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EESC fact-finding missions on the situation of refugees, as seen by civil society organisations



MISSION REPORT – CROATIA
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Mission Report – Croatia, 12-13 January 2016

In December 2015 and January 2016, EESC delegations visited eleven EU Member States to meet civil society organisations working with migrants in order to identify the problems, needs, failures, success stories and best practices of the various actors in the current refugee crisis, with the ultimate aim of providing input to EU policy making. The delegation to Croatia was made up of Dragica Martinović Džamonja (Croatia, Employers' Group), Ellen Nygren (Sweden, Workers' Group) and Marina Škrabalo (Croatia, Various Interests Group), supported by Ana Dumitrache, EESC secretariat.

1. Introduction

The delegation wanted to gather first-hand information from organisations working on the ground with refugees, in order to identify challenges, best practices and recommendations for dealing with the current crisis. It met representatives from various international and national organisations, volunteers, trade unions, employers' organisations, the Croatian Chamber of Economy and government representatives. It also visited a centre for refugees.

2. Background information on Croatia

At the time of the EESC delegation's visit, the number of refugees who had entered Croatia since the beginning of the crisis in 2015 amounted to 585 540.¹ It is mainly since September 2015 that Croatia started to become one of the main transit countries for refugees (about 12 000 entries per day), following Hungary's construction of a barbed wire fence on its border with Serbia. Until that time, the route taken by refugees went from Serbia to Hungary, and from there to Austria, Germany and northwards.

Since November 2015, Croatia has been organising the transport of refugees by train, directly from Šid in Serbia to the Reception and Transit Centre in Slavonski Brod, Croatia. In Šid, people receive assistance and food; they then board the train to Croatia. After a 4-6 hour journey, the train stops in Croatia, inside the Slavonski Brod transit centre. There, people are normally kept for a few hours to be registered and to receive food, information and assistance, including medical care. They then reboard the train, which takes them to Dobova, Slovenia in 4-6 hours.

In January 2016, depending on the day, 1000 to 3000 people per day entered Croatia and left on the same day. The Slavonski Brod centre, which has a capacity of 5000 people, accommodated between 1 and 37 people – for example people who stayed overnight to wait for family members.

¹

Figures from 13 January, provided on the [internet pages](#) of the Ministry of the Interior

Croatia is seen as a transit country, although it has a fair and effective asylum system and adequate reception and accommodation conditions. Only 43 people applied for asylum between 16 September and 31 December 2015.

3. Information gathered at the meetings of 12-13 January

Meeting with a representative of the Ministry of the Interior

The Ministry of the Interior plays a major role in the refugee crisis, as it is responsible for asylum procedure, admission of aliens, border protection and travel documents.

The EESC delegation understood the importance of political commitment to helping refugees. One illustration of this was the provision of transport and other services free of charge, which left no place for people smuggling. Another was the government's establishment of a "headquarters for the coordination of activities", to ensure coordinated action by all competent authorities and institutions in the refugee crisis. The Ministry of the Interior plays a leading role, and the Red Cross was mandated by the government to coordinate with NGOs regarding efficient assistance to refugees.

Regarding registration, EESC members learned that each country on the refugees' route (Greece, FYROM, Serbia, Croatia) registers foreigners crossing their borders and takes their fingerprints. There is a lack of information sharing (names and situations of refugees, fingerprints) between countries along the refugees' route, for various reasons such as data protection.

In Croatia, everybody arriving in Slavonski Brod is now registered, which was not the case at the peak of the crisis. Photos and fingerprints are taken, but not in accordance with EURODAC requirements, as it would be too time-consuming and there is reluctance from Croatia to become a hotspot.

Regarding asylum, all people who arrive in Croatia are informed about the possibility of requesting asylum in the country; they are shown a video and receive leaflets in Arabic, Farsi, Urdu and English. In Slavonski Brod, NGOs also provide them with relevant information. Their rights are explained to them, but they all want to continue on their way to Germany and say that they have families there.

