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## ARTICLES IN ENGLISH

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### **GRASSROOTS DIGITAL VOLUNTEERISM DURING CRISES: MUTUAL AID NETWORKS, PLATFORM LOGICS, AND SOCIAL POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

This article examines grassroots digital volunteerism as a form of civic self-organization in the context of a large-scale socio-economic disruption, using the 2022 refugee crisis in Russia as an empirical case study. It focuses on the mutual aid networks that emerged on the VKontakte social network and the Telegram messenger, analyzing their organizational characteristics, modes of participation, and functional roles in supporting vulnerable groups. Methodologically, the research is based on an interpretative quantitative analysis of digital trace data, drawing on open-source metrics such as audience dynamics, engagement indicators, publication intensity, and patterns of information circulation. The analysis reveals a functional differentiation between platforms: VKontakte primarily operates as an informational space that facilitates the articulation of needs, whereas Telegram serves as an operational infrastructure that enables coordination, task distribution and sustained volunteer interaction. The findings challenge growth-oriented approaches to assessing civic activity by demonstrating that the effectiveness of digital volunteer initiatives depends more on the stability of active participant cores and the density of communication networks than on audience expansion. The study also identifies hybrid and predominantly informal forms of inter-

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action between volunteer networks and public authorities, highlighting how digital self-organization can complement institutional systems of social support during crises. Overall, this article makes a valuable contribution to research on digital civic engagement and social policy, showing how platform-specific logics can shape mutual aid practices and redefine the boundaries between informal participation and institutional responses during crises.

*Key words:* grassroots digital volunteerism, mutual aid networks, digital self-organization, social media platforms, crisis and social policy

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Social and economic crises often act as catalysts for spontaneous and emergent forms of collective action, arising in response to both short-term emergencies and prolonged structural transformation (Yang 2021; Boersma et al. 2019; Kalogeraki 2018). Periods of instability increase the demand for support and stimulate processes of social self-organization, challenging the assumption that providing public goods does not encourage civic engagement (Hager 2014). Participation in volunteering, particularly when it involves visible and tangible forms of assistance, can serve a social and psychological function by enabling individuals to transform anxiety and uncertainty into meaningful collective action (Janoski 2010). This dual logic of simultaneously receiving and providing help is particularly evident in times of profound social disruption (Yang 2021).

The expansion of digital communication technologies has substantially broadened the scope for such forms of self-organization. Across different national contexts, social media platforms and messaging apps have become essential infrastructure for a variety of civic practices, such as mutual aid, public monitoring, and digital activism (Sun 2020). Importantly, virtual modes of self-organization are not necessarily antagonistic to the state. In fact, digital platforms often facilitate the coexistence and integration of institutionalized forms of civic participation and informal grassroots initiatives, creating hybrid modes of interaction among citizens, non-profit organizations, and public authorities (Bronnikov 2020; Tikhomirova et al. 2013). Contemporary research highlights how digital platforms reshape the logic of collective action by lowering entry barriers, accelerating coordination, and fostering horizontal forms of interaction (Törnberg, Uitermark 2020; Uitermark 2015).

From this perspective, self-organization is increasingly understood as a basic adaptive mechanism of social systems, rather than an exceptional response to crisis situations. This allows communities to generate situational solutions under conditions of uncertainty (Moraes et al. 2023). At the same time, self-organ-

ization in social crises exhibits unique characteristics. Unlike responses to natural disasters, it tends to be characterized by greater participant autonomy, fragmentation and situational leadership (Song et al. 2020; Simsa et al. 2019).

These dynamics were particularly evident in Russia in 2022, when the country experienced a significant influx of refugees from eastern and southern Ukraine following the initiation of the special military operation. According to United Nations estimates, between 1.3 million and 2.8 million individuals sought refuge in Russia within a few months (Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Refugee Situation, accessed September 2, 2023). In terms of both scale and intensity, this migration crisis exceeded the refugee flows of 2014–15, being compounded by structural factors complicating the provision of assistance. These factors included the forced nature of displacement, the lack of material resources among arrivals, and the concentration of refugees in regions with limited support infrastructure.

