and Instagram), are some prominent examples of social media. In time, they have become an integral part of life online and to a certain extent of the lives of many people all over the world, including hundreds of thousands of migrants heading for Europe.

II – Social media and migration crisis

Social media and their easy access in creating and in sharing content as well as in participating in social networking represent an important tool, as much for the migrants who have made it to Europe as for those still on the road. The reason is that social media allow them to interact with people and groups of people in order to access information about how to reach to and travel through Europe and, once there, how to maintain contact with family and friends.

Hence, the migrants making for Western Europe through the different roads and countries of the Balkan Route rely on social media to get welfare and travel advice including: railway maps and recommended routes and itineraries, GPS coordinates for cheap and most reliable smugglers, free Wi-Fi and estimated expenses, European asylum policies and border management of transit countries, as well as tips on where to sleep, eat, change, receive money or charge the smartphones, how to access help from volunteers etc.

The multiplicity of websites, the numerous testimonies, pictures and videos, and the vast and diverse amount of information disseminated online corroborate the scientific assumption that the migratory process relies on a multidirectional flow of information starting with information about the organization of the journey and the destination context obtained through networks, notably through the relations created inside of them, and

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9
beyond the family, friends and community connections in countries of origin.

Therefore, we can argue that social media have some positive functions, especially for people who move between different countries as migrants. The instantaneous nature of social media contributes, on one hand, to providing essential travel information live and on the other hand, to creating a feeling of intimacy, of proximity and of trust between the people and the networks that consume and produce information. Traditional communication is thus digitalized and the contacts, - acquaintances and unacquainted individuals -, are multiplied and become virtual, allowing migrants to have access to an interactive and simultaneous community of interest and of support, and in this way to cope more easily and successfully with the adversities of migration.

If social media fulfil some positive functions for individual migrants and migrant networks, they also have some limitations - for instance, the information can sometimes be inconsistent or based on rumours. Social media may influence migrants by giving them information that turns out to be unrealistic or even false. Information that is not checked before it is made public spreads quickly online, and is sometimes even relayed by the mass media - like the report that Germany was sending boats to bring refugees from Turkey and Lebanon10.

Social media can take on an even more perverse role when they hide instrumental motivations like those of smugglers who minimize the dangers and the difficulties of the European journey by creating “underground communication in the domain of illegality”11. The several temporary Facebook pages established by smugglers resemble, at first glance, an ordinary travel agency with comfortable boats and attractive descriptions of the journey to Europe, while others sell fake passports and ID cards or Schengen visas12. In these cases, migrants are left to sift through the different posts and comments of other migrants and smugglers and judge for themselves the reliability of the information they have access to.

Moreover, not all migrants have access to smartphones and other devices allowing them to connect to the Internet. The use of social media depends on several factors primarily such as age, social class and education – young, wealthy and educated people in their country of origin are more likely to organize or support their journey through Europe by using new technologies and information they gather from social media. We can therefore argue that the key of modern migration necessarily implies possessing new technologies and the ability to use them.

“Social media have evolved to become more widespread and less a mechanism for one-to-one information distribution (...) and made migrants producers, rather than just consumers, of media content”.

In sum, social media have evolved to become more widespread and less a mechanism for one-to-one information distribution, in addition to serving as personal communication tools13, and made migrants producers, rather than just consumers, of media content14. But social media are not limited to publishing, sharing and consuming information between migrants and intermediaries taking part in their journey through Europe, they likewise serve as platforms for numerous civil societies’ initiatives and local actions that seek to assist migrants.

III – Migration crisis and civil society

If these kinds of initiatives are considered as normal in Western European countries, they are more surprising in the Western Balkans context. Indeed, since the end of Communist rule, the development of civil society has been promoted by the international community, notably by the European Union, as of utmost importance for helping transitions in the region and strengthening democratic institutions to finally integrate them into the EU. Despite these efforts, individual participation and involvement in civic associations and their ability to contribute to the policymaking process “is found to be low and in some cases lower than in post-authoritarian regimes elsewhere in the
In other words, “post-socialist civil society is weak in Western Balkans countries”\(^{16}\).

Nevertheless, the extent of the migration crisis has contributed to the emergence of several actions initiated by civil society in Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia and Serbia. Primarily present on social media such as Facebook and Twitter, they have launched supportive activities and emergency aid for migrants. Some of them are integrated into international networks like No Border Organisation or w2eu.info—Welcome to Europe, - which have branches in Serbia, Croatia and Macedonia -, and mainly aim to advocate for migrants’ rights through political work and activism. But more locally rooted associations and groups involved in the migrants’ causes also exist. Even though their purpose is mainly the same - offering emergency aid (e.g. food, water and clothes, phone cards and chargers as well as transport support etc.) and calling for funding, donations or volunteer work - we can distinguish two categories among these local civic initiatives.

“The extent of the migration crisis has contributed to the emergence of several actions initiated by civil society”.