Regarding interpreting, the situation is challenging, as there is a lack of interpreters in Urdu, Somali and Farsi. A pool of interpreters is used, in cooperation with NGOs which have interpreters, and the system seems to work. The UNHCR is paying for 6 interpreters (to be extended to 12).

Meeting with representatives of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Youth

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Youth performs tasks related to social welfare institutions, care and protection of people and families, young people, persons with disabilities, victims of trafficking, refugees and asylum seekers. Its current role is mainly to provide assistance to unaccompanied minors.

When an unaccompanied minor (less than 18 years of age) arrives in Croatia, a custodian is designated by the competent Centre for Social Welfare, who is generally a social worker. These workers have already been trained by UNHCR Croatia, UNICEF and the Croatian Red Cross on their role and importance in protecting the rights of unaccompanied children. The custodian undertakes all necessary activities to reunite the child with his/her family if this is in the best interests of the child.

The EESC delegation learned about some specific ongoing cases in more detail. One of them related to the return of two Egyptian boys. Another case related to three boys from Afghanistan, who were accommodated in a children's home and received help from a custodian and a Pashto person found by the UNHCR. They received education in Pashto as well as Croatian language lessons. A procedure was started to reunite them with an uncle, as the boys wanted to continue their journey with their uncle. In this whole process, the Croatian government cooperated with the Red Cross and the UNHCR in the best interest of children.

Meeting with a representative of International Organization for Migration (IOM)

IOM is an intergovernmental organisation dedicated to promoting humane and orderly migration for the benefit of all. In Croatia, IOM is active both in research on migration and in the field. Its staff are particularly experienced in camp management and coordination. In Slavonski Brod, IOM provides information to refugees (including by showing a video); they also have interpreters from Arabic and Urdu.

IOM has also put in place a survey tool, the “displacement tracking matrix”, which aims to monitor refugee flows in order to better understand them. IOM also runs an early information network, which gathers data from several countries on the refugees' route, from Greece to Slovenia – number of migrants, vulnerabilities, number of elderly people, pregnant women and disabled people. Information is shared in real time with the Croatian Ministry of the Interior, so that the authorities are better prepared to provide adequate assistance to people in need.

IOM participated in public awareness campaigns organised by the Red Cross in schools, in which interpreters with a migrant background showed how they had managed to integrate into Croatian society and how they were trying to help other people in the present crisis.

Meeting with a representative of the Croatian Red Cross

The Croatian Red Cross is a national society that is part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The Croatian Red Cross uses the financial resources it raises to secure food, water, hygiene items and first aid kits for refugees. It also provides them with psychosocial support. The Red Cross cooperates closely with the UNHCR, which also finances their activities.

The Croatian Red Cross has a long history of cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior. In late August 2015, the government mandated the Red Cross to coordinate civil society efforts and fundraising to assist refugees. The Red Cross is consequently in charge of coordination in the Slavonski Brod Transit Centre.

People of Syrian, Persian, and Pashtun origin were hired by the Red Cross to provide interpreting. The Red Cross is now also helping those who do not have formal education to get it, so that they can continue working as interpreters or translators.

Meeting with representatives of the UNHCR's and UNICEF's Croatia offices

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is a United Nations agency mandated, since 1950, to protect, assist and find solutions for refugees, internally displaced people and stateless populations. Its aim is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees, and the Office therefore strives to ensure that everyone can exercise their right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another State.

Since the beginning of the migration crisis in Croatia, UNHCR representatives have been actively involved in dealing with migrants (distribution of leaflets and water, talking to migrants and providing various forms of assistance). Direct assistance is given in accordance with the requirements of the Croatian Red Cross, the Ministry of the Interior and other institutions (blankets, plastic sheeting for tents, water, high protein biscuits, etc.). The UNHCR also provides 24/7 assistance in the care of vulnerable people, in particular unaccompanied children. In Slavonski Brod, the UNHCR has opened a field office employing 10 staff members. In the transit centre, the UNHCR gives migrants information on the asylum procedure, with help from interpreters. Leaflets on the procedure are printed in several languages, in coordination with the Ministry of the Interior.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is an intergovernmental organisation that has provided long-term humanitarian and developmental assistance to children and mothers in developing countries since 1946. In Croatia, areas of intervention include technical assistance to boost family tracing and reunification efforts, to strengthen the capacity of frontline workers – including health workers, social workers and NGO staff – advocacy and awareness raising, establishment of child-friendly spaces, provision of dignity kits and baby kits, water, blankets and winter clothes.