Against the backdrop of an overburdened system of traditional non-governmental organizations, grassroots digital initiatives aimed at coordinating assistance through social networks and messengers rapidly expanded. Notably, a decline in media coverage of NGO activities coincided with a sustained level of public interest in volunteer opportunities, suggesting a growing mismatch between the institutional capacity of the established aid system and citizens' willingness to engage in mutual support practices (Figure 1). This discrepancy means that digital volunteerism can be seen as more than just a form of civic activity; it can also be considered an adaptive component of social support mechanisms that operate in times of crisis.

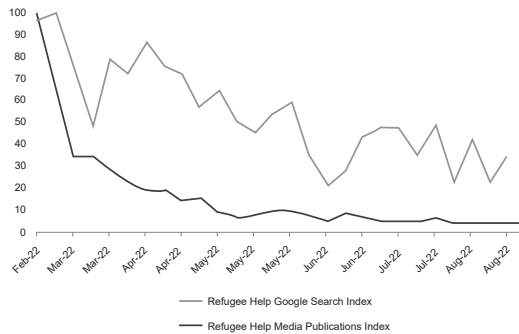


Figure 1. Refugee Assistance Index trends

This study aims to identify the key characteristics of civic self-organization on social media in the context of large-scale socio-economic change. It uses the 2022 refugee crisis in Russia as an empirical case study. It examines the practices of digital volunteering on the *Vkontakte* social network and the *Telegram* messenger, focusing on their potential and limitations in relation to social policy and support for vulnerable groups.

## Characteristics of Self-Organization in Social Networks during Economic and Social Changes

Social networks are increasingly functioning as key infrastructure for mobilizing and coordinating collective action, enabling new forms of civic engagement and alternative responses to social problems in uncertain conditions (Montalvan Castilla, Pursiainen 2019; Albris 2018). As systems of large-scale interpersonal communication, they facilitate rapid coordination, reduce transaction costs, and enable the redistribution of resources beyond formal organizational boundaries (Barrett et al. 2011). Empirical research also suggests that patterns of digital mobilization are shaped by normative framing, with narratives that focus on the collective proving more effective in stimulating participation than those that focus on the individual (Liu et al. 2023).

Beyond their mobilizing capacity, social networks play an important role in processes of social inclusion by providing access to support and information for groups that may be weakly integrated into institutional systems of assistance (Grigorieva et al. 2018). In this sense, the growing reliance on digital platforms reflects broader transformations in contemporary social policy, which increasingly operates under conditions of non-linearity, institutional overload, and limited administrative reach. Digital environments enable a wider range of actors to be involved in addressing social risks, including non-profit organizations, informal volunteer groups, and individual citizens. This blurs the boundaries between state and non-state provision of support (Bronnikov 2020).

In this context, digital mutual aid initiatives can be linked to targeted assistance practices. In traditional social policy frameworks, targeted assistance refers to measures aimed at supporting individuals or groups facing difficult life situations, typically through material aid, financial transfers, or social services (Kholostova 2016: 27–33; Gosuslugi 2025). However, when mediated through social networks, targeted assistance acquires distinct characteristics. It often takes the form of decentralized, request-based interactions that combine material support with informational, logistical, and psychological assistance. These practices have low entry barriers, rely on horizontal coordination, and are weakly institutionalized, enhancing their responsiveness while simultaneously limiting their sustainability and accountability (Bychenko, Loginova 2012).

The expansion of such digital practices does not eliminate the role of established non-profit organizations or public institutions. Instead, it creates a fragmented landscape of assistance, where institutional actors and spontaneous grassroots formations coexist and partially substitute for one another in emergency situations (Brainard, Siplon 2004). While this plurality of actors increases the overall capacity to respond to crises, it also raises questions about responsibility allocation, the uneven access to support, and the long-term implications of relying on informal digital networks to compensate for institutional constraints. From an analytical perspective, studying citizen self-

organization on social networks contributes to our understanding of contemporary forms of civic participation and helps us to assess the adaptive limits of social policy in times of crisis. While digital self-organization can function as a flexible and rapidly deployable support mechanism, its effectiveness remains contingent on broader institutional contexts and cannot be understood in isolation from existing systems of social protection.

