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



MISSION REPORT – SLOVENIA
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European Economic and Social Committee

Mission Report – Slovenia, 13-14 January 2016

In December 2015 and January 2016, EESC delegations visited 11 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 into EU policymaking. The delegation to Slovenia was composed of Madi Sharma (United Kingdom, Employers' Group), Andrej Zorko (Slovenia, Workers' Group) and Primož Šporar (Slovenia, Various interests Group), supported by June Bedaton from the EESC secretariat.

1. Conclusions

Slovenia is a transit country on the Balkan route towards northern Europe. Slovenia lacked the human resources and material and technical capacity to cope with the influx at the beginning. According to the Slovenian police, some 371 692 refugees and migrants have transited through Slovenia since 16 October 2015. Slovenia has managed to create an effective system for the transit of refugees/migrants, but there is fear that Austria will close its borders and 153 kilometres of razor wire fencing has been put up along the southern border.

The mission gave a good overall picture of the situation in Slovenia. What really stood out was the high level of organisation achieved and the population's willingness to volunteer and help the refugees/migrants. Several good practices were identified:

- good cooperation between NGOs themselves and with the government;
- good cooperation at local level between all operators, led by civil protection and the police;
- the creation of a temporary railway station within 48 hours, once the need had been identified;
- job creation for long-term unemployed;
- coordination of volunteers done by NGO's to prevent counterproductive individual contributions;
- efficiency of the EU Emergency Response Coordination – police, medical care and volunteers came from 14 other countries;
- the creation of a central crisis centre/situation room coordinating all actors and following all developments.

Problems identified:

- unsustainable reliance on volunteers in Slovenia;
- multiple registrations are ineffective and create frustration for migrants;
- transfer of registration information is ineffective;
- lack of dignity and humanity in the way migrants have to walk through Europe;
- lack of effective common EU policy, passing problems on instead of attempting to resolve them;
- lack of clear information provided to migrants/refugees about their rights and what will happen to them;

- lack of information provided to the general public about migrants/ lack of a positive message;
- lack of a strategy on integration of migrants in Slovenia;
- lack of interpreters in Slovenia;
- financing is problematic, as several Slovenian NGOs will run out of money in the spring;
- cooperation with other countries is not always smooth;
- lack of consultation of citizens and local communities on the erection of centres and fences;
- lack of consultation concerning the new Slovenian government migrant unit/agency.

2. Summaries of the meetings

Meeting with the International Organization for Migration (IOM)

The IOM's emergency response has consisted of procurement of non-food items, medical assistance (through the Women's Health Association), information-sharing, displacement tracking, which enables early warnings to be sounded, psychosocial assistance, counter-trafficking measures and assisting unaccompanied minors, who are sent to social care centres in Postojna. The fence which has been built along the Croatian border is unpopular, and with recent floods part of it has been removed. Cooperation in Slovenia between NGOs and the government is good, but the government should involve the Ministry of the Family and Social Affairs more to increase focus on integration measures. The trade union has been operating a good job counselling service, connecting refugees/migrants from the former Yugoslavia with jobs and providing legal aid and representation. This programme was shut down in September 2015, and the union is planning to create an NGO to apply for funding and continue its work.

Meeting with the regional civil protection office, Brežice

The Ministry of Defence's civil protection and disaster relief office is responsible for protection, rescue and relief tasks and has managed the refugee crisis. The regional office in Brežice is responsible for the operation of the reception centre in Dobova, from where migrants are taken directly to Karavanka and on to Austria, or to the accommodation centre in Šentilj, before they are sent to Austria. At the beginning it was chaotic, partly as a result of the initial lack of cooperation with Croatia, but routines and cooperation have improved. Cooperation with the army, the police and NGOs has been good. Civil protection was relying on volunteers, but has now employed 230 long-term unemployed. The government is now planning to create a special unit under the Ministry of the Interior, so that civil protection can return to its core task. There is now a total capacity of around 10 000 at accommodation centres throughout Slovenia. At times, they have had influxes of 10 000 migrants/day.

Meeting with the Municipality of Brežice

Brežice, a town with around 25 000 inhabitants, was overwhelmed by and unprepared for the influx of migrants, walking through the fields from Croatia. The local community responded because the state was slow to take action, and many volunteered. There have been huge financial costs for the local community, but they expect the government to cover them. Local residents no longer have any interaction with the migrants, but the reception centre is well accepted. Migrants can pass through, but

not stay. There is fear that Austria will close its borders, and that unhappy migrants could create tension. The wire fence is seen as a necessity by the community.

