

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



“Journeys to a New Life: Understanding the role of youth work in integrating young refugees in Europe”

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Young refugees finding their voice: participation between discourse and practice (draft version)

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Introduction

In 2015, more than one million refugees and asylum seekers, majority of them young, have crossed the Mediterranean Sea and reached European Union in what is referred to as the unprecedented refugee and migration crisis. According to UNHCR vast majority of them or 856,723 sea crossings were from Turkey to Greece. The Western Balkan region has been particularly affected as the refugees and asylum seekers that reached Greece were almost exclusively using the Balkan route on their way towards the countries of final destination. During the first months of the massive influx, the countries of the region did not presented capacity to respond to the situation. The initial response was reactive and ad-hoc which resulted in chaotic situation on the field - as they could not regularly (legally) transit through Republic of Macedonia¹, refugees and asylum seekers were walking during the night along the railroad in attempt to cross the country as quick as possible in clandestine fashion. Eight refugees and asylum seekers have been killed in traffic accidents on the railroad in the period October-December 2014.

As Europe started promoting open borders policy, the state authorities became more tolerant, allowing refugees and asylum seekers to transit as irregular migrants. Still, no reception or protection services were provided to these people, except to those that have submitted

¹ As the author is national of the respective country, in this paper the constitutional name of the country “Republic of Macedonia” is being used, allowing to Council of Europe to intervene replacing it with “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”

application for recognition right to asylum. Some activists and informal groups of citizens started providing food and non-food items to the people on the move, but the majority of the population was not aware on the complexity of the situation.

As the existing law and asylum system could not respond to the new situation where the country was facing with influx of thousands of people on daily basis, in June 2015 the Assembly of Republic of Macedonia has adopted amendments of the Law and Asylum and Temporary protection, providing opportunity to the refugees and migrants to submit intention for seeking asylum in the Republic of Macedonia. Persons that have submitted intention for seeking asylum could legally stay in the country for 72 hours, period in which they could lodge an asylum application or leave the country. This was a crucial provision that provided opportunity to organize reception and protection services to the refugees and asylum seekers that were arriving from Greece as well as to facilitate their transit to Serbia. In addition to the already existing Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers in Vizbegovo near Skopje, the state has also established two temporary transit centres – Vinojug on the border with Greece (served as entry point) and Tabanovce on the border with Serbia (served as exit point). Only few of the thousands persons that submitted intention for seeking asylum have subsequently submitted asylum application, while others have continued towards countries of final destination (predominantly Germany, Austria and Sweden).

Numerous domestic and international organizations started delivering food and non-food items in the transit centres and some of them additional services to the refugees and asylum seekers (legal aid and psychosocial support). Transport by train was organized for the refugees and asylum seekers from Vinojug to the Tabanovce transit centre.

After EU engaged with Turkey in attempt to stem the influx of irregular migrants, more restrictive policies were introduced in the Western Balkan Country. As of second half of November 2015, only Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan nationals were allowed to enter Macedonia from Greece, while since the first half on March the Balkan Route is officially and permanently closed.

Since the closure of the borders, most of the refugees and asylum seekers stranded in Macedonia and Serbia has managed to leave these countries using the dangerous routes of the irregular migration. Although official information for Republic of Macedonia are lacking, it is estimated that 100 refugees and asylum seekers are irregularly entering from Macedonia to Serbia on daily basis since the closure of the route. Additional refugees and asylum seekers are entering in Serbia from Bulgaria and Kosovo. As Hungary has increased the security control on the borders, the number of refugees and asylum seekers that are stranded in Serbia have risen to more than 1,500 in October 2016, while according to the information from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy 229 refugees and asylum seekers were accommodated in the transit centres and Reception centre for asylum seekers in Macedonia (situation on 15.10.2016). #

Although some improvements of the infrastructure have been made, the living conditions in the transit and reception centres are not in accordance with the Sphere standards in Shelter

and Settlement. The refugees and asylum seekers we have interviewed mostly complained on lack of adequate health care, lack of freedom of movement and denied access to education.

Research

The methodology included interviews with youth workers from six organizations from Republic of Macedonia, interviews with four field clerks working with refugees and asylum seekers in the transit centres in Republic of Macedonia, interview with 8 young refugees and asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan stranded in the transit centres in Macedonia and 4 young refugees and asylum seekers from Afghanistan that were temporary residing in the park near the central bus station in Belgrade. The interviews were held in the period September – October 2016.

In addition secondary research was made through desk research on the realized and ongoing projects, legal and policy documents adopted by the regional or national authorities.

The interviews with the aid workers that were working in the transit centres confirmed that the activities with refugees and migrants are mainly focused on providing protection services (legal aid, psychosocial support, health services, distribution of food and non food items as well as certain non-formal education activities and creative workshops) while activities aiming to enable young refugees and asylum seekers to raise their voice are lacking.

The refugees and asylum seekers we have interviewed mostly complained on not being allowed to reach the Western European Countries, lack of safety on the irregular routes, lack of adequate health care, lack of freedom of movement and denied access to education. None of the interviewed refugees and asylum seekers knew why participation of youth is important. They explained that in the country of origin they don't have freedom of speech they can't participate in the decision making processes and civil society organizations do not exist. They would like their voice to be heard, but don't know how to perform this.

We have contacted six youth workers from the leading youth association in Republic of Macedonia, none of them had program approach on working with young refugees and migrants. Restrictive policies for entrance and presence in the transit and reception centres, lack of funding as well as lack of knowledge on the migration issues were stated as main reasons why they are not involved.