### Research Methodology

This study's methodological framework is based on a quantitative analysis of digital trace data, aiming to identify the structural and organizational characteristics of grassroots civic initiatives in online environments. The research design focuses on platform-specific patterns of engagement, visibility, and coordination, enabling a comparative assessment of how different social media infrastructures influence digital volunteerism practices under crisis conditions. Empirically, the study relies on open-source data collected from the *Vkontakte* social network and the *Telegram* messenger. These platforms were selected due to their central role in civic communication and volunteer coordination during the 2022 refugee crisis in Russia, as well as due to the availability of comparable aggregated engagement metrics. Although the two platforms differ in terms of their architecture and communicative logic, both provide observable indicators of audience size, publication frequency and interaction intensity, making a structured comparative analysis methodologically feasible.

Data were collected using *TGstat analytics* tools and *Google Trends* to enable examination of audience growth, engagement indicators, posting dynamics, and patterns of inter-channel information circulation. Google Trends data were used as an indicator of broader public interest in refugee-related topics, rather than as a direct measure of volunteer participation. At the first stage, a systematic search and selection of relevant communities and channels was conducted based on keywords associated with refugee support, humanitarian aid, evacuation, temporary accommodation, and volunteer coordination. Quantitative indicators, including subscriber numbers, views, reposts, reactions, posting frequency, and longitudinal audience dynamics, were analyzed to assess levels of observable participation and communication density. At the second stage, a comparative platform analysis was undertaken to examine the differences in functional roles between *Vkontakte* and *Telegram* within the ecosystem of volunteer assistance. Rather than focusing on the semantic content of individual messages, the analysis concentrated on aggregated behavioral metrics and interaction patterns, such as engagement rate, publication intensity, audience stability, and cross-channel visibility. This approach enabled distinct modes of digital self-organization to be identified, including informational, coordinative, and operational configurations. The analytical strategy employed in the study can be characterized as interpretative quantitative analysis. While

the research did not include systematic qualitative coding or discourse analysis, the quantitative indicators were interpreted in relation to the platform's functionalities and observable communication patterns to infer organizational logics and coordination mechanisms. This strategy is well-suited to examining large-scale digital mobilization processes where access to closed communities is limited and ethical considerations restrict direct content extraction.

In addition to analysing aggregated quantitative indicators, the study incorporated limited interpretative observation of publicly available community content on both *Vkontakte* and *Telegram*. This additional step was employed to contextualize engagement metrics and to assess the functional orientation of communities (e.g., predominantly informational or coordinative roles). The analysis did not involve systematic coding procedures, the construction of textual corpora, or the extraction of direct quotations. Observations were based on the general characteristics of posts, their circulation patterns, and levels of interaction, and were solely used to support the interpretation of the quantitative findings.

### **Temporal Scope of Analysis**

The observation period ran from February to December 2022, which corresponded with the period of highest refugee arrivals and the rapid formation of volunteer support infrastructures. This timeframe captures the emergence, peak activity, and initial stabilization of digital coordination practices. Platform dynamics were examined in relation to three phases of the crisis, which can be distinguished analytically: (1) the initial emergency response stage, characterized by rapid audience growth and high publication density; (2) the phase of relative institutional stabilization of volunteer efforts; and (3) the subsequent normalization stage, marked by declining audience growth and more stable communication rhythms. This temporal structuring enhances the interpretability of engagement dynamics and improves the transparency and reproducibility of the analytical procedure.

### **Sampling and Selection Procedure**

Relevant communities and channels were identified through a structured, keyword-based search on *Vkontakte* and *Telegram*. Russian-language keywords and phrases specifically related to refugee assistance, humanitarian support, and volunteer coordination during the 2022 displacement crisis were employed in the search, including *pomoshch' bezhentsam*, *gumanitarnaya pomoshch'*, *volontery bezhentsam*, *punkty razmeshcheniya*, *evakuatsiya*, and *pomoshch' pereselentsam*. The same core keyword set was used across both platforms, although minor procedural adaptations were introduced to account for platform-specific search architectures. On *Telegram*, the search relied primarily on channel titles, descriptions, and hashtags, whereas on *Vkontakte* it relied on community names, descriptions, and thematic tags.

The sampling procedure was implemented in three stages. First, a broad keyword search was conducted to produce an initial pool of potentially relevant cases,

including 1,935 *Vkontakte* communities. In the second stage, duplicates and irrelevant, inactive, commercial, or only marginally related cases were removed, reducing the pool to 110 *Vkontakte* communities and 85 *Telegram* channels. The final inclusion criteria were applied at the third stage, resulting in a focused analytical sample of 24 communities and channels selected for detailed comparative analysis.