Visit to the Livarna registration centre (Dobova)

Reception has evolved a lot since the beginning. It has been a learning experience. The centre has been moved a few times, but now it is a more permanent facility away from inhabited areas. Migrants arriving at railway train station in Dobova are driven to the centre by bus, and only stay a few hours. Everyone is registered after an initial meal and humanitarian assistance. The group of migrants is diverse; three babies have been born there. Fights between different nationalities have occurred. They have had help from abroad, both police and NGOs, and they have relied heavily on local NGOs organising volunteers. They are lacking interpreters. The police are stretched to the limit and are on strike (although the effects are not felt in practice). At the beginning they needed around 450 people, but now 50-80 were enough to run the centre, as the influx was lower, around 900/day. Coordination at the centre was effected on a daily basis, and more substantial coordination was carried out on a weekly basis. Reaction to problems had been swift (e.g. asphalt was laid after rain showed the need for this).

Visit to the Livarna registration centre (Dobova), the Slovenian Red Cross and Slovene Philanthropy

At the beginning it was important to coordinate volunteers, as individual acts of goodwill were chaotic and counterproductive. NGOs had contributed many volunteers (some from Croatia), working 12 hours shifts, but many were exhausted now. No prior training had been possible. The over-reliance on volunteers for operational action was a problem. NGOs helped with food, non-food items, restoring family links and medical attention. The centre provides special facilities for mothers and babies, and sanitary wear for women, but no toilet facilities for the disabled. The NGOs attempt to identify victims of trafficking, abuse, violence and/or sexual violence, but time is very limited. There were some problems with coordination at the beginning. Migrants lacked proper information and many needed to talk.

Visit to the green border at Rigonce and wired fence and visit to the railway station in Dobova on the Slovenian-Croatian border; meeting with Caritas Slovenia, ADRA Slovenia and neighbours of the station and fence.

Trains arriving from Croatia do not have proper heating and toilets, and information about arrival times has not always been correct. Croatian trains have capacity of around 1 000 passengers, whereas Slovenian trains only have half that capacity. After arrival, migrants are bussed to Livarna to be registered. Registration is difficult, as there is only one official translator in Slovenia; the others, provided mainly by UNHCR, are unofficial. Work at the station has diminished: it only involves arrivals and departures, not registration. Now NGOs manage with 4-5 people providing refugees with clothes, food, and hygiene and health products.

The neighbours said that people were surprised to see migrants walking straight through their fields at the chaotic beginning, but not scared, as there had been police and military presence. Local residents rarely see the migrants now, as they only arrive at night. Migrants are less in the media, so some are

unaware that migrants are still arriving. The fence is unpopular as some animals have been caught up in it, but most people are in favour. Only two tourist regions close to Croatia, Primorska and Kraško-Notranjska, which are not directly affected by migrants, have complained about the fence. The fence was erected without any consultation, and it is feared that it will be replaced by some more permanent and solid structure, destroying access to the water at the green border for people and animals. This could create animosity towards migrants.

Meeting at the Šentilj accommodation centre; civil protection, police, Caritas, Slovene Philanthropy, UNHCR and the Red Cross

Accommodation centres have been set up in the area of the municipalities of Ankaran, Celje, Gornja Radgona, Lenart, Lendava, Ljubljana, Logatec, Maribor, Šentilj and Vrhnika. Šentilj is the biggest accommodation centre and is right on the border with Austria. 2000 can be accommodated in the tents. There are shower facilities and 87 toilets, but none for the disabled. Special areas were provided for mothers and babies, but no separate sleeping arrangements. The centre has Wi-Fi and serves three meals a day. Cultural sensitivities are not taken specifically into account, except for pork being avoided. At the beginning the migrants arrived in the city centre and blocked the main roads, so in 48 hours a new railway station just across from the centre was constructed. At times they have had 5 000 coming a day, but only had space for 2 000. The typical stay is 1-24 hours. The NGOs have divided the tasks between them. Distributing clothes, food items, restoration of family links, first aid. They have even organised burials. The main health problem is dehydration. UNHCR provides interpreters and UNICEF is expected to arrive at the centre soon. Every morning there are coordination meetings between civil protection, police and NGOs. Slovenia cannot absorb more than 500-1 000/day. Once, a group of 40 young men were sent back from Austria to determine their identity. They stayed for 4-5 days, but the facilities are not adapted and soldiers had to calm tensions until Austria accepted the group back. In this centre there is also a heavy reliance on volunteers. NGOs need funds for coordinators.