The EESC delegation gathered that the most important thing for refugees was to travel as quickly as possible to Germany and beyond. People are afraid that borders will close and are ready to do anything to continue their trip without delay. They refuse medical assistance, and in some cases the needs of children are not met.

The representatives appreciated the coordination of efforts by the government and the Red Cross as well as cooperation with local authorities in Slavonski Brod. The personal involvement of the Minister and Assistant Minister for the Interior had been found to be very useful and showed the

government's commitment. They welcomed the media's role in the crisis, as reporting by journalists had been correct and not exaggerated. Refugees are well perceived in Croatia, and people are empathise with them. IOM, the UNHCR and UNICEF have carried out awareness-raising campaigns, in particular in Slavonski Brod, where the population was initially reluctant to host a refugee centre.

Meeting with representatives of the Centre for Peace Studies (CMS)

The Centre for Peace Studies (known by its Croatian acronym CMS) is an NGO that promotes non-violence and social change, linking education, research and activism. In the last ten years, CMS has become a leading organisation working on migration, asylum, research, and advocacy. CMS issues policy papers and recommendations but also works in the field. It has a permanent presence in Slavonski Brod, where it provides assistance to refugees and monitors the application of human rights standards. CMS has launched public-awareness campaigns and activities that include people from migrant backgrounds. These activities include the participation of refugees in Zagreb's football team, lectures about origin countries, drumming, international cooking, exchange of traditions, and publication of fairy tales from refugees' countries.

The Centre for Peace Studies coordinates the "Welcome" initiative, which was launched in September 2015. The initiative brings together more than 60 civil society organisations, a football club and more than 400 volunteers who provide refugees with on-the-ground support on a day-to-day basis. Members of the initiative have called upon EU-level decision makers to establish more efficient and humane mechanisms for crisis management at EU level.

Meeting with representatives of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)

JRS is an international Catholic organisation that was founded in 1980 to aid refugees, forcibly displaced people and asylum seekers. JRS provides advocacy for asylum seekers, education, healthcare services, legal advice in procedures and interpreting. In the current crisis, it also provides refugees with emergency relief assistance, such as distribution of food and non-food items, in coordination with the other organisations present in Slavonski Brod.

The EESC delegation learned that the work of the various NGOs involved is complementary, and is well coordinated. The Croatian Catholic Church has also had a positive influence, showing a positive attitude towards refugees.

Meeting with representatives of the Croatian trade unions SSSH, NHS and Matica

Trade unions are not involved as such in managing the refugee crisis. They nonetheless monitor and act to counter any discrimination in the labour market and call for increased cooperation among trade unions on the topic of refugees. As SSSH and NHS are members of ETUC, they were actively involved in the first international conference held in December in Zagreb, on the topic of refugees.

Meeting with representatives of employers' organisations, of the Croatian Chamber of the Economy and of the South East European Centre for Entrepreneurial Learning (SEECEL)

Employers' organisations are not directly involved in the refugee crisis at this stage, but they all consider it important to prepare for a situation where refugees could be relocated to Croatia and would need to be integrated into the labour market. Employers point out the need for specific skills in some sectors. More research is needed to understand what worker profiles are needed, and this would also help in training and integrating refugees. The issue of recognition of qualifications also needs to be resolved. Refugees can also receive free advice and support to become entrepreneurs. A database of "refugee friendly" companies could be created.