Cases were retained in the final sample if they satisfied the following four criteria: (1) an audience size of approximately 1,000 or more subscribers or members at the time of data collection to ensure the availability of sufficiently stable engagement indicators; (2) regular posting activity defined as at least two to three posts per week during the observation period; (3) a clear thematic focus on refugee assistance, humanitarian support, or volunteer coordination related to civilian displacement; and (4) the public accessibility of aggregated statistical indicators. The audience threshold was introduced to ensure the comparability and continuity of longitudinal engagement measures, not to exclude small grassroots initiatives per se.

The empirical analysis reported in this article is confined to the 2022 period. Any references to 2023 that appeared in earlier drafts were background observations only and did not form part of the core analytical design. These references have therefore been removed to avoid ambiguity. Similarly, broader war-time support categories, such as assistance to mobilized soldiers, their families or individuals returning from combat zones, were excluded in the final analytical sample. As these categories constitute a distinct thematic domain, they were excluded in order to preserve the conceptual coherence of the study, which focuses specifically on refugee assistance as a form of civic self-organization.

Accordingly, the final sample should be understood as analytical rather than statistically representative. The purpose of the sample was to capture relatively stable, visible, and sustained forms of digital coordination on the two platforms.

### **Operationalization of Analytical Indicators**

Audience engagement was defined as the ratio of observable user interactions, such as reactions, comments, reposts, and forwards to the total number of subscribers. Where available, engagement was also assessed relative to the average reach of a post to account for discrepancies between formal subscription and actual content exposure. Publication intensity was measured as the average number of posts per day and per week during the observation period. This indicator was used to assess communication density and operational rhythm. Audience stability referred to longitudinal patterns of subscriber growth, decline, and fluctuation. This was assessed using platform-provided statistics and TGstat time-series data. Cross-channel visibility was estimated based on the frequency of reposts, forwards, and references between channels and communities, enabling the identification of information circulation within the broader digital ecosystem.

Engagement rate and publication intensity were treated as primary indicators of observable collective activity and coordination density. Audience

dynamics and cross-channel visibility functioned as secondary indicators supporting the interpretation of structural positioning and diffusion patterns.

### Limitations

The study relies exclusively on open-source and platform-provided aggregated metrics, which have several limitations. First, digital trace data does not permit direct observation of offline volunteer practices or internal decision-making processes within groups. Second, engagement metrics may be influenced by algorithmic filtering, platform-specific visibility mechanisms, and the potential for subscriber numbers to be artificially inflated, all of which are factors that cannot be fully controlled within the scope of this research. Third, reliance on public communities excludes closed or semi-private coordination spaces that may play a significant role in volunteer interaction. Consequently, the study captures only the visible layers of digital mobilization, rather than the entirety of volunteer infrastructures. Finally, the findings are context-specific, reflecting patterns of digital self-organization during a particular crisis period. They should therefore be interpreted as analytically informative rather than universally generalizable.

### Analysis of Citizen Self-Organization on the VK Social Network

Between July and August 2023, an analysis of communities on the VK social network was conducted using keywords related to humanitarian aid, support for refugees and mobilized soldiers and their families, assistance to individuals returning from combat zones, and fundraising in the context of the special military operation<sup>1</sup>. A total of 1,935 thematic groups were identified. The number of participants in these communities varied widely, ranging from a single user to several hundred thousand subscribers, with an average group size of 435 members. At the same time, the distribution of communities by size was highly skewed: approximately half of the identified groups had fewer than ten members, indicating a pronounced fragmentation of the digital mutual aid landscape (see Figure 2).

This distribution suggests that many initiatives emerging in response to the crisis do not evolve into stable forms of collective action. However, interpreting this pattern as solely indicative of failure or unrealized civic potential would be overly simplistic. The formation of small-scale, short-lived communities may be indicative not only of limited organizational capacity or resource constraints, but also of the situational nature of crisis-driven mobilization. In such situations,

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the following Russian keywords were used: *gumanitarnaya pomoshch' LNR i DNR* (humanitarian aid to the LPR and DPR), *pomoshch' mobilizovannym voennosluzhashchim i sem'yam* (assistance to mobilized military personnel and families), *pomoshch' frontu* (assistance to the frontlines), *pomoshch' vernuvshimsya iz zony boevykh deistvii* (assistance to those who returned from the war zone), *pomoshch' bezhentsam* (assistance to refugees), *sbor deneg SVO* (raising money for the SMO).

users respond to specific needs or events without seeking institutionalization or long-term consolidation.

