



countering violent extremism

Partizanski Odredi 106 1/3, Skopje

02/6159832

info@zipinstitute.mk

www.zipinstitute.mk



What is it like to work at the heart of the refugee crisis?

An interview with a humanitarian worker

3rd of May 2017

As part of our CVE Project, we have had the chance to meet, talk and communicate with people who work and manage different aspects of the refugee crisis that has affected Europe since late 2014. One of those people who are on the frontlines of the refugee crisis is Erlin Agic, a humanitarian aid-worker from Skopje, who is working in a French medical NGO since 2016.

Her humanitarian endeavors began as a volunteer on Tabanovce, the border crossing to the Republic of Serbia, where there is a transit center and a refugee camp, in late 2015, when thousands of refugees and migrants were transiting through Macedonia. Then she decided to take a more active part in the overall response to the crisis in the region. She started working as a Field Coordinator on Lesbos Island in Greece, and travelled to Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon for short missions. At present, she is coordinating operations on four Greek islands on the Dodecanese region. She aims to go back to the Middle East soon, where five million Syrian refugees are being hosted.

We had a chance to ask her questions about her work, the most challenging aspects of it, as well as insights and opinions on the refugee crisis itself. Read the short interview with Erlin below.

What is a typical work day like at a camp?

The term camp is an umbrella term that encompasses different forms of facilities where people are accommodated/housed in Greece. The hotspot managed by Reception and Identification Service of Greece is closest to our understanding of a camp. I personally work with persons of concern (PoC's) accommodated outside the hotspot: in a hotel or alternative accommodation facilities (AAF). As Field Coordinator, my job is to provide support to my team working on the field. A work day for me includes being in constant communication with all stakeholders and following the changing context closely.

What is the most challenging aspect of your job?

Work-wise, it's the unpredictability and lack of information. Quite often we face last minute changes that impact the operations of organizations responding to the crisis. This unpredictability also has a human dimension to the PoC's.

How did you embark on the decision to work at a camp?

I started off by volunteering in the border between Macedonia and Serbia and decided that I want to take on a more active role in the so-called 'refugee crisis' so I applied for positions I found suitable for my profile.

What makes your work fulfilling?

It's the small things: making a small difference to someone makes a big difference in our work. We are aware that we cannot change 'the world for the better' but we can make a small impact on the world of someone with whom we work.

What do you do to keep the people you work with in good spirits (both colleagues/volunteers/staff members and people who live in the camp)?

Team spirit and the continuous presence on the field makes a conspicuous difference in the overall efforts of an organization.

What do you need, but currently don't have to do your work better/to help the people you work with better?

Unfortunately, we don't have enough time for team building and relaxation activities as we work under continuous pressure...

What is the biggest misconception about your job?

The limitations faced by air-workers on the field are not clear to those outside of it.

What is the most inspiring and the most difficult part of your work?

Having the opportunity to meet people and get to know their stories and journeys from close is inspiring. Media outlets put all PoC's under a term 'refugee' and view them as a collective entity. Whereas, they all have different visions, dreams, backgrounds..

The most difficult part of my work is feeling hopeless quite often and feeling as if I am not doing enough.

What advice would you give to a young person who aspires to work in the field you currently work in?

I would encourage every young person to embark on a humanitarian mission at least once in their life.

What is the general atmosphere like in the camps?

The atmosphere varies from day to day. There are days when it feels like any other community, and there are days when their problems surface and you realize their suffering and frustration closely.

What is the security like? Have there been any attacks on the staffers of the camp and how are they mediated? Who provides the security?

Not in the areas that I cover. In addition, there are security plans updated regularly to ensure the safety both of the staffers and PoC's.



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What are the sexual and reproductive health facilities like?

In majority of cases, the hospitals or private doctors provide reproductive healthcare.

What are the educational facilities like?

Those enrolled, go to public schools on the islands, although this is a small percentage of children. In most cases, non-formal education happens in playgrounds or child friendly spaces.

What is the mental health state of people? Are there any appropriate facilities in which these issues are addressed?

In addition to the NGO's providing psychiatric and psychological support, the public mental institutions are also available for support.

What do you think of the process of community building in the camps? Seeing that usually the people living in the camps have lost their communities, support systems, sometimes even their closest family and friends, what do you think, how people find the community support?

The nuclear families are usually the support system for most cases. Those travelling alone, find company in the facilities accommodated.

Are there any resources over which there is always a fight (food, water, sanitation products, toys etc.)?

In the islands in which I operate, I haven't come across any big fights. Instead, the majority of the complaints are about the legal procedures...

What is the role of money in the camp? How do people exchange goods and services? Is there some sort of an internal system of exchange?

No. In some instances, where available, PoC's receive cash assistance from NGO's working on this.

What is the role of international organizations, humanitarian agencies, INGOs and local NGOs?

Each one of them has a different mandate and/or a different role. In almost all islands there is an inter-agency coordination mechanisms at place to avoid duplication of efforts, to coordinate for maximizing the effects of the services, etc

What is the role of local structures (municipalities, state ministries, police, military)?

The Ministry of Migration Policy, municipalities, police and army are all involved in the response within their mandates to ensure a safe, secure and dignified assistance.

We have seen many images of people fleeing home without anything but a telephone/smartphone. In your personal opinion, what is the role of smartphones and the internet in such places?

Smartphones have played a major role in the so-called 'refugee crisis' as its their only means to keep in touch with the people they have left behind or the people they aim to reunite with.

In your personal opinion, what would be the best/ fastest resolution for the refugees?

There is not a one-size-fits-all solution. As mentioned earlier, each person of concern has a different need, aspiration and background that needs to be addressed carefully by the stakeholders. In any case, I hope to see the war in Syria come to an end soon.

What languages do you speak? Have you experienced any particular troubles due to language/communication barriers?

I speak the local languages in Macedonia, English and a little bit of Italian. Of course, our job wouldn't be possible without the presence of translators, interpreters, cultural mediators on the ground.

Have you experienced any threats? What is the process of addressing personal threats?

None. As in any other country, you report it to the competent authorities.

What do you think is the biggest misconception, especially on the Balkans, about the refugees?

That these people pose a threat to the peace and stability of the Balkans is a misconception.



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