Meeting with the Municipality of Šentilj

The decision that Šentilj will become the biggest accommodation centre in Slovenia was made at national level. They were told that 2 000 would arrive a day, but at times it has been much more. At the beginning the migrants blocked the main road to neighbouring Maribor 6-7 times a day. Now, with the new railway station, there is no interaction between migrants and the local community. Economic losses for the local community are estimated at 2.3 million. It has been agreed with Austria that the border closest to Šentilj will be reopened. There is fear in the town of 1 000 inhabitants that migrant numbers will increase in spring and that migrants will be returned from Austria.

Meeting with the Ministry of the Interior and Civil Protection

The Ministry took preparatory measures as early as September, and used existing buildings to accommodate the migrants. It activated civil protection and used the EU Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC), which enabled it to receive help from 14 different countries. Now that the response to the refugee/migrant crisis is stabilising, the government is planning to set up a special migrant unit, responsible for the continued response. The ministry is planning to convert some of its

centres into bigger units, to facilitate coordination. The government has created a permanent coordination group (crisis centre/situation room) including all actors on the premises of the ministry.

The government is satisfied with cooperation within the administration and externally with NGOs and international stake holders. Communication between countries on the Balkan route is good, although there were some problems at the beginning. A meeting had been held the day before between directors-general of the Austrian and Slovenian police, unfortunately without Croatian involvement. The agreements on arrival of trains were working (trains could be refused if no advance warning was given), and all migrants were registered and sent on. There is a lack of qualified translators in Slovenia. There is no selection of people based on nationality, but if Austria imposes limits Slovenia will follow. The government has a contingency plan for 1 000 places for asylum-seekers. Slovenia estimates refugee crisis related costs in 2016 at EUR 126 million. The EU contribution towards meeting the cost is to be negotiated.

Meeting with SLOGA, the national platform for NGOs, attended by ADRA, Slovene Philanthropy, the Red Cross, Caritas, Amnesty, the Private Institute Board, the Peace Institute/Mirovni inštitut and Humanitas

The NGOs informed the delegation that the government had been slow to take action prior to the major influx in October, but that cooperation was now very good. They mentioned that there was still a need for a faster decision-making process in the centres. They had not been consulted on the creation of a new migrant agency by the government.

Coordination between all NGOs was generally smooth; SLOGA organises a meeting every week between NGOs, discussing their activities and tasks, and the work on the ground requires the pooling of all resources. In the field they help each other and even share all material and resources.

The NGOs mentioned the problem of over-reliance on volunteers and the need for funds for coordinators. Although the employment of long-term unemployed had been positive, the selection process had been flawed, neglecting those who had already volunteered, and it did not remove the over-reliance on volunteers. The NGOs were very concerned about the lack of funding (many will run out of funds by March 2016) and the lack of flexible EU funding. The NGOs have submitted a joint funding request via UNHCR.

NGOs were also concerned at the lack of sufficient preparation for migrants seeking protection in Slovenia (1 000 places insufficient), and the lack of integration measures in place.

Meeting with the UNHCR office in Slovenia

UNHCR moved its office to Slovenia after the closing of the Hungarian borders. It has 30 staff at all main entry points, working with non-food items and interpretation and identification of vulnerable migrants/refugees. The emergency response in Slovenia is very well organised, despite minor problems, and the office was impressed by the Slovenian government's involvement in the response to the refugee crisis. In some countries, but not Slovenia, migrants are charged unofficially and illegally for transport and trafficking is a problem on the Balkan route. Facilities in Slovenia are transit facilities and minimum standards are met. Stays of longer than 48 hours would be problematic and

would raise child protection issues. The government is looking to create a long-term facility in Kidričevo. The government did separate refugees on the basis of nationality for a short while, but it has stopped. Migrants and refugees should be evaluated in accordance with international law (1951 Refugee Convention), but due to the inefficiency of the processing of asylum applications and the amount of time involved it is not an advantage to register at arrival on EU borders, as it only takes 7 days to reach Germany. Only around 140 people had registered for asylum in Slovenia.

Press conference

There was a lot of media focus on the migrant issue and the EESC delegation, as directors-general of the Austrian and Slovenian police met on 13 January and Prime Minister Miro Cerar met Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin on 14 January. The delegation held a well-attended press conference, where it outlined the purpose of the mission and some of its findings, and praised the volunteers, NGOs, civil protection, police and the government of Slovenia for working well together to treat the refugees and migrants with dignity.