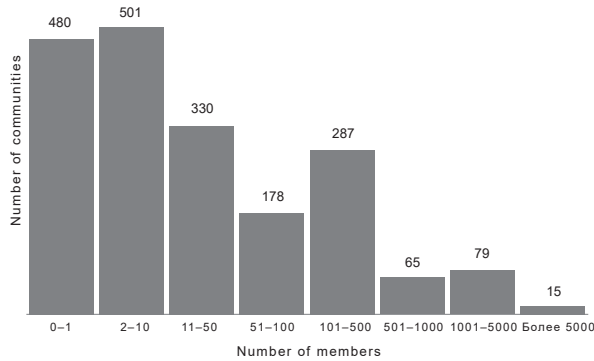


Figure 2. Distribution of Communities by Number of Members

A functional analysis of community content indicates that most of the identified groups predominantly perform an informational role. Even in the largest communities dedicated to assisting refugees, user engagement remains relatively low: posts rarely circulate beyond the boundaries of the groups themselves and typically receive only a limited number of reactions or shares. As a result, such communities function less as hubs for active mobilization and network expansion, and more as closed channels for information exchange, effectively operating as digital 'bulletin boards' that mediate information about needs and available assistance.

The limited dissemination of content by community members may be attributed to several factors. On the one hand, it reflects an individualized mode of digital participation, whereby users prefer to consume and transmit information within small, thematically homogeneous audiences. On the other hand, given the political and social sensitivity of the issues discussed, the relative closure of these communities may represent an adaptive strategy aimed at reducing the risks associated with public visibility and unwanted attention. From this perspective, low engagement and weak interconnection between groups should not merely be understood as indicators of limited effectiveness, but also as manifestations of the structural constraints of digital civic action.

Overall, the analysis of the *Vkontakte* community ecosystem suggests that, although the platform enables the swift development of grassroots initiatives with low barriers to entry, it offers limited support for their evolution into sustained forms of collective action. *Vkontakte* therefore seems to be more as a tool for the initial articulation of needs and the provision of localized informational support in contexts where institutional channels of social assistance are overloaded or inaccessible, and less as a space for coordinating complex forms of assistance.

## Telegram as a Platform for Civic Self-Organization

During periods of large-scale socio-economic disruption, the *Telegram* messenger has emerged as one of the key digital platforms for civic self-organization, particularly in the context of crisis-driven mobilization and the coordination of assistance. Unlike conventional social networking sites, Telegram combines mass information dissemination with real-time horizontal communication, making it well suited to coordinating volunteers under conditions of high uncertainty.

To assess its role within the ecosystem of refugee assistance, subscriber dynamics were analyzed across three types of channels: the largest traditional fund providing assistance during the special military operation, the largest nationwide channel dedicated to refugee aid, and the largest Moscow-based channel with a similar focus. The findings indicate that between March and August 2022, traditional NGOs did not experience comparable growth in audience size; meanwhile, channels associated with grassroots volunteer initiatives demonstrated steady increases in subscriber numbers (see Figure 3, Attachment). At the peak of mobilization, the combined audience of the two grassroots channels exceeded that of the largest traditional fund by more than twenty times.