How youth sector / civil society engages with refugees

Dealing with unprecedented refugee and humanitarian crisis the state, civil society organizations and informal groups of citizens were primarily focused on providing protection services to the refugees and asylum seekers.

Numerous international organizations had presence in the transit and asylum centres in Macedonia and Serbia (UNHCR, Red Cross, Oxfam, Danish Refugee Council, IOM, Save the Children, CRS, SOS Children village etc.). There were also numerous local civil society organizations that were providing services for the asylum seekers and refugees accommodated in the transit centres.

In Macedonia, The Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA), implementing partner of UNHCR has established 24 hours presence both in Tabanovce and Vinojug Transit Centre, providing access to free legal aid for the refugees and asylum seekers. MYLA was working in mixed mobile outreach teams with LaStrada who provided psychosocial workers as well as team of educators for the occupational activities and creative workshops. Women only and children well-being spaces were introduced in the transit centres. Project activities targeting women and children as specific vulnerable groups were supported by UNICEF and UNWOMEN.

As of 2016, the National Youth Council also had temporary presence in the transit centres, having young migrants as its focus. Number of organizations were organizing distribution of food and clothes.

Because of not being a legal entity, informal groups of citizens were not allowed presence in the transit centres in Macedonia.

Several groups for support of refugees have been established, such as the facebook pages *Help Refugees in Macedonia* with 10,455 members and *Refugee Aid Macedonia* with 8,194 members. Many refugees and asylum seekers have used these groups to raise their voice on the problems and challenges they are facing on daily basis.

Several socially engaged journalists regularly informed on the situation of the refugees and asylum seekers in Macedonia. As a result of their work the pressure from the general public has forced the government to improve the living conditions in the detention transit centre for irregular migrants in Gazi Baba – Skopje.

In October 2016, the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association has produced digital story telling video titled “Her struggle is my struggle – Bring back Dignity to Refugee Women!”. The video has more than 3500 views in the first three weeks.

Still, most of the work was done by organizations that have asylum and migration as focus of their work. Due to the restrictive policies for entrance and presence in the reception and transit centres for asylum seekers, the youth associations have almost no contact with the young refugees and asylum seekers.

In the initial period of the crisis the voice of the young refugees couldn't be heard even on the coordination meetings that were held in the camps (transit centres). All issues of significant importance for them – food, logistics etc. were discussed primarily between representatives of the state actors, international organization and the local civil society organizations as “representatives” of the refugees and asylum seekers.

Due to the restricted freedom of movement, young refugees and asylum seekers could not participate in the public debates related to the migration and refugee crisis that were taking place in the mass media. With few exceptions such as the events for the World Refugee Day and some local events that were organized in the transit centres, young refugees and asylum seekers were not invited/participating even on round tables and conferences

The refugees/asylum seekers we have interviewed mostly complained on lack of adequate health care, lack of freedom of movement and denied access to education.

The situation on the field in Serbia is slightly different - apart of the refugees and asylum seekers that are accommodated in the asylum centres and refugee aid points, due to the more liberal policy on freedom of movement, many refugees and asylum seekers could be seen at different locations in the Belgrade city centre (primarily at the park next to the central bus station) where there is distribution point of Info Park - a grass root initiative of activists.

In addition, refugee aid point called Miksaliste operates in Belgrade city centre. The Refugee aid serves not only as main distribution point for food and non-food items (clothes, hygiene kits etc.), but at the same time it is main gathering point for the young refugees and migrants as well as the civic activists. Various public events and creative workshops are organized in Miksaliste. The refugee aid Miksaliste provided space for the young refugees and asylum seekers not only to raise their voice, but also their voice to be heard through the mass and electronic media. In September 2016 Miksaliste won the European Citizenship Award. #

Apart of these ad-hoc initiatives, most of the services for the young refugees and asylum seekers in Serbia are provided by organization that were working on asylum issues prior to the unprecedented refugee and human rights crisis.

Grupa 484 is organization established from 484 refugees in Serbia from the armed conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia. The organization provides information, legal and psychosocial support to refugees and asylum seekers.

The Citizens association for combating trafficking of human beings and all forms of gender violence ATINA provides legal, psychosocial and medical assistance to the refugee in migrants and runs several safe-houses (shelters).

Belgrade Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), Praxis and Asylum Protection Service provide legal assistance to asylum seekers. ADRA provides psychosocial support to refugees, asylum seekers and victims of gender-based violence.

Apart of isolated events and several groups that are active on the social media, same as in Macedonia youth associations in Serbia are lacking program approach in working with young refugees and asylum seekers.

Conclusion

The voice of the young refugees and migrants in the Western Balkan remains unheard and youth associations are not adequately involved in working with young refugees and migrants.

Youth associations lack program approach which will ensure sustainability of their project activities. There is need of stronger networking of youth associations working with refugees and migrants.

Young refugees and migrants are not provided space to participate in the ongoing public debate on the issues of their concern. There are several factors that influence this – restricted freedom of movement, lack of will among the relevant institutions to involve young refugees and migrants in the decision making processes as well as lack of skills among young refugees and migrants due to the fact that in their country of origin civil society is not developed so they are familiar with the concepts of youth voice or active participation.

Young refugees and migrants are lacking access to basic services such as adequate health care, education and access to the labour market. Their voice could be hardly heard if they live in isolation from the local community.

The principles and standards of the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life were not applied for young refugees and asylum seekers in the region.

Although they are not member states of the EU, as candidate countries for accession both Macedonia and Serbia should conduct in compliance the EU Work Plan for Youth for 2016-2018, which lay down a stronger youth work and cross-sector cooperation, including “responding to the opportunities and challenges raised by the increasing numbers of young migrants and refugees in the European Union