The first one refers to the associations that already existed before the latest migrant crisis in the region (e.g. Migrant Solidarity Group of Hungary, Group 484 Serbia) and which embraced this new cause as a natural extension of their activities, while the second one consists of largely informal groups that emerged because of the migrant crisis (e.g. Dear refugees: Welcome to Croatia).

Depending on their structure, (more or less formal, self-organized groups), these associations have a website or a blog but all of them have Facebook and Twitter pages – some of them are even exclusively operating on social media. The content of their pages is made up of overviews of transit and destination countries and more precisely their asylum policies, and of different reports on the migrant situation in Europe as well as of updated news regarding borders closing, installation of new check points etc.. They also provide links to other informal groups and blogs (e.g. Lost at border) or to several international NGOs and humanitarian organizations like Doctors without borders or UNHCR.

In this landscape of different associations there is one that can’t be categorized as it should be considered more as an exception than as a rule: it’s the case of Migration Aid Association initiated by Hungarian volunteers. Created in summer 2015 as a “volunteer civil initiative providing life-saving emergency assistance for asylum-seekers travelling through Hungary”\(^{17}\), it led a few months later, - when the Hungarian government closed the borders -, to the establishment of a “supporting organization (...) in order to coordinate the international cooperation”\(^{18}\) called Migration Aid International, a charity organization registered in the United-Kingdom. In other words, Migration Aid Association and Migration Aid International have become an organization dedicated to “field work, aftercare and providing legal, integrational and social help to asylum-seekers (...) as well as carrying out social and public activities related to refugees, collecting donations and ensuring the conditions to the functioning of the Facebook group”\(^{19}\).

Their website has three different pages: in English, German and Hungarian. The organisation also created a smartphone application called InfoAid that provides information about what rules apply to migrants, where, when, why they have to register and what exactly it involves; where they can receive care and medical care; transport options and where and how they should buy train tickets, but also more unusual information like the fact that it is safe to drink running water in Hungary. The application is available in several languages: English, Arabic, Urdu and Farsi\(^{20}\).

In light of the first observations we gathered from our research on local civic initiatives and associations supporting migrant flows in Western Balkans countries, we can formulate several reflections. The impact of these initiatives on local citizens’ participation and involvement as well as on the policymaking process related to migration is rather limited despite their presence and visibility on social media. That reflects the weakness of post-
socialist civil society and the complexity of the on-going transformation in the region.

“The input of ICT in creating networks and communities of interest between migrants and civil society is a fact.”

Nonetheless, the input of new information and communication technology (ICT) in creating networks and communities of interest between migrants and civil societies, notably from the Western Balkans territories, is a fact. From that, we can reason that these same civil societies may find in ICT a way to express democracy to which they are inextricably linked.

IV – Civil society and democracy

On one hand, the widespread availability of ICT, their ease of use and especially their capacity to reach people beyond geographical borders play an important role in the expression of opinions and promotion of a cause, whatever that is. As a result, they represent the expression of a certain virtual aspiration to democracy.

On the other hand, civil society is one of the most explicit instances of the emergence of social networks. For that reason, those developed by migrants, could eventually contribute to the development of the willingness to combine with others and to accept the necessity of compromise resulting from such cooperation, and therefore be one of the key factors of their integration in Europe.

In other words, it is through immediate personal experience facilitated by civil society’s initiatives and associations, notably expressed through social media, that migrants could become “democratically cultivated”. We can hence claim that the Internet, and more precisely ICT, has an impact both on the expression of democracy by civil society in the Western Balkans and on migrants that transit the region as representing a space for democratic socialization.
Conclusion

Social media play a significant part in the migration crisis that is affecting Europe and especially the Western Balkans Route as they fill different functions. There are the positive ones, for example their use by migrants to map their journey through Europe in order to get welfare, travel advice but also to avoid as much as possible the closed borders and the check points. The instantaneity of social platforms offers migrants not only the necessary information but also the means to keep contact with family and friends and to build networks with unacquainted individuals, and thus developing a feeling of proximity and of trust. Therefore, social media is simultaneously a personal communication tool and a widespread digitalized communication platform that develops communities of interest and of support beyond geographical, linguistic and cultural borders.

We can therefore conclude that new information and communication technologies facilitate migrants’ journey through Europe but we cannot claim that they influence the arrival of migrant flows on European territories – that requires a deeper and different empirical study.

Regardless of the impact of civil societies in Western Balkans countries, - in terms of citizens’ mobilization and of their influence on policymaking processes -, several studies proved they are weak, though social media could represent a tool to express the need of and the wish for democracy in the region, notably through the creation of civic initiatives and associations, like for example the ones that support migrants.

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However, social media hide a more perverse side as they permit the development of illegal networks aided by the instrumental motivation of smugglers for which the migration crisis has become a lucrative business. This phenomenon is emphasized by a characteristic of social media: quick dispersion of any information published that is often not checked, and is therefore unreliable. Moreover, even if the possession of smartphones and other devices connecting to the Internet is common thing among migrants, it’s not the rule. Their access is limited to a particular category of people: wealthy and educated young men and women.
Endnotes

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