The Croatian Chamber of the Economy cooperates closely with other chambers in the Western Balkans region, and it envisages joint actions to provide support for vocational training and apprenticeships. Several initiatives for refugees are also being discussed within EUROCHAMBRES.

SEECEL recently launched a project for refugees. Activities include awareness raising on migrant entrepreneurship, basic training, creation of an instrument to give micro-grants for setting up businesses, mentoring and advice, and promoting good practices and successful migrant entrepreneurs.

Meeting with representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The Ministry is in charge of foreign relations and agreements and has an important negotiating role in the Council of the EU; it also holds talks about relocation and readmission.

Under a Council decision in June 2015, Croatia agreed to accept 550 refugees (400 relocation, 150 resettlement) and that is being now implemented. A later decision, in September, decided on a higher number, 1118 refugees, but it is not yet being implemented.

Croatia established an inter-disciplinary expert group in July 2015 to draft an operational plan on relocation, with a focus on the integration of refugees right from the start. The group includes relevant ministries and academia, and civil society representatives were consulted.

Regarding cooperation with neighbouring countries along the Balkan route, the situation has recently much improved and each country has appointed a contact person to ensure better coordination.

Trip to the Slavonski Brod Temporary Admission Centre

The centre has a capacity of 5000 people and went into operation on 2 November 2015. It is spacious and well equipped (several warehouses, a medical tent, a well-equipped medical building for acute cases, and heated tents for various purposes: tents with showers and beds, a tent for children, a tent for registration).

About 25 organisations (including the UNHCR, UNICEF, Save the Children, Magna (a medical aid organisation), the Centre for Peace Studies, JRS, IOM, Samaritan's Purse, Croatian Baptist Aid, Remar) are present in the camp and cooperate in an efficient way, coordinated by the Red Cross, to assist refugees.

The registration process is carried out by the police. Data (name, nationality, documents) are input using an electronic device, which is also used to take pictures and fingerprints.

Within about 2 hours refugees are given information and assistance, but the process is very fast and does not allow them to have a rest or a shower. People receive food packages prepared in advance for them, as well as information on the asylum procedure in Croatia in refugees' languages (Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Pashto, English). They then board a train that will stop in Slovenia after another 4-6 hours.

CONCLUSIONS

In 2015, and especially since September, **almost 600 000 refugees have quickly transited through Croatia** on their way northwards. Although Croatia has a fair and effective asylum system and good reception conditions, only 43 people applied for asylum between 16 September and 31 December 2015.

Faced with the massive influx of refugees, **Croatia took a responsible and humanitarian approach to the situation**. Rapid and efficient measures were put in place to ensure proper reception, assistance, registration and information of refugees. **All services are free of charge**, including transport by train from Serbia and to Slovenia, which made it possible to eradicate people smuggling.

Croatian civil society organisations and international organisations have played a major role in helping the government to assist and inform refugees. The Croatian Red Cross was given an official mandate to coordinate humanitarian efforts.

Cooperation between government and organisations seems to be efficient. "Headquarters for cooperation" have been created and coordination meetings take place each day.

Cooperation among civil society organisations, under the lead of the Red Cross, seems to be efficient, avoiding duplication of effort and confusion. Croatian organisations also cooperate with similar organisations in other countries (Slovenia, Hungary, Serbia). They help each other and inform each other about refugee flows.

The assistance provided to refugees is good. **Adequate information** on the possibility of claiming asylum in Croatia is provided, in various refugee languages. The Slavonski Brod Reception and

Transit Centre has a large capacity and is well equipped. Unaccompanied children are dealt with in an efficient way, in good cooperation between the government and the organisations.

Croatian public opinion is favourable towards refugees, but as it is a mere transit country, their impact is not deeply felt. Civil society organisations have initiated many public campaigns in favour of refugees, involving Croatians with migrant backgrounds as role models.

At EU level, Croatia has shown a **positive, pro-active position on relocation/resettlement**, in solidarity with other Member States. The country is now preparing to welcome 550 people under this scheme.