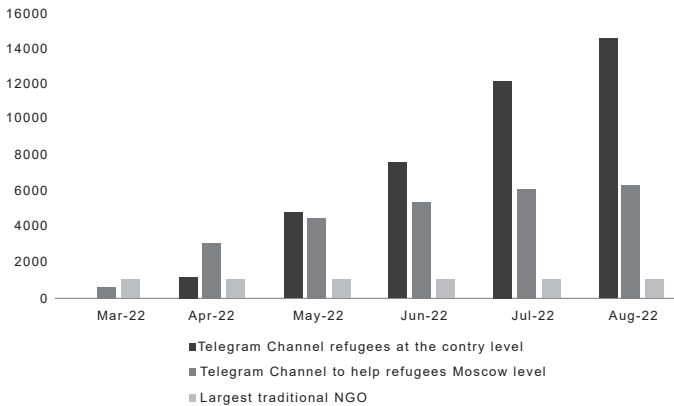


Figure 3. Telegram as a Platform for Civic Self-Organization

Notably, around 43% of subscribers to the nationwide channel were based in Moscow, despite the city accounting for less than 10% of the country's total population. This pattern indicates a spatial concentration of volunteer activity in the metropolitan area. A key factor underlying *Telegram's* effectiveness as a coordination tool lies in its functional architecture. Built-in features such as the straightforward creation of bots and organization of thematic chats allow information on refugees' needs to be collected automatically, routes and resources to be coordinated, and direct contact to be established between volunteers and beneficiaries without disclosing sensitive personal data. Within grassroots initiatives, specialized chats are usually organized both geographically and by the type of

assistance provided. These chats differentiate between coordinators, who are responsible for organizing processes, and helpers, who interact directly with beneficiaries. This arrangement enables a rapid response and operational flexibility, whilst maintaining predominantly horizontal forms of interaction. The resulting *Telegram*-based ecosystem is a dynamic, cross-functional, and geographically distributed network of mutual aid that traditional NGOs have struggled to replicate due to institutional constraints. Similar modes of coordination via *Telegram* have previously been observed in other fields requiring rapid, large-scale interaction, including volunteer firefighting, human rights initiatives during protest mobilization and environmental and animal protection initiatives.

Examining specific *Telegram* channels dedicated to refugee assistance further reveals differences between national and regional modes of digital self-organization. As of October 2023, the nationwide channel *Refugees in Russia*, which had 24,360 subscribers, demonstrated a large audience base accompanied by relatively low engagement levels. Only around 20% of subscribers regularly view posts, and overall interaction remains limited. Despite this, engagement indicators display a moderately positive trend, reaching a peak of 1.5% in July 2023. User interaction is dominated by reactions, while shares and comments are used far less frequently. This pattern indicates the prevalence of ‘silent’ information consumption and a limited willingness to engage in public discussion or the further dissemination of content. The stability of the viewing audience and the periodic increase in engagement suggest the existence of a core group of users for whom the channel is a primary source of information.

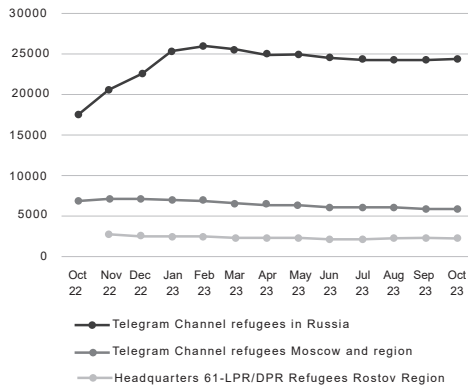


Figure 4. Analysis of the 'Refugees in Russia' Telegram Channel

Growth in subscribers to the nationwide channel is closely associated with mentions in other *Telegram* channels, highlighting its place within a wider network of channels sharing information. The largest increase in subscribers (710 users) occurred in September 2023, coinciding with 63 mentions across 28 channels and generating a total reach of over 419,000 views. Periods

with fewer mentions were accompanied by slower audience growth, suggesting that subscriber dynamics are primarily driven by the cross-channel circulation of attention rather than by internal user activity. In this sense, the nationwide channel functions as a stable informational hub that ensures access to verified content, rather than serving as a space for intensive interaction.

Regional channels exhibit a different configuration of participation. Despite having a smaller subscriber base, the Moscow-based channel *Refugees Moscow and MO* demonstrates substantially higher levels of engagement. After reaching peak values in late 2022, the number of subscribers gradually declined; however, around 70% of subscribers still regularly view posts, including a significant proportion of users who engage with content within the first 24 hours of publication. In some periods, engagement rates exceed 100%, indicating that a considerable proportion of viewers are not formal subscribers. This suggests that the channel operates not merely as an informational resource, but also as a coordination node embedded in the everyday volunteer practices of the metropolitan region. This interpretation is based on the combination of high audience density, the rapid consumption of time-sensitive content and engagement levels that exceed the formal subscriber base, i.e. patterns that are typically associated with the operational rather than the purely informational uses of digital channels.

