



countering violent extremism

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Visit to the Transit Center and Refugee Camp Vinojug in Gevgelija

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At the end of March, as part of our CVE Project, the team of ZIP Institute had the incredible opportunity to visit the Transit Center and Refugee Camp Vinojug in Gevgelija, close to the border between the Republic of Macedonia and Greece. During our visit, besides taking a walk through the camp and seeing the accommodation facilities, the kitchens, the water and sanitation facilities, as well as the living and working conditions, we also had the chance to meet the now 14 refugees who currently stay at Vinojug. Moreover, we talked with the people who volunteer, help out and work at the Center.

The transit center looks like a town within a town. At a glimpse, it is located on an isolated piece of land, surrounded by a tall fence with barbwire on top.

Although the refugee, i.e. the migrant crisis in the Republic of Macedonia was characterized as tumultuous, our team was greeted by a completely different situation. At the moment of our visit, only 14 people stay at the Center.

At the entry of the Center, we registered at the checkpoint of the Ministry of Interior, where we provided the documentation permitting us to visit the Center, as provided by the Crisis Management Center and the documentation permitting the use of media and camera devices, as provided by the Ministry of Interior themselves.

Strolling through the Center, we arrived to the container that is the office of the Red Cross of the Republic of Macedonia. That is where we met with Slobodan Mitrovikj, the team leader of the Red Cross for the Vinojug Center. We had the chance to talk with him about his work, the challenges that the volunteers and the staff of the camp face on the daily, as well as about the most media exploited topics and aspects of the refugee crisis. You can read more about this next week (soon, expect a very interesting interview!)

Together with Slobodan, we took a walk through the Center and met the other volunteers, as well as the people who transit, i.e. live here. The number of volunteers and staff at Vinojug is quite reduced, since quite a lot of the refugees and migrants have either transited towards the western European states, or upon their own request, have returned to Greece.

The living conditions in the transit center are good, if the living conditions in a transit center and a refugee camp can genuinely be called such. There are enough accommodation facilities, educational and children's corners, appropriate sanitation and hygiene facilities, kitchens and dining halls, as well as capacities for religious practices (such as praying rooms).

In the kitchen, we talked with the volunteers who take care of the 3 warm meals per day provided to the people at the center. Besides these, the people here are also supplied with food packets (usually with nonperishable foods). We were told that, since the number of the people who are in the Center has been lowered, more often than not, the food is prepared in agreement with the wishes and requests of the people. There is also a supply of regional and local foods and spices, with the purpose of bringing the taste of home close to the people. These, seemingly small things, really make the people who reside at the Center happy and improve the general atmosphere at the Center.

The medical needs, since the opening of the Center until today, are always taken care of. The health conditions of the people have transited and are still living here are good. At the kids' corner, one of the volunteers, while talking about the health condition and medical needs of people, made a comment that there weren't neither lice nor a measles epidemic, which are very common in places like this.

Talking with the UNICEF volunteers at the kids' corner, we found out a little bit more about the state and conditions of the children at the Center. The conflict, and the entire process of transit has had the most impact on the children, and very often, the traumas they have gone through have left severe and long term consequences on them. The approach of the volunteers towards the children is individualized, and as we could witness, they were very careful and gentle towards the children, and the little ones were included in activities individually tailored to the needs of each and every child. Of course, children being children, they were curious to meet us, so we played for a bit with them. The UNICEF girls told us about the educational programs, the social involvement of the children, as well as some jokes and anecdotes from the work at the Center. "We had a lot of volunteers named Ivana, so one of the babies born in the camp was named Ivan, after us!" the girls told us the story of the little Ivan, who has returned to Greece with his parents, smiling.

However, we were left the most impressionable by the story of the 4 year old Reno, whose parents have died in Syria and she arrived at the Center with her aunt. Currently, she is completely on her own in Vinojug, because her aunt returned to Greece, and as she is not her legal guardian, was not allowed to cross the border with her niece. Rano is being cared for by the volunteers in the Center, and will most likely be transferred to one of the safe houses in Skopje, with an assigned guardian from the Ministry for Labor and Social Affairs. Although due to the language barrier we could not directly talk to Rano, when we approached her, her smile had molten our hearts.

Although the feeling of eerie uncertainty has followed us since we crossed the security checkpoint at the entry of the Center, with our last step through the gates, our hearts have sunk and had lumps in our throats. Isolated people, stranded on a foreign land, who left their homes in the search for a better life, whatever better life means to them.

Usually, the big cities are considered the places where people can have big wishes and big dreams. However, the biggest and the most sincere wishes and dreams, wishes and dreams of better life, basic living conditions, safety and security and respect for the basic human rights, are wished and dreamt of in these transit centers and refugee camps.



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