The channel *Headquarters 61. Refugees LNR/DNR Rostov Region* is oriented towards southern regions experiencing high migration pressure and represents a distinct operational model of digital self-organization. Although the number of subscribers declined from peak levels in late 2022 (falling from approximately 2,950 subscribers in November–December 2022 to around 2,145 by summer of 2023), the channel retains a relatively stable audience of 2,287 subscribers and consistently publishes at a high rate. During its 2 years and 10 months of operation, the channel has published 11,396 posts, averaging 221 publications per month, 51 per week, and around eight posts per day. The highest publication activity was recorded in August 2023. This combination of declining audience size and sustained content production suggests that the channel primarily functions as an operational coordination tool rather than as a platform aimed at audience expansion. In this context, the speed, continuity, and density of information exchange appear to take precedence over outreach and visibility. The regularity of postings indicates that for participants, maintaining a consistent working rhythm and ensuring the uninterrupted coordination of assistance is more important than increasing subscriber numbers. This pattern is typical of regionally embedded crisis-response channels, where effectiveness is measured less by audience size than by the capacity to facilitate ongoing, task-oriented interaction.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that a declining audience size should not be interpreted as a straightforward indicator of decreasing relevance. Rather, it reflects a process of participation selection, in which broad, crisis-driven mobilization gives way to smaller, but more stable and committed, user groups. In this sense, digital self-organization evolves from an emergency response

mechanism into a routine mode of coordination. The findings also suggest that the effectiveness of digital volunteering initiatives cannot be evaluated based solely on metrics such as audience growth or reach. Rather, effectiveness is shaped by communities' capacity to sustain regular interaction, ensure continuity of coordination and adapt to prolonged conditions of socio-economic disruption. This redefinition of effectiveness is particularly important for understanding the role of digital platforms in contemporary social policy, where informal civic infrastructures are compensating for institutional overload without replacing formal systems of support entirely.

## Conclusions

This study makes a valuable contribution to the analysis of digital civic self-organization by demonstrating that, in crisis contexts, volunteer activity is structured through functionally differentiated digital platforms rather than through a single, homogeneous logic of online mobilization. The empirical findings show that social networks occupy distinct positions within the assistance ecosystem. *Vkontakte* primarily functions as a space for articulating needs, achieving symbolic visibility, and circulating information, whereas *Telegram* functions as an operational infrastructure that enables coordination, task allocation, and sustained interaction among volunteers in situations of high uncertainty.

The analysis also reveals a structural mismatch between public demand for participation in refugee assistance and the institutional visibility and capacity of traditional non-governmental organizations. Indicators of online search activity and user engagement suggest that grassroots digital initiatives can respond more flexibly and rapidly to emerging needs by operating outside of formal organizational frameworks, thus partially compensating for institutional overload. This highlights a discrepancy between institutionalized forms of assistance and the evolving trajectories of civic motivation, which are increasingly shaped within decentralized digital environments.

Crucially, the study challenges the growth-based interpretations of civic effectiveness which dominate both policy evaluation and parts of the academic literature. The results indicate that audience expansion, media visibility, or subscriber growth are insufficient indicators of the sustainability or effectiveness of volunteer initiatives. Rather, stable cores of active participants, dense communication networks and the continuity of coordination practices play a more decisive role in maintaining long-term functionality. This redefinition of effectiveness necessitates a reappraisal of how digital civic activity is assessed within the contexts of social policy, governance, and crisis management. The findings also document the emergence of hybrid and predominantly informal modes of cooperation between volunteer networks and public authorities. Rather than replacing state institutions or operating in direct opposition to them, digital self-organization complements formal systems in situational and

adaptive ways. Local administrations and emergency services draw on information and resources generated by volunteer networks, while volunteers gain limited access to administrative capacities. This pattern points to a form of crisis governance characterized by distributed responsibility, blurred institutional boundaries, and digitally mediated coordination.

Overall, the results imply that digital self-organization in social networks should not be viewed as a transient or purely spontaneous phenomenon, but rather as a context-dependent configuration of civic action that reshapes the relationship between informal participation and institutional social policy in times of crisis. Rather than generating volunteerism, digital platforms reorganize its forms, temporalities, and scales of action. In this sense, digital civic activity functions as both an adaptive response to acute disruptions and as an indicator of structural tensions within existing systems of social support, particularly in situations involving large-scale migration and prolonged socio-economic instability.

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